BARTLEBY AND YANK: (IN)SUBORDINATION AND "FAILURE" OF THE TRANSLATION OF CULTURAL LANGUAGES

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> The power to call a cabbage a rose and to make it stick in the public sphere implies the power to do the opposite, to stigmatize activities and persons that seem to call into question official realities.[1]

James C. Scott's work on relations of domination and the possibility of autonomous social action or resistance by subordinates[2] provides the theoretical basis for this analysis of the central characters in Herman Melville's short novel *Bartleby, the Scrivener* and Eugene O'Neill' s play *The Hairy Ape*. These two emblematic characters are seen here as illustrative of acts of insubordination. Stigmatized by powerholders, they are able to bring into the public sphere the fact that "a cabbage is not a rose."[3] In this study, a discussion on the issues of public and private also adds the possibility of looking at both Bartleby and Yank from the perspective of the translation of cultural languages insofar as we are able to look at their apparently unusual behavior, from the point of view of social communication, as a "failure' of translation. To the latter approach, the theoretical starting point is the study of the Brazilian anthropologist Rubem César Fernandes in his work *Privado Porém Público: o Terceiro Setor na América Latina*.[4]

Fernandes predicts the possibility of the formation of a third sector in civil society, in which there would be an unexpected combination of public and private spheres, according to a principle of multilingual communication of values. The Brazilian anthropologist remarks that the barriers created by univocal [5] values and social codes carry in themselves the denial of translatability of cultural languages and the consequential exclusion of those who try overcome the obstacles of intercultural communication.

The solution anticipated would not be an interlanguage, a language of common knowledge. Fernandes advocates the possibility of allowing this third sector to emerge in extensive communication with different segments of society in such a way that it would be open to the difference and the multiplicity of languages and to incorporate their symbolic codes. Fernandes explains that "activists of the third sector should learn the art of translation, they should become polyglots of sociability, they should be able to come and go into the various social spaces with a minimum of smartness and acknowledgment."[6]

The difficulties of the translation of cultural languages seem to be at the core of both Melville' s narrative and O' Neill' s drama. The central characters of both works deal in different ways with the barriers created by cultural codes. Yank, the revealing character of a primitive stage of *Homo Sapiens,* becomes astounded at his own naiveté when he finds out that he is unable to decode the values of the system that excludes him. Bartleby, the enigmatic scrivener who refuses to incessantly copy documents based on the legal codes of the capitalist world, without even knowing them for sure, or maybe because he knows them too well, ends up placing himself at the margin of the process, in a visionary attempt to overcome barriers with his personal, passive, silent resistance.

It is worth mentioning that the basic premise for the possibility of translation of cultural languages is the acknowledgment of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia,* that is, at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions - social, historical,

physiological - that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under other conditions. However, Bakhtin sees a place in which that diversity of voices may coexist: the novel. According to him, "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of languages)[7] and a diversity of individual voices artistically organized." [8]

In other words, fiction, or more exactly the novel, would illustrate the possibility of a polyphony that would make it possible for the subjects, or the characters, to decode the message of cultural languages and recodify it in their own terms. However, in some instances of real life, as well as in fiction, this is not always possible and therefore the "failure" of the translation of cultural languages is part of the individual drama of the representation of existential thought in both *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *The Hairy Ape*.

In Melville's existential short novel, Bartleby is the image of isolation itself. Even though the reader is not able to identify the reasons why the copyist suddenly refuses to accomplish the task he had been assigned by his boss, the narrator, it is possible to understand that, for some reason, the process of social communication has been interrupted. As the scrivener of the law office refuses to speak like the other copyists who answer the lawyer/narrator with words such as: "With submission, sir." [9], the reader realizes that there are some unusual traits in this eccentric character.

Bartleby's constant repetition of "I would prefer not to"[10] cannot be understood by the other employees of the law office. In the office there is only room for the univocal capitalist discourse of copying as much as possible in order to bring the expected profit to the lawyer, according to some very definite codes of cultural language. The possibility of the existence of Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* is thus explicitly denied by the narrator. Neither the copyists and nor the lawyer are what Fernandes calls "polyglots of sociability." Therefore, it is possible to see Bartleby as the personification of social exclusion in a conventional workday in the com-

mercialized world around him. Bartleby refuses the notion of subalternity in the social scale that the other copyists have been able to assimilate so well, in spite of all the diseases that follow their attitude.

The notions of subalternity and social exclusion do not seem to exist for Yank, O'Neill' s twentieth-century Neanderthal Man, as he works in the guts of a ship. He only has a glimpse that there might be something wrong with him when his boss's daughter looks down on him. Yank's conflict emerges when he leaves the univocal world of his shipmates and blindly tries to guess some of the social codes he has not had access to so far. A feeling of not belonging, brought on by the awareness of subalternity imposed on certain members of civil society, is what triggers Yank's wrath against a world he is unable to communicate with. O' Neill's main character becomes an allegory of a primeval anger against the possibility of social exclusion and subalternity.

As Yank leaves the somewhat private world in which he lives with his mates, he becomes a witness of the resistance to polyphonic discourse in twentieth-century American capitalist society. As he tries to call people's attention in a public place, he is arrested, since he represents a danger for those who exclude him and make him fail to translate cultural languages. Yank's ignorance of the differences between the private and public spheres is what causes his "failure" of translation of social codes.

The distinction between these two spheres can be understood from James Scott's perspective of forms of social subordination as he delineates the existence of a public transcript, in which, as he explains, "subordinates offer a performance of deference and consent while attempting to discern, to read, the real intentions and mood of the potentially threatening powerholder."[11] The public transcript is a theatrical imperative in situations of domination in which some elements of the subordinate discourse are concealed in what Scott defines as a hidden transcript, that is according to his definition:

> discourse that takes place "offstage," beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus a derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.[12]

From this perspective, we can understand Yank's "failure" of translation of social codes as a failure to discern the existence of those two kinds of transcripts, or codes. As a consequence he becomes susceptible to public punishment, which, as Scott puts it, "is a symbolic gesture of domination that serves to manifest and reinforce a hierarchical order."[13] According to Scott, whenever there is resistance in following patterns of domination, different sorts of punishment, such as warnings, secret understandings, beatings, jailings, executions, etc. may take place. Some of these have been applied to both Yank and Bartleby, who react against them in different ways. Let us now follow Yank first, in his crescendo of anger which is ignited as he is symbolically identified as the "Hairy Ape" - a primitive powerless being - by the representative of the powerful world of skyscrapers.

In the first scene of the play, the author makes it clear that Yank, like the other men in "a cramped space in the bowels of a ship," should have "the appearance of Neanderthal Man."[14] Yank is respected for his physical strength. He has a distorted image of himself as powerful enough to belong anywhere, as he believes he does in the ship, feeding its greedy furnace. In the bowels of the ship, he decides he does not need the concept of home, like one of his mates who longs for it in a sentimental song. Yank scolds him rudely: "Shut up, yuh lousy boob! Where d'yuh get dat tripe? Home? Home, hell! (…) I runned away from mine when I was a kid. On'y too glad to beat it, dat was me, dat's all." [15] Powerful among his mates, while in the ship, Yank seems to deal well with the social codes, which are circumscribed in a restricted sphere of action, therefore he thinks he belongs, as he despises the Salvation Army

and the capitalist class: "Dey're just baggage. Who makes dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't."[16]

When Mildred Douglas, the ship owner's daughter, decides to have the "thrilling" experience of going down to the ship furnace, dressed in white, Yank's shock takes place. He is driven to sudden fury when he realizes that she has seen him as a great hairy ape, escaped from the zoo. As one of his mates mocks him, saying that what had happened was love at first sight, he expresses his anger: "I've fallen in hate."[17]

Full of wrath, Yank walks among the wealthy gentlemen on Fifth Avenue, insulting them. He only stops when he hits a gentleman who calls a policeman and "the hairy ape" is finally put behind bars, where he is just as unaware of codes as he was on the streets of New York City. Having left jail, he joins a political meeting of workers and claims to use his power to explode Mildred' s father's steel factory. Seen as a stupid spy, he is thrown out in the street. The group of workers have their own hidden transcript, clear to all its members, but not to Yank, who could not understand why they did not lock the door. This code becomes clear when the secretary says: "That door is never locked"[18] In other words, they do not need to lock it, because they know the rules, but Yank does not realize how far from that world he is.

"The hairy ape" finally thinks he belongs in the zoo, as he breaks into a gorilla's cage and says: "Ain't we both members of the same club - de Hairy Apes?"[19] However he is defeated by physical force, wrapped in a murderous hug by the gorilla and finally sighs: "Even him didn't think I belonged."[20]

In O'Neill's play, different symbolic gestures of domination are not properly translated by the main character, as he haphazardly moves from the protected world of the dark ship's furnace into the powerful world of glittering diamonds and electric light. He is exemplarily punished by the system when he is scorned by the young lady in white, or when he is sent to jail, or when he is expelled from

the union meeting, and finally when he is rejected by the gorilla. The mere existence of rules of etiquette is emphasized by Scott as a means to show the hierarchy through rituals of power. He elucidates this aspect: "Rules of etiquette represent, after all, a kind of grammar of social intercourse, imposed by guardians of taste and decorum, which allows its users to safely navigate the shoals of strangers – especially powerful strangers."[21] Failure to observe the rules is taken as an act of insubordination and O'Neill's modern Neanderthal Man, the powerless hairy ape, is crushed by different instances of power, for his inability to translate cultural languages.

Unlike Yank, Melville's enigmatic character, Bartleby, reacts with passive resistance against the pressures of the powerful capitalist world of Wall Street in which he is hired as a law copyist. With his refusal to copy, Bartleby causes the impact of the reversal of a scheme that Scott cites as an example of how subordinates in a mill can be controlled by their superior through the color they wear in their collar, according to their production. The reversal of the scheme would be a mill in which each superior wore around his neck a daily evaluation of his conduct imposed by his subordinates and that this principle was extended all the way up to the mill owner himself. In the law office of Melville's fiction, the narrator/lawyer is separated from his employees by various rituals of power, for example the screen that separates his desk from Bartleby's. The other rituals are clearly established by the copyists as they show total submission to the lawyer's orders, as mentioned before. Nippers, for instance, reeinforces that submission when he says what he can do with Bartleby for his rebellious behavior: "I think I should kick him out of the office."[22] As the reversal of authority happens due to Bartleby's behavior, the lawyer himself is intimidated, forced to evaluate his own actions and to feel that he might be following his employee's orders and losing control of his business: "Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were. For I consider that one, for the time, is in a way unmanned when he tranquilly

permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his premises."[23]

As the lawyer finally decides to leave his own office since Bartleby refuses to leave, he is forced to submit to the ritual of power and punishment by humiliation that he would like Bartleby to undergo. With his passive resistance to follow the codes, Bartleby causes the reversal of rituals of power, as the employer orders his employee to leave the office and becomes so intimidated by his employee's passive authority and he is forced to leave his own premises:

> On the appointed day I engaged carts and men, proceeded to my chambers, and having but little furniture, everything was removed in a few hours. Throughout all, the scrivener remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was withdrawn; and being folded up like a huge folio, left him the motionless occupant of a naked room. I stood in the entry watching him a moment, while something from within me upbraided me.[24]

The daily routine of the law office is thus broken by Bartleby's unusual and daring attitude. As Scott explains, it is through what he calls the small "ceremonies" that the relations of power and judgment are expressed and become visible: as "Small 'ceremonies' are much more frequent, they become more telling as daily embodiments of domination and subordination."[25] The law copyists are totally submissive to their daily routine in such a way that each one of them manifests a different physical reaction to repetitive work. Turkey, for example, after twelve o'clock, has a blazing and radiant countenance, and even though his boss would tell him "very kindly" to go home and rest, "he insisted upon his afternoon devotions."[26] Nippers, for his turn, has a sallow countenance and digestive problems. Both of them, with their idiosyncrasies, do their best or their worse, to oil the machine of a usual day in a Wall Street office; as the narrator wryly adds, their fits relieve each

other like guards: "When Nippers's was on, Turkey's was off; and vice versa. This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances."[27]

Bartleby's repetition of "I would prefer not to"[28] curiously breaks the ritual of the law office. Some of the characteristics of Bartleby's behavior seem to show that he is in control of power relations in the office. One of them is that he has got the keys to the office, he does not leave his desk at the end of a work day, and he is there even on Sundays; that is, he violates the rules. We may thus assume he must be aware of the social codes that govern those rules. When he is sent to prison, his boss tries to use a euphemism to convince him that he is in a nice place, but he fires back: "I know where I am."[29] At the moment Melville's eccentric law copyist dies, the narrator gives up his pride in order to assert that his employee sleeps "with kings and counsellors." The ritual of power is finally inversely confirmed: Bartleby's powerful silence has placed him in a higher rank than his employer.

Yank and Bartleby remain witnesses of the stigmatization of rebels who are labeled deviants and mentally ill by powerholders, which is generally what happens to those who contest power in different ways, since there does not seem to be room for polyphonic interaction in civil society. In Fernandes's view, as we have seen in the introduction, there would be a possibility of not excluding these two personalities from social contact if civil society would allow polyphony and translatability of different cultural languages to occur.

Being exposed on the public stage, both Yank and Bartleby suffer the consequences of being subordinated to social codes that exclude them. Yank is crushed by his own primeval forces that impel him in his scramble for social contact. O' Neill's goodhearted character was not prepared for the subtle traps the dominant powerholders might prepare for him. As Scott points out, euphemism is not confined to language: "it may be seen in gestures, architecture, ritual actions, public ceremonies, any other actions

in which the powerful may portray their dominion as they wish. Taken together they represent the dominant elite's self-portrait."[30] Mildred Douglas calls a cabbage a rose as she decides to have a thrilling experience by descending to a lower level, to visit the ship bowels. In her words, she means to be a benefactor: "Please do not mock at my attempts to discover how the other half lives. Give me credit for some sort of groping sincerity in that at least. I would like to help them. I would like to be of some use in the world. Is it my fault I don't know how?"[31] Through her gesture, she brings Yank to mental chaos as he is not able to decode that type of double message and is therefore stigmatized as the "Hairy Ape."

Bartleby is also the aim of the lawyer's euphemistic gestures. As the narrator dismisses his clerk, he talks to himself proudly: "As I walked home in a pensive mood, my vanity got the better of my pity. I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby. Masterly I call it, and such it must appear to any dispassionate thinker."[32] In fact, he does not convince Bartleby with his gesture. Melville's scrivener is probably able to read the language of subordination between the lines and not accept it, even to the point of being stigmatized as a lunatic. At the end of the short novel, the scrivener is curiously embalmed by the narrator as an Egyptian king - in his powerful denial to be submissive, in his insubordination to the dominant powers of Wall Street personified in the lawyer/narrator.

Notes

1. SCOTT, 1990, P. 55.

2. SCOTT, 1990.

3. As quoted in the epigraph above.

4. FERNANDES, 1994.

5. The term *univocal* is used here in opposition to the concept of *polyphonic*.

6. FERNANDES, 1994. My translation.

7. The existence of different cultural languages is one of the premises of Fernandes, as he defines the process as a translation.

8. BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 262.

9. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 113.

10. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 119.

11. SCOTT, 1990, p. 3.

12. SCOTT, 1990, p. 4-5.

13. SCOTT, 1990, p. 45.

14. O'NEILL, 1972, p. 165-66.

15. O'NEILL, 1972, p. 170-71.

16. O' NEILL, 1972, p. 172.

17. O'NEILL, 1972, p. 195.

18. O'NEILL, 1972, p. 222,

19. O'NEILL, 1972, 229.

20. O'NEILL, 1972, p. 232.

21. SCOTT, 1990, p. 47.

22. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 122.

23. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 128.

24. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 146.

25. SCOTT, 1990, p. 46.

26. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 113.

27. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 116.

28. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 121.

29. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 151.

30. SCOTT, 1990, p. 54.

31. O'NEILL, 1972, p. 182.

32. MELVILLE, 1978, p. 138.

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