

XVII. Translation and Cannibalism

Once upon a time, in the sixteenth century, in what is now Brazil, members of the Tupinambà tribe devoured a Catholic priest. This act sent shudders of horror through Portugal and Spain, representing as it did the ultimate taboo for a European Christian. The very term 'cannibal' was associated with the Americas; originally referring to a group of Caribs in the Antilles, it entered the English language definitively in the *OED* of 1796 meaning 'an eater of human flesh' and subsequently passed into other European languages. The name of a tribe and the name given to savage peoples who ate human flesh fused into a single term.

The eating of the priest was not an illogical act on the part of the Tupinambà, and may even be said to have been an act of homage. After all, one does not eat people one does not respect, and in some societies the devouring of the strongest enemies or most worthy elders has been seen as a means of acquiring the powers they had wielded in life. Nor was it unknown in Europe; we need only think of Portia, the noble Roman widow who drank her husband's ashes in a glass of wine, declaring her body to be his fittest resting place. And, of course, no doubt confusingly for the Tupinambà tribe that the priest was seeking to convert, Christianity rests on the symbolism of devouring the body and blood of Christ, the Saviour. In vain to protest that the symbolic eating of the Eucharist needed to be distinguished from the actual eating of Father Sardinha's flesh – the

Tupinambà concept of eating and taboo came from very different sources.

Now what, we may ask, does this narrative have to do with translation? A great deal, in fact, but before considering the question more fully, it is important to establish certain premises. First, and very obviously: translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.

Recent work in translation studies had challenged the long-standing notion of the translation as inferior to the original. In this respect, translation studies research has followed a similar path to other radical movements within literary and cultural studies, calling into question the politics of canonization and moving resolutely away from ideas of universal literary greatness. This is not to deny that some texts are valued more highly than others, but simply to affirm that systems of evaluation vary from time to time and from culture to culture and are not consistent.

Title chosen by Kadhim Al-Ali, the text by Susan Bassnett & Harish Trivedi (eds), *Postcolonial Translation*, 2002, pp. 1-2.

Reading Guidelines:

Readers should be mindful of the tone of the topics they read. What are the qualifying adjectives the writer is using? Is he drawing "happy" or "sad" faces of the people in his/her text? Are the people oppressed or are they oppressors? Is the writer neutral and fair or biased and unfair?

Q.I Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: cannibalism, shudders, ultimate, OED, homage, devouring, wielded, rests on, Eucharist, premises, vacuum, continuum, manipulative, charged with, radical, canonization.

Q.II Derive as many words as you can from the following words: cannibalism, catholic, Caribs, acquiring, noble, narrative, manipulative, innocent, universal, deny, affirm, evaluation.

Q.III Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: ultimate, fused, illogical, noble, ongoing, innocent, equality, long-standing, original, resolutely, affirm.

Q.IV Answer the following questions briefly:

1. What happened in the sixteenth century? What was the effect of the act?
2. What is the origin and meaning of the term "cannibalism"?
3. How do the authors justify the act of the Tupinambà? What examples do they bring?
4. Where does translation happen? What is it part of?
5. What do the authors mean by saying that translation is a manipulative activity?
6. Why translation is seen as not innocent and transparent activity?
7. How are equality and inferiority viewed with regards to translation?
8. What does it mean to say that the politics of canonization is called into question?

Q.V Discuss paragraph 1 in general and the difference between the inverted comas over 'cannibal' and 'an eater of human flesh' in particular. Translate the paragraph into plain Arabic.

Research Activity:

What is the Brazilian Cannibalist approach to translation? Who are its representatives? How is cannibalism realized in translation?

Quote of the Day:

Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.

Anthony Burgess