TRANSPARENCY IN TRANSLATING
FROM ARABIC

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In current discourse on translation, and particularly from the perspectives of literary and cultural studies, the term *transparency* has acquired wide currency, denoting in most, but not all, cases attempts to conceal the translator's intervention from the reader of the target text. In this context the term *transparency* is used with a view to reappraising the role of the translator as agent, or in order to identify particular translation strategies - for instance "the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities" (Venuti, 1995:2) - which may have been employed to conceal any intervention.

For methodological reasons, it is important to distinguish between *transparency* when it describes the process, i.e., the act of translating, and *transparency* when the term is applied to the product, i.e., the translation itself. In fact, in the absence of such an epistemological distinction between *process* and *product*, which is now implicit in many approaches in the field and was first posited by Holmes in his seminal paper 'The name and nature of Translation Studies' (Holmes, 1987) - the term *transparency* can be given diverse interpretations.

Translations produced by the use of various strategies can each be described as 'transparent,' albeit at different levels and with varying degrees of exoticisation and/or domestication. This is discussed with reference to two translations of Naguib Mahfouz's epic novel *Malhamat al-Harafish*, first published in Arabic in 1977, one of these in French *La Chanson des Gueux*, translated by France Douvier Meyer and published by Denoël in 1989; the other in English, *The Harafish*, translated by Catherine Cobham and published by Doubleday in 1994.

The distinction between process and product can help answer the following question: By transparency do we refer to the muted presence of the translator who strives to produce a text that does not read like a translation, or do

we use the term in order to describe a translation which lets the original *shine through*, to use Benjamin's (1992) metaphor in which "a real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light", but allows the underlying pure language [*die reine Sprache*] to 'shine through.' The first interpretation of the term alludes to the process, and refers to the fact that the translator is `withdrawing wholly' as Hermans puts it, 'behind the narrating voice.' This transparency of process, which, as argued by Meschonnic (1973), Folkart (1991), Venuti (1992) and Hermans (1996), can only be illusory and based on the myth of absence of the translator, a myth that it is no longer possible to sustain once a translation is compared with its original, leads to the production of fluent translations, which do not tolerate interference, as described by Venuti in his discussion of the translator's invisibility (Venuti, 1995).

In the context of translation, the notion of process can describe either the act of producing a translation in relation to ideological and other constraints which bear upon the work of the translator (see Séguinot, 1989), or the mental operations which occur during translation (Bell, 1991). I would like to make it clear at this point that I am not looking at process in a cognitive sense, in terms of the translator processing information, an issue which has been addressed, to a certain extent, by researchers working on Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs).

Rather, in my discussion, process is an abstract construct, used to refer to the intervention of the translator. Of course, such an intervention can only be realized or actualised in the text itself, and paratexts such as forewords, prefaces, and even translator's notes can also provide valuable insights.

The second way in which transparency is used describes a translation which conveys the alien nature or foreignness of the source text, through recourse to literalism, as for instance in the traced nineteenth century translation by Chateaubriand of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which involved the use of both archaisms and new forms, and through the product of the painstaking faithfulness advocated later by Berman (1984). This type of translation does not disguise the fact that it is not the original, but instead claims to reproduce the original.

In linguistic approaches to translation, the term transparency, although it tends to be only mentioned in a cursory fashion, usually refers to the product: Vinay & Darbelnet (1977) speak of the transparency of the target text regarding the source text, and Newmark, with specific reference to the procedures used when translating the names of institutions, opposes transparency to opaqueness. He claims that "transparency may be defined as the source language term 'shining through' the corresponding target language term, thereby resembling it closely in form" (Newmark, 1981: 78).

In her discussion of transparency, Folkhart (1991) identifies categories she

terms syntagmatic, referential, formal and dynamic or pragmatic transparency, and points out the impossibility of any one translation combining all forms of transparency. She mainly discusses transparency with reference to the translation product, although her analysis also mentions the process of transparency, deeming it to be no more than an illusion.

Any discussion of transparency as process will engage at some point with the issue of the translator's lack of *visibility*. Indeed, transparency is sometimes equated with it. Despite Venuti's forceful plea in favour of visibility, and Bassnett's assertion that

> Once considered a subservient, transparent filter through which a text
> could and should pass without adulteration, translation can now be seen as
> a process in which that intervention is crucial. (1996: 22)

The way translations are received by critics indicates that intervention has to remain discrete. The translator's intervention might not be denied, as part of the process, and fluency might not always be automatically equated with acceptability. However, invisibility is still highly valued, a case illustrated by the following remark made in a collection of essays written in homage to Giovanni Pontiero, eminent translator from Portuguese into English, "it is a truism of translation theory that the finest translators are the least visible" (Orero & Sager, 1997:173). In this case, acceptability is equated with the invisibility of the translator, and therefore with the fluency of the translation.

In his magisterial *What is World Literature*? (2003:15), David Damrosh remarks that: "World Literature has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of classics, as an evolving canon of masterpieces, or as multiple windows on the world." Positioning Mahfouz's novel as part of World Literature, as the author was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988, I will argue that it is the type of transparency featured in a translation that determines to a large extent how we view this work's contribution to World Literature.

One Source, Two Targets: Transparency in Translating from Arabic

Al-Harafish is both universal and almost timeless; no clue is given as to the period in which it is set. It is grounded in the fictional context of Old Cairo, with its networks of alleyways and social inter-relationships. A few spatial markers are given, such as the mention of *Al-Husayn* Mosque and the *City of the Dead*. The work consists of ten tales in which the narrative follows the history and fate of generations of dwellers of the surrounding district, the *Haara*. A theme which occupies a prominent place in *Al-Harafish* is that of the *Takiyya*

[monastery]. This is omnipresent and yet distant, its gates being permanently closed, its inaccessibility from the surrounding *Haara* being reinforced by the singing of the dervishes, the occupants of the *Takiyya*, and the action takes place against the backcloth of their mysticism.

The hymns are in a foreign language, Persian. Indeed, the hymns are repeatedly described as 'obscure' (*ghaamida*) in the novel (this point is taken up later in the discussion). On the issue of the hymns, El-Enany (1993:158) points out:

> Mahfouz has done extremely well for his purpose to quote those Persian Sufi verses and scatter them all over the narrative, leaving them in their original tongue, as baffling to the Arab reader as they are to the people of the hara in the book.

As specified earlier, my comparison here takes into account the two viewpoints on *transparency*: transparency as a process and transparency of the product. In the first instance, I focus on the visibility of the translator, then my discussion of the transparency of the product itself examines the way culture-bound references are dealt with in each of the two translations, when compared with linguistic forms *per se*.

If one is to go by the composition of the title of the translations, it can be argued that the English text, which transliterates the Arabic title, *Al-Harafish*, projects itself from the start as a translated work. Compare this with the French title, *La Chanson des Gueux* (The Song of the Riff-raff). In the same vein, the English translation begins with a short translator's note, which informs the reader that: "The historical meaning of harafish is the rabble or riffraff. In the novel it means the common people in a positive sense, those in menial jobs, casual workers, and the unemployed and homeless."

In contrast, no translator's foreword is provided in the French translation. However a binary opposition between a visible English translator and an invisible French translator cannot be sustained for long. The translator's foreword and the transliteration of the title in the English version are the only concessions made to visibility. From that point on, the intervention of the translator becomes truly transparent. Compare this with the initial invisibility of the French translator, in a text the title of which obliterates its foreign origin. This initial transparency is not to last: The number and type of footnotes, connected with the insertion of Arabic terms, are a constant reminder to the reader of the intervention of the translator-facilitator, of the non-transparency of the process, as exemplified below:

Hatta masa katfuh suur al-takiya. (p.6)
His shoulder brushed the wall of the dervish monastery. (p.2)
Son épaule vint heurter le mur de la tékiyya*.
*Ou dervicherie, lieu d'habitation et de rassemblement des
derviches. (p.10)

In the second tier of comparison, that is when looking at the transparency of the product or translation itself, I will focus on two aspects, *cultural references* and *linguistic forms*. In this context, *cultural references*, or *culture specific items*, as they are described by Aixela (1996), include references to local dishes, religious and cultural events, as well as to the seasons of the year. The following examples illustrate the divergence of approaches when dealing with references to religion and ritual:

yatalaaqa ma`a sayyidnaa al-khiDr fi s-saaHa. (p.216)

In the monastery square he met Saint Khidr. (p.153)

[Il] *retrouva Sayedna al-Khidr* sur la place.* (p.187)

** Compagnon de Moise, cité par le Coran avec déférence. Il
occupa une place privilégiée chez les soufistes qui
recommendèrent la communion directe avec celui qui fut associé, par ses
attributs, à Saint Elie.*

Wa qaala: li-naqra' al-faatiHa `ala ruuH akhii `afra. (p.29)

*Let's say a prayer for my brother's soul. They
recited the prayer.* (p.18)

*L'invita [...] à prier pour le repos de l'âme de son frère Ufra. Ils récitèrent
la Fatiha*.*

* Première sourate du Coran. Du verbe Fataha: ouvrir en arabe. (p.29)

*taHarakat bih al-Kaaruu naHwu al-qabw kamaa taf`al fi
mawaasim al-qaraafa.* (p.59)

He drove out through the archway towards the cemetery as if it was a feast day. (p.38)

Il prit le chemin du cimetière comme à la saison des moussems.*

* Commémoration annuelle de la mort d'un wali (homme pieux et vénéré), donnant lieu à un pèlerinage accompagné de festivités. (p.52).

karimat kuudyat al-zaar SabaaH. (p.204)

The daughter of Sabah, the exorcist. (p.145)

La fille de Sabah, la meneuse de zar.*

* Du verbe ?zara?, visiter. Rituel mystique aux vertus d'exorcisme. (p.177)

The following example is particularly representative of the contrast between the translations discussed in this paper. In the English translation, naturalisation is achieved through the use of generalisation, the figurative meaning being the only one which is retained. The French translator, faithful to her overall approach, chooses to keep the Arabic metaphor, justifiably perhaps given the importance of the figure of `*antar* in Arabic pre-Islamic poetry and in Arabic literary culture. But she manages to deviate in the note from the scholarly to the anachronistic, drawing an analogy with *Romeo.*

yaa `antara. (p.338)

What a hero! (p.239)

Antar* ressuscité!

* Guerrier et poète arabe du VIe siècle, Roméo oriental célèbre pour ses amours avec Abla. (p.287)

It is at this level that the contrast between the English and French translations is most striking. With the exception of the transliteration of only a few items, the exoticism of which might be seen as sufficiently familiar (for example the names of dishes such as m*ulukhiyya*, and *Ta`miya*), the English translator

systematically erases the cultural specificity of most references with her use of generalizations, by allocating generic equivalents to specific items.

yatanaawalaan ta`aamahumaa `adasan wa-fuulan wa-Ta`miya. (p.70)

And [they] *ate lentils, beans and ta'miya.* (p.46)

Glanant leur comptant de lentilles, de fèves et de ta'miyya*.

* Boulettes de purée de fèves aromatisées à l'ail, à la coriandre et aux épices, frites à l'huile. (p.61)

wa ya`shaq al-muluukhiya wal-baamya wal-baTiikh wal-shamaam. (p.230)

He [...] adored the dinners of mulukhiyya, okra, melon and watermelon. (p.163)

Il [...] goûtait la douceur de ses soirées, adorait la corête, le bamia*, le melon ...

* Nom arabe de la ketmie comestible, parfois appelée "gombo" ou "doigt de fée." (p.197)

The fluid English text does not constantly remind the reader of the foreignness of the original. However the French translation does convey its own impression of transparency *vis-à-vis* the original. Its transliteration of Arabic terms which refer to religious events, and to the Coptic calendar used by Mahfouz to refer to the rhythm of the seasons, as in the Egyptian vernacular, is complemented by explanatory footnotes, as shown below:

tazamjara zawaabi` amshiir thumma ta`aqabuhaa riyaaH al-khamaassiin. (p.123)

The storms at the end of winter were followed by the hot dusty winds of early spring. (p.86)

Aux ouragans d'amshir* succéda la fournaise du khamsin.

* Sixième mois du calendrier copte correspondant au mois de février du calendrier grégorien. (p.108)

kaana shahr tuuba yastawa `la `irshih al-thalji. (p.154)

January sat on its icy throne. (p.109)

Tuba s'était installé sur son trône glacé.*

* Cinquième mois du calendrier copte, correspondant au mois de janvier du calendrier grégorien. (p.136)

nasaa'im bashansh. (p.438)

May breezes. (p.312)

*la brise de bashans**.

* Neuvième mois du calendrier copte, correspondant au mois de mai du calendrier grégorien. (p.369)

These examples illustrate the interdependence of the visibility of the process, as demonstrated by the French text with its frequent recourse to footnotes, and the transparency of the product. The emphasis on transparency of product in the French means that the source is not hidden in a `domesticated' narrative.

It is perhaps at this junction that the interdependence of the visibility of the process (i.e., the use of footnotes in the French translation) and the transparency of the product (the source literally shines through in this text) is most apparent. Thus, if transparency is taken to mean reflection of the original, the reverse is true of the English translation where the invisibility of the translator, or the illusory transparency of the process, results in a non-transparent product.

This comparison brings to mind Genette's view (1982:241) that perhaps there is no real choice, for the translator, between forced neutralisation [*neutralisation forcée*], as shown in the English translation, and the excessive stress [*accentuation abusive*] which is to be found in the French.

However, if this contrast is true of the way in which most of the culture-specific items are translated, an intriguing shift of strategies can be noted in the French translation, regarding the treatment of Persian verses, which occur at several points in the narrative. This time, it is the English translator who chooses

to transliterate, except for the last occurrence of the verse where, inexplicably, the verses are translated into English, whereas in the French text all of the verses are translated, with the addition of one footnote. The reader is informed in this that the verses were written by the Persian poet Hafiz (1320-1390), that they represent the beginning of a love poem, and furthermore thanks are given to the translator of these verses into French.

What is particularly significant is not so much that the overall fluency of the English text stops short of domesticating these verses, but that the French translator changes strategies, in contradiction of her attempt to produce an accurate representation of the original, thus profoundly dislocating Mahfouz's narrative. I have stressed earlier the importance of the monastery in the novel, and the remoteness and distance which is conveyed by the backdrop of the mysterious hymns. Though the meaning of the Persian hymns were hidden from the passers-by in the novel, and from the Arab reader, their translation into French goes far beyond the original. The transparency of the French text is quite misleading, discarding Mahfouz's intention in an over-zealous attempt at explication and failing to preserve the distance of those verses from the reader.

Whilst the comparison between the two translations reveals a sharp contrast with regard to the treatment of culture-specific items, a much greater similarity can be found in the way linguistic forms are dealt with. Both of them attempt to achieve naturalisation and neither resorts to marginal forms of discourse, nor do they employ resistant strategies which would bend the rules of their target language. A case in point is the avoidance of repetition in French. Whereas the Arabic epic refers to the Persian verse as 'obscure' [*ghaamida*] on more than one occasion, the French translator uses different terms, resorting to quasi-synonyms such as *nébuleux* [nebulous] or *indéchiffrables* [indecipher-able], bypassing the rhetorical device of repetition which was employed by Mahfouz. This point is all the more noticeable in a translation which places emphasis on the foreignness of the source text, illustrating Holmes's remarks on contemporary translators who:

> [S]how a marked tendency towards modernization and naturalization of the linguistic context, paired with a similar but less clear tendency in the same direction with regard to the literary intertext, but an opposing tendency towards exoticizing and historicizing in the socio-cultural situation. (1988:48)

Transparency of both product and process may thus fluctuate within the same translation. Transparency of the translation process is normally associated

with domestication, whilst transparency of the product has exoticisation as a possible correlation, but surely this exoticisation is no more than cultural bias. And, as argued by Toury:

> What a translator is actually introducing into the target literature is not the original work at all, but some version of it cut to the measure of a pre-existing literary and linguistic model. (1980:56).

The orientalist paradigm highlighted by Jacquemond (1992:129), with its punctilious emphasis on scientific accuracy, can be identified in the case of the French translation, with its use of scholarly notes and over-explication, which includes references to the etymology of Arabic terms, as shown earlier with the notes associated with the prayer of A*l-faatiHa*, and the ritual of the *zaar*. Damrosh (2003: 22) claims that: "All works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only "began" in their original language."

In a paradoxical fashion, the French translation of *al-Harafiish* both confirms and contradicts the above statement. On the one hand, through the scholarly exoticism it presents, it is certainly a product of the modern French 'translation' tradition. On the other hand, one cannot help but wonder whether the provision of a wealth of detailed information in the form of footnotes, which although accurate is often secondary, might in effect make it more difficult for the work to go beyond its 'beginnings' in the original language.

In fact, in the case of French translations of Arabic literature, exoticisation often involves the introduction of a more familiar exoticism, for instance Middle Eastern becomes North African: One such example is provided by the title of another of Mahfouz's novels *Awlaad Haaratina* (literally, *The Children of our District*), published in its English translation as *The Children of Gebelawi*. The French title is *Les Fils de la Médina*, where an exotic term, sufficiently familiar to the French reader for historico-political reasons, is introduced, distorting the initial transcultural code.

Conclusion

Wider issues are raised here. Transparency of process, however widespread in translations into Western languages, is not the only convention applied. The obvious presence of the translator, as exemplified by the wealth of almost encyclopaedic information provided with the French translation of *Al-Harafish*, is also an established tradition. Variables such as the types of text translated, and more importantly perhaps, the hierarchical relationship between

the source and target cultures - and the existence of a dominant discourse - will also come into play. And the pragmatic effects will vary greatly from the perhaps misleading neutralisation and familiarisation of the English translation discussed in this essay, to the distance and foreignisation, paradoxically created by the transparent French text, where presupposed knowledge is regularly presented as new. Whilst the transparency of process manifest in Catherine Cobham's translation (see Mahfouz, 1977) may bring the reader closer to the original work by universalising the latter through neutralisation of a number of culture-specific items, France Douvier Meyer's transparent product (see Mahfouz, 1977) which sometimes magnifies local detail offers a 'window' on Mahfouz's world and writing.

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