

BEYOND THE DOMESTIC AND THE FOREIGN: TRANSLATION AS DIALOGUE

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I

Translation as a theme is today considered important enough, in the world of Indian Writing in English and beyond, for a writer like Amitav Ghosh to make a professional translator-interpreter, commanding six languages, the protagonist and prime mover of *The Hungry Tide*, his novel of 2004 located in Bengal¹. However, the very fact that Ghosh brings to the fore a translator-*interpreter* should already alert us to the need to define and delimit what we mean by translation, before we begin to pronounce on its nature. Thus, for the purposes of this paper I shall be referring only to translation (written), not interpretation (spoken). Further, I shall be confining myself to literary, not institutional, legal, technical or audiovisual translation; and, within the broad area of literary translation, for the most part to work done on prose fiction and essays. My main concern will be to explore the relationship between translation and original, and to consider how, in today's globalised world, that relationship can most usefully be conceived for purposes of present and future practice².

II

I begin with an observation which may seem obvious but is not always made: *translation is a necessity*, because without it, for those who do not read the original language a book simply does not exist - or, at best, is available only through hearsay, through the reductive filters of summaries, reviews or stray critical comments by those who do know the source language. For instance, while many well-known Indian writers have been translated into French, both from English and from Indian languages, as critically acclaimed and best-selling an author as Manju Kapur has not, and thus her work, for most Francophone readers, remains a closed book. The time-lag between the appearance of original and translation, which varies between language pairs, can impact on the reception of a writer's work. The eminent American critic Harold Bloom believes that the greatest living novelist is the 1998 Nobel laureate, Portugal's José Saramago. However, Bloom does not read Portuguese, and is dependent on English versions which are at this moment two novels behind the original, and thus neither he nor we can yet know if his evaluation of Saramago's latest productions is as high as his rating of their predecessors. Latecomer status, though, is not a fatality. Saramago has a Spanish wife, Pilar del Río, who, we are told, translates as her partner writes, and today his novels appear simultaneously, or almost so, in Portuguese and Spanish. Indeed, for his latest novel, *As Intermitências da Morte* (which as yet lacks an English title but may be provisionally denominated *Death's Intervals*), Saramago went a step further and premiered the Spanish, Catalan and Italian versions in Portugal just a fortnight after launching the original in Brazil,

orchestrating a ceremony in Lisbon with readings from his book in four different languages. A comparable parallel release is, as I write, being planned for the English original and Hindi translation of Vikram Chandra's much-awaited novel *Sacred Games*³.

The notion of an inauguration, on the writer's home territory, of original and translation(s) as effective equals highlights the question of relationship between source text and translated text, original and translation. Is a translation equal to the original? Can it ever be as good? Can the relative merits of source and target texts be extrapolated from market decisions and criteria? Or - perhaps especially in a market-dominated environment - is translation a necessary evil, a reflection of a fallen state of linguistic and cultural fragmentation? In the English-speaking world, the King James Bible has traditionally enjoyed a special prestige, with its defenders often treating it as if it were an English original. The much-praised English-language Standard Edition of Sigmund Freud's psychological *oeuvre*, published between 1953 and 1974 under the supervision of James Strachey, has a special status in the annals of psychoanalysis:⁴ it came out when no full German-language version existed, and, for instance, the standard Portuguese translation, produced in Brazil, is based on that English edition and not on Freud's original.

III

One of the great minds of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin - a name cited with reverence in Translation Studies circles even though he produced only a sliver of reflections on the subject - has put forward philosophical arguments in favour of an ontological equality of source and translated texts. As a recent commentator, Diego Fernández, has observed, "human languages, in Benjamin's conception of language, maintain a relationship of affinity - not through being like each other or similar to each other, but through kinship"⁵. Translation thus becomes a matter not of similarity or identity (translated text copies source text) but of affinity in difference (translated text and source text are two objects, separate yet akin and equal in value). In his early, esoteric text "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916), Benjamin affirms: "Translation attains its full meaning in the realisation that every evolved language ... can be considered as a translation of all the others"⁶, perceiving translation as a succession not of similarities but of transformations, and thus pointing towards a vision of source and translated text as ontological equals.

Benjamin's second and better-known essay, "The Task of the Translator" (1923), further develops that insight - be it noted, in a context of translational practice, for this text originally appeared as Benjamin's preface to his own translation (French to German) of Charles Baudelaire's poem-sequence *Tableaux Parisiens*⁷. In this essay, he argues against the idea of a translation as a mere simulacrum of the original, adumbrating a counter-model of difference in equality: "a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel"⁸. This, certainly, points towards a notion of translation as dialogue. Indeed, such a dialogic model may be extrapolated from the peculiar textual nature of Benjamin's own greatest work, namely the vast and unfinished posthumous study of nineteenth-century Paris known in German as *Das Passagen-Werk*, in French as *Le Livre des Passages*, and in English as *The Arcades Project*. The German and French versions - though not the English - of Benjamin's book are, in different ways, hybrid objects. A large part of Benjamin's manuscript actually consists of blocks of quotations from other writers in, mostly, French; these quotations, generally brief, are arranged in sections, and are interspersed throughout with

segments of critical commentary in German, by Benjamin himself. His German editors have chosen not to translate the French passages, so that the German edition can only be understood in full by a bilingual reader - as if, provocatively, arguing the impossibility of translation by refusing it. The French edition, by contrast, presents itself as a translation, but swathes of it, interleaved with the translated material, in reality form a French-language original. The result is an unintended but eloquent graphic illustration on Benjamin's part of the ontological equality of translation (French) and original (German)⁹.

Interestingly, in the field of contemporary Indian writing something comparable will happen with a translation that does not yet exist, namely the future German version of Vikram Seth's recent work of non-fiction, *Two Lives* (2005). Seth's book, which narrates the life-stories of two of his relatives, respectively Indian and German-Jewish, taking in such major events and cataclysms as Indian independence, World War II, and, crucially, the Shoah, replicates large amounts of its source material in the form of "realia" - that is, textual material pre-existing the text in which it is inserted. The narrative in Seth's own voice is interspersed with the texts of original documents such as letters, most of which are translations done by Seth himself from the German - thus, neither into nor out of his mother tongue, which is Hindi, but into his second language (English) from a third one (German). This will certainly raise complex issues of translation ethics for Seth's German translator - above all given the sensitivity of the historical material. The German version will emerge as a mirror-image or *Doppelgänger* of the English text, with the realia restored in their authentic German and framed by commentary translated from English. Meanwhile, the English original of *Two Lives* is in its structure curiously comparable to that of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*. Benjamin's book appears, in the original, on the page in two languages and is thus visibly discontinuous. Seth's alternates original and translated text in the same language, thus concealing its heterogeneity and yet, just under the surface, striking a blow, intended or not, for the Benjaminian notion of translation and original as texts of equal status, "as fragments are part of a vessel".

Benjamin's vision of equality between source and translated texts is closely bound up with an antithesis which, though hardly a new invention, has received crucial attention in Translation Studies in our day, namely that between the *domestic* and the *foreign*, or, to use the somewhat inelegant prevailing terms, "domestication" and "foreignisation". In "The Task of the Translator", Benjamin approvingly quotes an earlier commentator, Rudolf Pannwitz, who, writing in 1917, said: "Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Greek, Hindi, English. (...) The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be profoundly affected by the foreign tongue. (...) [Rather], he must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language"¹⁰. In this context, Benjamin especially approves Friedrich Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, as being exemplary of Pannwitz's recommended method.

IV

This Benjamin-Pannwitz position looks both forwards and backwards, to Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century and Lawrence Venuti in our day¹¹. In his 1813 essay "On the Different Methods of Translating", Schleiermacher, the translator into German of the complete works of Plato, argued that as far as translation strategy is concerned "there are only two possibilities. Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him"¹². He strongly preferred the former option - i.e. the translator

highlights the otherness of the translated text, by "striving to adhere so closely to the foreign text as his own language allows"¹³. For Schleiermacher, if this method forces the reader to make more effort and may yield translations that appear "harsh and stiff"¹⁴, it is far superior to the other, less demanding approach. The latter, aiming at "lightness and naturalness of style"¹⁵ and seeking to "spare its reader all exertion and toil"¹⁶, smooths over the alien features of the foreign-language text, insouciantly omits or replaces whole passages, and risks occluding the differences between what we would now call source and target languages (and, we should add, the cultures behind them).

Schleiermacher's notion of the "two methods" has been taken up by a whole school of latter-day translation theorists who have named them, respectively, "foreignisation" (seen as good) and "domestication" (seen as bad). The high priest here is the Italian-American translator and translation scholar Lawrence Venuti, who is famously fierce in his opposition to what Schleiermacher termed "lightness and naturalness" and Venuti himself calls "fluency". For Venuti, a translation should not read as if it were an original, but should bear the visible signs of its translatedness. His essay of 2000, "Neoclassicism and Enlightenment", historically contextualises his position as regards translation into English, arguing that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "witnessed the decisive emergence of *fluency* as the most prevalent strategy" (with Alexander Pope's versions of Homer as the supreme example). Translators' "overriding project", he states, "was to make the foreign recognisably, even splendidly English": "Translation strategies were rarely wedded to a programme for preserving the foreignness of the foreign text. On the contrary, they were guided primarily by domestic values that were assuming cultural dominance"¹⁷. Elsewhere, in a text of 2004, Venuti defines his bipolar terms as follows: "Fluency masks a domestication of the foreign text that is appropriative and potentially imperialistic ... It can be countered by 'foreignising' translation that registers the irreducible differences of the foreign text".¹⁸ He believes that "domestication" remains the dominant mode today, at least in Anglophone cultures, despite the efforts of a minority - to whom Venuti himself has offered consistent ideological support - to advance the rival cause of "foreignisation".

Venuti's aim - to denaturalise translation and ensure it does not become a mere act of textual appropriation - certainly has been and remains laudable as such, as a means of seeking that equality between original and translation to which Benjamin aspired. I nonetheless suggest that the terms "domestication" and "foreignisation", as employed by him and others, may no longer be wholly appropriate in today's rapidly globalising context. It may of course be asked whether the binary opposition implied by Venuti is actually necessary. Thus, the Spanish translation scholar Dora Sales Salvador, writing in 2004, suggests that "in the contradictory yet complementary dialectic between exoticising (foreignising) and familiarising (domesticating), the ideal solution would be to find a medium term, an in-between space, respecting otherness but able to transmit and communicate to the target culture"¹⁹. Inevitably and whatever the ideological positions assumed, there will be a continuum; inevitably, any translation in practice will combine one and the other strategy, in the interests of intelligibility and, indeed, of selling the book and finding and keeping readers. At the same time, though, a given translator will certainly prefer to use one method more frequently than the other, and the question remains as to whether Venuti's terms are the most useful ones.

V

To speak of the "domestic" and the "foreign" appears, to say the least, problematic, at all events for today's global languages such as English or Spanish. Those terms may be

acceptable for Schleiermacher's nineteenth-century Germany (even though it was not then a nation-state) or the Augustan England described by Venuti, but "domestic", derived from Latin "domus" (home), implies that a language has a single "home", which certainly neither Spanish nor English does today²⁰, while to use "foreign" - a term that also carries a heavy juridical baggage - presupposes that the national and the alien, "us" and "them", always diverge along language lines. In the twenty-first century, a novel translated into English will be read not only by native speakers but by non-Anglophone purchasers in, say, Holland or Denmark. Nor do native speakers form a single community that can be called "home". Argentinian readers complain about incomprehensible Mexicanisms in translations into Spanish imported from Mexico. Even an English original can encounter communication barriers when crossing the Atlantic, as the British scholar John Denton has shown for Sue Townsend's novel of 1982 *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 3/4*, a cult best-seller in Britain but far less successful in the US, where its very British cultural codes and slang terms have impeded readers' enjoyment²¹, to the point where Denton even suggests the case points up the need for intralingual translation. A British book, then, can be "foreign" for American readers. Conversely, it is hard to see - at least juridically speaking - how a text translated between Spanish and Catalan (either way) can be considered a "foreign" production for either source or target community; however different some Catalan speakers may see their culture as being from the others of the Spanish state, there is as things stand no Catalan state (unless one counts Andorra) vis-à-vis which a Castilian or Andalusian can objectively be termed a "foreigner". In a similar vein, the translation of an Indian novel written into English into an autochthonous Indian language - say, the Hindi version of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* - could, at least in part, be considered more "authentic" or more "local" than the original, at least where it represent dialogue between characters that, were it "real", would have taken place not in English but in the target language. Here, translation does not domesticate an alien reality but reappropriates a domestic one. In yet another twist, the Standard Edition of Freud, which we have already evoked, has encountered fierce criticism from those like Bruno Bettelheim who object to its "de-Germanisation" of Freud's language in, for instance, replacing the German terms "das Ich" and "das Es" by the Latin words "ego" and "id"²²: this is a case, however, not of Anglicisation but internationalisation, with the implication that Freud's work is neither for German-speakers nor Anglophones, but for (at least Western) humanity in general. Given this multiplicity of real situations which the opposition domestic/foreign seems inadequate to cover, I would suggest, as alternative terms, the *naturalising* and the *dialogic*. Naturalising translation would be that which avoids risks and efforts for its readers, minimising the differences between their own world and that of the translated texts, while dialogic translation would rejoice in the surprises and complexities of intercultural encounter in a globalised world.

VI

From a translational viewpoint which would prefer the dialogic while, in the interests of intelligibility, not totally abandoning all naturalisation, it may, finally, be of use to suggest some possible approaches to a specific translation phenomenon, namely the translation of Indian Writing in English into European languages such as French, Spanish or Italian. First, it is clearly not desirable to change a book's title, since doing so at once places the whole text under an naturalising umbrella. To take two examples in the case of French²³, Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Circle of Reason*, whose title pays homage to the Bengali rationalist tradition, becomes, pseudo-exotically, *Les feux de Bengale (Bengal Lights)*, which is a pure pyrotechnic cliché; the same author's *In an Antique Land*, whose title quotes Shelley, is, tententially and un-Shelleyanly rendered *Un infidèle en Égypte (An Infidel in Egypt)*²⁴. Conversely and

fortunately, the second and improved Spanish version of Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, whose title - quoting a classical Tamil poem - was in the first edition distortingly reduced to *Tierra roja (Red Earth)* has now restored the full title, as *Tierra roja y lluvia torrencial*²⁵. Equally to be avoided, as should be self-evident, are textual cuts: yet, in the name of acceptability to the target culture, the French translation of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* warns the reader in its preface that, by the publisher's decision albeit with the author's consent, "we have had to sacrifice certain pages, certain fables ... we have made an effort here and there to refashion certain passages, with the twin aim of condensing them and not betraying their spirit"²⁶ - though it may be asked how such "condensation", presumably in the interests of naturalising or Europeanising the more brahminical of Rao's philosophical reflections, can do anything but, indeed, "betray" the book's spirit²⁷. Experience has, meanwhile, proved the usefulness of providing a critical apparatus - introduction, notes, glossary - to help readers situate the less familiar aspects of the translated culture. Such a strategy may be indeed considered a component of translation ethics from the translator's side. The reader, though, has also to make an ethical effort: as Ranga Rao, writing on translation from Telugu to English, has commented, "the obverse of this [the translator's] ethical imperative is the responsibility of the reader. The non-vernacular ('foreign') reader is entering a new world and ... gains by being receptive"; the reader "must be prepared, be willing to absorb the vernacular surprise that goes with the culture shock"²⁸. In practical terms and for Indian texts written in English, the dialogic approach will be furthered by retaining the terms from Indian languages that appear in the original (preferably glossed) and, with regard to specific registers, abstaining from naturalising the names of educational institutions, administrative bodies, etc, in other words not assimilating them to quasi-equivalents from the target cultural area. Meanwhile, in an interesting dialogic case of a translator's labour ending up enriching the original, the novelist Anita Nair relates, in the 2003 English edition of her book of 2001 *Ladies Coupé*, how she took up an idea originating with her Italian translator: "Francesca Diano, my good friend and Italian translator, ... suggested we include recipes rather than short descriptions in the glossary. It made perfect sense, and today several editions of *Ladies Coupé* carry these traditional South Indian recipes"²⁹, among those editions being the enriched original!

VII

This attractive note of culinary dialogue is emblematic of an ethical model of translation for the future, in a globalised context no longer always assimilable to traditional First World/Third World patterns. The dialogic model may be proposed as a means of reinscribing Schleiermacher's and Benjamin's aspirations to equitable translation within contemporary and emerging conditions - remembering that the next step forward from dialogue is concrete action in the world. Translation now appears as an interlocking series of dialogues - between cultures, between languages, between author and translator and translator and reader - and, above all, between two texts, source and target. Benjamin wrote of the traditional storyteller that he is 'the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself'³⁰: today, we may see dialogic translation as the ethical mirror in which original and translated text encounter each other, equal yet different, as twin manifestations of one and the same creative flame.

NOTE:

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¹ Cf. my own article of 2004 on this novel (Rollason, "'In Our Translated World'").

² For the French- and Spanish-language quotations in this paper which appear in both English translation and in the (footnoted) original, the translation is my own.

³ Marathi and Malayalam translations are expected to follow the Hindi version of Chandra's novel. See Debashish Mukerji, "Interview: Vikram Chandra", *The Week* (on-line journal), 1 January 2006 - <www.the-week.com/26jan01/lifestyle_article1.htm>.

⁴ Elisabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon (*Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*, 1997) describe the Standard Edition as "an admirable achievement which no translator in the world has succeeded in equalling" ("une réalisation admirable qu'aucun traducteur au monde n'est parvenu à égaler"), and stress how it has achieved the distinction of being "plus lue dans le monde entier, à partir des années 1970, que l'original allemand" ("more widely read worldwide, from the 1970s on, than the German original") (1016-17). For some of the more controversial aspects of Freud in English, cf. below.

⁵ Fernández, *Informe del tiempo* (Internet reference). Original: "las lenguas humanas, bajo una concepción benjaminiana de la lengua, guardan una relación de parentesco ... no por su parecido, por su semejanza, sino por una familiaridad".

⁶ Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", 117.

⁷ To add to the complexity, this Benjamin text on translation is generally read by English-speaking readers in a translated version - namely that from 1970 by Harry Zohn, which, as Stephen Rendall (2004) has shown, is by not entirely error-free.

⁸ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", 78.

⁹ For *The Arcades Project*, see my own extended discussion of 2002 (Rollason, "The Passageways of Paris").

¹⁰ Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Kultur (The Crisis of European Culture, 1917)*, quoted in Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", 80-81. Benjamin praises Pannwitz's remarks as being, ex aequo with certain observations of Goethe, "the best comment on the theory of translation that has been published in Germany" (80). Pannwitz (1881-1969), philosopher and poet, was himself a translator of Baudelaire. He is also credited with being one of the first to use the term 'postmodern'.

¹¹ Venuti has explicitly linked Benjamin to the earlier German writer, seeing him as "reviving Schleiermacher's notion of foreignising translating" (commentary in Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 72).

¹² Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating", 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ Venuti, "Neoclassicism and Enlightenment", 55.

¹⁸ Venuti, "1990s and Beyond", 334.

¹⁹ Sales Salvador, *Puentes sobre el mundo*, 246. Original: "en la contradictoria y al tiempo complementaria dialéctica entre exotizar (extranjerizar) y familiarizar (domesticar), lo ideal sería hallar el término medio, un espacio a medio camino, respetuoso con las alteridades pero capaz de transmitir y comunicar a la cultura receptora".

²⁰ Curiously, the term used in Catalan to render "domestication" is *anostrament*, from *nostre* ('our'), making a sharp distinction between that perceived as "ours" and that seen as "other" (my thanks to Esther Monzó Nebot for this point).

²¹ This has been the case even though critics have claimed similarities for Adrian Mole with a canonic American adolescent hero, Holden Caulfield of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

²² See Roudinesco and Plon, 1017.

²³ See the comprehensive list of translations of modern Indian works of fiction (from both English and Indian languages) into French prepared by the Municipal Library of Paris and reproduced in Rajesh Sharma, ed. *Les Belles Étrangères: 20 écrivains indiens* (2002), 279-287.

²⁴ *In an Antique Land's* title harks back to P.B. Shelley's poem of 1818, "Ozymandias", which begins: "I met a traveller from an antique land". For the disappearance of culturally-specific quotation from the translated title, compare the French title, *La mort aux troussees (Death in pursuit)*, of Alfred Hitchcock's film *North by North-West*, whose original title alludes directly to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

²⁵ Vikram Chandra, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, 1995. Spanish translation: 1st edn. *Tierra roja*, trans. José Luis Fernández-Villanueva Cencio. Madrid: Siruela, 1996. 2nd edn. *Tierra roja y lluvia torrencial*, ed. and rev. Dora Sales Salvador. Madrid: Siruela, 2005. As Dora Sales stresses in her preface to the second edition, "la esencia de este inmenso tapiz narrativo se halla precisamente en este título ... La imagen de la mezcla de la tierra roja y la lluvia torrencial evoca ... la superación de dicotomías, la posibilidad del diálogo" ("the essence of this vast narrative tapestry is to be found precisely in this title ... The image of red earth and pouring rain mixing evokes ... the overcoming of dichotomies, the possibility of dialogue" - 12) - thus suggestively linking titular fidelity to dialogic writing (and, implicitly, dialogic translation). It may be added that the German title of Chandra's novel is *Tanz der Götter* (*Dance of the Gods*), surely a flagrant case of naturalisation through "exotic" cliché.

²⁶ Original: "On offre ici ... une traduction sensiblement moins longue que l'original. Il a fallu sacrifier quelques pages, quelques fables ... on s'est efforcé de remanier çà et là certains passages, avec le double souci de les condenser et de n'en point trahir l'esprit" - Georges Fradier, 'Avertissement' (translator's note), Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, French translation: *Le serpent et la corde*, vii.

²⁷ One may compare a similarly naturalising announcement prefaced to the English version of *Confessions of a Yakuza*, by the contemporary Japanese writer Junichi Saga: "A number of cuts have been made in the original, with the author's permission, in order to eliminate passages that would be perplexing or tedious to the non-Japanese reader" ("Translator's Note", Junichi Saga, *Confessions of a Yakuza*, trans. John Bester, vii). For translation into English from Indian languages, Harish Trivedi recounts several flagrant cases of Hindi, Bengali or Malayalam texts being subjected to enormous cuts of between a sixth and a half, as in the case of the 1955 translation of Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay's classic Bengali novel *Pather Panchali*: "The translators [T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherjee] followed not the original but [Satyajit Ray's] film in leaving out the third and final part of the novel" (Trivedi, "Modern Indian Languages", 461).

²⁸ Ranga Rao, "Occasional Thoughts on Translation of Short Stories", 263.

²⁹ Anita Nair, "Author's Note" to *Ladies Coupé*, 293.

³⁰ Benjamin, "The Storyteller", 109.

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