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Turning Up the Volume on Translation: Transforming Narratives in the work of Mercè Rodoreda

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*This paper considers literary translation as a process that is both transformative and disruptive. Translation engenders movement, not only across languages, but it moves ideas from the centre to the periphery, and from the periphery to the centre. I argue that the translation of literature facilitates the movement and transfer of social narratives between languages and cultures, and in doing so, the very nature of these narratives is altered. Defining social narratives as “the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we tell other people, about the world(s) in which we live” (Baker 19), this paper considers how the properties of such narratives are transformed when translated for new audiences and readerships. Using the vocabulary of sound and volume, I identify and label social narratives on a spectrum of quiet and loud, moving away from previously used binary descriptions, in order to describe the power dynamics at play within world literature. I argue that the interaction between narratives in translation can be discussed in terms of amplification, muting, or silencing, in particular when considering the position and status of source and target languages. To demonstrate this new means with which to describe this process in translation, I take as a case study twentieth-century Catalan author Mercè Rodoreda’s novel *La mort i la primavera* (1986), and its English translation *Death in Spring* (2017), identifying how narratives interact and function across cultures, and how they may be made quieter or louder, in order to resonate with, or be ‘heard’ by new audiences.*

Introducing Social Narratives in Translation: The Need for a New Sound Model

In this article, I argue that the translation of literature facilitates the movement and transfer of social narratives between languages and cultures, and in doing so, the very nature of these narratives is altered. I introduce the vocabulary of volume as a means with which to refer to narratives, establishing a new sound model of assessing social narratives in translation. I explore and elaborate upon the ways in which the properties and strengths of social narratives are transformed when works of literature are translated for new language audiences. I propose a new means of identifying and describing narratives in translation and the changes which take place, labelling these as quiet and loud, in order to suggest a new, non-binary model.

To demonstrate this new means with which to describe this process in translation, I use the twentieth-century Catalan author Mercè Rodoreda’s novel *La mort i la primavera* (1986),

and its English translation *Death in Spring* (2017) as an example, assessing how narratives interact and function across cultures, and how narratives may become quieter or louder, in order to resonate with, or be ‘heard’ by new readers. I firstly focus on the material transformation which occurs when the novel is translated, before considering linguistic ones, and the less visible changes between narratives which also occur. The history and position of Catalan literature is illuminating, due to the repressive linguistic policies imposed by Franco following the end of the Spanish Civil War, including the banning of publishing books in Catalan as well as the use of Catalan as an official language in Spain. After 1939, “Catalan writers were isolated and scarcely tolerated and could not have any significant impact on contemporary society”, and it “was not until the 1960s that the cultural environment showed signs of recovery” for Catalan literature (Cornellà-Detrell 23). As such, the Catalan language experienced its own form of silencing and its position in the world literary sphere is one which is particularly interesting.

Throughout this paper I view and analyse translation through the lens of sociological narrative theory, a framework first introduced to Translation Studies by Mona Baker in her 2006 work, *Translation and Conflict*. Social narratives are understood as “public and personal ‘stories’ that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviour. They are the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we explicitly tell other people, about the world(s) in which we live” (Baker 19). Social narratives thus diverge from a literary understanding of narratology, as these narratives encompass a wider definition than those only in written form. Social narratives function and operate on a number of levels, from the smallest ontological narrative regarding one’s individual position and place in the world, defined by Baker as “personal stories that we tell ourselves about our place in the world and our own personal history” (29), to the meta-narratives, concerning larger themes such as “the epic dramas of our time, Capitalism vs. Communism, the Individual vs. Society, Barbarism/Nature vs. Civility” (Somers 605). In this paper, I focus on how public narratives present within the work of Catalan author Mercè Rodoreda (1908-1983), specifically her posthumous novel *La mort i la primavera*, are transformed and altered in English translation. Public narratives are “stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual, such as the family, religious or educational institution, the media, and the nation” (Baker 33). I describe these narratives as becoming quiet and loud, in order to demonstrate how translation is a process which transforms, alters, and disrupts, allowing opportunities for creativity and difference between the original source text and the translated target text. By employing the vocabulary of sound and dynamics, I demonstrate the advantages of moving away from a binary view of world

literature and translation, highlighting how translation is transformative, crossing borders and cultures in order to allow for narratives to resonate with new, changing audiences. This dynamic level functions on a scale, in that sociological narratives can become louder or quieter in translation, rather than existing as a fixed and rigid dichotomy.

I draw on previous studies concerning world literature to demonstrate how interlingual translation operates in a field which is characterised by disparity and inequity between languages, whilst I argue for the need to open up the language to use terms which indicate a spectrum, rather than a binary. I outline two previous models which divide languages within world literature into two distinct categories, and whilst these do outline the power imbalances between languages, they do not reflect how power is constantly shifting and in flux. In her work on literary capital and translation, Pascale Casanova states that “translation must be understood as an “unequal exchange” that takes place in a strongly hierarchized universe” (408). Casanova outlines the dichotomy between what she terms as “dominating” and “dominated” languages, with the former described as those “endowed with a relatively large volume of literary capital due to their specific prestige, their age, and the number of texts which are considered universal and which are written in these languages”, and the latter as “those that “have been recently nationalized (that is, have become national languages relatively recently), are relatively deprived of literary capital, have little international recognition, a small number of national or international translators, or are little known and have remained invisible for a long time in the great literary centres” (410).

Likewise, Theo D’haen employs the terminology of “major” and “minor” in reference to the position and status of languages within world literature. D’haen maintains that “whether a literature itself qualifies as major or minor depends on a number of factors, which may be weighed differently according to different criteria. One of the most obvious criteria would be the number of users of a given literature’s language” (33). He proposes that “French, English, and German literature, and to a lesser extent Italian and Spanish literature, next to literature in ancient Greek and in Latin, have received the lion’s share of attention and space” and as a consequence “all other European literatures are minor” (34). To return to the specifics of the language pairs assessed in this paper, Catalan therefore fits the description as a dominated, or minor language. Casanova also directly refers to Catalan in her work, described in her terms as one of the “languages which have been created or “recreated” recently and have become national languages following political independence” (410). There is therefore an immediate inequality and imbalance in power between the two languages in this study: English occupies a

hegemonic position in the world literary sphere, whereas Catalan does not. However, this is not to say that the narratives present in Catalan texts will all be quiet and be dominated by those in English, nor does it mean that narratives present in the English will necessarily be loud or dominate those from Catalan. Instead, I argue that a move away from the major/minor, or dominating/dominated dichotomy is necessary in order to describe the multiple crossings and transformations which take place across narratives in translation, in various directions.

Non-binary Translation Models

Whilst the above models rely on binaries and dichotomies as described, recent feminist and queer theories within Translation Studies move away from this. As Ruth Abou Rached outlines “as an activist praxis, feminist translation interrogates “the feminine” in a variety of ways: as a gender construct, women’s experiences, linguistic relations of power and a metaphor for translation itself (Castro 2009c)” (199). I draw upon this theory in order to demonstrate how different translation theories seek to transgress and disrupt ‘traditional’ models and understandings of translation. Furthermore, as William Spurlin writes, in recent years translation has come to be understood as “an act of re-creation, which produces in the target language an echo, not a mere copy, of the original, hinting at the utter impossibility of equivalent correspondence between the source and translated text” (201). Translation, Spurlin argues, is “a site of supplementarity and difference”, and a “highly dissident and politically transgressive act”, which thus “points to the possibilities of translation as a queer praxis” (204). Again, I refer to feminist and queer translation theories in order to further my argument that translation is a disruptive process, one which cannot be described merely in terms of binary models, and that the vocabulary of sound (like the echo referred to above) to describe narrative movement is a fruitful one.

To return then to my new proposed model, I describe and define social narratives as quiet or loud in order to reflect their power and influence in circulation within translations and the texts themselves. These labels depend on several characteristics, such as the visibility or recognisability of a narrative; a quiet narrative will, for example, reach or resonate with fewer people than a louder narrative. Furthermore, a particular public narrative may be loud if it belongs to or is shared by a powerful institution, whereas a quiet narrative may instead be subject to censorship or go against current prevailing popular narratives. For example, under a dictatorship (such as Spain under Franco), loud public narratives often were, or are, those in favour of the dictatorial regime, whereas dissenting voices (and therefore narratives, as

narratives function as stories) are silenced and circulate amongst a smaller group. The concept of loud narratives dominating, or silencing, quiet narratives in translation is useful when discussing the power dynamics at play in translation, considering how narratives interact across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and the effect this has on the text itself. I employ the vocabulary of volume, namely the spectrum of quiet and loud, to demonstrate this idea of the muting and amplification of narratives, as this imagery assists in describing and exploring the dynamics of translation within world literature. This further emphasises the ‘trans’ nature of translation; it is a transient process, involving dynamic relationships which are constantly in flux and shifting. The use of the semantic field of sound permits a broader understanding of the nuances of power relations between languages, and to refer to concepts more precisely, such as the muting, silencing, or amplification of narratives within a text. The notion of a sound being louder or quieter depending on how close you are to the source of the noise is also a useful analogy, as this again allows for more nuanced discussion of how translation can transform texts in multiple ways, where power does not simply flow in one direction, and where narratives may resonate with audiences in various and unexpected ways.

La mort i la primavera: Increasing the Volume of Catalan Narratives

As a means with which to demonstrate this new method of exploring narratives in translation, I focus on Mercè Rodoreda’s posthumous novel *La mort i la primavera* (1986) and its English translation *Death in Spring* (2017), translated by Martha Tennent. Certain aspects of the novel, including Rodoreda’s literary language and descriptions are muted, or quietened in English translation, whereas the narratives of Catalan culture and place are amplified and made louder. Thus, there is no singular way in which social narratives are dealt with between texts. These are strategies carried out in translation with the intention of resonating with and appealing to new anglophone audiences, by simultaneously reducing or restricting Rodoreda’s idiosyncratic literary style, whilst emphasising the ‘Catalan-ness’ and foreign nature of the novel. Here I emphasise the reasons as to why a new non-binary model is required, as whilst the work is translated from Catalan, a dominated or minor language, into the dominating, or major language of English, it is not a straightforward case of the Catalan narratives being displaced or marginalised in translation. Instead, I demonstrate that quiet narratives may indeed be powerful, even if they are associated with less-dominant languages.

La mort i la primavera is a novel set in an isolated Catalan village, narrated in the first person by a teenage boy, whose name the reader does not learn. The narrator describes the

customs that take place within the village, in an oppressive and claustrophobic environment, where the villagers participate in cruel rituals, such as locking children in cupboards, holding ceremonies which involve blindfolding the pregnant women, and burying the dead in trees in the nearby forest. It is a bleak and unsettling novel, which Colm Tóibín has described in the introduction to the English translation as “full of dark feelings and forebodings that are sharply present and ominous and persistent” (vii). In translation, it is framed as an “allegory for life under a dictatorship”, as this quote appears on the inside flap of the novel, and narratives of the Catalan physical and social landscape are amplified. The inclusion of an introduction written by Irish author Tóibín also provides interesting grounds for discussion, as the reader may be familiar with, and therefore draw conclusions between the history of the Spanish Civil War as well as the Catalan independence movement, introduced by an author known for his literary work which frequently depicts exile, often set both in Ireland and Catalonia. Interestingly, Tóibín also likens this novel to the work of Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai, writing that *Death in Spring* “soars beyond the ordinary... to evoke panic and unrelenting dread” (vii), thus associating Rodoreda with a living writer of an altogether different culture and language. This leads to the politicisation of the Catalan novel in translation, with an increased focus on and amplification of narratives of independence and the dangers of dictatorship.

To begin with, I turn to the physical form of the novel and its translation. As stated above, the novel was published after Rodoreda’s death, and the work was in fact left incomplete. Editors collated the drafts and notes left by the author and, as Penalba outlines, there have been four different publications of the novel in Catalan, published between 1986 and 2017, including critical and revised editions, in which each version proposes a different ordering of Rodoreda’s manuscripts, with various annotations and annexes (331). The 2017 Club Editor edition also includes a map drawn by Rodoreda of an outline of the fictional village in which the novel is set, along with critical commentaries and introductions, totalling over four hundred pages. In contrast, the 2018 Penguin translation, entitled *Death in Spring*, is a mere 150 pages long. No reference is made to the fact that the novel is an unfinished posthumous work, nor the fact that several incomplete versions exist. Instead, it is presented as a short read, forming part of the Penguin European Writers collection. Rodoreda’s canonical status as one of the greatest writers of Catalan fiction is thus subdued and suppressed in English translation for the anglophone market. A physical transformation is thus also brought about in translation, the book itself in its material form is altered and distorted. Whilst in Catalonia, her literary prowess and appreciation of her work is such that this posthumous novel merits multiple editions and analysis, this does

not translate to the English market. Indeed, her specific literary devices and techniques are also transformed, on the grounds of better appealing to and resonating with an anglophone audience, as I turn to now.

Transforming Rodoreda for a New Audience

As I have focused on the material transformation of the novel in translation, I now turn to linguistic transformation, and the less visible narrative transformation which this brings about. In translation, Rodoreda's idiosyncratic narrative style is muted, as I demonstrate in the following discussion of the lexical and literary style of *La mort i la primavera* and how this is transformed in translation. I draw upon the American translator Martha Tennent's commentary on how she approached the translation of the work and the strategies that she employed. In a 2011 article entitled 'Rodoreda's spring: a new life in English' (*La mort de Rodoreda: una nova vida en anglès; my translation*), Tennent outlines many of the great literary figures whom Rodoreda admired, such as Katherine Mansfield, and explains that for inspiration when translating the work into English, Tennent composed "un corpus lèxic", a lexical corpus, or glossary, of terms drawn from the work of other comparable English writers, such as Angela Carter and D.H. Lawrence (228). Tennent also describes the stream of consciousness-like style of *La mort i la primavera*, explaining how she again drew upon English literary figures who are known for their use of this literary technique, such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf, in order to recreate this in translation for an anglophone readership. To return to my terminology, Tennent draws upon a louder, literary narrative (that of celebrated English writers) in her translation, in her attempt to recreate the style of Rodoreda's writing in a way which will resonate with an anglophone audience.

In striking examples, Tennent plays with the description of "half-unsheathed flowers" from D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and uses it in her translation of *Death in Spring* (228). The phrase which she is translating is originally "el matoll tenia una flor groga badada" (the bush had a pale yellow flower; *my translation*), thus what was originally described by Rodoreda as pale and yellow is now altered, as Tennent renders this as "the shrub had a yellow, half-unsheathed flower" (11). Similarly, Tennent also borrows, again from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the phrase "utter hopeless ugliness" when translating the phrase "amb la claror les coses es veien massa i n'hi havia de massa lletges" (in the light you could see things too clearly and they were too ugly; *my translation*). This is translated as "you could see things too clearly in the light, and the utter hopeless ugliness of some things became too enormous"

(40). Furthermore, in relation to the stream of consciousness style which characterizes the text, Tennent explains that she removes the repeated use of the conjunction “i” (and) in some phrases, as this would not be acceptably stylistically in English (228). These examples, provided and explained by Tennent herself, are illuminating regarding the process of translation and the formation of intertextual links between works.

I also consider certain decisions which Tennent makes in the translation process that further mute Rodoreda’s idiosyncratic style, particularly regarding the sense of otherness and isolation which is present in the source text. For example, one of the recurring images within the novel is that of the figures of the mysterious *Caramens*, who are first introduced in the Catalan text with no explanation as to who, or what, they are. In contrast, in the English translation, they are introduced as “the *Caramens*, the shadows that crept among the shrubs, always threatening to attack the village” (7 [emphasis in original]). The fact that their name is italicised and given an explanation which is not included in the Catalan emphasises that the translator believes that these figures need a further introduction and would not be understood by an anglophone audience, but nor are they introduced for a Catalan readership, they are an invention of Rodoreda. The use of this term and its retention in translation, but alongside a description, reveals how Rodoreda’s stylistic choices are expected to be received in English. ‘Caramens’ is not a real or recognised Catalan word and has no actual meaning, there also appears to be no play on words here (for a Catalan speaker or reader).

However, I offer the idea of this being a variation on the two words ‘cara-menys’ which has the same pronunciation. In Catalan this would have a meaning relating to ‘face-less’, referring to the strangeness and surreal nature of these beings, but I have not come across this explanation anywhere else. Nevertheless, the *Caramens* name is retained in English, thus any references or allusions to the words ‘face’ and ‘less’ in English is not present in the translation, and thus Rodoreda’s inventive style is muted. The social narratives of otherness and disorientation are therefore quietened in English translation, due to explanations provided which are not present in the source text. The above lexical changes imbue *Death in Spring* with originality and its own character, but I argue that this strategy, which associates Rodoreda with the wider English literary canon, is one which mutes Rodoreda’s own literary style. With the aim of resonating with anglophone readers and those familiar with the works of famous authors writing in the English language, Tennent transforms this translation into one which reduces Rodoreda’s original narratives, amplifying the work of D.H. Lawrence and English-language norms, at the expense of allowing anglophone readers to hear Rodoreda’s authorial voice.

In addition, Tennent sometimes chooses to capitalise the word ‘Time’ in the novel, adapting this from the Catalan ‘temps’. I argue that this addition from the translator adds a new meaning to parts of the text, and in doing so, creates new narratives concerning the other-worldly nature of the novel, adding a further dystopian dimension to the village. In one scene, the protagonist speaks to his stepmother alone, and recounts “li vaig preguntar si sabia què era el temps i va dir, el temps sóc jo, i va dir, i tu” (64). This is translated as “I asked her if she knew what time was, and she said, Time is me – and you” (45). Tennent argues that writing Time with a capital T makes the text more intelligible, and that this is ultimately the task of the translator (230). This is an illuminating example as it demonstrates how the personification of a concept, which is not present in the source text, can alter the sense of the target text. The capitalisation of the word time creates a sense that the village (and the novel) is not set in this world, and that it exists in a purely mythical and allegorical sense. This in turn weakens the references to life in an isolated Catalan village and the consequences of a stifling, controlling society, instead shifting the narrative to focus on more abstract and wider references to an imagined totalitarian society. Orthographical changes made in translation again mute Rodoreda’s original literary style, as the translator adopts a more creative strategy, which also adapts the narratives of the novel.

This, however, is not the only direction of movement between narratives in the translation of *La mort i la primavera*. Whilst Rodoreda’s idiosyncratic style is muted, the narratives relating to the Catalan landscape and culture are amplified in translation into English. As stated previously, the publication of this novel formed part of the Penguin European Writers collection, the defining feature of which being to shine a spotlight on writers of other languages whose works have been translated into English. Narratives regarding Catalan culture and identity are emphasised and stand out in the translation, demonstrating how literature belonging to a so-called minor or dominated language can nevertheless make itself heard within ‘major’ languages’ literary spheres. As such, the Catalan nature of *La mort i la primavera* manifests in the descriptions of rural spaces, as local geographical landmarks are all written in standard Catalan form, which are then retained in the English translation. It may be that the translator’s strategy to retain the place names from the source language was in order to imbue the novel with these Catalan narratives, and to underline for an English readership the other-worldly nature of this novel, by referring to places which would be incomprehensible for a non-Catalan speaking reader. Whilst Venuti’s theory on foreignization and domestication in translation (1995) is relevant here and could be used as a means with which to identify and describe said

translator strategies, I instead refer to the use of Catalan terms in my analysis in order to demonstrate how retaining or omitting these names can contribute to an overall reframing and renarration of a novel, again using the vocabulary of sound to describe changes to social narratives.

For example, the locations of Pedres Altes (Tall Rocks), the Plaça (the Square), Pont de Fusta (Wooden Bridge), the Maraldina mountain and Pedres Baixes (Low Rocks), amongst several others, retain their Catalan titles in the English text. Similarly, in the English translation, whilst some character descriptors such as “the blacksmith” and “the prisoner” have been translated from Catalan, the “Senyor” remains as it is in the source text. One can assume that an English readership, even one without any knowledge of Catalan, could recognise this word as sharing similarities with the Spanish ‘señor’, as a term relatively widely understood by English speakers as ‘sir’ or ‘Mr’. It is also clear from the surrounding context of the novel that the “Senyor” lives in a large house, away from the village, and his higher status is also denoted by the fact that the villagers work on his land, therefore it is clear that it is a deferential title. The settings of the novel, its landmarks and place names, as well as the characters’ titles therefore contribute to the creation of an overall narrative of Catalan identity, which is amplified or made louder for an English audience, as they are retained in translation and become a defining feature of the text. Whilst Rodoreda’s original literary voice can be said to have been toned down or subdued in translation, replaced instead by the literary style of canonical English-language authors such as D.H. Lawrence, the narratives relating to Catalan culture and identity are amplified, to ensure that they resonate with an anglophone audience, despite belonging to a ‘minor’ language, in the unequal world literary sphere. However, as demonstrated above regarding the non-translation of ‘Caramens’, I consider that binary terms cannot always neatly describe decisions made in translation, and often within the same translation of a text this strategy will be used in differing ways. The figures of the ‘Caramens’ have not been translated, which could lead an English-reader to incorrectly believe that this is a Catalan term. As such, the boundaries of what can be defined as Catalan become blurred and fuzzy. Instead, narratives of otherness within the novel are dealt with in translation in various ways, on a spectrum, which is why I argue for a vocabulary of volume to describe how narratives shift between, and within, texts.

Conclusion

In this paper I have introduced the labels of quiet and loud in order to describe the

properties and characteristics of social narratives as they shift between languages and cultures in literary translation. I propose that whilst previous studies have focused on the binary divisions and power imbalances between languages, classifying them into two distinct categories in the world literary sphere, a new model is needed to account for the shifting power dynamics which occur in translation. Translation concerns transition and fluidity, and there is a need for a new model in which to describe these dynamics, rather than binary oppositions. I have used the vocabulary of sound with the aim of widening the scope of how we describe the interactions between narratives, accounting for their muting and amplification in translation, as well as to demonstrate how narratives from a minor language may also be powerful and resonate with the target language audience, even if that belongs to a major language. By using the example of the Catalan novel *La mort i la primavera* by Mercè Rodoreda, I have explored how narratives can shift and transform in translation, becoming louder or quieter when translated into another language, and how this may affect the target text. I have argued that due to the strategy of the translator, aspects of Rodoreda's distinct literary voice are muted in translation into English, whereas narratives surrounding Catalan culture and place are made louder, becoming one of the primary features of the text. This therefore offers scope for further discussion on the consequences of translating from so-called minority languages, and the effect that this has on authorial identity. In short, I ask if an author's idiosyncratic style or narrative voice is marginalised in translation from minoritised languages into English, and whether this is due to translation decisions which seek to emphasise more familiar narratives to anglophone audiences. This study demonstrates the need for a new model of defining social narratives in translation, opening up new possibilities for study, for example through a feminist or postcolonialist lens to explore disruptions of power in translation. Translation is therefore a transformative process, engendering movement across cultures and languages, displacing traditionally held positions of marginality, and resisting restrictions and limits.

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