

AWEJ Special Issue on Translation No. (2) 2013

pp. 200-211

## Translation in the Discourse of Modern Experience: The Modernists' Reckoning with Polyphony as an Aesthetic Device

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### Abstract:

The present paper discusses the modernist authors' process in blurring the lines between literature and translation as part of their various aesthetic experiments. In contention with their contemporary English linguistic and cultural agendas, the modernist writers have internalized translational strategies to challenge the national identity and culture. Since many of them straddled two cultures, the resort to translation was inevitable introducing not only literature to the intercultural communication but translation as well to working mechanisms of culture. Taking as a point of departure the nature and function of translation as a paradigm for modernist thought, I tend to survey Jacob Korg's idea of 'the verbal revolution', Venuti's views and the emergence of various translation types among which is the intertextual translation or transmitting and introducing a foreign word into a text. Such a meeting of two different languages in literature has indeed been the focus of many scholars in translation studies echoing Bakhtin's 'polyphony'. Second, considered as a key to cross-cultural communication, the paper offers insights about translation as an aesthetic experiment of the modernists in their attempts to forge the discourse of modern experience based on the interaction of many languages.

*Keywords:* translation, modernism, culture, extraterritoriality, intertextual translation, polyphony

## 1. Introduction

It is widely agreed that both literature and translation are influenced by culture in a number of ways. The common variable that has consolidated such a striking relationship is language being the primary tool in human communication. Using words is, indeed, the constant worry of writers to best express themselves, and, through their craft they do not only reveal their feelings and experiences, but also record the specificities of knowledge and culture prevailing in their epoch. The problem, however, is that when modernism emerged as a rebellious thought against tradition, the modernist writers felt deeply unsatisfied with the offerings of their immediate environment. Modern life, however, facilitated too much the individual's mobility so that translation and translators have imperatively intervened to ease understanding and conversion as well. It is henceforth undeniable that the practice of translation has always existed along with that of literature, yet the boom occurred when the literary translation has become the focus of Translation Studies when the exposure of the indigenous to the foreign has been overwhelming.

The complexity of the cultural activity in the modernist literature is clearly revealed in the field of translation. Indeed, the contact between two languages, or the mechanical sounding act of linguistic 'substitution' as Catford (1965) put it, has no more become the translator's priority. What is at stake is rather a knotty negotiation between two cultures thereby emphasizing the polemical issue of cultural identity. At this level of study, and with the fact that many modernists like E. Pound, G. Stein, T.S. Eliot, J. Joyce, V. Woolf, J. Conrad, and many others, went through the experience of exile and foreignness, one would contest the idea that the claim for cultural diversity and interculturality are particularly postmodern phenomena. Drawing from the conviction that the modernists' discontent with their native linguistic and cultural agendas must be seen as an essential condition to their resort to foreignizing poetics, it would be valid that translation is one of the paradigmatic features of modernist thought, or rather as an aesthetic device undertaken by those authors and poets who have been straddling two cultures.

## 2. Translation and modernism

The growth of linguistic experiments has been one of the major issues that acknowledged the very spirit of modernism. And as the relation of language to logic and reality has become a premise, some modernist writers engaged with translation as a mode of literary composition opening, therefore, a site for overlapping cultural parameters and exilic experiences. When these new developments took place, it began to be noticed that the experience of extraterritoriality has implied a new outlook for translation along with the rise of the notion that language is culturally embedded.

The correlation between language and culture has pervaded an extensive body of literature in the field of humanities and language study demonstrating that language could only be interpreted within a culture (Sapir, 1929). The most vigorous claim was Sapir's suggestion that "no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same

reality” (p. 214). The echoes of this idea have found a fertile ground in Kramsch’s *Language and Culture* (1998) who believes that:

Language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language: they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. .... Thus we can say that language symbolizes cultural reality. (p. 3)

Meanwhile, the Translation Studies have reached their strong version with the rise of ‘Cultural Translation’ when scholars like Venuti, Toury, and Munday have put forward the idea of translation as culturally embedded too. In this context they demonstrated that knowing and mastering the language alone does not guarantee a successful process of translation, they deal with the cruxes of culture, i.e. the resisting of particular items in the source language which draw particularly from each culture’s specificity. Such a translational capacity of culture has, indeed, been central to the modernists’ engagement with migration, exile, and displacement.

The relationship between modernism and translation tends to provoke one of the most sounding questioning that pertains to the nature and function of translation in the modernist thought. Though I shall not dwell here on a discussion of modernism as a concept per se, I wish just to stress that, be it viewed from whatever angle, it refers to the institutionalization of doubt over all earlier presumptions so that, in the present case at least, translation has turned to be a device for an exhaustive exploration of the renewing of literary language.

The most common difficulty for writers and poets at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the incapacity of language to translate the complexity of the modern world where a multitude of cultural experiences came into practice seeking therefore new modes of mediation. Based on the view of ‘revolution’, Jacob Korg (1979), in his book *Language in Modern Literature*, states “there is no doubt that a revolution occurred, and that it was primarily a verbal revolution, manifesting itself in new uses of language” (p. 1). In this context, the reality referred to is no more simple and definite but complex and multiple. Duality or even the multiplicity of the writers’ and poets’ lives, through their social and individual identities, urged them to probe new linguistic territories, yet foreign for them, obviously informing about the limitations existing in their native agendas --both linguistic and cultural.

One of the most earlier and influential formulation of this idea had been stated by T.S. Eliot (1957) as a contest to the reviewers who did not grasp his intention, “there is always the communication of some new experiences, or some fresh understanding of the familiar, or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words for, which enlarges or refines our sensibility” (p. 7). Modern experience had been shockingly new that the language of tradition could not hold it. Within such a growing tendency to rethink the role of conventional English and

its full capacity in the visibility of the modern experience, the appeal for a ‘foreignizing’ poetics had become imperatively urgent.

Much attraction to translation, both as a source of inspiration and as a means by which the western culture was altering, widened the range of modernist thought supplying the discipline of literature with new avenues. Venuti’s (1995) idea about the role of translation in this part should well be considered. He views translation as “an appropriation of foreign culture for domestic agendas, cultural, economic and political” (p.18). Besides that translation is also defined as a “cultural act, an act of communication across cultures” (House, 2009, p.11) contributed strikingly into the development of modernism. In his work *Translation and the Language of Modernism*, Yao (2002) explains that modernist translation, much as a process of transmission, has proved a full capacity to enrich the national literature by generating new meanings as it embraced foreign linguistic and cultural contexts:

It embodied a comprehensive textual strategy for negotiating between the demands of transmission and transformation, between the authority of tradition and the demands of innovation, between the endowments of the past and the imperatives of the present. In their drive to develop and renew different formal and social possibilities, the Modernists writing in (and into) English turned to translation and, in turn, reinvented it as a uniquely important mode of literary composition. (p.22)

A number of modernist writers and poets have internalized the entire process of translation without being concerned with transfer from one language to another but have adopted the language of translation as their own. Undoubtedly, translation has emerged heroically as a literary practice crucial to the very development of Anglo-American modernism. Authors such as J. Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Hilda Doolittle (known by her initials H.D.), M. Moore, T.S. Eliot, V. Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, and probably many others, have borrowed so much from the other cultures and have been influenced by writers in other languages. Yet, the most impressive of all and who recommended translation into the literary practice, was E. Pound who celebrated, at his utmost, the way foreign literary traditions traverse national and cultural borders. By a grafting of the foreign onto the domestic, Pound stands as a pre-eminent example of the translation-based literary experimentation. For him, modernist poetry would only be conceivable with translation. His approach, regarded as most scandalous within the realm of the national literature, sums up his audacities as a translator extending therefore the bounds of the English verse by establishing a new form very akin to that of the original. In this respect, a glance at some theoretical views like the poststructuralist and the semiotic is worth studying for a better understanding of the translation warranty within the modernist literature.

### 3. Translation Strategies in the Light of Poststructuralism and Semiotics

The poststructuralist definition of translation as “an action in which the movement along the surface of language is made visible” (Gentzler, 1993: 162) reflects very well Pound’s approach. For the sake of supporting this view one will just examine Venuti’s (1995) idea about translation as: “A process by which the chain of signifiers in the target language text that constitutes the source language is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language text which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation” (p.17). The present definition includes a two folded perspective; the poststructuralist’s perspective one “which entertains the belief in which culture plays a significant role in the translation of a particular text and it has much more precedence over the linguistic element due to its great influence on the translation process” (Nazzal, 2012, p.84). The semiotic point of view draws from the works of R. Jakobson and U. Eco who have introduced inter-linguistic, intra-linguistic and inter-semiotic translations as crucially revealing perspectives of the mechanisms of culture.

Several poststructuralist scholarly works have sustained the legitimacy of translation as a paradigm of thought for the modernists. Departing from the work of W. Benjamin, both J. Derrida and P.de Mann have developed their views about translation diametrically with the traditional notions. Indeed, the notion of “the stability of the original” lost its hold as P. de Man (1986, p.82) stated that translation “shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice.” Derrida, likewise, rejected the traditional function of translation pertaining to reproducing; he rather emphasized the capacity of the language of translation in modifying the source text.

So, the hitherto latest contribution to the ideas above, and the one that sums up both, is Venuti’s “refraction” rather than a mirror of the original text. Liberating translation from its long abiding fidelity to the original text to proceeding with estrangement and disruption, has given much impetus to the rise of Translation Studies as an interdisciplinary field.

This feature about the turning function of translation is also echoed by W. Benjamin (1992) who argued “the task of the translator is to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his recreation of that work” (pp. 80-81). He discusses the mobility of the original which implies a mode of displacement which, in its turn, informs a lot about the relationship between translation and modernism. Therein lies the attractiveness of Pound’s dubbing of the “labour of translation” in his essay devoted to Henry James as a displaced cosmopolitan who informed about cultures using translation. What must be noted at this level is that the aspects of mobility and displacement characterizing the modernist view of translation lead to the recreation of an original meaning within a completely foreign context. This is precisely what Schaeffner and Adab claim through the view of the ‘hybrid text’:

A hybrid text is a text that results from a translation process. It shows features that somehow seem ‘out of place’/ ‘strange’/ ‘unusual’ for the receiving culture, i.e. the target culture. These features, however, are not the result of a lack of translational competence or examples of ‘translationese’, but they are evidence of conscious and deliberate decisions by the translator. Although the text is not yet fully established in the target culture (because it does not conform to established norms and conventions), a hybrid text is accepted in its target culture because it fulfills its intended purpose in the communicative situation (at least for a certain time).” (quoted in Stockinger, 2003, p. 17)

The viability of a translation, therefore, is established by its self-reflexive characteristic of unfaithfulness to the previous text, leaving corridors open for dialogue and recreation. Through such an epistemological tendency, which sets translation as a trans-disciplinary paradigm, the modernist writers and poets hankered for it and practiced it as one of their miscellaneous aesthetic experiments through which they challenged established concepts of the self and the other on the one hand, and generating new agendas for their native language and culture on the other.

In their quest for the exotic and the unfamiliar, seen as a source of inspiration to fill in the discrepancies of the original, many modernists resorted to what has been considered “foreignizing” poetics in reference to their extraterritorial experiences being a main condition of the modern self in the modern world. By the turn of the twentieth century, the understanding of the cultural value of a to-be-translated text has been at stake so that the importance of translation for the identity of the receiving culture has become a condition. Much concern about it has grown deeper in what Venuti (1998) has called the identity forming power of translations enabling a culture to identify itself both via coherence and homogeneity as well as resistance or innovation.

Few years earlier than Venuti, Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the culture studies critic, had previously made an apt comment on this when he argued that “cultural translation is not simply an appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems and values, by departing from their habitual or ‘inbred’ roles of transformation” (p. 27). What was seen as outrageous, when the avant-garde modernists turned to foreign languages and cultures to find more telling words to their experiences, is by the time being fully institutionalized.

Moving beyond the legitimate condition of translation in the modernist literature, one would ask a further question which way we shall go to understand its connectedness to the working mechanisms of culture. The answer was provided by R. Jakobson when he

demonstrated that the borderline between translation studies and cultural semiotics has become fuzzy. Dealing with translation in the light of semiotics will not provoke much thought about its influence on translation theory, but I will nevertheless argue, through T. S. Eliot's use of foreign words into his texts, the semiotic aspect of intertextual translation displayed through dialogism.

Among the striking strategies that characterize the modernists' works is their inclusion of different fragments appropriated from texts in foreign languages attributing therefore to modernism a multilingual dimension. Languages other than English were the inspiration sources to defamiliarize their native language so that Pound's translations of Chinese poetry were the basic catalyst for the making aspects of the Anglo-American imagism. Besides that, T.S. Eliot's work written in French, 'Mélange adultère de tout' (1916), provides a sense of dialogic thought for the wanderer from one space to another supporting therefore Pound's central thesis of the juxtaposition of two or even three distinct parts. Semiotically speaking, such a freedom of interaction between languages could be read in terms of Leon Robel's (1995) "emphasis that Bakhtin attributes to the language of literature (and, at the same time, also the text) the capacity to operate as a metalanguage in translating from one sign system into another" (as quoted in Torop, 2002: 598).

Yet, what seems pertinent to Bakhtin's view is that the modernists' texts, through such a new medium of expression, operate as "a dia-logic place, for at least two different logics meet in it: those of two different languages" (De Michiel 1999: 695). Indeed, the meeting of two languages within a single space is not only a mere adjacency of two different cultures but a way to exercise freedom beyond the monolingual constraints. The works of Bakhtin are considered the most noticeable in acknowledging freedom as an important dimension in the literary works where different centres of consciousness are displayed. It is referred to as polyphony which literally means "multi-voicedness". In Eliot's poetic composition "En Amérique, professeur;/En Angleterre, journaliste; /A Londres un peu banquier; /En Allemagne, philosophe" (Eliot 1963: 39), the free wandering of the speaker provokes a set of play between different ideological positions determined by the specificities of the place obviously affecting identity in the process of translation and/or alteration. Meaning, according to Bakhtin is wholly derived from the interplay of several consciousnesses, which is recently defined in the studies of identity through the idea of location and cartography.

Another exemplary exponent of polyphony in the English literature is J. Joyce whose position, according to Sheldon Brivic, is very unique and that no one "before Joyce had expressed such a plural consciousness or taken such a multiphonic point of view." (p.58 quoted in Bakhtin 1984). His experience with linguistic alienation is first described in the autobiographical work *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a witness to his foreignness most of his life being constantly obliged to translate himself and speaking the other's language. Once he stated "I'd like a language which is above all languages" (Ellmann 1959: 410) mocking

the limits of a single language. Stephen Dedalus in *The Portrait* (1968) talks about the linguistic problem as follows:

The language in which we are speaking now is his before it is mine...His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My souls frets in the shadow of his language. (p. 189)

The maturation of his linguistic quest did not reach a wanted fulfillment since his life-long experience of self-exile led him to the fabric of English out of interwoven aspects from sixty different languages.

As discussed earlier, the interconnectedness between translation and modernism has, indeed, paved the way to many fields of research to widen their scopes such as the linguistic, the sociological, and the anthropological also. As far as identity is concerned, the cultural turn in translation has really expanded massively along with the rise of diasporic literatures. Last but not least, the following part will be a concise study about some modernists' voyage between worlds and languages undermining the traditions and the national stream of literature.

#### 4. Translating the hybrid self.

Michael North (1994), in his work *The Dialect of Modernism*, describes the influence of the variations in language on the identity formation dealing with the idea of 'betweenness' in the modernists' works. He cites T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a site for various cross-cultural artefacts to occur involving examples of otherness urging, then implicitly, the West to turn to other regions of the world to ensure its progress. This aspect of the translated self, put forward by the inclusion of lines in various languages, accounts for the study of the work as a diasporic one since it does not apply to the norms of the national literature. Recalling S. Rushdi's idea (1991) "we are translated men" (p. 16), Eliot had fundamentally rejected the original and replaced it by "the creative borrowing of another style and syntax which releases a plethora of 'voices'" (Ackroyd Peter, 1984, p. 117). Coming to maturity, Eliot's idea that his voice might be sound only by reproducing the others' voices, demonstrates his sense of living on the borderlines to be in continuous contact with languages and cultures.

Quando fiam uti chelidon---O swallow swallow

Le Prince d'Aquitanie à la tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

(Eliot, 1963: 69)

In this example contesting cultural and social homogeneity tends to provide a completely new language that exemplifies the cross-cultural encounters. The eagerness of exploring and exploiting foreign alternatives started with the process of translation since many writers were themselves translators. The geographical and cultural space is therefore another important parameter that accounts for translation as a discourse of the modern experience. The literary expatriate writers and poets were indeed the forerunners of break, whose joint conviction that only the foreign is a means to stretch their native language and culture, emphasized the force and significance of another language though incongruous with the original.

The new concern of writers in the modernist world conditions has become whether the words are capable enough to carry and transmit the reality about the complexity and strangeness of such a new experience. In a similar vein, Eugene O'Neill's contributions to both American and world theatre are acknowledged through his deep worries about how best a language would describe and create the intricate psychologies that define his troubled characters. Indeed, it is the language of the characters and of O'Neill himself that may indicate how successful the playwright was at creating a consistent universe in which all characters exist as cogs in the uncaring, mechanical vastness in which they all must eventually perish. In their efforts to somehow overcome the restrictive power to their lives, the characters rely heavily on a rhetoric that defines them as much as it conveys plot information to the audience. "How we poor monkeys hide from ourselves behind the sounds called words," declares Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude*, aware of her own downfall developing behind those very sounds.

O'Neill never showed any complacency with already established theories, and his reluctance had even extended to trust words to convey his ideas. During his experimental period, his difficulty with language had often been expressed as an act of exile and alienation. In fact, that act of exile was at once an act of criticism and that of quest also. In the pursuit of whether the most sordid, and to a certain extent, blind alleys of life could be illuminated, a concern with language, semantics and articulation found a fertile ground in O'Neill's drama. However, the unceasing experiments with the word, that he often found too protean to present completely his meaning, transcended the limits of the text seeking the actual process of presentation through the physical theatre. Throughout his canon, O'Neill critiques language itself, even as he relies on it to develop a sense of the difference between the intrinsic self and its expression (Bigsby, 1992). He indicates his own awareness of the ultimate inadequacy of language and its subsequent subversion of an objective truth.

Such a distrust of language can be seen throughout his body of work, populated as it is by preponderance of schemers, liars, dreamers, hucksters and actors, men and women who use language not to define reality but in an attempt to simultaneously conceal and transcend it. They are indeed a theatrical lot. However, as his body of work indicates, O'Neill feels a sense of camaraderie with people in all walks and stations of life, for if there is a certainty unmasked

behind the facade of language in O'Neill's work, it is to demonstrate that we are all doomed. Yet, O'Neill's drama is tragically circumscribed so that no language; the original or the fabricated; was possible to assuage the characters' grievous situations. We can relate his search for language to his creation of the tragic character whose retreat from articulateness to silence is generally evident in the character's escapes from reality, whether through insanity or drink or drugs being simply the overt symptoms of what the dramatist called the "Sickness of today".

The capacity of language for meaning and communicating was also the problem that Virginia Woolf encountered in many of her works. Her various strategies in writing like the use of disjointed and subversive sentences, fragmented thoughts and images, reflect an assignment for the modernist writers to forge a language proper to the experience of modernity. However, hers is a double exercise viewed from the literary and the social constraints being in struggle with the male dominant culture. This idea is best exemplified in her work *'A Room of One's Own'* where she discusses the role of the woman novelist in making a language for her status.

The very development of the language of translation occurred with the coming into existence of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1902), regarded as one of the prominent exercise of a translated self in the history of British literature. As a Polish émigré, J. Conrad's successful engagement with translation practices has been most crowning for the notion of modernist identity. His process differs from Eliot's, or Pound's, or Joyce's, since his is one-way from the outside to the inside whereas theirs are multiple dwellings between native and foreign. His novel provided a fertile ground for discussing the relationship between modernism and translation which became most complex through the multi-voiced characterization. The characters' interactions are represented linguistically by their different spoken languages all raising the issue of the role of space and place in forging a language. The writer's consciousness here plays a vital role while recording a variety of languages in the English language; French, German and Russian including also some native African tongues. Vainly, the experience of foreignness was so harsh and 'dark' that Marlow was unable to find a language by which he could tell his experience. The cacophony of voices in *Heart of Darkness* can also be inscribed into Bakhtin's notion of 'heteroglossia' but much extended by the inclusion of international voices rather than the diversity of local social speech types. The profile of Marlow resembles in many ways that of a translator whose inabilities at communicating the message of the original experience are forcefully accompanied with an anxiety. A successful engagement with the 'foreignness' necessitates a new matrix framed out of a deep knowledge of individuals, languages and cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

Translation has emerged as a literary practice crucial to the very development of Anglo-American modernism. History has proved that the existence of literature has always been accompanied by that of translation. Goethe believed that national literature rapidly stagnate when the outside influences are absent. In the same vein, E. Pound turned to the Chinese poetry to

write his body of fourteen poems entitled *Cathay* (1915), such a contact enabled him to write *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919) where he included his famous argument the West must turn, finally, to the East or else continue its decline into artistic oblivion. The celebration of translation as a paradigm of the modernist thought is done on the ground that migration, exile, dislocation and cross-cultural communication are the most informing facts of modernity. Across the twentieth century, when globalization further sustains a grip to individuality, the translator's role has become so important to serve effectively into the process of intercultural communication. Still, the way for cultural translation is not fully paved yet since the culturally continuous process of rising diasporas and the need to pull down the barriers dividing human beings on the globe seem much more accentuated than ever.

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