

TRANSLATION AND TEACHING: THE DANGERS OF REPRESENTING LATIN AMERICA FOR STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Steven F. White
St. Lawrence University

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO STIMULATE discussion on the problematic issue of how Latin America is represented to English-speaking university students in the United States. I will focus on four areas: the availability of works by Latin American authors translated into English, the questionable paradigm of the “smooth” translation, how academics tend to teach Latin America to English-speaking students (especially in interdisciplinary programs) and, finally, the ways “first world” students often read “third world” literature in translation.

In terms of the U.S. publishing industry, there is very little interest in translated works. Here are some statistics from recent articles that appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* and *Publishers Weekly*: in 1994, consumers in the United States bought 1.6 billion books, and spent \$15.2 billion dollars on these purchases. Of the 40,584 titles published in the U.S. in 1994, only 1124 (2.7%) were translations. Publishers quoted in these articles commented on how unprofitable translations are, how the United States is a very parochial country, and how presses that publish translations are often subsidized by a variety of grants, including funds from the government of the author’s native country (Lottman 1995; Sappenfield 1995; and Campbell 1995). To get a better idea as to what percentage of the already small percentage of translated works

published in the United States are works by Latin American authors, I consulted the May 1995 *Annotated Books Received Supplement* compiled by *Translation Review*. This listing consists of translated works published primarily between 1992-94 by nearly 100 publishers: a mix of large New York publishing houses, university presses and small presses (including some in Canada and England). What follows is my own compilation of works by Latin American authors translated into English based on the categories established by the editors of *Translation Review*:

- 3 anthologies
- 1 reprint
- 0 literary theory
- 0 social theory
- 0 children's books
- 1 history (Does Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* count here?)
- 0 art/film history
- 0 music history
- 0 philosophy
- 0 religion

There were no separate categories for anthropology, natural sciences, ecology, economics, political science, health, education. In terms of literary works written in languages from Latin America, there were 3 titles translated from French and Creole French (novels by two Haitian authors); 2 titles of works by Brazilian authors translated from Portuguese; and 24 titles by Hispanic American authors (which included several by the same author and a few classic works, such as *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz) (Tollett 1995).¹ One would like to think that this listing compiled by *Translation Review*, the official publication of the preeminent American Literary Translators Association (ALTA), is somehow erroneously incomplete. But, if one scans the advertisements for new publications that appear in the programs for major conferences such as those sponsored by the Modern Lan-

guage Association (MLA) and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), it's easy to see that the vast majority of works published on Latin America from all the disciplines are books written in English by U.S. academics. This leads to an obvious troubling question: Who represents Latin America in the United States? In the most recent issue of *LASA Forum*, John D. French from Duke University, in a very brief piece entitled "Translation: An Imperative for a Transnational World", says that "In the English-speaking world, Latin Americans are more often written about than read. As a result, the educated public in the United States continues to learn most of what it *does* know about the region from Latin Americanists who are themselves foreigners to the national realities they study" (French 1997, p. 44). As an effort to rectify this situation, Duke University has established a publishing project called "Latin America—In Translation/En Traducción/Em Tradução" that has published five books since 1993 and plans to publish eight more before the year 2000. Thirteen books over a seven-year period, representing works published throughout Latin America in the social sciences and humanities (including literature), is a praiseworthy contribution, but it is extremely modest given the nature of the imbalance.

Over the last three decades, of course, a number of works of Latin American fiction and poetry in English translation have achieved a great deal of recognition. In a recent review essay that appeared in *Latin American Research Review*, Clifford E. Landers mentions the names of some two dozen Latin American authors whose names would be familiar not only to academic specialists but to many general readers as well. Landers says that "this roll, however striking, is tiny when compared with the many talented and original voices that are unlikely to be heard outside their native languages and their country of origin. It is perhaps inevitable in the economic scheme of things that even in their original languages, many works of merit never go beyond their initial limited printing." Landers goes on to discuss the radical inequalities that exist when it comes to the availability of English source materials in

Latin American countries, where as many as 70-100% of the top ten best-selling books may be translations from English. According to Landers, "while the hemispheric net flow of capital in the past three decades has moved from the underdeveloped to the developed world, the stream of translated materials has also proceeded largely one way, but in the opposite direction" (Landers 1995, pp. 254-55).

I would like to turn now to certain issues regarding the translation process itself and how it can influence the way Latin America is represented, and therefore taught, in the United States. Traditionally, translation has been considered the supremely laudable endeavor of the humanist, who builds bridges between cultures and makes known what was previously unknown. Currently, however, the discussions of translation have focused on the problematic issue of how texts from Latin America are recreated in the English language and subsequently made available for pedagogical purposes in the United States. Clayton Eshleman has defined what he calls "translational imperialism," the process by which "first world" translators work on texts by "third world" authors, reshaping the "raw material" of the "colonized" text in order to produce translations that lead the reader to believe that the foreign author is aping literary conventions of the United States (Eshleman 1986, p. 4). Even if one disagrees with Eshleman, students often need to be reminded that the text before them was not written originally in English, that there is a text behind the text, and that the translation process implies ideological choices and can also be considered an act of literary criticism. Many of our colleagues, too, unfortunately, especially those who work in the increasingly common interdisciplinary initiatives in cultural studies on U.S. college campuses, present translated texts in class as if they were written originally in English, assuming what Tejaswini Niranjana calls "an unproblematic notion of representation," ignoring the "historicity of translation" and how translation can "completely occlude the violence that accompanies the construction of the colonial subject" (Niranjana 1992, p. 2). Again, even if one believes that the positions regarding trans-

lation taken by Eshleman and Niranjana are extreme, worst-case scenarios that do not reflect the *modus operandi* of translators in the United States, what sorts of assumptions underlie the goal of the translator who strives to make the translated work "sound like a book in English"? According to Edith Grossman, who translates the work of Gabriel García Márquez and who is one of a very select few in the United States who can earn a living by means of literary translation, "What is important is that the ideas and concepts are in the same tone as if the writer could speak in English" (Sappenfield, p. 14). What does it mean when multilingual translators, who are engaged in the process of self-criticism, and when monolingual editors and reviewers of translations, who are unable to enter into the dialogue between the translated text and the original, all speak of the translation solely in terms of "smoothness" and how easily the translation can be assimilated into literary and thematic traditions that already have shaped the English canon? Do translators apply the ostensibly aesthetic criterion for the creation of "smooth" translations to the text-selection process with limiting or exclusionary results? In other words, if a particular, perhaps experimental or culturally-different work cannot be rendered in such a way as to give the appearance of having been written originally in English, should it, then, not be translated at all?

In general, it is legitimate for readers to wonder why a particular work was translated into English. Sometimes the answer has more to do with chance than anything else. Frequently, since those who often make publishing decisions in the United States lack a continually-updated, systematic knowledge of Latin American literature, the translator becomes a mediator, an unofficial broker of literary power. The difficulties of this situation are clear, according to Rainer Schulte, who, in his article "Cross-Cultural Communication on the Information Highways," says that "the transplantation of works from other languages into English has never followed any clearly defined procedures or methods. Often, a book makes its way into English because a translator happens to meet an author or comes across a work by pure coincidence, which in many

instances leads to the translation of a work whose literary quality or importance might be quite questionable" (Schulte 1994, p. 1). When the number of published translations is severely limited (as the figures I have cited clearly demonstrate), the perseverance of a single translator can shape the knowledge of an entire country's literary production. An interesting example of this is the case of Brazilian novelist Osman Lins, the sole author from Brazil in the entire 1996 listing of *Translation Review*: one translator, Adria Frizzi, negotiated contracts for the publication of two novels by Lins.

Are there other, extra-literary, factors that affect which works of Latin American literature in translation will be translated, published and available for pedagogical purposes? For example, what causes works from certain countries (post-1990 Nicaragua, for example) or even entire regions (Latin America, for example) suddenly to lose even their minimal presence in the literary landscape of the United States? Although these questions are difficult to answer, they do facilitate what might be called "translation awareness," an understanding that reading a translated text may entail recognizing asymmetrical power relationships, seeking explanations as to who translated a text, when, why, and realizing that, yes, when it comes to literature in translation, the cliché is true: market forces play a dynamic role with regard to the creation of more accurate definitions of terms equated with democratic ideals such as freedom of expression.

If, as many publishers agree, the United States is fundamentally a parochial, inward-looking country with little interest in what happens in literature beyond its borders, new kinds of internal inequalities undoubtedly will influence teaching and translation. Translations into English of works by Latin American authors may dwindle virtually to non-existence as the market for works written in English by the long-ignored and marginalized U.S. Hispanic population continues to improve. Publishers and editors in the United States, who are generally monolingual and suspicious of the translation process and who dislike paying and recognizing the transla-

tor's efforts may soon be able to eliminate the translator completely. Authors such as Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Cristina García and Julia Alvarez, whose works are now big sellers, are American authors writing in English on American themes in keeping with American literary traditions (e.g. the immigrant experience). Of course, there still will be translations of García Márquez, Octavio Paz, Isabel Allende and a handful of other authors who have achieved international recognition. There also will be continued attempts to market Spanish-language books in the United States in certain urban areas. But it will become increasingly more attractive for U.S. publishers to represent Latin America (for mass market audiences as well as academic programs exploring the theme of American cultural pluralism) by means of U. S. Latino/a authors writing in English who, not surprisingly, are often praised for their "lyric magical realism," a legacy of the Latin American "boom" novelists whose writing styles they have assimilated.

Is it preferable to represent Latin America in the classroom by means of Anglo writers whose works are set in Latin America? In an article entitled "Mermaids and Other Fetishes: Images of Latin America," Geoffrey Fox mentions *Flag for Sunrise* by Robert Stone, *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry, *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene, and *Imagining Argentina* by Lawrence Thornton as works that seem to hold that "human nature is universal and immutable." Fox goes on to say that "this view of the essential sameness of human beings, generally associated with a liberal political outlook, masks or ignores the true relations of power that shape personalities and make them capable of inflicting, resisting, submitting or enduring in particular ways. And, of course, if we cannot see these relations of power, we cannot act consciously to change them" (Fox 1991, p.138).

It is by means of a discussion of these relations of power that many teachers choose to represent Latin America to their English-speaking U. S. students. In a remarkably frank, pragmatic and self-critical article called "How First World Students Read Third World Literature," however, Leigh Binford and Wendy Hardin

assess why their progressive, innovative strategies for presenting third world literature to students in a U.S. university was largely a failure. Binford and Hardin team-taught an interdisciplinary course on Third World Literature, using authors such as García Márquez, Argueta, Amado, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, and others, from their vantage points as anthropologist and reading specialist. They planned to study literature from a socio-economic perspective and culture through the lens of literary texts, with the idea of countering the segmentation of knowledge in U.S. academic institutions and challenging the interests of dominant culture "by privileging the representations of the dominated": Binford and Hardin hoped that "students would be encouraged to revise some of the preconceptions they inherit as members of the dominant culture" (Binford and Hardin 1991, pp. 146-47). Unfortunately, the two professors found that, more often than not, their students "translated" the translated texts they were reading in an attempt to make the unfamiliar more familiar and in so doing defused the threatening ideological implications of the texts. According to Binford and Hardin, "members of the class employed a variety of reading strategies which ignored, selectively attended, or transfigured alternative voices with the result that pre-existing discourses were usually reconfirmed" (Binford and Hardin, p. 147).

This brings me full circle to where I began, in that the commercial logic of the publishing world often reinforces a sensationalistic, stereotypical view of Latin America that mirrors U.S. students' perceptions of this region. The transformation of the titles of some works by Latin American authors that are widely used in universities in the United States illustrate this point perfectly: the Spanish title of Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* emphasizes the quotidian nature of the horror described in the novel, whereas the English translation *One Day of Life* makes everything melodramatic and removed from ordinary experience; the ambiguous, abstract, unwieldy poetry of Omar Cabezas's *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* becomes the Rambo-esque *Fire from the Mountain*. Similarly, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así*

me nació la conciencia, which might be translated “My Name is Rigoberta Menchú, and This Is How My Political Awareness Was Born”, or “...Came into Being” has a colloquial, simple, personal directness that is the exact opposite of the pretentious anthropological tone of *I...Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Would the mention of “political awareness” in the translated title have had a negative impact on the marketability of such a book in the United States at the time of its publication? Can one also imagine the opposite case, whereby a work by a Latin American author that has no overtly political thematics would be deemed unpublishable in English translation?

Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial work has circulated widely in U.S. academic institutions, especially after Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize during the same year of controversy surrounding the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the so-called New World. It provides a good example of how the issues of translation can be incorporated effectively in the classroom in a sophisticated way. As a woman, as a citizen of the Third World, and as a member of an ethnic minority, Menchú represents a triple subordination and marginalization. On the one hand, her current prominence as well as the availability of her work in English translation will enable indigenous peoples of Latin America to have a global voice. On the other hand, there are some well-known issues regarding how Menchú represents herself and speaks in the first person that might be raised with students when using this work in class. In order to generate the text for *I...Rigoberta Menchú*, the first world academically-trained interviewer Elizabeth Burgos-Debray tapes the interview in France in the second language of the third world activist-interviewee, chooses the questions that form the basis of the conversation, turns orality into written text, imposes the structure of a book, then edits herself from the published text as if she (the interviewer) had never been present, and as if the format were not an extended interview. Is Rigoberta Menchú truly representing herself and her culture in the book that purports to contain her words verbatim, or is testimonial literature generated under these

circumstances another example of an imperialist construct of a subject? Is the subsequent translation of the work into English an added layer of mediation, expropriation or domestication?

My conclusion is a gathering of some of the questions I have posed throughout this article that could serve as the basis of a discussion about the need for greater "translation awareness" when we teach Latin American literature in English translation: Are market forces the sole explanation as to why so few works written by Latin American authors across the disciplines are available in English translation? What are the pedagogical ramifications of this paucity of translated material? Should the translator reject the paradigm of the "smooth" translation and attempt to take the reader closer to the language of the author? Can analysis of different translation strategies be incorporated in classroom discussions of Latin American literature in translation? And, finally: How might teachers of Latin American literature in translation change the ways they present classroom material so as not to reinforce their students' stereotypical perceptions of Latin America?



Note

1. The most recent listings of *Translation Review: Annotated Books Received Supplement* included in vol. 2, nos. 1 & 2 (May and December 1996) contain a similar number of translations by Latin American authors published from 1994-1996: 4 anthologies, 2 reprints, 1 autobiography (from Quechua), 2 social/political theory, 2 history (journalistic accounts by the same author, published by the same small press), and 26 works of literature.

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