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Article abstract

This essay investigates the relationship between the idea of movement and the concept of translation in Licia Canton's short story "The Motorcycle" and in its Italian translation. The essay looks at translation both as a metaphor of negotiation and mediation that bridges two linguistic and cultural backgrounds and as a process thanks to which a text can effectively circulate in several languages and cultures. Thanks to some excerpts taken from the Italian text, the issue of the accent, that of self-translation and identity are explored through the lens of language, underlining its role in shaping and conveying images and narratives of the migrant.

Translating Migrations, (Re)Presenting Cultures in Transit: Licia Canton's "The Motorcycle"

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Abstract: This essay investigates the relationship between the idea of movement and the concept of translation in Licia Canton's short story "The Motorcycle" and in its Italian translation. The essay looks at translation both as a metaphor of negotiation and mediation that bridges two linguistic and cultural backgrounds and as a process thanks to which a text can effectively circulate in several languages and cultures. Thanks to some excerpts taken from the Italian text, the issue of the accent, that of self-translation and identity are explored through the lens of language, underlining its role in shaping and conveying images and narratives of the migrant.

Keywords: Migration, Translation, Licia Canton, Short story, Accent

"I translate, therefore I am." (Lahiri, 120)

In an era in which migration and diasporas are the essence of change, in a world which is constantly in movement, it is our duty to reconsider mobility not only as the physical act which comes from human beings' instinctive necessity to move, but as an event that causes irreversible transformations in the cultural contexts it affects. The literary response to migration processes is a literature capable of exploring the relationships among the linguistic and cultural heritages that experienced contamination as a consequence of contact; a literature which can itself be defined as migrant. Everyday life challenges us to decode and re-code messages, to deal with several sign systems and to define and re-define our identities according to the outcomes of movement; this means we are continuously incited to translate ourselves so as to create the multiple narrations that our sedimented identity is made up of.

In order to understand the bonds between translation and movement, suffice it to say that the word "translation" comes from the Latin verb *traducere*, that is "to transport." In a certain sense, the meaning of the Latin verb carries already the idea of movement because it recalls to the mind the act of transferring something from one place to another. So, to deal with translation means to experience the idea of transit(s), to move sets of meaning from one language and one culture to another. From this perspective, if we think about movement as the creative force

of migrant literature, then it would be natural to think of translation as its agent of communication, that is as a process which helps two or more linguistic and cultural universes to connect and to express their relationships.

As a country of immigration, Canada offers an important overview on the connections between translation and identity, and literature is often used as a means to reveal and convey these connections. So, while migrant writers explore their multi-layered identities at a personal level, writing their experiences onto the page, they also turn into metonymies for national identity, addressing through their bilingual and bicultural points of view issues like racism, classism, the difficulty to fit into a new social environment, the struggle to keep memory alive for the next generations and so forth. Licia Canton does this in many of her short stories, where she often questions the stereotyped image of the immigrant with basis on her personal experience of migration, addressing language as the first space of negotiation in which the migrant identity starts to be shaped; in fact, in her essay "Se traduire au quotidien," she affirms:

Je m'exprime en dialecte, en français, en anglais et en italien. Et c'est dans cet ordre que j'ai appris ces langues. Je porte plusieurs chapeaux au quotidien: mère, conjointe, bru, soeur, écrivaine, traductrice, directrice d'une revue culturelle, présidente d'une association d'écrivains. Je change de chapeau souvent et je passe d'une langue à l'autre aussi souvent (87).

The above statement proves how each language corresponds to a specific identity or even to a specific role and how self-translation is fundamental to find a mediation among the "plusieurs chapeaux" she has to wear every day.

For this reason, translation can no longer be considered only as a mere linguistic act but as an ongoing, dialectical movement which reveals itself through language, generating new and unpredictable meanings. This means migrations, diasporas, and transits affect human experiences with the same power gene mutations affect human bodies, and this is the reason why every moving person, regardless of his/her reasons to move, is constantly compelled to discuss new narratives of self, so to fit into a variable environment. In order to highlight the role of translation in the act of moving from a place to another, Salman Rushdie writes in his essay, *Imaginary Homelands*: "having been borne across the world, we are translated men" (17). With this brief statement he explains how the fact that we are able to re-invent ourselves by (self) translating, changing according to the urgencies of communication, is what keeps us alive in a world of continuous (sometimes violent) dislocations.

With base in these premises, it seems clear how working on a text of migrant literature that is the outcome of a sedimentation of previous self-translations, the translator finds her/himself mediating among the several aspects of movement and its effects. Translating "The Motorcycle" means dealing with a text of this kind, because both the

author and the characters in the story experienced immigration. Hence, for the author, the act of writing becomes a way of fixing a personal and a fictional experience of contact and contamination.

“The Motorcycle” is the story of an Italian *Alpino* who emigrated to Canada when he was young, so his story pushed me to search for translation strategies that would allow me to transmit to a public of Italian readers the translation of a story that was the result of a translation itself. In fact, if we think of translation as a way of “versare” contents from one container to another, then the *Alpino*’s story is a way of establishing a relationship between spoken and written words. This means that “The Motorcycle” is the first step in an ongoing process which started transferring and translating the old man’s oral patrimony to writing. The result was a meta-translation: a translation which contained different levels of (sub)translations. Specifically, I detected two levels of (sub)translations: the first is the one represented by the process of writing as a land of transfer, where the co-existence of several accents reveals an inclination to host the language and the culture of the Other. This inclination is the way in which the distance between “the Other and me” can no longer be seen as an obstacle. Rather, it turns out to be a way of negotiating creole identities in which everyone carries his linguistic, cultural, and traditional story, remaining disposed to miscegenation. The second level of (sub)translation is that of the characters, who are constantly involved in a process of self-translation in order to portray an identity which could respond to their idea of self.

To support my theoretical introduction and to analyse some aspects of the translation of “The Motorcycle,” I will discuss some excerpts from the Italian text (“La moto”)¹:

Quando l’aveva visto avvicinarsi allo sportello, lentamente, dopo che aveva già chiamato il numero successivo pensando che A23 non ci fosse, aveva raccolto tutta la sua pazienza.

“*Bonjour.*” L’uomo fissò la donna dai tratti cinesi che parlava in francese con l’accento del Québec.

Tirò fuori i fogli dal taschino interno e glieli diede.

Non disse nulla. Lei sapeva già cosa doveva fare.

“*Merci.*” La donna prese i fogli e li guardò con attenzione. Erano compilati in francese (sebbene con qualche errore di ortografia), in un corsivo che indicava che quel signore così anziano aveva risposto alle domande da solo. L’unica cosa che doveva fare ora era pagare.

L’anziano, stanco, fissava la donna attraverso gli occhiali dalla montatura spessa.

Lei guardò quel viso rugoso sotto il cappello da alpino. Esitò.

¹ Licia Canton’s “The Motorcycle and Luisa Marino’s full translation of “La moto” can be read on pages 96-103 of this issue.

"Monsieur," disse, "lo sa che può risparmiare del denaro se elimina la quota della moto?" Non sorrise.

Lui guardò l'impiegata ma non parlò.

"Le costerà molto di meno," disse lei ad alta voce, e attese la sua risposta.

Era un ottantenne che stava rinnovando la patente per poter guidare qualunque mezzo alla luce del sole, dal trattore al semirimorchio del camion alla moto.

Probabilmente avrebbe ancora guidato un trattore o un autoarticolato, ma sarebbe ancora salito su una moto? Lo fissò...e aspettò.

Sapeva che la donna gli aveva fatto una domanda. Sapeva che si aspettava una risposta.

"Mi scusi. Può ripetere, per favore?" disse con un certo accento.

This paragraph, taken from the beginning of the short story, allows us to focus on the issue of the accent. Both the Chinese woman and the *Alpino* talk with an accent; this means both of them found a way to "inhabit" the language they speak. Through the act of writing, Licia Canton does not only immortalize the voice of an old Italian man, who aims to preserve his accent as a mark of his linguistic heritage, but also the condition of a person who lives in the interstices of two cultures and two languages, experiencing the effects of liminality. The *Alpino* is old, his accent has to be "thick" while speaking English, his French has to contain "spelling errors", as he is trying to speak a language which is not his own, so the accent lets the reader understand the effort he is making to adapt to a different linguistic and cultural context, but, at the same time, it highlights how the old man's relationship with his motherland is still strong even if that land is no longer his homeland. On the other hand, the Chinese woman who speaks "French with a Quebecois accent" was probably born in Canada. She is not an immigrant, she feels comfortable with the language she speaks, her motherland is her homeland too, and yet the urgency to recuperate her origins materialize in the absent character of her own grandfather, with whom she has not talked to the phone for a while.

The next excerpt, taken from the middle of the story, allows me to describe the technical choices I made in order to preserve the structure of the source language, even if the translation "returned" to the protagonist's mother tongue:

Due ruote potevano sembrare poco all'impiegata o a quelli che guidavano SUV e Audi e BMW per ostentare la loro ricchezza. Ah, ma la Vespa! Lui lo sapeva, e anche gli uomini della sua generazione lo sapevano, che la Vespa era il miglior investimento che un giovane potesse fare dopo la guerra.

Era stato grazie alla Vespa che aveva conquistato la sua donna.

Allora aveva dietro un sacco di donne perché era uno dei pochi ad avere due ruote quando gran parte dei giovani portava la bici. Poi era arrivata *la sua donna*, quella che aveva sposato, quella che gli aveva dato dei figli, quella che lo aveva seguito in una terra lontana e fredda senza fare domande, nonostante lui stesso sapesse che lei non era sempre felice, nonostante sapesse che non era la prima scelta della famiglia di lei... Loro avrebbero preferito qualcuno di più ricco, di più stabile. Qualcuno senza idee stravaganti sull'emigrazione. Qualcuno che non se ne fosse andato in giro per la Svizzera e poi in Canada. Qualcuno che non avesse lasciato moglie e figli da soli per un anno per andare a stabilirsi in un piccolo appartamento seminterrato a Montreal-Nord. Qualcuno che non avesse sradicato una famiglia intera...

The memories of a man who lived his youth in Italy must necessarily be in Italian. In this case, the author plays with the role of translation thus lending an English voice to memories that are in Italian. In such a situation, I needed to find a solution that would allow me to preserve the idea of linguistic contamination. In other words, I needed a translation that could have shown how the Italian language had affected English and, at the same time, how English had affected Italian. For this reason, I chose to maintain the syntax of the source text almost intact, so that an Italian reader would have had the possibility to reproduce the rhythm of English sentences while reading them in Italian. I worked with the sentences to maintain the length of that paragraph almost unvaried, so too with the position of the commas, because that was the way in which the pressure of memories was displayed through the text. For the same reason, I reproduced the reiteration of the phrases "the one (who)" and "even though."

The last paragraph, taken from the end of the story, shows the objectification of translation as a way of "making sense of the foreign in order to survive" (Lahiri 119) but also as a way of "creating and illuminating" (Lahiri 120) new narrative identities. In fact, in Canton's text, the old *Alpino* says:

"Lei è cinese, vero?" Non si aspettava che rispondesse. "I suoi genitori o i suoi nonni sono immigrati in Canada, giusto? Siamo tutti della stessa pasta, sa. Quelli che sono emigrati e sono venuti qui. Dobbiamo essere migliori di chiunque altro perché non siamo nati qui. Ok, lei forse è nata qui e ha un impiego pubblico importante... ma viene comunque da un popolo di immigrati. Gente forte. Perciò lei è come me, come mia nipote.

Lei lo guardò e gli accenni di un sorriso incominciarono a prendere forma. Non capiva bene tutto quello che diceva con quell'accento marcato. Italiano. Doveva essere italiano.

I translated with "siamo tutti della stessa pasta" the original sentence "we are all of the same mould" in order to maintain the *Alpino*'s attempt to consider migrants as part of a big community of people whose urgency and wish is that to be accepted and respected. So, even if the Chinese

woman's parents and grandparents moved to Canada for different reasons, the *Alpino* feels a connection with them, as he knows that all migrants, regardless of the story they carry with them while moving, "[devono] essere migliori di chiunque altro"; that is they have to struggle to demonstrate they can be part of a new community. For this reason, all migrants are "gente forte" and, even if the Chinese woman is probably a Canadian born to second-generation Canadians, the *Alpino* recognizes in her all the efforts her parents and grandparents had to make in order to help her be recognized as part of the Canadian community.

Like the migrant who crosses the borders of a new land, the translator feels the language of the text s/he is going to translate does not belong to her/him, so too s/he feels that s/he does not belong within the cultural context in which the text was born. Yet s/he makes an effort to create a passage between two languages, two cultures and two traditional backgrounds to encourage communication. To conclude, translation teaches us the vulnerability of a text and the way in which a translator approaches a text depends on the "spiritual spectacles" (Thiong'o 27) s/he decides to wear while reading it. Translators are the filters thanks to and through which readers can access texts written in languages others than theirs, nevertheless they are filters; this means what readers access is a peculiar, personal reading of a text that has been affected by the translator's background knowledge, by his/her attitude towards the source culture, by his/her attitude towards the target culture, by the moment in which s/he translates and so forth. From this perspective, infinite translations of the same text are possible and each of them would be a legitimate version of that text. So, it is only by reading translation as an ongoing journey into a text, and not as its final destination, that we will be able to abandon the idea that a correct, perfect, definitive translation can exist and to accept that, as the reification of a process of movement, translation changes our way to perceive and to use language.

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