

A Translator's Apologia¹

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Based on the comparative study of two translators' apologias with regards to an American English and a hexagonal French translation of a Cuban novel, this paper argues that translation, like writing, is inextricably tied to the subjectivity of the practitioner. Perhaps that is why literary translators are often too shy to discuss their own practice. As the penury of translators' prefaces would attest, they have assimilated the fidelity imperative only too well and, even though they may be masters at transforming the literal into the literary, they often prefer to remain invisible behind their author as if only the latter were real and they merely fiction(al) workers. Suzanne Jill Levine and Albert Bensoussan are exceptions to this rule and, having both translated Guillermo Cabrera Infante from Spanish into English and French and written eloquently about their experience, offer useful contrastive insight not only into the question of fidelity but also into their own subjectivity and how it influences their practice.

Reading *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* and *Confessions d'un traître: Essai sur la traduction*, and analyzing the American English and French translations of *Tres Tristes Tigres*, also made me realize that where one comes from may have a greater influence on a literary translator than scholars are usually willing to admit. It may in fact influence not only whether or not you become a translator but what kind of translator you choose to be, a *sourcier* or a *cibliste*, a foreignizer or a domesticator, effacing yourself behind the author or proclaiming your visibility, or perhaps a dweller of the in-between, or finally none of the above. It most likely plays a role as well in what one chooses to translate. Levine's and Bensoussan's testimonials also suggest that theory is not necessarily confined to academic institutions, as I once heard someone comment at a meeting of the Literary Translators' Association of Canada in response to the question "What is theory?": "Something they do in universities". The question was well posed, the answer unsatisfactory and one that I found even insulting at the time as I was just making my entry into academia. This

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sixth Annual International Translation Day conference on September 30, 2008 (University of Alberta) whose theme was "The Translator as Theorist?".

study, therefore, given my dual position as practitioner and academic, enters into dialogue with the testimonials of two translators in order to resist the urge to hide behind them and withhold my own experience since it is my own practice, and the subjectivity inscribed within it, which leads me to read them as I do. Before proceeding to the “academic” treatment of my topic, therefore, I mean to subvert the beginning of the following phrase from the call for papers of the conference, which initially inspired me to write on this topic, and take an autobiographical detour: “Beyond the biographical and anecdotal we invite contributions from translators and translation scholars interested in reflecting upon, as in, looking on or contemplating, in the etymological sense of *theory*, translation activities”². Indeed, the tension this apparent self-betrayal, as I was the principal author of the call for papers, creates is reflected in the term *apologia* used in my title, meaning that translators writing about their craft need not apologize but defend the path they chose according to their own subject position.

It may matter, therefore, that, in spite of growing up in a monolingual, Francophone, small—and let me just spell it out, boring—Swiss town, I learned about the cultures of the world at my father’s knee. He was then a true globetrotter, as well as a freelance journalist, and made it a habit when he was home to fetch an object at supertime from his “office”, the room we only entered with the greatest caution so as not to disturb him at his typewriter, and to spin a tale about this object, complete with words and sayings in foreign tongues. In this fashion I became attuned to the sounds of the world, be they from Italy, Albania, Gypsies in Central Europe, Afghanistan, Turkey, Russia, India, Australia, many different places in Africa, Latin America, the United States or Iceland. In this fashion I understood how small my protected little valley really was and I quickly learned that what my father was relaying to us, interpreting, and therefore, translating for us, was the importance of diversity within diversity since, in his travels, he often met up with minorities: Aborigines in New Guinea, *clochards* and *Tziganes* in Paris, survivors of the near genocide in Biafra, etc.

As a result, when I left on my own adventure at eighteen, I knew that I needed to immerse myself in a different culture and a new language in order to figure out who and what I wanted to be. I didn’t yet know how important translation would become for me—since I only possessed a smattering of English, German and some Italian—but I resolutely left behind my origins, which in Switzerland happen to be a rather

² Call for Papers for The University of Alberta’s Sixth International Translation Day Conference (September 30, 2008).

complicated matter. Swiss citizens are all afflicted with a place of origin that is duly inscribed in their passport alongside the place of birth. Mine is Sigriswil, a tiny and postcard-pretty village in Central Switzerland, although I was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds, near the French border, where my ancestors had settled in the second half of the nineteenth century. I recently visited this Germanic dream-place for the first time and didn't feel any connection to it whatsoever: I didn't understand the language (*Schwitzerdeutsch*); I don't really like cows; and I would be terrified to disappear into the beautiful landscape, leaving behind my sardonic Cheshire-cat smile, if I had to live there. Furthermore, I only found out two weeks ago that, for the first twenty years of my life, my last name was actually a pseudonym without any legal status. My father, who is entirely responsible for this situation and for not clearly explaining it to my brothers and me, had chosen to drop the umlaut from his Sigriswil inherited surname of Bühler to create his pen name. He also occasionally used a French translation of the name: Dumont [of the hill]. As for me, the name proving impossible to pronounce correctly in English, with or without umlaut, I happily gave it up when I got married. Thus, having czekhed my surname at the door of the performance of my Canadian life, I became a cultural Bohemian in the multicultural and multilingual landscape of immigration. Did that make me a translator? Not entirely, of course, but it goes a long way, I think, in explaining why I view translation as a space of negotiation between two cultures and why I often choose to translate displaced authors, that is, to borrow and adapt a well-known phrase from Salman Rushdie³, "already translated women": the Icelandic Kristjana Gunnars; the *Québécoise* Claudine Potvin; the Indian Uma Parameswaran, etc. These bio-biographical details resemble the way both Levine and Bensoussan start their own narratives.

Albert Bensoussan, in asking himself why he became a translator, describes his origins in the following way:

Is it having dwelled so long in the in-between world?

. . . We spoke an unravelling language of the sea, *maman*, dialectal Arabic with Tlemcenian accents, hushing the occlusives, my Zouave father, recently acquired French mixed with barracks' speech, Fatie the maid, Berber from the hills, Baba-Sidi (pépé), biblical Hebrew, and I, my brothers, my sisters, the language of kings—from France or Fraud—, burdened with the problem of placing the circumflex accent in the right place, closing the *o*, nasalizing the *on* and *an*. . . When Ima (*maman*) requested "Touchiat zidane", an Andalusian partition, our fervour raised the synagogue...and *lazzi* and

³ The complete citation is: "Having been borne across the world, we are translated men" (17).

swearwords would fuse around us—in Arabic? in Kabyle (sorry, in Tamazight), in frank Zouave speech? (17; my translation)⁴

Does Bensoussan resort to rhetorical questions in order to suggest a kind of inherent uncertainty in the issue of origins and their link to translation? Irony, similar to my own, albeit expressed in brilliant lyrical fashion, also colours his tone, particularly with regards to French. The diverse background he evokes, summarized far too simply as having being born a Sephardic Jew in Algeria, describes a situation apparently conducive to translation and emerging here out of the need, acquired in childhood, to juggle languages, cultures and religions.

Jill Levine, who never uses the name Suzanne—for me, echoing my own nomenclatural choice—expresses a similar awakening to the foreign:

You often seek in the foreign what you are drawn to, perhaps unknowingly, in the familiar. I was born and raised in New York City, in a culture within a culture, in an “assimilated” Jewish family in which my mother spoke Yiddish to my father when she didn’t want me to understand the topic of conversation. I made my first entry at age twelve into another language, French. The teacher, a gentleman with a British accent who recalled Alistair Sim in the sinister comedy film *The Green Man*, would tease us constantly, threatening that we would become “a grease spot on Academy Street” if we didn’t learn our conjugations “chop chop”. He made French into a *jeu de mots* and I played the game with ease since I seemed to have what they called an aptitude. Maybe too, I wanted to have access to a mysterious code, like my mother. But most of all I was curious to be transported, not from the sixth-floor window to Academy Street, but into a foreign world. We translate to be translated. (v)

These three testimonials echo each other. All of us, more explicitly expressed by Bensoussan and me, were conscious of dwelling in the in-between; Levine and I speak of a strong desire to escape our origins, first through language, then physically, and in my case permanently, and finally through translation. We are all inhabited by the contradictory desire to recognize, and even celebrate, mixed beginnings, and to escape them, subvert them, perhaps even betray them. Is that what translation is? A

⁴ Est-ce d’avoir longtemps habité l’entre-monde? . . . Alors parlions-nous une langue de mer et d’effiloche, maman le dialectal arabe en accent tlemcénien, chuintant les occlusives, mon zouave de père un français de fraîche date mâtiné de caserne, Fatie la bonne le berbère des collines, Baba-Sidi (pépé) l’hébreu biblique, et moi, mes frères et sœurs, le langage des rois — de France ou de Frime —, grevé de l’embarras à bien poser l’accent circonflexe, à refermer l’o, à l’on et l’an nasaliser. . . Quand Ima (maman) réclamait « Touchiat zidane », une partition andalouse, nous soulevions de ferveur la synagogue... et lazzi et jurons de notre entourage — en arabe? en kabyle (pardon, en tamazight), en franc-parler zouave?

contradictory, irrepressible and constant movement between who one is, or is supposed to be, and the wish to be someone else and somewhere else?

Albert Bensoussan sees his translator persona as that of a traitor while Jill Levine casts herself in the role of a subversive scribe. Their choice of these words is based on the privileged relationship they developed with the source text and its author. The terms “*traître*” and “subversive” belong to the same semantic field of politics and are both connoted negatively from the dominant perspective of legitimate government or normality. Not as clear is what they might reveal about the translators’ subject positions with regards to the task facing them. They do, however, point to a fundamental difference in attitude. Does one deliberately call him or herself a traitor? It seems indeed to be the case with Bensoussan, a sort of reasoned acceptance of the old cliché *traduttore traditore*, which he problematically interprets as a female submissive and loving position (13-15). Raising the question of fidelity, he threads his arguments through the familiar minefield of the “*belles infidèles*” highlighted by Georges Mounin (1955) and formulates a provisional deontology of the translator based on his experience of “intimate” collaboration with several authors. He thus establishes three rules of conduct: 1) respect of the source text and its length⁵; 2) respect of the Foreign⁶; 3) respect of the reader. He then concludes with the somewhat troubling metaphor, because of its biological tenor, of the couple formed by the author and the translator for which no fidelity is possible without love:

Because sometimes the author, seized by the genesial flux of forced paternity, goes so far as to dictate, or believe he does, the very words of his translation. It’s because he knows that every sentence of his text that is scattered throughout the world will still be his own child. Something of a bastard or peculiar child since he has two fathers, two genitors: the one who conceived him and the one who carried him in the belly of another language. What has changed perhaps is that this child continues to be wanted, the translator having invested all of his flame and affection. All of his faith as well for, acknowledging today with optimism that the “*belles infidèles*” are defective, it is possible to state that, in this necessary couple of author/translator, which functions so well, there can be no fidelity without love. (40; my translation)⁷

⁵ This alludes to the fact that one of the documented tendencies of translation is to lengthen the source text (see Berman, “Translation” 290).

⁶ Although not explicitly stated this second rule seems to be directly drawn from the work of Antoine Berman on Schleiermacher, German romanticism and foreignization (1984), and later taken up by Lawrence Venuti (1992; 1995; 1998). This in spite of the fact that, I will argue, Bensoussan’s self-appraisal seems to contradict Venuti’s standpoint on the translator, which can be construed as the intent to equal the author, that is bring authorial visibility to the craft of the translator.

⁷ Car il arrive parfois que l’auteur, saisi par le flux génésique d’une paternité forcée, aille jusqu’à dicter, ou croire qu’il dicte, les propres mots de sa traduction. C’est qu’il sait que chacune des phrases de son

The role of traitor that Bensoussan assigns himself, therefore, does not appear to be entirely deliberate but is nevertheless explicitly associated with images of marriage, love and fidelity, all three seemingly necessary for translation. He also blurs gender distinctions, cloaking the author in maternal feelings and himself as a caring mother-to-be in spite of the use of terms such as “paternity”, “fathers” and “genitors”. In fact both the male author and the male translator, each in his own way, seems to gain female attributes, to incarnate the “necessary couple” alone as well as together, and to be united in love of the child/text. Their relationship, as the three rules make clear, is also defined by respect but one cannot help wonder how equal this arrangement really is since it borrows from the heterosexual model of love and marriage, which, as is well known, disadvantages the woman, relegating her to the private space and often denying her any power of creation beyond childbirth.

On the other hand, Levine’s choice of the term “subversive” does appear to be entirely the result of an informed decision. While in both cases the “collaboration” between translator and author greatly influences their self-definitions, Levine’s theorization of this relationship adds much more to the semantic field of politics discussed above than Bensoussan’s does with his use of a biological and heterosexual metaphor. As such the terms “subversive” and “collaboration” imply a contentious relationship, yet aiming for the same goal of translating a difficult text. But what does being subversive mean in this context? A rejection of the sort of duty owed the author and the text that Bensoussan formulates? A dismantling of linguistic norms in order to find neologisms and puns worthy of the author’s own inventiveness? A subversion of the traditions and conventions of translation? All of these? When asked in the mid 90s whether “translation [is], then, a quintessential artistic act of modernism—‘subverting’ the author, whose creative product becomes conceptual, a relation between perceiver and perceived”, Levine answers in the following way: “I think that’s true, but that extends to writers as well. Modernism is about self-consciousness: the act of writing, the questioning of the author, the fragmented self, the fragmented discourse--the effort to try to bring all these fragments together, but never completed” (Taylor 46-47). This

texte éparpillé de par le monde sera quand même son enfant. Un enfant quelque peu bâtard ou singulier, car enfin il aura deux pères, deux géniteurs : celui qui l’aura conçu et celui qui l’aura porté dans le ventre d’une autre langue. Ce qui a changé, peut-être, est que cet enfant est toujours désiré, le traducteur y ayant mis toute sa flamme et son affection. Toute sa foi aussi car, reconnaissant aujourd’hui avec optimisme que les « belle infidèles » sont caduques, on peut affirmer que, dans ce couple nécessaire auteur/traducteur qui fonctionne si bien, il ne peut y avoir de fidélité sans amour. (40)

decidedly academic question has brought out the scholar in Levine who provides a nuanced answer and suggests that the work of translation is in and of itself an “act of writing”, never finished and no different from that of a writer. Given the accepted notion of the invisibility and submissive role of the translator at the time *Tres tristes tigres* was being translated, that was certainly a “subversive” and provocative stance to take in the early 70s if it was indeed how she saw herself at that time. Taylor then asks: “Who is the boss, text or author?” to which she replies: “This has been different at different times. Puig and Cabrera Infante were both extremely influential; helping me out, consulting, coming up with solutions. But, I think that the text was the boss for everybody” (47). In the epilog to her book, entitled “Traduttora, Traditora” Levine offers a Barthian interpretation: “From a readerly perspective, translation is an act of interpretation. From a writerly one (for this now visible invisible scribe) it has been a (w)rite of passage” (184)⁸. Interestingly this statement follows a quotation by Bensoussan in a 1982 article, which would later make its way into his book:

The translator suffers, submissive, subjugated. [In the book “translator” is changed to “Traduttore” and “to the condottiere” is added after “submissive”; this first sentence is also preceded by two other ones: “To translate, to introduce oneself into the other and be introduced in a ceaseless dispute. What a couple”!] Female, even if he is sometimes Amazon. Caught, imprisoned, chained, enclosed. No longer his own person. Alienated, absorbed, violated and dispossessed of his own words. Words of the other, the author, the ether. The translator is inferior, posterior, postsynchronized. The translator renders in his language the author publishable but he is forgettable. The author opens himself, the translator closes himself, the first flourishes, the second perishes. The author is created, the translator cremated.

The translator is merely a passing voice. (71; my translation, which attempts to give an idea of Bensoussan’s puns)⁹

Levine gives the following interpretation/translation of this passage, which she recognizes as having been written “playfully and poignantly”:

None of these Borgesian games about translation being “a more advanced stage”.¹⁰ The translator is secondary, enslaved, nay raped by another’s words; the translator does not belong to himself but

⁸ This is also quoted by Taylor as his conclusion.

⁹ Le traducteur subit, soumis, subjugué. Femelle, même s’il est parfois amazone. Pris, prisonnier, enfermé, enserré. Ne s’appartient plus. Aliéné, absorbé, ravi et dépossédé de sa propre parole. Parole de l’autre, l’auteur, la hauteur. Le traducteur est inférieur, postérieur, postsynchronisé. Le traducteur rend en son langage l’auteur publiable, mais il est oubliable. L’auteur s’ouvre, le traducteur se ferme, le premier s’éclot, le second se clot. L’auteur se crée, le traducteur secret.

Le traducteur n’est que voix de passage (71).

is alienated from his own language; the author creates himself, the translator remains secret. The translator is only a voice of passage. The translator is female, even if she is sometimes a male. (183)

She goes on to respond more explicitly in the following manner:

If somehow we learn to de-sex the original vis-à-vis its translation, particularly in our postmodern age, when originality has been all but exhausted, if we recognize the borderlessness or at least continuity between translation and original, then perhaps we can begin to see the translator in another light, no longer bearing the stigma of servant, of handmaiden. Translation, saddling the scholarly and the creative, can be a route through which a writer/translator may seek to reconcile fragments: fragments of texts, of language, of oneself. (183-184)

Levine, therefore, is very clear about the subversive status of her writerly position and doesn't apologize for it. My own reading of Bensoussan and Levine has convinced me that, in the case at hand, both terms of "traître" and "subversive" were inspired by Guillermo Cabrera Infante and his *TTT*¹¹. Keeping within the same semantic field identified above, "collaboration", a loaded term if any, can be motivated by the desire to create something new or destroy something bad, to promote a person, a project or a regime perceived as positive or to betray or overthrow a person or a regime perceived to be negative. In other words collaborators give themselves a clear mandate. If asked by the great Cuban exile to help him get his book out into the world, translators collaborate to the fullest. Why wouldn't they? Their own career is surely bound to profit from it after all but, as we all know, collaboration is never free of problems and will, therefore, be experienced in different ways. Bensoussan seems to have lived it as a descent into hell, a sort of necessary purification process at the hands of a benevolent tyrant before being able to emerge with the captured essence of the source text and being allowed to put it into French. He never manages to shake off the feeling of betrayal and his testimonial functions as a cleansing of his soul. Levine, on the other hand, doesn't reveal very much about how she felt working with the great man, and several others, and maintains a professional tone throughout. The enthusiasm she felt, however, is infectious and brilliantly demonstrates that nothing is impossible in translation. Her overthrow is a peaceful one and indeed a coup.

So we have two highly suggestive titles and two very different styles. Bensoussan writes in a prose that vibrates with the virtuosity of a lyrical poet, taking flights of fancy to describe the guilty pleasures of transposing Latin American literature, almost as if he

¹⁰ This is an allusion to a quotation by Borges put in epigraph to the introduction of *The Subversive Scribe*: "Perhaps the translator's craft is more subtle, more civilized than the writer's: the translator obviously comes after the writer. Translation is a more advanced stage" (1).

¹¹ Levine points out in her preface that the coinage of *TTT* was Cabrera Infante's own (x).

was somehow compensating for the feelings of imprisonment he experienced while translating the text; Levine adopts a much more chastised style, complete with even references to Freud, to relate the fun she had in finding equivalents for puns and popular cultural references, traditionally known as untranslatable. Bensoussan casts himself in different roles at the beginning of his book, which delays its contents by including no less than a one page prologue, entitled “Vestibule”, and three short introductions where he takes on different personas: the aforementioned “*Traduire, dit-elle* [to translate she says]” where he first figures as a diamond miner, then as female, inferior and imprisoned for betrayal; “*Outrepasseur de mots* [one who exceeds words]”, filtering the words of Latin American writers across the ocean through his own, while risking losing himself in the process; and finally “*L’aliment de traduction* [the food of translation]” in which he relates the Promethean task of working with authors such as Cabrera Infante. The food metaphor is inspired by the Italian writer, Guido Piovene, who once said to him: “Eat me and diffuse me”¹² (24; my translation). When he finally outlines his views of translation, it is hardly surprising, therefore, to find highly sensuous language to equate the activity of translating to the very concrete process of chewing and swallowing. This inscription of the body into the work of translation is marred, however, by a form of self-mutilation, a self-imposed silencing that stresses the need for submissiveness:

Since it seems to me that the quotidian exercise of the translator — his hygiene, his vital necessity — who chews and grinds his author’s utterances while trying to enter him into another language only completes the task, when he’s successful, at the cost of a bite. The translator bites his own tongue, it’s even an imperative for him if he wants to attain the highest heaven of language, the Mount Sinai of writing. As a matter of fact, according to tradition, Moses, the translator of the divine word, stuttered. (25; my translation)¹³

It’s interesting to note that cannibalistic theories of translation originated in Latin America, a fact pointing to Bensoussan ingesting more than his author’s utterances along the way, that is a great deal of his culture, not to mention his own tongue.

Levine’s opening is very different and appears sober by comparison. Even the epigraph by Borges (see note 9) seems subdued for such a colourful writer. Levine’s discourse is academic, managing to mention and quote in the first paragraph, in

¹² Mangez-moi et mettez-moi en circulation.

¹³ Car il m’apparaît que l’exercice quotidien du traducteur — son hygiène, sa nécessité vitale — qui mâche et broie les propos de son auteur en cherchant à le faire entrer dans un autre langage n’aboutit, lorsqu’il y réussit, qu’au prix de quelque morsure. Le traducteur se mord la langue, il le doit même impérativement, s’il veut atteindre à l’empyrée du langage, au Sinaï de l’écriture. D’ailleurs, Moïse, qui fut le traducteur de la parole divine, la tradition nous l’assure, était bègue.

addition to Borges, Walter Benjamin and Maurice Blanchot. There is no doubt, however, that this also constitutes a strategy to mask her own subjectivity¹⁴. But the attentive reader cannot help but notice that her impersonal opening statement recalls the biographical details given in the preface:

Translators, upon escaping the mother tongue in order to serve another language, experience exile in their own language, and share with exiles an expanded cultural context that gives them a privileged view of their original language's limitations. (1)

No biting nor ingesting of the mother tongue is suggested here but the expression of having to distance oneself from one's own culture is not that far from Bensoussan's, albeit far more explicit. I find myself relating to this statement, perhaps because my own chosen exile was real and led to a complete assimilation into the other language and eventually a feeling of strangeness in the mother tongue. Levine quickly veers away from these subjective allusions, however, perhaps intent on translating her own subject position to make it palatable to academe. This may not be a problem in itself but it does make the introduction quickly deviate toward literary criticism, thus deepening the divide, mentioned above, between practitioners and academics¹⁵. We are far from the passionate and embodied language of Bensoussan but the message is just as clear:

Far from the traditional view of translators as servile, nameless scribes, the literary translator can be considered a subversive scribe. Something is destroyed—the form of the original—but meaning is reproduced through another form. A translation in this light becomes a continuation of the original, which already always alters the reality it intends to re-create. (7-8)

I find myself preferring the messy images of biting, deglutition and swallowing although I'm more sympathetic to the assertiveness of the female subversive translator than to the tortured meanderings of the male subservient translator. In a clever play of mirrors, this questionable gendered difference has in fact been created by Bensoussan himself. In his book, published in 1995, he puts the following statement by Levine in epigraph: "The translator is female, even if she is sometimes a male" (41; 183 in Levine).

¹⁴ I wish to thank the anonymous reader for making very useful suggestions to improve this article, which I have mostly followed. It was suggested here, however, that Levine may have meant to raise the manifestations of her subjectivity to academic standards and while, that may certainly have been part of it, I do believe that a process of masking, whether conscious or not, is happening in this passage and throughout the book.

¹⁵ Let me be clear that academics who translate, like Levine or I, do not themselves feel divided but that the perception outside academy is often against theory of any kind, as I pointed out in the introduction. The theme of the conference where this paper was first read aimed to explore and counteract this perception.

As we already saw, this was in direct response to Bensoussan's 1982 article, so a dialogue between their two books is now established. Obviously Levine pokes gentle fun at Bensoussan with her "The translator is female, even if she is sometimes a male", matching his "Female, even if he is sometimes Amazon" and reversing the pronouns. In this "epilog", adorned with an epigraph by Stendhal giving advice to women: "Don't write, translate, and you will earn an honourable living", she means to

briefly ponder the feminized translator, traitor: me as self-betrayer fallen under the spell of male discourse, translating books that speak of woman as the often treacherous or betrayed other, as well as subversive scribe, "transcreating" writing that stretches the boundaries of patriarchal discourse. (181)

Levine's apologia then is to "take her own back", so to speak, to subvert the notion of the translator and female betrayer, in fact to embrace betrayal and the pleasures of "transcreating". She explains: "What drew me as a translator to these writers [Puig, Sarduy and Cabrera Infante] was the playful, creative possibility of self-betrayal, or re-creating (in) language" (182). Levine's discretion about her dealings with writers is not only professional but a deliberate turning away from the nightmare of traditionally female associations with the craft of translator because, like Bensoussan, she's aware of the necessity to recognize the gender tension in writers and translators but, unlike Bensoussan, she chooses to celebrate, while striving to match it, the creative genius of writers such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, Sardo Sarduy and others. Here is an example of how she welcomes challenges:

Memory betrays: In order to illustrate the way we worked together on *TTT*, I'll rely on yet another text, our correspondence. A particularly abstruse section of "Brainteaser", for example, which in Spanish was titled "*Los Pro-y-Contra Nombres*," became "Pro and Con Names." The play on "pronouns" —*pro-nombres*—in the original was displaced in English by "con names." Registers of fame were reduced here to lists of *calembours* based on phonetic relations (or confusions) in and between several languages. For example, "Philosuffers: Aristocrates, Empiricles, Antipaster, Presocrates, Ludwig Offerbach, Luftwaffe Feuer-Bang, Marxcuse, Ortega y Gasset, Julius Marx, Giordano Brûlé, Des Carter, S. Boyassian-Mamassian. . ." (288)¹⁶. (22)

¹⁶ Memory does betray as this example is taken not from "Brainteaser", which I will return to below, but from a section entitled "Revelations". Another example, which has no corresponding original so constitutes an addition, is entitled "Famous in Books (or in Famous Books): *Crime and Puns*, by Bustrofedor Dostowhiskey; *Under the Lorry* by Malcom Volcao; *Comfort of the Season*, by Gore Vidal Sasson; *In Caldo Brodo*, by Truman Capone; *Against Impenetrability*, by Su Sanstag; *The Company She Peeps*, by Merrimac Arty; *Mutter Carajo!*, by Bert Oldbitch; *By Left Possessed*, by Lord Brussell; *Ruined Vision*, by Stephen Spent; *Troubles with My Cant*, by Green Grams" (288).

There is a tone of liberation in this passage and in the ludic creativity of the translation itself. In comparing the source text with her translation I find that “philosuffers [filósofos]”, “Empiricles [Empéinocles del Grajiento]”, “Offerbach [Offenbach]”, “Marxcuse” Ortega y Gasset [Ortega und Gasset] and “Julius Marx” are her own creations/additions¹⁷. Through her collaboration with the author Levine discovers and celebrates the cultural richness of American English while transcending the usual inhibitions about propriety of language and respect of conventions, literary and social. Is she going too far? Are creations such as “*Against Impenetrability*”, by Su Sanstag” or “*Mutter Carajo!*”, by Bert Oldbitch” still funny today? Are they in fact funny beyond her own choice of self-betrayal? The very fact that these questions come to mind indicate how strong and deeply entrenched conventions, and today political correctness, really are. At the very least, however, such references may soon be dated and a new translation of *TTT* necessary, thus continuing the creative process.

As for Bensoussan his apologia is not liberating. He remains tied forever to the mast of the vessel that has carried him from beginning to end but, finally, the sirens are singing in his deaf ear “que l’on m’aime et que je suis aimé”, an strange phrase using the redundancy of the impersonal and passive voices [literally: that one loves me and that I’m loved] (121-122). Doth he protest too much? Those final words are preceded by a short and vengeful panache of lyricism when he dares, his words, to entitle his conclusion “Colophon”, borrowed from the Spanish “Colofón”. Cabrera Infante had introduced the originally Greek term to him and he subsequently found it as the title of the last chapter of *El pez en el agua*, a novel by Mario Vargas Llosa. Bensoussan, who saw himself and Levine cast in the role of concubines in Cabrera Infante’s harem (43), views the process of translation as a crisis into which he enters willingly but that utterly drains him and threatens his manhood. He has chosen the confession mode to unburden himself of his experience, and perhaps also to compensate for it, but it is clear that the only person who can forgive him for his betrayal, or rather his sense of betrayal, is himself. The unfortunate thing is that, for translators seeking answers to questions of language, culture, style, process, strategies, oh, let’s just say it, theory, his is a disappointing model in spite of the entertaining value of his virtuoso writing. As a final assessment, however, this could be glaringly unfair without at least a look at the translations themselves.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that “Marxcuse”, with no equivalent in the original, also appears in Bensoussan’s translation. This is perhaps due to the influence of the author.

For this I have chosen the opening of Cabrera's novel in order to assess the extent to which Levine's and Bensoussan's translations may differ beyond the binding linguistic norms of English and French:

Showtime! Señoras y señores. Ladies and gentlemen. Muy buenas noches, damas y caballeros, tengan todos ustedes. Good evening, ladies & gentlemen. Tropicana, el cabaret MAS fabuloso del mundo... «Tropicana», the most fabulous night-club in the WORLD... presenta... presents... su nuevo espectáculo... its new show... en el que artistas de fama continental... where performers of continental fame... se encargarán de transportarlos a ustedes al mundo maravilloso... They will take you all to the wonderful world... y extraordinario... of supernatural beauty... y hermoso... of the Tropics... El Trópico para ustedes queridos compatriotas... ¡El Trópico en Tropicana! In the marvelous production of our Rodney the Great... En la gran, maravillosa producción de nuestro GRANDE, ¡Roderico Neyra!... « Going to Brazil »... Intitulada, Me voy pal Brasil... Taratará tarará, taratará tarará taratareo... Brazuil terra dye nostra felichidade... That was Brezill for you, ladies and gentlemen. That is, my very, very particular version of it!¹⁸ (Cabrera Infante 1975, 15)

Showtime! Señoras y señores. Ladies and gentlemen. And a very good evening to you all, ladies and gentlemen. Muy buenas noches, damas y caballeros. Tropicana! the MOST fabulous nightclub in the WORLD—el cabaret MAS fabuloso del mundo— presents—presenta—its latest show—su nuevo espectáculo— where performers of continental fame will take you all to the wonderful world of supernatural beauty of the Tropics—al mundo maravilloso y extraordinario y hermoso: The Tropic in the Tropicana! El Trópico en Tropicana! In the marvelous production of our Rodney the Great—el gran Roderico Neyra—entitled Me voy pal Brasil—that means “Going to Brazil.” . . . Brazuil terra dye nostra felichidade. That was Brezill for you, ladies and gentlemen, in Brassilian! El Brasil brasileiro, damas y caballeros que me escucháis esta noche. That is, my very, very particular version of it! (Cabrera Infante 1978, 3)¹⁹

Showtime! Mesdames, messieurs. Ladies and gentlemen. Je vous souhate à tous, mesdames et messieurs, une très bonne soirée. Good evening, ladies & gentlemen. Le Tropicana, le cabaret le PLUS fabuleux du monde ... «Tropicana», the most fabulous night-club in the WORLD... présente... presents... son nouveau spectacle... its new show... où des artistes de renommée continentale... where performers of continental fame... vont se charger de vous transporter au monde merveilleux... They will take you all to the wonderful world... y extraordinaire... of supernatural beauty... et beau... of the Tropics... Les joyeux tropiques pour vous chers compatriotes... Les Tropiques au Tropicana! In the marvelous production of our Rodney the Great... Dans la grande, la merveilleuse production de notre GRAND Roderico Neyra!... « Going to Brazil »... Intitulée, J'm'en vais au Brésil... Tatatata tatata, tatatata tatata et patata... Brazuil terra dye nostra felichidade... That was Brezill for you, ladies and gentlemen. That is, my very, very particular version of it! (Cabrera Infante 1970, 15)

¹⁸ Roderico Neyra was a talented, gay choreographer who made the cabaret shows at the Tropicana famous (Moruzzi 111).

¹⁹ Donald Gardner's name in the 1978 edition is explained by the fact that this British poet had worked with Cabrera Infante on a first draft of several sections of *TTT* before Levine's arrival in London in 1969 (see Levine 21).

Levine's translation is more of a typographical (italics, dashes, etc.) and syntactic rearrangement than a translation since both languages are already present in the source text and all that is apparently needed is a linguistic switch from the Cuban point of view to the American one. This, of course, isn't a simple thing to do because culturally and ideologically the point of view must remain Cuban and preserve the highly suggestive irony the author produces by his juxtaposition of Spanish and English. Writing about the book as a whole Levine explains this challenge in the following way:

Translation in *TTT* [...] speaks to the United States' exploitative relationship with Cuba. [...] *Three Trapped Tigers* performs a triple translation act precisely because of the author's and the original's duplicitous relationship to English, to a web of English-language texts (including movies), translated into the Cuban idiom. Returning to English, one of the sources of the source, signifies betraying the original's critique of the language of the exploiter, but also, finally, exploiting or cannibalizing the exploiter²⁰. (Levine 91-92)

Not surprisingly then, Levine pays close attention to the English phrases in the source text and translates them into a more colloquial form: "And a very good evening to you all"; "its latest show"; By the same token she has simplified the Spanish phrases so as not to overtax the target American reader. At the end of this excerpt she makes use of a clever strategy to push the reader, by now sufficiently familiarized with the bilingual to and fro movement of the text, further into the Cuban context and to highlight the humour. The reader cannot help but smile at the spelling of "Brassilian", a well-placed clue, and will get the joke without necessarily understanding the context and certainly without noticing that he or she is being manipulated. The translation has sacrificed the amusing sound of "Taratará tarará, taratará tarará taratareo" but added another phrase in Spanish—*El Brasil brasileiro, damas y caballeros que me escucháis esta noche*²¹—to maintain the reader within the illusion of being part of the audience at the Cuban show. The stage is set for what follows, or at least for the next four pages of this bilingual game, and for the reader who hangs in there, the novel will open up with the promise of more clever and erudite amusement.

Taking a look now at Bensoussan's translation it appears that his task was much more difficult in spite of the linguistic closeness of Spanish and French. In order to preserve the spirit of the piece Bensoussan would need to maintain the play between

²⁰ Levine is most likely referring indirectly to the article on translation and cannibalization in a colonial context, published by the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos in 1981 (see also Vieira).

²¹ The use of the second plural person (*escucháis*), the norm in Spain but not in Latin America, where the "ustedes" form is used, does seem strange in a Cuban context.

Spanish and English, a difficult thing to accomplish in French! The challenge for him is to lead the reader to an understanding of the Cuban context, inextricably linked to the Spanish language and the American presence, and prevent the target language, French, from taking over culturally and ideologically. It is surprising, therefore, that Spanish has been turned into the object of what could be termed a conventional approach to translation and disappears entirely for the sake of French²². The translator maintains some typographical details (italics, capitals, etc.) but does not take advantage of the numerous cognates between Spanish and French to preserve some of the Spanish terms, thus making the translation seem a sleight of hand whereby Cuban is obscured by the very transparency of French. The only changes are the addition of “*joyeux* [joyous]” to qualify the Tropics, “*J’m’en vais au Brésil* [I’m going to Brazil]” (the contractions marking the orality) and the simplification of “*Taratará tarará, taratará tarará taratareo*”—one wonders why—through the erasure of the “*r*” as well as the transformation of the last word into “*patata*” introduced by “*et*”. Mysteriously, the faulty Brazilian phrase is maintained but no help is given the reader to interpret it, an unexplainable fact since no demand of any kind had been made on the reader up till then, not even in English.

Another passage, taken from a chapter entitled respectively in the three versions *Rompecabeza*/*Brainteaser*/*Casse-tête*, illustrates further the differences between Levine’s strategies and Bensoussan’s. The former is all about having fun and the latter about keeping the reader in a relatively safe zone:

¿Quién era Bustrófedon? ¿Quién fue quién será quién es Bustrófedon? ¿B? Pensar en él es como pensar en la gallina de los huevos de oro, en una adivinanza sin respuesta, en la espiral. *El era Bustrófedon para todos y todo para Bustrófedon era él*. No sé de dónde carajo saco la palabrita — o la palabrota. Lo único que sé es que yo me llamaba muchas veces Bustrófoton o Bustrófotomatón o Busnéforoniepce, depende, dependiendo y Silvestre era Bustrófenix o Bustrofeliz o Bustrófitzgerald, y Florentino Cazalis fue Bustróflorencia mucho antes de que se cambiara el nombre y se pusiera a escribir en los periódicos con su nuevo nombre de Floren Cassalis, y una novia de él se llamó siempre Bustrofedora y su madre era Bustrofelisa y su padre Bustrófader, y ni siquiera puedo decir si su novia se llamaba Fedora de veras o su madre Felisa y que él tuviera otro nombre

²² Cabrera included a “warning” (advertencia), which has disappeared from the American edition used for this study but is present in the French version, where he states that the book is written in Cuban, that is in the different dialects of Spanish spoken in Cuba: “*El libro está en cubano. Es decir, escrito en los diferentes dialectos del español que se hablan en Cuba. . .*” Levine explains the deliberate omission of this “caveat”: “The particularly Cuban speech and Havanan accents in *TTT* inevitably vanish in its English version. And the English reader would find a statement innovative in the American idiom a century ago now unnecessary” (67).

que el que él mismo se dio. Me imagino de una medicina (¿ayudado por Silvestre?) tomó lo del continente de Mutaflora, que era la bustrofloresta de los bustrófalos²³. (Cabrera Infante 1975, 207)

Who was Bustrófedon? Who was/is/will be Bustrófedon? Boustrophedon? Thinking about him is like thinking of the goose that laid the golden eggs, of a riddle with no answer, a spiral without end. *He was Bustrófedon for all and all for Bustrófedon was he.*

I don't know where the fuck he got that 7-plus-4-letter name from. All I know is that he often called me Bustrofoton or Bustrophotomaton or Busneforoniepce, depending deepening my current hangup, but I always answered his mastery voice, and Silvestre was Bustropoenix or Bustrophoelix or Bustrofitzherald, and Florentino Cazalis was Bustrofloren long before he changed his name and began writing in the papers bustroperously as Floren Cassalis, and his girl was always called Bustrofedora and his mother was Bustrofelisa and his father Bustrofater, and I just don't know if his girl friend's real name was Fedora or if his mother was really called Felisa or whatever. But I guess he must have picked that word, *the* word at random (house) out of a dictionary like the way he took the name of a medicine (with Silvestre's help?) to bustroform the continent of Mutaflora with its metafauna of bustroffaloes composed of bustrophies sent back alive. (Cabrera Infante 1978, 213)

Qui était Bustrófedon? Qui fut-ce qui sera-ce qui est-ce Bustrófedon? B? Penser à lui c'est comme penser à la poule aux œufs d'or, à une devinette sans réponse, à la spirale. *Lui était Bustrófedon, pour tous et tout pour Bustrófedon était lui.* Je ne sais d'où diable il avait pris ce petit mot — ou ce gros mot. La seule chose que je sais c'est que je m'appelais souvent Bustrophoton ou Bustrophotomaton ou Busneforoniepce, cela dépend tout en dépendant et Silvestre était Bustrophénix ou Bustrophélice ou Bustrofitz général et Florentin Cazalis devint Bustrófloren bien avant qu'il ne change de nom et se mette à écrire dans les journaux sous le nouveau nom Floren Cassalis, et une fiancée à lui fut toujours appelée Bustrofedora, sa mère était Bustrofélica et son père Bustrófader, mais je ne peux pas même dire si sa fiancée s'appelait vraiment Fedora ou sa mère Felisa et s'il avait un autre nom que celui qu'il se donnait lui-même. J'imagine qu'il attrapa les grands maux dans un dictionnaire, comme avec les grands remèdes (aidé par Silvestre?) il inventa le pays de Mutaflora qui était la bustroflora des Bustrophales. (Cabrera Infante 1970, 215)

Levine takes advantage of the “B” to remind the reader of the existence of the English word *Boustrophedon*. As she explains her version means to uphold the subversive principle of the source text: “In *Three Trapped Tigers*, wordsmith Bustrófedon and his friends perpetually play upon their own names and others’: One proper name is never enough; each new name is another clue to an ever-evasive identity” (Levine 18). Whether her rendition of “yo me llamaba muchas veces Bustrófoton” is erroneous— “yo” is the explicit subject of the verb “llamaba” although Spanish verbs normally don't

²³ According to the OED “boustrophedon” comes from the Greek term describing the turning movement of oxen in ploughing and designates writing “alternately from right to left and from left to right, like the course of the plough in successive furrows; as in various ancient inscriptions in Greek and other languages.”

require subjects—or a subversive move is impossible to tell but it surprisingly entails a displaced note of humility reinforced by the additions of “my current hangup” and “I always answered his mastery voice”, no doubt a play on the image of the dog that made Victor records famous. Some of the creative liberties Levine takes are not always easy to interpret when submitted to such a close examination as this, but they certainly illustrate her ultimate point of “borderlessness” between source and target texts. Paying attention to small details (two paragraphs instead of one; addition of “he must have picked that word, *the* word at random (house) out of a dictionary” and the joke it contains; the brilliant final creation of “bustrophies sent back alive”) as I’m doing here is unfair but the exercise worthwhile in that it uncovers the strategies the translator and the author chose together to make the book even more irreverent in order to minimize the risk of erasing its Cuban origin when brought back into the American context.

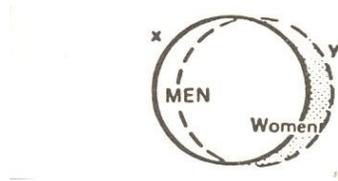
As discussed above, Bensoussan faced a different kind of challenge and his translation reveals the creative possibilities that remain available with a choice of literal, or what I would prefer to call close translation, both in some felicitous choices and missed opportunities. My close examination of this passage is, of course, also unfair to the work that went into the entire book. Disappointingly, however, Bensoussan refrains from discussing this in detail in his essay, limiting his comments to a fine literary analysis of *TTT*. An analysis of this passage, therefore, doesn’t pretend to illuminate his entire project but rather to point to certain tendencies in his translating method and to contrast his confessional standpoint of the traitor with Levine’s playful embrace of subversion. As often happens in French, most strikingly in France, as opposed to other Francophone countries, where the *Académie* exerts tight centralized control over the language, translators’ choices can be limited by traditions and norms, be they perceived or real. Such is probably the case here for Bensoussan’s decision to use a high register for “*fut-ce*”, “*sera-ce*” and “*est-ce*” instead of opting to simply drop the demonstrative pronoun “*ce*” only required by the strictest of grammatical rules. The absence of commas separating these verbs contradicts the elitist nature of these forms and adds a touch of irony to this sentence. An altogether (all too?) clever choice? The remainder of this passage follows the source text very closely with the notable exceptions of tiny shifts toward French orthography and one target-oriented pun. “Bustrófenix” thus becomes “Bustrophénix”, which precipitates “Bustrophélice” for the sake of orthographic/typographic parallelism with the unfortunate consequence of losing the obvious reference to felicity—*félicité* in French—that could have been preserved by keeping the “*f*”. The translation of “*sacó la pal-abra de un dictionario como del nombre de una medicina*” by “*il attrapa les grands maux dans un dictionnaire, comme avec les grands*

remèdes [he caught the big ills in a dictionary, as with the big remedies]²⁴ is brilliant because it plays on the homonyms *mots* [words]/*maux*[ills] and the latter's antonym of *remèdes*. It is one of those rare instances when translation is better than the original. The final phrase also demanded creativity on the part of the translator but Bensoussan chose not to depart from the source text and translate the Spanish euphonic parallel construction literally. As luck would have it, it didn't take me long to find the word "*phalère*" in French, referring to a large butterfly also called "*bucéphale*" (*Le Petit Robert*). Keeping in mind Levine's buffaloes we are also reminded that *Bucéphale* was the name of Alexander the Great's famed horse. It is, therefore, entirely possible that Bensoussan's apparent strategy of mirroring the Spanish contains a hidden reference to both creatures. The translator hasn't revealed as much as Levine did about his close collaboration with the author but, as someone who has had opportunities to do collective translation, I know that dynamic exchange between two creative minds can be very productive.

In conclusion, we don't get the same sense of joy and celebration of one's own inventiveness, and thereby one's own culture, in Bensoussan's translation, as we do reading Levine's. As I have tried to show, this is due in large part to the importance of American culture in the source text, a very difficult thing to transfer into French as the relationship between France and Cuba is devoid of colonial overtones and finding French equivalents for the American cultural references would not make any sense and deprive *TTT* of its originality and representation of the duplicitous American influence. Bensoussan opted for a "faithful" translation and with his superior writing skills has produced an equally entertaining novel as the original in spite of the loss of Spanish. In my own practice, I have struggled with the same doubts as he does, as expressed in his confessions, concerning the much debated notion of faithfulness—the very word setting off all my defensive and rebellious triggers—to the author and to the text, as well as with the danger of pushing the gesture of appropriation too far through creativity, the respect of the reader, the necessity of maintaining ambiguity, etc., etc. As Bensoussan painstakingly outlines his three rules of conduct, the respect for the text in its form and volume (37), the respect for the Foreign (38) and the respect for the reader (39), these precepts do amount to a theory of translation. However, as he himself amply demonstrates with his highly metaphorical and *carnivalesque* style—and Levine playfully asserts in academic mode—, a translator's theory ultimately has to be found somewhere else. And Bensoussan, maybe unwittingly, is the one who suggests where

²⁴ This is merely back translation, an admittedly deficient technique but one that helps make my point clear.

that might be when he refers to the image proposed by Schopenhauer of two overlapping circles representing source and target texts. Conventionally the target circle is supposed to completely cover the source circle when the translation is complete, but never quite manages it, which means that a small crescent always remains outside of each circle. Bensoussan interprets these remainders as gains and losses. Cultural anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener used this same image when they sought to represent women's culture as the muted group in relation to the dominant male group and, with the now classic feminist theorization of the "wild zone" by Elaine Showalter, based on the Arderners' diagram in her 1981 article on "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", we have come full circle, so to speak. I propose, therefore, that, in the spirit of "de-sexing" the relationship between author and translator, while still privileging subjectivity, we consider substituting "original" and "translation" to "men" and "women" and ponder both wild zones as the exclusive realms of author and translator. The crescent x then remains inaccessible to the translator as an untranslatable remainder and the crescent y remains inaccessible to the author, no matter the amount of collaboration between translator and author, and is even wilder than the first since it represents the translator's creativity and her right to it.



Obviously, since this diagram is the result of my reading Bensoussan and Levine, I hadn't yet thought of it when I wrote a piece entitled "The Trace of the Translator in *The Prowler* and *Zero Hour*", which was devoted to the contemplation, i.e. theorization, of my translations of Kristjana Gunnars' novels. I will, therefore, quote and comment myself as a way to conclude and to advance my own process of theorization:

I translate, therefore I write. . . Aren't translators called traitors for good reason? Do they not violate the text's home ground in order to transplant it into alien soil? Translation, like desire, transcends the binary oppositions these questions presuppose and operates in a fluid zone of intermingling shadows, furtive touches and multiple influences. Translation is appropriation but it can be done in a spirit of respect for alterity and as a way of promoting a work you love and admire. (128)

Too wisely, it now seems to me, I focused only on the part in the middle where both circles intersect. This is the possibility of translation but how much more exciting and rewarding to venture into the impossible and subvert conventions.

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