The ethics of postcolonial translation

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1 Introduction

The English word “ethics” derives from the Greek ἠθικός/ēthikós, from ἔθος/ēthos, “character”: an ethical person is a person of good character. The implication is that ethics is not just a moral code but also a social value system governing good behavior. The ethical person behaves in accordance with social norms for good character, the “good person.” Technically, an ethical person is a good person, a person of good character; but since the interiority of ἔθος/ēthos/“character” is a black box to which other people have no direct access, ethics has come to refer to outer behavior as a (hopefully reliable) sign of inner character.

This shift from good (inner) character to normative (outer) behavior has two further axiomatic ramifications. The first is that the ethical person is subordinate to social norms for good behavior. In Louis Althusser’s ([1970] 1971) terms, the ethical person has been “interpellated” or “hailed” by society as a good person, and in that manner subjected to reigning ethical norms. Ethicality is in this sense a state of social subjection. The ethical subject is “overpowered” by social norms, and therefore subjectified or subjectively organized by those norms.

Politically in the colonial and postcolonial context, this subordinacy axiom entails resistance to coloniality – or, to put that differently, subordination to an ἔθος/ēthos of anticoloniality/decoloniality. A postcolonial ethics is a decolonizing ethics. One can thematize this ethics negatively, as organized by a collective desire and effort to negate the social, political, cultural, and affective effects of colonization, or positively, as organized by a collective desire and effort to mobilize forces for the egalitarian restructuring of postcolonial society. In the negative sense, the postcolonially ethical person is what Albert Memmi ([1957] 1991, 19–44) calls “the colonizer who refuses”; in the positive sense, the postcolonially ethical person is a proactive member of that community that is collectively rebuilding the postcolonial society. In both senses, postcolonial ethics implies the submergence or surrender of the subject’s ego to larger decolonizing forces in society.

The second axiomatic ramification, however, is that this submergence also strengthens the ethical ego. To the extent that the postcolonially ethical person is widely accepted and even acclaimed as a good person, a right-thinking person, a properly behaved person, that gives them a certain stature in the community as an authority on postcolonial ethics. How should we act now? Look at X. Follow that model. When in doubt, ask X’s opinion. Let X pronounce. Whatever X says on this head should be given the imprimatur of authority.
The obvious tension between the subordinacy and authority axioms of postcolonial ethics puts a shimmer at the core of this chapter – a wavering across the boundary between willingness to submit to outside forces and the ability to dominate outside forces. Rhetorically this becomes a wavering between receptivity and dogmatism.

Running like a scarlet thread all though printed discussions of the postcolonial ethics of translation, for example, is the Schleiermacherian dualism between domesticating and foreignizing translation, which Antoine Berman ([1984] 1992) and later thinkers have mobilized for a postcolonial “ethics of difference”: the translator who domesticates the source text imposes hegemonic target-cultural norms on it, and so fails to respect the difference or Otherness of the source-cultural and source-textual situation; to foreignize that same text, by contrast, is to surrender to its difference, and so to practice an ethics of difference.

Of course, this prescriptive postcolonial ethics of translation only applies to cases in which the translator is translating a text from a former colony to a former colonizing culture, or, more generally, as Richard Jacquemond (1992) puts it, from a less powerful to a more powerful culture. As Vicente Rafael ([1988] 1993) has shown, in his discussion of the Tagalog response to the Spanish colonization and conversion of the Philippines to Christianity, a domesticating translation undertaken by the colonized can be the strongest form of anticolonial resistance, and can be recuperated by postcolonial generations for decolonizing purposes. In this light, any attempt to universalize foreignization as the postcolonial ethics of translation becomes an object lesson in shimmering over into the recolonizing axiom of authority, becoming not only dogmatic but domineering, and so effectively recolonizing.

The knotty ethical and epistemological question – indeed, psychosocial, affective-becoming-cognitive question – facing any postcolonial ethics of translation is whether it is even possible to remain so thoroughly and transparently open and flexible and receptive to decolonizing social forces that one never veers over into authoritative dogmatism.

The most radical (and, some would say, cynical) blanket response to a postcolonial ethics of difference would be that it is always basically complicit with colonialism, in the sense that it mobilizes a sympathetic ethics of identification with the (formerly) colonized Other as a new power identity. Power takes many forms, including the apparent surrendering of power.

On the other hand, vis-à-vis the affective bass note to ethics, perhaps we would want to make some kind of affective “sincerity” the authenticating criterion for a postcolonial ethics of translation. If so, do we want, in response to the quite reasonable epistemological challenge – “How could you possibly know how sincere the translator’s sympathy is?” – to make our own empathic response to the translation the litmus test of affective-becoming-ethical authenticity?

If we really feel that the translator really feels sympathy for the Other, say, should we hold off denouncing her or him as complicit in colonial power regimes, and indeed extol him or her as a paragon of the ethics of difference? Or if we get a strong feeling that the translator’s sympathy for the Other is not sincere, should we shame him or her as a fraud and secret toady to capitalist/colonial power?

Should the target reader’s affect be used first epistemically, as a vetting of the translator’s ethical affect, and then consequentialistically, as a reward (approval, acclaim) for perceived ethicality or a punishment (disapproval, blame, shame) for perceived ethical infractions?

2 Historical trajectory

The ethics of postcolonial translation begins, as one might suspect, as a reaction against the ethics of colonial translation – namely, against the mandate to enforce loyalty to the colonial
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power. One of the early forms that colonial ethics takes, as George Steiner ([1975] 1998, 314) reminds us in his second stage of the hermeneutic motion, is the recurring metaphor of translation as conquest: “Saint Jerome uses his famous image of meaning brought home captive by the translator.” Especially once the European powers began colonizing the rest of the world in the fifteenth century, dozens of commentators on language and translation underscored the parallels between translation and conquest. Steiner goes on to insist that the ethics of translation requires restoration of what was destroyed or stolen and hauled away in translation-as-conquest:

The translator, the exegetist, the reader is faithful to his text, makes his response responsible, only when he endeavours to restore the balance of forces, of integral presence, which his appropriative comprehension has disrupted. Fidelity is ethical, but also, in the full sense, economic.

(Steiner ([1975] 1998, 302)

Just as the former colonizing powers, having enriched themselves through devastating exploitation of the former colonies, must make restitution through economic development, so too must the translator, having plundered the source text in the creation of a brilliant translation, make restitution through semantic development. What that means in practice, Steiner never quite makes explicit, but it seems to have something to do with the radical literalism enjoined by German Romantic and post-Romantic thinkers from Herder and Goethe to Benjamin and Heidegger.

In more practical terms, this ideological and imagistic alignment of translation with empire meant that, if one was translating from the language of the colonized to the language of the colonizer, one could ethically foreignize strange-sounding items so as to heighten the impression of primitivity or exoticism, but if one was translating from the language of the colonizer to the language of the colonized, one was ethically constrained to impose source-cultural and source-language norms universalizingly on the target text. The former “imperial” use of foreignization has survived into the modern era; Roger Hart (1999), for example, cites the case of Jean-Claude Martzloff (b. 1943) translating passages from the 1607 Chinese translation of Euclid’s Elements by Xu Guangqi 徐光啓 (1562–1633) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in his History of Chinese Mathematics (1987) and using foreignizing strategies to exaggerate the radical otherness of the Chinese: “King speak: Sage! not far thousand mile and come; also will have use gain me realm, hey?” (quoted in Hart 53). The purpose is to make classical Chinese seem not only strange, and even childish, but utterly incommensurable with Western languages. This imperial ethics tended to be reinforced by the dominant religion of the West, namely Christianity, according to which the universal ethics of colonization began with Jesus’s Great Commission: “Go ye and make disciples of all nations.”

Postcolonial complexity enters the conversation when the voice of the colonized begins to be taken seriously as having an ethical claim on the translator’s loyalty. Thus for example Malinche, the indigenous interpreter and lover of conquering Spanish general Hernán Cortés, was celebrated by the Spanish colonizers for betraying her people to the invading forces but vilified by later Mexicans as “a betrayer of her own people who facilitated Cortés’s colonization of Mexico and then mothered a race of bastardized mestizos that eventually displaced the ‘pure’ indigenous native population of Mexico” (Cutter 2010, 1; see also Cronin 2002). Negotiating the ethical tensions between those two perspectives becomes even more complicated when gender loyalties begin to be taken into account, as some Chicana feminists have defended and recuperated Malinche as a strong religious woman whose action in the long run caused fewer of her people
to suffer. Cutter’s (2010) summary of that complexity is a good introduction to the problematics of the ethics of postcolonial translation:

Malinche instantiates translation’s potential both to be unfaithful to a source text but also to beget a new kind of fidelity that creates something unique from the disparate parts of experience and language that the translator brings into linguistic and cultural contact.

3 Core issues and topics

3.1 The ethics of difference

It is generally agreed that the dominant postcolonial ethics of translation in the West emerges out of German Romantic thought, especially Friedrich Schleiermacher’s 1813 Academy address on the different methods of translating – which is ironic, given the tendency that one finds at the end of that address to follow the Schlegel brothers in celebrating translation into German in imperialistic terms: “the domain of scholarship and art – a domain in which no fetters curb the human spirit’s natural desire for expansion and conquest” (Friedrich von Schlegel; Robinson [1997] 2015, 220); “the German language will become the speaking voice of the civilized world” (August Wilhelm von Schlegel; Robinson [1997] 2015, 221) and

our respect for the foreign and our mediatory nature together destine the German people to incorporate linguistically, and to preserve in the geographical center and heart of Europe, all the treasures of both foreign and our own art and scholarship in a prodigious historical totality, so that with the help of our language everyone can enjoy, as purely and as perfectly as a foreigner can, all the beauty that the ages have wrought.

(Friedrich Schleiermacher; Robinson [1997] 2015, 238)

Nevertheless, Schleiermacher’s nationalistic insistence that translators leave a “feeling of the foreign” (232) in their translations has been picked up as the basis of an “ethics of difference” or an “ethics of alterity,” based on respect for the voices of nonlocal Others. This is in fact very much a self-critique launched from within the bastions of white privilege, or white male privilege: the implication is that membership in dominant groups tends to blind one to one’s own ideological commitments and the power differentials those commitments perpetuate, and that ethical postcolonial translation demands of the privileged an unending series of critical self-reflections and self-limitations aimed at a more just and equitable balance of power (see e.g. Berman 1992; Venuti 1992).

One interesting application of this approach comes from Mahasweta Sengupta (1990) in her paper on Tagore, “Translation, Colonialism, and Poetics: Rabindranath Tagore in Two Worlds,” in which she argues that for the 1912 poetry collection that won him the Nobel Prize for literature, Gitanjali: Song Offering, Tagore translated from the original Bengali only his more mystical poems, and translated them in such a way as to confirm the Orientalist stereotype of Asians as “natural” mystics. The idea in this reading is that it was relatively easy for Tagore to “disguise” himself as the perfect “Oriental” “native” precisely because of the blindness white male privilege imposed on his Western champions, from William Rothenstein to W.B. Yeats, A.C. Bradley, and Stopford Brooke to the Nobel Prize committee. Sengupta criticizes Tagore for his “imposture,” but the “ethics of difference” model would also extend the criticism to the authorities among Tagore’s target readers who were looking not for difference but for sameness – for confirmation of their Orientalist stereotypes.
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Sengupta’s reading rests on two pillars:

The first is that I believe that his understanding of English language and literature was largely influenced by the aesthetic ideology of the Romantic and Victorian periods, the time when imperialism reached its high-water mark in the expansion of the British empire. Though Tagore himself did not have any formal education and heartily disliked the British educational system that was being imposed on India, he nevertheless imbibed the aesthetic ideology that was prevalent at the time of his growing up and learnt the language primarily through its literature. . . . What is apparent is that Tagore deliberately chooses to write like these poets when he translates his own poems into English; he makes adjustments to suit the ideology of the dominating culture or system and therefore his translations fit the target-language poetics quite easily.

(1990, 57–58)

The second is that Tagore deliberately chose his more “devotional or spiritual” (Sengupta 1990, 59) poems from several previously published collections, and in translating them into English adapted them to Christian assumptions about religious devotion and spirituality. And indeed, as Sengupta shows, the Nobel committee, in awarding the prize for the very first time to a non-Westerner, explicitly identified him as a British subject who had come under the sphere of Christianizing influence radiating colonially around the world:

The true inwardness of this work is most clearly and purely revealed in the efforts exerted in the Christian mission-field throughout the world. . . . Thanks to this movement, bubbling springs of living water have been tapped, from which poetry in particular may draw inspiration, even though those springs are perhaps mingled with alien streams, and whether or not they be traced to the depths of the dreamworld. More especially, the preaching of the Christian religion has provided in many places the first definite impulse toward a revival and regeneration of the vernacular language, i.e., its liberation from the bondage of an artificial tradition, and consequently also toward a development of its capacity for nurturing and sustaining a vein of living and natural poetry.

(the Nobel Prize award text, quoted by Sengupta 61)

As Sengupta reads this, “the West was prepared to accept the poet Tagore only on two distinct grounds, as a mystic or a religious prophet” – and thus as a stereotypical exemplar of the Orientalist conception of Asian culture – “and as a person who was following the Christian missionaries in their task of unshackling the natives from the bondage of tradition and history” (61). The irony of this convergence of political and poetic values is not only that Tagore himself successfully pandered to Orientalist stereotypes in his self-translations, but that his success coincided historically with the new modernist upheavals, which in a matter of years overthrew the nostalgic modalities of Romantic and Victorian poetry and pushed Tagore out of favor.

If one pushes tough-mindedly enough on this problem of white Western privilege and the blindness to the Other that it imposes, in fact, the postcolonial ethics of difference tends to turn recursively back on itself and undermine its own authority. At least this is the subversive argument made in what may be the most famous postcolonial text ever published, Gayatri Spivak’s ([1985] 1993) essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak’s argument is that the well-intentioned attempt by Western intellectuals to empathize with the subaltern – to be postcolonially ethical – is in large part a continuation of the colonial project to aggrandize the Western Subject and silence the subaltern, especially the subaltern woman, as a mute object:
Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat. According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here), can speak and know their conditions. We must now confront the following question: on the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?

(78; emphasis original)

Or, to put that in the terms developed by the French sociologists Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (1981, 279) in their sociology of translation, if translating entails “all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or a force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force,” can an ethically foreignized source author speak through the well-meaning Western translator’s target text? “As soon as an actor speaks of ‘us,’” Callon and Latour go on, “s/he is translating other actors into a single will, of which s/he becomes spirit and spokesman” (279) – which is to say, those other actors become mute objects, subject to the “single will” of the Western Subject.

Another version of this postcolonial ethics of translation was launched by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1993) in “Thick Translation,” building on Clifford Geertz’s (1973) famous anthropological manifesto “Thick Description.” Appiah’s idea, while similarly oriented to respect for the voice of the other, was aimed strategically at the retention not so much of the feeling of the foreign as of the source-textual density of the foreign. As Theo Hermans (2003) picks up this notion, he expands it from a postcolonial ethics of translation to a postcolonial ethics of translation studies:

For all these reasons “thick translation” seems to me a line worth pursuing in the cross-cultural study, interpretation, mapping and translation of translation. It seems well placed to address both the epistemological complexities and the political implications of cross-cultural translation studies, in that it is capable of bringing about a double dislocation: of the foreign terms and concepts, which are probed and unhinged by means of an alien methodology and vocabulary, and of the describer’s own vocabulary, which needs to be wrenched out of its familiar shape to accommodate not only similarity but also alterity. Especially this latter operation requires a measure of imaginative and experimental vigour. My emphasis on this double dislocation will hopefully also make it clear that I think of thick translation at least in part as a critique of current translation studies, and not as a generalized form of description or translation (which also means that my use of the concept differs considerably from Appiah’s).

(386)
stereotypes of “innate” Asian mysticism. And Gayatri Spivak’s example of white men priding themselves on saving brown women from brown men: an ethics of alterity? No: the (post)colonial savior complex effectively deafens the white man’s ability to hear the voice of the brown women he is attempting to save, so that she “can’t speak.” Appiah’s “thick translation” is effectively an attempt to bring the silenced voices and nuances and implications of the source text to Geertzian “thick description” – to uncover what white Western privilege blinds one to, deafens one to. Is that, then, finally, an ethics of alterity? Potentially. It too, in the end, is an attempt to minimize the negative effects of white privilege – and may, like W.B. Yeats on Tagore, end up reiterating the Western stereotypes it is striving to get past.

3.2 Confusion between ethics and respectability: the criss-crossing ethics of transmajoritization and transminoritization

One quite widespread conception of ethics is that it is a rigid social code controlling inclusion and exclusion: if you are widely perceived as an ethical person, you are not only approved and acclaimed – the affective consequentialism adumbrated in the Introduction – but included. You are accepted into “good society.” If on the other hand you come to be suspected of unethical dealings, you are not only blamed and shamed, but excluded. You are declared not fit for good society and banished to the periphery.

As George Mosse (1985) has shown at length, this is ethics or morality as respectability – a social regime that historically, over the last few centuries, has been linked closely with nationalism. Nationalist sentiment is respectable and therefore ethical; any perceived attempt to question the nation and its heroes is disrespectful and therefore disreputable, and thus also morally or ethically suspect.

Mosse is specifically interested in the emergence of National Socialism out of an increasingly militant German Romantic respectability over the course of the nineteenth century – and one of the key texts that must be reread in that light is Schleiermacher’s Academy address (a historical text that continues to resonate throughout contemporary discussions of the ethics of difference). Schleiermacher’s nationalism is in fact quite fervent in the address, even though it is cagily invo-luted, presented as courting the ill repute of anti-nationalist cosmopolitanism:

There can hardly be a more astonishing form of self-abasement to which a good writer will knowingly submit. Who would not want his native language to appear in the resplendence most characteristic of his people and of each individual genre? Who would willingly breed mongrels when he could instead sire loving children in the pure image of their father? Who would publicly cripple his own verbal facility and grace in order to appear, at least at times, churlish and clumsy, and as offensive as is necessary to keep the reader aware of what is going on? Who would gladly be thought a bungler just because he took pains to stick as close to the foreign language as his own would allow – or be censured like parents who give their children to be raised by acrobats, because he would not train his language in its own native gymnastics but most inure it to alien and unnatural contortions?

(Robinson [1997] 2015, 232)

This seems to be saying that a true translational ethics of difference (“to keep the reader aware of what is going on”) must flout social ideals of respectability. It is, however, not that simple. For one thing, Schleiermacher is not saying that foreignization is mired in unrespectability; he’s saying that it may be perceived that way, by moralizing nationalists who want the translator to forswear foreign ways.
More important, he also mobilizes figures of (un)respectability to attack domesticating approaches to translation:

To be sure, some write in Latin or one of the Romance languages for their own pleasure; and if their intentions in this were to write as well and as originally in the foreign language as in their own, I would unhesitatingly pronounce it a wicked and magical art akin to going doubled, an attempt at once to flout the laws of nature and to perplex others. But that is truly not their aim; their hobby is but an exquisite mimetic game with which to beguile away the hours on the margins of philosophy and art. . . . If on the other hand, in defiance of nature and morality, a writer becomes a traitor to his native language by surrendering his verbal life to another, it is no false or affected self-mockery when he protests that he can no longer move about in that language; it is rather his attempt to vindicate himself by portraying himself as a wonder, a miracle surpassing all natural rule and order, and a relief to others that he at least does not go doubled like a ghost.

Schleiermacher’s analogical reasoning is somewhat farfetched here (see Robinson 2013, 120–144): he is arguing that because it would be wildly immoral to attempt to write original literature in a foreign language, it is by extension equally immoral to pretend in translating that the source author wrote the work in the target language. Domesticating strategies in translation, after all, seek to create a target text that sounds and feels to the target reader as if it had been written directly by the source author, without translationese – and this ideal is what Schleiermacher condemns moralistically as disreputable (“a wicked and magical art akin to going doubled”). In other words, the apparently cosmopolitan strategy of “taking the reader to the author” – foreignizing – is actually the more nationally respectable. It respects national difference.

In fact, this foreignizing respectability works on two different levels. The first level is the translator’s respect for the foreignness of the Other, which is designed to infect the entire target readership with the same respect. This is the cosmopolitan (foreign- or Other-directed) ethical respectability championed by Schleiermacher’s recent acolytes like Berman and Venuti.

The second level, however, which recent Schleiermacherians do not follow, is explicitly nationalistic. The “feeling of the foreign” with which Schleiermacher’s ideal translator infuses the target text is supposed to make target readers feel what intermediate students of the foreign language feel when reading the source text: the awkwardness, the uncertainty about what things mean, the alienation from smooth and easy understanding. On this nationalistic level, the goal is to inoculate the target reader against the alienating force of the foreign. By chafing and abrading the foreign speaking voice, and so marking it as alien, the foreignizing translator protects the target reader against the potential alienating force of foreignness. By alienating the German speaker/reader from the alien, by recursively doubling alienation, Schleiermacher’s German foreignizer reconditions and reintensifies the experience of belonging to the German Volk and the German landscape. The social ideal is respectable belonging, rooted in the authentic German soil, but retrofitted as an alienation-like affect. It is rootedness staged as simulated rootlessness, yielding an aestheticized simulacrum of cosmopolitanism that does not – cannot – actually alienate one from the Volk and all that is humanly wonderful. Because one feels the foreign in the German body, with German ears and a German tongue that are rooted in the German Volk’s “naturally” embodied ability to distinguish and reproduce home-grown German sounds, the outlandish feeling that the foreign sounds one is hearing and voicing produce in one’s German breast tingles with awkwardness, with strangeness, with uprootedness – but in actual fact, by signaling with its alien tingle the alienness of the other, the foreigner, the
stranger, that feeling confirms one’s homey Volkishness, one’s rootedness in the *Heimat*, the German homeland.

As mentioned, however, the recent Schleiermacherians do not go to this nationalistic place in their adaptations of Schleiermacher for a foreignizing ethics of difference. Where they do go with the first level – the explicit ethics of difference – is a different kind of respectabilization: namely, what Deleuze and Guattari ([1980] 1987) call the “majoritization” of the source text in transit to the target culture. The “majority” of the major writer, after all, for Deleuze and Guattari is literary respectability; and the disreputable “minority” of the minor writer is like the “self-abasement” of Schleiermacher’s foreignizer, who “would willingly breed mongrels when he could instead sire loving children in the pure image of their father,” who “would publicly cripple his own verbal facility and grace in order to appear, at least at times, churlish and clumsy, and as offensive as is necessary to keep the reader aware of what is going on,” who is willing to “be censured like parents who give their children to be raised by acrobats, because he would not train his language in its own native gymnastics but most imure it to alien and unnatural contortions.” If the majoritizing writer protects literary respectability, the majoritizing translator or “transmajoritizer” may even improve the text’s respectability by tacitly touching it up in areas where the majoritizing source author may unfortunately have lapsed. The minoritizing writer, by contrast, demolishes literary respectability, and the transminoritizer may seek to make the source author even seedier, less reputable, less respectable, by intensifying any lapses s/he may find in the text, capitalizing on half-submerged embarrassments, even building the entire translation around them, in order to “send the major language racing” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 116; emphasis original).

So far, so good. The problem arises, however, when foreignizing advocates of an ethics of difference subtly elevate their approach to a new respectability – a new shame-driven regime of conformity to ethical norms based on a fear of political shaming. This problem is amply evident, for example, in the essays collected in Venuti (1998), which on one level champion transminoritization as respect for Otherness while on another level converting respect into respectability, and thus into literary majority.

The ethical question to ask would be whether minoritizing a problematic style is respectful of a minoritizing impulse in the source author or an attack – a deliberate attempt to minoritize a majoritizing writer. If the source author is striving valiantly for literary majority/reputation/reputability and the transminoritizer gleefully highlights that writer’s failures, in order to debunk her or his reputation, that would arguably not be ethical – especially, in a postcolonial context, if the aim, conscious or unconscious, is to adopt an implicitly colonial power position in order to put the “hapless” postcolonial majoritizer in his or her place. If on the other hand the source author is launching a minoritizing attack on literary majority, the ethical translator will support that. This would be the postcolonial ethics of difference.

Again, however, things are not so simple. It is possible, for example, that the postcolonial writer has mixed aspirations: to be hailed as a major writer precisely by radically undermining literary majority, for example. It is also possible for the postcolonial writer to be serenely unaware of one or the other aspiration: to majoritize consciously and minoritize unconsciously, say, or vice versa. And it is possible for the postcolonial writer to want one thing and be read as wanting another, for say nationalistic reasons: the source readership may elevate the writer to majority out of national pride, for example, for decades or even centuries after the writer’s death suppressing all awareness of her or his minoritizing impulses. Arguably Rabindranath Tagore, for example, sought the global “majority” that resulted in his Nobel Prize without full awareness of what it was he was attempting to achieve: major international poetry? Poetry that would be seen as internationally “minor,” because “mired” in regionalism: Indian, Bengali,
A case in point is a conflict that arose a few years ago between a nationalistic reader of Finland’s greatest writer Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872) and Kivi’s American transminoritizer. The American translator-critic was appalled at the Finnish editor-critic’s (Nummi 2010) apparently unmotivated reading of Kivi’s greatest play, *Nummisuutarit* (1864), translated by the American translator-critic in 1993 as *Heath Cobblers*. In a review (Robinson 2014), he quoted the actual passages from the play that the Finnish editor-critic (without quoting) was reading nationalistically, wondering how it was even possible, let alone ethical, to dream up a reading of warm harmonious loving kindness and communal acceptance out of a concluding scene that is manifestly racked with bitterness and failure. The Finnish editor-critic’s riposte (Nummi 2014) was viciously ad hominem, and completely ungrounded in the text. What was going on?

So the American translator-critic undertook further research, and a few years later reported (Robinson 2017a, 135–145) his discovery that the Finnish editor-critic’s reading was not at all unmotivated: it was organized by a nationalist project that had been launched in the late nineteenth century, with the goal of mobilizing Kivi for national pride, leading up to independence (and full postcoloniality) in 1917. Finland in the 1860s was in a sense a quasi-postcolonial culture: after six centuries of colonization by Sweden, it had been occupied and recolonized in 1809 by Russia, which allowed it a high degree of proto-national autonomy, until the Russification regime around the turn of the twentieth century – precisely the period during which Kivi began to be lionized as Finland’s National Writer, in support of a resurgent revolutionary spirit.

Another discovery: the American translator-critic realized that his own minoritizing approach to Kivi wasn’t unmotivated either. It had been shaped by minoritizing readings of Kivi in the 1960s and 1970s by Finland’s rebellious modernists, who had spurned the still-dominant nationalist majoritizations of Kivi and celebrated a proto-modernist Kivi who hated literary majority as much as they did. The powerful majoritarian voice in mid-nineteenth-century Finland was the (post)colony’s only professor of Finnish literature, August Ahlqvist (1826–1889), whose conception of Finnish literary majority was all about respectability. Ahlqvist effectively hounded Kivi into an early grave, through a series of vicious pre-publication attacks on Kivi’s great 1870 novel, *Seitsemän veljestä*, translated into English as *Seven Brothers* (Matson 1929; Impola 1991) and *The Brothers Seven* (Robinson 2017b), as “haplessly” disreputable, the author himself as a “taitamatoin tahruri/Ja hullu viinan juoja vaan”/*a skill-less hack/and just a crazy boozer*/ (quoted in Finnish in Ketonen 1989: 121; translation by DR). The nationalist move to idealize Kivi as Finland’s National Writer was conceived as a series of knock-down refutations of Ahlqvist’s attack: he was not immoral, not unrealistic, not anti-religious, not bitter or brutal, and so on. The modernist revision of Kivi in the 1960s and 1970s, by contrast, argued that Ahlqvist got Kivi right: he was a dangerous iconoclast! Ahlqvist’s only error, said the modernists, lay in thinking that was a bad thing.

In *The Brothers Seven*, the American translator-critic joined forces with the modernists’ minoritarian Kivi by participating gleefully in his anti-majoritarian project: indulging in playful proto-postmodern antics like metafiction/metatranslation, breaking the fourth wall, playing with anachronism and the other “strange loops” (Hofstadter [1979] 1989, 2007) of translation, and in general, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “sending the major language racing” – in this case, minoritizing “major” English. This transminoritizing approach is different from an ethics of difference, something other than respect for the Other, in that it seeks not to represent the Other as fairly and accurately as possible but rather to engage with an ally in interactionist solidarity. The transmajoritizer seeks to respect the Other through accurate but static reproduction; the transminoritizer seeks to engage the Other dialogically, through a series of participatory responses
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that may well end up parodying or pastiching the source text in playful ways. To the transmajoritizer, the Other-ēthos is a stable identity that must be captured and displayed equitably; to the transminoritizer, the Other-ēthos is a back-projection of a series of actions that provoke reactions, performances that invite the target author and target reader to play along, to improvise (“don’t deny – add to the action”).

This transminoritizing strategy in *The Brothers Seven* is strongly allied to the trend Boris Groys (2016) identifies in modern art, where “Already a long time ago modern artists practiced a revolt against the identities which were imposed on them by others – by society, the state, schools, parents.” In refusing to identify with the identities imposed on them by power-holders they are not, however, clinging defensively to their “own” “true” identities, Groys notes, but rather challenging the very idea of identity:

Here the question is not whether the true self is real or merely a metaphysical fiction. The question of identity is not a question of truth but a question of power: Who has the power over my own identity – I myself or society? And, more generally: Who exercises control and sovereignty over the social taxonomy, the social mechanisms of identification – state institutions or I myself?

The “question of power” is specifically a majoritizing ethics of power, grounded in respect for stable and above all respectable identities. “Rather,” Groys (2016) continues, these artists “began to use their nominal identities as ready-mades – and to organize a complicated play with them. But this strategy still presupposes a disidentification from nominal, socially codified identities – with the goal of artistically reappropriating, transforming, and manipulating them.” And if as a result “the politics of modern and contemporary art is the politics of nonidentity,” it is also thereby the ethics of minority, seeking to disrupt majority by courting audience rejection through perceived disreputability. Identities are roles, playthings, not prisons. Since audiences often project identities onto actions, artists play with actions as with masks, styles of dressing and walking, props. Artistic actions are used to deflect and redirect the attention, like a matador’s red flag, behind which the bull thinks the matador stands. “Art says to its spectator: I am not what you think I am (in stark contrast to: I am what I am).” I’m not where you think I am. I’m somewhere else, heading in another direction.

This transminoritizing strategy in *The Brothers Seven* is strongly allied as well to the iconoclastic Finnish modernist revision of Kivi, of which there is not a single mention in the Finnish Literature Society’s nationalistic critical edition (Nummi 2010). *The Brothers Seven* is not merely a disreputable travesty, not just a shameful dragging of Finland’s National Writer through the mud of unrespectability (a line of attack leveled against the Finnish modernists as well, by a group of establishment conservatives that included one of the original nationalist majoritizers of Kivi [Koskenniemi 1934]). It is also an unrespectable translation. In the American translator-critic’s view, the very disreputability of its minoritizing attack on nationalist respectability is what makes it an example of the ethics of postcolonial translation.

4 New debates and emerging issues

Inspired by Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of “cultural translation,” new trends in the postcolonial ethics of translation often focus on the translator less as a heroic mediator across linguistic and cultural lines and more as a migrant, a “translated person” whose physical body bears the brunt of movement in time and space. As Anthony Pym (2010) writes of this approach, “The focus is cultural processes rather than products. The prime cause of cultural translation is the
movement of people (subjects) rather than the movement of texts (objects)” (144). This shift of focus from manipulation to migration tends to privilege the translator as an intercultural mediator whose in-between “hybridity” problematizes traditional distinctions between the foreign and the local. In Laura Lomas’s (2011) terms,

Metaphors of migration, the bodies of “translated persons,” to allude to Salman Rushdie’s meditations on diaspora crop up regularly in translation studies. They suggest how historical processes of migration on an unprecedented scale and a relatively recent, if incomplete, recognition of conditions of difference and impurity in any cultural formation press for a distinct conception of the foreign.

Bhabha originally introduced the notion of cultural translation in a discussion of Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel The Satanic Verses, a novel written in English, not translated from an Indian language into English: a product of cultural translation, in that Rushdie was an Indian immigrant in London writing about Indian immigrants in London, encountering and engendering cultural and linguistic hybridities. And as the Gujarati writer, translator, and translation scholar Rita Kothari (2006) notes, Gujarati “curricula in English literary studies” have begun to favor literature by Indian writers like Rushdie and Anita Desai, and thus also cultural translation and its attendant hybridity, over “pure” imports like Charles Dickens and Jane Austen – “not only a structural change,” she says, “but also a reflection of a postcolonial ethos and a shift from ‘English literature’ to ‘literature in English’” (97). This curricular “de-Anglicization”/”Indianization” has also, she notes, “made room for many Indian texts available in English translation, creating an institutionalized consensus for translation” (97).

Kothari tracks the historical imbalances among Indian languages, with an extraordinarily high level of translation from other Indian languages into Gujarati, but virtually no translation at all from Gujarati into other Indian languages – perhaps, she suggests, because Gujarati is widely (though incorrectly) thought to be “devoid of literary merit since it is the product of a mercantile, business-oriented community” (94). As Kothari notes wryly in her introduction, “Translators, researchers and publishers seldom acknowledge that translation sharpens, makes and unmakes hierarchies among the Indian languages” (93).

In the twenty-first century, however, as “translation . . . emerges in the minds of Gujarati literati as an index of inequality” (Kothari 2006, 95), and the collective cultural resentment at that inequality has grown and found voice, attitudes are changing, especially in regard to English, long sidelined in the state as the interloper colonial language:

A possible corollary to this realization would have been to make concerted efforts to have Gujarati texts translated into other Indian languages. However, given the significance of English as the only language of the urban bourgeoisie (Ahmad 1994, 78), the Gujarati community has sought to have Gujarati texts translated into that language. The underlying assumption is that translation into English would correct the linguistic/literary balance by “representing” Gujarat, making it available to a wider readership. The feeling that Gujarati literature has not been given its due at the national level makes leading literary figures in Gujarat advocate English translation to correct this historical wrong (Kothari 2003, 76).

Several significant differences present themselves between this ethics of postcolonial translation and the “ethics of difference” promoted by Western translation scholars: (1) while
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Gujarati and Westerners are both dealing with translation from postcolonial languages into colonizing languages, the Western postcolonial translation scholars are dealing with target-driven translation projects and the project of translating Gujarati literature into English is source-driven. As a result, (2) while the representational ethics of difference in the West seeks to enforce respect for the Other, in Gujarat it seeks to enhance the Other’s respect for the collective self. And because in the West the (colonizing) target culture is more powerful and privileged than the (post-/decolonial) source culture, (3) representatives of the former have to work hard to be “representationally accurate” and “fair” (without being condescending) to the latter, while representatives of the latter are able to mobilize the former to serve their own political and cultural ends. The affects driving the two opposed ethical norms also differ: (4) where the Western ethics of postcolonial translation tends to be driven by guilt and/or shame, in Kothari’s account the Gujarati ethics of postcolonial translation tends to be driven by resentment at intra-Indian inequality and an ambitious desire to redress the inequitable imbalance. And finally, (5) to Westerners, English is the language of global power, global capitalism, global Westernism, but to Gujarati literati English is an Indian lingua franca, strongly favored by the Indian urban bourgeoisie – occupying a higher rung on the cultural status hierarchy, perhaps, but specifically a local status hierarchy.

The upshot of all this is something like a warning: don’t universalize. The ethics of postcolonial translation is not one thing. It varies significantly from context to context, and from rhetorical exigency to rhetorical exigency.

Notes

1 For an example, see the famous postcolonial dialogue on this topic between Fredric Jameson (1986/2007), who adopts the power position that puts postcolonial writers in their place, and Aijaz Ahmad (1987/2007), who challenges Jameson’s crypto-colonializing move.

2 From a poem written by Ahlqvist after Kivi’s early death at the age of 38, in an apparently gratuitous attack on the author whose demise his earlier vicious attacks in print had hastened. Arguably, however, the attack was not entirely gratuitous, as the nationalist movement to elevate Kivi to National Writer status, which would not reach full fruition for several more decades, was already beginning to bud in the early 1870s, and presumably Ahlqvist was trying to nip it in the bud.

References


Douglas Robinson


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Further reading


