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Translation studies and the other cannibal: the English version of Fernández Retamar's *Calibán*

According to Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, the editors of *Post-Colonial Translation*, postcolonialism and translation studies share a similar view on the relationships between texts. Instead of conceiving of these texts in terms of “originals” and “copies,” “source texts” and “target texts,” “universal models” and “peripheral imitations,” postcolonial critics and translation specialists are said to prefer more dynamic terms and concepts such as “cannibalisation,” “transfusion” and “hybridity.”¹ But postcolonial studies are concerned not only with the relationships between texts. They also provide a critical way of looking at one particular text. It is striking that these critical reading strategies have often been described in terms of translation as well, understood in a more metaphorical sense: what was once seen as “the Wrong side” in the work is translated into “the Other side” of it.² A key work in this context is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Whereas former interpretations had focused on Prospero as the main character of the play, postcolonial readings reframe Caliban as its new hero, turning him from a disobedient slave who has only a minor part in the play into the unjustly oppressed native, the image of the colonised subject himself.

This kind of interpretation is also at work in Roberto Fernández Retamar's reading of *The Tempest*, which was published in Cuba in 1971 under the significant title "Calibán." Retamar, however, goes one step further by claiming an immediate identity between Caliban as the colonised subject and one region of the colonial world in particular: the Caribbean. Adducing etymological arguments, Retamar states that Caliban *is* the Caribbean,³ which in its turn functions as a metonymy for Latin America. Hence, Latin American and Caribbean writers should conceive of their relationship with European literature in the same way as Caliban assumes his dependency on Prospero: Prospero taught Caliban how to speak, but the latter now uses this knowledge to curse his master.⁴

Literature as a curse: it is another kind of intertextual play, a more aggressive one, than the one suggested by the image of the Brazilian cannibal who devours his fellow men in amorous recognition of their strength. If the Brazilian cannibal has profoundly marked postcolonial translation studies,⁵ Retamar's Calibán represents the other cannibal, exemplary of the other kind of thinking that can be discovered in postcolonial literary criticism, not the one that is linked to notions of "hybridity" and "inbetweenness,"⁶ but the one that appeals to images of "resistance" and "opposition."

In focusing upon the other cannibal, I not only want to restore this other tradition in Latin American thinking to the contemporary discussions on postcolonialism and translation studies. My main interest concerns the way in which the above translational strategy towards *The Tempest* in Retamar's essay is mirrored by another one that works the other way round: from the "other" side into "the wrong" side. In order to do so, I will situate the "Calibán" essay in the wider context of Cuban social discourse in the 1960s. Afterwards, I will make some comments on contemporary rereadings of the essay by postcolonial scholars who erase these contextual clues.

Before discussing the translational strategies in Retamar's essay, I should recall that Calibán deals not only with European literature. It also and even primarily concerns Latin American literature and culture. In this respect, the essay contains the thesis that Latin American culture is internally divided between two kinds of intellectuals: there are those who side with the oppressed people and curse the invader, and there are those who side with Prospero and adopt his culture. Retamar's argument is that Latin American writers have to choose between the two traditions, because no reconciliation between them is ever possible. José Martí is an example of the Calibanesque tradition, since he stood up for the rights of the indigenous cultures, whereas Borges and Carlos Fuentes exemplify the other one because of their tendency to "copy" foreign models. The difference between the two traditions is sustained by a set of oppositions, such as "América *mestiza*" versus "América europea," "popular culture" versus "bourgeois culture," "barbarism" versus "civilisation" and, of course, "revolutionary culture" versus "colonial or counterrevolutionary culture." In this last respect, it becomes possible for Retamar to link the Calibanesque tradition with the project of the Cuban Revolution, which is what happens in the closing paragraphs of the essay.

This reading of Latin American culture in oppositional terms implies a revision of previous and well-known Latin American interpretations of *The Tempest*, which are explicitly discussed in the essay. But Retamar's meditations on Latin American culture also implicitly revise former ideas on this topic in his own magazine, and this is rarely pointed out. More precisely, "Calibán" was published in the magazine *Casa de las Américas*, which was led by Retamar and which had been completely dedicated to Latin American literature.⁷ In this magazine, writers such as Carlos Fuentes or Mario Vargas Llosa, who now appear as followers of Prospero, had been given ample space and even—in the case of Vargas Llosa—allowed membership of the editorial board. In different issues, the magazine had stressed its willingness

to identify with the Latin American literary tradition as a whole, even in its most complex expressions.⁸ This inclusive presentation of Latin American culture was expressed time after time through a concept of José Martí, “Nuestra América” or “Our America,” without adding the qualification “mestiza” or “europea,” which also stems from this writer.

At first sight, then, a unitarian model of Latin American culture is exchanged in *Calibán* for an oppositional one, but the whole procedure turns out to be more complex when we trace the function of the adjectives “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary” both in the essay itself and outside it. As I have explained, these adjectives sustain the opposition between the two traditions in Latin American thinking and their incompatibility. They are part of a general logic of inclusion and exclusion, of “for” and “against,” of choices that have to be made. However, one of the most important utterances quoted in the essay contains a trace of a former model. This quotation from a speech by Fidel Castro from 1961 known as *Palabras a los intelectuales* (*Words to the Intellectuals*) runs as follows: “within the revolution everything, against the revolution, nothing.”⁹ “dentro/contra,” “within/against”, not “for/against” or “inside/outside.” “Within/against” is not a pair of mutually exclusive prepositions and this is no accident, since the background of this utterance is the idea that the Revolution should also leave room for those who disagree with the official policy either in politics or in culture. In Castro’s own words as they sounded in 1961:

The revolution has to understand this reality and therefore has to act in such a way that this whole group of artists and intellectuals who are not genuinely revolutionary, finds within the Revolution a place to work and to create, and that their creative minds, even though they are not revolutionary writers and artists, find the opportunity and freedom to express themselves, within the Revolution. This means that within the Revolution, everything, against the Revolution, nothing.¹⁰

This is the category of the ones who are neither “revolutionary” nor “counterrevolutionary:” they are “non-revolutionary,” a third position in between the two others. It is this position which, in

spite of ongoing tensions with political hardliners, would allow experimental artists and critical intellectuals in the years following this famous speech to work and identify with the Cuban revolution. However, towards the end of the 1960s, an analysis of periodical literature in Cuba indicates that this third position was disappearing. Official speeches accentuate the unbridgeable gap between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary elements (e.g. Pérez, 1969), literary critics quote Castro but eliminate the part of the utterance that concerned the non-revolutionary people (e.g. Avila) and in 1969 leading Cuban intellectuals took part in a debate on the following question: “Is it possible to be an intellectual *outside* the Revolution? Is it possible to be a *non-revolutionary* intellectual?”¹¹ Their answer, of course, is negative. Simultaneously, the notion of the “critical intellectual,” which Cuban writers had taken from Sartre, is replaced by the idea of the “organic intellectual,” attributed to Gramsci and used to accentuate the need for a socially committed intellectual instead of a critical outsider.¹²

On the official side, this replacement of a tripartite model by a binary one (revolutionary/counterrevolutionary) was not commented upon, except in terms of “radicalisation” within the inner logic of the revolution. In the cultural field, however, various protests emerged against what was seen as a deformation or a deviation. This protest culminated in the context of the famous Padilla-affair in 1971. The imprisonment and self-criticism of the Cuban writer was interpreted by foreign intellectuals as a sign that the Cuban regime would no longer tolerate any opposition to its ideas. If the facts surrounding the Padilla-affair are rather well known among scholars of Latin American literature, the self-criticism itself is rarely analysed or discussed. This is a pity because a close look at the text of the self-criticism shows a link with the discursive transformation described above which to my knowledge is never mentioned. Apart from reminding outsiders of Stalinist self-criticisms, this document displayed a translational strategy which must have been obvious to insiders. This strategy amounted to the

recodification of the “non-revolutionary” discourse into the “counterrevolutionary” one. As an example, I quote the following paragraph:

I was arrested because of counterrevolutionary activities. Though this accusation may sound very serious and impressive, it was based on a set of activities and criticisms.... “Criticisms” is not the best word to describe my attitude, “insults” and “gossips” is more appropriate, yes, a series of “insults” and “rumours” against the Revolution that will always make me feel ashamed in front of her.¹³

Through cases such as Padilla’s, Cuban politics and culture translate the non-revolutionary side of the revolution into its “counter-revolutionary” side, the “other side” of the revolutionary field into the “wrong” side. Hence, a strong revisionist tendency appears in the texts of those years, which has writers meditate on former utterances while anthologies engage in selective readings and new canonisations. *Casa de las Américas*’ “Calibán” participates in this process by implicitly rewriting the discourse of the magazine and by thematising the motif of “the choice.” Indeed, towards the end of the essay it becomes crystal clear that the main issue of the essay concerns Ariel as a symbol of the intellectual. It is Ariel who has to choose between Caliban and Prospero and has to find a new place in this binary model. The “non” revolutionary subject has to decide what he is going to be: “revolutionary” or “counterrevolutionary,” “for” or “against,” “right” or “wrong.”

This important discursive transformation, this inscription of the historical meanings of the signifiers involved, is impossible to track in the English translation of Edward Baker, which appeared in book form in 1989. Indeed, Baker translates the quotation as “within the revolution, everything, outside the revolution, nothing,” thus using a pair of mutually exclusive prepositions. This is a mistake, because Retamar’s own quotation from the original speech is correct. However, true to the surrounding social discourse that looks for dualities and polarisations, Retamar does not quote the preceding lines on the presence of a variety of opinions within the revolutionary

field,¹⁴ but the ones that follow and elaborate the idea that there is a counterrevolutionary front, an oppositional attack. The fact that this notion of “counterrevolutionary” functioned in double opposition to “revolutionary” and to “non-revolutionary” is left out of consideration. Together with the generally dualistic argument of Retamar’s essay, which privileges the idea of the “curse” in the Caliban-character, of the “conflict” in Latin American culture etc., this elision makes it understandable why Edward Baker wrongly translated this crucial passage. However, since Retamar’s main argument in these paragraphs is that the Cuban revolution always remained faithful to its basic principles, one might argue that Baker’s translation in fact seizes the deeper sense of Retamar’s idea and completes the rhetorical structure through his linguistic mistake. In this way, Baker himself partakes, unconsciously no doubt, in the translation of the “other side” of the revolution into the “wrong side.”

My analysis begs another question. What is the relationship between the two kinds of translation that I observe in this essay, the one regarding *The Tempest* which translates “wrong” into “other,” and the one regarding former discourses which translates “other” into “wrong”? Do they not contradict one another? In a way they do, since a discourse on *The Tempest* aiming at emancipating the Other functions at a local level as an eradication of Otherness. On the other hand one could say that there is an intimate connection between the two translational strategies, which could be characterised once more as a translation. The rewriting of Cuban social discourse into a dual and oppositional system, imposed by the political leaders, is translated into the more universal and culturally prestigious metaphors handed over by Shakespeare. It is this third translation in the essay which is the stroke of genius of Retamar and accounts for the powerful legitimising function it could exert. For indeed, the counter-canonical reading of *The Tempest* was not limited to the Cuban essay but instead belonged to a whole paradigm of similar readings that influenced it, as Rob Nixon¹⁵ has shown. And the rewriting of social discourse into a binary

model had been taking place at the official level and in periodical literature for a number of years. Retamar's very own translational strategy consists in the way he connects the two kinds of translations, in the way he translates what is local politics into the supposedly universal categories of high culture.

Yet if Retamar translates local politics into a reading of *The Tempest*, this also means that postcolonialism itself has become a language by itself into which one can translate and which can fulfil specific rhetorical functions. Though I believe that "Calibán" is a brilliant essay that contains many ideas fundamental to postcolonial concerns, I cannot but notice its current popularity in postcolonial circles with a sense of irritation. While enthroning Retamar as the new Said, for instance,¹⁶ postcolonial critics consistently misread his essay on fundamental issues by selecting certain fragments of it without looking at the context. It is striking that Retamar's essay is basically read as a meditation on race by scholars such as Bhabha¹⁷ and Spivak,¹⁸ and the term "mestizaje" is explained as a form of intermingling and hybridity.¹⁹ Said even believes that Retamar singles out Caliban as the most appropriate metaphor for Latin American identity because of the "strange and unpredictable attributes of this character" which would better match the "creole nature of the new América."²⁰ These misreadings have to do with the fact that postcolonialism pays special attention to issues of race and ethnicity and therefore risks translating documents that centre on other issues into their own terms and preoccupations. True, the word "mestizo" appears in a prominent way in the essay,²¹ but the current association of the word with terms such as "unpredictability," "strangeness" and "hybridity" removes it from its original meaning, which was to trace a sharp line between the two, antagonistic traditions in Latin America. What was opposition and conflict becomes a sign of the continent's diversity and complexity.

No doubt, Fredric Jameson's presentation of the essay in his foreword to the book publication of 1989 facilitated its reception into this kind of postcolonialism, for one thing because Cuba, which in Retamar's essay appears as an anti-colonial, revolutionary and anti-imperialist nation only, is qualified by Jameson as a postcolonial nation.²² Simultaneously, Retamar is praised by Jameson for "his keen sense of the dialectics of difference and the paradoxical reversals of Identity and Difference, of the Same and the Other, his supremely mutable polemics of marginality and centrality."²³ This is the Bakhtinian, Brazilian view of the cannibal imposed upon the cursing Caliban. This is one cannibal eating another.

Where does this analysis lead us? What is its bearing on the debate on postcolonialism and translation studies? First of all, and though the example of Baker might cast some doubt upon this, I truly believe that postcolonial critics have much to learn from the scrupulous attention to material signifiers that translators display, whether they adhere to the poststructuralist current or not. It is because this attention is lacking in present-day receptions of "Calibán" in postcolonialism at large, that the essay is misread, recast as a reflection on race instead of language, translated from an "anti-colonial" text into a certain kind of "postcolonial" discourse, which blurs its basic distinctions and thus removes it from its original meanings. But I also think that it pays for translation specialists to conceive of postcolonial literature and criticism as texts that aim at the translation of values, at the permutation of bad into good, of right into wrong. Yet, aren't these old-fashioned concepts that still presuppose stable identities and autonomous subjects? one might object. Yes, they are, but they are present in that other kind of postcolonialism that is so important in Latin America and that we could call "the oppositional" post-colonialism.

If anything does remain of Retamar's "Calibán" in translation studies, it is perhaps the fact that his essay consciously reflects upon this procedure and gives it a name. I quote: "This is

the dialectic of Caliban: to offend us they call us *mambi*, they call us *black*, but we reclaim as a mark of glory the honor of considering ourselves descendants of the *mambi*, descendants of the rebel, runaway, *independentista* black—*never* descendants of the slave holder.”²⁴ More perhaps than the other version of postcolonialism which stresses the impossibility of constructing stable identities and the omnipresence of the other or others in ourselves, this kind of postcolonialism and concomitant translation leaves room for the subject to take part in these transmutations, to actively perform them and turn socially constructed images of degrading identities into opposite symbols that uplift people. Whether translators themselves can or should become part of this process through their activity, I do not know. It would imply that, besides translating words into equivalents with the same connotations, they might translate texts in such a way that negative images turn into positive ones and vice versa. I would assume that this is where we leave translation studies, unless we consider artistic rewritings of canonical works as other forms of translation. Nevertheless, literature provides at least one convincing example of a “translation” that has coincided with a transformation of values. This example is the very name Caliban, a name that was adopted in the Caribbean as a positive word for the region’s identity and traced to “Carib,” but that had also been given an alternative etymology from the Spanish “canibal” with negative connotations. As Retamar explains it,

“Caliban” is Shakespeare’s anagram for “cannibal,” an expression that he had already used to mean “anthropophagus,” in the third part of *Henry IV* and in *Othello*, and that comes in turn from the word “carib.” Before the arrival of the Europeans, whom they resisted heroically, the Carib Indians were the most valiant and warlike inhabitants of the very lands that we occupy today. Their name lives on in the name Caribbean Sea.... But the name “Carib” itself—as well as in its deformation, “cannibal”—has been perpetuated in the eyes of Europeans above all as a deformation. It is the term in this sense that Shakespeare takes up and elaborates into a complex symbol.²⁵

Retamar also inherited the name Caliban from the Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó (1871-1917), who had used it in his 1900 essay on Latin American identity, *Ariel*, with a negative connotation.²⁶ Though Retamar intends his essay as a tribute to Rodó on the centenary of his birth, he does not identify with Rodó's reading of *The Tempest*, which had taken Caliban for a symbol of materialism and barbarism.²⁷ Instead, he turns Caliban into a powerful token of Latin American identity itself. In this sense, the so-called "dialectic of Caliban" is also at work in Retamar's own essay, and even constitutes its foundational gesture. If it is true, as Eric Cheyfitz has affirmed, that the name Caliban is the place of translation in *The Tempest*,²⁸ we could perhaps say that Retamar's reading turns it into the very place of postcolonial translation itself.²⁹

¹ Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, "Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars" in Bassnett and Trivedi, eds., *Post-Colonial Translation. Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999, 1-18) 2, 5.

² Rob Nixon, "Caribbean and African appropriations of *The Tempest*" (*Critical Inquiry* 13, 1987, 557-578), 575.

³ Roberto Fernández Retamar, "Caliban: Notes towards a Discussion of Our America" [1971] in Idem, *Caliban and Other Essays*, translated by Edward Baker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 3-45 (originally published in *Casa de las Américas*, La Habana, año XI, n.º68, 124-151), 9.

⁴ Fernández Retamar 1989, 5.

⁵ "The cannibalistic metaphor has come to be used to demonstrate to translators what they can do with a text. Translation, says the great Brazilian translator Haraldo de Campos (...) may be likened to a blood transfusion, where the emphasis is on the health and nourishment of the translator" (Bassnett and Trivedi, 5).

⁶ The editors of *Post-Colonial Translation* feel more akin to the postmodern version of postcolonialism as influenced by Homi K. Bhabha. See Bassnett and Trivedi, 6.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of this magazine, see Nadia Lie, *Transición y transacción: La revista cubana "Casa de las Américas."* Gaithersburg, Maryland, and Leuven: Ed. Hispamérica and Leuven University Press, 1996.

⁸ See, for instance, n.º 26 (1964, on the Latin American novel) and n.º42 (1967, on Rubén Darío) of the magazine *Casa de las Américas*.

⁹ Fernández Retamar 1989, 43.

¹⁰ Fidel Castro, *Palabras a los intelectuales* [1961] (La Habana: Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, 1991) 13, my translation.

¹¹ *Casa* 56, 7. For Avila, see Leopoldo Avila, "Sobre algunas corrientes de la crítica y la literatura en Cuba" (*La Gaceta de Cuba*, n.º68, 1968), 3-4.

¹² See Lie 1996, 155-192.

¹³ Heberto Padilla, "Intervención en la Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba" in *Casa de las Américas* (La Habana), año XI, n.º 65-66, 1971, supplement, 191, my translation.

¹⁴ "La Revolución tiene que comprender esa realidad y, por lo tanto, debe actuar de manera que todo ese sector de artistas y de intelectuales que no sean genuinamente revolucionarios, encuentre dentro de la Revolución un campo

donde trabajar y crear y que su espíritu creador, aún cuando no sean escritores o artistas revolucionarios, tenga oportunidad y libertad para expresarse, dentro de la Revolución” (“The Revolution must understand this reality, and must act in such a way that this whole group of artists and intellectuals who are not genuinely revolutionary, finds a place in the revolution in which to work and create and in which their creative spirit can freely express itself, even when they are not revolutionary writers or artists”) (Castro, 12).

¹⁵ Nixon.

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Foreword” in Fernández Retamar, 1989 (vii-xvi), vii.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (*Critical Inquiry* 12, 1985, 243-261, special issue: Race and Writing).

¹⁹ In 1993, Retamar himself acknowledged the widespread character of these “racial” readings, expressing his astonishment and concern about it (Fernández Retamar 1993, 118).

²⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* ([1993] London: Vintage, 1994), 257.

²¹ See, e.g., “But within the colonial world there exists a case unique to the entire planet: a vast zone for which mestizaje is not an accident but rather the essence, the central line: ourselves, ‘our mestizo América’” (Fernández Retamar, 4).

²² Jameson, viii.

²³ Jameson, viii.

²⁴ Fernández Retamar 1989, 16.

²⁵ Fernández Retamar, 1989,6.

²⁶ See, on this essay, Maarten van Delden, “The Survival of the Prettiest: Transmutations of Darwin in José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel*” in Nadia Lie and Theo D’haen, eds., *Constellation Caliban: Figurations of a Character* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1997), 145-161.

²⁷ Fernández Retamar, 1989, 14. See also Fernández Retamar, “Adiós a Calibán” in *Casa de las Américas*, año XXXIII, n.º191, 161-122.

²⁸ Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism, Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* ([1991], Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, expanded edition, 1997) 43, 88.

²⁹ This article is part of the Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek research project “Cross-cultural contacts in Caribbean literatures: theories and models,” which is supervised by Lieven D’hulst (francophone literature) and myself at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.