Lady Chatterley's Lover and the Case of the Strategically Placed Translator's Note

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Abstract

This paper straddles the disciplines of translation history and intercultural studies and aims to interrogate the relationship between translators, cultures and taboo. Pym has claimed that "translation history can fulfil a service function with respect to the humanistic disciplines concerned with describing individual cultures" (Pym 1998: 16) and it is hoped that the present study will on the one hand take an initial step towards tracing the changing coordinates of the boundaries separating target (English) culture from source (Italian) culture, and on the other shed light on some of the salient aspects of post-war Italian culture. To this end, we take as our focus of study the oft-cited though little-studied translator's note as an instance in which meaning transfer within the translated text is for some reason blocked by the translator and substituted with a comment issued by the translator him/herself. Through studying the translator's note appearing in Giulio Monteleone's Italian translation of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published in 1946, which appears at the point in which Mellors uses what in the English courts was deemed scandalously offensive language, we seek to investigate the textual function of this particular translator's note and the way in which it either bridges or distances source and target cultures.

1. Introduction

In his defensive essay, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D.H. Lawrence pits the prohibitive paranoia of a repressive English society (personified by George Bernard Shaw) against the progressively liberal attitudes of Italian society (personified, somewhat unpredictably, by the Pope). Towards the end of the essay he addresses the issue of language:

> If I use the taboo words, there is a reason. We shall never free the phallic reality from the 'uplift' taint till we give it its own phallic language and use the obscene words. The greatest blasphemy of all against the phallic reality is this 'lifting to a higher plain' (Lawrence 1993b: 334).

This assertion is followed by a revealing anecdote. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first published in Florence in 1928, at Lawrence's own expense, by a Florentine publisher who didn't speak a word of English (Lawrence 1993b). When the publisher was told by a newspaper that he was being deceived into publishing a potentially scandalous novel, he duly informed himself of its content and exclaimed, "with the short indifference of a Florentine: Oh! Ma! But we do it every day!" (Lawrence 1993b: 334)

These two extracts provide an interesting perspective on Lawrence's English-repressive / Italian-receptive dichotomy. Language is pivotal in the first statement. By asserting that certain realities have their 'own' words, Lawrence falls only just short of suggesting that the famously arbitrary signifier-signified relationship might not be quite as arbitrary as Saussure would have us believe. Yet in the

second example, which probably accounts for the first instance of Italian reception of the novel, the issue at stake is purely content-based; the publisher's reported indifference towards Lawrence's breaking of taboos conveniently side-steps the issue of the novel's language. It was not until 1946, after the Fascist ban on the translation had been lifted, that Italians had the chance to savour the novel in the Italian language. The novel was translated by Giulio Monteleone and published by the Milan-based Arnaldo Mondadori Editore in 1946.

So given what Lawrence perceived to be the increased sensitivity and general enlightenment of Italian culture, one would expect that the novel's language, too obscene to be published in the UK or the US, would not have fallen foul of the "uplift taint" and would have been reproduced in all its scandalous glory in the Italian translation. But this was only partly true. This paper will seek to show that Lawrence's notions regarding the receptiveness of Italian society towards the question of taboos were not entirely well-founded and are partly contradicted by the Italian translation of his novel. It will argue that whilst many of the obscene lexical items were reproduced as transparently (or scandalously) as possible, the translator's decision to replace Mellors' and, more importantly, Lady Chatterley's use of dialect with a well-placed translator's note in fact eradicates the political and social taboos broken by the source text. The translator's note acts as a sort of textual fig leaf positioned between target and source culture at precisely the most linguistically, culturally and sexually subversive moment in the narrative.

2. Translation History: A Method

Before we move towards the consideration of this minutia, it might first be useful to locate the argument in its broader field. Pym raises an important point when, in a paper on the historiography of

translation, he signals the problem of what can be considered "properly historical" (Pym 1992: 221). His questioning of the historiography of translation points to the need to "construct an explanatory narrative" (221). If the present, necessarily brief study of the Italian translation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is to be of interest to the field of translation historiography, it would need to discover the explanatory narrative framing Monteleone's decision to place his translator's note at this particular moment in the narrative (rather than when dialect is first used) and why he deems it necessary to translate the sexually explicit lexis of the source text but not its dialect. The falsifiable hypothesis we need to test is this: the translator's note functions as a buffer to the transgressive material contained in the source text. But who and what does the note seek to protect? In order to answer this question we need to find textual evidence supporting the claim that the translator's note does indeed act as a sort of protective shield, we would need to assess the implications of this strategy by collocating Monteleone's decision within the context of contemporary views on translation, and we would need to examine what constitutes taboo in the source and target cultures.

3. Taboo

Taboo was associated by the Victorian theorizer James Frazer with primitive cultures (cited in Robinson 1996) but more recent thinkers, including Freud (1950), Douglas (1966) and Robinson (1996) have shown how taboo is present in modern cultures as addiction and obsession. "Taboo as obsession or addiction would be the ideosomatic fabric that holds society together, the shared bodily feel for right and wrong that causes us to shudder (and feel powerfully and fearfully attracted to) socially deviant behaviour" (Robinson 1996: 28). In his influential essay *Totem and Taboo*

(1950), Freud shows how taboo denotes something inaccessible or unapproachable, it drives covert prohibitions and restrictions and as such implies something untouchable or something that should be kept out of reach: "the principle prohibition, the nucleus of the neurosis, is against touching" (Freud 1950: 27). The inherent danger of taboo lies in its ability to infect, to spread contagion. In the case of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the source culture taboo was at once of a sexual and a social nature. Whilst the obscene lexis was considered dirty, Hoggart defends Lawrence's decision to break taboos and in his introduction to the first edition after the ban on the book was lifted he claims that

> our language for sex shows us to be knotted and ashamed, too dirty and too shy. Hence the use of the four-letter words. Lawrence's object was to throw some light into a dark corner of our emotional life (Hoggart 1961: 5).

The idea of touching signalled by taboo is deemed subversive, not merely in a sexual sense, but also in a socio-political sense. Meyers notes how one of the appalling aspects of the book was the way in which "[the working class Mellors] caresses Connie, establishes his authority by commanding her to lie down and makes love to her for the first time as sex transcends class through the democracy of touch" (Meyers 1990: 358). Source culture taboos are doubtlessly challenged by Lawrence, but as we shall see, the concept of taboo and what was considered subversive and thus unapproachable to the target culture differed significantly from those of Great Britain or America where the novel was banned until 1960. The boundary separating the two sites of taboo lies somewhere in Monteleone's translator's note, and it is to this we must now turn our attention.

4. The Case of the Well placed Translator's Note

Monteleone enters the text with his note towards the end of chapter twelve, just before Mellors and Lady Chatterley utter what are considered to be the most subversively lewd words in a novel which, according to Michael Squires "has endured not only because of its peculiar status as a sexually explicit work but also because, like a camera, it succeeded in photographing a series of moments in the particular history of a society" (Squires 1994: 13). Not only does the upper class Lady Chatterley relish these obscenities which she pronounces with aplomb, she also attempts to communicate with Mellors in his own dialect, which was received with horror by the British establishment as the implications of this linguistic debasement of the ruling class threatened the stability of the British class-system and thus the very foundations of British society. Whilst the target text seeks an equivalent lexis and register for what was seen in the UK as the offensive naming of body parts and sexual activity, it does not reproduce the dialect in which the characters speak, and so the section in which the most potentially subversive elements appear in the target text is prefaced by the following translator's note:

> Le battute effettivamente in dialetto, sono state tradotte in italiano. Non si poteva altrimenti, salvo ricorrere a uno dei nostri dialetti. Ma ne sarebbe nato alcunché di risibile. (Monteleone trans. 1960: 211)

> (These lines are actually in dialect but have been translated into standard Italian. They could not have been translated otherwise, except by resorting to one of our own dialects. Had that been the case, the result would have been laughable.)

Let us take a moment to analyse the lexis used by the translator. The term *effettivamente* (which can be translated as 'actually' or

'really') immediately sets the target text at a distance from the 'real' and 'actual' source text; the implication is that if the source text is the 'real' and 'actual' then what we have here, in the target text, is somehow unreal, not actual. The distancing techniques continue with the word *ricorrere* (which can be translated as 'resort to', 'have recourse to', 'go back to', 'turn back to') which contains an implied anaphoric referencing this time suggestive of temporal distance. The most interesting choice of lexis, however, is the translator's use of the word *risibile*, which in English can be translated as 'laughable' or 'ludicrous'. To reference laughter in this scene is highly significant. One of the functions of laughter is protective; it can divert attention away from and conceal the subject's embarrassment in front of a potentially face-threatening situation and is once more a distancing mechanism. These references to distance thus preface the most subversive scene in the novel and act as a framing device, which serves to highlight the translation's identity as translation, that is, as something at one remove from the 'real' novel. The translator's note thus acts like a sort of veil, or a buffer or textual fig leaf, protecting the sensibilities of the target text reader at precisely the most challenging moment. Had Monteleone been preoccupied solely with explaining problems of a purely translational kind, surely this note would have appeared when Mellors first speaks in dialect and where the target text first veers away from 'faithful' reproduction. By referring to himself as translator at this precise moment, Monteleone evokes and invokes the material presence of the translator who, brought now into visibility, acts as a shield in standing between target and source text.

But whilst this interpretation seeks to express the textual effects produced by the insertion of the translator's note, it nevertheless falls short of an explanation as to *why* Monteleone needed to sidestep the issue of dialect. In order to take this argument a step further, we should examine the issue of dialects and translatability in general as treated by contemporaries or near contemporaries of

Monteleone.

5. Historical Perspectives

Venuti has claimed that translation theory during the 1940s and 1950s was "dominated by the fundamental issue of translatability. The obstacles to translation are duly noted, judged either insurmountable or negotiable, and translation methods are formulated with precision" (Venuti 2004: 111). The present case-study could be said to reflect the preoccupation with issues of translatability. If taken on face value, then, Monteleone's suggestion that translating the source text dialect into an Italian dialect would have laughable consequences is in effect a comment on the non-translatability of culture-specific discourse.

Monteleone's strategy seems on an initial reading to find justification in Benjamin's 1923 assertion that "a real translation is transparent, it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" (Benjamin 1992: 80). Taken in this regard, one could argue that Monteleone's 'uplifting' strategy is transparent to the extent that it does not cloud the target reader's appreciation of the cultural specificity of the source text by diverting him/her through dialect towards an inescapably Italian cultural, geographic and socio-economic reality.

It was Benjamin, again, who suggested that translation is unlike a work of literature insofar as it "does not find itself in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (Benjamin 1992: 77). Given the incongruous positioning of the translator's note, the significance we have attributed to Monteleone's choice of the word *risibile* and the

resulting distancing effect, any talk of transparency in this particular case would appear to be a somewhat short-sighted explanation. That said, however, in a 1937 paper, Ortega y Gasset takes a rather more admissive attitude to translational problems of this kind:

> What will [the translator] do with the rebellious text? Isn't it too much to ask that he also be rebellious, particularly since the text is someone else's? He will be ruled by cowardice, so instead of resisting grammatical constraints he will do just the opposite: he will place the translated author in the prison of normal expression; that is, he will betray him. *Traduttore, traditore*. (Ortega y Gasset 1992: 94)

To Ortega y Gasset, betrayal is unavoidable and necessarily accompanies the act of translation.

Issues of faithfulness and betrayal concerned practitioners and theorists alike, and Valéry's 1953 essay on translating Virgil's *Eclogues* is peppered with allusions to these values and presents an interesting insight into the relationship between poets and authority. Valéry talks specifically of poets, though we believe his observations hold true for writers and translators alike:

> Majesty dazzles. Authority impresses. Freedom intoxicates. Anarchy terrifies. Personal interest speaks with a powerful voice. One must not forget, either, that every individual distinguished by his talents places himself in his heart among a certain aristocracy. Whether he wishes it or not, he cannot confuse himself with the masses, and this unavoidable feeling has the most various consequences. (Valéry 1992: 123)

But to what authority is Monteleone displaying loyalty in his circumlocution of the dialect problem? Is his use of standardized

language really an attempt to enhance transparency and increase loyalty towards Lawrence's novel? In considering this, it might prove useful to look briefly at Nabakov's 1955 essay 'Problems of translation: Onegin in English' (Nabakov 1992: 127-143). Here we find Nabakov condemning 'readable' translations, translations – like Monteleone's – which tend towards language standardization: "It is when the translator sets out to render the 'spirit' – not the textual sense – that he begins to traduce his author" (Nabokov 1992: 127). Lawrence was far from vague when it came to expressing what he considered to be the spirit of the novel, but Monteleone's decision to lift the dialect represents a form of resistance to that spirit and thus we can hardly accept that the translator's loyalty, in this instance at least, was directed towards the source text. Therefore, Monteleone's strategy cannot be adequately accounted for by Benjamin's 'transparency' argument.

Nabakov also makes some interesting observations about the use of footnotes:

> It is possible to describe in a series of footnotes the modulations and rhymes of the text as well as its associations and other special features…. I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page…. I want such footnotes and the absolutely literal sense, with no emasculation and no padding (Nabakov 1992: 143).

Far from helping to explain Monteleone's decision to make recourse to the translator's note, Nabakov's assertion obfuscates the present issue even more. Our translator's footnote could hardly be described as explanatory – nowhere does Monteleone seek to convey the significance to the source culture of Mellors and Connie speaking in dialect. Indeed, his rather terse use of the *risibile* label functions like a door being slammed in the face of the target reader. We are by no

means dealing with a porous border; if Monteleone is the transcultural gate-keeper here, he is letting nothing through. The note is an expression of almost obstinate immobility in its refusal to transport the target reader towards a greater understanding of the source text. Monteleone's laughter is also the laughter of derision, deflecting any urge to probe for explanation. And yet what if this derision were another instance of protection? But more on this later.

Our theoretical explanation-seeking ends with a statement from Jakobson's 1959 paper, 'On linguistic aspects of translation': "languages differ in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey" (Jakobson 1992: 149). The distinction drawn between what *may* be conveyed and what *must* be conveyed is vital to our search for an explanation as to why Monteleone needed both to block the dialect and position himself as visible gate-keeper between the source and target texts. Did Monteleone believe that it was his responsibility to purify, to disinfect and to re-impose what Borges has called a "scandalous decorum" (Borges 2004: 97) on the language of the source text? Or was he responding to some prohibitive imperative – a specific need *not* to allow the dialectical voice to speak?

6. Translation and Dialect

Milton provides a useful insight into the translation of sub-standard language (Milton 2001). In a study on the translation of classic fiction for mass markets, he notes that dialect often remained untranslated in classic novels translated from English into Brasilian Portuguese during the period 1944 to 1976, and suggests that the same probably holds true for novels translated into other languages (Milton 2001: 51). In questioning this non-translation of dialect, Milton suggests that one reason for its absence is the fact that language was frequently considered secondary to the actual semantic content of a novel's speech. He quotes M.E. Coindreau, Faulkner's French

translator in this regard: "I have often been asked, 'How can you translate dialect?'. This is, in my opinion, a detail of slight importance" (Milton 2001: 52). Milton however comes up with a number of other suggestions, two of which might go some way to explaining the eradication of dialect in our particular translation. The first of these takes an aesthetic slant: minority language would be seen to sully the pages of a classic novel. The second is socio-political in nature: literature, both its production and consumption, was a decidedly middle class, conservative affair which shied away from experimentation.

Thus it was common for translators not in fact to translate the source text's minority language into a minority language in the target text. This explanation however does not go far enough in accounting for Monteleone's placing of the translator's note at precisely the most subversive moment in the text. Were his strategy a simple example of norm-following (it was *normal* not to meet dialect with dialect) then one would expect his note either to be placed right at the beginning of the translated novel or, at least, at the point where the referenced dialect is first used. Paradoxically, what we have referred to as the note's masking intentions actually serve to draw attention to the question of dialect in the target culture.

So what was Monteleone trying to hide, with his masking note, and why? Could it have something to do with taboos, and if so, what kind of taboos? Whilst sex and social impropriety (which could lead to the destabilisation of the class-structure) were considered taboos in the English source culture, Italian target culture taboos were plotted along a slightly different set of coordinates. Douglas Robinson suggests that the narrative of taboo progresses from repression, through denial, and on towards rationalisation. We would argue that, on the basis of what has been discussed so far, Monteleone's strategy is an example of repression. If this is so, then we ought to consider the possibility that it is not a sexual taboo that needs to be repressed in the target culture (as Lawrence himself pointed out), but a socio-linguistic taboo, i.e., it is the sub-standard language form,

the dialect itself, that for some reason is deemed to be threatening or destabilising and needs to be repressed. Indeed, at the time of translation, the dialectical voice was representative of a rural and practical (as opposed to intellectual) culture; it hinted at the fractured, fragmented and insular identity of a past that Italy was seeking to turn its back on through unification, which was finally achieved in 1861. Castonovo elucidates this point:

> Garibaldi's extraordinary achievement of liberating southern Italy had entered popular myth. With his audacity and strategic genius, the so-called 'Hero of the Two Worlds' succeeded in driving out the Bourbons with just a handful of men, thus allowing Cavour to implement his wise policies. But having "made Italy," it proved considerably more difficult to "make Italians" and to amalgamate the various populations which inhabited the peninsula. (Castonovo 2005)

Each of these "various populations" had its own dialect, its own specific linguistic identity, meaning that cultural, social and political unification were to a large extent superficial. The use of dialect in everyday life represented a challenge not only to the sense of national unity but was also at clear odds with the intellectual language of high-brow literary culture. To translate one of the literary greats of the Anglo-American world into an Italian dialect would have meant exposing the Achilles' heel of Italian unification: whilst Lawrence's use of dialect was sexually trangressive and thus morally offended its censors, it did little to threaten the actual linguistic integrity of Anglo-American culture; conversely, the introduction of localised sub-standard language (with its rural and practical connotations) into high Italian culture might have had an undermining effect; it might have weakened rather than strengthened the target language and culture.

In order to fully understand this cultural consideration, we

should examine in its proper socio-political context. In 1946, at the time of the translation, Italy had just emerged shattered from the experience of Fascism and the humiliation of defeat in the Second World War. Given this situation, the self-image of the Italian nation was far from positive. Benedetto Croce famously recorded in his diary in 1943 that "all political, economic and moral developments that the Italian people had worked for during the past century have been irreparably destroyed" (cited in Scoppola 2005), and Salvatore Satta, an astute and well-known jurist proclaimed in his 1948 book *De Profundis* "the death of a nation" (cited in Scoppola 2005). Italy's self-image was therefore incredibly fragile – so fragile, perhaps, as to be unable to accommodate even the slightest hint of cultural subversion. Too fragile, perhaps, to allow Monteleone the possibility of translating the subversive linguistic spirit of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

A preoccupation with a perceived cultural inferiority is implied by this fragility and is another factor we must take into account. The Fascist regime's censorship policy regarding translations proves insightful in this regard. The regime's policy was driven not so much by a need to suppress the potentially subversive content of foreign novels but quite simply by a preoccupation with quotas; during the period 1930-1940, Italy produced more translations than any other country in the world:

> In the period leading up to the war, the political importance
> of translations was not so much that English was the
> language most translated from, or that so many translations
> of Anglo-American popular fiction were bestsellers, but
> rather that the regime did not want Italy to appear too
> *receptive* to foreign influence. Excessive receptivity would
> imply a failure on the part of the fascist revolution to create
> an authentic culture of its own, and to guard against this, the
> regime adopted an increasingly autarchic cultural policy,

which also led to restrictions being imposed on translations.
(Rundle 1999: 427)

What we also find is that Germany was producing a large
volume of translations, but that the situation differed there to the
extent that an equally great volume of German literature was being
translated in the other direction. The cultural inferiority implied by
this imbalance preoccupied the regime and represented the driving
force behind the introduction of censorship in the field of translation,
but it continued to manifest itself in the post-war period. Arnaldo
Mondadori, Monteleone's publisher, successfully managed to negotiate
most censoring obstacles set in place by the Fascist regime and
continued "virtually unhindered in what was his most profitable
operation, publishing translations of popular fiction" (Rundle 1999).
Mondadori regularly resorted to 'adaptations' (i.e. the censorship of
subversive episodes from novels) in order to appease the regime and
made his money publishing popular American fiction in translation.
He must have clearly recognised the advantages of publishing the
translation of Lawrence's infamous novel and even though the
sexually explicit lexis of the source text was a source of potential
offence, this was far outweighed by the interest and curiosity
aroused by the text's content. The novel was clearly going to be a
big seller, unless, of course, a dialectical voice diminished readers'
enjoyment of the sexual content.

What we are suggesting, therefore, is that the issue of the
dialectical voice needed to be veiled and suppressed for two reasons.
Firstly because any transgressive voice would have detracted
attention from the sexual content (which was probably what drew
the majority of readers in the first place). This in turn would have
threatened sales, and profits, for Mondadori. Secondly, as argued
above, the use of sub-standard language would have raised problematic
cultural issues which may have rendered even more unstable an
already fragile sense of internationally estimable cultural identity.

7. Conclusion

We can now attempt to trace our explanatory narrative. It would clearly be over-simplistic to claim that Monteleone was merely following a certain norm in his avoidance of sub-standard language in his target text. The illogical textual positioning of the translator's note cannot and should not be overlooked and leads the attentive reader to question what it was that Monteleone was trying to mask. What our study reveals is that the translator's note on the one hand addresses itself to the target culture and can be interpreted as a distancing mechanism which functions in such a way as to dilute or disarm the source text's subversiveness. On the other hand, the note also addresses the source text/source culture, meeting it, so to speak, head on, but with the protective armour of a standard language grounded in the high culture of the intellectual elite. The note speaks to both target and source cultures when it ridicules the voice of dialect and suggests it would be considered a laughable invasion to an Italian readership. Thus the note constitutes both attack and defence and marks the site in which source and target cultures collide.

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