

The Place of Translation

The writer and Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti, exposed to numerous languages early in his life – Ladino, Bulgarian, German, English and French – because of his extraterritorial condition, noted that “a language is a place”¹. Canetti’s multilingual childhood was strikingly rich in displacements. Born in 1905 into a far-flung Sephardic family quartered in Bulgaria (his paternal grandparents came from Turkey), Canetti turned to Vienna as the mental capital of all the other places where he had lived and which included Manchester, Lausanne, Zurich and Berlin. In his memoirs², the writer explains that when his father died unexpectedly his mother began to teach him German, the language of her former relationship between herself and her husband, so that the young Canetti saw himself as if speaking in his father’s *place*. It was to Vienna that his mother brought him and his two younger brothers in 1912, and from there that Canetti emigrated in 1938, spending a year in Paris before settling in London.

If “a language is a place” as the writer claimed, to live was for him to exist between languages and places, thus being simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, perpetually (dis)placed. Canetti’s youth, as he himself describes it in his memoirs, was characterized by “this mysterious translation” which happened on occasions such as those in which he would remember the Balkan fairytales which he had heard in the Bulgarian language but only knew in German: “It is not the literary translation of the book from one language to another, it is a translation that happened of its own accord in mind consciousness”³(10). Unsurprisingly, Canetti’s own oeuvre is hard to place. To a certain extent, his placelessness in the “world republic of letters”⁴ becomes a symptom of how exile and homelessness mediated the writer’s relation to a “literary” place, a relation ultimately marked by the estrangement between what was to become his literary language, German, and his domicile, London.

Detached from Canetti’s own biographical trajectory, the claim that “a language is a place” would initially seem to suggest that a place is also a language, since, presumably, languages are anchored in a bounded space, determined by the place(s) they inhabit. Thus, national literatures are often invoked to relate to the languages that generate and sustain them as if representing a natural identification or intrinsic affiliation between grammar and geography, land and language, ultimately words and worlds. Yet, this complex equation of language and place, which as discussed above, transnational and extraterritorial writers like Canetti paradoxically both illustrate and destabilize, is further complicated when analyzed in the light of processes that aim at representing the notion of a *place* in an alien context and, more importantly, through a language necessarily removed from the particularities of that specific place.

¹ Quoted in Gustavo Pérez Firmat, “Land or Language”, *The Cuban condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 138.

² See Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood* (London: Granta Books, 1979).

³ Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*, 10.

⁴ See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). Significantly, despite fact that, as the author explains in the preface, the book is aimed at inaugurating an “international literary criticism” at a “truly transnational level” through a method “which consists chiefly in situating a work on the basis of its position in world literary space” (xii-xii), not a single reference to Elias Canetti’s works is made.

The etymology of *translatio* invokes the notion of “transporting” simultaneously as a movement of “carrying across” from one place to another and also in itself as a process of constant transformation and *displacement*. Envisioned as a journey between two different places, translation evokes crossing the territories of languages as experiences must be communicated precisely in those *other* languages, transposed, transplanted and ultimately “displaced”. Just as the transit between political borders often becomes “perturbed”, the reconstruction of linguistic, cultural and social geographies across boundaries, which translation entails, does not happen in an unproblematic way. As has been noted⁵, in certain sensitive contexts (and places) in which translation becomes a probing site of inter-linguistic and intercultural contact, specific translations materialize and reveal the intricate traces of such challenging processes of cultural interaction often affected by power relations.

Much has been written about translation not as a *locus* of equivalence but rather as a *locus* of difference⁶. Approached as a practice carrying both ethical and aesthetic imperatives, the activity of the translator may determine the nature of the transactions and negotiations which translation ultimately embodies⁷. In recent years, the concept of translation has been extended to include processes that exceed questions of linguistic and textual analysis. Invoked as a polymorphous trope which accounts for a heterogeneous list of “encounters with otherness”, translation does not always emerge as a well defined or unified concept but remains a rather ungraspable and elusive term, camouflaged in a spectrum of disparate notions. Whereas the diversification and globalization of the discipline is exciting, it also raises the question of what is in our contemporary age *the place of translation*. In this respect, the editors’ proposal to consider the role of translation and the function of translators specifically in relation to the notion of “place” is twofold. On the one hand, our aim is to explore how presumably “essential” and idiosyncratic notions linked to the identification of one’s territory, space, city, origins, roots and identity are imported, adopted, adapted, appropriated and reconfigured as they trespass cultural and linguistic borders through translation. As we draw attention to language and place issues, our focus is on translation in the context of cultural encounters and linguistic exchanges inextricably mediated by discursive and textual practices and equally attached to culturally bounded codes and forms of representation. At the same time, we want to call readers’ attention to the ways in which the boundaries of the discipline have expanded beyond the traditional concerns and limitations of what used to be a secondary or “minor” academic field, now rediscovered as a vibrant transdisciplinary paradigm opening new frontiers for the study of the Humanities in the 21st century.

Two of the articles in this issue, the contributions by Gys-Walt Van Egdom and Karen Bennett aim specifically at resituating the relevance of translation studies for

⁵ See Sherry Simon and Paul Saint Pierre eds., *Changing the Terms. Translating in the Postcolonial Era*. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa P, 2000).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel” in ed. and trans Joseph F. Graham, *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 165-248.

⁷ See André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992); Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London: Routledge, 1996); Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, (London: Routledge, 1995) and *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethic of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998).

ethical and political debates through their proposal to reinterpret the theoretical concepts of “selfhood/otherness” and “in-betweenness” respectively. Manuela Palacios, for her part, reflects on the value of translation as a strategy of resistance favouring the establishment of allegiances between small nations in a world where globalizing tendencies threaten the specificity of local cultures and vernacular languages. The complexities underlying the translation of vernacular languages and cultures is also the main focus of the contributions by Sara Corrizato and Tzu-yi Lee, whose analysis of the (mis)representation of African-American culture(s) in films and novels respectively, converge in their denunciation of homogenizing practices at work in target-oriented translations.

As evinced in several articles, translating texts that display features deeply grounded in a specific culture or a specific place is indeed an extremely challenging task which often poses insurmountable difficulties for the translator. This is the case of Martín Urdiales Shaw’s discussion of the ways in which languages can be made (or not) to reverberate with the register that signals the identity of the survivors of “unspeakable sites” in translation. In the same vein, Teresa Caneda Cabrera reflects on the “untranslatability” of Joyce’s self-reflexive writing which relies on the implications derived from the multiple levels of interdependence between words, texts and contexts. Yet, notwithstanding all these impossibilities, translation must necessarily be contemplated as the “art of the possible”, since translations exist not to remind readers of scholarly debates on untranslatability but to allow access and readability to otherwise inaccessible texts. Thus, two articles within the framework of Descriptive Translation Studies, by Alexandra Assis Rosa and Ana B. Fernández Guerra, concentrate on an examination of the procedures and strategies involved in translating linguistic variation and cultural references as they analyze the consequences of the translator’s choices.

Serap Erincin’s discussion of crosscultural spectatorship as a form of translation involves a conceptual extension that clearly tells it apart from the other studies in this issue. This approach to translation which goes beyond the concern with purely linguistic matters and foregrounds the notion of “performance” is also addressed by Mark O’Thomas in the “Miscellaneous” section, thus pointing out new directions and unexplored horizons for the discipline in the years to come. The “Reviews” section covers a variety of geographical and linguistic contexts which is eloquent in itself, including Arleen Ionescu and Adina Nicolae’s review of Jiří Levý, *The Art of Translation*; Douglas Robinson, *Translation and the Problem of Sway* by Răzvan Săftoiu; Aidan O’Malley’s *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities. Performing Contradictions* reviewed by José Carregal Romero and Sherry Simon’s *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Languages and Memory* by Vanessa Silva.

Ultimately, poised at the intersection of diverse cultures, territories, idioms and epistemologies, and offering a series of reflections on theories, practices, discourses and approaches from different angles, this issue hopes to contribute to a productive remapping of the ever-changing *place of translation*.

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