TOWARD A LIMITED PLURALIST APPROACH TO TRANSLATION: TRANSLATING JOSÉ ISAACSON'S *LA REALIDAD METAFÍSICA DE FRANZ KAFKA*

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The Argentine, José Isaacson, a prominent poet and essayist who recently died, wrote a remarkably thoughtful and insightful prose work, *La realidad metafísca de Franz Kafka (The Metaphysical Reality of Franz Kafka)*. Isaacson's analysis of how we still struggle with the same social and cultural issues that Kafka confronts within his work, Isaacson's fluidity with the philosophical ideas and critiques underpinning Kafka's writings, and his dexterity in showing that they are our problems as well make both Kafka's and Issacson's works very relevant. His ability to weave together Kafka's stories with his diary entries and his life offer perceptive and unique insights into how Kafka affirms that there are different realities and that he wanted his work to be read on a metaphysical realm. This perspective speaks to how Kafka's Jewish heritage influenced his writing. At the same time, Isaacson's reading of Kafka provides insight into Isaacson's poetry. After reading *La realidad metafísica de Franz Kafka*, I decided that the work deserves to be translated into English so it could reach a larger audience.

I proceeded to translate this work and have revised it numerous times. I am currently working on my sixth revision. I have given some thought to what theoretical approaches or methods have governed my translation work. I concluded that it is the same approach that I bring to literature in general and literary criticism, a limited pluralist approach, which, in my opinion, is the foundation for Postmodernism. In this paper, first I will explain exactly what a limited pluralist methodology entails, illustrate how Jorge Luis Borges, José Ortega y Gasset, Eugene Nida, and Edith Grossman express perspectives, opinions and ideas that correlate with a limited pluralist perspective although often using different terminology. Then I will discuss how my own approach to the translation I am working on fits into the limited pluralist model.

In its foundation, a limited pluralism engages questions about knowledge and what we can know with certainty. It argues that universal concepts such as truth, objectivity, beauty in a work of art, questions of meaning, and purpose in our lives, the existence or

non-existence of God or of a divine being, the one correct sacred text, certainty in interpreting complex texts, knowledge about the order of the cosmos, etc., may exist but are beyond our understanding as human beings. Any answers are at best subjective and unknown with real certainty. A healthy skepticism and a sense of humility are critical to this vision of the world. The pluralist constantly challenges the monists who assert certainty in these questions. It says to them, give me your best argument, and I will show you that there are other perspectives, other ways of viewing and understanding your approach. The image that is often used is that of the wheel with infinite spokes. As humans with limitations, not gods, we are in the center trying to understand our world. The spokes represent our systems, our philosophies, our religions, our constructs, individuals trying to explain and make sense of the world. We may be able to grasp a part of that outer circumference, but we will never truly answer these most important questions. The outer rim represents those ideals and that knowledge that we seek.

This approach is not nihilistic. It suggests that positive knowledge may be possible, that we should continue to create our systems, our histories, our explanations of the world, but should be aware of their limitations and realize that there may always be another perspective, another reality.[1]

What does a limited pluralist perspective have to do with translation? Borges, in «Las versiones homéricas» («The Homeric Versions») says: «Ningún problema [es] tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción… El concepto de texto definitivo de un texto no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio» (239). («No problema is as consubstantial with literature and the modest mysteries that encompass it as those of translation. The concept of the definitive text belong only to the realms of religión and exhaustion.») The same sort of issues that literature and literary criticism confront also apply to translations. Ortega y Gasset, in his essay, «Miseria y esplendor de la traducción» («The Misery and Splendor of Translation») asserts that any translation is a utopian undertaking, but then argues that all human projects are utopian in scope:

[1] For further reading about this, see Wayne Booth, Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism, Matei Calinescu, «From the One to the Many: Pluralism in Today's Thought» and Mark Frisch, You Might Be Able to Get There from Here: Reconsidering Borges and the Postmodern.

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Menard did with Cervantes. But again, because translation matters, it is important that we try.

Eugene Nida expresses qualities of translation that are very similar to what I have defined as a limited pluralist perspective. Nida begins his article, «Principles of Correspondence» by stating:

> Since no two languages are identical, either in the meaning given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations. The total impact of a translation may be reasonably close to the original, but there can be no identity in detail…One must not imagine that the process of translation can avoid a certain degree of interpretation by the translator. In fact, as D.G. Rossetti stated in 1874 (Fang 1953), «A translation remains perhaps the most direct form of commentary» (*The Translation Studies Reader,* 2021:174)

Nida affirms here that the ideal of an identical equivalent in translation is unattainable, and that all translations are to some extent interpretations as well, and says that in translating, one must seek the closest possible equivalent. He views the practice of translation as relational and defines two types of translation, «formal» and «dynamic». «Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content» (*The Translation Studies Reader,* 2021:174). Such a translation focuses on form and content literally and in a meaningful way. In poetry, a formal translation would attempt to render the structure, the syntax and idiom, content, themes, ideas, and concepts in as close an approximation as possible. Dynamic equivalence seeks a complete naturalness of expression with a focus on the audience's «relevant modes of behavior in the context of his own culture» (*The Translation Studies Reader,* 2021: p 174). The translators are less concerned with the audience knowing the cultural patterns of the source language than assuring that the translation can relate to the culture of the receiving audience. Nida emphasizes that with both translations, there are varying shades of gray. In defining what is a good or a proper translation Nida affirms a diverse vision. He states the following:

> Definitions of proper translating are almost as numerous and varied as the persons who have undertaken to discuss the subject. This diversity is in a sense quite understandable; for there are vast differences in the materials translated, in the purposes of the publication, and in the needs of the prospective audience. Moreover, live languages are constantly changing, and stylistic preferences undergo continual modification.

> Thus, a translation acceptable in one period is often quite unacceptable at a later time. (*The Translation Studies Reader,* 2021: 175).

Again, Nida's pluralist attitudes along with his respect for certain limits are clear here.

Edith Grossman's thoughts and ideas are also similar to Borges and Nida. Grossman, who has translated a number of Hispanic texts into English, was invited to deliver a series of lectures at Yale University on the theme, Why Translation Matters? These lectures have been published as a book with that title, *Why Translation Matters.* In those lectures she states that she does not espouse any specific theory of translation, but many of her perceptive comments shed light on her thoughts about specific translation issues. Those ideas often correspond with the thinking of a limited pluralist. Regarding whether translators are simply servants of the publishing industry, she replies with «a resounding yet decorous» no, and proceeds to describe what translators do:

> For the most fundamental description of what translators do is that we write —perhaps rewrite— in language B a work of literature originally composed in language A, hoping that readers of the second language -– I mean, of course, readers of translation— will perceive the text, emotionally and artistically, in a manner that parallels and corresponds to the esthetic experience of its first readers. This is the translator's grand ambition. Good translations approach that purpose. Bad translations never leave the starting line. (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 9)

From these comments, clearly a translator's work is not simply mechanical and literal. Capturing the esthetic, artistic and emotional qualities of a work are a central goal. Her description of good translations as «approaching that goal» suggests that the «perfect translation» its ultimate attainment may be beyond our reach. It's an attitude that Borges, Ortega y Gasset, and Nida share and corresponds with what a limited pluralist approach would affirm.

She then goes on to describe what the translator must consider in translating, and connects translation with the act of criticism and interpretation:

> The undeniable reality is that the work becomes the translator's (while simultaneously and mysteriously somehow remaining the work of the original author) as we transmute it into a second language. Perhaps *transmute* is the wrong verb; what we do is not an act of magic, like altering base metals into precious ones, but the result of a series of

> creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism. In the process of translating, we endeavor to hear the first version of the work as profoundly and completely as possible, struggling to discover the linguistic charge, the structural rhythms, the complexities of meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing, and the ambient, cultural inferences and conclusions these tonalities allow us to extrapolate. This is a kind of reading as deep as any encounter with a literary text can be. (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 8-9)

Grossman suggests that what the translators try to do is much like what Pierre Menard does in Borges' short story. The translators totally immerse themselves in the work and attempt to express that in a different language. It is an act of reading and of literary criticism, but also with creativity, implying that the autonomy of the translated work is an offshoot of the original text and an independent, creative text in itself. Grossman later refers to Ortega y Gasset's essay on translation that refers to translation as a Utopian endeavor that is unrealizable, and discusses what fidelity to the original actually means: «In translation, the ongoing, absolutely utopian idea is fidelity. But fidelity should never be confused with literalness» (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 67). She takes issue with Vladimir Nabokov's assertion in his translation of *Onegin* that translators should emphasize literalness in their translations. Grossman counters that «literalism is a clumsy, unhelpful concept that radically skews and oversimplifies the complicated relationship between translation and an original. The languages we speak and write are too sprawling, too unruly to be successfully contained» (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 67). The languages, with their long cultural traditions, are so filled with variations in meanings, with slang, with subtleties and oblique references that they can never dovetail exactly. Any dictionary, when it is first published is twenty years out of date because languages are living, evolving entities. Instead, the good translation pays attention to the tone, intentions, and the level of discourse rather than being faithful to just the words or syntax. (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 67-75)[2]. Implicit in all of these comments is the sense that the task is Herculean, Utopian, unattainable in its perfect form and very much relative to one's time and place. This corresponds very clearly with a limited pluralist perspective.

[2] Jaques Derrida, in «What is a 'Relevant' Translation?» discusses this problem with literal translations of words, and suggests that works are untranslatable.

Grossman acknowledges that translating poetry creates special problems for a translator, because the «sound, sense and form» are so integral to poetry.

> How can you separate the inseparable? The simultaneous, indissoluble components of a poetic statement have to be re-created in another language without violating them beyond recognition, but the knotty perplexing quandary is that in the poet's conception of the work, those elements are not disconnected but are all present at once in the imaging of the poem (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 95).

The translator may search for the right words as the poet did, but in order to do so, the structures, syntax and general language of the poem may have to be altered. The translator is separating the inseparable (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 95). All of Edith Grossman's comments on the importance of translation, on translation as a Utopian undertaking, on the role of the translator as critic, and on the autonomy of the translation align with the thinking of a limited pluralist approach.

The challenges that Edith Grossman describes concerning translating poetry into another language are similar to what I faced as well in translating José Isaacson's prose work. Although the book is written in prose, as a poet, Isaacson's prose often waxes poetic. As several of the translators I have referred to above assert, any translation is not the copying of the work, but the creation of a new work. It is impossible for the translator to completely capture and represent the culture, the milieu, and the author's individual experiences that went into the writing of the original work, its tone and syntax and lexicon, but we must make our best attempt. That is particularly true when translating the work of a poet such as Isaacson. In the following quotation in Isaacson's introduction where he states that he has been embracing and struggling with Kafka's works for the last fifty (50) years, Isaacson plays with the titles of Kafka's works:

> Con los días que se sucedieron, mi relación con Kafka se proyectó en varios libros y ensayos. Éste que ahora entrego incluye no sólo maduraciones de algunos textos que crecieron conmigo sin otros escritos que tal vez, en los próximos cincuenta años, sigan el mismo *proceso* y sin abandonar *América,* me concedan un gran escritorio en el *castillo»* (Isaacson *La realidad metafísica de Franz Kafka [2005] 10*).
>
> (With the passing of time, my relationship with Kafka was projected in various books and essays. These that I now offer, not only the maturation of some texts that grew with me but also other writings that perhaps in

> the next fifty years, may continue the same *trial,* and without abandoning *America,* may grant me a large desk in the *castle.*)

Isaacson is saying that his own writing in some sense is an expression of Kafka's, which means that to do justice to it, I must be familiar with Kafka's writings as well. Isaacson's playfulness here also underscores that he is a poet. The question becomes in translating it, how to represent that in English. Sometimes the English translation has a similar sound sequence. More often, though, it does not.

So what to do? Literalness is not an option. It will not do justice to the work. Efraín Kristal asserts that for Borges, being faithful is not whether you change the words, but whether you capture the essence of the work or whether you change it: «A faithful translation, for Borges, retains the meaning and effects of the work, whereas the unfaithful translation changes them» (*Invisible Work: Borges and Translation.* 2002: 32-33).

There is another aspect of doing a translation that I am not sure I can explain. I am not a mystic, but the experience or the sense of it is almost mystical. In doing the translation of a poet like Isaacson, I have been very concerned about what his intention is in what he is asserting, and I have tried to capture that accurately in English. From time to time, I seemed to hit on a phrase or sentence that I thought was just perfect. It almost seemed as if Isaacson and I were one, and that I was expressing it in English just as he would have done it. Edith Grossman refers to that sensation as well. She talks about being lucky enough to hit a «sweet spot» from time to time «when I can imagine that the author and I have started to speak together—never in unison, certainly, but in a kind of satisfying harmony» (*Why Translation Matters* 2010: 82).

There are other issues as well. One concerned gender neutrality. Isaacson frequently employed the word «hombre», «man» to mean «people» or «humans or «humanity». Our current practice is to try to keep the language gender neutral. Ultimately, I decided that whenever I could use a gender-neutral word or expression in those situations, I would do so. If it sounded rather awkward like that, I reverted to the way it was.

Another problem concerned translation and Isaacson's topic. Isaacson, a Spanish speaking Argentine, was writing about a German speaking Czechoslovakian. Whenever Isaacson quoted

Kafka, he gave the Spanish translation of Kafka's text. Isaacson did not indicate how he arrived at his Spanish translation. Was he using a Spanish translation of the texts that someone translated, or was he translating Kafka's text himself from the German? Since he doesn't mention anything about using someone else's translation, I would assume that it is his own translation, but I am not certain of that. Either way, for me to translate his Spanish translation of Kafka into English seemed foolish, because then it would be a translation of a translation. While I do have knowledge of the German language, I wasn't satisfied that my command of German was adequate for me to translate Kafka. Thus, I opted for using a widely accepted English translation of the Kafka texts that Isaacson translated into Spanish. However, Isaacson did not always clearly state which work or Diary entry he was citing. If I could not locate the original quotation in Kafka's writings, I translated Isaacson's Spanish translation into English. This issue underscores the impossibility of simply «copying» a literary text into another language.

It is clear that the single, perfect, Utopian authoritative, correct translation of Isaacson's book or any book is not possible. The best anyone can do is try to obtain as complete an understanding of Isaacson's social and cultural contexts, of the philosophical, social, cultural and literary ideas and concepts he addresses, and the language he uses and then search in English for the language (syntax, lexicon, tone and style) that will best express those thoughts, concepts and ideas. I realize that translators interpret any work they translate, that Isaacson's original work is the inspiration for my work, but that my work is also independent of Isaacson's work.

Using Borges's Ortega y Gasset's, Nida's and Grossman's theoretical discussions of translation along with my own experience with translation, I have attempted to define certain visions, values, ideas and concepts that would represent a postmodern, pluralist approach to translation, an approach that respects certain boundaries or limits on that pluralism. The aspects of the pluralism and its boundaries that I have highlighted are by no means exclusive. They are simply a starting point in imagining and fleshing out what a limited pluralist approach to translation entails and exploring, discovering and addressing its limits.

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