

RETRANSLATING THE SPANISH CONQUEST: FICTIONAL ACCOUNTS OF REAL INTERPRETERS IN (POST)COLONIAL LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the thematization of the role of colonial interpreters in two contemporary short stories as a narrative resource for the discursive (re)writing and (re)reading of History. Juan José Saer's "*El intérprete*" (1976) and Carlos Fuentes's "*Las dos orillas*" (1993) offer fictional accounts of the lives of two real interpreters during the Spanish Conquest. Their representation of language mediators challenges traditional renderings of translation in a Hispanic colonial setting and foregrounds the importance of otherwise historically disregarded interpreters.

Key words: interpretation, translation, historical fiction, Latin America, Spanish conquest, postcolonial literature.

I. Introduction

With increasing frequency in the last few decades, many Latin American writers have turned to colonial times as backdrop for their writing, springing a revival of historical fiction (see CARPENTIER 1979, POSSE 1983, AGUIRRE 1983, AGUINIS 1991, ROA BASTOS 1992, BOULLOSA 1994, ESQUIVEL 2006, OSPINA 2008, to name but a few amongst many). In most cases, authors are able to grapple with their present time through this historiographical lens, reflecting upon current asymmetrical power dynamics that are product of a colonial past and that still pervade political and social configurations in the Americas now. By (re)imagining and (re)constructing History, Latin American postcolonial fictions encourage reflection upon the present in view of the past, and are therefore also an attempt to give voice to those who have been long marginalized, silenced, and made invisible. It is in this context that it should come as no surprise to find interpreters in these novels, since they were, after all, instrumental to the conquest. Historically, however, interpreters have been disregarded and

undermined, “their relevance in linguistic and cultural exchanges has gone unrecognized or been vilified” (RÍOS CASTAÑO 2005: 58).

In this article, I focus on two short stories that feature interpreters, not as secondary characters, background props, or a necessary evil, but rather, as protagonists. These colonial interpreters are key players in their own stories that barely made it into History. “*El intérprete*” [The Interpreter] (1976, my translation) by Juan José Saer focuses on the figure of Felipillo and “The Two Shores” (1993) by Carlos Fuentes (in Alfred Mac Adam’s translation) recovers the voice of Franciscan Friar Jerónimo de Aguilar. The former was an indigenous man captured by Francisco Pizarro’s soldiers in Peru and a fundamental piece in the negotiations with the Inca Atahualpa, while the latter accompanied conquistador Hernán Cortés as a Mayan-Spanish interpreter in the conquest of Tenochtitlan after being rescued by the Spaniards following eight years amongst the Mayans as a castaway. Having written it during the onset of the bloodiest of the Argentine dictatorships, Saer was able to use history as refuge and literary resource in a moment when addressing the present posed a risk. As for Fuentes, to commemorate five centuries since Columbus’ arrival to the Americas, he published *The Orange Tree*, a collection of stories (which includes “The Two Shores”) and demonstrated the lasting effects of colonial history.

These two stories both challenge and amend traditional colonial power dynamics. They reexamine the beliefs historically associated with the task of translation and reject the long-standing tradition of it being solely dependent on the original in an irredeemable inferior condition—a notion Post-Colonial Studies have turned to in order to challenge the analogous asymmetric power dynamics between the colonizer-colonized relationship (BASSNETT & TRIVEDI 1999). Thus, Saer and Fuentes have managed to underscore the fundamental role language mediators played during colonial times by recreating history and turning them into central characters in their stories. Highlighting the centrality of interpreters in a moment from whose narratives they have remained historically elusive, these contemporary authors offer an approach to translation as a way of apprehending the foreign and empowering the Other.

II. Juan José Saer's "El intérprete" and Carlos Fuentes's "Las dos orillas"

The lack of available resources and research on the interlinguistic mediation and contact in the Hispanic colonies has become commonplace (ARAGUÁS et. al. 2008). In turn, there is very little literature on the translators and interpreters that made the colonial enterprise possible. For example, the absence of translators in Spanish translation history books is very telling, such as in Mendéndez y Pelayo's *Biblioteca de traductores españoles* (1940) and the more recent *Historia de la traducción en España*, edited by Francisco Lafarga y Luis Pegenaute (2004). As Victoria Ríos Castaño points out, "At the time of the conquest, despite being engaged in decisive talks between conquerors and native rulers, their linguistic *savoir-faire* seems to have passed unnoticed as the conquerors were reluctant to acknowledge the role of servants, slaves and women" (RÍOS CASTAÑO 2005: 58). In his introduction "Translation and Identity," Ilan Stavans offers the examples of Melchorejo and Julianillo, two Mayans who aided Cortés in the conquest of Mexico as interpreters after being captured in the Yucatan peninsula, and who are but a passing footnote in history (IX). Bernal Díaz del Castillo seems to be the only conquistador to have mentioned them in his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*. Therefore, it is in the early chronicles and historical documents of the conquest that the point of departure for the fictionalizing of interpreters can be found (RÍOS CASTAÑO 2005: 58). Literary resources shape our construction of History and fiction often mirrors it. In *Valiente mundo nuevo*, Carlos Fuentes refers to Bernal Díaz del Castillo as the founder of Mexican Literature. "Es nuestro primer novelista" [he is our first novelist], he says (74, my translation). Thus, the current persistence with which translators and interpreters appear depicted in contemporary literature in Spanish –the Fictional Turn of Translation Studies– can therefore be traced back to colonial times.

In fact, both "El intérprete" and "The Two Shores" reproduce narrative devices typical of colonial chronicles, and especially of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (here in Alfred Maudslay's translation). Firstly, these narratives all take on a retrospective viewpoint. Bernal Díaz wrote his chronicle over thirty years after the events had occurred and died before they were ever published. Saer's narrator speaks from the perspective of an "indio ya viejo que vaga por la selva en silencio" [old Indian who wanders the

jungle in silence] (162), while Fuentes's narrates from the tomb, after a "horrible death, painful, incurable" (3). Therefore, these stories operate in a way that is intrinsically translational. They reflect back, they read the 15th century with 20th century's eyes, bestowing a present tense on a previous text, re-elaborating the original, and offering a new reading of it.

Furthermore, Bernal Díaz's emphasizes the importance of the first-person account, legitimizing his own eye-witness version of the events. For example, it is through him that we learn about Malinche's vital participation in the conquest of Tenochtitlan. Marina, Malinalli, Malinche, the woman of many names and different tongues, was first Aguilar's counterpart in the translation enterprise that was the conquest, interpreting from his Mayan into Nahuatl. She later learned Spanish, making Aguilar expendable and becoming Hernán Cortés's sole advisor and intermediary. According to Stavans, Malinche "understood the role of translator as loyalist and charlatan: aside from interpreting her function was to advance her lover's military purposes"; therefore, while other interpreters, such as Melchorejo and Julianillo, remain in the shadows, Malinche has become famous, or rather, infamous: "her stature inspires and infuriates, so much so that Mexicans call *malinchista* a person who sells his country to foreign forces for his own sake" (STAVANS 1997: X). From essays on Mexican national identity (PAZ 1950, 2004), to literary renditions (ROSSET 2004, ESQUIVEL 2006, to name a few), to Chicana feminist reappropriations (see ALARCÓN 1989, BIRMINGHAM-POKORNY 1996, and GOYADOL 2012, for example), the figure of Malinche has been studied amply (MESSINGER CYPESS 1991),

making her a unique exception in the general obscurity of colonial interpreters. Nonetheless, she is still never mentioned by name once in the chronicles of Mexico's conquistador. Her presence is an absence – but, perhaps it is this invisibility that accounts for her real power. In Bernal Díaz's version of history, the indigenous interpreter's instrumentality is fundamental, while the figure of Cortés is minimized. After all, he referred to as "*Señor Malinche*" for a reason. For Bernal Díaz, Cortés was nothing without his interpreter, to whom the chronicler pays his respect by calling her "*doña*": "thanks be to God, things prospered with us (...) because without the help of Dona Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico" (135). Whereas Cortés aims to become a larger than life figure by

presenting himself in his chronicle as the sole conquistador of the New World, Bernal Díaz claims to narrate the true history by recognizing the figures that fought and participated in battles - ordinary people like himself without whom the conquest never would have been possible. In their short stories, Fuentes and Saer's characters also strive to achieve what has always been the ultimate goal of colonial chronicles: to become the real, true, version of history. Thus, Aguilar and Felipillo's accounts are narrated in the first person, and they are testimonies of action: "All this I saw" opens the story of "The Two Shoes" (3, my emphasis). "*Si miro el horizonte, me parece que empezaré a ver, otra vez, los barcos carniceros avanzando desde el mar hacia la costa*" [If I look at the horizon, I feel I will start seeing, again, those butcher ships advancing from the sea to the shore] (160, my emphasis), says Felipillo while walking on the seashore.

The seashore is indeed a place of enunciation for both interpreters, a place that for Ribas "manifests the liminal, borderline condition of what Homi Bhabha calls the 'freak social and cultural displacements' that epitomize contemporary literature" (150). This liminality is also typical of the language mediator and is used as a metaphor for understanding colonialism through the lens of a contemporary and postmodern text. Fragmented, unstable, treacherous, living in the "in-between," the translator has become the epitome of the contemporary novel; it is indeed telling that the authors have chosen interpreters as protagonists to reread the colonial period, considering their split personalities and divided loyalties. In both cases, the narrators have a dual cultural and linguistic sense of belonging. In Saer's story, Felipillo is yet another anonymous character in history. In fact, we do not even know his real name, only the one given to him when "*los carniceros tocaron con una cruz la frente del niño que yo era*" [the butchers touched with a cross the forehead of the child I used to be] (160). Touched by the symbol of the institution and reborn as Christian, Felipillo bears from his conception the seed of betrayal: "*Empecé a ser Filipillo, el hombre dotado de una lengua doble, como la de las víboras*" [I started being Felipillo, the man gifted with a double tongue, like that of snakes] (161). Felipillo narrates from the shore as he compares himself to sea foam, dividing the ocean from the continent, belonging to none. Like foam, Felipillo feels ephemeral and unstable. Taken from his indigenous community, Felipillo does not find refuge amongst the Spanish; his split position creates vulnerability, and Felipillo resents his condition:

Me siento como atravesando una región en la que hay zonas diurnas y nocturnas (...) Las palabras pasaban por mí (...) Yo fui la línea de blancura, inestable, agitada, que separó los dos ejércitos formidables, como la franja de espuma separa la arena amarilla del mar (161)

[I feel like I'm piercing into a region of diurnal and nocturnal zones (...) Words were going through me (...) I was the line of whiteness, unstable, agitated, that separated the two formidable armies, like the fringe of foam that separates the yellow sand from the sea]

In Fuentes's story, the choice of Aguilar as narrator and protagonist is already telling. He is the marginal character in a history taken over by Malinche. He is a castaway, and later a "throwaway" character, who gets reincorporated into Western society only to be displaced in favor of an indigenous woman. He had, however, found a home amongst the Mayas, and refers to Mexico as his "adoptive country" (22). In opposition to Felipillo, it is precisely this merging of cultures that in fact poses a problem for him: "I found myself divided between Spain and the New World. I knew both shores" (22). Thus, both protagonists are the analogous reverse of each other. Felipillo is separated from his indigenous community and is seduced by the Spanish power: "*Me avergoncé de nuestras ciudades toscas y humildes (...) Vi fluir desde el mar un chorro desplegado de gloria y abundancia*" [I was ashamed of our rough and humble cities (...) I saw flowing from the sea an unfurling stream of glory and abundance] (160), he confesses. Separated from his Spanish expedition, Aguilar blends in with the Indians: "No one among us had ever seen a city more splendid than Moctezuma's capital" (14), he remembers. In both cases, there is a strong attraction to the Other that makes them question their own identity and sense of belonging, which now becomes fragile and destabilized to the point of not being able to tell which is which anymore. (LOGIE 2003: 125).

The interstitial shore, the in-between space that, according to Bhabha, is a place of "overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (2), creates cracks within the identities of the interpreters, which is then echoed in the way that they translate. In both cases, the interpreters deliberately lie and translate incorrectly. The faithfulness of the interpreter becomes a question of loyalty towards the cultural surroundings in which they now live. "*Las palabras salían como flechas y se clavaban en mí resonando. ¿Entendí lo mismo que me dijeron? ¿Devolví lo mismo que recibí?*" [The words were coming out of me like

arrows and pounded like reverberations. Did I understand the same thing they told me? Did I give back that which I received?] (161), asks Felipillo. "I translated as I pleased (...) I translated, I betrayed, I invented" (10), confesses Aguilar, who condemned the behavior of the conquistadores in the Americas. Cortés's interpreter translated his friendly words as violent and threatening, as to alert the indigenous people to his real intentions. However, his translations as "a falsifier, a traitor" (10) were not far from the truth: "By translating the conquistador I lied. And yet, I spoke the truth" (30), he admits. He's a faithful, treacherous interpreter.

In both cases, there is also an emotional conflict that affects the faithfulness of their translation: "A woman was to blame" (11), explains Aguilar. In the trial against Ataliba (a fictionalized Atahualpa), there is a lustful motive triggering Felipillo's betrayal, and the sentencing of the Inca almost becomes a crime of passion. In love with one of his concubines, the interpreter impulsively sets the execution into motion:

Cuando mis ojos, durante el juicio, se clavaban en las tetas azules de la mujer de Ataliba, tetas a las que la ausencia de la mano de Ataliba permitiría, tal vez, la visita de mis dedos ávidos, ¿la turbación desfiguraba el sentido de las palabras que resonaban en el recinto inmóvil? (...) Mi lengua fue como la bandeja doble sobre cuyos platos elásticos se asentaban cómodamente la mentira y la conspiración (161).

[When my eyes, during the trial, were fixed on the blue breasts of Ataliba's woman, breasts that the absence of his hand might, perhaps, allow the visit of my avid fingers, did the bewilderment disfigure the sense of the words that echoed in the motionless enclosure? (...) My tongue was like the double tray where lying and conspiring laid down comfortably over its elastic plates]

Repentant, Felipillo wanders aimlessly as punishment for his betrayal, and the initial image of the white foam finds new meaning in a white wall, the debris standing as testimony of the city that the Spaniards would never finish constructing: "*Pienso que la lengua carnicera es para mí como esa pared, compacta, inútil y sin significado y que me enceguece cuando la luz rebota contra su cara estragada y árida*" [I believe the butcher tongue is for me like that wall, compact, useless, and meaningless, and that it blinds me when the light bounces against its ravaged and arid face] (162). The barrier, once frothy and malleable, becomes a rigid wall; yet, while rubble, it remains secure and forceful, continuing to separate him from his origins. Through his

translation, Felipillo disturbs indigenous hierarchies, and while captivated by the Other, he challenges their central power.

In Aguilar's case, it is spitefulness and disillusion that bring him to commit infidelity. Aguilar had originally seen in Malinche an ideal companion, a half-breed, a hybrid like himself. He believed that together, they would have been an "invincible couple because we understood the two voices of Mexico" (32). However, Cortés put a stop to this dream, turning Malinche, who had learned the language of the conquistador, into his interpreter, lover, and counselor. Aguilar is fuming:

All this did La Malinche translate from Mexican into Spanish, while I, Jerónimo de Aguilar, the first of all the interpreters, remained in a kind of limbo, waiting for my time to translate into Castilian, until I realized, perhaps stupefied (...) I realized that Jerónimo de Aguilar was no longer needed. The diabolical female was translating everything, this bitch of a Marina, this whore who learned to speak Spanish. This scoundrel, this trickster, this expert in sucking, the conquistador's concubine, had stolen my professional singularity away from me, the function where there was no substitute for me, my-to coin a word- my *monopoly* over the Castilian language (...) This language was no longer mine alone (24-5, emphasis in the original)

Whereas Aguilar takes revenge because he is displaced from his place of power, Felipillo seeks revenge by taking advantage of the power he gained when he became an interpreter. Felipillo rebels against the Incan leader that had oppressed indigenous groups similar to his own; Aguilar betrays the Spanish conquistador because of the crimes committed against his brothers, his "true friends" of Yucatán (27). In both cases, these characters have a power-challenging attitude, a betrayal hidden behind a faithful alliance with the Other.

Through a contemporary reading, their betrayal, the infamous *traduttore traditore* condemnation, is actually celebrated. Through his mistranslation, Felipillo "puts the original in motion to decolonize it, giving it the movement of fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile" (DE MAN, cited in BHABHA 1994: 326). By revealing the truth behind a bad translation, Aguilar transforms into a subversive translator; in Suzanne Jill Levine's sense of the word, subversion indicating a sub-version where "the word is dissected to

reveal another meaning, a 'version underneath,' a potential version that the original imparts through the magical art of translation" (iii). These fragile destabilizations of their identities are thus now seen as places of empowerment.

III. Conclusion

The short stories "*El intérprete*" by Juan José Saer and "The Two Shores" by Carlos Fuentes travel thematically and stylistically through time, offering fictional accounts of real colonial events foregrounding a contemporary take on translation. In a postcolonial gesture of writing-back, the stories by Saer and Fuentes invite readers to rethink the Americas' colonial past through its overlooked characters, and they do so by featuring language mediator protagonists. The interpreters in these stories can be understood as "people who inhabit frontiers between worlds, or as *bisagras* (hinges) who serve as connections between disparate knowledges, cultures, and places" (MALLON 2012: 4). But the dialogue between cultures is hardly ever a clean and seamless process, and it is precisely for this reason that translation is vital and mistranslation can hold so much importance. As becomes evident in the stories by Saer and Fuentes, there is a recognition of the power of translation as a tool for resistance, and the opportunities that mistranslation can provide for this purpose. Whereas an interpreter's cultural dual belonging has historically been motive of suspicion and discredit, stories like the ones analyzed here allow us to see the interpreter's double role as "a strength, one perhaps indicative of the complex communications found in the hybridized conditions characteristic of many cultures today" (TYMOCZKO & GENTZLER 2002: XIX). The seashore, the in-between of the colonial experience, is now a site of creative resistance that challenges the hierarchical and asymmetrical power dynamics between original/translation and colonizer/colonized.

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