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Collage sobre lienzo. Bastidor redondo, 45 cm de diámetro

The Spectrum of Translation in Cortázar's "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris"*

Mg. María Constanza Guzmán**

Translation is a recurrent theme in Julio Cortázar's fiction. In this paper, his short story "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" is presented as a story about translation in which the protagonist, who comes to inhabit a space temporarily, "invades" that space subverting the original order. This representation is discussed in relation to prevailing notions about translation and translators.

Keywords: Cortázar and translation, translation and fiction, translation and authorship, fidelity and intervention, translator's visibility, translator's subjectivity, translation as writing, translation and difference

La traducción es un tema frecuente en la narrativa de Julio Cortázar. El presente artículo consiste en una lectura del cuento "Carta a una señorita en París", como un relato acerca de la traducción en el cual el protagonista, quien comienza a habitar un espacio de manera temporal, lo "invade" y subvierte el orden original. La discusión de esta representación surge a partir de perspectivas teóricas actuales con respecto a la traducción y los traductores.

Palabras clave: Cortázar y la traducción, traducción y ficción, traducción y autoría, fidelidad e intervención, visibilidad del traductor, subjetividad del traductor, traducción como escritura, traducción y diferencia.

La traduction est un thème récurrent dans la fiction de Julio Cortázar. Dans cet article, sa nouvelle «Lettre à une jeune femme à Paris» est lue comme un récit de traduction où le protagoniste, qui vient occuper temporairement un espace, finit par «envahir» cet espace, bouleversant ainsi l'ordre original. La discussion de cette représentation est fondée sur les concepts théoriques actuels concernant la traduction et les traducteurs.

Mots clés: Cortázar et la traduction, traduction et fiction, traduction et voix d'auteur, fidélité et intervention, visibilité du traducteur, subjectivité du traducteur, traduction comme écriture, traduction et différence.

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*The boundaries which divide
Life from Death are at best
shadowy and vague. Who
shall say where the one ends
and where the other begins?*
--Edgar Allan Poe

One of the main preoccupations reflected in the fiction of Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar is the fact that language is already a translation resulting from an imposition of words and meanings to experience. In his view, such a process always entails reduction and violence. Translation is a recurrent theme in the works of Cortázar, and it is represented in various forms. In a general sense, his work shows the entrapment to which one is led when striving for objective observation, transparency, and detachment, in processes of creative reproduction, such as painting, photography, writing, and translation itself.

In the experimental novel *A Manual for Manuel*, Cortázar offers translation as a pedagogical option to reread texts; translation is an instrument to reveal what remains unsaid in official history by subverting texts in such a way that the silenced versions emerge. In the article "Translation as Testimony: On Official Histories and Subversive Pedagogies in Cortázar," in which Adriana Pagano explores the theme of translation in *A Manual for Manuel*; she notes that Cortázar's fiction is his site for theoretical speculation: "He theorizes translation as a *locus* of violence and tension: a violence resulting from the imposition of words and meanings to translate reality" (Pagano 82).

Pagano highlights the relevance of translation in Cortázar's work by remarking how, for this author, any discussion on language and translation leads inevitably to ideological considerations on the production of meaning. "Because it is a task inherently related to language production and control, translation is seen as a site of violence and tension, where words impose themselves and are imposed on others, and where meanings fight to escape suppression and oblivion" (96).

Several of Cortázar's stories have translators as characters. In this paper I read the short story "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" as a story about translation.

The protagonist of the story is a translator, a nameless individual who moves temporarily into a woman's apartment in Argentina while she is in Paris. The whole story occurs in this space where the protagonist is foreign, but which at the same time has become his living space. The story is constructed as a letter, from the narrator-protagonist to Andrea, the owner of the apartment where he was to stay for four months at the most, "perhaps with luck three" (43). The translator moves into a space that is someone else's property and he is, reluctantly, an intruder.

Cortázar's characters often have complex relations with space and with their surroundings; the characters he creates are often entering, leaving, violating boundaries, crossing bridges, moving into spaces. Their existence is often constructed on the basis of these very crossings. In "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" the translator-protagonist is an involuntary violator of the territory of the true owner. The importance of space in the story is evident from the first paragraph:

It offends me to intrude on a compact order [...] It hurts me to come into an ambience where someone who lives beautifully has arranged everything like a visible affirmation of her soul, here the books (Spanish on one side, French and English on the other) the large green cushions there, the crystal ashtray that looks like a soap-bubble that's been cut open on this exact spot on the little table, and always a perfume, a sound, a sprouting of plants, a photograph of a dead friend, the ritual of tea trays and sugar tongs. (40)

Space and being are interrelated; the legitimate "being" is the one who establishes the order of the space. There is the expectation that the temporary dweller will inhabit the place without intervention - without being. The protagonist is aware of the chain of consequences that a minor alteration of the pre-existing order will unleash: "Moving that tray alters the play of relationships in the whole house, of each object with another, of each moment of their soul with the soul of the house and its absent inhabitant" (40). From the very beginning of the story, an analogy can be drawn between translation and the experience of the protagonist-narrator, in relation to the translator's experience of 'inhabiting' a text that is somebody else's property, an original order to which the translator owes fidelity.

In 'Letter to a Young Lady in Paris' the protagonist's alien presence will have an even greater effect on the place because of the peculiar condition of his, which we learn about early in the narration: "Once in a while it happens that I vomit up a bunny. It's no reason not to live in whatever house, it's no reason for one to blush and isolate oneself and to walk around keeping one's mouth shut" (41). The narrator explains that, when he was living in his own house, he could live somewhat normally since vomiting bunnies had become a matter of habit. However, he was not expecting for it to happen in Andrea's house: "Before leaving my house, only two days before, I'd vomited a bunny and so was safe for a month, five weeks, maybe six with a little luck" (43).

Among the several readings that may be proposed for "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris," it has been said to be a story about writing. Studies that have read the story in this light associate this "condition" of the protagonist - that of vomiting bunnies - to the creative act and to creation as living experience. The protagonist describes the moment the rabbit appears in his throat as a "warm bustling fleece covering an inalienable presence... like a poem in its first minutes" (43). However, he is aware of the fact that the intimacy of that moment will not last. In fact, although at first, it is "as much one as oneself" (43), afterwards it is "not so much one, so distant and isolated in its flat white world the size of a letter." (43) The distance that follows the initial moment of creation is clear also in the way the protagonist's relationship to the bunnies changes as they grow. If we interpret the story as an allegory of the process of writing, then such process appears characterized by a paradox, for it stems from and also leads to the author's alienation. As George Shivers claims:

The narrator's discomfort at being in the closed order of his friend Andrea's apartment underscores his similar alienation from the world around him. The two become interrelated in that the rhythm of his vomiting rabbits increases in the new surroundings. The implication is clearly that it is the writer's estrangement from the world around him which stimulates his creativity. (Shivers, 142)

Shivers describes the protagonist's life and energies as fragmented because of the differing worlds he inhabits, where the creative one absorbs him more and more, separating him from the outside world, locking him inside himself (143).

While *Shivers* sees translation as opposed to creative writing in the story, I would argue that the story is, more significantly, about the tension and ambiguity of intervening creatively upon a text while translating it. The most explicit connection with translation in the story appears in the first paragraph where the protagonist seems to foresee that, although altering the original order is “not right” or not allowed, it is just not possible to preserve it: “How much at fault one feels taking a small metal tray and putting it at the far end of the table, setting it there simply because one has brought one’s English dictionaries and it’s at this end, within easy reach of the hand, that they ought to be” (40). The protagonist finds it difficult “to stand counter to, yet to accept with perfect submission” of his whole being the “elaborate” original order (40). Rearranging the objects on the table, so as to put the dictionaries “within easy reach of the hand” (40), marks the beginning of the change to the original order caused by the unavoidable presence of the translating subject. This act, however, is a transgression, for it disturbs the space of the original, rendering the translator’s presence visible. This transgression defies common sense perceptions - and self-representations - of translators, in terms of what Douglas Robinson calls the translator’s “desirable subordinated or instrumentalized subjectivity” (7), for it portrays a translator that is aware of the difficulty of being subordinate to an original ordering.

Lilian Cibil, who has analyzed “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris” as a metaphor of translation, highlights the fact that the story reveals the tension between creativity and fidelity. In her view, the story revolves around the notions of the sacred author and the immutable original; she associates the absent owner’s arrangement of objects in the house with an author’s presence in his or her own work (59). As the protagonist violates the immutable order, he is still concerned with concealing the changes; this is consistent with the image of the translator as an intruder, expected to make his presence as invisible as possible. As Rosemary Arrojo puts it, the conception of the sacralized original is at the center of this desire for invisibility:

If the conscious presence of the author is somehow expected to be found in her or his writing, and if the original is seen as the true recipient of its creator’s intentions and expression, any translation is, by definition, devalued since it necessarily represents a form of falsification, always removed from the original and its author. (21)

According to Arrojo, in any culture in which authorship and property are equated, and which perceives writing as a site for the conscious presence of the producer, the translator's activity is always related not only with secondariness and failure, but also with indecency and transgression (21).

These ideas about texts, which imagine originals as stable and which construct them as clearly differentiated from any form of reproduction, are among the themes that Cortázar problematizes in his fiction. In "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" the tension grows as the protagonist tries to conceal his presence but does not succeed. Even before the bunnies appear in the story, the protagonist acknowledges the meaning of his iconoclastic and subversive gesture of moving the tray (to put the dictionaries where he needs them): "To move that tray is the equivalent of an unexpected horrible crimson in the middle of one of Ozenfant's painterly cadences, as if suddenly the strings of all the double basses snapped at the same time with the same dreadful whiplash at the most hushed instant in a Mozart symphony" (40). Culture, that is, high culture, must remain untouched—which is why the protagonist is constantly trying to protect the books from the rabbits. But at the same time it cannot remain untouched.

As Lilian Cibil states, it is not only the creative drive of the translator that increasingly shows as the story unfolds, but also the translator-author's desire to control the text. Just like the absent owner was not able to prevent intervention on the part of the translator, the latter does not succeed in his attempts to create or reconstitute some kind of authorial order for himself. As the story unfolds, the bunnies "hop about on the carpet, into the chairs, then tiny blotches shift like a moving constellation from one part to another" (45), which is increasingly anguishing for the protagonist. He writes in his letter: "I'd like to see them quiet, see them at my feet and being quiet - somewhat the dream of any God, Andrea, a dream the gods never see fulfilled" (45). The translator-author struggles to control his own language, his text.

In the story, when the number of bunnies reaches ten, the protagonist feels some relief. He thinks that ten is the limit and that no more bunnies will come. Although his routine has changed dramatically and he has become isolated - he spends his time reorganizing his life according to his new circumstance - he manages to

adjust his existence to the presence and needs of the ten growing bunnies. As they grow he takes new measures, such as putting the books on higher shelves so the rabbits cannot reach them. To him, ten is a set number, thus resembling a manageable order. But when an eleventh bunny appears toward the end of the story, his lack of control becomes absolute. At that point, the protagonist tries to release himself of the responsibility of what has happened to the owner's space, which is what leads him to write the letter in the first place: "Enough now, I've written this because it's important to me to let you know that I was not all that responsible for the unavoidable and helpless destruction of your home" (48). The protagonist must now face the uselessness of his attempts to control the situation; he has lost hope: "As far as I'm concerned, going from ten to eleven is an unbridgeable chasm. You understand: ten was fine, with a wardrobe, clover and hope, so many things could happen for the better. But not with eleven, because to say eleven is already to say twelve for sure, and Andrea, twelve would be thirteen" (49). For the protagonist, eleven signifies endless possibilities. He discovers that it is not in his hands to stop the reproduction, and also realizes that the closure he had established with the number ten was part of the illusion of another arbitrary order he had attempted to create, he becomes completely overwhelmed with the materiality of his own presence.

In "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" we see that, while the traces left by the subject's existence are unavoidable, they are not 'proper' from a social point of view. In the story this is also analogous to the creative process, which must remain a private act: "Always I have managed to be alone when it happens, guarding the fact much as we guard so many of our privy acts, evidences of our physical selves which happen to us in total privacy" (41). As the protagonist inhabits the space, instead of developing a sense of belonging he becomes increasingly marginalized. In any case, it is essential to note the growing ironic tone in the story; it is evident throughout that the search for order is somehow a compulsion, not a real possibility. The more the protagonist tries to be faithful to the original, the more he intervenes. However, he has no choice. At the beginning of the story he anticipates that the alleged order of the place can be appreciated only at the surface: "Everything looks so natural, as always when one does not know the truth." (40). The reference to the sacred status of cultural products is often ironic, as is the description of the disproportionate

consequences of each single intervention. The "intruder" says that he cannot even bring his fingers close to a book without perceiving his own gesture as a transgression: "I can hardly change a lamp's cone of light, open the piano bench, without feeling a rivalry and offense swinging before my eyes like a flock of sparrows" (40). The ironic tone of the story conveys the idea of the ambiguity of the protagonist's intentions; he finds the boundaries immense, but the restrictions constitute, at the same time, a provocation.

Upon the arrival of the eleventh bunny, the protagonist takes drastic measures; he decides to kill the rabbits and writes the last lines of the letter before jumping into the void. Taken literally, this death may be seen as a self-destructive outcome of the irreversibility of the creative situation. The protagonist-translator is defeated by the impossibility of faithfulness and, as Shivers remarks, by "his inability to deal with the expansion and then the fragmentation of the self."

However, this death should not be read as an irreversible 'end.' It should be read, instead, in light of other pieces of Cortázar's fiction. As a theme in several of the works by this author, death cannot easily be equated with destruction. First of all, the narration often leaves death open as a possibility; it may be about to happen but we do not see it realized. Moreover, death is often part of the process of creation and it is a transcendental experience of change. At the end of *Hopscotch*, for example, the protagonist, Horacio Oliveira, is sitting by the window, ready to jump into the void. As Cortázar himself remarked about Oliveira's possible suicide, the end of the novel remains undefined. He says: "I don't know myself whether Oliveira really jumped out the window and killed himself or simply went completely mad ... I think that was an attempt on my part to demonstrate from an Occidental viewpoint, with all the limitations and shortcomings this implies, a jump into the absolute like that of the Zen Buddhist monk or the Master of Vedanta" (Harss 233-4 in Cibil, 70).

By means of this ambiguity Cortázar often creates a representation of death as productive, rather than destructive. His 'deaths' may signify exposure, mutation, metamorphosis, even liberation - a translation of the self into another reality. Hence, in "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" death may represent a turning point. In any case it would be a way out of an oppressive, alienating situation.

But what may such an end mean when reading this particular story as a story about translation? Before entering into this question it might be useful to examine Cortázar's views about his own translation practice. Besides being a translator for UNESCO for several years, he translated such important authors as Poe and Gide:

All this [translation work] has left me with an appreciation for the subtle transmutations and transgressions that take place in the translation of any text when its meaning goes beyond the bridges of language ... Not to mention the more subtle distortion that historical and cultural distance imposes; Borges showed this better than anyone in "Pierre Menard" ... where it isn't even a question of translation but instead a literal reproduction that, nevertheless, comes out completely different from the original text. (Cortázar, 2002: 21)

It also seems relevant to note that, in a general sense, translation in Cortázar's works has often been associated with another one of his recurrent themes, that of exile. The exiled person is displaced and must inhabit a foreign space. The exile's condition is one of both loss (or want), and encounter. In "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" the protagonist tells Andrea about his transitory existential condition: "I've closed so many suitcases in my life, I've passed so many hours preparing luggage that never manages to get moved anywhere" (40). The exile is a subject in between, who belongs both to two places at once and to none, and who is forced to translate himself in order to be able to participate in a foreign order.

Keeping in mind these elements - the recurring analogy translation-exile and the author's view of his own practice - we can see how the act of translation in "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" corresponds to an experience of transformation. In this regard, Cortázar's view on translation would resemble Jacques Derrida's reflections on translation:

For the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact have never had, to do with some "transport" of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched. (20)

Thus, in the absence of a "pure" difference between signified and signifier, the difficulty of speaking about translation in terms of "fidelity," "reproduction," or "purity" is evidenced. Through the recognition of the dynamics of difference inherent in translation, it becomes a creative, rather than falsifying or illegitimate practice actively performed by a present subject in a relational dynamic. In this light, instead of being understood as a neutral reproduction of texts as closed orders - independent from translators and their circumstances - translation appears as a possibility for legitimate interference.

Therefore, if we accept the analogy between translation and experience in "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris," and more specifically the relationship between the potential death of the translator-protagonist in the story, and the traditional view of translation as the "death" of the work, then both deaths must necessarily be similarly ambiguous. Translation as the death of the work would be analogous to the potential deaths, or crossings of Cortázar's characters. Translation would then be the crossing or "transmigration" to use Cortázar's word, of the work from its life into its afterlife. Such notion would provide suggestive possibilities to approach translation as in *A Manual for Manuel* as a creative, transformational space, a strategic instrument, and a form of writing.

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THE AUTHOR

** María Constanza Guzmán is a full-time teacher at the School of Translation and the Department of Hispanic Studies at York University, Glendon College. E-mail: mguzman@gl.yorku.ca.