

POSTCARD FROM THE DERRIDEAN ISLANDS: RESPONSE TO ANTHONY PYM

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In TradTerm 2/1995 Anthony Pym expresses his doubts about deconstruction as a general theory of translation. Having myself written about translation and deconstruction on several occasions (e.g. Koskinen 1994, 1995), I feel compelled to respond. While I do share some of Pym's opinions, my conclusions are in opposition to his.

As indicated by his title, "Doubts about Deconstruction as a General Theory of Translation", Pym reacts to deconstruction as an attempt to formulate a general theory of translation. That, to be sure, would be a futile attempt. Translation is such a diverse activity, and so deeply entwined in different social constraints, that I do not think we will ever find a master key to answer all the questions it raises. Nor do I see a necessity for it. Rather, Translation Studies as an "interdiscipline" – as it has been epitomized – should have room for different approaches, all shedding light to translation from different angles. And in my opinion deconstruction can be one of them.

Pym lists the basic flaws of deconstruction as follows: "*opposition to a generalized ex-*

ternal conception of translation, restriction to a problematic of origins, and a residual inferiorization of translation" (1995: 16). While I have to admit that the first one is a touché, I beg to differ with the last two. Simplifications of the conventional or naïve understanding of translation are dangerously easy to make, and one easily forgets the diversity of attitudes and translation practices during its long history. But I do not think one can only blame deconstructionists for this. In fact, one might even claim that Anthony Pym falls into the same trap himself in criticizing Derrida for seeing translations "in a rather traditional way" (1995: 16).

Pym's claim that deconstruction is centred around the problem of origins is surprising. In my view deconstruction rather shifts the focus away from the source and, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, to the *afterlife* and maturation process of the text in translation. To use Derrida's concepts, *différence* and supplementarity both essentially include the idea of excess, of growing, adding, becoming more – all verbs indicating forward, towards the future.

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Admittedly, Jacques Derrida, like so many philosophers philosophizing about translation, may occasionally be guilty of inferiorization of translation. But Anthony Pym equates Derrida and deconstructionist texts, thus blaming Rosemary Arrojo, Barbara Johnson and other deconstructionist translation theorists for Derrida's opinions. While it is interesting to read Derrida's thoughts about translation (e.g. 1985), deconstruction's most valuable insights into translation theory are found elsewhere, in the challenge posed by the ideas of *différance*, trace, intertextuality and supplementarity. With or without deconstruction, the questions of sameness and difference, of identity and otherness, underlie all conceptions of translation. For practising translators, as well as translation scholars, deconstruction can be of assistance in articulating one's own understanding of the process of translation.

Deconstruction as a method of "close reading" can also be used as a tool for analyzing translations, or translation theory as Pym's own example shows. In a very deconstructive manner, Pym locates the points of rupture or incongruence in the four translations of Derrida's sentence. In so doing he successfully deconstructs his own argumentation of the uselessness of deconstruction.

Pym makes a long list of issues requiring attention within Translation Studies and claims that deconstruction can be of no use to them. For

Pym deconstruction remains hopelessly wrecked on the Derridean Islands of textuality. Perhaps Andrew Benjamin may want to shift the emphasis to the text and away from the social context of translation, but he is not all there is to deconstructive translation theory. In parenthesis, Pym actually notes that Arrojo's approach leads to a different conclusion. Personally, I am most intrigued by Pym's repeated stress on the ethical aspect of translation, and his claim that it is the blind spot of deconstruction:

"They [translators] have to make choices between available alternatives, many of which involve potentially beneficial reductions of plurality. Such choices require ethical guidelines. And yet the question of ethics, which is where translation theory needs real help from philosophers, is precisely the point obscured by fixations on origins."

Contrary to Pym's scepticism, in my opinion this is the most interesting aspect of deconstruction and translation: in a web of multiple and changing meanings, translators have to force a fixture and create a closure. How this is done, on what premises and for whose benefit is precisely the point that deconstruction demands us to investigate. For me, deconstruction is essentially a question of ethics.

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