

PETER BUSH

Reviewing Translations: Barcelona, London and Paris

What happens to translations out there in the marketplace of culture when the originals have been through selection procedures, approaches by agents, readers' reports, in-house editorial meetings, sample translations, haggling over contracts, the mill of the translator's mind and possible fine-tuning with editor, copy editor and writer? Publicity departments, in the well organised publishing houses, will send out scores of bound proofs anything up to four months in advance to whet appetites of literary editors, gurus of books programmes, buyers for book chains, programmers of literary festivals, to be followed at a later stage by the final item elegant in its eye-catching glossy cover. The less well organised will desperately dispatch copies a month before publication day in the hope of making it into the book pages. Is there a different culture of reception in different countries in this area of such vital importance for getting books on the shelves and keeping them there?

Translating English is easy?

Those of us familiar with the lamentations that mark debates in the English-speaking world—the miserable three per cent of books translated from the total massive output

as opposed to the thirty or forty per cent in France or Spain, or the eighty or ninety per cent of books published in Iran or Brazil—are also familiar with the explanations that are trotted out, that American culture is economically and politically dominant, that the English-speaking world can satisfy all its reading appetites within the range of writing in English, that it is this combination of power and heterogeneity which also leads to the largest percentile of books translated outside the Anglo-Saxon world being always from English.

However, literary agents and publishers in the UK or USA are not ululating: their export revenues are buoyant from the international sale of English language writers and on the home front these same writers have a field day in a market protected, one is frequently told, from the “problems of translation,” where even many of those publishers who are proud of their devotion to bringing other literatures into English wish to keep the translator at a distance and conceal the translated nature of books they sell. Isn’t it strange how translation never seems to be a problem when it comes to the translation of English-language authors from English into whichever world language? Do we resign ourselves to the fact of life of a form of cultural and economic imperialism, to the essential ethnocentrism of the Anglo-Saxon world?

Frontiers crossed

In this chapter, in order to focus on a fragment of this publishing world, we will look at the reviewing of translations in London, Barcelona and Paris over a short period of two months and a few issues of a handful of publications: *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The London Review of Books*, the cultural review of *The Guardian*, *Babelia*, the literary supplement of *El País* and the weekly literary supplement of *Le Monde*. It is then a somewhat arbitrary, impressionistic state of play as glimpsed in

those publications one would imagine to be sympathetic to the reviewing of translations, given their reputations and traditions as channels of liberal, humanistic thought.

Literary translations, like most migrating activities, are subject to change in a world of transnational companies that straddle nation-states and their boundaries, in which nothing is what it seems and old epithets are but half-truths. When categorising particular national cultures or cultural phenomena with the terms that readily come to mind, we should remember that such labels are there as attempts to fix convenient handles on realities that are much less stable and complex, in order to safeguard and perpetuate certain nationalist prejudices and cultural politics through institutions like the media, schools and universities. The literary pages in the three cities we are concerned with here generally act as if traditional versions of national cultures stand intact. Differences, though stark, do not denote any radical re-conceptualising of the nature of French, English or Spanish cultures. Our understanding of how and why translations sell and are reviewed in different tones and quantities should not lose sight of “invisible” cultural and commercial presences erased by an appearance of continuity.

Begrudgingly in our pages

How is this traditional state of affairs reflected in the review pages of our chosen English publications in the months of February and March 2004? Well if one criterion for book-buyers working for the book chains is the column space devoted to reviews, then translations don't get much of a fillip from that direction. *The London Review of Books* printed in this period all of four reviews of translations. A critique of Don Paterson's latest book of poetry (4 March) quotes approvingly the view of this most

professional of poets that one should “forget the relation in which these poems stand to the originals” and is seduced by his alchemy as a translator: “Such native English emerging from such foreign surroundings magically abolished cultural difference or at least hid it in an impressive feat of prestidigitation.” Jacqueline Rose’s five-page review of two books by Israeli writer David Grossman (18 March) does not even credit the translator, though in the last two lines she does say: “For me, there is no other Israeli writer translated who gets so close to the matter.” A most sensitive literary critic, her admiration of subtlety occludes the key mediation. The vagaries of *LRB* title selection meant that a book on Kafka at the cinema and the reprint of a 1935 translation of a nineteenth-century policeman’s memoirs were the only foreign voices which got a murmur. On the other hand, the *LRB* is fond of that very English genre, the diary of the English man or woman abroad in strange places, so we get lengthy diary accounts of days in Las Vegas, Vladivostok and Madrid. One could call this the Orwell syndrome: much better the vivid readability of an Etonian on the Ebro or on Wigan pier or under the bridges of Paris, than translations of books by literary locals not merely paying a flying journalistic visit, however risky and radical.

One of the great innovations in recent years is *The Guardian*’s weekend cultural supplement. If it is a general rule that books pages in the UK press have shrunk in size, so here at last came expansion and even double-page interviews with foreign writers. The supplement is undoubtedly a welcome addition, though the interviews have now gone and the reviews of translations or references to the foreign sometimes lapse into comforting clichés. In this two-month period *The Guardian* managed thirteen reviews and seven of those were short paperback items.

A novel by Sandro Veroni translated by Alastair McEwan is felt to be “a heady aroma of fried mozzarella, bitter espresso and scooters” (21 February) whilst

W. S. Merwin's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is judged "an elegant gloss" as this early English work is "impossible to translate"(21 February). In a different spirit Alan Sillitoe celebrates his reading of Homer and other Greek classics through "translations of the highest quality"(28 February). A substantial account of Margaret Jull Costa's latest translation of Javier Marías credits the translator but makes no comment on the translation (28 February) whilst the mediator from the Icelandic of Halldór Laxness is invisible, as is the translator of a book by Anna Gawalda (13 March) (nevertheless, "The heavy Americanisms in the translation may grate," claims a reviewer presumably wedded to the aesthetics of bland mid-Atlanticism). In similar vein, a paper-back review of the latest Andrey Kurkov Penguin novel makes no mention of translator George Bird but manages to snipe at his "wearisome" sentences (3 April), whilst the one on the new J. K. Huysmans, *Parisian Sketches*, from Dedalus, silences both translator and translation.

The *Guardian* supplement, like the *LRB*, also enjoys the English-speaker perspective on things foreign. One issue (13 March) led with an extract from Robert Hughes's book on Dalí—inevitably entitled "Homage to Catalonia"—where Hughes states incorrectly that none of the great Catalan writers is translated. We also get: Miranda France on Hugh Thomas on the Spanish Empire, Martin Jacques on Amy Chua and the Chinese Philippines. More generous space is accorded to Michael Holroyd on his mistress, Alan Bennett on an aspect of English pastoral, Gail Rebeck on World Book Day and a chic website devoted to Zadie Smith and friends. Of course, it helps when those of foreign extraction or with foreign-sounding names can write in English. Panos Karnezis's novel set in 1920s Anatolia is by "a Greek who writes in English" and "it shows in his English" but he has the saving grace of a

“confident touch with magical realism: a “flicker of De Bernières and even of Márquez” (27 March).

Surprisingly, it is *The Times Literary Supplement*, a Murdoch publication, which published not only the most reviews of translations in these three months—thirty-one—but also fifteen reviews of books as yet untranslated from their original language. Here, the tradition of one-nation liberal Toryism nurtured by a reading of the classics, translated or not, has survived changes of ownership. The *TLS* has also for years, under different editors, sponsored and given publicity to the various UK prizes for Literary Translation funded by the Arts Council and respective embassies.

Reviews in the *TLS* rarely miss out the translator’s name and usually comment, if briefly, on the quality of the translation. We are told that Stanley Chapman’s translation of Boris Vian’s “dizzy mill of verbal play and invention” is “not unsuccessful” (13 February). More forthright is Oliver Robinson in his comments on Andrew Brown’s translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that it is “spirited, if slightly sexed-up” and creates “a wholly credible, reinvigorated Rabelais” in an English that is “born from a multitude of sources, Shakespeare, Chaucer, PG Wodehouse” and “is incredibly phlegmatic in the bottom department” (13 February). Richard Sieburth’s translations of Gershol Scholem’s *The Fullness of Time* and essays are “lucid, sensitive, forceful and always attentive to the originals” (27 February). Margaret Jull Costa’s English rendering of Javier Marías’s *The Man of Feeling* is “superb” (5 March). Stephen Rohmer and Robert Chandler contribute respectively detailed, positive critiques of new translations of Victor Hugo and Mallarmé (19 March). On the other hand, Shaun Whiteside (26 March) notes how Jordan Stump’s translation of Christian Oster’s *My Big Apartment* misses out “a crucial part of the dialogue” and that “the humour of the original, always a faint pressure, is fainter still

in the translated version.” There is also a letters page in which translators sometimes defend themselves against reviewers, as in Brian Stimpson’s defence of his decisions (6 February) in relation to his translation of Valéry’s *Cahiers*.

Looking out from Spain

Babelia, the weekly cultural supplement of *El País*, carried eighty-one reviews of translations during the same period in issues that usually dedicate twelve pages to book reviews and the fine arts. The first February issue (7 February) carries a two-page spread celebrating the publication of the Complete Works of Adorno in translation and in paperback, at last “in a format for everyone,” a one-page article on *Death in Persia* by Anne-Marie Schwarzenbach, a two-page essay by John Berger on Borges, and shorter reviews of translations of Chateaubriand, Sartre, Safran Foer, Italo Svevo, Ruben Fonseca, Daniel Pennac, and Montale. The one-page end-piece is usually by the Portuguese writer, Lobo Antunes, translated by Mario Merlino. The supplement also found space for reviews of a new biography of Kant and two new translations of books by Kant as well as of George Bataille on Manet. The next February supplement reviews translations of Thomas Mann, US novelist Dawn Powell, Canadian poet Anne Michaels and Stephen Pinker (14 February). The third issue (21 February) returns mainly to Spain with four pages on new Spanish playwrights, reviews of three Spanish novels and one Uruguayan, and three collections by Spanish essayists. The final fling of February (28 February) brings reviews of three translations of Tolstoy, of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and novels by Robert Irwin, Richard Russo and Véronique Tadjo amongst others. March continues in like vein with reviews of translations of books by authors as varied as J. M. Coetzee, Niall Binns, Jenny Diski, Jeanette Winterton, John Gray and Sadiq Hedayat.

It concludes on 27 March with a bumper issue with translations of nine poems by Djuna Barnes and reviews of books by American, English, French, German and Serbian authors in translation.

It is also true that the writers of these reviews—or editorial policy—ensure that translators of individual works reviewed or the feature articles published are always credited. However, there are virtually no qualitative judgements on the translations as translations. The tone of the reviews in relation to the foreign work is unanimously positive: the foreign is both recognised and welcome and surely a visible pleasure. The griping, begrudging tone so familiar in the English press is absent.

These Spanish review pages are part of a book chain that is currently very open to writing in translation. What lies more hidden is the corollary in terms of a large translation profession working for publishers who have a tradition of handling large numbers of translations. The tradition is based on short deadlines, low and stagnant rates of pay and poor contracts (sometimes, no contracts at all) in an economy where the cost of living has rocketed as a result of Spain's greater integration into the global economy and the adoption of the euro as currency. Although there are several translators' associations in Spain, these have never reached a position where they can bargain effectively with publishers, as happens in Norway. Besides, the rapid expansion of undergraduate and postgraduate university courses in translation and interpreting pours into the marketplace every year thousands of graduates with a desire to earn their living as translators, a factor that depresses pay-rates. Publishers employ editors who heavily edit translations that are completed in a rush. Of course, there is an elite of literary translators with public reputations who can command better rates and deadlines, but these are a minority within a profession

where most keep their heads down and produce a translation every two months, if not one a month.

Babelia's pages have plenty of space for feature articles and reviews focusing on writing from the Hispanic world, and yet their devotion to the foreign belongs to a Spanish liberal tradition that has always tended to privilege the foreign as against a domestic intellectual scene dominated by a Church and army never too keen on what comes from abroad, unless it has emerged from the Vatican.

Defensively open

The literary supplement of *Le Monde* is equally open to the foreign: the five issues seen for March and April carried over eighty reviews of works of fiction, science, history and politics alongside a large number of reviews of books written in French. However, the underlying assumptions are different. As on the floors dedicated to literature at the main Gibert bookstore in Paris, French literature is predominant and a separate room houses a considerable number of translations from world literature: there is no doubt as to which is the most important literature, though due respect is paid elsewhere. Additionally, French culture lives buffeted by the expansive wave of English and fights a losing battle to preserve its corner. The Centre National du Livre and other bodies subsidise translations of French literature and activities to promote writing in French. *Le Monde des Livres*, through its gossip column on the publishing world, keeps track of staff changes that might make the publication of translated French literature more difficult: the demise of the Flamingo list at Harper Collins (13 February) and departure of Christopher MacLehose from Harvill are lamented. Equally the arrival of Bill Keller, the new editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, a man pledged to reviewing more essays and less fiction, is viewed as part of “*le*

naufage de la littérature et la promotion des livres ‘fabriqués,’ produits purement commerciaux” (27 February). On the other hand, the supplement comments on activities organised by different national translation centres in Europe to promote the reading of literature in translation. Reviewers always include the name of the translator in the heading of the review and almost never comment on the quality of the translation.

Individual supplements often have a themed element. The 13 February issue carries reviews of five erotic works in translation and a baroque novel about paedophilia by Paul Golding whilst the following week brings a clutch of books on the Middle East translated from English. A March issue (12 March) is devoted to literature from the French speaking world yet there is still space to review translations of three science fiction books by Terry Pratchett, three books of essays from Russian, French and German respectively and to devote a page of reviews to Greek fiction in translation.

Contexts for comparison

How do French and Spanish cultural environments compare with the English state of affairs? All three countries have publishing industries subject to the executive policies of transnational companies, long established family firms now merely desks in conglomerate offices, and the odd independents that soldier enthusiastically on. All three countries have imperial histories that mean they had to seek labour from former colonies to bolster shortages when their economies were expanding while their birthrates plummeted. So cities like Paris and Barcelona are cosmopolitan, multilingual places. However, public conceptions of recent social change and national

histories and interactions with the rest of the world create different cultural attitudes when it comes to the phenomenon of literary translation and foreign literatures.

A tradition of silencing

In Spain the appearance is one of a generous coverage of foreign literatures, but not everyone agrees about the quality of what gets into print. At a recent launch of Reverso, the new independent list published in Barcelona, the distinguished panel of speakers including Juan Goytisolo, Eduardo Subirats and Ana Nuño welcomed the first titles, a mixture of translations and work originally written in Spanish on the peninsula or in Latin America and, above all, the series as an exception to the rule in the Spanish publishing scene, namely an attempt to create a space for works of literature as opposed to hamburgers of words, the publishers' money-spinning products. Subirats described a Spanish tradition from the Counter-Reformation that silences critical, heterodox voices from within or without. Juan Goytisolo gave the example, amongst others, of *La Regenta*, the novel written by Leopoldo Alas, one of the great works of the nineteenth century that was met by virulently hostile reviews upon publication and remained unavailable in the last century until the 1970s. Critical voices may no longer burn on Inquisitional pyres: they are simply silenced by the market. Of course, it was Generalísimo Franco who fully resurrected the spirit of the Counter-Reformation with militant censorship after his victorious crusade against the Second Republic. After the fascist victory in 1939 there were years of cultural as well as economic autarky when a virtual ban was imposed on translation either for moral reasons or the expedient of the shortage of paper. Though things changed in the sixties well before the dictator's death, the translations available first clandestinely and then in bookshops were made in Argentina.

Recent Spanish president José María Aznar attempted to re-assert the rhetoric and practices of the extreme nationalist right, though an English observer of the Spanish scene would be nevertheless surprised by the openness to the foreign which still predominates in the democratic transition from Fascism. Spain is a multilingual state: Galician, Basque and Catalan are taught and are the medium of education in primary and secondary educational institutions in their respective autonomous regions. Bookshops, whether small independents or chains like FNAC or the book sections within the department store chain of El Corte Inglés stock and prominently display translations. Publishing-houses like the solvent and independent Anagrama bring out a stream of translations—Barnes, Amis, Sebald. The pendulum has swung and the Spanish reader of *El País*, unlike the English reader of the *Guardian*, walks in a library of the imagination where the translated and the non-translated enjoy parity of esteem, where the former even has more glamour because it is foreign.

French amnesia

In November 1983 President Mitterand welcomed the findings of the Girault Report on the teaching of history in French schools, because he was, he told his ministers, “shocked and deeply worried by the younger generation’s loss of collective memory.” Professor Girault of Nanterre University recommended, in conclusions contemporary with and parallel to Thatcherite policy “innovations,” a move away from the internationalist theme-based syllabus introduced in the late 1960s and a return to a chronological approach that could restore a proper sense of the importance of the past of the nation.¹ The socialist leader would want to erase from such a survey nasty blots like Vichy collaborationism or his own connections with the anti-semitic thugs who sponsored his first post-war political steps while white-washing their own immediate

past.² This is just a sanitised version of national glories and secular republicanism that has to be promoted as an ideological defence and rallying point in a defensive perception of French culture which sees itself as under threat from Muslim and other “foreign” presences. This republicanism has never shown much sympathy for the acceptance of cultural or linguistic difference, whether these languages be Basque, Breton, Catalan or Corsican, in its policy-making. Mitterand was intent on removing a blip introduced in permissive, 1968 days. So, the generosity of the reviews in *Le Monde* towards translated literature must be set within an overall defensive historical and cultural French context.

Proud to be British

In the UK there was a significant nationalist turn in the eighties as the policies of Margaret Thatcher began to be driven home after her defeat of the miners’ strike. Sir Keith Joseph told the Historical Association in 1984 that world history had inexorably to be perceived from the perspective of a British nation: “As time passes, as the dust of multiple changes settles, the nation constantly emerging from the crucible is more complex, and often enriched and revitalised....”³ The groundwork that had been done by the Linguistic Minorities research project at London University’s Institute of Education, the changes in curricular focus and policies of linguistic diversification in the large urban local authorities to reflect the experiences of pupils in primary and secondary schools and ease their access to a critical democratic consciousness were sharply reversed. Traditional visions of Englishness were once more centre-stage and this process has only accelerated under the Blair administration, as Blair himself signalled in his first election victory speech in which he pledged to restore Britain’s greatness back to eighteenth-century levels.

For our purposes this cultural politics was neatly encapsulated in the speech⁴ given by Gail Rebuck, the Chair and Chief Executive of Random House, to celebrate World Book Day 2004. After mentioning Matthew Arnold's praise of books as bringing "sweetness and light" and the fact that the reading of books, according to historian Steven Rose, liberated the working classes in the nineteenth century (never mentioning the large number of translations read by the newly literate in the first half of the nineteenth century), she waxes optimistic about the 125,000 titles published every year in the UK. World Book Day is "one of the most exciting expressions of that optimism" around which twelve million one-pound book tokens will be given to primary and secondary schoolchildren who will have to buy from a set of English titles that will shoot to head the best-seller lists. Her coda to this was that five British writers have successfully penetrated the US market and her climax: "The more people's lives can be touched and changed by books, the more fulfilled and successful the next generation of British people will be."

What the rhetoric exudes is the Blairite market focus and Anglo-centrism that one would expect from someone who is a close ally of the Prime Minister and a leading proponent of the Creative Industries. Of course, nobody could carp about a campaign to get children to read—but why no translations? And isn't the idea of World Book Day to give readers a sense of a world of different literatures out there, of sharing in something that is being done elsewhere in the world, on other national World Book Days? Well, not in this neck of the woods! The UK WBD doesn't take place on 23 April, as elsewhere internationally, because that day might fall in the school holidays and that would hinder the campaign to lead twelve million vouchers of one pound sterling from government to publisher. As one only seems concerned to sell the theme of "the British book is best," one can curb severely any impulse to flirt

with internationalist rhetoric and hope presumably that all the profits aren't repatriated to Germany.

Not in our window

Our delineation of some aspects of the context of the publishing of translations points up the complex national issues in the handling of the foreign: the intrinsically supranational act of translation is influenced by historical moods moving those who have the power to shape what seems to be the public national consciousness. Other indicators of context could be the physical presence of translations in main bookshops. There are very rarely window displays that include translations, let alone displays dedicated to literature in translation. Window space costs publishers, and small publishers (Arcadia, Dedalus, Hesperus, Serpent's Tail) who do bring out translations as part of their niche marketing don't have the money to buy that space and even have to struggle to get their books on the shelves since there isn't room for all the titles Ms Rebeck celebrates. The new, enterprising venture of Hesperus which has built up a large list in a short space of time managed to negotiate with Waterstones space for their stands, but in every store that I visited recently the stand was at the back of the mainstream, bestseller display stand that greets you as you walk in: the Hesperus books bid you farewell as you leave.

To conclude, the review pages of a few key national newspapers or literary journals are but a small part of a domestic book chain which ensures some books get into the book shops and then whether they stay there or not. They reflect and shape particular national traditions in relation to elsewhere in the world. The pressure of the marketplace is never far away, though to different degrees. Literary editors of publishing houses wine, dine and butter up the editors of the literary pages in the

various capital cities in order to try to get their books reviewed. In New York and London, the number of such pages is constantly under threat from advertising and other items more likely to sell the paper—like sport. Is it any wonder that translated literature is rarely featured? The newspaper reader in Paris, Barcelona or Madrid faces no shortage of books pages or reviews of literature in translation. In the present Anglo-American political climate that prefers bombs to words and holds most things foreign as objects of suspicion, one cannot be optimistic that publishing in the English-speaking world is suddenly going to free itself from its chauvinism, even though much of the industry is no longer owned by the “English.” Our snapshot analysis of the more free-thinking segments of the paraphernalia of public opinion formation in England, France and Spain spotlights the extreme reluctance of English editors to chance their arm with the foreign.

Notes

¹ *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 December 1983.

² See for example Monica Waizfelder, *L'Oréal a pris ma maison* (Paris: Hachette, 2004).

³ *TES*, 17 December 1984.

⁴ *The Guardian*, 13 March 2004.