



Different Readings: The ‘Special’ Readings of the Literary Translator

Interpretation and Cultural Mediation

Ágnes SOMLÓ

Pázmány Péter Catholic University
Institute of English and American Studies
somlo.agnes@btk.ppke.hu
somloa@t-online.hu

Abstract. All readers of a literary text form their own interpretation of it, and so does the literary translator, a special kind of reader. His professional interpretation requires the skills and knowledge of the literati, the empathy of the creative and performing artist, and an understanding of other fields of life. In short: an overall knowledge of universal human culture as well as of both SL and TL cultures, for the literary translator must look upon the entire world, much as literature does.

Simultaneously, the literary translator’s interpretation represents a kind of educational role directed towards the aim, the ‘skopos’ of translation, which denotes the relationship between translator and reader. Following the translator’s special reading, understanding and interpretation, the target language text and the translator’s professional interpretation of the knowledge and cultural content and context present in the source language text will be defined, as well as limited, by the scope of understanding of the target audience, that is, its general cultural standard and background.

In what follows I will examine the ‘cooperative role’ and some of the different aspects of a creative interpretation of the translator as reader.

Keywords: levels of reading; implied and actual, model and empirical reader; horizon of expectations; map of the text; intercultural sensitivity

The main content of my paper is perfectly outlined by the words of Susan Bassnett: “The translator is [...] first a reader and then a writer, and in the process of reading he or she must take a position” (2007, 81). We will start from the assumption

that all readers of a literary work form their own interpretation of it, and thus there are an unlimited number of different readings of the text, and we suppose that one of them is that of the literary translator. Before going on, we have to state that there are different levels of reading of which I will differentiate three: (1) first reading; (2) re-reading or critical reading; (3) translator's reading, that is, the re-reading by the cultural mediator. Moreover, there are different meanings and connotations of the word interpretation itself, and we will see that interpretation by a literary translator is more complex than any definitions that dictionaries¹ might suggest.

First reading is determined primarily by the expectation of pleasure and by the reader's personal impressions and appreciation, while re-reading is already a kind of critical reading denoting a more *structured* pleasure of intellectual experience in the broader contexts of the reader's culture. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau says that the best reading "requires a training [...] books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (2009, n.p.). Thus the reader returns to a text focusing on some special aspects, passages or details, tracing patterns and developing ideas, asking questions and perhaps even collecting some additional information about socio-cultural and historical contents and contexts. This critical reading and interpretation used to be, on the one hand, the realm of professionals, literati (critics and analysts of literary texts in our case), and on the other hand, that of education, in which re-reading is one of the most important methods of teaching students to understand and interpret texts in a creative way. At the same time, however, according to Susan Sontag: "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art" (1983, 101). This kind of interpretation reduces the meaning of a work of art to make it "manageable" and, as Sontag notes, "literary critics have understood it to be their task to translate the elements of the poem or play or novel or story into something else" (1983, 99).

¹ As defined by different dictionaries: (1) an explanation of the meaning or importance of something; (2) a way of performing a piece of music, a part in a play etc. that shows how you understand it and feel about it; (3) the oral translation of what is said in one language into another, so that speakers of different languages can communicate; (4) explanatory information to help people understand what they are seeing or encountering at a place of interest

The online version of Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged (© HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003) defines interpretation as:

- (1) the act or process of interpreting or explaining; elucidation
- (2) the result of interpreting; an explanation
- (3) a particular view of an artistic work, especially as expressed by stylistic individuality in its performance
- (4) explanation, as of the environment, a historical site, etc., provided by the use of original objects, personal experience, visual display material, etc.
- (5) (Philosophy / Logic) *Logic* an allocation of significance to the terms of a purely formal system, by specifying ranges for the variables, denotations for the individual constants, etc.; a function from the formal language to such elements of a possible world

In literary criticism it was Reception Theory that first shifted focus from the author and the content of the work to the text and the reader. It is, in fact, considered to be “a creative process that occurs in the act of reading” (Kinoshita 2004, 2); that is to say, an interaction between text and reader. Wolfgang Iser, one of the most significant representatives of Reception Theory, says that preoccupation with “the author’s intention was replaced by the impact a piece of literature has on its potential recipient” (2006, 60). The fact that there are different readings of the same text seems to prove that the act of reading is not a passive reception. Iser explains part of the process with the stimulating presence of blanks and gaps in the text:

The discontinuities of the textual segments trigger synthesizing operations in the reader’s mind because the blanks lead to collisions between the individual ideas formed, [...] These colliding ideas condition each other in the time-flow of reading. (2006, 66)

In this way, a chain of ideas that “emerges in the reader’s mind is the means by which the text is translated into the imagination” (Iser 2006, 66). Reception Theory as a model has managed to explain how a text (still in strictly monolingual exchange) can mean different things to different people by throwing light on the artistic and aesthetic faculty of a literary work; the former refers to the text created by the author and the latter “to the realization accomplished by the reader, the interaction of which unfolds the work’s potential” (Iser 2006, 68).

At the same time, this new creative role of the reader in the literary process also called for the categorization of the term ‘reader’ itself, dividing it into *implied reader*² and *actual reader*. “The first is the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to a network of response-inviting structures, which predispose us to read in certain ways,” while the other is defined as the reader who “receives certain mental images in the process of reading,” yet these images “will inevitably be coloured by the reader’s existing stock of experience” (Selden 2005, 53).³

Umberto Eco, dealing with the same problem, makes a slightly different distinction between *Model Reader* and *Empirical Reader*. According to him “every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader’s world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates

² The term *implied reader* was first introduced by Iser.

³ Here we might also mention Kristeva’s idea of intertextuality that seems to add to the reader’s interpretation suggesting that all texts are linked to other texts – in our case to texts that precede and surround the text in question – both in the reader’s mind and in his surroundings. “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotation; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (Kristeva 1980, 66).

in order to be read in an economic way" (Eco 1996, n.p.). Thus, when defining the first he says: "A text is a device conceived in order to produce its Model Reader" (Eco 1996, n.p.). In an interview he elaborated on this idea, explaining that in a book "you are building up your readers, you are designing a possible reader, and then the model reader is the one who plays your game" (Eco qtd. in Basbanes 2001, 227). In contrast, the Empirical Reader can be anyone and read in many different ways. Empirical readers "often use the text as a container for their own passions, which may come from outside the text, or which the text may arouse by chance" (Eco 1996, n.p.).

When trying to understand and explain the way different readers interpret a text, a new term, the *horizon of expectations* was introduced by H. R. Jauss. It comprises all the elements, such as cultural norms and other criteria that shape the way in which readers understand and judge a literary work at a given time. Naturally, changes in history also determine the range of meanings that readers of a particular period see in the same work; that is the '*there and then*' of the work as against the '*here and now*' of the reader. Thus, the *horizon of expectations* is formed through the reader's experience, customs and understanding of the world (see Jauss 1982, 39).

I suppose we might try to connect this notion to the term *map of the text*, used by Holmes in describing the translation process, which he considers a *multi-level process*; "while we are translating sentences, we have a map of the original text in our minds and at the same time a map of the kind of text we want to produce in the target language" (Holmes, 1988, 96). Consequently, "each sentence in our translation is determined not only by the sentence in the original but by the two maps of the original text and of the translated text, which we are carrying along as we translate" (Holmes 1988, 96).

Now, all that we have discussed up to this point will come together and converge when we try to define and describe the literary translator's special reading. Although the literary translator is an individual reader, his interpretation is special for different reasons. First, we have to state that the translator interprets a foreign language text that was born in foreign cultural surroundings. This personal interpretation is followed by a kind of '*metatext*' in the '*black box*' comprising both the personal and the professional interpretations of the translator, after which it is recreated and reinterpreted in a different language, the target language and culture.

The interlingual translation is bound to reflect the translator's own creative interpretation of the SL text. Moreover, the degree to which the translator reproduces the form, metre, rhythm, tone, register etc. of the SL text, will be as much determined by the TL system as by the SL system and will also depend on the function of the translation. (Bassnett 2007, 83)

Let us see how the readings of the translator of a poem might operate on different levels. The first reading of the source language text is to get an impression, to draw the outlines of the *map*. The second level or re-reading will make the translator focus on and select special details such as the form of the poem, its rhyming scheme (if any), the number of syllables to the line and many more, to see the general pattern and add it to the map of the source text and, at the same time, look for relevant options in the target cultural system on all levels so as to be able to draw the map of the target text. This second reading might partly correspond with the reading by the literary critic, the analyst of a literary text, and thus requires the skills and knowledge of a literary scholar, philologist and linguist, as well as the talents and empathy of both creative and performing artists.

The map of the target text will also need some details of the future reader of the translation, and so the translator now moves on to *build up* the Model Reader of the target text. Thus interpretation, the special reading by the literary translator, requires more than his personal reading, more than critical reading, but constitutes a third level, the translator's reading, which requires an in-depth analysis of similarities and differences between the two cultures on all levels of the text. Therefore, the translator's reading should also satisfy the requirements of his role as *cultural mediator*, which is

performed by interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions, and expectations of each cultural group to the other, that is, by establishing and balancing the communication between them. In order to serve as a link in this sense, the mediator must be able to participate to some extent in both cultures. Thus a mediator must be to a certain extent bicultural. (Taft qtd. in Katan 2009, 88)

The latter presupposes a certain amount of *intercultural sensitivity* that is also an integral part of the translator's role as an educator, which

in a broader sense, is in connection with the role literary translation plays in a nation's culture and in cultural exchange, and it requires the translator to know how much of the foreign and unknown can be incorporated in the target text on all levels. (Somló 2010, 128)

Thus the literary translator, following personal reading, special reading, understanding and interpretation of the source language text on the basis of his overall knowledge of universal human culture as well as of two national cultures – i.e., source language culture and target language culture – will create (recreate) the target language text. At the same time, the translator's professional interpretation

of the knowledge, cultural content and context present in the source language text will be defined as well as limited by the scope of understanding, that is, the general cultural standard and background, of the target audience, the community that the translation, the target text is aimed at, and thus will also provide the frame within which the Model Reader of the translated literary text will be moulded.

We have yet another aspect of reading: the difference between *insider* and *outsider* reading. In system of the three different levels of reading described above, insider reading is by and large the equivalent of the re-reading of the source text by the monolingual reader.

Insiders have large funds of special information about other relevant claims, received opinion, and previous positions of the writer, in addition, they have an interest in the matter under discussion: they themselves have positions against which they test the argument [...] they are in a position to evaluate what is said in terms of what is alluded to, obliquely touched on, or even unsaid. [ellipsis in the original] (Dillon qtd. in Katan 2009, 86)

Most outsiders have none of these, thus the foreign text will remain foreign to them, and will represent a foreign model of the world, which they might try to understand but they are “bound to receive the text according to their own expectations” (Katan 2009, 75), thus their interpretation will be tested against their own model of the world, their own background, their own education and scope of understanding of the foreign culture represented in the text. The translator is somewhere in between the two; he is definitely not an insider, as his knowledge of the foreign culture is based rather on education than on personal experience,⁴ but he is definitely able to understand more than the target reader, and so he should try to extend the target reader’s

scope and range of understanding of another culture, and it is (ideally)⁵ the task of the literary translator to determine how much of it – represented in a foreign literary text – can be extended by incorporating and interpreting as much of the special cultural, historical, social etc. aspects and content of the source text as possible. (Somló 2010, 128)

⁴ That is why he would also need special empathic capacities to be able to interpret the SL text for TL readers.

⁵ Certainly the translator’s hands might be tied by the expectations of powers (patrons) outside the literary system that have tended (still tend?) to force a kind of self-censorship on translators here in Hungary. “On every level of the translation process, it can be shown that, if linguistic considerations enter into conflict with considerations of an ideological and/or poetological nature, the latter tend to win out” (Lefevere 1992, 39).

Based on my practice as a literary translator I have tried to examine what a translator should know about a text before setting to work and, at the request of my students, formulate my ideas into some clear-cut thoughts to help them grasp the task but, after all, I found that I came to nearly the same conclusion as Katan. Let me, therefore, quote his words:

All translators will need to have an idea of the type of text they have to translate and what culture-bound features it may manifest [...] how the text operates in the target culture [...] what beliefs and values are implicitly carried by the ST, how these are likely to be filtered by the intended target reader; and what the (likely) intentions of the ST author were compared to the actors involved in the translation. (2009, 90 et seq.)

In conclusion the translator, while recreating the text in the target language, should try to build up the model reader of the target text, which might lead to a set of compromises: should it be domesticated or should we rather “let the reader come into direct contact with the difference of ‘the other’” (Katan 2009, 88). The task and role of the literary translator’s special interpretation by means of the three levels of his special reading is, therefore, finally to create a text in the target language that the target reader (notably our Model Reader of the translation) will be able to interpret in such a way that it activates his creative role in the literary process, and thus the target text eventually enriches the target cultural system and, in due course, becomes an integral part of it.

Works cited

- Basbanes, Nicholas A. 2001. *Patience and Fortitude. A Roving Chronicle of Book People. Book Places and Book Culture*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Bassnett, Susan. 2007. *Translation Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Eco, Umberto. 1996. “The Author and his Interpreters”, 1996 lecture at The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America. http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_author.html (21 April 2011)
- Holmes, James S. 1988. *Translated!: Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 2006. *How to Do Theory*. Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. 1982. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Katan, David. 2009. Translation as Intercultural Communication. In *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies* (revised edition), ed. Jeremy Munday, 74-93. London and New York: Routledge.

-
- Kinoshita, Yumi. 2004. *Reception Theory*. Department of Art University of California, Santa Barbara <http://yumikinoshita.com/receptiontheory.pdf> (5 March 2011)
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. Word, Dialogue, and Novel. In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora et al, 64-92. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lefevere, André. 1992. *Translating, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London and New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Selden, Raman et al. 2005. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Somló, Ágnes. 2010. The Role of Literary Translators in the Mediation of Ideas and Literature across Cultures. In *Event or Incident*, ed. Ton Naaijken, 121-141. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Sontag, Susan. 1983. *A Susan Sontag Reader*. New York: Vintage Books Random House.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 2009. Reading, Thoreau's *Walden* Chapter 3.
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/walden/hdt03.html> (20 April 2011)