

THE POETICS OF MOVEMENT & TRANSLATION – THE CASE OF RICHARD ZIMLER’S *STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER*

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Abstract: The article focuses on a novel with a convoluted publishing history: Richard Zimler’s *Strawberry Fields Forever*. As a narrative about migrants, its publishing trajectory constitutes in itself a migration story. In 2011, Zimler planned to have a book coming out – *Strawberry Fields Forever*. In 2012, the book was paginated and ready to go to press. However, Arcadia Books went bankrupt, and the book remained unpublished. In 2011, José Lima translated the novel into European Portuguese. In a translator’s note, Lima discusses his translation as a form of ‘consented betrayal’. Using the resources of Portuguese, the translated text creates a surplus of meaning(s) dependent on the target language and experience. Although hardly new, the surplus results, in this case, from a phenomenon of “overtranslatability”. This publishing history has been further compounded by the fact that the translated text was exported to Brazil, after being “translated” into Brazilian Portuguese. I would like to address the different forms of migration that this translation brings to the fore: (1) migration as story; (2) migration as form; (3) translation as transit; (4) text migration as a challenge to traditional concepts – as the “original” has never been published, the translations are the only extant texts.

Keywords: Migration. Translatedness and (un)translatability. Overtranslatability. Translated literature.

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POÉTICA DO MOVIMENTO & TRADUÇÃO – O CASO DE *STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER* DE RICHARD ZIMLER

Resumo: Este artigo debruça-se sobre um romance com uma complexa história de publicação: *Strawberry Fields Forever* de Richard Zimler. Sendo uma narrativa sobre migrantes, o seu trajeto de publicação constitui por si só uma história de migração. Em 2011, Zimler decidiu publicar um livro – *Strawberry Fields Forever*. Em 2012, o livro estava paginado e pronto para a gráfica. Porém, a Arcadia Books abriu falência, e o livro ficaria por publicar. Em 2011, José Lima traduziu o romance para português europeu com o título *Ilha Teresa*. Numa nota de tradutor, Lima discute a tradução como forma de “traição consentida”. Assim, a tradução cria um excesso de significado que depende da língua e da experiência de chegada. Embora não constitua propriamente novidade, este excesso resulta, neste caso, do fenómeno da “sobretaduzibilidade”.

Esta história de publicação complica-se quando a tradução é exportada para o Brasil, após ter sido “traduzida” para português do Brasil. Abordo aqui diferentes modos de migração que esta tradução coloca: (1) migração como história; (2) migração como forma; (3) tradução como trânsito; (4) migração textual como desafio a conceitos tradicionais – uma vez que o “original” não está publicado, as traduções são, de forma radical, os únicos textos que existem.

Palavras-chave: Migração. ‘Ser-se traduzido’ e traduzibilidade. Sobretaduzibilidade. literatura traduzida.

Part 1. Of movement(s), concepts & remixing.

Concepts can – and, to some extent, must – remain open and provisional, which does not mean vague, approximate or confused...
(Bourdieu 1990, 40)

The concept underlying the following considerations is that of culture – and translation as a cultural phenomenon – as an age-old remixing practice (Lessig 2008). In this sense, creativity and, to some extent, “originality”¹ have always been inhabited by an

¹ I use the terms in roughly the same sense as Derek Attridge, even though “originality” would merit an in-depth historical discussion: “To be creative is to make something new out of whatever materials one possesses [...]. To be original, however, is to create something

inherent instability – a mobility of sorts. Mobility is, I argue, a feature of the literary, for literature is both an echo chamber and an experimental laboratory where language and texts resonate and are subject to appropriation, thus creating what Harold Bloom has famously called “the immense anxieties of indebtedness (Bloom 1997, 5)”. Literature is intrinsically fluid, as meaning is always already deferred and/or borrowed, i.e., built upon “what has gone before”. In fact, creativity and originality do not exist out of context, and cannot be extricated from the cultural debates of a given time and space. To put it succinctly: if one accepts that originality “entails a particular kind of difference from what has gone before, one that changes the field in question for later practitioners (Attridge 2004, 36)”, then this must mean that “the anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex of strong misreading” (Bloom 1997, xxiii; my emphasis), i.e., out of the dialogue with extant materials, readings and misreadings.

Nowadays, however, mobility seems to be further compounded by an extra-literary phenomenon: the modern-day experience of mass migration. The ensuing translatedness shapes contemporary forms of being-in-the-world. I would like to tentatively suggest that the “elsewhereness” of experience, which results from dislocation, may well constitute a contemporary redefinition of the concept of literature as “defamiliarization”, as purported by the Russian Formalists. In fact, difference originated in migration may well be at the very heart of the contemporary narrative, and to represent this kind of difference translation is pivotal. Therefore, I argue that translation inhabits the very essence of the literary nowadays.

By reflecting on the possibilities of articulating disparate concepts, I would like to test the potential of conceptual and theoretical intersections for shedding light on contemporary forms of literature that are themselves inhabited by translation – the translatedness I referred to earlier – and the challenges

that marks a significant departure from the norms of the cultural matrix within which it is produced and received...” (2004, 35).

they represent for the act of interlingual translation. For this purpose, I will take Richard Zimler's *Strawberry Fields Forever* as a case in point.²

1st movement. concepts-in-transit & provisionality (brisk and lively).

Should Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o be right when he suggests that '[t]ranslation seen as conversation – for conversation assumes equality among the speakers – is clearly the language of languages, the language that all languages should speak' (Allen 2007, 131), then it must follow that translation is one of the oldest remixing practices, as translating both potentiates and performs the possibility of dialogue between people, languages, cultures, traditions, texts.

It is true that, unlike Lawrence Lessig's description of remixing practices in his work *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, translation does not commonly “quote sounds over images, or video over text, or text over sounds” (2008, 69). But to a researcher in Translation Studies that constraint seems both rash and unproductive, for translation is a many-sided activity, and technology plays a vital role at least in technical translation (see translation memories and other software and tools). All the constraint apparently does is preclude the concept's mobility and the much more interesting assumption that “remix with ‘media’ is just the same sort of stuff that we've always done with word (82)”, as Lessig himself puts it further on in the book. Hence the rather obvious conclusion that “the interesting part of remix isn't something new (82)”.

The present article owes as much to my suspicion that remix is indeed nothing new, and can therefore be used to describe translation

² This is a novel that merits discussion in its own right, and I intend to do it (fuller) justice elsewhere. Here it will mostly be taken as a sort of touchstone for the tentative theoretical debate I am about to initiate.

practices, as to my weakness for agile new – or travelling, i.e., made new (Bal 2002) – concepts and their incredible ability to think old things through and anew. Like Mieke Bal, I too take:

Concepts not so much as firmly established univocal terms but as dynamic in themselves. While groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may mean, we gain insight into what it can do. It is in the groping that the valuable work lies. This is why I have come to value concepts. The groping is a collective endeavour. Even those concepts that are tenuously established, suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential intersubjectivity. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don’t. (Bal 2002, 11)

From my standpoint, remixing is one such concept. While it is clear to me that it emerges out of the culture of new technologies, its potentiality reaches back to much older cultural practices, such as literature, art and fashion, and translates into contemporary jargon the experience of creation as an *ars combinatoria*. As George Steiner puts it: “All human constructs are combinatorial. Which is simply to say that they are arte-facts made up of a selection and combination of pre-existent elements (2002, 116)”.

In the humanities in general, remixing awakens many echoes, as it has been variously known as manipulation, intertextuality, rewriting, intersemiotic translation, remediation and/or plagiarism.³ While it is true that the above mentioned concepts are not strictly speaking synonymous or even interchangeable and they have

³ One of Lessig’s influences, Richard Posner, argues in *The Little Book of Plagiarism*, “[t]he reader has to care about being deceived about authorial identity in order for the deceit to cross the line to fraud and thus constitute plagiarism” (Posner 2007, 19), which is an interesting positioning, as it places the burden of definition on the reader and on his/her (in)difference.

precise and complex meanings in their original context, each of them points to the momentous twentieth-century (re)discovery that creativity may – and indeed often is – quite different from originality, that our common tradition was/is as much a product of remixing practices as of the illusory originality, that art thrives on allusion, citation, parody, influence and imitation, that “[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors (Wilde 1966, 17)”. Again, this is nothing new – as the various types of renaissance and classic movements show abundantly well. Nonetheless, one of the most enduring illusions of Western culture is that of absolute originality and its avatar, the author, as authority – as Michel Foucault would say “the author’s name characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse. Discourse that possesses an author’s name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten. Neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to the ordinary, fleeting words. Rather its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates (123)”. However:

Combinations can be novel and without strict precedent. The yoking together of the disparate, the generation of the androgynous or the hermaphroditic, can assume and beget limitless guises. But even the most revolutionary of designs, of chromatic assemblages, of new tints, makes inevitable use of extant material, which is circumscribed by the limitations of our optical nerves. The most “futuristic” of musical compositions, the most emancipated of atonalities, enlist prior sounds, and these are also constrained by our means of acoustic reception. Performative novelties [...] obscure this fundamental truth. What they “make new” is the old recombined, differently hybrid. What they exploit and generate metamorphically are given, themselves almost dismayingly confined to the narrow bands, to the spectroscopy as it were, of our physiology. (Steiner 2002, 117)

To put it quite simply: we cannot escape the materiality of the body and its constraints. Therefore, the new must emerge out of the old, together with the old. Old and new are not opposing but rather complementary aspects – always competing, always vying ontologically, politically and economically for primacy. As a contemporary writer acknowledges, “[e]verything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border we cross (Ondaatje 2007, 16)”. An alternative to this view would naturally be to stress that everything is original, not perhaps in the late eighteenth-century sense, but in a much more practical way: if “[a]n *ars combinatoria* points to invention and reinvention” (Steiner 2002, 127), then a measure of creativity and, indeed, singularity must inhabit every work of art.

With its emphasis on the process rather than the product, on creation as potentiality to be shared, the culture of remix is just another powerful but perhaps highly visible form of age-old as well as new practices. Even if it arises from a very different set of preoccupations, Lawrence Lessig’s proposal goes hand in hand with the assertion that “[i]n our age of transition to new mappings, to new ways of telling the story, the natural and the “human” sciences (*sciences humaines*) present a spiralling motion (Steiner 9)”. In fact, the very attractiveness of the concept of remix lies precisely in its suggestion that we embrace the spiralling movement, instead of resisting it.

2nd movement. doxa, paradoxa, community (*scherzo*).

Walter Benjamin dreamt of publishing a book composed entirely of quotations. I lack the necessary originality. Juxtaposed, quotations take on novel meanings and enter into mutual debate.
(Steiner 2002, 13)

Over the course of history, translation has been doubted, (ab) used, outright rejected, forbidden, exalted, made compulsory,

subject to metaphors (\approx translated), elected as metaphor, silenced. Never, however, has it ceased to impact on our worldview in one form or another. Translation is inescapable, both as a profession and as an ontological and epistemological necessity. In 1813, Friederich Schleiermacher famously asked whether we were not “often compelled [...] to translate for ourselves the words of another person who is quite like us, but of a different temperament and mind (36)”, and then went on to reflect that we may even have to translate ourselves to ourselves. Translation is all around us and within us. And yet Western culture insists on seeing it as a simple tool, a matter of linguistic equivalence, often discarded as unimportant. A necessary evil. A second-rate activity at best.

In the context of these considerations, I would like to suggest that translation may well have been the very first – or at least the most common – form of remixing, and that it was precisely this feature that has doomed it to cultural oblivion in the West. While we need translations, we are in love with (the idea of) originals. Thus, Western culture tends to focus on an idea of singularity which reifies pure creation and excludes most human endeavours as repetition and, therefore, uncritical echoes, demanding that they remain invisible and compliant. Thus creativity falls hostage to originality, and we live *dans l’oubli de nos métamorphoses* (Éluard 1963).

The overpowering gesture that privileges originality over other forms of creativity builds upon the dream of authority and unequivocal authorship, a dream that implicitly commands the imperative of a passive and singular reception, rather than an active and plural discussion of the works. Indeed, it tends to forget that “[w]here the most thorough possible interpretation occurs, where our sensibility appropriates its object while, in this appropriation, guarding, quickening that object’s autonomous life, the process is one of ‘original repetition’ (Steiner 1992, 27)”.

At this point, I will venture to suggest an alternative reading of the tradition that canonizes literature and sees translation as an interpretation and, therefore, a potential betrayal of the “true” value of the work. This reading was suggested to me by

the work of Candice Breitz, and more specifically by her series of portraits – *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)* and *Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon)*⁴ – with its focus on reception and fandom. I propose to read the canon, the sum of the “great” works of art, as the result not so much of an intrinsic value but rather of the capability of the works to entice not one but many different individual responses. Should we accept this premise, the uniqueness of reception would thus be the touchstone for the market value of artworks, and creativity would be partially displaced from authorship to readership, in *latu sensu*. Authority would lie not in the work itself, or in the producer, but in the web of intellectual and emotional ties that a given artwork establishes with receptors at a given moment in time. Moreover, reception, any form of reception, implies, as Breitz acknowledges, a form of translation. The artist says:

Even the most broadly distributed, most marked-inflected music comes to have a very specific and local meaning for people according to where it is that they’re hearing it or at what moment in their life they’re hearing it. What goes hand in hand with the moment of reception is a dimension of personal translation. (*apud* Lessig 2008, 7)

In this light, reception is creative and multiple and becomes the springboard for further creation – that is to say, to an endless *Nachleben* of the “original” work, if I may misquote Walter Benjamin. This slight Benjaminian misreading has perhaps one small advantage which may excuse my temerity – the merit of (dis)placing the afterlife of “great” works to the very heart of humanity, rather than to see it as a manifestation of the suprahuman translatability of the works. Thus understood, *Nachleben* would remain a migratory concept which would indeed reflect, as

⁴ <http://www.candicebreitz.net/>, 05 de julho de 2016.

Benjamin intended, “the maturing process of the original language (2000, 18)” and works.

This is, of course, nothing new: reception theory, post-modernism, post-structuralisms of various denominations have all highlighted the fragility of authorship/authority and questioned the meaning of originality. Still mainstream culture remains hostage to the concept of “originality”, be it for economic factors, as Lawrence Lessig stresses, or on symbolic and ideological grounds. These reasons postpone indefinitely the diffusion of a participatory culture in favour of what might be called the mysticism of authorship.

In the process of reification of originality, the dialogical nature of tradition and the interplay of identity and otherness in the appropriating gesture that inhabits all art is lost. As Lessig points out, literacy is a form of building up a (sense of) community. This, in turn, stimulates infinite creation and recreation. Or to highlight it from the perspective of translation:

On the one hand, the world is presented to us as a collection of similarities; on the other, as a growing heap of texts, each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation – first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. However, the inverse of this reasoning is also entirely valid. All texts are originals because each translation has its own distinctive character. (Paz 1992, 154)

Translation could play – and does play, however silently – an important role in the building-up of communities. Because it creates a domestic audience around a foreign text, translation remains forcefully a hybrid, an always slightly decentred geography. However assimilated the foreign text may be by the

recipient culture, translation remains a locus of difference (Venuti 1992), of exposure to and contagion from other worldviews, other languages, other people. Decentred and recentred, translation is also always decentring, which may partially account for its imposed secondariness and perceived betrayals. To a greater or lesser extent, translation always confronts us with the “elsewhereness” of existence, our dependence upon the other to achieve even the semblance of autonomy. That is why, contrary to the widespread perception, translation can never be transparent (see, among others, Hermans 1996, Venuti 1992, 2000, 2013).

Throughout history, the discourse on translation has reminded us of the participatory nature of culture – sometimes in spite of itself and out of its dream of total equivalence. Metaphors as different as digestion/cannibalism (du Bellay/de Campos), transplantation (Schleiermacher), transubstantiation (Mendes Leal), cross-dressing (Willamowitz-Moellendorf), all used by translators to describe their practice, point to translation as a geography of confluence, both integrating and transgressing difference – a patchwork of creativity and dissonance, polyphony and nostalgia. As Lawrence Venuti aptly puts it:

Because translating traffics in the foreign, in the introduction of linguistic and cultural differences, it is equally capable of crossing or reinforcing the boundaries between domestic audiences and the hierarchies in which they are positioned. If the domestic inscription includes part of the social or historical context in which the foreign text first emerged, then a translation can also create a community that includes foreign intelligibilities and interests, an understanding in common with another culture, another tradition. (2000, 477)

Thus, translation cannot but be inclusive, even schizoid perhaps, as it aims to harbour, to lend voice to otherness while it must needs remain inextricably tied to its own domesticity. The “translator knows that translations never simply communicate

foreign texts because they make possible only a domesticated understanding, however much defamiliarized, however much subversive or supportive of the domestic” (469). Crossing linguistic, intellectual and cultural boundaries, remixing languages, traditions and idiolects, translators, as Ortega y Gasset argues, enable their readership to be “for a while amused at being another” (1992, 112).

3rd movement. some notes towards the (in)definition of “translatability” (andante)

I agree that one’s *weltanschauung* is formed by the language that one speaks and writes most easily and, to a degree, thinks in. But it is not formed so deeply that one can never stand far enough outside that language to inspect it critically – particularly if one speaks or even just understands another language. That is why I say that it is possible to have a first language yet nonetheless not feel at home in it... (Coetzee/Auster 2013, 72)

Over the centuries, much reflection on literary translation has been devoted to considerations on how to handle the singularity of a literary work. Contemporary concepts of “originality” and “mother language”, although much older, rely heavily on the Romantic mythology of creation as a singular gesture of the artist-demiurge. More recently, both concepts have been challenged by scholars and authors alike. Present-day experience of migration, displacement and globalization has rendered concepts such as “mother tongue” and “nationality” obsolete or at least questionable in their presuppositions: “Oui, je n’ai qu’une langue, or ce n’est pas la mienne”, wrote Jacques Derrida (1996, 15), to which Jhumpa Lahiri adds more recently: “Those two languages of mine [Bengali and English] didn’t get along. They were incompatible adversaries, intolerant of each other” (2016, 149). Both the impossibility of speaking of one’s own language and/or the existence in one person of more than one first language question Romantic conceptions

of “one man, one nation, one language”,⁵ and, to a considerable extent, notions of “originality” and “singularity”, for experience has become ostensibly plural and unstable. As Kwame Anthony Appiah so eloquently describes it, “[t]he world is getting more crowded: in the next half a century the population of our once foraging species will approach nine billion. Depending on the circumstances, conversations across boundaries can be delightful, or just vexing: what they mainly are, though, is inevitable” (2006, xix). The complexity of the many language and culture entanglements in one space tends to upset traditional categories and concepts, mixing traditions, voices, temporalities.

The anxiety over the singularity in literature, and the ensuing disquiet over what translations do, develops, and absolutizes, a concept of “otherness” totally separated from the notion of “sameness”. The generous and all-inclusive philosophy of being hospitable to the foreign in one’s language actually arises from a too neat distinction between identity and forms of alterity.

If the translator chooses the author, the work, and the foreign language as exclusive masters, aiming to impose them on his own cultural realm in their pure foreign form, he runs the risk of appearing to be a foreigner, a traitor in the eyes of his kin. (Berman 1992, 3; my emphasis)

Berman’s terms cannot, I argue, be applied to most of contemporary fiction. The latter is anything but linguistically or culturally “pure” and/or “exclusive”, as much of it is not being written by “immobile one-place, one-language one-culture writers” (Rushdie 2013, 98). On the contrary, by being inhabited by translation, by being homeless in

⁵ I have suggested elsewhere (Lopes 2016) that this may render Friedrich Schleiermacher’s 1813 treaty to some extent obsolete. The experiential underlying the German theologian’s theoretical assumptions is perhaps too distant to prove productive. There is, however, no denying that his legacy has been most influential to post-structuralist thinking. My point is that this has only been possible by decontextualizing the text.

a sense, contemporary narrative foregrounds the translatability that is inherent to literature (and the arts).

Although I do not wish to argue with the sound ethical gesture towards the other that an ethics of translation as foreignization entails, I would like to point out (a) that sameness and otherness are always enmeshed, as they can only be discussed relationally, and (b) that very idea of difference has become more and more diverse in and for itself. Therefore, when interpreting a text – translated or not –, the reader will have to come to terms with many possibilities of difference, as the literary work is often the site of multiple unbelongings:⁶ language – that “travail de déplacement qu’il [l’écrivain] exerce sur la langue” (Barthes 1978, 17) –, “boundary-crossing” fictionalizing (Iser 1990, 939), representation and translatability, all point to the condition of a certain rootlessness inherent to writing fiction. Again mobility – itself a form of translatedness – seems to be a hallmark of literature.

All these reflections have a considerable bearing when it comes to discussing novels that focus on the experience of migration, which, as Salman Rushdie so deftly described it, often feels like straddling two cultures (2010, 15), mixing and remixing languages, cultures and traditions. The novel I am briefly discussing here as illustration for these reflections – Richard Zimler’s *Strawberry Fields Forever* – involves right from the onset not one, but at least two sets of differences in language and culture: English and Portuguese. This poses the often insurmountable question of “overtranslatability” that I have discussed elsewhere (Lopes 2006, 169-184). Overtranslatability refers to the process of translating

⁶ Arguably all literature is always already a site of multiple “unbelongings”, as it represents the self and the world by means of a medium – verbal language – that organizes and questions both that world and itself. This is what Barthes may have had in mind when discussing literary language as a means to escape the “fascist” everyday language that forces one to think according to its (im)possibilities: “Je vise donc en elle [la pratique d’écrire], essentiellement, le texte, c’est-à-dire le tissu des signifiants qui constitue l’œuvre, parce que le texte est l’affleurement même de la langue, et que c’est à l’intérieur de la langue que la langue doit être combattue, dévoyée: non par le message dont elle est l’instrument, mais par le jeu des mots dont elle est le théâtre” (Barthes 1978, 16-17).

a two-language narrative into what is the foreign language in the source text. Although a significant portion of the text needs no translation, it is precisely this transparency that, paradoxically, renders translation obscure and perhaps improbable.

I therefore propose to examine *Strawberry Fields Forever* as an example of the intricacy of translating the domestic linguistic and cultural difference back into what Venuti calls the “domestic remainder” (Venuti 2000). It seems important to examine what happens when a translator is faced with the overtranslatability of a text, or parts of it, when difference entails similarity.

Part 2. The always already elsewhere-ness of home.

This is the new continent I explore now and where I find myself at one time a stranger and a native. To live in that state one needs to make oneself porous and let languages and impressions flow in and flow through, to become the element in which one floats.
(Desai 2003, 17)

I would like to focus now on a novel with a convoluted publishing history: Richard Zimler’s *Strawberry Fields Forever*. As a narrative about the migrating experience, its publishing trajectory in itself constitutes a migration story. Content and form, as well as the novel’s circulation history, seem to showcase Stuart Hall’s assertion that migration may well be at the core of the postmodern experience, as “more and more people now recognize themselves in the narratives of displacement” (1987).

The original does not live here anymore: translation and its avatars.

Sometime in 2011, Richard Zimler, an American writer living in Portugal since 1990, planned to have a new book coming out. The novel was called *Strawberry Fields Forever*, and, in 2012, it was ready to go to press. However, the publishing house went bankrupt

and the book remained unpublished. Should one wish to read this book, one cannot. At least not in English. In a sense, therefore, there is an absence where the “original” should have been.

In 2011, José Lima translated the novel into European Portuguese. The translation bears the title *Ilha Teresa* [Teresa Island]. The title is already interesting, as it shifts the focus of the novel to some extent, and misses out on one important textual feature: the narrative resonates with intertextual references to series, movies, and songs. These compound the textual fabric, turning it into a mosaic of echoes and references that showcase the polyphony comprised in every linguistic act, building upon the already linguistically fraught narrative.

This complex publishing history has been further compounded by the fact that the translated text has to some extent functioned as an original when it was exported to Brazil, apparently after being intralingually “translated” into the more acceptable variant of Brazilian Portuguese. This is a rare occurrence in the publishing world, as most books translated into either European or Brazilian Portuguese remain firmly (and legally) within their respective geographic borders. On the title page one can read that the novel has been translated by José Lima, after having undergone some sort of “technical revision” by Elia Fidalgo. “Technical revision” sounds strange in the context, as the phrase is usually applied to the translation of sets of instructions for appliances and not literary texts. Be that as it may, the fact is the novel has been subject to major changes, particularly in syntax and vocabulary. Furthermore, in its Brazilian attire, the novel returns to the original title.⁷

The conundrum can be summed up briefly: a novel presents itself as a private journal of a 15-year-old girl who is writing about her situation as a recent migrant in the US. She is writing in English about the difficulties of commanding a foreign language, and the improbability of the situation is overcome as follows:

⁷ I am planning a second essay on the comparison between the Portuguese translation and its Brazilian avatar.

It’s Angel who corrects my grammar in what you’re reading. And who translates my Portuguese into English when I don’t know how to say what I need to. Though if I keep writing about my life, I’m going to have to say some compromising things about him, and I won’t want him to read those parts until I decide how much I want to keep to myself, so I may have to have another person correct some of this later. (Zimler, n.d., 5)

The story’s verisimilitude is further achieved by means of including Portuguese words and phrases in the novel, which get explained for the sake of the English-speaking readership. Of course, when the narrative gets translated into Portuguese, this *Verfremdungseffekt* is fully lost, as the whole text is now in Portuguese.

Strawberry Fields Forever tells the story of a teenage girl, Teresa, whose family has emigrated from Lisbon to Long Island. The story is narrated by Teresa herself, and the text is presented as a kind of personal journal that covers the months from October 2011 to January 2012.⁸ The significance of the first-person narration in the novel cannot be overstated, as the narrative becomes a kind of survival kit, while allowing the migrant to have a voice, to tell her story on her terms. This opens up the possibility of agency: “Putting everything down on paper would help me become the person I wanted to be” (Zimler, n.d., 190). At the end of the novel, Teresa has learned from reading William Maxwell’s *They Came Like Swallows* that “even the quietest words – whispered from a page – can change us (260)”.

the translator, the translation & the missing language

In a translator’s note at the end of the book, José Lima discusses his translation as a form of “consented betrayal”. As the plot revolves

⁸ Curiously, as if to underscore the absence of the original, the story takes place between October 7, 2009 and January 29, 2010 in the Portuguese translation, which, as we have seen, precedes the source text in the public realm.

around Teresa and her experience of a country and a language she is unfamiliar with, the translator has decided to “explore some of the phenomena of linguistic contamination” between the language pair Portuguese-English, which the English source could hardly reflect. In other words, the translator attempts to recreate in Portuguese the particular speech patterns of Portuguese and Brazilian emigrants in the US. Thus, the translated text creates a surplus of meaning(s) dependent on the target language and experience. Although hardly new, this surplus results, in this case, from the overtranslatability of the source text.

While José Lima says nothing of the difficulties that this phenomenon entails, his note reverberates age-old *topoi* of translators’ rhetoric. I will highlight here the three most important: (a) emphasis on the novelist’s authority and on the authorization (the “*nihil obstat*”, as José Lima puts it) bestowed on the translator to intervene in the text – Zimler’s permission is referred to three times in a one-page note; (b) reiteration of the inferiority of the role of the translator – “Não querendo porém ir muito acima da chinela que por função me cabe [...], fiz questão em contar com o seu [do autor] ‘*nihil obstat*’...” [Wishing not to overstep the boundaries of the task I had undertaken, I made a point of getting his [the author’s] “*nihil obstat*”] (my translation); (c) insistence on the merits of literalness and the value of “fidelity”. This apology of literal translation is all the more striking as it is impossible. The seeming unawareness of the textual impossibilities produces at times unwanted misreadings.

As the novel is narrated as a personal journal, Teresa explains to the reader how it is that the novel reads well, despite the fact that she is constantly reminding us that she does not master English. This becomes less clear in the translation, as Teresa is now writing in Portuguese to all intents and purposes, and no further clarification is provided: “É o Angel que corrige os meus erros de gramática nisto que estão a ler. E que traduz o meu português para inglês quando não sei como dizer o que quero dizer” (Zimler 2011, 15). The reader may be misled into assuming that Angel

corrects Teresa’s Portuguese. This may have a perplexing effect, as Angel speaks a variety of Brazilian Portuguese, whereas Teresa speaks European Portuguese. The differences between the two varieties are regularly discussed throughout the novel. Therefore, literalness here confounds the syntax, as the reader has to *guess* – rather than *know*, as in the source text – that Teresa is writing this text in English.

By mixing English with European and Brazilian Portuguese, in order to discursively highlight the difficulties of a 15-year-old in adjusting to a new country and language, the narrative – a first person narration, to top it all off – is conceptually almost impossible to translate, because Teresa’s translatedness relies heavily on the fact that, from the moment she migrates, she is straddling two languages and at least two cultures. The experience of being “suspended rather than rooted” (Lahiri 2016, 111) is very difficult to convey in one language alone, as must happen in the translation. This, I argue, produces a degree of artificiality in the Portuguese text. A couple examples must suffice here:

Questioning English language.

1. Eryting unnuh coontrow,’ she said in her verb-free English.
(Zimler, n.d., 58)
«Eryting unnuh coontrow», disse ela no seu espanglês isento de verbos... (Zimler 2011, 65)
2. Unsure of what to do, he [Mickey] looks down with a friendly smile at my brother and says, ‘*Que tal a Coca Cola?*’ *How’s the Coke?*
‘*Optima. ? Great.* (Zimler, n.d., 128)
Sem saber o que fazer, baixa o olhar com um sorriso amistoso para o meu irmão e diz:
– Que tal a Coca Cola?
– Ótima. (Zimler 2011, 133)

3. Sikki also says *loo* for bathroom and *hang on* for *hold on* and *kit* for *uniform*, but by now we're all pretty much used to her British-style English. (Zimler, n.d., 154)

A Sikki também diz «loo» em vez de «bathroom» e «hang on» em vez de «hold on» e «kit» em vez de «uniform», mas agora já estamos todos habituados ao estilo british do inglês que ela fala. (Zimler 2011, 159)

Examples 2 and 3 showcase the difficulty of translating the self-reflexivity of the English text into Portuguese. Teresa's thoughts on the pronunciation, syntax and/or semantics of the English language are difficult to render in any other language. On the other hand, example 1 solves the pronunciation problem rather well with the creative introduction of the word “espanglês” [Spanglish]. All the examples showcase the difficulty of metalinguistically discussing a language outside the borders of that language.

What turns out to be even more complex is, of course, the interweaving of Portuguese words and phrases into the English text. Portuguese appears in the source text as a measure of otherness, something to be translated and explained. When the text is translated into Portuguese, this effect gets lost, must get lost, and this, of course, diminishes the diversity inhabiting the translated text. To put it simply: while there are two languages in the source text, there is only one in the translation. Again I will only be able to discuss three of the many instances in the text.

Inclusion of Portuguese phrases in the English text.

1. As a special treat, Mom picked up custard pastries – *pasteis de nata* – at the Lisbon Bakery on the way to the hospital. (Zimler, n.d., 20)

Como um brinde especial, a minha mãe comprou pastéis de nata na Lisbon Bakery a caminho do hospital. (Zimler 2011, 29)

2. I once even heard him [the father] calling Angel *maricas* while talking on the phone. That’s a real bad Portuguese word for gay people. (Zimler, n.d., 27)
Uma vez ouvi-o chamar «maricas» ao Angel quando estava a falar ao telephone. (Zimler 2011, 35)
3. “Yeah, it’s a fermented drink made with hops and water”. For *hops*, I say *lúpulo*, because I don’t know the English word. (Zimler, n.d., 132)
– Já, uma bebida fermentada feita com hops e água. – Digo «hops», em vez de lúpulo, porque não sabia ainda a palavra portuguesa. (Zimler 2011, 138)

While examples 1 and 2 omit the unnecessary explanations of Portuguese expressions in the source text, example 3 is more complex, as it tries partially unsuccessfully to invert the effect of both languages.

Throughout the novel, Teresa tries to come to grips with a three-fold loss: the loss of home as she was forced to move to the US, the loss of language (she does not have a good command of English) and the loss of her father who dies at the beginning of the novel. Add to this the fact that many of the other characters seem to be struggling with trauma and seeking refuge from a past of sexual abuse, discrimination on account of their sexual orientation and/or social inadequacy. The experience of migration seems to conflate displacements of different types, be they social and/or identity-related, for to migrate is to be “shipwrecked in a foreign country (Zimler, n.d., 148)”. Or, as Teresa aptly puts it, when pondering on the word “mad”: “*Mad*, meaning both angry *and* crazy – a pretty useful word for immigrant kids to pick up on their way out of passport control at Newark Airport” (3). As this example shows, this kind of offbeat, autodiegetical *Bildungsroman* is permeated by translation, as Portuguese seeps into the narrative in English on a regular basis:

Language as a hermeneutic process.

‘Who’s here?’ I ask.

‘Mrs. Coelho.’

That’s Diana’s last name. It means *rabbit* in Portuguese, but of late she looks more like a poodle, to tell you the truth. (Zimler, n.d., 12)

Language as experience.

1. ‘És tu ou Frodo?’ I asked. *Is that you or Frodo?*

I spoke in Portuguese because I didn’t have insomnia in English yet. (76)

2. I spoke in English because I sound more confident in a language that isn’t my own’ (77)

3. I spoke in Portuguese so we could have a more private conversation. (113)

4. It was such a relief not to have to speak English. (113)

5. This shuttling between languages is getting tiring. I’m sticking to Portuguese. (130)

Language as commentary.

1. Calling a girl *filha* is really common in Portugal. And it means *kid* in this context, but it can also mean *daughter*, which is why I can’t stop myself from crying. (139)

Moreover, the novel is inherently meta-reflexive, as it constantly ponders upon linguistic possibility and potentiality, i.e., the possibility of saying what one wishes is a recurrent topic of the novel, as characters struggle to be able to express themselves in a language not their own. Teresa keeps stressing her unfamiliarity and awe with words she comes across. Three examples must suffice:

1. ‘*Perusing* is a word he [Angel] taught me just last week. I love its round, leisurely shape in my mouth’ (23)
2. ‘In English, *plot* made it sound like the Fultz family and I were characters in the same novel, but we were obviously not in the same chapters’ (67)
3. ‘*Pittance* is a great word I learned the other day in the excerpt from *Little Dorrit*...’ (69)

I have been arguing that translation is central to our present-day understanding of the literary experience, and I am hoping I have been able to convey how “being translated”, both literally and metaphorically, describes Teresa’s experience. As she is a migrant, she “was one of those who had ended up in a place that was not the place where [s]he began. Migration tore up all the traditional roots of the self” (Rushdie 2013, 53). These roots are, according to Rushdie, “place, community, culture and language” (53). In one sense, the whole novel constitutes, at the formal level, not only an effort of the narrator to make sense out of an experience of loss, but the actual translation – the act of putting oneself into words – is a (re)invention of the self. Playing with words of different languages, weighing them, savouring/devouring new turns of phrases, calibrating words in one language against words in another – all this speaks of the relational, plural, and partial nature of translation, and the ways in which it is embedded in the act of writing.

Conclusion. The secret life of translated words.

Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing
everybody.
(Salinger 1958, 192)

As I have tried to show, this novel and its circulation showcase different forms of migration that are all inhabited by translation:

(1) migration as story of an identity “at once plural and partial” (Rushdie 2007, 15); (2) migration as (linguistic) form – in different ways, the Portuguese text may be said to ring linguistically more “authentic” than its source at least to some extent, even if it struggles to include a diversity that must elude it; (3) translation as transit, not only from a foreign text but also from a different language variant; (4) text migration as a challenge to traditional concepts – as the “original” has never been published, the translations are, in a very meaningful way, the only extant texts.

In these multiple trajectories, languages and cultures, traditions and ways of living are intermingled, remixed one could argue, in order to shape and make sense out of experiences of displacement and loss: “I say drum roll in Portuguese as *rufar do tambor*, but I’m not sure if it’s such a hot translation. I get stuck between languages all the time these days” (Zimler, n.d., 127).

Strawberry Fields Forever depicts, in content, form and in its “afterlife”, that “the truth is you can never simply ‘go back’, to home or to anywhere else. When you get ‘there’ the place will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed” (Massey 2005, 124-125). Teresa can never go back home, as migration has transformed, displaced and decentered her in indelible ways – whoever she becomes, she is “on the outside now, looking in” (Desai 2003, 13). If she feels “shipwrecked in a foreign country” (Zimler, n.d., 148), she can never truly return to Portugal, as both she and her home country are not the same. She too has come to experience that “the notion of displacement as a place of ‘identity’ is a concept you learn to live with, long before you are able to spell it. Living with, living through difference” (Hall 1997, 135).

The novel too, it can be argued, is always displaced, straddling as it does two languages and two cultures, building up a sort of uncertain home, a space not easily translatable into other places and languages – a space that, creating a liminal realm of negotiation, does not lend itself easily to monolingualization, which is, to some extent, what must happen in the Portuguese translation due to the circumstances described above. To be able to be true to the

narrative space of possibilities in the source text, the translation would have had to be a radical gesture and “make itself porous and let languages and impressions flow in and flow through”, to misquote slightly Anita Desai’s beautiful passage on the migrant’s identity. Whether or not that would have been accepted by the publisher and the readership is, of course, the question that remains unanswered. Perhaps different temporalities call for a more “fluid, more uncertain” translation. A translation, in short, that does justice to etymology.

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