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# The translation of Spanish American Literature: An inevitable cultural distortion?[1]

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It could easily be argued that the very title of this paper is a cruel distortion: to speak, in the English language which is so often scornful of translation, about 'Spanish American' literature as a single entity is to ignore an important fact - Spanish America is 'a world composed of many cultures', as is stressed by Julio Rodríguez Luis (1991: 2) in his introduction to the important collection of papers *Translating Latin America: Culture as Text*. When it comes to rendering Spanish American fiction in other languages, he sees the translation process as necessitating the accompaniment of an 'interpretation' of that culture. The present paper will endeavour to trace some of the history of that translation process and of that cultural interpretation: the focus will be on modern Spanish American *fiction* in its mainly English translation (but also touching on French and German), and there will be an attempt to locate the analysis within a cultural/translation studies framework by considering the forces at play within the publishing world, forces which affect translation decisions.

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Antoine Berman, writing in 1985, usefully divides the history of Latin American translations into *French* into four broad stages: (1) pre-war, which saw the publication of books containing exoticism and local colour, (2) post-war, with the *Croix du Sud* series by Roger Caillois, comprising around 50 publications from 1954 to 1968 including Asturias, Borges and Carpentier, (3) the 'Boom', dominated by García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Cortázar and Fuentes, which led to a widening readership, and (4) 'the present' with translations of lesser-known writers (Roberto Arlt, Roa Bastos, etc.).

A similar pattern seems to have occurred with early English translations: in the first half of the twentieth century (according to Jason Wilson's [1989] data base), just a very few works were translated, again 'exotic' or 'local colour' books such as Quiroga's *South American Jungle Tales* (translated by Arthur Livingston, 1922) and Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra* (translated by Harriet de Onís, 1935).

The second, or post-war period, sees fuller translation into English, but lagging behind French: the French translation of Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949) appeared in 1954, three years before Onís's English version (Luis 1991: 9); similarly, Borges' *Ficciones* appeared in the *La Croix du Sud* series in 1952, but not in English until 1962 (Castro-Klarén and Campos 1983: 333-4), at the beginning of the Boom.

Inevitably, it was during that Boom period, especially from the mid-sixties onwards, that the English translation of modern Latin American fiction really took off. But the massive effect of the Boom led to distortions of the image of Latin America abroad. Firstly, chronological distortions: Borges' early work (*Ficciones* [1944], *El Aleph* [1949]) appeared in English translation at more or less the same time as the major Boom writers (1962 and 1970 respectively), as is signalled by Payne (1993: 2).

A second distortion arose from the huge success of García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, even before its translation. Published in 1967 in Buenos Aires, the novel quickly went into several print-runs. The English translation, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, came out three years later: by March 1983 the book had sold over twelve million copies in thirty languages (figure quoted by Payne 1993: 18) and the subsequent label of 'magic realism' had become attached to *all* the writers of the area, creating new literary stereotypes for the continent and reinforcing the old and simplistic cultural images of Latin America as a fantastical natural paradise.

The phenomenal success of *Cien años de soledad* created a rush for other translations. At that time certain translators, notably Gregory Rabassa, began to dominate the scene. Rabassa's translations included *One Hundred Years of Solitude* itself and *Hopscotch* (1966), the translation of Cortázar's *Rayuela* (published in Spanish in 1963), which Gerdes (forthcoming) describes as 'the two landmark publications that helped effect the breakthrough of Latin American literature into the English-speaking world'.

Rabassa has been acknowledged as a pioneer in the field of literary translation. He was awarded the US National Book Award for Translation in 1967 for *Hopscotch* and the PEN American Center Translation Prize in 1977 for *The Autumn of the Patriarch*; García Márquez himself has acclaimed his translation of *Cien años de soledad* (García Márquez and Apuleyo Mendoza, 1982: 81). Good though Rabassa is, it is worth pondering the inevitable distortion that has occurred because so many different Latin American voices at that time and since were heard in English through the same American English voice: Rabassa has translated Amado (Brazil), Asturias (Guatemala), Cortázar (Argentina), García Márquez (Colombia), Lezama Lima (Cuba), Lins (Brazil), Lispector (Brazil), Valenzuela (Uruguay), Vargas Llosa (Peru) as well as other lesser-known authors (Aguilera Malta, de Andrade, Trevisan, etc.). Rabassa makes light of the difficulties of translating these different dialects and regionalisms (Hoeksema 1978: 13). Nevertheless, the importance for the translator of 'hearing' and capturing the individual author's 'voice' is underlined by Peden (1987). If the voice of each individual author needs to be listened to, does the reader of translation not need to be made aware that so many originally individual voices are in fact being modulated by the (albeit laudable and capable) efforts of the same relatively few translators? All translators, no matter how hard they strive to avoid it, have their own idiolect that inevitably marks the style of their writing and which therefore reduces the individuality of the original voice. Commenting on Rabassa's style, Vázquez Ayora applauds his idiomaticity but sees his most frequent translation technique as being explicitation, which would make him a 'traductor-explicador':

> El lector inglés puede, por ejemplo, sin saberlo, estar muy complacido de leer una transposición «en claro» de Cortázar, pero no está leyendo a Cortázar. Este hecho de la claridad conseguida puede engañar al analista no traductor y al no comparatista (Vázquez Ayora, 1978: 16)

Equally confusing is the unavoidable result that there can be no consistency across the translation process and products: Rabassa (Hoeksema 1978: 9) has said that he has worked in a different way with different authors - so, García Márquez would give him a relatively free hand, but Dalton Trevisan would always be changing words; then, whereas Rabassa's prose is usually clear, Suzanne Jill Levine collaborated with Cabrera Infante in the translation of *Tres tristes tigres* to produce a *different* product, a longer and even more pun-filled book than the original (Levine 1991: 9).

Of course, just as the same *translator* often translates a variety of *authors*, so the same *author* often has a variety of *translators*: García Márquez, whose first translator, J. S. Bernstein, was roundly criticized for his version of *No one writes to the colonel*, has subsequently been translated by Gregory Rabassa and Edith Grossman, with his non-fiction being given to lesser-known translators; Carlos Fuentes has been translated by Lysander Kamp, Sam Hileman, Margaret Sayers Peden and Suzanne Jill Levine. Such lists demonstrate another distortion: the major figures of the Boom have been described (King 1987: xiv) as 'a male club'; it is not mentioned that quite a large number of this club have achieved their international fame through the mediation of the voice of female translators.

But there is a wider context to translation - the fact that it occurs as part of the commercial business of publishing and that, in Venuti's words (Venuti 1995: 19), it is a 'cultural political practice, constructing and critiquing ideology-stamped identities for foreign cultures.' Looking at this wider context, there is an irony in the success of the Boom: Luis (1991: 7) and Payne (1993: 20) point to the influence of Cuba, both in promoting Latin American authors in their own continent and in providing a focal point politically which attracted world-wide interest in the area. Yet, at the same time, the very term and concept 'Boom' relates to 'the increased consumption of cultural production in the 1960's' (King 1987: xiii) and it involved selling literature as a commodity (Castro-Klarén and Campos 1983: 324). Payne sees both the economic and cultural consequences of the Boom as examples of US capitalist imperialism: he describes (Payne 1993: 33) how the large commercial houses in the US and Europe promoted the Boom and helped create 'a handful of privileged successes... mega-authors'. Castro-Klarén and Campos (1983:329) argue that in fact many other authors (both older classical names and younger writers) *were* published, but the picture painted by Doyle (1988) would seem to support Payne. Doyle

finds that by the late 80's the field of Spanish American fiction published in translation in the United States is dominated by eight authors (Borges, Cortázar, Fuentes, García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa plus Carpentier, Donoso and Puig) and two countries (Argentina and Mexico), while there is no representation at all for seven whole countries (Bolivia, Costa Rica, The Dominican Republic, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay and Venezuela)!

Katz (1996) in an article highly critical of the Random House conglomerate, highlights the present situation where publishers are bent on profit-making, and deal only in books that are sure to sell well. An inevitable result is a reluctance to publish new authors. This may be simplifying matters, but, when it comes to deciding what to publish, the key role is clearly played by the company's and the editor's perception of the market appeal of the author. In telephone interviews, both Huw Barnes, of Penguin UK, and Dan Franklin, of Jonathan Cape (Random House) stress García Márquez's enormous appeal. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* continues to sell around 20 000 copies a year in the UK[2] and *Love in the Times of Cholera* enabled him 'to expand his market' (Franklin), 'to break out of the prestige market' (Barnes). In this sense he is truly a phenomenon in English language publishing, unequalled by other writers of the Boom, or indeed by perhaps any another foreign writer.

Yet this success did not occur in all countries simultaneously: Meg Brown, in her fascinating study of Spanish American best-sellers in West Germany, points out that it was only after the Nobel Prize that García Márquez, together with other Latin American authors such as Isabel Allende, Angeles Mastretta and Mario Vargas Llosa, really broke into the German market. Above all else, the 'new' Latin American writing filled a perceived void in the stagnant German literary scene in the 80's (Brown 1994: 148), much as it had done in the United States in the 1960's (Payne 1993: 15).

Luis (1991: 9) also sees this influence of Latin culture on North America. This supports García Márquez's own publicized perceptions (García Márquez 1989) where he emphasizes both the importance of his books for the *Latin American* market and the growing Latin cultural influence in the US. As evidence he gives the success of the translation of his then recent *El amor*

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2. Estimated figure supplied by Stephen Butler, Bookwatch.

*en los tiempos del cólera* that had figured in the US best-sellers list 'for almost fifty weeks'.

Whether real cultural understanding *has* occurred is a moot point, however; in the same volume appears a paper by Binford and Hardin (1991) entitled 'How First World Students read Third World Literature.' Not only is there an inherent sense of superiority conveyed by the contrast between 'First' and 'Third', but practically the whole argument is carried out without mention that the original language of this literature is Spanish! Further indication of such attitudes amongst critics may be found in Doyle's (1988) work, which fails to mention the names of the translators of the books he has listed, and in Gerdes' conclusion (Gerdes, forthcoming), where he perhaps unintentionally reveals his own underlying precept of linguistic colonialism:

> And there is always the bugbear of the translation that is bad, not because the translator does not understand the language of the literary text, but because s/he does not understand and translate its entire culture well enough to avoid such errors as for example rendering ponderous phrases, common in Mexican literature, straight into English, where they are embarrassing.

The precepts here are, firstly, that the 'entire culture' of one language *can* be translated into another, and, secondly, that the translation must conform to the stylistic norms of the target language, what in Toury's terms would be the norm of *acceptability* which would win out over *adequacy* (Toury 1995: 131). What Dan Franklin of Jonathan Cape says tallies with this norm, for what he looks for in a translation 'is not 100% accuracy; the translation should read well in the foreign language.'

The danger is, of course, that the focussing on the translated text's role in English and the translating of works from all countries into a clear and uniform English style will lead to a loss of 'identity' of individual works (see Maier 1990: 19). An extreme example of this is to be found in the blurb of the Penguin USA edition of García Márquez's *Strange Pilgrims*, where the Colombian author is described as 'one of our foremost magicians of the spoken word': there can be fewer more obvious cases of domestication of a foreign writer than this denial of his foreignness.

Venuti's view of the situation is devastating:

> it can be said that Anglo-American publishing has been instrumental in producing readers who are aggressively monolingual and culturally parochial while reaping the economic benefits of successfully imposing Anglo-American cultural values on a sizeable foreign readership. (Venuti 1992: 6).

But it is not so clear whether the 'problem' lies with the publishers or the audience, nor what might be done about it. Talking about the situation in the UK, Dan Franklin emphasizes that the market for translations is 'extremely difficult' because of the 'insular culture'. Huw Barnes at Penguin agrees, stressing the influence of the United States which is producing a unification of culture under the English language; foreign literature is thus seen as much more of a challenge to the average reader.

Looking at the present or 'post-Boom' situation, Basnett (1987) sees increased attention being paid to women writers. Gerdes (forthcoming) draws attention to anthologies of poetry and short stories, to best-sellers being made into films (e.g. *Like Water for Chocolate* 1992, *The House of the Spirits* 1993) and to the support in the US from smaller publishers, including the university presses. But the numbers of translations remain small: PEN American Center (*Handbook* 1991:5) gives the figures of translations between 1984 and 1990 as accounting for only approximately 3.5% of the books published in the US, while Hale (forthcoming) gives a figure of 3% for the UK for 1991. And the selection of books for translation is seen as 'random' (Wilson 1989a). Getting previously untranslated authors into translation is becoming increasingly difficult. How is one to make these 'unheard voices' heard? Venuti (1995: 19) suggests that freelance literary translators do exercise a potential resistance to 'imperialism' by choosing which authors to translate and which norms they adopt in their translation. Yet one wonders how strong that influence is: even Edith Grossman, García Márquez's translator, says (personal communication) that she now 'rarely' suggests new projects to publishers, who often do not share her enthusiasm for new works. Hale (forthcoming) mentions that editors increasingly rely 'on agents and... the Frankfurt Book Fair rather than on the advice of translators.'

My own interest as a translator is in modern Venezuelan literature. Doyle (1988) found no Venezuelan authors translated into English, while Wilson (1989a) was surprised that well-known authors Salvador Garmendia and José Balza had been overlooked. It is by personal contact and the help of the Venezuelan Embassies in London and Madrid that I have been

able to approach authors such as Garmendia, Adriano González León (author of the recent success *Viejo*), Julio Ortega and Carlos González Vegas, all of whom are intensely keen to see translations of Venezuelan literature published. But funding is the big obstacle: for Penguin the works are 'too specialized', Serpent's Tail are reducing the numbers of translated texts, the University of Texas has a limited quota of Latin American books in translation, and so on. An interested publisher, Peter Owen Ltd, requires some form of subvention and, with the present economic crisis, the Venezuelan state has little cash to spare. The possibility exists, therefore, that these particular voices and the culture of a whole country will remain silenced, marginalized, unable to communicate outside their own language. The vicious distorting circle persists of insular English-language readers, of publishers unable or unwilling to take a risk, the concentration on a few 'safe' writers. The European Community is setting up a pilot Ariane project, in the words of its own publicity 'to promote by means of translation a wider knowledge and circulation of European literature and history amongst the citizens of Europe.' Is it too much to ask that such a project be eventually extended in order to promote greater translation and interpretation of *all* cultures, including *all* countries of Spanish America?

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