

THE UNCONSCIOUS INSCRIBED IN THE TRANSLATED TEXT

Maria Paula Frota

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro

I would like to begin by telling a brief story which I propose as an epigraph to this paper:

A Brazilian film translator, who has been working in this area for almost twenty years, told me some time ago that she had translated *rocking chair* as Portuguese *cadeira de rodas* (*wheelchair*) in the song "Enjoy Yourself, It's Later Than You Think". This song appears in the Woody Allen musical *Everyone Says I Love You*. She sent me an e-mail in which she wrote:

Some weeks before the national première of the movie, but when it had already been subtitled by the laboratory, I woke up at dawn very much alarmed with the sudden conviction that there was a mistake in the translation of one of the songs. I went to the computer and read all the songs over again until I came across it.

The context of this particular song in the movie is the deathwatch of a grandfather whose ghost rises up from the coffin and tells his family that if they keep working so hard their lives will go by and, before they know it, they will find themselves in rocking chairs. The translator, who lived for several years in the United States where she earned a graduate degree in literature, reported me, in distress, what she considered a "terrible slip" (the mistake could not at all come from ignorance). I said to her that in spite of being a verbal slip, an unconscious choice, it ended up by fortunately being a good one, since in our Brazilian culture rocking chairs are more of a life symbol than a metaphor of old age, since they are used by new mothers to breast-feed their babies and rock them to sleep. I also argued in favor of her unconscious choice that the chairs on which we sit at our work desks usually have small wheels, so that *wheelchair* had fitted very well the context where it appeared. But whether or not we consider it an adequate translation, I find it interesting to add that the translator first attributed her uncon-

scious motivation to a possible identification of the movie's grandfather with her own aged relatives who, almost all of them, had ended their lives in wheelchairs. But after she and her psychoanalyst interpreted the slip, the identification shifted to herself, who had been translating nonstop for so many years, stuck in a "wheelchair".

*

My theoretical point of departure is the assumption that most contemporary theories of translation fail to address an important aspect concerning the translating subject and this subject's task. Subjectivity is thought to be an effect of sociocultural values and historical-ideological determinants, but, with rare exceptions, nothing is said about a sphere that is necessarily implied in the act of translating: the unconscious. In the present paper I point out what seems to be the cause of this failure, and propose psychoanalysis — particularly its notion of the subject of the unconscious — as the one epistemological path that can overcome it.¹

One of the main proposals of translation theorists in the last two or three decades has been to fight against the invisibility of translation in all societies, even in academic circles. As Lawrence Venuti wrote, "the fact of translation tends to be ignored even by the most sophisticated scholars who must rely on translated texts in their research and teaching" (1996, p. 100). Seeking to transform translation into a socially visible and prestigious activity, to rescue it from the marginal position to which it has traditionally been relegated, theorists have concentrated their attacks on a subjectivistic notion of the subject that is mostly related by them to the philosophy of Descartes, but also to German romanticism, as well as to liberalism. But why attack this subjectivistic notion of the subject? Because it is this notion that underlies the belief in the author as a free or autonomous individual whose own reason is the sole origin of his work. And it is this belief, in turn, that implies the low status of the translator's activity and the imperative that translators should remain neutral and passive, should not contaminate the Author's "sacred" work. This conceptual situation is very sharply summarized by Theo Hermans in the following passage:

The ultimate provenance of these views [which neglect translation], it seems, lies in a number of naively romantic concepts of "artistic genius", "originality",

¹ This paper is based on the results of my doctoral research; see references, Frota, 2000.

“creativity” [...]. If the literary artist is viewed as a uniquely gifted creative genius endowed with profound insight and a mastery of his native language, the work he produces will naturally come to be regarded as exalted, untouchable, inimitable, hallowed. (1985, p. 7).

Venuti develops virtually the same argument:

Whereas authorship is defined as originality, self-expression in a unique text, translation is derivative, neither self-expression nor unique: it imitates another text. Given the reigning concept of authorship, translation provokes the fear of inauthenticity, distortion, contamination. (1996, p. 99).

Deconstructing this situation, theorists (inspired by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and others) have stressed the idea that no individual is free or autonomous; that all individuals, and consequently all their acts, are subjected to cultural values and historical forces. This view necessarily entails that neither authorship as purely individual creativity nor translation as an absolutely neutral activity can exist. As for the author, one argues that if subjectivity is neither self-originated nor transcendental but determined, the author’s work reflects all his social and cultural background, including all the texts he has read — in this sense, every writing is a rewriting of pre-existing texts. As for the translator, the argument is that if one cannot get rid of one’s sociocultural background, which influences everything one does, the translator’s reading and writing are no doubt mediated by it — in this sense, the suppression of the translating subject is impossible. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere wrote in the editors’ preface to all books of the Translation Studies Series, published by Routledge: “Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way” (1993, p. ix).

Very much influenced by poststructuralism, translation theorists thus propose that authors, translators, and readers be conceived as social subjects, as historical subjects, and, as a reaction to linguistic theories identified with the Saussurean linguistics of *langue*, they propose a view of language not as an abstract homogeneous system, but as use, or as a diversified structure totally interwoven with cultural formations and historical circumstances. It goes without saying that the universalist approach to language and meaning is no longer a viable alternative; the notions of context and difference are nowadays pretty much established within translation

studies. If cultures are different and if “meaning is context-bound” (Culler, 1987, p. 123), theorists cannot but reject the idea of translation as a transparent conveyer of an original’s permanent meanings and intentions, and they redefine it as transformation. In an interview to Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida said the often-quoted words:

[...] à la notion de traduction, il faudra substituer une notion de *transformation* : transformation réglée d’une langue par une autre, d’un texte par un autre. Nous n’aurons et n’avons en fait jamais eu affaire à quelque “transport” de signifiés purs que l’instrument — ou le “véhicule” — signifiant laisserait vierge et inentamé, d’une langue à l’autre, ou à l’intérieur d’une même langue. (1972, p. 31).

The process of translation as transformation or as rewriting has, then, been considered — by different theoretical stances and in a less or more explicit manner — mostly in its sociocultural, historical, political aspects. The inevitable transformations are ascribed to cultural and linguistic differences, to a specific function required of the translated text in the target culture, to patronage, and so on and so forth. But very few works have investigated the intervention of the unconscious in that process.² This seems to me a serious lacuna because, as Lacan wrote, “l’effcience de l’inconscient ne s’arrête pas au réveil. L’expérience psychanalytique n’est pas autre chose que d’établir que l’inconscient ne laisse aucune de nos actions hors de son champ” (1966, p. 273). What we can learn from these words is that the unconscious operates 24 hours a day and not only in our dreams or when we lie on a couch in the psychoanalyst’s office, but in all of our actions. Freud remarked that unconscious desires and thoughts intervene “even [in] subtle and difficult intellectual operations which ordinarily require strenuous reflection” (1978, v. XIX, p. 26). It then seems quite relevant and necessary to direct our attention to psychoanalysis the better to understand the translating process, and the translating subject in particular.

Within translation studies, the death of the Cartesian subject has been proclaimed and apparently very little investigation has been conducted afterwards in order to reconceive the sphere of the individual, to think of subjectivity not only in terms of its sociocultural constitution but also in terms of a more restrictive or singular plane. Psychoanalysis, in turn, as it con-

² In the volume of *Meta* published in 1982 and dedicated to the conjunction of the fields of translation and psychoanalysis, we find only three authors specialized in translation, among them Derrida, and seventeen psychoanalysts. In the volume of *TTR*, published in 1998 and having the same subject as *Meta*’s, the eleven authors’ biodata shows that only two are professionally related to translation.

ceives the unconscious, its structure and its workings, as it conceives the subject of the unconscious, is indeed construed as an alternative to Cartesian subjectivism. What makes it different from other theories is that, without neglecting the historical and cultural dimensions, it goes beyond them. This is so because, according to psychoanalytic theory, the individual is undoubtedly subjected to language, to history and culture,³ but this subjection is mingled with the subjection operated by desire, which is marked by a profound singularity, constituted, so to say, by the personal history of the subject — by residues of words heard and images seen throughout the life of the individual (see Freud, 1978, v. XIX).

In order to present in this paper a little of the subject of the unconscious or of the unconscious desire and to relate it to the translator, the best thing to do, it seems, is to resort to Freud's own work. And, since translators deal with texts and their main activities are reading and writing, I propose Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, for it is in this book that he investigates, through the occurrence of verbal lapses or slips, the inscription of the unconscious desire in texts. For the same reason, I propose to concentrate on misreadings and slips of the pen.

Freud conceives the verbal slip as an unobserved error resulting from a psychic event which consists in the momentary forgetting of a correct expression and the emergence in its place of an incorrect one, produced by an illusion of the memory. The incorrect expression has an associative connection with the forgotten expression and, most importantly, with some other material — a thought or a desire — which is being repressed. This repressed material, being unconscious, "struggles" with conscious intentions and may have some disturbing influence on them, being at times at least partially successful (see Freud, 1978, v. VI, p. 221). This struggle of the unconscious to find expression occurs without knowledge of consciousness and, as shown in Lacan's text, it is permanent. It is worth emphasizing that "these errors that derive from repression are to be sharply distinguished from others which are based on genuine ignorance" (ibid., p. 220). It is exactly the psychic operations which constitute them and characterize them that are of interest here as a means to grasp, with psychoanalysis, a bit of the complex relation between language and the subject of the unconscious. Although I cannot discuss, within the limits of the present paper, the Lacanian notion of *lalangue*, I would like to simply note here that it seeks to express precisely those moments when language and unconscious desire are articulated.

³ Let us not forget such works by Freud as *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

We all witness the occurrence of verbal slips in various situations in our everyday lives, translation included, even though we usually ignore what they imply and thus fail to appreciate their significance. Because verbal slips are among the typical formations of the unconscious — together with dreams, jokes, bungled actions and symptoms — they are precious for the psychoanalyst's work in the clinic; translators, on the other hand, must eradicate them from their texts, even though, more often than we would like, we are "blind" to them and they escape us. As for translators in general and translation theorists in particular, the relevance of understanding these lapses is that they expand our knowledge of what goes on "behind the scene" when we read and write, when we translate.

In the book, Freud reports dozens of cases of slips of the tongue, misreadings and slips of the pen. Most of them were committed by himself, by other fellow-doctors, or by patients, so that Freud was in a position to analyse them or to report others' analyses. It is worth remarking that the interpretation of the lapse must be made by the one who committed it, or perhaps by one's psychoanalyst, since it implies information other people ignore. What I mean is that for us translators there is no point in analysing other translators' lapses; what is relevant to us, as has already been said, is to have some idea of how those psychic processes occur so as to understand what is involved in translation as far as the unconscious is concerned.

Let us now see (through Strachey's translation) one of those verbal slips committed and analysed by Freud himself. It is one of the slips of the pen that he committed when he wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* and which also escaped him in three proof-readings he made. He introduces it as follows:

In my *Interpretation of Dreams* I was responsible for a number of falsifications which I was astonished to discover after the book was published. They concerned historical points and, in general, points of fact. After closer examination I found that they did not owe their origin to my ignorance, but are traceable to errors of memory which analysis is able to explain. (1978, v. VI, p. 217).

The specific slip of the pen that I would like to present is Freud's referring to Hannibal's father not as Hamilcar, but as Hasdrubal — Hasdrubal was in reality the name of Hannibal's brother. The material similarity of the three names is worth noting, similarity which Freud calls "verbal bridges" and which, as he explains, facilitate the work of the repressed desires, of the un-

conscious thoughts that insist on expressing themselves. Those bridges are usually formed, although at times they are unnecessary in the face of the strength of such desires. Freud observed:

This error annoyed me especially, but it furnished me with the strongest corroboration of my view of such errors. There must be few readers of my book who are better acquainted with the history of the house of Barca than its author, who penned this error and who overlooked it in three sets of proofs. (ibid., p. 218).

And he added, after reporting not only that slip of the pen but also two others:

How is it to be explained that my memory provided me at these points with what was incorrect, while otherwise — as the reader of the book can see for himself — it put at my disposal the most out-of-the-way and unusual material? And how, too, did I pass over these errors while I carefully went through three sets of proofs — as if I had been struck blind? (ibid., p. 218).

Freud himself answered those questions by explaining that where his error made its appearance a repression lay behind it:

The error of putting *Hasdrubal* instead of *Hamilcar*, the brother's name instead of the father's, occurred precisely in a context that concerned the Hannibal-phantasies of my school years and my dissatisfaction with my father's behaviour towards the "enemies of our people". *I could have gone on to tell* how my relationship with my father was changed by a visit to England, which resulted in my getting to know my half-brother, the child of my father's first marriage, who lived there. My brother's eldest son is the same age as I am. Thus the relations between our ages were no hindrance to my phantasies of how different things would have been if I had been born the son not of my father but of my brother. *These suppressed phantasies falsified the text of my book at the place where I broke off the analysis*, by forcing me to put the brother's name for the father's. (ibid., pp. 219-20, emphases added).

Another verbal slip, this time a misreading, also helps us to understand better the action of the unconscious in our relations with texts: one day Freud read in a newspaper, written in large print, *Der Friede von Görz* ("The Peace of Gorizia"). But, in reality, what was written in the newspaper was *Die*

Feinde von Görz ("The Enemy before Gorizia"). Freud explains it by saying that "it is easy for someone who has two sons fighting at this very time in that theatre of operations to make such a mistake in reading" (ibid., p. 113). Translators very often commit these misreadings by reading in the source-text a word that is not there, a word materially similar to the one which is in fact written.

Concerning these misreadings, Freud distinguishes two situations; in one of them he ascribes to the reader a stronger participation in the constitution of the misreading, and in the other, on the contrary, it is the text that mostly contributes to it. He says:

[...] in a very large number of cases it is the reader's preparedness that alters the text and reads into it something which he is expecting or with which he is occupied. The only contribution towards a misreading which the text itself need make is that of affording some sort of resemblance in the verbal image, which the reader can alter in the sense he requires. (ibid., pp. 112-113).

In a second group of cases the part which the text contributes to the misreading is a much larger one. It contains something which rouses the reader's defences — some information or imputation distressing to him — and which is therefore corrected by being misread so as to fit in with a repudiation or with the fulfilment of a wish. In such cases we are of course obliged to assume that the text was first correctly understood and judged by the reader before it underwent correction, although his consciousness learnt nothing of this first reading. (ibid., p. 114).

There are verbal slips that we commit when translating and which we cannot identify clearly whether it occurred during the process of reading the original text or when writing the translated text. Freud reports one of those cases, one that involves the omission of a crucial word — *effektiv* ("actual") — in a Hungarian translation of one of the sections of the law settled between Austria and Hungary, in 1867, dealing with the financial obligations of the two countries. According to Freud, this historical slip would have caused financial losses to Austria, thus satisfying the likely "unconscious desire of the Hungarian parliamentary draftsmen to grant Austria the least possible advantages" (ibid., p. 128).

People usually ignore or minimize the action of the unconscious in these verbal slips, and believe that they merely result from a quantitative lessening of attention. Freud counters that most often the disturbance of at-

tion is not the cause of the mistake, but that this disturbance is itself effect of an alien thought that imposed itself.

Every verbal slip is undeniably a mistake, i. e., a radical break with what is established, predictable, and it is indeed a formation of the unconscious, or, in other words, one of those situations in which the unconscious thought or desire was totally successful after a struggle against an intention held to be conscious. This conception of the verbal slips can lead us to deduce that Freud's proposals were exclusively based on the incorrect/correct dichotomy, which, in turn, would imply a binary opposition between, on the one hand, formations of the unconscious and, on the other hand, forms resulting from an unshaken conscious intention, from strictly secondary revision or elaboration. Now, Freud was very emphatic when he stated, in later works, that part of the *Ich* (ego) is also unconscious. He said that "consciousness is only a *quality* or attribute of what is psychical, and moreover an inconstant one"; that "consciousness can only offer us an incomplete and broken chain of phenomena"; "that the psychical is in itself unconscious and that the unconscious is the truly psychical" (1978, v. XXIII, pp. 285-286). We can discern in these sayings a real revolution concerning the Cartesian subject of reason: Freud not only inverts the terms of the hierarchy traditionally present in the dichotomy consciousness/unconscious, placing the unconscious in the superior position, but he also explodes the very idea one had always had of consciousness or reason when he brings the unconscious to its sphere.

Given that the action of the unconscious is so powerful and wide-ranging, could its effects on language be restricted to verbal slips? I would say that they are not, and I propose that we think of subjective verbal choices that, as distinguished from verbal slips, do not go as far as to disrupt the code so drastically as to result in complete nonsense — they would not amount to an explicit or visible writing of the subject of the unconscious. They would be forms that escaped dichotomies so as to be neither correct nor incorrect, correct *and* incorrect, effects of an intellectual secondary elaboration invaded by the unconscious. These forms — which I name *singularities* — would indeed consist of formations of the unconscious, but less explicit, more subtle, perhaps due to the fact that the unconscious is only partly successful in its struggle against repressive forces.

The notion of singularity, thus conceived, might profitably be extended to the field of translation studies, throwing a much-needed light on the theme of this paper and this colloquium: the translating subject.

To conclude, I propose we consider the following example of *singularity* in the translating process: once, one of our undergraduate students reacted strongly against the correction of a certain expression she had used in her translation of a poem by Sylvia Plath. It was the translation of *picking up* as the Portuguese *colando* (*glueing*). Surprised in face of her reaction, I asked her to justify her choice. After some moments in silence — in which, it seemed, she was for the first time constructing the history of her choice, of that singular moment in which subject and text constituted themselves — she said:

When I was a *child*, my mother, when baking cakes, would often say to me that the *glue* of the cake was the *icing* and, indeed, she was right. Sometimes I saw those cakes completely crumbled into *pieces*, due to the softness of the dough. But, with a bit of patience and with the help of the icing, the *restoration* of the cake was possible. The icing, besides being the glue, was also the only *cure*. (emphases added).⁴

Next I will show two stanzas of the original poem and the student's translation. I will emphasize the signifiers that formed a kind of a net in which the translator was caught up unawares, during the whole process of translation she had experienced. In this net, the Portuguese word *colando* emerged for *picking up* instead of other, more predictable forms as *catando* ou *pegando*, more literal translations for *picking up*:

<p>(...)</p> <p>What is so real as the cry of a <u>child</u>? A rabbit's cry may be wilder But it has no soul. <u>Sugar</u> can <u>cure</u> every thing, so Kindness says. Sugar is a <u>necessary fluid</u>,</p> <p>Its <u>crystals</u> a little <u>poultice</u>. O kindness, kindness Sweetly <u>picking up</u> pieces! My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies, May be pinned any minute, anaesthetized.</p> <p>(...)</p>	<p>(...)</p> <p>O que é mais puro que o choro de um <u>filho</u>? O choro de um coelho pode ter mais ardor Mas ele não tem alma. O <u>açúcar cura</u> tudo, diz a Bondade. Açúcar, um <u>fluido necessário</u>,</p> <p>Seus <u>cristais</u>, um pequeno <u>cataplasma</u>. Ó bondade, bondade <u>Colando</u> os <u>cacos</u> com doçura! Minhas sedas japonesas, desesperadas borboletas, Alfinetadas a qualquer minuto, anestesiadas.</p> <p>(...)</p>
---	---

child - *filho* — the translator as a child
sugar - *crystals* - *pieces* - *açúcar* - *cristais* - *cacos* — her mother's cakes, her cakes
cure - *poultice* - *cura* - *cataplasma* — the restoration of the cake, the icing: *necessary fluid* that restores, cures, *glues*!

⁴ This statement was later transcribed in a work by the student; see references, Prado, 1994.

Bibliography

- Bassnett, S. and A. Lefevere, "General Editors' Preface", in E. Gentzler, (ed.), *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Routledge, London/New York, 1993.
- Culler, J., *On Deconstruction — Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1987.
- Derrida, J., *Positions*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972.
- Freud, S., *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. by J. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. VI, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1978 [1901].
- "The Ego and the Id", in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, trans. by J. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XIX, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1978 [1923].
- "Some Elementary Lessons in Psycho-Analysis", in *Moses and Monotheism: An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, trans. by J. Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XXIII, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London, 1978 [1938].
- Frota, M. P., *A singularidade na escrita tradutora: linguagem e subjetividade nos estudos da tradução, na lingüística e na psicanálise*, Pontes & Fapesp, Campinas & São Paulo, 2000.
- Hermans, T., "Introduction: Translation Studies and a New Paradigm", in T. Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature — Studies in Literary Translation*, Croom Helm, London/Sydney, 1985.
- Lacan, J., "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud", in *Écrits I*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1966.
- Prado, M., "Kindness/Bondade & comentários", in A. Ferreira et. al. (eds.), *Letras em tradução: antologia de poemas traduzidos*, Pontifícia Universidade Católica, Rio de Janeiro, 1994.
- Venuti, L., "The Scandal of Translation", *TradTerm*, 3, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 1996, pp. 99-110.