

## Some Spanish studies of translation (review article)

**Anthony Pym**

*Published in Translation and Literature* 10/2 (2001): 289-205.

*Traducción, emigración y culturas*. Edited by Miguel Hernando de Larramendi and Juan Pablo Arias. Pp 286. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 1999. Pb. € 12.02.

*Orientalismo, exotismo y traducción*. Edited by Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla and Manuel C. Feria García. Pp 247. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2000. Pb. € 12.02.

*Traducir la edad media: La traducción de la literatura medieval románica*. Edited by Juan Paredes and Eva Muñoz Raya. Pp 465. Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 1999. Pb. No price indicated.

Translation Studies is alive and well in Spain. At last count the country had some 27 universities with specialized translator training of one kind or another, teaching almost 7,000 students at any given moment. This is a significant institutional base for serious academic work. A few fundamental reference texts are also well in place, notably Julio-César Santoyo's excellent anthology of Hispanic translation theory since the 14th century (*Teoría y crítica de la traducción: antología*, Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 1987) and Francisco Lafarga's similarly essential multilingual anthology of Western translation theories (*El discurso sobre la traducción en la historia*, Barcelona: EUB, 1996). More recently we have José Francisco Ruiz Casanova's reference archeology (*Aproximación a una historia de la traducción en España*, Madrid: Cátedra, 2000), which systematically lists translators and translations for each century of Spanish literature. In the background, the extent of research may be grasped from the 6,000 or so Hispanic books and articles on translation listed in Santoyo's *Bibliografía de la traducción* (León: Universidad de León, 1996). And beyond that lie the growing lists of corpora and theses from Spain's ten or so doctoral programs in Translation Studies. Each year Spain probably organizes more conferences on translation than any other country, attracting the main international names and exchanging reams of papers. There is a whole lot of Translation Studies going on.

Yet very little of this activity has had much impact outside of Spain; few of the names are cited; virtually none of the books are translated out of Spanish. One of the reasons for this is obvious enough to be dispensed with forthwith: many of the publications, including those to be addressed here, are heavily subsidized and are printed by university presses that are relatively unconcerned with distribution and sales. Many, including the random sample that has fallen to us here, are thinly disguised conference proceedings, edited with few visible selection criteria, very roughly organized in terms of thematics, and strung together without minimal scholarly apparatuses like abstracts, notes on authors, or indices of names and subjects. Everyone goes to the conference, almost everyone gets published, and the result is too often a curriculum-building jamboree where any linear reader of the product simply has to take the rough with the smooth. As a result, much of the quantitatively impressive work in Spanish Translation Studies remains relatively unstructured and unfiltered, tapering off into parallel play as mutual respect. Notably lacking are across-the-board evaluative criteria or central points

of reference, such as might be in evidence if Spain had a solidly refereed academic journal like *Translation and Literature*, to name a random example. There is no such journal; the publications generally do not function as qualitative filters; we have to work with what is there. Which, if understood against this background, is sometimes surprisingly good.

The volume *Traducción, emigración y culturas* (Translation, emigration and cultures) brings together papers presented at a conference organized by the Escuela de Traductores de Toledo en 1996. As such, it might be taken as a worthy representative of the many interesting symposia and courses put together by this young institution, founded in 1994 and ostensibly dedicated to exchanges between Hispanic, Arabic and Hebrew cultures (recalling the mission of the Toledan translators of the 12th and 13th centuries). What we have here is an admirably interdisciplinary and intercultural volume. It starts with broadly sociological surveys of immigration policies in France, the Netherlands and the Spanish education system, presenting a European social reality that is only now becoming truly problematic in Spain, long a country of emigration rather than immigration. This forms the backdrop for a series of texts on ‘cultural markets’, focusing specifically on the situation of Arabic culture within European contexts: the politics of publishing, of journals, of the Arabic service of the BBC, and of various NGOs. Only then do we enter the very pragmatic problems of translation, with Roberto Mayoral and others writing on the translation of official texts for immigrants, and Karima Hajajj and Manuel Fera García explaining their work as sworn interpreters in legal settings. Amid several displays of irrelevant erudition, this same section also includes texts that we would recognize as straight criticism and theory. Basil Hatim, published in English, analyzes the way Arabic literature tends to be excessively domesticated (through ‘overshooting’) when translated into English. Ovidi Carbonell, whom we shall soon meet in a slightly different context, mulls over various postmodern and postcolonial approaches to these problems and warns against their ‘facile macrological solutions to problems that can only be solved micrologically, in the everyday processes of opposing, constructing, representing and displacing’ (172). And that is perhaps the basic message to be gleaned from the interdisciplinary perspective of the volume: despite the grand theories, the cultural situations configured by immigration are irredeemably complex, to be worked on phrase-by-phrase, at the level of practice. In keeping with this vision, the final section of the book offers five reflections on literature and exile, written by exiled writers, all of them translated here from Arabic or, in the case of the Turkish writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar, from German. If read by themselves, these final texts might seem just so many writers spinning out their writerly platitudes. In this context, though, the personal experiences, often tragic yet narrated in calm and sometimes ironic voices, show human souls within the social statistics. There, perhaps, we also locate the practical role of literary translation in the vital and turbulent remix of cultures: this is a book that not only accords translation a role, but sets about achieving that task by translating. If only other collective publications were as clear in their aims.

*Orientalismo, exotismo y traducción* (Orientalism, exoticism and translation) is another set of proceedings from the Escuela de Traductores de Toledo (actually number 8 in the series), tackling many of the same themes and in some cases with the same contributors. Far from applying the critique of orientalism such as found in Edward Said, the volume starts from an orient within, namely that Semitic part of Hispanic culture that was indeed the first Orient for the West. Introductory historical studies thus seek to undo the ‘essentialist’ myth of an ideal Islamic element in the Hispanic Middle Ages. Eduardo Manzano Moreno does this by tracing the development of Arabic studies in Spain, seen

as a historical discipline emerging in the 19th century and participating in the identity search triggered by the defeats of 1898. The tone here is self-confident critique of one's own past. The classical research in which Miguel Asín Palacios proclaimed the Islamic within Hispanic glory, arguing for example that a Toledan translation from Arabic influenced the eschatology of Dante, is here criticized through simple guilt by association: the same Asín Palacios apparently believed that cultural affinity also made Moroccans fight in Franco's army (33-35). Thus would the current historian (Manzano Moreno) distance the idealizations of the past. Spain is no longer under Franco; many myths can be undone. Yet the democratic critique still does little to address the historical facts, nor does it provide many new ideas about the part of the Hispanic that remains undoubtedly Semitic and quite possibly exotic. Further, philological investigation here offers unfortunately little help with such questions. Federico Corriente, for example, defines the term 'culture' in such a way that 'in the Iberian peninsula there were only two cultures in the Middle Ages: the Hispanic in the Christian kingdoms of the north, and the Arabic, following by all the inhabitants of Al-Andalus' (45). One or the other, us or them, no matter what the role of the Mozarabs, Jews, Moriscos, Berbers, French and other cultural groups that were all at work there. This is essentialist binarism, of precisely the kind that other historians are seeking to undo. So what are the writers, translators and translation scholars to make of such questions?

A few pages by Salvador Peña, vaguely inspired by Baudrillard, claim that answers will come by considering the logic of Al-Andalus from within, from its language, and by questioning the reigning concepts of the exotic. What this means in practical terms is anyone's guess. A long study by Eva Lapiedra, on the Medieval Arabic terms used to describe Christians, might seem to fit the bill. It produces many interesting words yet few clear conclusions, apart from a certain admiration for the 'blurring of the division between the self and the other', considered 'an important part of Islamic-Christian relations' (77). This might be a case of internal philological understanding coming up with many actual answers, if only the initial questions had not been lost in the process. Much the same could be said for the series of studies that then trace the ways North Africa was seen by a various writers. All very interesting, but to what purpose? And then, such things appear to have little relation to Alberto Gómez Font's engaging study of official translators in the Spanish protectorate in Morocco, faced with the dilemma of working into Classical or Moroccan Arabic. This, at least, was a real historical dilemma, with a range of historical answers.

The strongest section of this book is undoubtedly the last, where the problems of exoticism and translation are dealt with most directly. Bernabé López García presents a rich and detailed survey of the way translations were a necessary part of the development of Arabic studies in Spain, with numerous links with the French Romantic tradition. Juan Pablo Arias recounts Spanish receptions of the Qur'an, revealing on the one hand a tradition of willful ignorance lasting some four centuries, and on the other a wealth of translations since 1951. Richard van Leeuwen, published here in English, then traces European receptions of the *Thousand and One Nights*, superficially entertaining because of receptive ambivalence between fairy tales and pornography, yet also operative here as a contribution to the theoretical debate. Van Leeuwen argues, with the art historian John Mackenzie, that Orientalism was never a system 'but rather many different representations of the Orient reflecting a variety of attitudes organized within cultural currents' (198). This is indeed more like what one tends to find in any history of translations. And that position—which becomes Bakhtinian dialogue for van Leeuwen—can usefully be opposed to the Foucauldian model of Said, whose systemic

concept of Orientalism here receives a drubbing. For van Leeuwen, exoticizing translation can thus work within serious attempts to come to terms with the other. Unfortunately he finds no particular place for the Hispanic in this dialogue, and Dolores Cinca's appended study of Spanish translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* reveals little more than that the text still sells. Further, the few texts offered here by actual translators do little more than argue against the 'exotic' in the name of 'exactitude' or 'understanding cultural institutions', an opposition that was scarcely at stake in the debate as such. Ovidi Carbonell, who criticized broad postcolonial approaches in the volume reviewed above, nevertheless partly follows van Leeuwen in directly tackling the question of why exoticizing strategies remain commercially successful when presenting things Arabic (cf. Paul Bowles). He proposes that the exotic is in some way necessary to literary translation, as part of not only the literary itself but also as a way of presenting the other as a coherent alternative to the known (179). Such arguments make Carbonell one of the real thinkers in a new generation of Spanish Translation Studies. Yet one suspects he has left much unsaid. The article presented here remains paradoxically exoticizing in its non-definition of exoticism, in its fragile generalizations of 'literature' and 'the Arabic', and in blindness to an easy contradiction: if Western literature requires the exotic, then exoticism is surely presenting no substantial alternative to that tradition. And so we would drift back to Said, without real fulfilment of the hope, held out by the first articles in this volume, that Spain's historical complicity with the Semitic would produce something thoroughly new on the subject of exoticism in translation. What we have in Carbonell is nevertheless a vast improvement on previous ideas of one culture against the other. More, it takes careful position in a way that one regrets not finding in María Carmen África Vidal's short but fine parody of the postmodern intellectual, with which the volume closes.

The third Spanish volume to land on the editor's desk last year is *Traducir la edad media: La traducción de la literatura medieval románica* (Translating the Middle Ages: The Translation of Medieval Romance-Language Literature). Published by the university press at Granada, this perhaps is a more typical set of conference proceedings. I tried to find a price for it on the publisher's website, but to no avail; this is not a commercial operation. The book has no visible sections, no obvious criteria underlying the order of presentation, no abstracts or indices, and mistakes not only in English (for example pp. 46, 86, 109, 134, 166, 174, 175) but also in Romance languages (73, 134, 167, 174, 175, 222, 239, after which point I ceased to care). Editing such things is always a thankless task; here it seems to have been done with little concern for any actual eyes that might be following.

So what is focus of the volume? The 26 articles talk about contemporary translations of Medieval texts, about Medieval translations of other texts, about Medieval ideas on translation, and occasionally about philosophical theorizing that seems not to go anywhere. That is, the volume has no center. Eva Muñoz Raya's introductory text contextualizes the offering in terms of contemporary translation theory yet is restricted to references published in French and Spanish, which is a very problematic limitation these days. Julio-César Santoyo provides a more solid introduction, covering a thousand years, no less, of what has been written about translation in Romance languages. As pretentious as that might sound, Santoyo really does have the necessary resources: you turn on the tap and out it comes, a millennium, as clear as desalinated water. Yet the sea of those citations has little to do with contemporary translations of medieval texts, nor with many of the other diverse concerns that scurry across these pages.

There may be a common field here, but it is not easy to see paths across it. Most of the writers are academics and occasional translators, which might explain how easily they shift between the study of historical texts, the handing down of pedagogical norms, and sometimes quite subtle appreciation of very practical translation problems. Carlos Alvar, for example, who offers a very careful comparison of three recent translations of the Paulo and Francesca episode of the *Commedia*, mixes close criticism with blunt dictates such as ‘the best translator is the one who least interposes their presence’ (151). Similarly, in discussing Castilian translations of Ausiàs March, Enrique J. Nogueras and Lourdes Sánchez start from the prescriptive belief that ‘verse is virtually indispensable’ (171) then shift to the descriptive position that ‘in principle, all options are legitimate’ (202). There are also texts full of major ideas that avoid contradiction by offering little practical application to the Middle Ages. Joaquín Rubio Tovar dismisses the use of archaizing registers because ‘we are not Hölderlin’ (62), which seems a non-argument. Fernando Carmona, who has interesting things to say on Cervantes’ references to translation, sails between wandering rocks of fidelity, objectivity and interpretation that might have stabilized had a few examples been offered. And there are other contributions, like Isabel de Riquer’s long study of medieval references to dress codes, that give numerous details without any clear organizing ideas.

This volume lacks the kind of theorizing that might distinguish the ethical from the descriptive, or establish concepts with a clear grounding in practice. More to the point, there is little sign of evidence-based academic debate; the norms of Hispanic intellectuals seem to prohibit such things. Indeed, only in Alan Deyermond’s study of English translations of Ausiàs March do we find references to theoretical pronouncements by others in the field, notably to Alvar, Rubio Tovar and Conejero, reaching out in search of dialogue or disagreement. The Spaniards, on the other hand, usually cite each other only to agree, as a sign of scholarly recognition. Deyermond also uses a simple idea that might have moderated many of the tired dictums concerning the visibility of the translator, whether to use archaisms, whether to render verse as prose, and so on. He finds that translations are different because they are trying to do different things: some are guides to the original, others attempt to evoke a historical location, and still others seek to function as literary texts in their own right. This basic functionalism might have undermined many of the positions adopted in other articles. It might also have relativized Anxo Fernández Ocampo’s defense of archaisms and foreignizing translations (*à la Berman*), with which the volume closes. But the theorization of functionalist categories was locked up in German-language *Skopostheorie* for a number of decades; it remains without visible effect on these Romance-language translators and researchers.

There must be doubt as to whether much new is to be expected from these various approaches to ‘Romance-language translation’. The limits of that field remain untested (is it really so different from any other language family?); its problems are not clearly formulated. If anything, the points of convergence are here defined by the fact that most of the researchers are also teachers of Spanish and French literature, losing students to English and sometimes saving their academic skins by jumping aboard Spain’s numerous translation faculties. The concerns of these scholars remain very close to traditional literary studies, and not especially on the trail of Translation Studies in any disciplinary sense. This compares poorly with the work being achieved by the Escuela de Toledo, whose volumes are not only rather more multilingual and multidisciplinary, but are firmly anchored in immediate intercultural problematics. If the Romance-language teachers are looking to the past and ultimately to literary studies, the Toledan

project, working from one of Spain's most vital places in the world, might yet open up new horizons for Translation Studies.