



On Transference And Transposition In Translation

Vrasidas Karalis

i) The history of the translator

My experience with translation started with the discovery of a novel by Patrick White in a remainders bookshop in Amsterdam. I also found there most of his books at cheap prices and devoured immediately, partly in order to forget the dark weather partly because of the beautiful Viking publications. By reading his works, I realised that he was Australian; and I had no preconceived ideas about Australia and its literature. For a non native speaker, all English writers belong to the amorphous mass of the “English” language. It takes a long and somehow erratic experience in reading different works for a foreigner to be able to discern the variations, the subtle nuances and the stylistic variations amongst writers from different Anglo-Saxon countries of the ecumenical tradition established by the English language.

Gradually I understood the peculiarities of White’s idiom and his preoccupation with the irregular, the hidden and the unpredictable within his tradition. For example, the Australian settings of his novels are so accurate, obvious and imposing (as I discovered when I migrated to the country) that only someone who has distanced himself from them over a period of time could capture them so effectively. It needs having a measure of comparison in order to situate yourself within the geometry of a native landscape, a place charged with childhood attachments and emotional rituals of maturation. However, beyond such landscapes there is something distinctly de-territorialised in White’s novels, as if their stories had a universal relevance that went beyond their actual settings. Their Australian morphology is somehow secondary. To my





understanding as his translator, Patrick White was primarily a demanding and complex writer, challenging reading habits and personal expectations about literature; as such I thought of his work as a very engaging field where language became the excuse for a deep experiment in existential modalities. So, I started translating his novels because they themselves offered me the approach and the key to their translation. This was enough and is always enough for the translator; when I finally decided to translate two of his novels into Greek, I thought that White's text would be an interesting experimentation within the Greek language, an exploration of expressive limits and semantic limitations for the language itself and the translator alike.

While reading his novel *Voss* I was really puzzled by the irregular grammar and dislocated syntax for which White has been so ruthlessly criticised. It looked as if someone was consciously trying to re-invent the English language and re-mould its expressive potential. Reading his novels offered the real pleasure of exploring an unknown field of potentialities in poetics which were either hidden behind the excesses of the avant garde or suppressed by the phobias of traditionalism. I was really pleased for an additional reason; because it is extremely rare to find similar experiments in the official literature taught in universities and schools. White's prose is literature by definition; its reading creates a new perception about the *literariness* of language which constructs a different *espace litteraire*, a semiotic space with a completely new creative performative function for verbal communication.

Having studied English through literature in Greece, I was impressed by the fact that most of the English writers of 20th century, namely E.M Forster, Evelyn Waugh, Angus Wilson, even John Fowles, depicted an extremely *phonographic* and somehow journalistic realism in their writing. With the exception of several American writers of the '30s or closer to our age, Thomas Pynchon's linguistic phantasmagoria, most of the English "accepted" literary tradition was firmly grounded on the traditions of the 19th century great masters and their grand colonising discourses. The euphoric re-adjustment of language, the change in the signification processes, and the relentless exploration of new forms of re-assembling stories, which we see in the French,





German, Russian, Italian traditions, was something spectacularly missing from the official canon of the British academia.

Despite the modernist break inaugurated by James Joyce, Djuna Barnes or even Wyndham Lewis, the dominant form of understanding literary English language has been through the canonical texts that have shaped the reception of the language through educational channels. Most of the British writers of the 20thth century follow textual patterns and myth-making processes of the 19th century, as if they try to perpetuate the discourse of an imperial, normative and normalising literary dialect, which became dominant with Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and other writers of the same period, despite of being painfully aware of its limitations and its “metropolitan” ideology. One can even observe that even post-structuralist or post-colonial writers in their attempts to dismantle dominant literary discourses, remain extremely dependant on them in regard to their mythopoetic imaginary. Even as a nostalgic reconstruction of a bygone era, the political implications of such writing within the context of post-colonial world were rather too obvious to be ignored. Contemporary writers of the so-called Anglo-Indian tradition, Salman Rushdie or Michael Ondaatje, of more recent decades followed patterns of acceptability and “respectability” that allowed them to be easily incorporated into the dominant discourse of writing and legitimize their presence by employing the great canonical texts of the English tradition as the sub-texts of their own plots.

It can be assumed that there is a kind of stylistic fixation to a well-established and accepted manner of writing in English, whose principles are imposed to an unexpected degree to this day by most literary critics and book reviewers. Settings have to be “natural”, language has to be “fluent” and characters “believable”. Many writers have questioned this tradition which is still dominant and simply excludes, or deems as marginal, what is not permitted by the horizon of expectations of a cultural system that replicates itself through best-sellers and the implicit understanding of a novel as the first draft for a cinematic script to be consumed as a movie.

For someone who discovers the English tradition after having being constructed as an individual and a reader in another, this seems as an





embarrassing obstacle to the creative innovation of language through literature. Through the imperfect knowledge of a language, the linguistic outsider is able to understand the potentialities hidden within a text more directly than a native speaker whose knowledge is conditioned by custom and convention. The written word on the page presents its own "pictoriality" and its own distinct processes into being transformed into an image. When one perceives novels as scriptural renderings of the existing order, as is the case today, what is earned in popularity is lost in signification; another text is needed to be produced with its own strategies of framing semantic fields which will expand the limits of "scriptibility" to situations and conditions which are not immediately seen or located. Despite their structural analogies image and word function as opposite poles during the production of meaning. The word as signification always functions as if within an imaginary dialogue between reader, writer and translator, whereas the verbal image is mediated by the necessities of the cultural system and the dynamics of daily interaction.

For literature, 20th century starts in Russia with Andrey Biely's *Petersburg*, (1913) a novel that re-invented the methods of writing in Russian and proposed a new understanding of the sense of time in the act of reading, by distorting narrative time and thus the experience of time as existential testimony. The condensed simultaneity of its narrative temporality was a rather effective device used by Biely's radical reconstruction of the act of writing, so much so that the next generation of artists had to proceed with the concept of *zaum* or *beyonsense*, (Velimir Clebnikov) in order to depict the reality of a new perception of temporality emerging under social conditions of tension and collapse. Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* monumentalize the experimentation that we find in Biely's novel by creating a baroque version of modern story-telling, in which chaos is not simply the object of writing by an element within writing itself. Patrick White's stylistic experiment can be located somewhere in the middle, in the fringes of the modernist world and the grey areas of in-between, where the limits and the potentialities of language are re-negotiated, explored for their uncharted possibilities or even pushed to their uttermost finality.





In the grey area of such tension, Patrick White has constructed a literary topography of antinomic writing. *Voss* represents not simply one of the best novels of this century but the matrix for a mythopoetic revision of historical reconstruction: it revised the codes of representation employed in order to depict historical personalities and their relation with time and space. In his book, White actualised the utter fluidity of language, the plasticity of stylistic inventiveness and finally the way in which experiment and narrative linearity can function successfully. Although the terms are slightly dated, in his historical period and within the Australian literary context Patrick White almost subconsciously *decentred* the literary subject and *defamiliarised* his readers from the actual story through a completely novel hybridized perception of writing. His writing, that is the discursive practices of his narrative voice, interrupt conventional expectations about novelistic writing by de-identifying readers from the story, through a masterful dislocation of narrative temporality. White stresses that a reader is only a reader, who has his or her own life and reads that specific book under given circumstances. *Voss'* reading creates an existential dysphoria that forces the reader to look around, detach its attention from the printed page and posit questions about the function of such art.

This is probably one of the greatest achievements of Patrick White's novels; they don't create illusions or invent a simulacrum which would create the reality effect as another conscious device to make readers oblivious of their actual existential condition. White mocks the expectation of his readers to be empathetically identified with what they read; and in many passages, he undermines the Aristotelian stipulation for a cathartic *anagnoresis* by dissolving his own mythic configurations into chaotic and completely incongruous elements. Overall this is the most challenging part of his creative praxis. His style transcends linguistic normality; he destroys the conventional morality of writing according to which the writer must conform to the expectations of that Platonic abstraction called "average reader" (something he paid dearly for by being restricted to a small but demanding reading audience). Here on the contrary, we have a writer who simply exacerbates and intensifies the phobias of his readers; he makes them feel uneasy by employing the performative strategy of *estrangement*.





By not having a crystallised opinion about his own characters, White leaves the story fluctuating and becoming amorphous and finally in some occasions annoying and disturbing for his readers, as it is obvious in her later novels.

The most characteristic stylistic element of White's novels lies in their mythoplastic irregularity. The very disturbing and disconcerting picture they draw of human motives and actions; a depiction which does not pacify or assuage but simply shows the invisible histories of the human body in their most dreadful and terrifying absurdity. Very few writers have done so and in such a successful way; probably Hermann Broch in his *Death of Vergil*, Robert Musil in his *Man without Qualities*, Samuel Beckett in some of his most readable novels or Thomas Pynchon more recently. The work is probably product of a foundational crisis of meaning and structure that expressed the aftermath of a wider catastrophe of social cohesion. The destruction of language indicates a destruction of the sacred within the existential reality of their surrounding forms of life. The death of the sacred within language, or even more the loss of the ability to sacralise the real through language, fetishises words and creates a communication gap between writer and readers. Such break in communication vividly existed in European writing after World War II, the background against which a contemporary must see White's mythoplastic imagination.

Patrick White differs from the more popular English novelists because of his middle-ground approach to the art of novel writing, and his conscious attempt to reconcile modernity and tradition through a symbiotic relationship based on different temporalities. Despite the rather unfair criticism that has been raised lately against his writing, White constructed a rather unsettling exemplar for contemporary writing; and as such his model can be dismantled or re-configured according to the needs of each specific reader and critic.

The translation of his works has to foreground the multivocality of his writing, the non-linearity of his stories, the gaps in narrative, the omissions in structure, the inverted temporality and so many other "irregular" practices which White introduced in his attempt to establish an anti-language, within the hegemonic discourse of the English tradition, a





negative language of liminal situations, expressed through liminal idioms with an decentring function. The task for the translator is to produce an analogous condition of such liminality in another language by employing the relevant strategies that that language has already in place in order to articulate liminality in meaning and expression. The translator institutes analogies between traditions; and from within such analogies the text becomes the nexus of multiple meanings, the intersection of linguistic experimentations and finally the topos of convergence between conflicting signifiers. Retaining the tension between such contradictory textual forces is another task for the translator who must not succumb to the temptations of the market or the complacency of editorial uniformity.

ii) The act of translating

Whoever translates a book must have formed first a general critical view about its writer. This means that the translator must be able to locate the sources of linguistic complexities in specific texts from a writer's total oeuvre and situate them within a system of stylistic devices, which form the aesthetics of that writer within his/her own tradition and at a specific point in the development of his/her art. For example the early Ernest Hemingway uses language in a rather different manner than in his later works: the translator must be able to indicate and even emphasize the difference. Essentially the translator must know as much as possible about the history of the writer, the text and the tradition in which it was produced. Then the translator must exercise some sort of 'analogical imagination' and establish the necessary connections between source and target languages so that the original text could emerge effectively as an actualized potentiality within the language. This approach does not validate the theory of dynamic equivalence but stands closer to the practice of formal equivalence, even if the translated text gives the impression that it is a translation indeed. One could claim that a translation must show that it is a translation since it introduces to the target language tonalities and rhythms, or even meanings, which didn't exist in that form previously in the specific linguistic tradition.

In that sense, *translation makes visible, audible and comprehensible semantic*





processes and verbal structures which function behind the level of textual configuration and are independent of the specific language. The translator must detect the “archetypal structure” of the text and try to transfer it to another linguistic environment. The skeleton of the textual form must be retained whereas it must be fleshed out in another formal representation. Language is always the pretext, the mask behind which we can sense the need to hand over a message in the most effective way; the translator must find the formal singularity of the message in both linguistic traditions and make it obvious even with the danger of alienating through its foreignness or deceiving through its indigenisation. The purpose is to reconstruct an atmosphere of being as articulated by the writer in the original with the process of the trans-position into a new linguistic reality added on.

If we accept Noam Chomsky’s idea about language as a growing structure within our mind, then language is not simply the house of being, as Heidegger so advocated, but the very building-material of the human mind; *translation then transposes, in a spatial sense, and transfers, in a psychological meaning, a story by projecting its complete semantic value on the expressive flow of another language.* Translation indicates the invariant elements of language, the elements which are not dependant on the actual signs, but on the methods employed to textualise these signs, or the specific approach to language which makes such configuration possible.

Of course this refutes the old superstition that literary language is untranslatable. But language itself is translation; psychologically and existentially, language transfigures the vagueness and fluidity of inarticulation into the concrete and solid space of an aural/oral existence. Language is concrete reality for the mind since it links experiences, maps out situations and creates the meaning of common past through memory. Translation liberates the text from its topicality, from its own boundaries and opens its semiotic systems to the challenges and the questioning of another linguistic pattern within another literary tradition. By doing so, translation stresses the polysemantic value of linguistic signs, creates a new space for the writing “I” by multiplying it. The translator and the writer become a new composite writing subject: the multilayered signifiers on whom the act of writing establishes its validity.





So, translating Patrick White is like super-imposing another map of reality on his imaginative topography. The translator must show the difficulties in White's language, to stress the gaps in his stories, to make visible the complexity of his poetics. It would be pointless to produce a "natural" easy-to-read text for his Greek readers; the text itself and its implications are so irregular that would give a completely false perception about White's writing. The translator therefore had but one option to de-familiarise the readers from the illusion of identifying themselves with another writer, in order to forget the actual conditions of their own realities. If readers felt uneasy and perturbed, then the translation must have been successful; otherwise the translator must have been unfaithful to the original and rather have attempted an exercise in failure. But the possibility of failing is the greatest challenge in the game of translation itself; it will give the incentive to other people to translate the work again and re-start the experiment from the beginning. Translation is therefore the testing ground of cultural strength and semantic resistance; it brings out the invariant and universal structure of language and proves the liberating potential in the acts of writing and reading. Finally, it verifies that we desire communication especially when we feel that the complete otherness of the text is the only way for discovering our own location in time and place.

iii) Who translates?

Furthermore, in the art and act of interpreting translation our primary concern should focus first on the crucial question "who translates?" and then on "what is translated?" With this double question we want to raise the problematic on the translator's subjectivity as articulated within the translated text of a given work. Such subjectivity does not simply refer to the psychological and socio-cultural conditioning of the translator; on the contrary it approaches the translator as a semantic agent who has to make choices and take decisions about existing dilemmas or even dictates perceptions about contentious points emerging during the act of translating. *The most important aspect of such decision-making process is the co-evolution of the translator together with the translated text as parallel*





explorations of meaning in a transcultural condition and in a translanguual exchange of communicative forms.

“Who translates?” is also a question about the specific individual whose work establishes a meaningful code of communicative practices within a new cultural environment. So the “who” of the translator becomes in its new articulation a cultural agent and a subject who intervenes in the process of cultural production by introducing (inserting) into to an existing system of scriptural values a different value system that disrupts its normal applications and deflects expectations towards unpredicted directions. So with the actual translated text, the main concern is to delineate the directions taken by various literatures when such a text has disrupted the expected normality of reading practices in a given culture. For example, the translators of the Bible (the Septuagint, Jerome, Luther etc) have disrupted their own traditions by inserting non indigenous reading temporalities in the act of reading, establishing eventually new spaces for reading and writing.

The second aspect of the act of translating is precisely “what is translated?” and refers predominately to the polysemy of any given text in its original form and then to the re-framing of its semantic field that takes place in order to make that text communicatively active in a new language. This presupposes the detailed study of the stylistic and formal choices that the translator has introduced in cases of semantic incommensurability between two cultural areas or two linguistic systems. What is translated does not simply deal with the so-called ‘content’ of a text; on the contrary, it explores how contextual practices multiply the semantic possibilities within the translated text and therefore sees the act of translating as a form of cultural interpenetration that reveals unexplored potentialities of language and meaning. In a sense translation multiplies meaning, introduces grades of differentiation and nuances of tone

Finally the question about what is in the translated text that didn’t exist in the original is equally important for the exploration of the new meanings emerging within any given text and at the same time the restructuring of literary and ideological values that takes places after the recognition, incorporation and canonisation of a text. The texts by





Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and others in various languages can be taken as primary examples here and the changes they introduced to the thematology and the artistic practices especially throughout the centuries.

Again this is not simply a matter of the so-called "influence"; beyond that it is a matter of cultural openness and what we would call "performability", since a text dramatises and ritualises its meaning in different ways within different cultural formations. What we intend to study with the concept of "performability" is how effectively meaning is acted out by various reading practices and individual readers in cultural contexts that essentially look different and incompatible with each other. For example, how Japanese culture recognised and incorporated crucial texts of European tradition starting with the New Testament until recent philosophical texts by Heidegger. The same could apply in the study of the Indian philosophy, poetry and art as in the case of Sri Aurobindo or on the reverse how Zen influenced Nietzsche, Heidegger and Tillich.

So both questions "who translates?" and "what is translated?" are actually interrelated and mutually complemented. The translated text is not a derivative copy of a superior original transmitting its cognitive values; and the translator is not a passive medium who communicates messages articulated by some one else without interfering in the act of producing meaning. On the contrary the translated text is a poly-systemic semiotic space made of different layers of linguistic experiences which in their co-existence generate meanings that may have not been encoded within the original. From this chain of semantic exchange we must not also forget the reader, who will add her /his experience on the text within the conditions and the limitations of the surrounding culture and personal conditioning. The translated text maps out the experience of meaning as found in a transcultural, or transpersonal, situation, in a state of searching for the interpretive community which will adopt it and make it theirs. So the translation of Shakespeare into German was adopted by the young romantics all belonging to the intellectual elite and upper high culture, in contrast to the very "low" culture, almost urban folk community, that produced the Shakespearean stage. Transferring Shakespeare to





another language re-invented its audience and its semantics, which in turn, was imported back to England, establishing a new position for the Shakespearean work within the Victorian ruling class.

From a theoretical point of view, we must try to experience the translated text not at the level of plot-making and ideological messages encrypted through it; on the contrary through the act of translation we see its formation as a number of inter-texts with polyvalent significations, linked with each other, in order to establish its semantic fields in the new linguistic and cultural context. The translated text is of compound nature as is the original text. Its "synthetic nature" determines an "in-between" language which links discourses and practices by thus establishing new fields of semantic production. Indeed translation somehow annuls the prevailing belief in referentiality: in many occasions what is referred to as a matter of pragmatics in the original language is totally absent in the translation. In some instances that gap is so large that the reader, and before the reader, the translator, must try to establish what the Russian formalist critic Boris Uspensky called "structural isomorphism" in their attempt to indicate and explain the "common structural principles of internal organisation of the artistic text". It is the structure of linguistic configuration as encountered in each text (both in the original and its translation) that presents us with an "autotelic" reality; as Uspensky would have concluded "each work presents a unique microworld, organised according to its own laws and characterised by its own spatial and temporal structure". Both the original and its translation affirm Eliot's axiom that "a work of art is autotelic" whereas their criticism, and reception, is not. The self-sufficiency of the text however does not imply its "semantic isolation"; a text is always at the crossroads of interpretation because of its audience. A community of readers may adopt a text in a way which was not foreseen by its writer: the semantic centre of any text is relocated according to the changing expectations from writing. In the case of translation the act of importing a text into another tradition refracts its systemic signification according to the subjectivity of the translator and the expectations of its readers. So in many occasions a translated text may be appreciated for completely different reasons from





those of its origin. The act of translating transfers psychologically and transpositions culturally a complex system of significations that develop their own meanings within the new cultural mentality surrounding the text: so what happens is not “lost in translation” but what is “found in translation” and what is “born through translation”. The act of translating does not reflect an echo of the original or express faithfully its meanings: it refracts the textual configuration towards the open interpretation of its structures. It therefore extends the life of the work towards the future: it makes its language habitable and diachronic. It releases the text, and the form of the world portrayed in it, from its circumstances and topicality. Translation inaugurates a constant dialogue between cultures; it shows the wide variety of forms that creative engagement with language can take by generating a surplus of meanings and by multiplying its potential readers. As the poet James Merrill would have said:

*But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(or found....).*

