

POLYGLOT VOICES, HYBRID SELVES AND FOREIGN
IDENTITIES: TRANSLATION AS A PARADIGM OF THOUGHT FOR
MODERNISM

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Modernism is generally defined as a major revolt against prevalent aesthetic traditions of the Western world and is usually associated with the cultural and social context of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, when all forms of expression were coming under investigation and the relation of language to logic and reality became a central theme. Taking as a point of departure the notion of linguistic experiment as an essential element of literary modernism, this article proposes to re-evaluate the ideological implications of modernism's experimental poetics in the light of the modernist writers' engagement with translation as mode of literary composition. Drawing from contemporary translation theories, the notion of translation is developed as a self-conscious interrogation of the nature and function of communication; accordingly, it is argued that this notion informs modernist epistemology. Through an examination of representative authors and texts, the essay demonstrates that a large number of modernist writers (many of them also translators) were 'foreigners' who sought to express the articulation of alternative identities through a radically new language. Ultimately, the article explores the different ways in which translation may be used as an enlightening paradigm of thought for modernism.

Key words: modernism, translation, self-consciousness, alienation, exile, identity, foreignness, between-ness.

"America is my country and Paris my home town"
Gertrude Stein

It is impossible to separate the history of translation from the history of languages, of cultures and of literatures—even of religions and nations. To be sure, this is not a question of mixing everything up, but of showing how in each period or in each given historical setting, the practice of translation is articulated in relation to the practice of literature, of languages, of the several intercultural and interlinguistic exchanges.

Antoine Berman

Most recent work in the field of Translation Studies has focused on the aspect of literary translation as a complex cultural activity, thereby emphasizing its centrality to the emergence of innovative aesthetics, and the development of new ideologies throughout different historical contexts and literary traditions. Drawing from the conviction that translation must be observed as an essential mechanism in the process of consolidation of new poetics as well as in the negotiation of issues of cultural and individual identity, I propose to re-evaluate modernist practices and concerns in the light of my own investigation into the relationship between modernism and translation.

In the post-traditional order of modernity, characterized by the pluralization of contexts of action, the diversity of authorities and the emergence of new modes of mediated experience, the concept of personal and social identity is continuously subjected to revision as previous configurations of knowledge take now the form of provisional hypotheses and doubt is institutionalized.¹ Many earlier presumptions, including those of national inviolability, the location of culture and the nature of the relation between the sexes, come under scrutiny.

Although I shall not dwell here on either a discussion of modernity or an inquiry of the various ways in which modernism interacts with social modernity, I wish to stress that critics have frequently elaborated on the parallels between historical and social modernity on the one hand, and modernist art and literature on the other. Likewise, notwithstanding the debate underlying irreconcilable conceptualizations of modernism and postmodernism, my point of departure will be based on the critical consensus that regards modernism as a major revolt against prevalent aesthetic traditions of the Western world, later continued in the so-called postmodern age.² Therefore, modernism will be understood not only as the cultural and social context of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, when artists and thinkers were challenging previous conventions in order to accommodate their perception of an unsettling world, but also as a radical break in the historical attitude towards language and communication as evinced in the literary texts I will refer to.³

At the turn of the century the complexity of the modern world demanded a literature of such unconventional force that writers felt compelled to reshape language. In this respect, modernist innovation relies fundamentally on the creation of a new language. As Jacob Korg states in the introduction to his book *Language in Modern*

¹ For a study of the interconnections between mechanisms of self-identity and the institutions of modernity see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*.

² For a thorough examination of the different positions in the philosophical debate about modernity and postmodernity see D'Entrèves, Passerin and Benhabib, Seyla eds, *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*.

³ For an exceptionally lucid exploration of modernism from the perspective of literary history and theory and an illuminating reading of modernist texts and authors see Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*. See also Randy Malamud, *The Language of Modernism*, for an exhaustive exploration of the renewal of literary language as undertaken by the modernist writers Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

Literature: “There is no doubt that a revolution occurred, and that it was primarily a verbal revolution, manifesting itself in new uses of language” (1979: 1). Most importantly, linguistic experiment must be seen both as an essential element of literary modernism, and a symptom of how Western culture as a whole changed in the first decades of the twentieth century. The relation of language to reality became a central theme for the modernists whose art was to reveal a constant dialogue between the artist and his or her medium.

The poet T.S. Eliot, whose major work, *The Waste Land* (1922), was dismissed by early reviewers as a kind of modern excess for its transgression of poetic decorum, had stated that “there is always the communication of some new experiences, or some fresh understanding of the familiar, or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words for, which enlarges or refines our sensibility” (Eliot 1957: 7). As Eliot acknowledged, and manifested repeatedly as he struggled to articulate a new language, modern experience cannot be fully explained by tradition. Consequently, the modernists must now endow their language with new possibilities; they must deviate from the straight path of conventional English, abandon the conventional lexicon and syntax, and even violate the principles of standard grammar as if they were writing under the pressure of having to translate from a different tongue.

Significantly, during the first years of the twentieth century, both in Britain and the United States, translation appealed to a large number of modernist writers who found in foreign languages and cultures not only sources of inspiration and models for renewing their own culture but also ways of expanding the possibilities of expression in English. Critics such as Lawrence Venuti and Steven G. Yao have remarked on the fact that translation played a crucial role in the development of modernism. In his recent *Translation and the Language of Modernism*, Yao explains that modernist translation constituted a fruitful autonomous literary activity that inspired varied and sustained critical reflection and served modernist cultural agendas:

It embodied a comprehensive textual strategy for negotiating between the demands of transmission and transformation, between the authority of tradition and the demands of innovation, between the endowments of the past and the imperatives of the present. In their drive to develop and renew different formal and social possibilities, the Modernists writing in (and into) English turned to translation and, in turn, reinvented it as a uniquely important mode of literary composition. (2002: 22)

Undoubtedly, modernism could be seen as a ‘heroic age of translations’ if only judging by the number of modernist writers who engaged in translation at crucial points in their careers. Yao provides an impressive list, extremely diverse both as regards the chosen subjects and the languages involved. Thus, he refers to James Joyce’s youthful renderings of two plays by the German writer Gerhart Hauptmann and discusses also the case of another Irish author, W.B. Yeats, who approached Greek tragedy as a model for the formation of a national Irish Drama. Other significant examples provided by the critic are the translations of Hellenic poetry and drama by the American writer Hilda Doolittle (known by her initials H.D.), the versions of the fables of La Fontaine by Marianne Moore, Eliot’s renderings of French essays, Virginia Woolf’s versions of

Dostoevsky and William Carlos Williams's translations of numerous poems by French, Spanish and Latin American writers such as Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda and Miguel Hernández. In this context, the American poet Ezra Pound, with his versions of Guido Cavalcanti, his rendition of medieval Chinese lyrics and Japanese haikus, and his treatment of Latin poets, stands as a pre-eminent example of the interconnection between translation and other modes of literary production.

Interestingly, Pound, who recommended translation as an imperative practice for young poets, stands as a remarkable example of how the experimentation that characterized the literature of the period must be approached in the context of the modernist writers' concern with translation. In fact, for Pound translating does not differ in essence from original poetic composition. Indeed, much of the innovation of his poetry derives from his efforts to revitalize English through acts of homage to other languages and cultures. Both as a translator and as a writer, he employs strategies that aimed to challenge what Venuti has called the dominance of transparent discourse:

Pound's translations avoided the transparent discourse that has dominated English-language translation since the seventeenth century. Instead of translating fluently, foregrounding the signified and minimizing any play of the signifier that impeded communication, pursuing linear syntax, univocal meaning, current usage, standard dialects, prosodic smoothness, Pound increased the play of the signifier, cultivating inverted or convoluted syntax, polysemy, archaism, non-standard dialects, elaborate stanzaic forms—textual features that frustrate immediate intelligibility, emphatic response, interpretive mastery. (1995: 203)

Modernist translation as undertaken by Pound entails the inscription of the foreign in the native culture through the disruption of hierarchies and the estrangement of the dominant values, thus illustrating an understanding of the practice of translation which deviates from the notion of a mere crossing over in order to transport and fix the original.⁴ Pound's approach to translation can be seen in the light of what poststructuralist thought has conceptualized as “an action in which the movement along the surface of language is made visible” (Gentzler 1993: 162). Notwithstanding that my invocation of poststructuralism will not be followed by a discussion in depth of the influence of poststructuralism on translation theory, I will nevertheless resort to certain theoretical positions which allow me to think about modernist translation in other than traditional terms.

Significantly, Jacques Derrida's and Paul de Man's approaches to translation take as a point of departure the work of Walter Benjamin, one of the most representative figures of modernist thought. De Man is interested in how, according to Benjamin, translation dismantles the notion of “the stability of the original” and thus, whereas “the translation canonizes, freezes, an original”, it simultaneously “shows in the original

⁴ In this respect, in his introduction to *Ezra Pound: Translations*, Hugh Kenner appropriately comments on Pound's audacities as a translator “Ezra Pound never translates ‘into’ something already existing in English . . . only Pound has both the boldness and resource to make a new form, similar in effect to that of the original, which permanently extends the bounds of English verse” (Pound 1963: 9).

a mobility, an instability which at first one did not notice” (de Man 1986: 82). Likewise, Derrida questions traditional definitions of translation based on the notion of reproducing or communicating the ‘meaning’ of the original in similar terms. For him, translation might better be viewed as “one instance in which language can be seen as always in the process of modifying the original text, of deferring and displacing for ever any possibility of grasping that which the original text desired to name” (Gentzler 1993: 163).

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, “the functions of communication and representability of language are always problematized in translation through the paradox that translation itself represents” (Caneda 2007: 677). A translation obligatorily speaks of itself as an act of linguistic provisionality and displacement of meaning which “ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering” (Benjamin 1992: 77). So conceived, translation explicitly becomes a site of conflict which defers an end or a definitive interpretation. In this respect, by deviating from traditional approaches which regarded fidelity and freedom as competing tendencies, we can open the possibility for a translation theory which can go beyond the obsession with the reproduction of meaning.

Translation is directly related to the notion of *incommunicability*, since, as Benjamin argues, a total transfer is not possible: “Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive” (Benjamin 1992: 76). The mobility and elusiveness which become visible through the process of translation—“the task of the translator is to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (Benjamin 1992: 80-81)—would thus seem to suggest an implicit elusiveness and mobility in the original itself. In this respect, this approach to translation as a mode of displacement would appear to fit in with a particular view of the original as a text which does not communicate an authorized meaning through formal wholeness but, rather, as a linguistic construct which self-consciously manifests its ambiguity through open forms and lends itself to being displaced and transformed. Therein lies the attractiveness of Benjamin’s redefinition of translation for an exploration of the relationship between translation and modernism.⁵ Ultimately, his notion of translation seems fraught with the same anxiety about language which lies at the heart of modernism.

The work of translation scholars like Alexis Nouss, who has followed in the footsteps of Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’, clearly illustrates a contemporary concern in the field of translation studies to move beyond the obsession with transmission and the strict adherence to the traditional distinction between signifier and signified. Nouss (1997) maintains that translation is in itself a form of philosophy and consequently exposes the need for a translation theory which encourages commentary on texts which are themselves commentaries. According to traditional

⁵ For further discussion of translation as a mode of displacement that must be approached as “the inescapable destiny of modernism”, see Caneda ‘The Untranslatability of Modernism’ (682).

perspectives, translation entails the recollection of an original meaning which must be unveiled and restored. Yet, as defended by Nuss, it is possible to produce a translation theory which focuses not on the traditional opposition between the original and its translation, but rather centres on how a translation self-reflexively speaks of its unfulfilled relation to a previous text. This is precisely the scholar's own standpoint as he claims that translation must be approached as a trans-disciplinary paradigm, in itself a transversal and transgressive form of epistemology.

It is my contention that this notion of translation, a self-conscious act of communication which constantly interrogates its nature and function, not only informs the overall trajectory of modernism but appropriately illustrates epistemological modernist concerns. Thus, I will argue that the modernists' interest in the play of signifiers and the employment of textual features that frustrated immediate intelligibility and transparency in the composition of their own original works requires to be approached in the context of the writers' own (explicit or implicit) engagement with translation. It must be noted that this 'engagement with translation' was not always made visible. Apart from those writers who (like Pound and Eliot) developed deviant and eccentric forms of trans-lingual writing, for modernists translation was much more of an implicit practice; it conformed to a whole array of aesthetic experiments through which they challenge established concepts of self and otherness.

Many modernists cultivated heterogeneity by resorting to a foreignizing poetics which, far from being a mere play with aesthetic formulas, stands as a symptomatic foregrounding of their own engagement with the unfamiliar, an engagement which is inherent to the task of the translator. In this respect, the practice of translation becomes paradigmatic of the writers' attempt to articulate a new language through which they can express their rejection of tradition and, simultaneously, speak about the 'foreignness' inevitably linked to the experience of the modern self in the modern world.

The inclusion of fragments appropriated from texts in foreign languages becomes essential in a large number of modernist creations, both manifesting a new intertextual poetics which deviates from standard literary values and simultaneously making an explicit statement about the multilingual dimensions of modernism.⁶ Furthermore, in their attempt to defamiliarize their medium of expression the modernists include languages other than English with such frequency that Pound's famous motto *make it new* can well be interpreted as an implicit exhortation to *make it foreign*.

As Michael North has indicated in his superb study on race and language in twentieth century literature, *The Dialect of Modernism*, a striking example of the use of foreignizing poetics can be found in one of the poems that Eliot wrote in French, 'Mélange adultère de tout' (1916). This poetic composition introduces a speaker who wanders from place to place so that the recurrent motif of movement through space

⁶ In his foreword to *Extraterritorial* (1971), George Steiner identifies a clear convergence between the "language revolution" and the crisis of "morals and formal values" which immediately precedes and follows the First World War. For him, one of the most striking aspects of the language revolution is represented by "the emergence of linguistic pluralism or 'unhousedness'" (viii) in representative figures in the literature of exile.

appropriately entails a translation/alteration of personality as well: “En Amérique, professeur;/En Angleterre, journaliste ; /A Londres un peu banquier; /en Allemagne, philosophe” (Eliot 1963: 39). North remarks that the poem expresses instability of place and identity by variations in language: it is written in French about an American much like Eliot himself and includes German terminology, American place-names, French slang and non-linguistic expressions like *tra la la*. I agree with North that both in this poem, and indeed in his longer and more representative *The Waste Land*, the modernist freedom afforded by the drastic mix of styles and languages reveals Eliot’s obsession with ‘between-ness’ which appears everywhere in his work.⁷

Certainly, the writer’s poetic method is significant in relation to other modernist texts which incorporate foreign languages as examples of otherness, thus becoming cross-cultural artefacts in the middle of a fragmented and disrupted Western culture. However, it is not only that Eliot attempts to express his own dislocation between languages in order to illustrate that “the protagonist’s movements from country to country unsettle identity and language at once” (North 1994: 84). Furthermore, I will argue that since in both poems the notion of a single standard style, tone or diction is undermined by poetic voices that speak different languages and employ radically opposed linguistic registers, Eliot consciously produces a hybrid text that undermines the very concept of monolingualism.⁸

In doing so, the poet, who in his early years had considered giving up English and writing only in French, seems to suggest a challenging new mode of linguistic affiliation for the modern self which simultaneously exposes the flaws of narrowly compact discourses of ‘national’ culture. In this respect, both ‘Mélange’ with its adulterate mixture of places and identities, and *The Waste Land*, with its inclusion of lines in German, French, Italian, Latin and Hindi, self-reflexively reveal themselves as multilingual modernist texts marking the speakers’ position as strangers, always being somewhere else, always translating themselves into someone else and thus standing in opposition to clearly defined identities speaking in the ‘original’ language.⁹

⁷ My use of *between-ness* differs from North’s employment of the same term. The critic, consistent with his exploration of Eliot’s anxiety about race and language, identifies the quality of *between-ness* with “the loss of an identity once underwritten by secure racial boundaries” (North 1994: 86). In my case, the concept is used to refer to Eliot’s typical modernist dislocation as a writer between worlds and languages and manifested through the techniques of quotation, juxtaposition, montage and parody.

⁸ In his biography of T.S. Eliot, Peter Ackroyd explains that in *The Waste Land* Eliot developed his gift for dramatic impersonation and stylistic allusiveness and appropriately remarks that his passages of parody and pastiche are not simply imitations but “the creative borrowing of another style and syntax which releases a plethora of ‘voices’” (1984: 117). The critic maintains that Eliot found his voice “by reproducing that of others” and explains that *Ulysses* struck him so forcibly because “Joyce had created a world which exists only in, and through, the multiple uses of languages—through voices” (1984: 118). Ackroyd, who also states that the position of alien had always appealed to the poet, clearly identifies Eliot’s experimental techniques with his undermining of a monolingual identity.

⁹ Although Ackroyd does not discuss Eliot’s modernism in the context of translation theories, he significantly comments on Eliot’s skepticism and relativism as follows: “His early

The polyglot finale of Eliot's major poem eloquently speaks of a modern consciousness that exists only in a constant state of translation and consequently can only be defined through a continuous movement between languages and cultures:

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitanie à la tour abolie
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih
 (Eliot 1963: 69)

As in the case of Eliot, a large number of modernist writers belonged to a group of cross-cultural individuals who aspired to contest cultural and social homogeneity and sought to express their cultural defiance through the articulation of a radically new language. Among others, the New Zealand-born Katherine Mansfield and the Dominican-born Jean Rhys accordingly translated their own colonial experiences, and their subsequent conflicts of identity crises and divided consciousness, into narratives of movement and migration in which foreign female protagonists, existing 'between' languages and cultures, wander as alienated strangers in the European metropolises of London and Paris. As we have seen, many of these writers were also translators who travelled and lived in foreign countries or exiles displaced through Europe fleeing from asphyxiating impositions of national or gender identity, eager to explore possible/foreign alternatives.

As mentioned in the cases of Pound and Eliot, but also Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and the lesbian writers Stein and H.D. who, together with Djuna Barnes found in Paris an escape from constraining social and cultural conventions, the unequalled phenomenon of literary expatriation is connected with the origins and development of modernism.¹⁰ Directly or indirectly, all of these writers embraced translation, not only as a theme, but as the discourse of modern experience *par excellence*. Interestingly enough, their personal and geographical exile, their cultural and linguistic displacement appropriately illustrates the 'transcendental homelessness' of modernity, the foreignness of individuals in a world in which "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Yeats 1921: 184).¹¹

philosophical investigations had been concerned with the primacy of 'interpretation' and the irrecoverability of any original 'meaning'" (1984: 18).

¹⁰ In reference to modernist women writers, feminist criticism has for some time now argued that although literary history has confined women to the margins of modernism, the modernism emerging from the women's line is more complex than 'canonical' male modernism. Feminist critics maintain that since women are historically outsiders in relation to the institutions and beliefs that constitute the official version of history, 'making it new' for female writers entails rebelling against the cultural inheritance of patriarchy. Thus, as Stein's *The Making of Americans* evidences in its radical abandonment of syntactical structures, modernist women writers believe that they must defy not only traditional representations of the feminine but reinvent language itself.

¹¹ This line from 'The Second Coming' (1921) has often been invoked by critics to refer to the

In this respect, if modernist poetry must necessarily resort to foreign languages and cultures since, as Pound declares in Canto LXXXVI, “it can’t be all in one language” (1975: 563), in a similar way, a large number of modernist narratives bear witness to the recognition that there no longer exists a single inherited reservoir of meaning or language which can be taken for granted. Making a statement about the inadequacy of the old language, modernist fiction turns to the quest for alternatives so that earlier presumptions about national identity, political enterprises, religious faiths and moral beliefs, cultural certainties, social policies and sexual differences are constantly subjected to scrutiny. Linguistic experiment unites a varied spectrum of writers whose works reflect the conviction that language in the modern age had to stretch and change in order to say more.

In its breaking away from assumptions, the modernist novel becomes the space where a moment of crisis is dramatized rather than solved. Thus, the explicit challenge to inherited concepts of culture and language is recurrently addressed in fictional representations which often deal with tensions in the identification of self and society. Significantly, these modernist narratives portray personal conflicts, the protagonists of which are always ‘outsiders’ translating themselves, standing in a skewed relationship to the rest of humanity, out of tune with some of the most broadly accepted values and attitudes.

In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the shell-shocked soldier Septimus Warren Smith, married to Rezia, a foreigner who feels herself at odds in England, epitomizes the condition of the modern individual whose estrangement from a sense of common experience is symptomatically reflected in his obsession with language.¹² After the war, Septimus, who was once well versed in “Shakespeare, Darwin, *The History of Civilisation*, and Bernard Shaw” (Woolf 1992: 93) and had shown serious aspirations to become a poet, finds that the inherited ‘original’ language of his native cultural tradition cannot be used to express what has happened to him:

“You served with great distinction in the war?”

The patient repeated the word “war” interrogatively. He was attaching meaning to words of a symbolical kind . . . “The war?” the patient asked. The European war—the little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with distinction? He really forgot. (Woolf 1992: 105)

His chaotic and fragmented stream of consciousness appropriately begins to question the conditions of conventional language as a valid mode of communication. Any predetermined and externally objective definition becomes incomprehensible and

perception of a fragmented modern age in which modernist writers must necessarily break down the inherited tradition into fragments in order to reformulate modernist aesthetics.

¹² In her study *Outsiders Together*, Natania Rosenfeld argues that *Mrs Dalloway* deploys images of hybridity and mutation; thus, she interestingly remarks that Woolf gives Septimus Warren Smith an ambiguous label through his absurd name, emblematic of his between-ness. She explains it as follows: “He is a border case, neither one thing, nor the other . . . His surname is as prosaic and ‘common’ as his given name is high-flown and extraordinary” (2000: 4)

irrelevant for the shell-shocked war veteran who must translate himself into a new invented language, beyond the limitations of his given tradition and society:

The word “time” split its husk, poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable, words, and flew to attach themselves to their places. (Woolf 1992: 76)

As if she were engaging in the typical task of a translator, Woolf explores in this novel the separation of words from their traditional associations and meanings. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, as is typical of her other novels and stories in which characters are portrayed puzzling over the gap between words and the world, the writer questions the capacity of language to mean and communicate. Through her employment of disjointed and subverted sentences, fragmented thoughts and images, Woolf pointedly demonstrates that the task of the modernist writer is to envision a new language that can represent or, rather, translate the experience of modern men and women. Woolf was indeed an outsider, a dislocated writer; both as a woman and as a manic-depressive she was aware of her exclusion from the centres of power and, thus, her work constantly celebrates experiences of marginality and displacement.¹³ In this respect, *Mrs. Dalloway* may well be read as a textbook of modernism since it illustrates Woolf’s repudiation of her Edwardian predecessors and, furthermore, embodies her own project to create a language that would undermine the linguistic and literary structures of tradition through a “translation of the languid artefacts from the past into what must carry on into the future” (Malamud 1989: 24).

In a similar vein, Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1902), must be viewed as another paradigmatic modernist text, on the one hand dealing with the protagonist’s encounter with foreignness and the subsequent experience of personal and social alienation, and, on the other hand, operating according to the principles which inform the translation process. If in Woolf’s novel her engagement with translation practices and her ‘foreignness’ and exile must be considered in the context of the literary tradition and the male dominated culture she seeks to liberate herself from, Conrad’s own biography and literary trajectory, as a Polish émigré who kept on translating himself into French and English, comes to illustrate the notion of modernist identity that I have been discussing.

North appropriately remarks that the Polish-born expatriate who lived and wrote “in constant remembrance of linguistic difference” came before his British public as a foreigner, “a racial outcast” (North 1994: 52). As a foreign speaker of the English language and as a stranger in the context of the cultural and literary tradition that, ironically, the writer would become part of, Conrad’s work raises important issues for the study of the relationship between modernism and translation. Conrad’s fictional

¹³ In her ‘A Room of One’s Own’ Woolf sees the exclusion of women from the patriarchal system as having specific consequences for the language of women’s writing. She points to a particular form of linguistic exile when she remarks that the woman novelist has to revise the syntax, sentence structure, literary conventions and value system of the novel created by men.

worlds, like the ships he embarked on as a sailor, are crowded with outsiders, and his novels, often set in remote territories, abound with scenes representing dialogues between characters speaking different languages or translating from one language into another, doubtless inspired by his own experience among the polyglot crews he worked with.¹⁴ In this regard, Conrad seems to relish in the dramatization of foreignness through the inclusion of scenes dealing with either simultaneous translation between languages or the shift from English to a foreign tongue. In *Lord Jim*, for example, apart from Marlow, other narrators communicate through a hybrid speech form which mixes syntactic patterns and vocabulary from different languages. The narrative functions as a translation in progress as it reminds us that “nothing can be seen independently of ways of seeing it which are inevitably specific, to individuals, cultures and ultimately languages” (Stevenson 1992: 189).

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s protagonist cites and translates a variety of different languages which includes French, Russian and German as well as unspecified native African tongues. Although recorded in the English language, the novel accounts for the heteroglot nature of the European colonial enterprise in the African territories. Furthermore, Marlow’s main struggle as a narrator is directly related to the frustrations that he experiences as a translator of Africa, a radically foreign place, where normal Western linguistic categories cannot aptly be used to signify. Since both representability and communication are problematized, the emphasis falls on language as a way of negotiating one’s relation to a world which is experienced as ‘foreign’: “We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse” (Conrad 1995: 62).

Ironically, although Marlow recognizes that he cannot find an appropriate language, his narrative does rely on specific language uses which ultimately reveal his ideology as a translator. In his ‘translation’ of Africa, he often resorts to a vocabulary influenced by his own appreciation of the Congo experience as strange, exotic, primal and ‘dark’:

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. (Conrad 1995: 62)

Heart of Darkness operates according to the principles that inform the translation process. On the one hand, the novel offers itself as Marlow’s retelling through a sort of creative and performative act, the importance of which lies not in the fact that it puts us in contact with the ‘original’ and ‘pure’ experience, “but rather in how it self-reflexively speaks of itself as a linguistic reconstruction of a past experience in the present moment” (Caneda 2007: 679). On the other hand, Marlow inhabits a mediating position, marked by uncertainty, which resembles the translator’s—“It seems to me I

¹⁴ In fact, as Nico Israel maintains in his *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora*, Conrad extends Bakhtin’s formulation of the social heteroglossia “to include an international cast of voices” (2000: 64).

am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation” (Conrad 1995: 50). He is inside and outside at the same time, someone whose identity has become terminally displaced through a cross-cultural experience: “We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings . . . We could not understand, because we were too far and could not remember” (Conrad 1995: 62).

Whereas Conrad’s text can be seen as a modernist variation of a larger tradition of travel novels about Europeans voyaging in remote territories, *Heart of Darkness*, the work of a foreigner trying to make a career in England and a writer aware of how language structures civilization, also proclaims the modernist conviction that the establishment of personal and cultural identity, like translation, requires engaging with the multiple others of foreign languages and cultures.

Marlow acknowledges repeatedly through the novel that his attempts at communicating his experience turn into vain efforts because representation can only reproduce its relation to experience but is far from conveying experience itself. Paradoxically, the ungraspable nature of Marlow’s original experience remains a constant even while he insistently attempts to re-create it for his audience. The narrative obsessively exposes its uncertain (modernist) condition. As if it were a translation, the text performs a displacement of the ‘original’ experience and, thus, dramatizes how meaning is always interpreted, subjected to the possibilities and limits of language and mediated by its formal and ideological boundaries. In this respect, rather than a chronicle, Marlow’s tale must be better understood as a translation (Caneda 2007: 680) since, paradoxically, as he attempts to tell his experience he confesses the futility of a task that remains impossible: “No, it is impossible; it’s impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning— its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible” (Conrad 1995: 50).

Because of his own linguistic and cultural alienation Conrad himself emerges as a particularly apt representative of the ‘between-ness’ and uncertainty of the modern identity which he thematized in his novels. Ultimately, Marlow’s shocking discovery that the European colonial enterprise is supported by destruction and death emerges accompanied by his own realization that the English language cannot be used appropriately to convey the unfamiliar experience of Africa. His deep sense of void, as he is confronted with the purposelessness and failure of a Western civilization and language in the negotiation between self and other, occurs in the context of a modernity characterized by unequal imperial encounters that the novel dramatizes but does not solve. Challenged by the experience, Marlow’s telling exposes how much a human being cannot know mainly because the knowledge of reality depends essentially on individual perception and, in its turn, human perception is mediated by cultural values:

You can’t understand. How could you? –with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman . . . These little things make all the great difference (Conrad 1995: 85).

Whereas Conrad's narrative is grounded on modernist uncertainty and indeterminacy, it nevertheless brings into question nineteenth-century assumptions of universal reality, suggesting that Western models of reason and experience are relative and as such cannot be universalized. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's (and Conrad's) anxious telling is fraught with the anxiety of failure inherent to the task of the translator. Symptomatically, in the context of a modern world characterized by the shift from the familiar experience of common and civilized values to an unfamiliar world informed by scepticism and self-doubt, the novel proposes that new forms of understanding must be created for a successful engagement with the 'foreignness' of experience. Marlow's attempts at puzzling out the demands of a foreign environment evidence the gaps between word and world which translation always reveals. Translation always exposes that nothing can be seen absolutely as it is since nothing is independent from ways of seeing it. This is so because the singularity of a particular perspective is inevitably linked to particular individuals, cultures and ultimately languages.

"I'd like a language which is above all languages" (Ellmann 1959: 410), proclaimed the Irish writer James Joyce echoing Pound's acknowledgement that no language can make more than an incomplete contact with the world. This idea is celebrated in *Ulysses* (1922) where Joyce parodies and mocks a large range of styles, registers and speech patterns avoiding expressing himself in one single language. As Fritz Senn has claimed, Joyce's novel can only be understood as a "continuous intratranslation" since the different chapter modes function as translations, illustrating "the idea of a conjugation of all languages' potential and all stylistic ranges" (Senn 1984: 52-53).

As discussed in the opening pages of this essay, for most modernist writers linguistic concern and experiment go hand in hand with the experience of exile and linguistic displacement. In this respect, Joyce's modernist awareness of the arbitrariness in the relation between signifier and signified, and his subsequent exploration of alternatives is first manifested in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where he seems to reflect on his particular experience of linguistic alienation as an English speaker, through the words of Stephen Dedalus:

The language in which we are speaking now is his before it is mine . . . His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My souls frets in the shadow of his language. (1968: 189)

Joyce himself spent most of his life between 'acquired speeches', having to translate himself constantly, first as an Irish writer dispossessed of an original language and later as an exile in France, Switzerland and Italy. His life-long interest in languages other than English, together with his exile and alienation from his mother tongue, provides the appropriate framework for understanding the modernist experimentation that culminates in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), where Joyce interweaves strands from sixty different languages into the fabric of English. Certainly, his most radically experimental work must be seen in the context of the modernist writer's urge to escape from the stylistic and formal constraints of tradition. Yet, more significantly, *Finnegans Wake* can be understood as the ultimate expression of a modernist attempt to expand the

possibilities of English by imaginatively translating it into a nonexistent 'autonomous' language which, paradoxically, manages to effectively multiply its endless relation to many other foreign languages and cultures. Through the carnivalesque fantasy of a world in which different languages and cultures mingle to create a new one, simultaneously unique and multiple, original and derivative, Joyce dismantles monolithic linguistic structures and attacks the ideology of cultural purity and homogeneity. As the scholar John McCourt has remarked:

Writing against notions of pure Aryan and pure Irish here, Joyce gave voice to the "confusioning of human races" (FW35.5) and in doing so gave voice to the Europe he saw from afar and longed for in Dublin, discovered at first hand in the multicultural city of Trieste, and in Zurich, city of refugees and later in Paris. (2006: 12)

Finnegans Wake embodies the translation process itself since it forces us to look for similarities between languages and cultures, particularly similar signifiers and sounds, and simultaneously reminds us of dissimilarities, mainly as different meanings are evoked by the same word. Ultimately, Joyce's text, like the translated text, becomes a hybrid site where difference and otherness are not only allowed to emerge but are encouraged and celebrated.

"When I translate", explains Nous, "I translate as much the other into myself, as myself into the other" (2007:251). For the critic, who envisions translation as a 'navigation' between languages and cultures, to translate means always to receive the foreigner who takes refuge in one's language as one simultaneously takes refuge in the other's. Across the twentieth century, a time of unprecedented mass migration, exile, displacement and increasing new forms of (trans)national affiliation, the work of many modernist (and postmodernist) writers will recurrently insist on telling stories of hybridity and *métissage*, narratives about the movement and mixture of people, languages and cultures, thus proclaiming that translation has become the defining (and necessary) condition of our modern era.

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Received 16 January 2007

Revised version received 9 November 2007