

Book review

BELÉN BISTUÉ

COLLABORATIVE TRANSLATION AND MULTI-VERSION TEXTS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Ashgate, 2014¹

Within its 163 pages Belén Bistué's volume aims to cover a large corpus of different textual typologies, both manuscript and print, in several disciplines and genres over a period that goes from the twelfth to the early seventeenth centuries. The texts under analysis include Roman and Greek classics, Scripture, European vernaculars, and Arabic. It provides a general survey of multiple language translations, their strategies, formats, and readership. This vast scope is among the most singular contributions of her book.

Bistué takes early modern translation theory as the touchstone against which she seeks to build her case for the often neglected relevance of collaborative translation strategies and polyglot texts within the disciplines of literary history and translation studies. One of her central leitmotifs holds that Renaissance translation theory inaugurates a growing emphasis on the singularity of the original, its translator, and the translated text. By proposing a total identification between author and translator, Leonardo Bruni's *De interpretatione recta* (c. 1424-1426) stands here for the unifying tendencies that theorized a single point of view and a single translator at the centre of the process. This went against the grain of the actual textual and linguistic diversities that translation entailed as it also ignored a well-established tradition of collaborative translation strategies which Bistué aims to map. Her book demonstrates the familiarity of late medieval and renaissance audiences with this multilingual format and their reading strategies. She also proves that the study of collaborative multilingual translation should facilitate a close analytical approach to the different processes, tasks and agents involved in it.

This focus on multilingual translations foregrounds the dialectic between the monological theorization of translation as a unitary linear process and the multiplicity of actual translation practices. To prove her point Bistué musters an impressive list of authors, translators, languages, and texts. The last part of chapter two, for instance, surveys a series of collaborative multilingual translations between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries. Some of these translations were made from Arabic, Hebrew, or Greek, to Latin—frequently through the oral mediation of a vernacular in dictation. This technique was not uncommon in some of the cultural hubs that thrived during the Middle Ages in regions like Castile, Al-Andalus, the Norman kingdom of Southern Italy, and some French-speaking territories. Chapter three adds a series of samples that underline the relevance of the material design of texts displayed in multiple versions within a single format. The formal variety and generic diversity of these samples account for the difficulty encountered by any attempt at systematic classification. A cartography of the obstacles and critical challenges met during a search for order is among the main pursuits in the first part of Bistué's volume. The title of her opening chapter proclaims that translation is a *res difficilis*.

Bistué singles out the *Libro de la ochava esfera* as a representative case study. A manuscript produced under the patronage of the Castilian monarch Alfonso X (1221-1284), this translation flaunts a rich intercultural Mediterranean background that reaches back to Antiquity, and its multilingual format is part of a well-established tradition in medieval astronomy and botany. It also constitutes an early example of the relation between linguistic homogenization, translation,

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and the establishment of common identities. Alfonso X aspired to become Holy Roman Emperor, and the political agenda of cultural and imperial unification that gave momentum to the *Libro* provides a dialectical counterpart to the collaborative multilingual translation strategies that went into its production. Alfonso X also promoted the compilation of legal codes: political homogenization ran parallel with the standardization of legal texts and with the appropriation of cultural capital through translation. Literary translation was an important part of these centripetal processes, but so was the rendering from texts in other disciplines—a corpus frequently displaced to the background by the focus upon literature within translation studies. One of the virtues of Bistué’s account is that it sheds light on some of these other disciplines. She discusses, for instance, Abraham Ortelius’s *Synonymia geographica* (1578), whose combination of lexicography, toponymy, anthropology, translation and cartography illustrates the tension between unity and fragmentation that Bistué pursues in her volume.

The *Libro de la ochava esfera* and Ortelius’s *Synonymia geographica* are thus excellent examples, each in its own period, of the *difficulties* of translation that Bistué identifies in her opening chapter. The critical analysis of these paradoxes is a first step towards a more detailed account of the complex relations between discursive and cultural diversity—in terms of language communities and also as far as the definition of different disciplines is concerned—in interaction with geopolitical relations. Thus, the rich linguistic and religious diversity of the medieval Mediterranean was gradually transformed by the tendencies towards political and administrative centralization during the European Renaissance—as the globe simultaneously expanded through the establishment of new exploration and trade routes. Hence, for instance, the paradoxes implicit in the Greek, Arabic and Latin background to the Castilian *Libro de la ochava esfera*—a child of this Mediterranean heterogeneity which was then used as part of a more ambitious programme for the construction of a singular Castilian identity. Hence, also, the polyglot cartography delineated by Ortelius’s lexicon, a worthy representative of early modern imperialistic globalization, and of the cultural and linguistic diversification that exploration was bringing about. The actual fragmentation exemplified by the case studies proposed by Bistué constitutes an avatar of one of the aporias that have traditionally haunted Western thought: the dichotomy between sameness and difference. To put it in simple terms: Bruni exemplifies the unitary ideal in the field of translation studies, whereas the diversity of multilingual and collaborative translation formats and strategies illustrate its dialectical counterpart.

One of the most regrettable gaps in Bistué’s secondary literature is the omission of André Berman’s *L’Épreuve de l’étranger* (Paris, 1984, *The Experience of the Foreign*, Albany, 1992). Berman demonstrates how German Romanticism redefined the field, and established the theoretical foundations for more philosophically speculative—even metaphysical—approaches to translation. The influence of this approach has reached our own days, and constitutes the link between pre-Romantic translation theory and the school of thought represented by Walter Benjamin, which extends further down the poststructuralist road to Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The indisputable merit that originates in the variety and richness of Bistué’s sample cases, in the important questions that she raises, and in the ambition of her scope deserved a more detailed and comprehensive theoretical foundation. For Bistué proceeds from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and then breezes past the English and French seventeenth century—with only brief nods in the direction of d’Ablancourt and Dryden—directly on to Benjamin. She concludes with Derrida and Spivak’s proposals for the deconstruction of ontological singularities, which view multilingual collaborative translation ‘as a model for the reader to resist an ideological invocation to “self-identity”’.² This leads to the important question of the relation between readership and translation—in particular as regards the singular point of view and hence world vision implicit in the notion of the ideal reader as the repository of the universal subject. Which in turn brings up the question of interpretive unity and how this relates to translation as hermeneutics. Bistué does mention important recent

² The essays quoted by Bistué in this section are Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Politics of Translation’, in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Jacques Derrida’s ‘Des Tours de Babel’ (tr. and ed. By J.F. Graham. *Difference in Translation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, 171-5

contributions in this field, such as Jacques Lezra's insights on how the multiplicity and fluidity of lexicography and translation during the Renaissance amounted to a 'specifically nonsubjectivist form of cultural (self)resistance'.³ Here, again, she could have mustered support from Heidegger's *The Age of the World Picture*, one of the fundamental approaches to this topic, in particular as regards the momentous changes that took place in early modernity. A more comprehensive foundation for her methodological premises, alongside a more extensive account of the tradition behind the aporias she aims to map out might have precluded Bistué from frequently proclaiming that her book seeks to challenge the notion that "there should be a unified reading position in the text". This is a premise which has been challenged in numerous occasions.

One of the methodological challenges met by Bistué is the fact that until fairly recently catalogue searches could not be conducted with terms such as 'multilingual', 'polyglot', or 'multiple languages'—which proves that literary and intellectual history could not bring itself to classify these complex samples as single observable subjects. This is another avatar of the inherent paradoxes in the *res difficilis* of translation that lie at the centre of Bistué's book. It would therefore be unfair to say that her contention that a multilingual sample *can* be actually considered as *a text* is somewhat mystifying, if only because she is striving to bestow unity—the status of a singular object of legitimate empirical and critical study—upon the final result of a phenomenon whose heterogeneity and multiplicity she is simultaneously trying to emphasise. And it could be unfair because this is precisely the aporia she strives to confront—and this is a battle certainly worth fighting. For, albeit in a tenor and even a format that occasionally betray its origins in what appears to be a recent PhD dissertation, Bistué's text does succeed in bringing multilingual translation to bear on this and other important issues, and in foregrounding a multitude of relevant case studies whose further analysis can contribute to clarify the terms of the paradoxes involved in translation. Her accurate diagnosis suggests that although multilingual collaborative translation was and still is a well-established practice 'we do not have a convincing model to account for the production of multilingual translations' (p. 13). Bistué consequently proclaims that her aim is to make translation's multiplicity *visible*. In this the first part of her book indisputably succeeds.

The comprehensive survey and the critical issues raised in the first part lead to a focus within the fourth and last chapter upon several cases of early modern prose fiction: *Utopia*, *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel* and above all *Don Quixote*. Bistué aims to show how Thomas More, François Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes resorted to translation as one of their narrative devices. This is a most interesting subject—but it is also a vast and complex field that would have deserved a book for itself. She opens chapter four with an episode in *Don Quixote* on the relations between translation and the book business, after which Bistué traces the origins of the trope of translation in romance prose fiction. The presentation of the story in romance as a translation started as a sincere declaration on the originally alien sources of the plot, it then became a structural narrative device that bestowed literary legitimacy to newly produced texts, until it ended up as a parodic device. Like the sort of prose exemplified by Alfonso X's *Libro de la ochava esfera*, the multilingual background to chivalric romance originates in the inveterate polyglotism of the Mediterranean Middle Ages, during which well-established literary patterns in Greek or Arabic coexisted with Latinate culture and the emerging vernaculars.⁴ This literary polyglotism was of a piece with the linguistic diversity of medieval science discussed in Bistué's opening chapters. And actually some of the episodes which Bistué reads in *Don Quixote* as parodies of multilingual collaborative translation techniques might be also read as parodies of early modern scientific discourse. This also applies to other cases of early modern prose: Rabelais was a

³ Bistué, pp. 100-1. The essay in question is Jacques Lezra's 'Nationum Origo' (in *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*. Ed. S. Berman and M. Wood. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 203-28).

⁴ The Greek tradition included frontier epics like *Digenis Akritas*, which provided models for Byzantine fiction in European vernaculars, whereas the Arabic influence resulted in works such as *Calila e Dimma*, an originally Persian collection translated from the Arabic into Castilian under the patronage of Alfonso X, or *Sendebâr*, another collection of exemplary short stories of Hindu and Persian origin rendered into Castilian from the Arabic, also within the circles of Alfonso X.

novelist, but his day job was as a physician who translated Hippocratic and Galenic treatises from a multilingual tradition of Greek, Hebrew and Arabic medical texts.

Bistué's attempt at building up a critical narrative that visualizes the presence of a large transgeneric variety of textual typologies with common multilingual translation strategies is among the most valuable contributions of her volume. She successfully situates this incipient critical narrative within larger narratives of translation studies and literary history. But her volume could have been enriched by a detailed account of how translation dovetails with the porosity of discursive varieties in early modern prose fiction—whose languages and vocabulary frequently overlap with those of political discourse, theology, or natural philosophy, to name just a few disciplines. Such porosity could account for what she takes as the underlying presence of multilingual translation techniques. For instance, when Bistué discusses the use of *synonymia* in *Don Quixote* (pp. 156-7), this may be plausibly taken as a parody of this particular translation strategy, but it is also a parody of contemporary scientific prose. *Don Quixote* contains many other types of parodic passages—playfulness and self-reflective irony being among its main narrative strategies. Bistué claims that the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the novel as a whole respond to its narrative design as a translation of the kind described in the first part of her book and that, as such, it contains many simultaneous perspectives which account for the fragmented nature of the novel. There is no doubt that translation and linguistic multiplicity are among the many different strategies and intellectual habits that Cervantes examines, appropriates, and then parodies. Her succinct account of the similarities between the techniques and formats, the customs and habits, of multilingual translation strategies, on the one hand, and certain stylistic and narrative techniques in *Don Quixote* is reasonable enough. And she accurately concludes that “Cervantes uses translation as one of the discursive models from which—and perhaps against which—he defines a new form of narrative fiction” (p. 147).

Bistué's book suggests an assortment of directions for groundbreaking research in both traditional and new subjects. One of them should deal with the production of transgeneric texts, a field which calls for a redefinition of current generic categories and textual typologies. This is essential for a comprehensive and truly interdisciplinary account of early modernity—from its material foundations to more intellectual or speculative concerns. This approach is beset with difficulties, and Bistué acknowledges that rather than embarking on a full mapping of the field of multilingual collaborative translation practices, her book only starts to provide an outline, and to describe its challenges. It combines interesting analysis and suggestive ideas with a fresh survey of relevant samples that demonstrate the necessity for more sophisticated and comprehensive analyses of the import of multi-authored polyglot translations, and the relevance of the different formats through which they were presented.

Bistué's book takes an important first step towards the exploration and critical account of collaborative multilingual translation practices, their epistemological and heuristic implications. This involves large topics such as the history of reading, the emergence of the subject, political and religious centralization, or the material history of the book. This ambitious attempt is then complemented with a wide ranging, but regrettably swift survey of examples that illustrate the myriad of studies that lie ahead for the enterprising scholar in the field. To this effect, Bistué's book is an excellent introduction to this topic, because she points to the large corpora of primary documents available, and she starts to map some of the existing scholarship that an initiate can consult. The book succeeds in being a catalogue of excellent case studies and incipient suggestions for methodological approaches, many of them eagerly calling for their full development as book-long essays. This is also a well-organized book whose narrative development is clearly spelled out, as are its arguments and different lines of research. The price for this clarity and order is an occasional sense of redundancy in the expression of the main leitmotifs within its narrative texture. The author and her topics certainly deserved the vigorous intervention of an experienced editor who could have contributed to make the book more solid and supple. There are, in spite of this, many things to praise in this book, and an attentive reader

will not only learn a good deal from it—this reviewer did—but will be also enticed to look further into the many texts and authors that Bistué's study musters.

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