

TRANSLATABLE AND UNTRANSLATABLE COMEDY: THE CASE OF ENGLISH AND SPANISH*

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I admit that when a month ago I finally received the programme of this 4th National Conference and saw my paper just before Susan Bassnett's, I first regarded it as a sort of challenge, then as a temerity on my part in the very sense made explicit by the dictionary when it speaks of «*courage in forward action..., arising from contempt of danger or from lack of due consideration of chances of failure, rebuff, or defeat...*», and lastly, after a rather brief reflection, I finished by defining it as a trap carefully and perhaps slyly set by Dr. Hermans. It was not the coincidence of appearing together with Susan Bassnett that really worried me (being rather an honour), but the coincidence of speaking on the same topic, which we both, I suppose, had chosen in ignorance of what the other had in mind.

This being as irremediable as it now seems to be, I am willy-nilly bound to accept the challenge, assume the temerity, and endeavour to avoid at all costs the trap. If there is a trap. By no means, however, do I intend to slip quietly away or to evade the issue. On the contrary, my intention is to take at once the bull by the horns, a metaphor which is exactly the same both in your language and mine, though I imagine it originally comes from a country so given to bullfights as my own.

So let it be my first step to determine what kind of comedy, both translatable and untranslatable, I am going to deal with. The very question may sound idle to many (what does «comedy in translation» mean?, or simply, and better perhaps, what does «comedy» mean?), but the sheer truth is that nobody knows, though everybody seems to know. Apparently, few words signify so much and at the same time so little. At the beginning of the century the notion was still quite distinct for anyone searching for the word in a dictionary; for the Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, for instance, it was only «*a dramatic piece of a pleasant and humorous character, originally accompanied with dancing and singing*». In its turn, the Oxford English Dictionary explained the word as «*a stage-play of a light and amusing character with a happy conclusion to its plot*», or as «*that branch of the drama which adopts a humorous or familiar style, and depicts*

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laughable characters and incidents». Something, in short, specifically written for, and played on, the stage. However, the participants in this conference, summoned all by the magic wand of this single word, have focussed their papers not only on dramatic pieces, stage-plays, and dramas «of a humorous and familiar style», but also on Herodotus and Don Quixote, on Robert Browning and Dr. Johnson, on Proust and Kingsley Amis, on Alessandri and Matthew Prior. Which means that *comedy* may encompass today almost anything, from the oldest history to the newest poetry. What this conference, in fact, may be directly or indirectly demonstrating is that *comedy* is nowadays a concept considerably more spacious than the mere notion of «dramatic piece»; having become in some way a general, manifold and multifarious synonym of «the comic» in any of its facets, as well as in any situation, literary form, or historical period. A synonym, in other words, of what the New Webster's defines as just «the comic element», be it present in a play, story or motion picture, with the obvious result that throughout these three days «comic effects», «comic rhetoric», «comic devices», «comic sense» and «comic elements» have been expressions often repeated in the very titles of the papers, and with the result, too, that one after another all participants have spoken both of German lieds and early Irish tales, commedia dell'arte and university novels, Tudor drama and photo-romances, dance macabre and satire, farces and parodies, political cartoons and modernist fiction, operas and French fabliaux...

Nevertheless, in spite of this spacious generalization, I am going to stick today to what we might call the «original» meaning of the word, that of *humorous play*. If I am not within my rights, which anyway would be a matter of dispute, at least I am within a very long tradition. At the same time, it is also advisable to set this *comedy* in a comparative context: not in vain, we are participating in a conference of the British Comparative Literature Association, and to translate is always to compare, specially if we deal with literary translations. In my case, and for obvious reasons, my intention is to establish a relation between the two literatures I am more familiar with, English literature and Spanish.

There are some data, easily verifiable, that do not fail to surprise any historian of translation. Since the very beginning of the 16th century almost everything has been translated from English into Spanish, and vice versa: from royal last wills and testaments to refrigeration service manuals, from medieval ballads and detective stories to books on criminology, marketing and forestry, from chronicles of the New World to Elizabethan and Victorian plays, fairy tales, treatises on animal husbandry and tracts on moral or religious subjects. Over two hundred thousand titles have been transferred from one language into the other on both sides of the Atlantic during the last five centuries. Almost every little piece of literature has been translated, and not only once, but twice, three, and (in some cases) even twenty or thirty times, as is the case of many of Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Everything, that is, but comedy.

Of course, as we have seen these days, comedy is a vast territory on the continent of Literature, with ill-defined limits and disputed boundaries, even though we confine ourselves to stage-plays. One need not be reminded that (as J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms* states) the genre includes today black, high, domestic, drawing-room, romantic, musical, satirical and sentimental comedies, besides farce, tragi-comedies and burlesque, plus *comédie-ballet*, *comédie larmoyante*, comedy of humours, of ideas, of intrigue, of manners, of morals, and so on and so forth... Even so, Shakespeare, Shaw and Wilde excepted, very few English comedies have been translated into Spanish, and no more than, shall we say, three or four score from Spanish into English. In five centuries. Massinger, for example, has never been translated, neither, barring error or omission, have his fellow playwrights Chapman, Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher, Heywood, Dekker or Tourneur. Over four thousand English titles are now being translated into Spanish every year, but only a couple of comedies, mainly Elizabethan and cloak-and-dagger pieces, comedies of manners or of intrigue, French-window comedies and the like.

Obviously, such forms of comedy are *translatable*: Lope de Vega, Moratín and Benavente, Sheridan, Wilde and Shaw can now be read either in English or in Spanish in rather good renderings. But these authors do not make us laugh. I do not remember having burst into a hearty laughter with any of them. If anything, they make us smile. In fact, when we take into consideration the common, popular feeling that identifies *comedy* («an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man», to quote Ezra Pound¹) with *funny comedy*, the number of translated texts becomes negligible, and even despicable; because no *funny* comedy has ever been translated from one language into the other. I only know of one one-act play by Carlos Arniches translated into English, for instance, and that was in 1934, fifty-two years ago; and not a single play either by Jardiel Poncela or by Muñoz Seca has ever been translated into English, although the latter wrote over three hundred comedies between 1915 and 1936, and some of them, such as *Don Mendo's Revenge*, have been performed «hundreds of times, thousands perhaps»².

But not only this: as a result of this lack of translations, the selfsame names of these three playwrights are completely unknown to the British theatre-going public, whereas in my country they personify this century's best comic theatre. To a certain extent, this is a fact that cannot but surprise us. Only to a certain extent, for we at once realize that just the same happens in Spain with the most characteristic English comedies of the last fifty years. Ignorance and indifference may be absolute. And I do not mention Dutch, Greek, Polish or Danish comedies, because we do not even know whether they exist: they have never been translated, never staged.

(1) M. MERCHANT : *Comedy*, London: Methuen («The Critical Idiom»), 1971, p. 82.

(2) Salvador GARCIA-CASTAÑEDA in his introduction to P. Muñoz-Seca's *La venganza de Don Mendo*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1986, p. 47.

The question now is: Has comedy, or at least a certain type of comedy, got some inherent quality that makes it untranslatable, different from gardening and history, different from poetry, fiction and tragedy? The answer, which I think is an affirmative one, calls for a brief digression.

I do not need to remind you now that, as far as the Occident is concerned, we share the same civilization, but not our distinctive cultures. The difference between culture and civilization may seem very subtle, but it is of major importance in the translation of comedy. In common parlance, both terms interchange their meanings, but never so indiscriminately as one might believe, and the best proof is that many countries have a Ministry of Culture, but not a Ministry of Civilization³; because the idea of culture is mainly related to the individual, local and peculiar «lore» of a people or community, with well-defined space and time characteristics that need not coincide with national or state boundaries, while civilization represents above all a supra or international condition that can easily embrace within its limits a vast society or several societies in contact⁴ and a large variety of cultural subsystems that coexist beside each other, and even overlap.

The effect this can have on the translation of comedy is obvious. We partake of a western civilization that, with slight, anecdotal differences, is the same in Italy, Panama or Vancouver. We are, however, kept apart by our respective cultural backgrounds, that are no longer shared by our nearest neighbours, and that may vary substantially from Greece to Italy, from Italy to Spain, from Spain to Portugal, and so on.

Now, humour, the backbone of comedy, is largely rooted in the soil of a particular cultural subsystem. Our laughter, in the words of Henri Bergson, is always the laughter of a group, *our* social group. «*Pour comprendre le rire*—he writes—*il faut le replacer dans son milieu naturel, qui est la société*»⁵, *our* society, which is ours because it has a language that is our own, and has a collective memory of its own, and keeps a type of intra-social relationships that are likewise different from those kept by other groups. In this particular society does comedy find its richest and most authentic inspiration, which, understandably so, can no longer be shared with other societies, either neighbouring or distant. And a culture that is not shared only concerns anthropologists.

The direct consequence of this «cultural gap» is that, but for very few and «literary» exceptions, the comedy of one country does not arouse any interest in another. Few things, it is evident, more idiosyncratic than laughter, as few things are more «cultural» than humour and comedy, in the sense that both depend on and reflect the core itself of a definite culture. This is why many jokes, and not only those based on wordplay, are untranslatable; or, if trans-

(3) Vide «cultura/civilización» in *Los 60 conceptos clave de la antropología*, ed. by Angel AGUIRRE, Barcelona: Daimón, 1982, p. 133.

(4) Vide A. LALANDE: *Vocabulario técnico y crítico de la Filosofía*, Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1967, p. 149.

(5) Henri BERGSON: *Le Rire*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972, p. 6.

lated, they lose their «spice», charm, liveliness. Far from me to deny now the universality of humour, but one thing is this universal nature, and a very different matter its particular forms of local performance, that are anything but universal. Insofar then as the humour of a comedy derives from the use of culture-bound elements, its transference to another language will be seriously handicapped, if not utterly limited.

A comedy will thus present, previous to any special examination, some points of general and intercultural reference, which eventually are translatable, and at the same time some others (in a varying degree) that prove untranslatable. It is the high proportion of these latter, as well as their high cultural tension, that determines that many Spanish authors, as those I mentioned earlier, have not yet been translated into English; as, by the way, it is also the case of comedies by, shall we say, Ben Travers, Alan Ayckbourn, Edward Bond or Charles Wood, still untranslated into Spanish. This would also be the most reasonable explanation of why so many comedies of the past have never been translated in both countries.

But *untranslated* and *untranslatable* are not exactly the same thing. Let's now take for granted the interest of public, translators and publishers in a particular foreign comedy. Let's also take for granted that its conceptual contents are fully understandable and understood in a second culture. There is one more difficulty, still harder to surmount: the textual condition, that may determine in a drastic way the untranslatability of any comic text. For cultural reasons as well.

There is no expression and no vehicle of culture more powerful than language. The very space limits of a culture often coincide with those of a linguistic area. Most cultures, on the other hand, have a language of their own that identifies them⁶. Vehicle of expression and communication, when a language, however, conveys cultural elements in a high proportion, their transference to another language that is not acquainted with them is in practice impossible. I cannot imagine, for instance, the translation of a Spanish bullfight chronicle into the Eskimo language, and not only because they may lack the adequate vocabulary, but because even the concepts themselves do not belong to the culture of this people; and what is more important, the ultimate «feeling» of the chronicle would be absolutely impossible to reproduce.

But there is still more: a language is not only the vehicle of a particular culture or, as is today our case, of its particular sense of humour: it may also become the final reason of humour, hindering therefore its translation. As translators, we either turn then to an imitation of the original (parallel to literary creation) or, ruined the reason of humour in the new language, we end by trying to explain the impossible in a footnote, a more usual practice than anyone would suppose.

These are the cases, as it is easy to imagine, in which humour, depending

(6) Max MULLER, Alois HALDER et al.: *Breve diccionario de Filosofía*, Barcelona: Herder, 1976, p. 100.

only on its linguistic support, stems from the deliberate transgression of the linguistic rule or from the manipulation of rhyme, dialect and accent, register, ambiguity and polysemy, among other things. In such instances, the linguistic juggling that quite naturally is performed in one language becomes almost (some say «altogether») irreproducible in another, because in this latter neither the elements nor the laws of the linguistic game are any longer the same. As Bergson wrote, «il faut distinguer entre le comique que le langage exprime et celui que le langage crée. Le premier pourrait, à la rigueur, se traduire d'une langue dans une autre, quitte à perdre la plus grande partie de son relief en passant dans une société nouvelle... Mais le second est généralement intraduisible. Il doit ce qu'il est à la structure de la phrase ou au choix des mots»⁷.

These are, briefly expressed, the two points always present in most of the good, entertaining, funny comedies of our best comic tradition. And together they explain both the «un-translated-ness» and the untranslatability of so many of them. And in particular of *Don Mendo's Revenge*, by Muñoz Seca, a play performed for the first time in 1918 and still qualified by the critics, just a month ago, as «a major text of our comic theatre»⁸, «absolutely exceptional»⁹, that «seems to have become in its own right a tradition in itself, a sort of popular «classic»¹⁰.

The action takes place somewhere in Spain during the 12th century. Don Mendo, count of Cabra, but rather poor, has fallen in love with Madeleine, the fickle and scatterbrained daughter of count Nuño Manso. Surprised in the rooms of his beloved, whom he had gone to visit, Don Mendo, who does not want to get her involved, admits his having entered the castle to steal a necklace they find in his hands. Condemned to life imprisonment, she does not lift a finger to help him; on the contrary, a little later she marries the rich duke of Toro, favourite of the king. Released by some friends who know the truth, Don Mendo swears to take full revenge of his unfaithful love and soon comes back disguised as a minstrel. Sundry incidents compel the many characters of the drama towards a cave, where several dates have been simultaneously agreed. There Don Mendo discloses his identity and his revenge is fulfilled when almost everybody, Madeleine included, dies at the hands of somebody else. Don Mendo himself commits suicide.

Thus told, the play could be a new sprout of the most furious romantic tradition. Yet, *Don Mendo's Revenge* is not a tragedy, but rather the «caricature of a tragedy», as stated in the subtitle, a parody of the hackneyed, trite and well-worn postromantic and modernist dramas that proliferated on the Spanish stage at the turn of the century. On this commonplace plot, so fami-

(7) Op. cit., p. 79.

(8) Enrique LLOVET in *ABC* (Madrid), November 28th, 1986, p. 66.

(9) Joaquín CALVO SOTELLO in *ABC* (Madrid), November 28th, 1986, p. 63.

(10) Salvador GARCIA CASTAÑEDA in his introduction to Muñoz Seca's *La Venganza de Don Mendo*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1986, p. 48.

liar and understandable on any western stage, Muñoz Seca, however, builds up a comedy so intrinsically Spanish that I dare say it cannot make sense in any other language and culture. Because in 2.500 verses the author has piled up such an amount and variety of specifically culture-bound elements, all twisted, dislocated and caricatured, that in order to appreciate the plentiful humour in every scene you must not only master a culture completely, but also its own mechanisms of distortion, including, of course, the most disfiguring and wildest manipulation of language.

Here the family names of the three main male characters, Cabra, Toro and Manso (that is, Goat, Bull and Bellwether) interweave a dense fabric of criss-crossed references both to bullfighting and to the horns sported by the many cuckolds in the play. Here droll imitations of wellknown fragments of classical Spanish dramas (as Calderon's *Life is a Dream*) follow one another. Here language itself is always made use of as the main means of parody: a rough pseudo-Old Spanish, mixed up with present-day forms; grand and lofty verses taking turns with the most popular and daily speech, and this in the mouth of a single character and within the same conversation; grammatical rules, regular and irregular verbs, plural endings and the phonetics of words systematically and mercilessly rent asunder to make them rhyme with whatever the author has fancied before; puns, jests and jokes, quips and witticisms; a constant concoction of absurd, impossible and nonexistent words; double meanings and unexpected new meanings that catch the audience unawares... In what supposedly is a 12th century language, the author introduces fanciful archaisms and such wild anachronisms as *vaseline*, *brachycephaly* and the *eustachian tube*; paronomasias, anaphoras, ambiguities, forced rhymes and doggerel verse sprinkle the whole play, from beginning to end, all with a view to and for the sake only of mirth and laughter. To such a point and in such an extreme way that there is no other comic text in Spanish in which the language has been more and more often infringed and trampled upon. All these elements, piled up sometimes one upon another, and impregnated with «national» flavour, have no chances at all of surviving in translation and being shared by other cultures. They are still untranslated because they are definitely untranslatable.

What in fact happens in that in many of the linguistic contrivances on which Muñoz Seca makes his humour dependent the significant is marked by phonological, morphosyntactic and functional characteristics which cannot be reproduced in the new language of translation. The linguistic sign, which—as Saussure noted long ago—is arbitrary, comes to be used here, however, in a deliberate and motivated way with a relevant intra-textual function that no longer has anything to do with arbitrariness. And the more outstanding this function, the more difficult (and even impossible) the translation. The prominence of these «secondary» functions is what in many instances is going to determine the untranslatability of a comic text, which could also be foretold. For, as long as the natural balance of the linguistic sign, that is, its natural communicative role, is altered by any unusual functional prominence, and as

long as that imbalance cannot be equally expressed in another language, translation will be limited or made impossible. In such cases, languages lack also intra-textual resolutions, because certain texts cannot be intra-translated without destroying their first «raison d'être», that may not coincide with the strictly communicative one. «The means—here again—is the message». The only way-out left is explanation and imitation.

No doubt, all these untranslatable comic elements are replaceable by new ones in the target language, that, as likely as not, will have little or nothing to do with the original. If anything, they will only serve as a sort of succedaneum. However, this is no longer to translate, but to substitute, to replace, to supplant, to adapt, or whatever you prefer to call it: the synonyms are many. It represents a very different linguistic strategy, and, of course, it is also another story, as Sterne used to say long before Kipling. Because the truth is that, from the point of view of what translation implies, comedies such as *Don Mendo's Revenge* happen to be untranslatable. Or at least that is what this translator thinks. If anyone holds a different opinion, which I admit is quite possible, wait in any case till he translates this play into English, and his new text, still faithful to the original, obtains before an English audience the long, successful answer that for almost seventy years now it has been obtaining in Spain.