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Catullus, Horace, and a Polysystem in Rome

Polysystem theory, as proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar of the University of Tel Aviv in the 1970s, provides the structure for my talk today. As the name of this theory implies, polysystem theory takes a broad view of literature, positing that any literature is made up of many smaller systems that are in regular competition with another. Polysystem theorists emphasize two ideas that are important for my talk today: one, the role of translated texts is dynamic in a literary system; and two, translations are to be viewed more as products of the target, or receiving, culture than of a source text.

In regards to the dynamic nature of translations in a literary system, Even-Zohar argues that translations are positioned differently depending upon the age, strength, and stability of the particular literary polysystem. Specifically, he suggests (1978a: 24) that there are three social circumstances that enable translations to maintain a primary, or influential, position in the polysystem: 1) the literature is young or in the process of being established; 2) the literature is weak; or 3) the literature is experiencing a crisis or turning point.

In the first scenario, a young literature is unable to create all forms and genres, and thus translations function as substitutes for native examples. In the second scenario, the weak literature of an often smaller nation comes into contact with that of a stronger, larger system. The smaller system cannot produce all the kinds of writing of the larger system, and thus again translations serve as substitutes. Crucial to these first two scenarios is the understanding that a system that lacks certain forms and genres will realize its defective status and seek to repair itself by importing the necessary foreign texts. In the third situation, established literary models no longer inspire writers, who then turn elsewhere for new ideas. In any of these scenarios, or

combination thereof, writers produce translations to introduce new elements and innovations into the literary system. As their function is to import the foreign into the receiving culture, translations in these scenarios necessarily adhere to the form of the source text.

The idea that translations are to be viewed as products of the target culture was further developed by Gideon Toury, a colleague of Itamar Even-Zohar. That translations are better representations of their target culture than of a source text is a fundamental position of descriptive translation studies, a branch of studies that is at odds with prescriptive studies, or studies which impose criteria stipulating how translation should be performed. In contrast, a descriptive study examines the phenomena of translating and translations by orienting itself towards the translated, or target, text. Toury contributed to this branch with his formulation of "norms", which could be defined as a series of interrelated factors that govern the translation product. By examining a translation, an analyst can reconstruct the norms of a target culture of a given period. Toury finds three kinds of translation norms: preliminary, operational, and initial. These norms influence the choices of the translator at different stages of the translation project. However, as Toury explains, *all* translational norms are dependent on the position held by translations in the target literary polysystem. The translator's attitude toward the source text, and also many of the decisions that will be made during translation, is thus largely predetermined by the socio-literary conditions of the receiving audience.

In summary, under certain socio-literary conditions translations are imported into the system of the receiving culture in order to stimulate innovation. In this scenario the borderlines between original and borrowed are diffuse, and translations function as original work. Translations are then relied upon to provide this stimulation until native literature takes over and forces translation into a secondary, non-influential sphere. What I argue is that the translation

poetry of Catullus and Horace represents a transitional state in the position of translations in the Latin polysystem wherein there is a perceived need to associate oneself with an outside source author, and yet innovation must come from within the system. In the poetry of Catullus there is evidence that the poet is dissatisfied in the expressions provided to him by translation; in that of Horace, he actively innovates upon material borrowed from his sources with Latin content. The two poems that I discuss today reveal each poet's attempt to move beyond translation.

Catullus

In poem 51, Catullus abandons the translation project in order to make a statement of independence from his source Sappho. Poem 51 has long been recognized as a translation of Sappho *fr.* 31 (Voigt). For the first 12 lines, Catullus faithfully follows the source material. As Sappho did, Catullus views his love interest from across the room; both poets are taken aback at how well their lover's partner remains composed at the side of such a beauty and surmise in their opening line that the lover must be equal to a god. Both poets describe the effect that the lover's beauty has on their person: the subject loses his voice (Catullus 7–9 = Sappho 7–9); passions settle in under the limbs (Catullus 9–10 = Sappho 9–10); and the eyes go dark (Catullus11–12 = Sappho 11). The two poems are so close in structure that it is difficult to imagine that any learned reader would fail to recognize the Sapphic source.

Catullus does make a few shifts in his translation. One in particular, Catullus' modification of Sappho's declaration that the lover is equal to the god (ἴσος θέοισιν) to the more humble *ille, si fas est, superare divos*, recalls Livius Andronicus' tempering of Homer's (3.110) description of Patroclus as θεόφιν μήστωρ ἀτάλαντος to *uir summus adprimus* (*fr.* 10). Catullus'

translation of Livius Andronicus represents an obligatory shift, since the restrictions placed upon him by Roman culture did not permit him to speak of a mortal as equal to a god. *Vir summus ad primus* is a translation that fulfills a similar function as the source description, namely pointing out the supremacy of Patroclus. Catullus engages in some metapoetics as he questions not only Sappho's description of the lover, but even Livius Andronicus' shift in his translation of Homer. Nevertheless, although this line does function as a commentary on the work of both Livius Andronicus and Sappho, the imagery of the translation still evokes the Sapphic original.

Catullus truly personalizes this poem when he suddenly breaks off the description of his love-sickness. By a self-address in the vocative in line 13, he cautions himself that *otium* is a problem for him. He reproves himself with the censure of line 14 "too greatly do you delight and spend time in leisure." This self-admonition subsequently becomes the theme of the remainder of the poem. No longer does Catullus follow the thread started by Sappho, but instead deviates into a conversation with himself, and not with the self as a lover, but as a poet. He ends with his warning in lines 15–16 that *otium* has the power to destroy even kings and blessed cities.

By ending his translation with a call to put aside activities fit for *otium*, Catullus makes a statement of the inadequacy of the translational supplement in the world of Catullus' poetics. That is, translation, which is here depicted as an activity fit for *otium*, cannot fulfill Catullus as a poet. The poem preceding 51 opens with a depiction of Catullus and Licinius Calvus at play on their writing tablets on a leisurely day. When 50 and 51 are read together, the translation portion of 51 emerges as the product of that play. Translations do not provide innovation in this scenario; they are the mere pastimes of poets at play. The final stanza then represents Catullus rejecting the tradition of translation as he seeks to mark his own independent nature.

Horace

Before advancing to a poem of Horace, I want to clarify my idea of what form a translation can take. The definition of a "translation" varies widely; recently, pseudo-translations, which are translations for which no source text actually exists, have been admitted into the classification. In general terms, however, one of the requirements for a text to be called a translation is that it interacts with a source in an effort to attain a sense of equivalence with its proposed source. I recognize that even this claim could be disputed by those who see equivalence as an impossibility, and even if we accept equivalence as a possibility, the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* lists over fifteen formulations of "equivalence". Nevertheless, equivalence need not be thought of as an absolute, a state of complete concord. Mark Possanza (2004: 38-39) advocates the centering of equivalence, positing that there must exist a core equivalence that defines the relationship between two texts as that of source text and translation. He formulates this core equivalence as a "very specialized form of intertextual relation in which the distinguishing feature of a text is its demonstrable relatedness, on the lexical and semantic levels, to a source text in another language." Here there is a reduced investigation of lexical concord between source and translation, but also an acknowledgement that translation is a particular type of creative activity. It is this type of translation activity that I see in Horace: a belief that a sense of equivalence can be achieved with his source Alcaeus, that he can do in Rome what Alcaeus did on Lesbos, and not that a translation exists to serve, and preserve, the source

Horace does not abandon translation, but neither does he provide a translation as faithful as the first 12 lines of Catullus 51. The translations of Horace feature a blend of borrowed and original material that inspires innovation. For Horace claims in *Epistle* (1.19) that in following Alcaeus he was the first Latin lyricist to make Alcaeus known (*hunc* [Alcaeus] *ego, non alio*

dictum prius ore Latinus/ uolgaui fidicen, 31-32). In this reference to his model, Horace is obscuring his debt to Sappho and fashioning a lyric tradition that sees Alcaeus as the primary lyricist from Lesbos. When Horace positions Alcaeus in this way, he is able to claim primacy for adapting the Greek lyric model as he sidesteps the poetry of Catullus who, if we are to judge from his use of the pseudonym Lesbia, outwardly favoured Sappho and her emphasis on the pathos of love.

Yet Alcaeus' model poses a challenge for Horace, as Colin Macleod (1983: 245) observes: "what he (Horace) imitates is not merely metres or lines or poems of Alcaeus, but a whole poet." Alessandro Barchiesi (2000: 169) followed in recognizing this aspect unique to lyric poetry, observing that lyric poetry presents special problems in imitation since "more than other genres, it implies the imitation of individuals, not just texts." In his attempt to reach some fashion of equivalence, Horace adapts not just lines, but an entire poet. Here he recognizes the poetry of Alcaeus as a type, or a frame, and this notion is further reflected in *Ode* 1.32, when Horace calls on his lyre to play a Latin song (*age, dic Latinum, barbite carmen*). By using the identifiably Greek word *barbitos*, Horace implies in this sentence that he is playing a Latin song on a Greek instrument, or filling the framework provided by his Greek sources with Latin content. This call for a Latin song on a Greek instrument is reflected in *Ode* 1.9.

Ode 1.9

In *Ode* 1.9 we find Horace calling for his addressee to bring forth the wine (7), leave the rest to the gods (9) and leave tomorrow's cares for tomorrow (13 – 15). Horace models the opening two strophes of the poem on Alcaeus (*fr.* 338): *Zeus sends rain, a great storm comes from the heavens, running waters are frozen solid (missing lines) Down with the storm! Stroke up the fire, mix the honeysweet wine unsparingly, and put a soft fillet round your brows*." The

Horace is similar: "Do you see how Soracte stands there white with deep snow, and how the straining woods no longer sustain their burden, and how the rivers stand fixed by sharp ice? Melt away the cold by placing logs high above the fire and more generously bring forth the four-year old wine from the Sabine diota, O Thaliarchus." As Richard Bentley (1978: 9, reprint) long ago detected, the opening lines of Horace are quite close to those of Alcaeus: in both, bad weather has forced the party inside, where there is the warmth of the fire and the comfort of wine; as Nisbet and Hubbard argue (116), Horace even "keeps something of the movement of the exemplar" as his call *dissolve frigus* follows the form of κάλλαβε τὸν χείμων'.

Yet most commentators only allow the resemblances to go that far. We cannot accurately assess Horace's dependence on the source material due to the relevant portion of Alcaeus being lost, but some general alterations are notable in what we can compare: as Kenneth Quinn identifies (1980: 140), in Alcaeus the storm that forces the group indoors for the comfort of warmth and wine is currently raging. Horace's storm, however, is already over. Lowell Edmunds (1992: 5) notices the disappearance of Zeus in the Latin translation as Horace shifts the conversation between a speaker and an addressee. Edmunds (10) further detects that our attention should be drawn to the Horatian description of the wine, since it is "fuller" than the corresponding description in Alcaeus (who refers to the wine only as sweet [μέλιχρος]). Edmunds' remark introduces an important feature of the Horatian poem.

Horace creates a rich description of the wine by labeling it as four years old and coming from a Sabine jar. Here begins a string of Greek elements. For we begin with an /o/, and then the command issued by the narrator is aimed at one Thaliarchus, a name which indicates him as a Greek, and likely a slave, and is qualified by the ablative *diota,* a recognizably Greek word that occurs nowhere else in Latin poetry. The sum of the description is that the Greek slave is to bring

the wine in a Greek jar. The terms of the description reveal that there is an abundant description of the wine in order to create a Greek scenario in the poem.

The true effect of this string of Greek references is only realized when compared to the opening question posed to the narrator's fellow whether he saw how Mt. Soracte stood, bright with snow (1-2). Mt. Soracte, as various commentators have pointed out, is visible from some places in Rome. The reference to Mt. Soracte conjures the image of Rome (Nisbet-Hubbard: 116). Thus, Horace provides the local (Roman) setting to his Greek theme. In this manner, Horace attains equivalence with his source: *Ode* 1.9 is the Latin song played on the Greek lyre. The instrument of expression is Greek, but the setting is Latin. In this particular poem, we see that Greece is moved to Rome, in view of Mt. Soracte itself. The transfer (or *transferre,* the root verb for translation) occurs quickly, as the close translation of the opening reminds us of Alcaeus while simultaneously situating us in Rome. The call for wine further propels the idea of Greece in Rome, as the Greek elements find a place in a Roman poem.

Conclusion

These two poems are examples from the poetic works of Catullus and Horace. There are a number of other examples that form the overall picture of the place of translation in the poetry of Catullus and Horace. Poem 66 of Catullus is a translation of Callimachus, but the circumstances of its production are explained in 65 where he excuses the translation aspect on the grounds that he is too consumed by grief to compose anything else. In the *Epodes,* Horace uses the framework provided by Archilochus when he borrows the rhythm and spirit, not the subject matter or the words, of the Greek iambic poet, regularly completing the model framework with material that

undercuts his position as an iambist (*Parios ego primus iambos / ostendi Latio, numerous animosque secutus / Archilochi, non res et agentia uerba Lycamben*, *Ep.* 19, 23-26). For example, *Epode* 12, a thematic echo of Archilochus' *First Cologne Epode*, falters in the attack on the former lover when the object of Horace's scorn is given a chance to speak and turn our sympathies towards her. In *Ode* 1.37 Horace continues to use Alcaeus only as his outline when he adapts Alcaeus' celebration of the tyrant Myrsilus' death and the call to drink (*nunc est bibendum,* 1) to reflect on the nature of Cleopatra, who is introduced as the mad ruin of Rome but in the final lines of the poem is presented in more somber tones, "no humble woman she" (*non humilis mulier,* 32). These poems are a recognition that innovation cannot come from outside he Latin literary system, but must come from within. Catullus rejects the tradition of translation; Horace promises innovation by minimizing the borrowings from his source models, casting them as only the instrument on which he plays. When we use these texts as reflections of their target culture, it appears that translations are deemed insufficient in the Latin polysystem. While displaying knowledge of the source, claiming adherence to the practice of another poet, and inserting oneself into long-standing genres are all important goals of these poems that are achieved via translation, these features are not enough for either the poet or the audience.