

# Lily Briscoe's «Chinese Eyes»: The Reading of Difference in Translated Fiction

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## Abstract

Since the eighties, translation scholars have increasingly turned to «differences» rather than similarities between the original and the translation. More important than the mere existence of these differences is the fact that they are experienced by the reader. Reading a translation can be characterized as a «border-crossing experience» in that the reader moves back and forth between two semiotic realms, one familiar, the other strange. My paper will take as its starting point the repeated references in Virginia Woolf's masterpiece *To the Lighthouse* to its central character Lily Briscoe's «Chinese eyes». That the Chinese reader of the translation should feel uncomfortable because Lily's «Chinese eyes» are said to be the main obstacle to her finding a husband is symptomatic of a more general problem concerning readers' reception of translated realist fiction. As a literary method, realism can be understood as a self-conscious effort to make literature appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself. Unfortunately, by their very nature, translations call attention to the target language in addition to describing a reality. In the case of Woolf's biased reference to «Chinese eyes», we have an interesting instance of how the reader's sympathetic identification with the characters (encouraged by the language used—Chinese in this case) can be suddenly shattered when his attention is drawn to an unpleasant feature he, as a Chinese person, possesses. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that in translations, one language is used to capture the reality normally expressed by another. Is there reality beyond language? Can reality exist outside of language?

**Key words:** the Other, reader, difference, the Self, alterity.

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## Resum

Des dels anys vuitanta, els especialistes en traducció s'ocupen cada vegada més de les «diferències» i no de les similituds entre l'original i la traducció. Més important que la mera existència d'aquestes diferències és el fet que el lector les experimenta. Podríem dir que llegir una traducció és una «experiència de frontera», en la qual el lector es mou endavant i endarrere entre dos camps semiòtics, un de familiar i un altre d'estrany. L'article pren com a punt de partida les nombroses referències a «els ulls xinesos» en l'obra mestra de Virginia Woolf, *Al Far*, del seu personatge central, Lily Briscoe. Que el lector xinès de la traducció s'hauria de sentir incòmode perquè es diu que «els ulls xinesos» de Lily són l'obstacle principal perquè no trobi marit, és simptomàtic d'un problema més general pel que fa a la recepció dels lectors de ficció realista traduïda. Com a mètode literari, el realisme es pot entendre com un esforç tímid per fer que la literatura sembli que descriu directament no una altra llengua, sinó la realitat mateixa. Malauradament, per la seva

mateixa naturalesa, les traduccions criden l'atenció sobre la llengua de destinació, a més de descriure una realitat. En el cas de la referència esbiaixada de Woolf a «ulls xinesos», tenim un exemple interessant de com es pot, de cop i volta, destruir la identificació del lector amb els personatges (fomentat per la llengua utilitzada —el xinès, en aquest cas) quan es crida la seva atenció sobre un tret desagradable que té, com a xinesa. El cor del problema rau en el fet que en les traduccions es fa servir una llengua per a captar la realitat normalment expressada per una altra. Hi ha realitat més enllà de la llengua? Pot la realitat existir fora de la llengua?

**Paraules clau:** l'Altre, lector, diferència, el Jo, alteritat.

### Summary

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Few will doubt that far greater attention has been paid in translation theorizing to the translator (and his methods) than to the reader of translations (and his strategies). The relationship the reader bears to translated literature is a little explored area of translation studies.<sup>1</sup> He occupies a position rather unlike that of the translator-as-reader, who reads the original text, then interprets it for himself as well as those he intends his translation for. He is also quite unlike the source-language reader, who is equipped with both the linguistic and cultural resources to decipher without interference the meaning of the text, intended for him in the first place. He is, finally, not completely like the reader who has foreign language competence and reads a text in the language it was originally written in. Even in the case of the reader of a translation who has an acquaintance with the source language, the fact that he chooses to read a translation means that he will have to participate in a rather unique kind of boundary-crossing experience, taking up an «interliminal space» created by translation.

A crucial aspect of the experience of reading a translation resides in the recognition of difference, which is experienced as a kind of interference on the discursive level. What troubles the reader is the assertive difference within a translated text, an Otherness that the translator cannot erase, much as he might have tried. This is, however, not «difference» due to a failure to render the meaning of the original because of cultural gaps and the absence of equivalences; this is an ontological difference. Whatever the extent of naturalization, reading a translation is inevitably an encounter with the foreign, with the alterity of the Other. One might say, of

1. Marilyn Gaddis Rose is among the few who have probed into issues of the reading of translations. Her advocacy of «stereoscopic readings» of translations posits, however, a bilingual reader-implicitly, a translation scholar/critic (see Rose, 1997). My focus is the majority of readers of translations who are monolingual and mono-cultural, who do not have the option of bringing the original to bear on the translation.

course, that this applies too to reading a foreign text in the original language —to all texts, in fact. But in reading translations the tension is exacerbated, for the reader is placed in a situation where something foreign is forced to appear indigenous, where the Self seeks to contain the Other, although, at the same time, the translation continues to assert its alterity.

Researches on the psychology of reading have pointed out that part of the reading process involves breaking through the old boundaries of the self. This could be an enjoyable experience but it could equally well be painful. Discomfort can be experienced when the reader is exposed to different subject positions occupied by himself in relation to others. This opens up horizons at the same time as it poses a threat to stability. As he moves in and out of a text, constantly negotiating between reality as presented in the text and reality as he knows it, he is confronted with an array of possibilities, to be accepted or rejected. As Molly A. Travis (1998: 12) puts it: «All textual reading-interpretation... is emphatic in that it involves a temporary fusion with the other, followed by separation, differentiation and active interpretation». It is a dance of the Self with the Other, a dance which is exemplified to a remarkable degree in the reading of a translation.

Emotionally, this reading experience can be described as a willing suspension between the twin poles of immersion and distancing. Romantic identification occurs where the reader falls under the spell of the story, but unease, or discomfort, is produced when the differences between cultures are highlighted, as we shall see in the example of Virginia Woolf's mention of «Lily Briscoe's eyes» in *To the Lighthouse*. Of course, unease is felt in reading original texts as well —as when a female reader reads a text perforated by male prejudices— but in reading translations, itself a cross-cultural experience, the drama is intensified. All translated texts are bicultural in nature, and in the case of a translated novel, for instance, narrative satisfaction becomes a problematic issue. None of the various kinds of pleasure available to the so-called conventional reader —the pleasure of recognition, of discovering order and structure in the world, and so on— comes by easily.

### **Translated Texts, Readers and Contexts**

Though the issue has seldom been raised, it is imperative that translated texts be understood differently from non-translated texts. A consideration of the parameters of (a) text, (b) reader and (c) context as they pertain to a literary (fictional) translation allows us to unravel its true nature as well as how it works, only on the basis of which matters of reception and interpretation can be clarified. To begin with, the traditional approach in which the text assumes primacy, so that the only task a reader is capable of is deciphering the structure of meaning, has to be dispensed with. The text does not uphold a coherent picture of the world; nor does it give readers the comfort of knowing that a plausible interpretation can be worked out. In what follows we will have the opportunity of annotating, as it were, the opening sections of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, as they are presented in Chinese translation to a reader from a culture very distant from Woolf's own.

Roland Barthes has engaged at some length with questions of the pleasure derivable from texts, demonstrating how the effort to interpret Maupaussant's *Sarrasine*, for instance, can be pleasurable. For him there are two kinds of texts, the text of pleasure and the text of bliss or *jouissance* («extreme pleasure»). While both give rise to experiences that are beyond words, the latter is more of the nature of an action; the former, of a state. The text of pleasure is also supposed to be «the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes *from culture* and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading» (Barthes 1975: 14; italics mine). If so, then a translation is not even good enough as a text of pleasure, breaking (perhaps even tempering, as we shall see) with the semiotic systems located within a culture. In fact, Barthes singles out translations for separate treatment as texts. He notes several things that one cannot take into consideration when attempting to construe the significance of a text: besides the intentions of the author, he mentions «the impact of reading a text in translation» (Simpkins 2001: 108).

By no means is it suggested here that readers occupy fixed positions, reacting passively to the world translated for him while witnessing the fragmentation of an order familiar to him, feeling frustrated when he can no longer identify with a coherent subjectivity. Even the most passive receptor will be aroused in reading a translation. He keeps drawing inferences as he reads, though he will have to give up attempting a linear processing of the narrative unfolded before him. Instead of simple decoding as noted in conventional models of translation, the reader resorts to new strategies of making sense of a translated text in relation to his own world. The relationship between the translated text and the reader is complex and older models will be proved to be highly inadequate. To all intents and purposes, the reader of translations exhibits a split consciousness: as he reads, he remains aware of his own identity and locale, even as he simultaneously recognizes the foreign, the Other that he cannot but acknowledge. He experiences disturbance on the one hand and displacement on the other. For what a translated text exemplifies best—to use Homi Bhabha's terminology—is «cultural inter-articulation» (Malena 1998: 526), not a reality that is informed mono-culturally and mono-linguistically.

An awareness of context, however, is needed to complete our model of the hermeneutic process pertaining to the reading of a translation. The reader does not handle the translated text in any which way he likes, however unconventional and anomalous such a text may be. Interpretation must proceed within the perimeters stipulated by the cultural environment within which the reader finds himself, by a kind of conceptual grid within his interpretive community. There is individual agency as well as collective forces at work. Very often the «environment» asserts itself through the language of translation, in which a particular text is presented to the community in question. Translation scholars are all too familiar with the ways in which certain cultural terms receive their standard translations, so that what is translated accordingly becomes perceived in a particular way and receives a particular target-language coloring. This means, in effect, that the original text is already interpreted *for* the reader by the translator through the language he uses, and the reader's interpretation is of necessity framed. In discussing the reception of a translated text, what is involved, therefore, is not just an individual reader, but

an entire collectivity —and it is here that ideology intervenes and casts a shadow. In sum, then, the reader's interpretation is always determined by the text on the one hand and by his culture, especially that part of his culture that determines how translations are to be read, if not enjoyed.

It could be argued that the ordinary reader of a translation is hardly cognizant of the complex nature of a translated text, and neither is he likely to resort to such strategies as might impede his simple enjoyment of a good story well told. The answer is rather simple. Otherness is only apparently and deceptively changed into sameness, and while the reader is temporarily taken in, he is never wholly duped. He may feel immersed in the foreign world described in the novel, till he comes to a point when he feels jolted, and is made to realize that a gap is only temporarily bridged, that the opposition between Self and the Other exists, though it can be forgotten under the illusion of similarity. He suddenly is confronted with what the translator experiences so immediately and directly —with that which is not assimilable to the target culture. And a great deal of what is in the original text is not. Because Otherness is not so easily rejected or eliminated, the foreign continues to hound the reader of a translation. That is why no complete domestication, naturalization or acculturation is in fact possible.

#### Four Kinds of Dislocation

Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique has often been praised for the way it frees writers from the rigidities of traditional ways of rendering point of view. Her narrative voice virtually disappears so as to allow direct access to characters' thought processes. This is done to the extent that one can be puzzled as to whether what is presented are the thoughts of one character or the comments of the narrator. As Tim Parks (1998: 95) said of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the impression is often given of «a mind at work on its own, rather than a narrator attentive to the reader's desire for useful information». One advantage of this is that it allows the reader to quickly immerse himself in the flow of thought of the characters, particularly in that of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Consider the following passage at the beginning of the novel, in which Mrs. Ramsay almost seems to be directly addressing the reader, when describing the miserable conditions of living atop the lighthouse: «For how would *you* like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon the rock the size of a tennis lawn?» (5). Virginia Woolf's tremendous success in immersing her readers in the Real is often commended, not least by Erich Auerbach, who wrote perceptively on her presentation of reality in *To the Lighthouse*. But can this success be carried over to a translation?

The path to success seems to be beset with difficulties. There is geographical dislocation, to begin with. Readers of the original are naturally much better prepared than readers of the translation when it comes to background knowledge about places alluded to in the novel. It helps tremendously if the reader knows about the setting in the Hebrides, an island resort to which the Ramsays have invited their guests for the legendary dinner that is the focus of Part One of the novel. It is

referred to almost casually by Mrs. Ramsay, but its significance will not be lost on the source text reader. Innumerable are the passing references to England and, for that matter, Europe —to the Swiss girl whose father is dying of cancer «in the Grisons» (8) (an area in Switzerland famous from the 1880s for the curative power of its spas and baths); to Brompton Road (19) where Lily Briscoe, the artist-spinster and Mrs. Ramsay's double, lives— a reference that indirectly gives information on the class background of Lily; and to Westmorland (20), a county in the English Lake District that is familiar to source-language readers.

The Other intrudes to raise major and minor turbulences that prevent readers from completely immersing in the realistically presented fictional world. As might be expected, political and historical dislocations are most unsettling. A Chinese reader is sure to be puzzled by Mrs. Ramsay's ruminations on the impolite behavior that her girls have presumably picked up from the Parisians. A footnote might have helped here, but over a hundred footnotes would have to be inserted to make the opening pages of *To the Lighthouse* comprehensible. After taking a jab at the French, Mrs. Ramsay proceeds to comment briefly on the colonialist empire built by the British in the nineteenth century:

her daughters, Prue, Nancy, Rose —could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry, of the bank of England and the Indian Empire... (6-7)

The link of the last sentence to the allusion to the Army and Navy Stores in the first paragraph of the novel, where James Ramsay is described as indulging in «cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogues of the Army and Navy Stores» (3), will also be lost to a Chinese reader not familiar with the source culture. The contemporary early twentieth-century reader<sup>2</sup> would have known that, founded in 1871 by British officers for their families, these stores opened their Victoria Street premises to the public at the time the novel's events were supposed to take place.

Further dislocation is experienced when readers of the translation come to the discussion carried on about poetry by Charles Tansley, the «atheist,» and Mr. Ramsay. The two men refer to the «ablest fellow in Balliol» «who had buried his light temporarily at Bristol or Bedford» (7) —Balliol being one of the oldest of the Oxford colleges. Naturally, the non-native reader of the original novel would have experienced a feeling of being blocked as well, especially if he is not knowledgeable about the cultural world of Virginia Woolf, just like the reader of the translation. Yet there is a key difference: the cultural items figure differently in the two types of texts in question. In the source text, what is foreign stays foreign; in the translation, the foreign emerges out of a context of the familiar. Further examples

2. This is the Historical Reader. Other categories of readers that will be relevant to the present inquiry include the Implied Reader (Iser), the Informed Reader (Fish), the Created Reader (Booth), the Model Reader (Eco) (see Ruthrof, 1981).

where a knowledge of the Western heritage would be helpful in allowing the reader to immerse himself in the narrative include: «Croom on the Mind» (43) (Croom Robertson is an eminent biographer) and «Bates on the Savage Customs of Polynesia» (43) (Bates was a famous naturalist). If the non-native reader can stop and look up reference books to gain a better understanding of the novel, such an avenue whereby cultural information can be supplied is totally denied to the reader of the translation.

One could keep adding to the list with examples from just the first few pages of the novel, for the allusions used are plentiful. Many of these appear almost to have been offhandedly thrown in, for no other reason than to render the minute details of everyday, quotidian reality that are a hallmark of the stream of consciousness novel: (a) the passing of the Reform Bill, (b) the «mythical» Italian house, (c) going to Ibsen's theater, and (d) a direct quotation from a poem by Tennyson. So how can one enjoy reading translated fiction, and how can one interpret it? Considering the fact that many of the details provide no more than local flavor, one wonders what good they can do in the translation, other than aggravating a sense of non-comprehension.

Finally, in contrast to the above forms of dislocation, there is generic dislocation, associated with the difficulties of understanding the narrative conventions like those of the stream-of-consciousness novel. Here we are dealing not so much with the realm of the presented word but with the presentational process by which Reality is shown and displayed. In fact one of the translators of *To the Lighthouse*, Kong Fanyun, seeks to reorient the reader by providing extra assistance in the form of footnotes.<sup>3</sup> On the first page, immediately after Mrs. Ramsay's first words in the opening paragraph, he adds, as a footnote: «Words in quotation marks convey in traditional fiction what the characters think. But such direct quotation is used most sparingly in this novel; they are most scattered and incomplete» (287). After the parenthetical insertion of a statement («here Mr. Ramsay would straighten his back...») into a long passage where thought-streams are presented at some length, Kong inserts another footnote: «In general words in brackets give the viewpoint or perspective of the omnipotent narrator. Parentheses are utilized in many ways in the novel» (289). To make clear to the reader that it is Mrs. Ramsay who is thinking, there is yet another footnote: «From this sentence onwards till the end of the paragraph, we have Mrs. Ramsay's views and impressions of Tansley» (291). All these are ostensibly efforts made to ensure that the reader will be *comfortable* following what was, for many, an innovative narrative method in the Chinese context.

It is of some interest to note the lengths that translators could go to cushion the shock that experimentalist fiction (like the stream-of-consciousness novel) imposes on the reader of translations. Li Wenjun's translation of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (Li 1982) is a rather typical, though extreme, example of unusual methods of narration being removed or downplayed. In the first chapter (Benjy's story) alone, a total of 137 footnotes are added by Li, the majority of them indicating

3. Kong Fanyun, *Hang xiang dengta*. The other two translations referred to in this article are those by Qu Shijiang (1993) and Song Deming (1998).

where temporal shifts in Benjy's stream of thought occur, between several important dates within the twenty-eight years from 1900 to 1928 —these include the day Benjy was christened, the day of his sister Caddy's marriage, the day of his grandma's death, the day being narrated («the present: 7 April, 1928»), and so on. The translated story, as a result, becomes more readable, in a way that the original *The Sound in the Fury* is not. Incidentally, scholars of Faulkner's Italian translations have also noted the way in which the modernist novelist's narratives have generally been regularized or normalized. In particular, non-standard punctuation has been revised so as to conform to readers' conventional expectations. While this assists the reader in understanding Faulkner's text, the detrimental effects on the presentation of Benjy's and Quentin's consciousnesses are equally obvious (Zozri, 1998: 28-30). Other than punctuation, one notices the elimination of (1) repetition of words and images, (2) extensively used parentheses, (3) personal pronouns where nouns would be preferred, (4) compound words à la Joyce, and (5) Black American dialects. In the European versions of Faulkner's novels, strategies were calculated to smoothen readers' reception of some of the most abstruse fictional works of the twentieth century. In the process of removing the disorienting aspects of style in these novels, though, what is distinctly Faulknerian is also removed.

### «Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes»

Though debatable, it has been argued, most fervently by Auerbach, that the stream-of-consciousness novel represents the climax of Western realism. With the narrator receding almost completely into the background and the characters' thoughts presented without intervention, this fictional genre, it is said, shows what is ultimately real by going beyond surfaces and appearances. Flourishing on the basis of theories of the mind (by William James) and mental time (Henri Bergson), this genre allows the reader to go inside characters' minds, and share their thoughts and feelings as readers hitherto have not been able to. Sympathetic identification with literary characters becomes direct and unmediated through the processes of internalization; this represents a step forward from the realist masterpieces of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries like *Pamela*, *Bleak House* and *Madame Bovary*. At its moments of greatest success, the stream of consciousness novel permits a conflation of the reader's consciousness with the consciousness of characters. That reader, however, is the reader of the original text, not the reader of the translation.

At the end of section 5, Part 1, of *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe, the young painter who is a close friend of Mrs. Ramsay —the hostess of the party that is the focus of Part 1 of the novel as well as its «spiritual» center— is introduced for the first time. As Mrs. Ramsay looks at her across the lawn, she ruminates on her facial features:

the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded (Mrs. Ramsay); she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily's picture. Lily's picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry [...] (Woolf, 1927: 17)

This reference is repeated on four other occasions. The second time when it appears, again before the party, Mrs. Ramsay seems to have altered her view somewhat, believing that Lily's little problem may not be so serious after all: «And now,» she said, thinking that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it [...]» (26)

Near the end of the party, the narrator, who seldom steps in, again makes reference to Lily's Chinese eyes, unwittingly confirming for the reader Mrs. Ramsay's earlier observations. S/he notes her Chinese eyes while presenting her own inner thoughts as she observes the young philosopher William Bankes's chauvinistic views on the fishing industry: «But she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how (Bankes) sneered at women, "can't paint, can't write," why should I help him to relieve himself?» (91)

The narrator is also responsible for the two final references in the novel to Lily's «*little* puckered face and her *little* Chinese eyes» (104, 157; italics mine). In the twice-used word «*little*,» he reveals his acquiescence in Mrs. Ramsay's bias. The last instance occurs near the end of the novel, in Part 3, where after an unstated number of years, the house where the party was held has become deserted and Mrs. Ramsay has died. Only Lily Briscoe returns to the house to complete her painting, begun years ago, and watches (with her Chinese eyes!) the Ramsay family making the projected journey to the lighthouse. Virginia Woolf's point is clear: she wants the detail about the Chinese face to be closely associated with Lily Briscoe.

That the Chinese reader of the translation should feel uncomfortable, if not repelled, because Lily's «Chinese eyes» are said to be the main obstacle to her finding a husband clues us to a more general problem concerning readers' reception of translated realist fiction. The effects of the realist method has been described thus by George Levine's (1995: 240) definition: «(this is) a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself» The key phrases in this definition are «human sympathy» and «reality itself». First, even today sympathetic identification remains in many ways still the dominant mode in which reading fiction is carried on, despite the birth of a new generation of readers who are familiar with postmodern texts and even hypertexts in the present-day world of cybernetics. Of a conventional genre like the realist novel, this is even more true. Second, by their very nature, translations call attention to the target *language* in addition to the *reality* being inscribed.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the biased references to «Chinese eyes» in *To the Lighthouse*, we have a fascinating instance of how the reader's sympathetic identification with a character (encouraged by the language used —Chinese in this case) can be ruthlessly shattered when his attention is drawn to an unpleasant feature he, as a Chinese person, possesses. The «realist aesthetic» is punctured in translation.

4. Language is an important element in modernist fiction. It does not serve to point to reality in a mimetic way. Language becomes existence itself; it is a metaphor of experience. Such is the innovative use of language in works by an entire generation of modernists. Their works often contain pure signifiers without signifieds. How can they be translated?

The problems related to the reception of translated realist fiction, purportedly representing the Real, have broad implications. The crux of the matter is that in translations, one language is used to capture the reality normally expressed by another. Since Sapir and Whorf it has been commonplace to assume that the world is created through language, and that one language presents one reality.<sup>5</sup> If, however, reality is inevitably mediated through language, how can the reality of the original text remain unaffected in translation? The experience of a reader of a translation of *To the Lighthouse*—different not only from that of the native reader of the original, but also from that of a foreign reader of the original—points to the incongruities in the world presented that are disturbing for him, and this shows up in ways other than references to the «eyes» of Lily Briscoe. By comparison, the temporal and spatial dislocations are a lot more manageable. On the whole, in theorizing about translation reception, it is more than just a question of readers of translations not responding easily to the appeal made by realist fiction to their sense of social and historical reality. In effect, they have to construct the Real in radically different terms than the readers of fiction in the «original» language.

### Reading as Border-Crossing

In the case of original literary writings, the author can easily make use of the readers' expectations (of genre and conventions, among other things) and, by not tempering substantially with these, he is able to achieve some degree of rapport with them. In the case of a translation, by contrast, because the readers belong to a different linguistic and cultural community, the path to smooth reception becomes blocked. This, as we have seen, has been the cause of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that characterize the reader's response to a translated realist novel. The translator is acting in the capacity of an author when he attempts to ease the passage, to alleviate some (not all) of the discomfort, and to enhance as best he can the pleasure of reading. Bereft of the emotional benefits of romantic identification, one can well ask if one learns anything from reading translated fiction. What kind of knowledge can be produced—or is reading such translations a self-defeating activity?

The difficulty with translated literary texts can be understood with reference to the theory of literary communication recently expounded by Piotr Sadowski. According to him, the reader's construction of meaning is to be differentiated not only from the retrieval of the original author's intended meaning, but also from the extraction of information from a text. The physical elements of language (like grammar and lexis) as perceived in a narrative (or other literary texts) only provide the ground for such an effort to construct meaning. An understanding is finally arrived at when the reader brings his own knowledge of the world to bear on the linguistic properties. Such knowledge is conjured up as mental associations which pass through a reader's mind when he attempts to make sense of a text. What

5. According to the famous Sapir-Whorf «linguistic relativity principle», language gives shape and structure to human perceptions (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1921).

appears significant is that the store of knowledge available to different individuals and communities is not the same. That being the case, when the reader is dealing with a translation he is necessarily handicapped because, although he is familiar with the language used, the language now refers to a world to which it is not directly connected. He can make use of the mental associations that he has in interpreting the translation, but only partly so. Sadowski describes this process of interaction between reader and text:

[T]he text does not contain meaning, but it can provoke or suggest it by providing the reader with necessary stimuli. What the reader possesses in turn is the potential of meaning in the form of registers of para-information, but these will not be activated unless triggered by text. The meaning of the text is therefore neither solely in the text nor solely in the reader, but is a product of both. (Sadowski, 1999: 61)

When a text becomes undecipherable, then, this is because the reader cannot handle the information conveyed by to him by the translation, he cannot handle the rupture with his own knowledge of the world, his own worldview, preferences and predilections. To put it in simpler terms, if we talk of two kinds of reader competence, the linguistic and the cultural, then in a translation it is inevitable that the latter can never be adequate (unlike the former). Alternatively, it can be said that linguistic barriers can be overcome, but not so the «mental» or «psychological» barriers existing in the mind of the reader. The difference from the reading of a literary work by a native reader cannot be greater: in this case the author's and the reader's linguistic and cultural maps overlap, and understanding occurs.

However, the gap between the reader's «world» (of knowledge) and the world of the translated text promises to be one is that productive; the lack of full communication can be a fertile one—if one might borrow feminist terminology here. The reading subject may feel insecure in the face of the incomprehensible, but insecurity is also a precondition for growth—the Self depends on the Other to get itself constituted. Since one's identity is defined through language and discursive activities, a translation provides a fecund linguistic environment for this to occur (just like physical or social environments impact on the growth of personal identity). The reading consciousness, in moving forward, learns to re-create as it encounters new elements in the text. In reading translations, the reader is forced to be active in imputing new connotations to words he has been used to in a different way. Since the distance is great between the author's design and the cultural presuppositions (and prejudices) of the (foreign) reader, the latter has no choice but seek to bridge the gap as he reads on. In such an interaction with the translated text, at times the Other (difference) is transformed into the Same, while at other times the Same becomes converted into the Other.

Reading a translation can be characterized as a «border-crossing experience» (Hicks, 1991: xxvi) in that the reader moves back and forth between the two semi-otic systems embedded in the text; in that way this is a form of cultural contact. In the face of the Other, it might be thought that the reader may either resort to simple assimilation, so that on outside system becomes absorbed into his own, or suc-

cumb to the power of the foreign, allowing what is different to loom large and dominate. That is not necessarily true. There is also a third possibility, whereby a *constant* re-negotiation of boundaries —instead of a rigidifying of boundaries— occurs. The reader goes outside, as it were, and returns, to go out again, in a «dynamic, non-destructive (and) balancing relationship between cultures in contact» (Schwab, 1996: 45). In reading foreign literature, too, the reader confronts the Other, but basically he leaves his own world behind as he embarks on his journey. In that sense, for the reader all foreign literature is experienced as travel writing. The difference in the case of translated foreign literature is that the reader «stays home» even while as he «goes abroad».<sup>6</sup>

In a translated text like the opening sections of *To the Lighthouse* which we have examined, we see a sequence of collisions between cultures (or «ways of looking at the world») being enacted as the reader moves along. These collisions highlight the boundaries, pose a challenge to them, but never completely dissolve them. The reader is poised between two cultures, much like the reader of the fantastic fiction which, according to Tzvetan Todorov (1973), comes into being when the reader hesitates between two interpretations —the natural and the supernatural— of an unusual event. In similar terms, a translation is a text in which the reader hesitates between two cultures, between two different socio-historical semiotic systems. The feeling of unease, even frustration, is underscored thus by Gabriele Schwab:

[A]lterity is not given and may therefore not be «found» in a text, but appears only as an effect of frustrated expectations regarding the aesthetic norms, tastes, and cultural prejudices that readers derive from their own tradition and history of reading [...] As works pass from one cultural or historical context to another, their meaning, as well as their alterity, changes accordingly because they will be generated within a new horizon of expectations. (Schwab, 1996:18)

Schwab does not have translated texts in mind, but perhaps her argument is made even more valid when translations are taken into consideration.

The application of reader-response theories to the study of translations has for long been neglected. This is important because it reveals much about the way translated texts are received, not by a culture or a nation (the focus of polysystem theorists), but by the individual. The complications involved in reading a translation occur precisely because of the existence of different referential codes that the author and the reader deploy, between which the translator can never mediate successfully. The codes of the three parties simply do not overlap. The meaning of a translated text vaporizes in the conflict between these codes. Of course, here the translator who translates into the mother-tongue need not be at a disadvantage over the trans-

6. There is also the question of how we can describe the experience of a reader who reads a translation in his second language—very often English, the twentieth-century lingua franca and the language of the majority of translations. Suffice it to say that, in these cases, the reader will be twice removed from the original text, and becomes doubly estranged in the face of two Others, finding at times even the Other othered.

lator translating into an acquired second language. While the former stays closer to the reader (since both belong to the same community), the latter is very much on the author's side. In either case, however, any complete code-sharing among the three parties is totally out of the question, and consequently none can exercise complete control over the interpretive process. It can be that attempts at a unified interpretation often come to a dead end with a translation, but as an Othered text, it necessitates a different mode of text-processing which we, used to more conventional habits of reading, often fail to recognize for what it is.

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