

AT FIRST SIGHT: PARATEXTUAL ELEMENTS IN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF *LA PLAÇA DEL DIAMANT*

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Abstract

The Catalan novel *La plaça del Diamant* (1962) by Mercè Rodoreda has been translated into English twice. The first translation was done by Eda O'Shiel and published in the UK in 1967 under the title *The Pigeon Girl*. The second one was published in New York in 1981, and was translated by David Rosenthal with the title *The Times of the Doves*. Since its second edition in 1986, the North American translation replaced the British one to the point of its disappearance from the market.

This article has the purpose to analyze the paratextual differences between the two translations as well as the translation/transformation of cultural and historical references present in the Catalan novel. This analysis will allow to discuss the concrete impact on the way Rodoreda's novel may be received and perceived among English-speaking audiences in the span of fourteen years, and to argue that the reception of a foreign culture is shaped and reshaped by translations and retranslations.

Keywords: *La plaça del Diamant*, *The Times of the Doves*, *The Pigeon Girl*, Paratexts and Translation, Retranslation, Rodoreda.

The act of retranslating dislocates the conventional definition of translation as it shows a force at work on the part of the translator that is geared towards the *modification* of the text rather than towards the *presentation* of the text since it is obvious that the original has already been presented to the target audience. From this point of view, retranslations, contrary to first translations, stress dissent

over the passing on of information and thus become textual proofs of the multilayered interaction between the original and its translation(s).

It is well known that literary retranslations are traditionally considered the result of updating the original. This is specially the case in the retranslations of the “classics”, including canonical religious texts, where translators seem to have great freedom in rendering the source text closer to present audiences, a sort of legitimate mediators between past and present.

Conversely, authors like Berman (1990) have argued that retranslations, one should say of more contemporary texts, tend to be closer to the source text and, are therefore less assimilative, since there is no need for the translator to make the original text more “palatable” to foreign readers.

Regardless of which taxonomies and definitions we use to study retranslations, we always have to face the question of why? Why retranslate? As Yves Gambier points out (1994:414), there are innumerable elements such as commercial, stylistic, sociological, historical and psychological considerations to be taken into account when studying retranslations. The analysis of these elements, along with that of the choices and divergences between retranslations and translations could possibly serve to reveal the intention of the translator when presenting a modified text.

Since such an analysis will surpass the aims of the present article, I am proposing to analyze, with the same purpose in mind, some of the paratextual elements through which the British translation and the American retranslation of the Catalan novel *La plaça del Diamant* (1962), by Mercè Rodoreda have been introduced into the market.

Paratexts, as G. Genette has defined the term, are those extratextual elements, and yet inextricable from the text, which predispose the reader to a certain reception: “We do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to

make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book (Genette, 1997:1).

Since some paratexts are not directly linked to the translator's choice, for example, those described by Genette as peritexts: the design of the book, cover illustrations, etc., I shall focus the analysis on the titles¹ and tangentially on the preface of the retranslation, although I shall not refrain from mentioning some peritexts that seek to support, either graphically or textually, a number of the choices made by the translators. I shall also refer to the excerpts from newspaper and magazine reviews reproduced on covers and to the correspondence exchanges between author and translator, and author and editor, what Genette would call epitexts, comments about the text that might modify its reception either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.

However limited, I think the contrastive analysis of these paratextual elements will make it possible to show the shifts in presenting the original to a foreign audience in the span of the 14 years that separate translations from retranslation. This analysis will also present an overview of the ways the retranslation differs or coincides with the previous translation.

1. On certain peritexts: covers and prefaces

Prior to its publication in 1960, Mercè Rodoreda submitted the text *Colometa* –latter to become *La plaça del Diamant*– to the jury of the Catalan prize Saint Jordi. The text did not win the prize but attracted the attention of a member of the jury who recommended its publication to the editor Joan Sales.

After its publication in 1962, the work had poor sales, but this situation was dramatically reversed some decades later when critics became to consider *La plaça* as one of the most representative novels of post-war Catalan literature.

The text could be described as the monologue of a female voice that recounts the past vicissitudes of her life during a period of some 20 years in Barcelona. It is set between the 1930s and the 1950s, when the Second Republic, the Civil War, and the early years of Franco's dictatorship had a profound effect on Catalan society.

Although these events are very vaguely indicated, their presence in the narrative made it possible for contemporary critics to read the text as a metaphor for the political fate undergone by Catalan society as a whole – one has to have in mind that Rodoreda herself wrote the text while in exile. It is within this context that the British translation appeared in 1967, under the title *The Pigeon Girl*, translated by Eda O'Shiel, just two years after the publication of the first Spanish translation, and published by Andre Deutsch.

The cover of the translation reproduces the drawing of a young female face with doves superimposed on her forehead. The book opens with a page-long plot summary written by the British editor, beginning with the sentence: "Barcelona, before the Spanish Civil War", and finishes with the statement: "...[A] novel which must be recognised as one of the classics of modern European writing."

It is interesting to note that in a letter² sent at the end of 1965 by Diana Athill, literary agent of Andre Deutsch to Joan Sales, in order to have the rights to commission the British translation, she states that for her *La plaça* is "...the best novel ever appeared in Europe in many years". Therefore, what formerly was an epitext later became, slightly modified, a peritext the function of which was to shorten the distance between the text and the potential reader by finding a common ground in the signifier "European culture". However, this comment fails to mention the cultural distinctiveness of the Catalan culture, thereby making it difficult for the potential reader to separate it from the Spanish-speaking culture.

Apart from this editorial note and for the title, the translation does not have any extratextual element provided by the translator other than the footnotes which are not part of the present analysis.

In 1980, and in the midst of a national and international recognition³, Mercè Rodoreda was awarded the Prize of Honour of the Catalan Letters. A year later, and within this conducive moment for the reception, the American retranslation appeared, written by David Rosenthal and published by Tapingler Publishing Company in New York. The book was issued in hardcover and with a dust jacket containing no illustrations, but with excerpts of reviews previously published in the American press.

From this moment on, *La plaça* became the object of the attention of American scholars, which culminated in 1987 with the publication in the United States of the first monograph devoted to the study of the works of Rodoreda.⁴

I think it is worth mentioning that, in general, critical studies published in the United States showed a shift in the reception of *La plaça* since they furnished a reading that superposes the problematic of gender relations on the historical reading of the text. Interestingly enough, this shift can be already seen in the preface written by Rosenthal as he states: "...*The Time of the Doves* is the story of most Spaniards during the 1930s and 1940s. But more profoundly, it explores what it feels to be an ordinary woman in a Mediterranean country." (Rodoreda, 1981: 8)

One can wonder what Rosenthal understood as the "story of most Spaniards", since his statement obliterates the division of the Spanish society "during the 1930s and 1940s". One can also wonder about the statement "an ordinary woman in a Mediterranean country" being that the Mediterranean is a mosaic of many different cultures.

The preface by Rosenthal also gives a general overview of Catalan culture. In that way, and unlike the British translator, Rosenthal found it necessary to be a mediator between the potential reader and the original, filling in for the readers the gaps in their knowledge.

The Time of the Doves was issued in a second edition in 1986, this time in paperback and published by Graywolf Press of Minnesota, which is the only publishing house that at present

continues publishing the translation. This second edition appeared simultaneously in the British market published by Arrow Books; this edition seems to be out of circulation.

The American second edition had on its cover a drawing of a woman hanging out the washing surrounded by doves while the cover of the British edition reproduced the drawing of a female face contemplating the doves taking off from a railing of a Barcelona style building, conceptually and graphically closer to the British translation published in 1967. Above the title can be read: "First British Publication - Mercè Rodoreda's Classic Novel of Spanish Civil War", a rather surprising statement as the translation is not the first British publication but the first American publication, in fact, a retranslation published now in Great Britain. Furthermore, the preface written by Rosenthal does not clarify this fact nor acknowledge the existence of a previous translation.

On the back cover of both editions, there are printed excerpts of the novel mentioning the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic followed by an excerpt of a newspaper review describing the female character: "Natalia is a naïve Barcelona shop girl when she marries the volatile Quimet."

I have not been able to collect information about the print run of this retranslation, but one can almost be certain that since its publication in 1986 the real first British translation went out of circulation. It is also worth mentioning that all critical studies of Rodoreda's novel published in English use as a reference the American translation, and that the only mention of the British translation I have found is in the monograph of the *Catalan Review* cited above.

2. On titles

Titles, as we know, predispose the reader to a certain reading. By stressing some substantial elements related to the text, they give

a sense of textual cohesiveness that provides a key to grasp a specific textual meaning. It could be argued that titles are to books what proper names are to fictional characters. Titles share with fictional proper names some of the characteristics that Yves Baudelle summarises in his semantics of the proper name (1996), namely an intention of meaning set up by the author that has to be decoded by the reader. It is obvious that the full understanding of this intention will take place *après coup*, after the reading has come to an end, and that in many cases author's choice and reader's reception would not achieve the same semantic appreciation.

Since what we are dealing with here is titles as paratexts, that is, with first glances of a text prior to its reading, I will comment only on the possible effects that titles of both translation and retranslation might have upon the reading of the text.

First let's begin by saying that translated titles are the most evident textual intervention of translators in a text, and even more so, when, as in the cases we are examining, the translated titles are semantically very different from the original ones. As we can see, *The Pigeon Girl* and *The Time of the Doves* do not seek to imitate the original statement, thus revealing the existence of two voices whose enunciations are two different approximations to the same text.

I have just mentioned that the semantic function of titles could be taken as that of fictional proper names. In the case of *La plaça del Diamant* this function is double since the title is already a proper name whose referent is unknown to the British reader. This very circumstance seems to have prevented E. O'Shiel from making a literal translation of the title as we can read in a letter she sent to Rodoreda on 10th January, 1966:

It is obvious that the title *La plaça del Diamant*, like this in Catalan in its translation into English does not give any information or awake any feelings here. And I would like to ask you whether you could give me some alternative. Maybe *The Pigeon Woman*?⁵ (My translation)

The proper name “plaça del Diamant” has been taken by the translator primarily in its referential dimension without worrying about its signifying effects as the reader is allowed to produce a chain of signifiers, what O’Shiel refers to the “awakening of feelings”, which could bring about, as we shall see, a possibly wider interpretation.

It has to be mentioned, however, that similarly to O’Shiel, Rodoreda herself and her editor considered different possibilities before finding the title for the novel and the topographical referent became for Rodoreda the pretext for a very specific reading of the text.

Between February and July of 1961, Rodoreda and Sales corresponded to solve certain editorial problems, the most important of which was the finding of an appropriate title for a novel which, as I mentioned earlier, had at that moment the title *Colometa*. In these letters a number of possibilities are suggested, including *La noia dels coloms* mentioned by Rodoreda, which is very close to *The Pigeon girl*, which would later become the British title. Finally, in a letter dated 10th July, Rodoreda is sure she has found the right title and justifies her decision as follows:

What happens in the Square (of the Diamant) is important enough to justify the title. When the novel begins, all the life of Colometa changes in the Square of the Diamant. And in the last chapter, when Colometa returns to the Square of the Diamant, it is to be aware of her reality, which is good.⁶ (My translation).

Thus, Rodoreda made use of the urban topography to underline the development of the female character. Seeing that both translation and retranslation conceal the topographic reference we might conclude that one of the most immediate effects would be the concealing of the subjective trajectory of Natàlia. In any case, the question is to find what type of reading is otherwise promoted through

the translated titles, and whether they semantically contradict the first reading put forward by the author.

Firstly, it is interesting to note that *The Pigeon Girl*, as I mentioned earlier, is very close to the Catalan title proposed by Rodoreda in her letter to Sales. I have not found any archival material that can explain the choice of O'Shiel, however, the phrase *noia dels coloms* or "pigeon girl" occurs twice within the Catalan text, something that might have been conclusive for the choice of the English title.

It is obvious that *The Pigeon Girl* brings attention to the female character and more specifically to her youth and ingenuity. Furthermore, the title here functions as an eponymous, since during the first part of the novel one of the epithets of Natàlia is "pigeon girl". However, by pointing out at the qualities of Natàlia as a young woman *The Pigeon* overrides the subjective trajectory of a voice that by the end of the novel, and at the moment of narrating, has left behind youth and fragility. Therefore, the metonymy of the title in relation to Natàlia reduces the scope of the metonymic effect set up by *La plaça del Diamant*.

The Time of the Doves, on the other hand, displaces the focus of attention from the female character to that of a period. To the reader acquainted to the text, it would be obvious to relate this "time of doves" to the Second Spanish Republic or even to the war, understood as a revolt against fascism, since the noun is qualified by a signifier that denotes peace and hope. Furthermore, the "doves" of Rosenthal's title are directly connected to the reference to Picasso mentioned in the preface. (Although Rosenthal wrongly places the artist among Catalan painters, see Rodoreda, 1981: 10).

While semantically broader, *The Time of Doves* shares with *The Pigeon Girl* its delimiting function since what the American title indicates is the textual predominance of a specific time period. This selective effect obliterates the time of the dictatorship during which half of the narration takes place, a time when paradoxically, and hence the subtle irony that some critics have remarked on in the novel, the female voice finds internal freedom.

Thus, the selective function of both titles, even though using semantic elements present in the text, does not give a hint of further development either in the female character or in the historical events.

Furthermore, it can be said that *The Time of the Doves* not only shifts the focus of attention from a symbolic topography to a specific historical time, but also that the title is enunciated from a perspective that seems to stress the actions of Quimet, the male character, since he is the political fighter, and, by extension, the social struggle predominant at the time in Catalan society.

This semantic displacement and hence the switch to the male character is also textualized in both titles through the choice of the nouns “pigeon” and “doves”, interestingly enough, the only connection between both titles even though limited to the referent and not to the signifier.

Although it is true that pigeons or doves have a special significance in *La plaça*, it is necessary to mention that they act as metaphors of Quimet’s desire (i.e. Quimet renames Natàlia as *Colometa*, literally “little dove”, and sets up a dovecote in the roof of their house). Later on, Natàlia, after the departure of Quimet to the war front, kills the doves, remarries and regains her name, freed from the signifier of the doves. Therefore, the centrality given to the birds in both titles paradoxically displaces the focus of attention from the female narrative voice that speaks freed from the signifier of the birds, on to the male character whose desire is carried symbolically through them.

At first glance the paratextual elements of the translation and the second edition of the American retranslation suggest a continuum in the perception of *La plaça* for the graphic elements are focused on both Natàlia and the doves-pigeons. Nevertheless, this thematic connection is interrupted, as we have seen, by the American title that brings forth the importance of the theme of the Spanish Civil War, reinforced in the second edition by the excerpts that appear on the cover.

To place in the title the theme of the Spanish Civil War, although disguised by a metaphor that denotes hope rather than tragedy, could have been one of the marketing strategies to launch the American retranslation. Certainly, the subtle reference to the war might have appealed to readers already acquainted with a subject which had been previously introduced into the English-speaking world by writers such as George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway.

Thus, the shift from the introspective tone of the narrative suggested by *The Pigeon Girl* to a political and historical reading inferred in *The Time of the Doves* might indicate that the Spanish Civil War may be an effective way to introduce a Barcelona text into the English-speaking market. However, it has to be mentioned that this mediation also obscures the cultural identity of the Catalan novel, which is assimilated into the Spanish culture.

Genette summarises the function of titles as follows: to designate, to indicate the context of the text and to seduce the public (1988: 708). In the case of the titles, along with a number of paratexts I have just commented on, it seems as if the seduction function has been predominant over the designation and indication functions. Certainly, when translating titles, giving priority to the seduction function can be easily explained by the commercial need to market a product and even more so when the product is a book that belongs to a minority culture, and hence to a minority author, who is unknown to the target audience. The question, then, is not to criticize the choice of the translators for not having been “faithful” to the original title, it is taken for granted that every translation is an interpretation, but to problematize it when, for extra-literary reasons, translators compromise a wider interpretation of the text, or, as in the case of *La plaça*, they partially obscure the reading that the author saw as the most prevalent.

Furthermore, and without having to consider the interpretation of the author, something that is neither compulsory nor always available, the rejection of a literally translated title in the case of *La*

plaça also raises the question about the way a minority culture is introduced into a foreign market. Firstly, the introduction of *La plaça* through the signifier of the Spanish Civil War means that while the novel is being designated by an historical event which, although shared with the State to which the Catalan culture politically belongs, both the Catalan cultural difference and the importance of an urban icon by which Barcelona can be recognized and symbolized are being negated.

Mercè Rodoreda once stated that *La plaça del Diamant* was, above all, a novel about love, and an attentive reader can certainly find a hint of this interpretation in the original title. For is it not true that we can find an *amant* hiding inside the “diamant”? A lover that none of the English titles has been able to uncover.

I began this article by saying that retranslations where statements of dissent in relation to previous translation(s). However, the *Time of the Doves* poses a methodological question that surpasses the analysis of the textual elements through which translator and editor have attempted to differentiate the new translation. Could one consider strictly as retranslations those that have denied that they are retranslations? For the moment, we can finish by saying that dissent can also be expressed extratextually by taking the form of a negation.

Notes

1. I am fully aware that, in general, translators do not intervene in the choice of titles. However, as we will see, this has not been the case in the British translation of *La plaça*.
2. I am grateful to Mrs. Núria Folch, widow of Joan Sales, who granted me the permission to research in her personal archives. All the letters referenced here belong to hers.
3. After the British translation and prior to the American retranslation, *La plaça del Diamant* was translated into Italian (1970), Polish (1970), French (1971), Czech (1973), Japanese (1975), Hungarian (1977), and German (1979).
4. *Catalan Review. Homage to Mercè Rodoreda*, vol. II (2). North American Catalan Society, 1987.
5. ...és evident que el nom *La plaça del Diamant*, així en català a la traducció a l'anglès no pot donar informació ni desvetllar cap sentiment ací. I jo voldria demanar-li si vostè em pogués donar alguna alternativa. Potser "la dona dels coloms" (*The Pigeon Woman*).
6. ...és prou important el que passa a la plaça [del Diamant] per a justificar el títol. Quan comença la novel·la tota la vida de Colometa canvia a la plaça del Diamant. I al darrer capítol quan Colometa torna a la plaça del Diamant és perquè prengui consciència de la seva realitat, que és bona.

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