

Arvi Sepp, Philippe Humblé (Eds.)

Bearing Across

Translating Literary Narratives of Migration

Immacolata Amodeo, Brendan Dooley (Eds.)

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Introduction: Literary Translation and Migration

Arvi Sepp and Philippe Humblé

In migration literature, mobility, both in a literal and figurative sense, lies at the heart of the concept of translation. The spatial aspect of translation is emphasized in the famous quote by Salman Rushdie from *Imaginary Homelands*: “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men” (1992, 17). Moreover, migrant writers “are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders of this society” (19).

Translation – in French *traduction* and in German *Übersetzung* – is seen as a sequence of language practices and an existential situation of a migrant dealing with dislocation. Rushdie’s definition of “translated men” (17) with their “stereoscopic vision” (19) has become an iconic image for present-day mobility, movement and transience, together with their implications for individual and collective identity. Susan Bassnett’s essay “Constructing Cultures: The Politics of Travellers’ Tales” (1993) shows the similarities between and ambiguities of both translation and mobility which, embedded in spatial practices, involve the transfer of views and people (see Polezzi 2006). Both have starting points and end points. Travellers link the novel to the familiar, just like translators. Travellers and translators are eventually not capable of writing – or rather functioning – as reliable guides and mediators in their stories and translations.

This volume seeks to map the wider coordinates of different approaches on the relation between migration and translation. The thirteen contributions are interested in how the effects of globalization, digitalization, exile, asylum, assimilation fundamentally shape literature and its translation in their broadest definition: including life-writing, migrant and refugee fiction. They explore the effects of translation on our relation with the national, subnational and the world at large. They deal with the translation of literary texts from Italian-Canadian, Dutch-Moroccan, Australian-Uruguayan, German-Portuguese, Italian-Jewish, Spanish-American, American-Puerto Rican, Bosnian-American, French-Canadian and French-Algerian authors. These hyphenated designations are at the core of the negotiation of a sense of belonging. From their personal locations consisting of multiple connections and allegiances, the writers reinvent the multilingual space they inhabit, endowing it with deeply personal meaning coloured by the diverse cultural strands deriving from this experience. Through issues such as dwelling and displacement, monolingualism and multilingualism, transnationalism and national identity, the contributions in this volume investigate how the translation of migration literature engages with and shapes the ongoing redefinition of cultural identities. Translation also encompasses practices of cultural translation, which involve the nego-

tiation of languages, values, and narratives across cultures. This volume thus aims to explore the possibilities and limits of the notion of “migrant writing”, investigate migration as a theoretical concept, analytical category, and lived experience by writers and professional translators and ask how language practices in migration literature signify the translated experience of migration.

In these literary texts and their translations, alternative, peripheral views of the discourse on national or regional history constructed by dominant culture, opens up an avenue of investigation that conceives of translation as an “ethics of Otherness” (Sonja Lavaert). The condition of the modern subject as a translated being indeed seems to be that of geographical and linguistic border-crossing, between the local and the global. Translation can thus be regarded as a sequence of language practices and an existential situation of migrants dealing with dislocation. Accordingly, this volume focuses, on the one hand, on the translation of literary narratives of migration as an intralingual transaction – as a cultural translation – that reformulates and reassesses cultural specificities in a new and often alienating way and, on the other hand, as an interlingual transaction that applies processes of mediation to issues of agency and communication.

The thirteen contributions in this volume show the interaction of global and local forces in translation and migration literature. From different angles, they elucidate how translation – in its manifold understandings – brings to the fore the deconstruction of the paradigm of individual self-identity and the idea of monolingual authenticity. The translator is a prominent actor of the intercultural. Jhumpa Lahiri, the Bengali author of *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999), equally defines the concept of translation as a means of making sense of the other and the foreign: “Almost all of my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive” (120). The sense of belonging can be understood as a complex sense of place that is created by linking a multiplicity of locations (Sepp 2017).

Transcultural writers, such as Francisco Ayala and Ilse Losa, reject a hermeneutics of transcultural literature that is solely focused on “questions of belonging” at the expense of the literariness and singularity of their texts. Accordingly, the German-Turkish Zafer Şenocak writes:

In the case of authors who live outside their native linguistic geography, questions about belonging threaten to obscure other biographical details. The mythic foundations of their work disappear completely from view. [...] One does not read an author’s texts, but rather, the biography written onto his body. Genealogy substitutes for biography. The body of the text – with its own patterns, its own concealed forewords, disappears behind the image of the author. What motivates this type of reading? Fear of wonder? Fear of understanding or not understanding, a sense of strangeness, real or imagined? (2000, 77-8)

The ethical dimension of a translational hermeneutics of migration literature cannot be underestimated in this context. Indeed, as Rita Wilson (2011, 244-5) notes, the utopian horizon of transnational literature points to the multi-faceted nature of society and the fecundity of *métissage*: “[T]he function of translanguing literature is not primarily a pragmatic, but an aesthetic and an ethical one. Its aim is more symbolic than realistic:

it symbolizes the variety, the contact and the crossing of cultures and languages.” In migration literature, the act of ‘translating’ is a powerful yet complex image showing a “dialogue” of Turkish and German cultural elements. According to Zafer Şenocak, the communicational ethics of conversation, inherent in transcultural literature, entails the possibility of a *Sich-Verstehen-Können*, of a mutual understanding, that is fundamental to the idea of translation: “Every conversation, that would like to be more than mere monologues meeting, is translation” (Şenocak 2011, 17) (Our translation).

Writing in another tongue cannot be separated from a quest for identity and, by extension, from centre-periphery issues in general. As is the case for postcolonial franco-phone literature, for instance, context and form, “resist and ultimately exclude the monolingual and demand of their readers to be like themselves: ‘in between’, at once capable of reading and translating, where translation becomes an integral part of the reading experience” (Mehrez 1992, 122). The unbalancing of cultural and linguistic points of reference nearly always implies a deconstruction of identities and fixed ideas. Migration literature offers alternative, peripheral views of the dominant discourse on national culture and history and most often entails a deconstruction of the romantic idea of monolingual nationhood. The Dutch-Moroccan writer Fouad Laroui (2014, 43), for example, states that neither classical Arabic nor French are languages of the Moroccan nation. As a consequence, it has been impossible to establish a genuinely Moroccan national literature: “The Moroccan writer uses the language of the Other or the language of others: either way, it’s mission impossible.”

In *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (2012), Yasemin Yildiz argues that we are currently living in an era of migration and mobility, characterized by a “postmonolingual condition”. In a similar vein, in *Means Without End* (2000, 66-7), Giorgio Agamben underlines the interconnection of *factum loquendi* and *factum pluralitatis* as fictions that have been legitimated by political and language theory since Romanticism. The relation between language and community, that is taken for granted within the context of the nation-state, is deconstructed by emphasizing the fundamental and indefinite “foreignness” of both “language” and “people”:

The relation between Gypsies and *argot* puts this correspondence radically into question in the very instant in which it paradoxically reenacts it. Gypsies are to a people what *argot* is to language. And although this analogy can last but for a brief moment, it nonetheless sheds light on that truth which the correspondence between language and people was secretly intended to conceal: all peoples are gangs and *coquilles*, all languages are jargons and *argot*.

If the foreign is fundamentally inscribed into every language, then consequently every language is already a translation, “no originally natural language, but an originally cultivated superposed language” (Haverkamp 1997, 9) (Our translation). This language-philosophical reflexion is made highly explicit in migration literature in its emphasis on the heterogeneity of languages.

In his introduction to the English translation of Paul Ricœur’s *Sur la traduction*, Richard Kearney (2006, xx) emphasizes that, for Ricœur, translation ultimately desig-

nates “interlinguistic hospitality”. For Ricœur, the future political ethos of Europe and the world is based on translation in that it translates the collective wounds of national traumas into the language of the other. Migration as a profoundly personal experience bound to a collective movement is given a voice in migration literature and its translation that has intimate ties with a sense of justice. The ethical relation between translation and justice is also brought to the fore by James Boyd White in *Justice as Translation*: “Translation and justice first meet at the point where we recognize that they are both ways of talking about right relations, and of two kinds simultaneously: relations with languages, relations with people” (1990, 233). The contributions in this volume intend to scrutinize these relations, both with languages and with people.

The contributions selected for this book were presented at the international conference “Bearing Across. Translating Literary Narratives of Migration”, which took place on September 16-17, 2013. The conference was organized at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel by the Centre for Literature in Translation/Centrum voor Literatuur in Vertaling (CLIV).

The first part of this book focuses on otherness, community and communication. In his chapter “Translating Migration: The Digital Connection”, Michael Cronin suggests that there is a schismatic paradigm of migrant language which is undergoing a readjustment in the contemporary digital moment and that this readjustment has potentially major implications for the way we think about the city as translation zone in literary contexts. Cronin illustrates his remarks by specific references to the city of Dublin which has witnessed an increase in migration in the first decade of the 21st century. The digital age is indeed transforming the landscapes of ‘here’ and ‘there’ in ways that will profoundly shape migrant literature for many years to come.

In “Translated Lives in Australian ‘Crónicas’”, Michael Jacklin investigates the genre that is known in the Spanish-speaking world as ‘crónica’ in its Australian version. The crónica offers a subjective view of contemporary events, current affairs or social issues. In recent decades it has migrated successfully to “the home of the platypus: Australia”. Jacklin focuses specifically on the work of Ernesto Balcells, a pseudonym for Uruguayan-born migrant, Michael Gamarra. In the magazine *Versión* he published between 1982 and 1986 a total of thirteen crónicas. Through language and cultural heritage these texts may appear ‘foreign’ in the sense that they are not English, but many of these texts tell Australian stories with Australian settings, Australian characters and Australian circumstances. The crónicas discussed here exemplify this; they do so in the language spoken by those many thousands of Australians who have migrated from Spanish America and from Spain.

In “Translation as Ethics of Otherness: Primo Levi’s *The Canto of Ulysses*”, Sonja Lavaert discusses Agamben’s thesis that all languages are vernaculars, dialects, jargon, or argot. All people are migrating, moving, dislocated, unidentifiable gypsies in two separate stages. First, Lavaert relates this to Susan Sontag’s reflection on the subject of translation and literature – both considered as ethics of otherness. Second, she focuses