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The Translator's (In)visibility in Julio Cortázar's "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris"

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Abstract

Julio Cortázar's "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" (1951)—a short story written in the form of a letter that the narrator, a translator, leaves for Andrea, the owner of the apartment he has moved into while she is in Paris—is a commentary on the (in)visibility of the translator. The protagonist of the story, a nameless translator (signifying the marginalized role of translators), relinquishes control over the apartment/text that he temporarily inhabits. The translator expresses his anxiety over his unsettling visibility in the apartment/text, where he anticipates staying for a maximum of four months, "perhaps with luck three," the estimated time arguably required to finish his translation project (43). Rosemary Arrojo points out that the story reveals "the translator's gripping narrative of his failure to protect the author's textual space from his agency and relentless creativity" (2018, 7). The story, we contend, is a metaphor for translation, a word mentioned only twice in the story (46-7), pondering the translator's impossibility of shielding the absent author's textual space from his inevitable manipulation and destructive creativity.

Keywords: (In)visibility, "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris," Transgression, Translation, Julio Cortázar

Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) was a key figure in the Latin American Boom, a period of remarkable literary innovation in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside luminaries like Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. This era is celebrated for its experimental narrative techniques and the fusion of diverse cultural themes, marking a significant moment in global literature. Cortázar's work, notably *Hopscotch* (1966), exemplifies the creative spirit of the Boom, influencing an array of Spanish-speaking writers and readers worldwide (Poblete 2019).

We propose reading Cortázar's "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris," originally published in Argentina in 1951 and translated into English by Paul Blackburn in 1967, as a metaphor for translation or the problems faced by the translator,

specifically the tension between creativity and the expectation of faithfulness to the “original”/source text. The story, written in the form of a letter addressed to the owner of an upscale apartment in Buenos Aires, Andrea, is about the mounting anxiety over the visibility and agency of the translator. The protagonist’s/narrator’s/translator’s movement into Andrea’s apartment represents his immersion in the “original” text and his attempt to translate it into another language. The narrator, a translator, starts experiencing a surge of unconfined creativity, represented by the appearance of a bunny (coming out of his mouth) upon his arrival at Andrea’s apartment, which signifies the textual space he is temporarily occupying. He decides to keep the bunnies in a wardrobe during the day. As time passes, the number of bunnies gradually increases, and so does the resulting chaos and disorder in the apartment/text. When the eleventh bunny appears, the translator writes a letter to Andrea, telling her about the bunnies, how he cannot contain the mess, and insinuating he might kill himself along with them. In this article, we employ Lawrence Venuti’s concepts of domestication and foreignization, shedding light on the translator’s visibility and his unsuccessful efforts to remain (in)visible. Venuti criticizes domestication for its “ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values” (2017, 20). He challenges the notion of fluency, contending that it diminishes the text’s foreignness and uniqueness, thereby making the translator (in)visible. On the contrary, Venuti applauds foreignization, which he describes as “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, thereby transporting the reader abroad” (2017, 15). Venuti’s translator (in)visibility paradigm can thus be summarized as follows:

A translated text is judged successful—by most editors, publishers, reviewers, readers, by translators themselves—when it reads fluently, when it gives the appearance that it is not translated, that it is the original, transparently reflecting the foreign author’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text. (2018, 4)

In light of Venuti’s paradigm of (in)visibility, we contend that Cortázar’s “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris” highlights the challenges and complexities inherent in the act of translation, and the narrator’s obsessive concern with concealing the bunnies and repairing the damage they caused can be understood as a metaphor for the translator’s efforts to reconcile the demands of faithfulness and artistic expression. As we will see, the narrator/translator embodies the concept of (in)visibility. While he expresses his creativity symbolized by the bunnies, he commits suicide at the end of the story once he loses control over the bunnies—that is, over the original order of the apartment/text.

The translator affirms that it is impossible for him to keep the original order of the apartment, the source text on which he is working: “How much at fault one feels taking a small metal tray and putting it at the far end of the table, setting it there simply because one has brought one’s English dictionaries and it’s at this end, within easy reach of the hand, that they ought to be” (40). The use

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of dictionaries emphasizes the role of the translator as an intermediary between language and culture. The translator's feeling of fault or guilt in moving the objects/words of the apartment/text shows that he translates under the constraints of the original apartment/text that he is supposed to keep intact. However, the protagonist/translator finds it difficult "to stand counter to, yet to accept with perfect submission of one's whole being, the elaborate order that a woman establishes in her own gracious flat" (40). The fact that the owner/author of the apartment/text, Andrea, is a female shows that Cortázar undermines the author/translator opposition, which is based on the production/reproduction paradigm: original/translation, masculine/feminine. Putting the dictionaries that he needs for translation "within easy reach of the land" marks the beginning of the change to the original order of the apartment/text (40). Later on, the narrator/translator repairs a lamp that a bunny has broken: "The crack where the piece was broken out barely shows, I spent a whole night doing it with a special cement" (46). This quote is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's argument about translation:

Fragments of a vessel, which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest detail, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (1968, 78)

While the translator fixes the broken lamp, his attempt to make the visible (in)visible is thwarted. What "barely shows," just like the "fragments of a greater language" proposed by Benjamin, is visible (78). Indeed, the translator asserts that his touching of any object in the apartment is a token of transgression: "I can hardly change a lamp's cone of light, open the piano bench, without feeling a rivalry and offense swinging before my eyes like a flock of sparrows" (40). The translator's feeling of rivalry and offence reveals the impossibility of a pure, unmediated relation between the original text and its translation. The apartment is Andrea's textual space and "a visible affirmation of her soul" (39), which reflects her feelings and thoughts, or, in the words of Venuti, "the individualistic conception of authorship" (2017, 6). Relocation becomes a metaphor for translation. The protagonist moves into Andrea's apartment and occupies her physical and textual space, representing his immersion in the original text and his attempt to reproduce it in another language. Any translation is, therefore, associated with the indecency, violation, or transgression of the original text.

A translated text, according to Venuti, is considered acceptable when "the translation is not in fact a translation, but the 'original'" (2017, 1). This means that the absence of any stylistic or linguistic additions from the translator makes the text seem transparent. The (in)visibility of the translator means the visibility of the writer and fluency in the reading, as mentioned earlier. This illusory transparency conceals any necessary interventions in the original text that the translator might attempt. Therefore, the translator gets trapped in his struggle

for transparency, objective reproduction, and detachment from the text he is occupying/translating. Adriana Pagano perceives the theme of translation in Cortázar's writing as "a locus of violence and tension: a violence resulting from the imposition of words and meanings to translate reality" (2002, 82). The translator is in a constant state of tension and ambiguity, living in an apartment and translating a text without being allowed to intervene in its original order/meaning creatively. There is the assumption that the narrator/translator should temporarily inhabit both spaces, the apartment and the text, without interventions or traces of his being or creativity. The protagonist/translator is aware that any alteration to the existing order will have ramifications, even if it goes unnoticed. A simple adjustment like moving a tray "alters the play of relationships in the whole house, of each object with another, of each moment of their soul with the soul of the house and its absent inhabitant" (40). The tension builds up as the translator violates the established order by "conceiving" the bunnies and then fruitlessly trying to conceal his violation by hiding them.

The translator's oral conception of the bunnies, which are associated with uncontrollable verbal expression and creativity, reveals his unsettling feelings about his unwanted visibility in the author's apartment/text. In other words, the bunnies represent the translator's creative impulse, the irresistible desire to deviate from faithfulness to the original order of the apartment/text and unleash his creative expressions, expressions (bunnies) that come from his mouth, highlighting his inability to repress his creativity. Indeed, the bunnies that come out of the translator's mouth are associated with poetic creativity. He compares a newly born bunny to "a poem in its first minutes" (43). The translator's growing bunnies destroy the authorial, textual space of the author, whose books are the first target of the bunnies: "They've nibbled away a little at the books on the lowest shelf" (46). The translator feels embarrassed by the birth of the bunnies, telling Andrea that "always I have managed to be alone when it happens, guarding the fact much as we guard so many of our privy acts, evidence of physical selves which happen to us in total privacy" (41). The tension between loyalty to the original and the irrepressible desire for creative expression is reflected in the protagonist's struggle to maintain order while allowing the bunnies to exist within the apartment. He releases and tends to his bunnies from the wardrobe at night, clears their mess, and keeps them locked in the wardrobe during the day to protect them from Andrea's housekeeper, Sara, who, as a critic, tries to keep the original order of the apartment and the textual space: "That way Sara always finds everything in order, although at times I've noticed a restrained astonishment, a stopping to look at some object, a slight discoloration in the carpet, and again the desire to ask me about something" (47). The protagonist's concern to eliminate the changes created by the bunnies is at the crux of the translator's desire for (in)visibility.

The story shows that the translator is unable to exercise authorial control over the text he is translating. Rosemary Arrojo (2018, 26) points out that "Cortázar's conflicted protagonist invites us to rethink the impossible position of translators in a culture that idealizes originals as unmediated expressions of their author's thoughts while it expects translators to be neutral and invisible in

their work.” The translator expresses his lack of control over the bunnies that “hop about on the carpet, into the chairs, then tiny blotches shift like a moving constellation from one part to another” (45). He writes in his letter: “I’d like to see them quiet, see them at my feet and being quiet—somewhat the dream of any God, Andrea, a dream the gods never see fulfilled” (45). One can say that faithful translation adhering to the original text is a dream that cannot be realized.

The translator’s anxiety peaks with the appearance of the eleventh bunny: “ten was fine, with a wardrobe, clover and hope, so many things could happen for the better. But not with eleven, because to say eleven is already to say twelve for sure, and Andrea, twelve would be thirteen” (49). For the protagonist, ten is an even number; it resembles a controllable arrangement, but the eleventh symbolizes infinite possibilities and a lack of order and control. His loss of control is further substantiated by his releasing himself from the responsibility of destroying the apartment and, by extension, the authorial space that he initially pledged that he would protect from any intervention, writing that “I was not all that responsible for the unavoidable and helpless destruction of your home” (48).

Both the author and the owner of the apartment are absent, and they are, therefore, unable to prevent the translator’s interventions. However, both of their spaces are extensions of their “self” that have an enigmatic power over the translator and make him feel guilty for claiming a sense of authority over them. This aligns with Venuti’s argument that “work-for-hire contracts alienate the translator from the product of his or her labour with remarkable finality” (2017, 9). Such contracts bring forth the *aporia* of “death-in-birth,” where the birth of the translator’s authority and presence in translation signifies his death (Spivak 2021, 410). At the end of the story, the protagonist loses the literality and textuality of the text/apartment and “surrender(s) [himself] to linguistic rhetoric” of the original order of the apartment/text (45). Through his suicide note, and presumably his death, the translator erases himself and his non-compliance with the apartment/text. While it is the narrator’s/translator’s awareness of this subordinate position and his desire for (in)visibility that spur him on to jump to his death with the 11 bunnies, Maria Guzmán suggests that his suicide “may signify exposure, mutation, metamorphosis, even liberation—a translation of the self into another reality” (2006, 83). The ambiguity of death, a transcendental expression of creation, unshackles the translator from the alienating conditions of his expressive post. Death appears as the last resort to the exiled protagonist, who, in the story, has prepared and closed many suitcases “that never manage to get moved anyplace” (40). The translator, who occupied two spaces simultaneously, failed to belong to any.

The (in)visibility of the translator is also apparent in his name. Even though the whole story revolves around him, Cortázar did not give his protagonist a forename or a surname. Namelessness suggests a loss of referentiality and identity. Recognizing and acknowledging a person’s existence starts when he/she is designated or identified by a name. It is Cortázar’s way of inscribing and making sense of the exiled translator’s life. Since the translator, to quote Sam Sacks

(2015), “has no proper home, he can also have no proper name.” Names have a role in creating one’s identity and belonging to a community. Places where names are connected and recognized by society include jobs, marital status, opinions, and personal habits. While the translator is nameless in these places, his striving to be visible goes unexpressed and remains insignificant (Kakade 2020). The translator is not granted a name in life or in his translation. According to Theo Hermans, copyright law could reduce translation to “reproduction” where the translator’s agency bears repercussions of ethics and accountability (2014, 293). Similarly, the protagonist’s namelessness suggests the supposedly prescribed role of the translator as a mouthpiece of the writer.

Accordingly, the translator’s suicide can be read as a defeat, as self-destruction in the face of the impossibility of resolving the tension created by the uncontrollable reproduction and activity of the bunnies, which the translator also eliminates, and the concern to leave the order of the apartment/original text intact. In other words, the translator opts for a faithful or servile translation of the original, denying his impulse for creativity, an attitude Venuti calls “self-erasure” (2017, 41). It is significant that the letter lacks a signature; we know the name of the recipient/author/(Andrea) but not the name of the narrator/translator/(nonexistent). The protagonist’s absence at the end of the story corresponds to the lack of a signature on the letter; the translator has disappeared, concealing his passage through the work. However, one can argue that the translator’s suicide continues the transgression of boundaries initiated by the bunnies, throwing himself from the original text/apartment into the unknown, without limits, into the liberating dynamics of translation. In this act, the translator embraces the transformative power of language and breaks free from the constraints of fidelity to the original. The act of translation becomes a creative and liberating process, allowing for the expansion and growth of language.

Conclusion

Cortázar’s “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris” is a commentary on the inevitable presence/visibility of the translator whose desire to be (in)visible is thwarted by his conception of the bunnies. This conflict between loyalty to the established order and the drive for creative expression evolves as the translator grapples with maintaining the status quo while accommodating the presence of the bunnies. His efforts to conceal the changes caused by the bunnies emphasizes his desire for (in)visibility in the translation process. Moreover, the translator’s anonymity mirrors his struggle with visibility and identity due to the prescribed role restricted to embodying the author’s voice. His suicide note marks his attempts to escape confinement and glorify the transformative prospect of translation. In other words, the story shows that translation is a transgression and violation of the original/source text.

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