



PROJECT MUSE®

Foreignization: A Discussion of Theoretical and Practical Issues

John Milton

Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, Volume 54, 2008, pp. 103-113 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/402971>

FOREIGNIZATION A DISCUSSION OF THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

John Milton

INTRODUCTION: NIRANJANA AND THE *VACANA*

In this paper I shall look at a number of theories and approaches to foreignization in translation, illustrated by, initially, three different translations of the Sanskrit *vacana*, and used by Tejaswini Niranjana in *Siting Translation*, and, secondly, the translation of the *Odyssey* by a Brazilian, Manuel Odorico Mendes, written before the author's death in 1865, but only published in 1928.

In *Siting Translation* (1992), Tejaswini Niranjana draws heavily on Benjamin and Derrida to support her ideas on postcolonial translation and proposes a translation which incorporates elements of the original, influenced by the ideas of Lawrence Venuti. She gives examples of translations of a *vacana*, a fragment from a spiritual text produced in southern India in the twelfth century.

As I stepped back and looked
To see Thy light,
It seemed a hundred million suns
Came into sight;
A cluster of creeping lightnings I
With wonder saw.
O Guhesvara, if Thou become
The effulgent Linga, there be none
Thy glory to match!

From the *Sunyasampadane*, ed. and tr. S.
C. Nandimath, L. M. A Menezes, and R. C.
Hiremath, 1965, in Niranjana 174

Looking for your light,
I went out:
It was like the sudden dawn

Of a million million suns,
 A ganglion of lightnings
 For my wonder.
 O Lord of Caves,
 If you are light
 There can be no metaphor.

From *Speaking of Siva*, A. K. Rananujan,
 1973, in *Niranjana* 174

Niranjana believes that both of these translations fail to, in Benjamin's words, "understand the special significance inherent in the original which manifests itself in its translatability" (Niranjana 180), and that they attempt to assimilate Saivite poetry to a Christian neo-colonialist discourse, using terms we generally associate with Christianity such as "Thy", "Thou", "thy light" and "Lord". They continue to use the Western terms which were typical of 19th century missionaries and Anglo-Indian commentators. For example, Rananujan compares the various Virasaiva saints to the characters from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and stresses the value of direct immediate religious experience, unmediated by priests.

Niranjana believes in a retranslation of the Indian classics which would be free of such pseudo-Christian values. Her retranslation of the fragment is as follows:

Drawing back
 To look at your radiance
 I saw
 The dawning of a hundred million suns.
 I gazed in wonder
 At the lightning's creepers playing.
 Guhesvara, if you are become the *linga* of light
 Who can find your figuration.

Niranjana 175

Niranjana insists on leaving proper names, Guhesvara and *linga*, untranslated. She attempts to translate the central concept more accurately, in non-Christian terms. It is not a question of "finding other gods or mortals to 'match' the glory of *Guhesvara*, but one of finding someone capable of representing the *linga*" (185).

Niranjana insists that her version is deliberately rough, in the Benjamin tradition, that it will "affect" the language into which it is translated, "interrupting the 'transparency' and smoothness of a totalizing narrative like that of Rananujan" (185). Her translation will be inserted into the attack against "homogenizing and continuous narratives" (185). She finishes *Siting Translation* by making a call, *à la* Venuti, to the postcolonial translator, who can uncover "hegemonic representations of the non-Western world", and attempt to find the richer complexity of "our notions of the 'self', a more densely textured understanding of who 'we' are" (186). It is here that translators should intervene to introduce heterogeneity, avoid the idea of purity and to show that origins are never monolithic and pure. Translation thus becomes a disruptive and disseminating force.

ARGUING AGAINST NIRANJANA

I shall begin by following a defence of the translation which Niranjana criticizes, Rananujan's translation of the *vacana*. In "A. K. Rananujan's theory and practice of translation" (1999), Vinay Dharwadker accuses Niranjana of refusing "to engage with the specifics of Rananujan's work" and abandoning "any pretence at documentation and demonstration" (Dharwadker 124), arbitrarily accusing Rananujan of colonialism, orientalism and forcing Christianity on to the *vacana*. Dharwadker shows that Niranjana's research had been somewhat sloppy, failing to take into account the different editions of the *vacana* that Rananujan had used and that she had also based these accusations on Rananujan's translation of a single poem.

Dharwadker develops this into a wider critique of the Derridean and Benjaminian theories which Niranjana uses: whereas Benjamin and Derrida privilege the word over the whole, Rananujan emphasizes "the need to treat language, poetry and translation as processes which have multiple levels that cannot be collapsed onto each other" (126). Despite somewhat porous boundaries, every language will have its own clear identity in relation to other languages.

Another point of difference between Rananujan's ideas on translation and those found in Benjamin and Derrida is the emphasis that should be given to the reader. Contrasting with Benjamin's view that it is never fruitful to consider the receiver when producing a work of art, as seen in "The Task of the Translator," Rananujan believes that the imagined reader must be considered.

A further point of disagreement is that of the transparency which the translation should show. According to Dharwadker, it may be possible to "show" the other language when translating from one European language to another, but is not possible when dealing with languages which are so far apart as the southern Indian Kannada or Tamil, which are not part of the Indo-European group of languages, and English. Indeed, the concept of the transparent and literal rendering of the text and the *Ursprache* are part of the Judaeo-Christian Babelian myth that form the background of Benjamin's essay, which become much more problematic when one is also dealing with non Indo-European languages. Dharwadker states firmly that "Rananujan did not believe that there was such a lost transcendental, universal language underlying the differences between the Germanic, Romance, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages" (Dharwadker 128) and even accuses Niranjana of "attributing a universal, neo-colonial authority to Benjamin's and Derrida's views, which are centred on modern European philosophy and much older Judaic traditions" (126).

Another critic of Niranjana's solutions is Douglas Robinson. By following Benjamin's literalism and foreignization, "the potential for creative retranslation is somewhat impoverished, largely because she has found or developed no local models for such creativity" (Robinson 1997c, 158). Secondly, he wonders how "holding back from communicating" can have a social effect such as decolonization due to the fact that communication is essential to the "spreading" of an effect (Robinson 1997b, 93; 1997c, 158).

Furthermore, he criticizes Niranjana's translation of the *vacana* above. He fails to see how her translation is better than the others for the decolonization of India and how it will lead readers to social action. He questions the view of the

supporters of foreignization that a facilitating translation will necessarily “dull the mind of ‘the’ target-language reader and enforce a hegemonic mindless blandness that will be increasingly blocked to cultural difference, and that a foreignizing translation will rouse ‘the’ target-language reader to critical appreciation for cultural difference” (Robinson 1997c, 161). This seems to him to be a somewhat ingenuous approach:

The fact is, the assumption that a phrase has to be alien to startle us into an awareness of alterity is grounded in a naïve realistic epistemology according to which old (or realistic, or familiar) information is always ground and new (or fantastic, or alien) information is always figured.

Robinson 1997a, 95

Indeed, foreignizing translations have clear disadvantages for encouraging direct action as their awkwardness may be associated with the authoritarian discourse of textbooks or legalese. Conversely, a direct translation of idioms such as *el mundo es un pañuelo* [‘the world is a handkerchief’] may make “authors, and the source culture in general, seem childish, backward, primitive, precisely the reaction foreignism is supposed to counteract” (Robinson 1997c, 162).

Robinson mentions other possible avenues that the resistant translator may explore. The translation may occupy the middle or hybrid ground between source and target languages. An example is the kind of translation described by Vicente Rafael in his study of the native Phillipine Tagalogs use of the Spanish of the colonizers. Rafael explores a series of different ‘mistranslations’ “that playfully complicate and reframe communication between the Tagalogs and the Spanish without ever assuming that communication is in itself harmful and to be avoided” (cited in Robinson 1997b, 94). Rafael discovers that the Tagalogs have their counterparts in every colonized culture in the world, whose peoples have no choice but to accept certain elements of the colonizing power but who make sense of them on their own terms, preserving important elements of their own independence. These channels will be hybrid, mixing both indigenous material and material imported from the colonizers. Rafael gives an example from a song through which native Tagalogs learned Castilian in 1610:

O ama con Dios, o gran Dios mi Padre;
Tolongan aco, quered ayudarme;
Amponin aco, sedme favorable;
Nang mayari ito, porque esto se acabe;
At icao ng purihin, y a vos os alaben.

Rafael gives an English translation:

O God my Father, O great God my Father;
Help me, please help me;
Adopt me, be favorable to me;
That this be accomplished, so that this can be finished;
And you will be praised, and you will be glorified.

cited in Robinson 1997b, 98

According to Robinson, the “back-and-forth movement [...] a shuttling between the familiar and the foreign allows Tagalogs to contain and to some extent control the incursion of the foreign by playing with it in song (Robinson 1997c, 99). And he quotes Rafael:

Tagalogs [...] would thus have at their disposal a way of inoculating themselves against the larger shock of conquest. By interspersing Spanish sounds as discrete fragments among the Tagalog words, the *aita* made available a way of signaling the potentially dangerous outside force. By doing so, it posited a position where natives could protect themselves against the threat of being engulfed by a flood of unreadable signs.

Robinson 1997c, 99–100

For Robinson, this form of translation reflects the complexity of cultural and linguistic interchanges of the colonial encounter. Though it may be a mistranslation from the colonizer’s viewpoint, this makes it all the more useful to think about the theory and practice of retranslation, “which in order to work toward decolonization must precisely break the colonizer’s translation rules” (157). Other examples of this hybrid translation that Robinson mentions are the “Tex-Mex mix of Gloria Anzaldúa and the Québec translations which playfully use a mixture of Joul and English” (163–164).

It seems to me that Niranjana’s translation merely attempts to use a couple of key terms from the Sanskrit. This is a common technique amongst literary translators, many of them translating prose works, who wish to add a taste of the foreign, while using standard syntax, in the language they are writing in. Maria Tymoczko calls these key terms “signature terms”, in her analysis of Thomas Kinsella’s translation of the medieval Irish epic, *The Tain* (Tymoczko 1999). A wholesale foreignizing translation would be very different. Let me give now give an example from the Portuguese.

A FOREIGNIZING TRANSLATION: MANUEL ODORICO MENDES’ *ODYSSEY*

The translation of Manuel Odorico Mendes of Homer’s *Odyssey* into Brazilian Portuguese is an excellent example of the way in which the translator makes a deliberate attempt to introduce Greek and Latin elements into Portuguese, through inverted syntax, and, more particularly, a large number of neologisms, inventing new words in Portuguese from Greek and Latin roots. Odorico imitated syntactic and lexical elements of the original, in an attempt to achieve the rhythm and the cinematic elements of Homer, eliminating from the original a large number of explicative periphrases and epithets, thereby making his translation shorter than the original.

This translation is awkward to read, and certainly not a good introduction for someone who has never read Homer. It has been severely criticized on various occasions, by 19th century critic Silvio Romero, who called it “macarronic [...] Everything is false, constrained, extravagant, impossible” (in Homero 32), and by contemporary critic, Antonio Cândido, who wrote about its “monstrosities” (Milton 164–5). Recently, however, this translation has been rehabilitated by Haroldo de Campos, who saw Odorico as one of his own precursors in terms of recreation, and

a carefully annotated edition has been published by the University of São Paulo, with an excellent introduction by Professor of Greek, Antônio Medina (Homero).

Let us now examine some of the neologisms:

Beginning Book II

Veste-se, à luz da **dedirrósea** aurora,
 Sai da alcova o amadíssimo Ulisseida;
 Ao tiracolo a espada e aos pés sandálias,
 Fulgente como um deus, expede arautos
 A apregoar e reunir os Gregos.
 De hasta **aênea**, ao congresso alvoroçado,
 Não sem dois cães alvíssimos, se agrega:
 [...]
 Egípcio ergueu-se, de anos curvo e sábio,
 A lembrar-se de Antífo, que audaz indo
 Como Ulisses a Tróia, do Ciclope
 Foi na **seva** espelunca última ceia.

Homero 77

[Gloss: Samuel Butler's 1900 translation] Now when the child of morning, rosy-fingered Dawn, appeared Telemachus rose and dressed himself. He bound his sandals on to his comely feet, girded his sword about his shoulder, and left his room looking like an immortal god. He at once sent the criers round to call the people in assembly, so they called them and the people gathered thereon; then, when they were got together, he went to the place of assembly spear in hand--not alone, for his two hounds went with him.

...

Aegyptius, a man bent double with age, and of infinite experience, was the first to speak. His son Antiphus had gone with Ulysses to Ilius, land of noble steeds, but the savage Cyclops had killed him when they were all shut up in the cave, and had cooked his last dinner for him.

Dedirrósea aurora [*dedos*, 'fingers;' *róseos*, 'pink'] is the portmanteau word Odorico invents to translate the Homeric epithet *rododāktylos Eōs*. For 'bronze,' he invents the term *aênea*, using the Latin root *aenus*, and for 'cruel,' the equally unknown *seva*, from the Latin *saevus*.

End Book III

la pernoitaram
 Em jucunda pousada; e, mal fugia
 A manhã **dedirrósea**, a biga jungem
 Ao vário coche, e os brutos flagelados
 Ledos voam do pórtico estrondoso.
 Por **frugífero** campo atravessando,
 A carreira os **unguíssonos** terminam,
 Quando as veredas obumbrava a tarde

Homero 100

[Gloss]: Here they passed the night and Diocles entertained them hospitably. When the child of morning, rosy-fingered Dawn, appeared, they again yoked their horses and drove out through the gateway under the echoing gatehouse. Pisistratus lashed the horses on and they flew forward nothing loth; presently they came to the corn lands of the open country, and in the course of time completed their journey, so well did their steeds take them. Now when the sun had set and darkness was over the land.

Here Odorico uses once again *dedirrósea*, used to translate the Homeric epithet. He uses the unusual Latinate *jucunda*, and rather than the prosaic *campo de trigo* ['field of wheat'], he prefers to neologize and rescue unused Portuguese words such as *frugífero*, from the Latin *frugifer* ['wheat field'], and invents *unguíssonos*, ['horses, with the noise of their hooves'], using the Greek roots of *ūngüe*, ['nail/hooves'] and *som*, ['noise'].

Odorico attempts to bring the foreign into Portuguese. He Hellenizes and Latinizes the Portuguese text through changes in syntax and neologisms, which introduce new words with Greek and Latin bases into Portuguese.

Although Odorico's *Odisséia* was only published in 1928, it was translated in the years before Odorico's death in 1864, in a Brazil which had recently become independent from Portugal (1822). Writers were determined to express this sense of the independent Brazil, no longer shackled to Portugal. And little in academic terms was owed to Portugal, which had not, unlike Spain in its colonies, set up a university, and which had even forbidden the establishment of printing presses in the colony. Indeed, the first press was only established in 1821, just before Independence.

Novelist José de Alencar expressed this difference of Brazil by glorifying the Brazilian native Indians in novels such as *O Guarani* (1957) and *Iracema* (1865), introducing certain words from the Brazilian Indian language of Tupí into Portuguese. Odorico, however, believed he could help regenerate the Portuguese language by imitating the classical languages, exploring the darker and hidden side of the language, the 'remainder,' to use the term Venuti borrowed from Lecercle (Venuti 1997, 10).

MACHADO DE ASSIS AND ADAPTATION

The questions surrounding language and translation by the Brazilian writer in the newly independent colony are further examined by Adriana Pagano in her analysis of the translation by the 19th century Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis. She uses the image of translation as a laboratory for the Brazilian writer in the 19th century, commenting on the large number of adaptations, imitations, translations and condensations published in weekly *folhetins* (Pagano 11–21). The barriers between the original and the translation have been taken down. She describes the way in which Machado uses translation in different ways. In *Crisálidas* [*Chrysalises*] (1864), when the butterfly is still at the chrysalis stage, the translations that Machado makes are correct and measured. However, in *Falenas* (1870), the period of the complete existence of the butterfly, he presents recreations, which are much less subject to the original. Like Ezra Pound, he appropriates the foreign, adapting Chinese poems through French translations and uses a translation of

Lamartine's "*A Elvira*" as part of another poem, "*Pálida Elvira*" ["Pale Elvira"]. At a time when there was an 'epidemic' or glut of translations of Victor Hugo, Byron and others, Machado presents Lamartine's Elvira as a "pale Elvira," an imitation of the French conventions of Romanticism, thus criticizing the convention of straightforward copying. The narrator then shows how Lamartine's copy can be made original through critical and humoristic recreation.

Sergio Bellei (1987) comments on Machado de Assis' translation of Poe's "The Raven," published in the fourth volume of Machado's complete poems, *Poesias Completas, Ocidentais*, (1901) together with translations of Shakespeare, Dante and La Fontaine. In his "*O Corvo*," (The Raven) Machado makes no attempt, unlike Fernando Pessoa was to do later, to reproduce any of Poe's special poetical effects. Bellei connects this with Machado's theories on the way forward for Brazilian literature. The writer in the colony can never get away from the metropolitan origins, but he can make new beginnings and try to ensure that the literature of the colony is not a mere epigon of that of the European center. Bellei sees Machado's translation as a reification of this theory: Poe's *The Raven* is the metropolitan base on which the new literature, the translation, will be made. But it is just the base. An absolute copy of the European model, an attempt to bring the stylistic features of the original into Portuguese would thus show an inability to get away from the European norms.

We can make a generalization and say that a society which is confident in itself will often use fluent strategies in translation of foreign literary works. The France of the *belles infidèles* and the US and UK today are the obvious example. But we should not make the generalization that these fluent strategies will necessarily lead to the obliteration of the translator, *à la* Venuti. Machado's attempts to use and adapt works coming from the metropolis may represent a growing confidence on the part of the writer and literature in the colony.

POLITICAL TRANSLATIONS

Something similar can be seen in *Translating Ireland*, where Michael Cronin describes the fluent strategies used by medieval Irish translators, the most prolific period of translation in Ireland, and also the period when Irish literature was at its most confident. Cronin questions "Venuti's claim that fluent strategies efface the translator's crucial intervention in the translation of the foreign text" (Cronin 23–24). In the translations made into Irish between 1200 and 1500 which Cronin describes, there is no kind of dominance by the foreign text and culture and effacement of the home culture, but rather, on the contrary, "the translator's signature is everywhere in these medieval translations which are manipulated, expanded, adopted to the expectations, desires and cultural referents of the target culture" (24). These fluent strategies may often be, as in the cases Cronin describes, the results of active processes, where the translator's presence is clearly felt in the element he or she may omit or add: "Effacement in translation rules out self-effacement" (24).

Maria Tymoczko examines the way in which translations of the legend of Cú Chuliann was used by the movement of Irish nationalism at the end of the 19th century and the first twenty years of the 20th century, a period of growing Irish nationalism, which would lead to the establishment of the Irish Republic in

1921, and makes the following propositions on the use of translation for political engagement.

Firstly, texts must be chosen for translation with political goals in view, and, if need be, there must be a willingness to manipulate the texts in translation, so as to adapt and subordinate the texts to political aims and agendas. The intent to transmit the texts closely, in and for themselves, must in many cases — perhaps even most — be abandoned. It is important to flag this point for this type of radical manipulation is usually inimical to most people whose primary orientation is to the integrity of texts *per se*.

Secondly, translators should be ingenious and varied in their approach to translation. No single translation approach or strategy is likely to suffice - whether it is literal or free, ‘domesticating’ or ‘foreignizing.’ Instead, as the Irish translators show, multiple strategies should be deployed and maximum tactical flexibility maintained, so as to respond to the immediate cultural context most effectively. It may even be desirable, as in the Irish case, to have multiple and complementary representations of the same set of texts. Trying to prescribe a single translation strategy is like trying to prescribe a single strategy for effective guerrilla warfare. What is required instead is a certain opportunistic vitality that seizes upon immediate short-term gains as the long-term goal remains in view.

Tymoczko 2000, 41–42

Her major study, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, examines a number of translations and adaptations of the legend of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, produced from 1878 to 1969. A large number of important literary figures, such as W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and A. E. Yeats, were rewriting, adapting and manipulating Celtic legends, producing pseudo-translations, pretending they had made translations of Irish myths, when they had actually written them themselves, in order to challenge the dominant systems based on English literary values. In such cases, there is often an invisible line between original work and translations. Both popularizing and scholarly translations of the *Táin* were produced: firstly a “vigorous tradition of literary translation” will provide reading texts for the general public, and “interpretative readings [...] to guide the specialists’ understanding of the literary import of the same texts” (139), and the production of scholarly, serious translations from Old Irish, will give the putative nation an academic respectability.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, like Robinson, I find Niranjana’s approach simplistic and one which disregards historical and socio-political conditions of production. Niranjana, Venuti and Berman argue for more sensitivity to foreign works and cultures by American, British and French cultures, but I have tried to show that the situation is very different in other cultures, where a domesticating translating practice may not necessarily be a means of ignoring the foreign culture and making it obey national

norms, and may rather be one of appropriation, signifying a moment when the national culture has come of age and is able to use and adapt works from abroad rather than being dominated by the foreign metropolitan culture. A domesticating translation practice may signify an assertion of the newly-discovered independent thinking of a nation.

Secondly, Niranjana's own foreignizing techniques are limited to inserting a couple of Sanskrit words into the English text. I hope my example of Odorico Mendes' translation of Homer has shown a much more powerful foreignizing translation, which attempts to introduce Greek and Latin elements into Portuguese. But the question remains whether this practice is possible when the languages are very far apart.

Finally, foreignizing translations may play a role in new poetics which are proposed by authors and literary movements, as we can see in the work of Haroldo de Campos, who has tried to innovate various poetic forms into Brazilian Portuguese through translation, and as we could see in Odorico Mendes' *Odyssey*, but this type of translation will not be the most appropriate form to use to introduce literary forms to the masses. A translation which has clear political ends, as Maria Tymoczko stated, may simplify, cut and adapt, as in the versions of traditional Irish stories by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory.

University of São Paulo

WORKS CITED

- Bellei, Sergio. "O Corvo Tropical de Edgar Allan Poe", in *Ilha do Desterro*, no. 17, "Tradução: Teoria e Prática", eds. Malcolm Coulthard and Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 1987. 155–169.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator", tr. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin. New York: Schocken, 1962. 69–82.
- Cronin, Michael. *Translating Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996.
- Dharwadker, Vinay. "A. K. Rananujan's theory and practice of translation", in *Post-colonial Translation*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. London: Routledge, 1999. 114–140.
- Homero, *Odisséia*, tradução de Manuel Odorico Mendes; Edição de Antonio Medina Rodrigues. São Paulo: EDUSP/ Ars Poética, 1992.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context*. Berkley, California and Oxford: Univ. California Press, 1992.
- Pagano, Adriana. "Tradução e Visibilidade: A Teorização sobre o Processo Tradutório no Brasil do Século XIX", in *Veredas da Tradução*. São Paulo, Humanitas, 1998. 11–21.
- Robinson, Douglas. *What is Translation?* Ohio: Kent State University, 1997a.
- . *Translation and Empire*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997b.
- . "Tejaswini Niranjana, Retranslation, and the Problem of Foreignism", in *TradTerm* 4.2, 1997c.
- Tymoczko, Maria. *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999.
- . "Translation and Political Engagement: Activism, Social Change and the Role of Translation in Geopolitical Shifts", in *The Translator*, Volume 6, Number 1, 2000. 23–47.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- . *The Scandals of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1997.