THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER
IN EZRA POUND'S TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract

The main drive behind Ezra Pound's translating efforts was to present the American readership with literary experiences that were remote both in time and in place. The purpose was, on the one hand, to make readers aware of the existence of distinct and distant literatures, and, on the other hand, to revitalize the American literature with the help of the infusion of such foreign and sometimes exotic literary manifestations. An innovator in the field of translation, Pound drew away from the domesticating strategies of the time, which had a tendency to efface and appropriate the difference presented by other literatures, and, acting as a true visible translator, strived to emphasize Otherness with all its mystery and exotic flavour.

Keywords: translation, rewriting, domestication, foreignness, inventor

Introduction

From times immemorial, translation has been an effective tool for connecting people, cultures and ideologies. The importance and influence such an activity has had both on source and target context is manifold. For the source literature/culture (literature understood as a subsystem of the larger 'system of systems' which culture is deemed to be), it has helped disseminate the values and concepts which are at the core of the said culture, introducing a new image into the framework of a given target context. For the target literature/culture, it has represented a factor of enrichment or, on the contrary, a means to impose a certain ideology on the target audience. The implications are far more complex than that, but what remains certain is that each act of translation is a two-faced mirror, which reflects images with various degrees of distortion.

Translators' choices

Translating is first a re-reading and then, as Lefevere claims it, a rewriting. And "rewriting manipulates, and it is effective" (Lefevere, 1992: 9). It draws its influential powers from the fact that it enables the image of a certain author to go beyond the boundaries of his/her own culture. The reception such an author and his/her writings enjoy in the target culture depends on many factors, and here intervenes the manipulative aspect, of which the most significant example is the translator's handling of the work he/she has to perform. Every choice a translator makes in selecting the works he/she intends to translate is a statement, a reflection of his/her translating agenda. Such an agenda comprises mainly aspects which may be deemed as being of a personal, 'individual' nature, including his/her personal ideology, preference for one author or another or for one genre or another, but it can not totally overlook 'external' factors, such as the mainstream ideology of the period he/she is translating in, the poetics of the period, the expectations of the intended readership and even the translator's attitude towards such poetics and ideology. Ezra Pound is an example of how a translator's choice can initiate a new reception context of a foreign literature in the target culture and can challenge the traditional stereotypes in assessing such literature. This paper intends to analyze a few aspects related to Pound's translating agenda and the influence it had on the image of the Other as mirrored in the literary context of his time. The paper will mainly draw on ideas promoted by the Manipulation School and culture-related theories in translation studies.

Pound and the context of his translations

No translation can be performed out of context, or assessed in a de-contextualized manner. As we have already seen, the selections made by a translator are deeply dependent on the various types of context: temporal, ideological, spatial etc. Therefore, Pound's concern with the translation activity should also be seen in the particular context of its production. The interest he took in translation went beyond the mere intention of introducing his contemporaries to new cultures or to civilizations that, because of the large span of time, had began to fade in the contemporary consciousness. It was also an attempt to revitalize the poetry of his time with new transfusions of imagination coming from times gone by and remote places. He attempted thus to establish a dialogue between the present and the past, with the present capturing as much as possible from the knowledge and experience of the past. His enterprise is best expressed by Ricoeur: "What did these people with a passion for translation expect from their desire? What one of them called the broadening of the horizon of their own language – together with what they have all called formation, *Bildung,* that is to say, both configuration and education, and, if I may put it that way, the discovery of their own language and of its resources which

have been left to lie fallow" (2006: 21). Pound's endeavour was directed towards the re-shaping of the cultural background of his time.

The literatures of the world reflected in his translations cover two axes: temporal and spatial. The Other is remote not only in space, but also in time, the intention being that of extracting the essence of the whole cultural thesaurus of humanity, by means of which to place the foundations of a new civilization. At times, the same work of literature belonged to the two coordinates simultaneously, as was the case with the Chinese poetry of the 10th century or the Provençal poetry of the 12th century.

In order to achieve his goals, he needed to detach himself from the domesticating translating trends of his time. The main tendency was to present the readers with a text that completely annihilated the differences (of whatever order), erased the borders, 'killed' the translator, denying altogether the existence of the Other; a text perfectly fitting the cultural framework of the target community. Instead Pound was founding his translating theory on the idea of difference, on the idea of 'borrowing' from the other cultures what the Anglo-American one lacked and needed in order to get a new life. And before proposing such borrowings, he had to present the audience with an 'offer' and indicate why such an offer was useful for being sponged. Thus, he deliberately chose to perform non-fluid translations, using the terms of Venuti, and thus make his contemporary readers aware that what they had in front of their eyes was bearer of values and concepts different from what they used to deal with: "It is conceivable the poetry of far-off time and place requires a translation not only of word and of spirit, but of 'accompaniment', that is that the modern audience must in some measure be aware of the mental content of the older audience, and of what these others drew from certain fashions of thought and speech" (Pound quoted in Venuti, 2005: 192). Through the Godlike powers he undertook, Pound tried to resurrect 'these Others' and make them speak to the modern audience, introducing them and the past culture they were standing for.

Ignoring the domesticating strategies fashionable at the time and embracing the foreignizing ones, he hoped to produce a stronger impact and a presumably greater influence on his readers. In so doing, Pound was initiating a movement away from the established translation canons of the period. In Lefevere's terms, he took the path of the subversive translator, undertaking the risks of going against the mainstream poetics. Modernism had already begun to challenge the supremacy of the transparent, domesticating discourse of English translations. It was a complete switch from the prevalent Victorian perspective, according to which foreign texts had to be approached so as to perfectly match the constructs and principles of the time of translation reception. Certain Modernists considered translation an act of interpretation, in which the historical context played a significant part. Pound took such views a step further and besides undertaking this act of interpretation, he attempted to impose the image of the other as the Other. The foreignness of the

translated texts could preserve their status as 'foreign' only if they presented themselves as a break from the established set of values of the target culture, indicating a clear cultural difference.

The starting point for Pound's preoccupation with translation was the position of the English-speaking readership at the beginning of the 20th century. This involved their luggage of knowledge with respect to foreign cultures or the lack thereof. It is from there that Pound started to draw a different image of such cultures, as was the case with Latin and Greek literatures, or altogether to create an image for almost ignored ones, as was the case with Chinese and Japanese literatures. "In translation, the foreignness of the foreign text can only be what currently appears 'foreign' in the target-language culture, in relation to dominant domestic values, and therefore only as values that are marginal in various degrees, whether because they are residual, survivals of previous cultural forms in the target language or because they are emergent, transformations of previous forms that are recognizably different" (Venuti, 2005: 203). This was exactly what drove Pound in selecting the texts for his translations. "Residual" was, for example, *The Seafarer*, which Pound translated in his own style, in keeping with his, so to say, secular interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon poem. "Emergent", at least in the American culture, were the pieces of literature translated from Chinese and Japanese, exponents of the Asian continent, to whom the American readers were just being introduced. "The transformations of the previous forms" ranged from the lyric of the Provençal poets to Greek and Latin literatures, or Italian poetry, mainly represented by Cavalcanti.

The strategies he used in emphasizing the foreignness of the texts he translated were of the most diverse and depended on the type of text approached. At the beginning of his "career" as a translator, he was particularly fond of the poetry of the Provençal troubadours. Pound first promoted a strategy that approached translation in terms of mere "makeshift", which he explained as a limitation on his part to completely recreate the original (without knowing it, he thus sided with the trend of opinion according to which equivalence is not only hard to obtain, but altogether inexistent): "It is not to be expected that I can do in ten years what it took two hundred troubadours a century and a half to accomplish; for the full understanding of Arnaut's system of echoes and blending there is no substitute for the original" (Pound, 1968: 115). Later, he moved from these exegetic translations to what he called "interpretative" ones, such as *Na Audiart* or *Marvoil*, which are examples of more creative translations, "cases where the 'translator' is definitely making a new poem fall simply in the domain of original writing" (ibid., 200). Recovering the Provençal poetics through translation, Pound made the American readership acquainted with a distinct notion of love, *l'amour courtois,* and with a different class of poetry, a successful mixture of literature and music.

Of relevant importance was the influence of the Provençal poets not only on the American sensitivity of the time, but also on Pound's own *ars poetica.* The

troubadours provided him with a model of poetic originality[1]*,* which was to become the mark of his literary achievement. The means by which he managed to maintain both the unique and distinct flavour of the Provençal poetry were his efforts to render into English the balance between literature and musicality, the main feature of the troubadours' lyric. He also resorted to archaizing, a method he would continue to use in his further translations, such as *The Seafarer* or Cavalcanti's poems. Furthermore, the titles of the poems, the first contact the reader has with the text and which sometimes drives the reader to it or drives him/her away from it, are maintained in Provençal. An illustrative example of the strategies indicated above could be this first stanza of the poem titled *Can Chai la Fueilla*: *When sere leaf falleth / from the high forked tips/ And cold appaleth / dry osier, haws and hips, / Coppice he strips / of birds, that now none calleth. / Fordel my lips / in love have, though he galleth.*

The translations he performed from Provençal are among his most experimental; he preserved his surprising translation strategies being at the same time fully aware that they were contradicting the current tendencies of translation into English at the time. He developed a heterogenic type of discourse that was not favoured by the dominant poetic values, according to which "the language must be characterized by perspicuity, for the sole reason that the emotion is not conveyable to reader or hearer unless it be clearly expressed" (Homberger, 1972: 78). He also tried to imitate the sound effects and rhythms of the Provençal poets as can be seen from the example above. As a reaction to the negative feedback he faced for his translation, he indicated that the sense of awkwardness came from the cultural remoteness separating the troubadours and the modern readers, a remoteness which he could not overlook in his translation. Pound was perfectly aware of the 'quaintness', as he called it, of the results of his work and of the reactions he would get from his audience. That is why he explained such a reaction from the perspective of the different constraints he and the poets he translated had to face: "In extenuation of the language of my verses, I would point out that the Provençals were not constrained by the modern literary sense. Their restraints were the tune and the rhyme-scheme, they were not constrained by a need for certain qualities of writing, without which no modern poet is complete or satisfactory" (Pound, 1968: 115). Although he mentions here only the constraints related to the system of poetics and writing standards, Pound's statement gives a relevant account of the limitations to which a translator submits himself in order to reach at least a minimum degree of acceptability. Pound was a 'rebellious' translator, but he was well-aware that, if his translations had been strongly rejected, he would have failed to achieve his particular goals.

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[1] The name *trobaire* has its origins in the Provençal verb *trobar*, which means 'to invent, to find'. Translating the 'inventors' of a new poetics, Pound was turning himself into an inventor of a new method of approaching the art of translating.

The impression of foreignness transmitted by his translations is not due to the faithfulness with which Pound approached the source texts (given the temporal and geographical remoteness of the translated texts, faithfulness in itself would have brought a significant degree of exoticism), but to the fact that he defied the literary canons in English (Venuti, 2005: 200). Of course, he put at work a similar attitude also in the case of Cavalcanti's poems. Due to the same strategies he applied in the case of the troubadours (archaizing, complicated syntax, polysemy, sophisticated sound effects), the poetry of Cavalcanti seemed to 20th century readers to bear the signs of a complete remoteness, which set it as different from the modern reality. Again, he fully assumed the errors of his translation and indicated that the work he had performed was only an attempt to open doors for the readers who would wish to dig deeper, to find 'where the treasure lies': "As to the atrocities of my translation, all that can be said in excuse is that they are, I hope, for the most part intentional, and committed with the aim of driving the reader's perception further into the original than it would without them have penetrated" (Pound, 1968: 172).

In emphasizing the divergence transmitted by Cavalcanti's poetry, Pound challenged the naturalizing translating trends in his culture, which presented the foreign text not as a translation, but as an "original", leaving the reader as content as possible for not being shaken out of his/her comfortable reading habits. Pound dared to challenge his readers and, in Schleiermacher's terms, instead of bringing the text to the readers, he chose to bring the readers to the text. The readers were thus confronted with a new aesthetics, a new or at least a distinct vision on love, on the relationships involved by romantic exchanges as were lived in the 12th century Italy. There was not so much of a shock, as an awareness of the difference.

The shock, however, represented the translation of *The Seafarer,* which was a shock both for readers and critics. Despite the fact that it was a 'residual' form of the same culture, the Anglo-Saxon poem represented an exotic world for the modern readers due, as in the case of the troubadours, to the span of time separating the moment of its production and that of its re-translation. In the hero of the poem, Pound had found another persona, the atmosphere of personal alienation, solitary life and spiritual anguish being most appealing to him. This choice came as a surprise first of all for coming from a poet totally immersed in his interests in the poetry of Southern Europe. The surprise continued with the intrepid manner in which he modified the original text, eliminating all the references to the religious sentiments that are an integral part of the poem. The text did not obey the rules of accuracy demanded of every translation, a point much debated upon at the publication of the translation. But the so-called errors he was accused of were not necessarily philological, if not an expression of his personal interpretation of the source text. Some of his solutions are well-known and indicated in any study dealing with Pound's translation of *The Seafarer*. Such are his translations of *englum* as 'English' and not as 'angels', of *byrig* as 'berries', not as 'town', of *thruh* as 'through, in' instead of 'tomb'.

As happens with any literary work and even more with a translation, especially in the English-speaking environment, where translations normally occupy a marginal position in the literary system, Pound's translation, too, was assessed according to the norms of acceptability in the target language. Unfortunately, in his case, certain factors of acceptability registered negative reactions. It failed, for example, to meet the requirements of intentionality (the text was not perceived as was intended by the translator, as an example of glorious times long gone that could represent an impetus for the moderns' actions), informativity (the language used by Pound was not exactly what the readers expected and all the abundance of archaisms made the text fairly unintelligible to the modern readers) or intertextuality (Pound's translation was preceded by other translations, that had already set a certain context of reception for his readership). Although the text belonged to the same culture, the readers did not recognize it as familiar both because of the discourse, which they found totally different from what they expected to encounter in a text that was part of their spiritual heritage, and because of the new values and the new perspective cast by the translator's interpretation on the ancient text.

Later on, when Pound discovered the Asian literature, he found a link between the Anglo-Saxon poem and the early Chinese literature, especially the poetry of Li Po, an imperial poet of the 12th century. The American readers were somewhat familiar with the Asian literature due to the translations performed by late-Victorian scholars such as Herbert Giles or James Legge, but their approach was domesticating to the highest degree. Having as a starting point a pre-established image of the Asian literature in the eyes of his modern readers, Pound set off to enrich this image even more, trying at the same time to maintain a balance between the exoticism of the foreign culture and the existing familiar features of the same culture from the target culture perspective.

The idea was to indicate to what degree the perspective on life of the English-speaking communities could see itself mirrored into that of such a culturally distant society. What Pound attempted to achieve was a recognition of the familiar in the Other. The link he had discovered between the Anglo-Saxon poem and the poetry of Li Po went beyond the similarities of poetic strategies. He understood clearly that the main ideological difference resided in the fact that the Chinese poems "implied an imperial culture, complete and ordered, whereas *The Seafarer* was not the product of an empire, but of a more truly primitive state of social development" (Xie, 1999: 236). Despite such a difference, the protagonists of the two poems resembled more than merely in their discursive habits; they also revealed themselves with an incredible sincerity and frankness. The two poems speak to each other as in an inter-cultural dialogue and reflect each other as in a two-faced mirror: "I once got a man to start translating the *Seafarer* into Chinese. It came out almost immediately into Chinese verse, with two solid ideograms in each half-line. Apart from the *Seafarer,* I know no other European poems of the period that you

can hang up with the "Exile's Letter" of Li Po, displaying the West on a par with the Orient" (Pound, 1960: 51).

In 1915, when Pound published *Cathay*, a set of 14 poems translated from Chinese, it represented a total break from the existing American poetics. He performed these translations based on notes taken by the American scholar Ernest Fenollosa, who, while living and working in Japan, had transcribed a number of Chinese poems with the help of a Professor Mori and a Mr. Ariga. Although Eliot stated that "Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time", his translations were subject to controversy. The discussions mainly centred on the idea whether Pound's Chinese translations were a total literary success or a literary fraud. That, partly because Pound did not speak Chinese at the time of the translation and the mere idea of a translator's interpreting the source text was simply inconceivable. Nevertheless, he set off on this intrepid voyage, granting himself the right to modify the texts, which were, in their turn, not originals, but already mediated by the interference of professor Fenollosa. The degree of manipulation seems higher in this instance than in other cases, but one has to take into account the context of the translation: Pound's intention in carrying out such a translation, which is that of revealing to his contemporaries "the new Greece" he had found in China; then his 'history' as a translator, which proved his preference for 'interpretative' translations, subversive for the literary system for which he was translating, but nonetheless valid from the standpoint of his translation agenda.

Conclusions

Every single text Pound selected for translation was deeply coherent with the rest of his work. He was a conscious translator, with a profound sense of the responsibility he undertook for such an activity, as may be noticed from his numerous reflections on translation. Eliot's statement according to which "Pound is the inventor of the Chinese poetry for our time" contains two references that deserve special attention and that may be extended to refer also to other translations signed by Pound. First, he said 'the inventor', not the translator or the imitator. It is a complete turn from the traditional role assigned to the translator, who was, under no circumstances, to assume any position of visibly interfering with the original text. Therefore, such a statement gives Pound the role of a creator, the weight and responsibility of the original writer. It is true that the implication is fairly complex: if he is the inventor of the Chinese literature for the Western culture, what are the consequences both for the source and for the target communities? Does the Chinese environment recognize itself in the image created on its behalf? On the other hand, Eliot's declaration mentioned 'for our time', which is to say that other generations may have other opinions on the matter and may create their own perspective on the Other.

Although Pound did not manage to turn himself into a trendsetter as far as translation strategies are concerned, what he did manage to do was change the perspective of looking into the others. Again, when Eliot stated that he influenced the Greeks or the Anglo-Saxons or the Chinese, what he meant was probably that he influenced the idea his English-speaking readers had about the said cultures and literatures. An exoticizing translator, Pound reflected in his translations and in his poetry the image of the other not as alien, but simply as different.

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