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Poems from the Inner Life: how to translate spirit voices

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Abstract

Lizzie Doten, a famous 19th century American poet, was best known for being a medium through whom the spirits of popular poets such as Edgar A. Poe could still transmit their verses even dead by using her as a channel. The characteristics of the trances in which she would recite a poem supposedly under the influence of a spirit were mostly oral and improvised. Lizzie Doten wrote two books: *Poems from the Inner Life* (1863) and *Poems of Progress* (1871). They are both a compilation of poems created by spirits through her. In this paper we will focus on the former, for it is the best example of Doten's work where we can find those types of poems. It is also a challenging text to translate, for what we must take into account some of the main items that appear in Doten's poetry: intertextuality, the mediumship process, rhythms, and metrics.

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1. State of the art

References on Lizzie Doten and Spiritualism are treated from diverse points of view: comparative literature (Fritz, 2013; Rudy, 2009), history of religions (McDannell, 2001) or feminism and genre studies (Braude, 2001), just to name a few. There are also some authors who have written about Lizzie Doten since they were studying the influences of Shakespeare, Poe or Burns (Richards, 2004). Nevertheless, the main work on Doten's life is Bednarowski's dissertation, written in 1969.

On the other hand, there are no specific references on translation of spiritualist literature, but we can take advantage of what has been said in general Translation Studies. Furthermore, we think that this kind of literature is interesting for a translation analysis because it encounters many problems, such as the double voice of a text (in this

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case triple: author–medium–translator), metrics, rhythm, realia, or intertextuality, discussed by the most recent translation theories: Cultural Studies or the Manipulation School.

2. Introduction

We often find authors in the history of literature who have been deliberately displaced or forgotten by the public over the course of the years. And we use the word ‘find’ here because we, as translators, consider that a vital part of our work is to resurrect certain authors who would otherwise remain completely unknown for almost everyone in our days. Thus, the main objective of this paper will be not only to analyse the translational aspects related to a certain work whose peculiarities make it highly complex and fascinating, but also to bring back to life an authoress who is nowadays unknown but who was, a hundred years back in the eastern coast of the United States, one of the most famous and influential mediums of her time: Lizzie Doten.

Leaving aside the general aspects of the translation of poetry (EN>ES), topic which has been covered by many Spanish theorists (Hurtado, 2004 and Torre, 1994 and 2000, for example), in this paper we would classify the main characteristics of Doten’s poetry, namely those that suppose a challenge from a Translation Studies’ point of view.

Lizzie Doten (1829-1913?, Plymouth, Massachusetts) was known for being a medium through whom the spirits of diverse poets wrote their verses from the great beyond, spirits like those of William Shakespeare, Robert Burns, or Edgar Allan Poe, as well as many other unknown spirits. The most interesting feature of those episodes in which she allegedly contacted those spirits is that the result was, most of the time, an oral speech that Doten would improvise in front of an audience. These performances were, apparently, unexpected (Martin, 2009, p. 257).

Despite of those poems being made to be declaimed, this type of improvised spiritual poetry would be successfully edited and printed. Her most famous works were *Poems from the Inner Life* (1863) and *Poems of Progress* (1871). We will focus on *Poems of the Inner Life* as it is in its second part where we find the poems in which the authoress does recognize a direct spiritual influence (that of Shakespeare, Burns and Poe), poems which are actually the most unusual and challenging pieces for us, as translators, to work with.

Thus, in order to not just translate those poems, but also to read and understand them, it is necessary to define the context of these pieces of work—that is to say, the situation in which an interaction was supposedly established between the spirit and Doten in order to create poetry. The context used to be very specific: the trance would arise during or after one of the series of conferences that Doten used to give to an audience, which tended to be speeches of a religious character (Braude, 2001, p. 89).

In addition to this, in order to better translate her poems, we would have to ask ourselves who we are actually translating from: the living authoress/channel that is Lizzie Doten or the spiritual author/influence who possessed her in order to ultimately create those poems? According to Doten herself, the poem was the result of a shared effort, thus it would likely be of a shared responsibility, and then, authorship (Doten, xi). She was convinced that she was not just a mere channel to another author’s spiritual voice, but that she added her personal touch to the final outcome. As matter of fact, Doten claimed that those spirits chose her because of her poetic skills, but we will go beyond and state that she had an excellent ability to mimic the technique and personal style of every single poet she theoretically was ‘influenced’ by. As some authors have said, this capacity for copycatting was a way of proving that those ‘visits’ were actually occurring (Richards, 2004, pp. 121-122).

Sontag states that «The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a subtext which is a true one» (1996, p. 6). In the texts we are analyzing the translator should work without prejudice, without questioning or interpreting the truth of Lizzie Doten powers. Even more: in case of doubt, the translator of Doten’s poetry should use all the possible tools in the translation to make possible to the reader’s eyes that what Doten said was true.

Anyway, whatever the truth might be, she finally left her medium career claiming that she was no longer able to clearly differentiate those messages created by her and those that came from the spiritual presences. This double voice, which was something confusing even for Doten in her last days, is an almost unique characteristic and a joyful challenge for a translator, taking into account that he or she would not only be translating a poem by Shakespeare or Poe, but also a poem by Doten. She was not just a channel: she filtered those poems from that ‘inner life’ according to her own ability, to her literary and writing skills and style, just like a translator does.

Finally, we must consider another very important aspect of Doten's poetry: its spoken dimension. As they were recited in public speeches and often improvised, her poems are defined by very specific rhyme, rhythm and verse types that we can typically find in oral poetry and that the translator would have to take under consideration in order to better translate them.

3. William Shakespeare

In *Poems from the Inner Life* we find two poems allegedly attributed to William Shakespeare. According to Doten, the influence of the Bard overwhelmed her and made her shrink from it (Doten, xix). We find then that there are only two poems, *Love* and *Life*, which were directly influenced by the spirit of Shakespeare, as compared to a more large number of poems influenced by Poe.

She expressed that Shakespeare was the most powerful presence that had ever composed through her, and that therefore the resulting poems were not perfect productions at the height of his mastermind, as they were limited by her capacity: "his power was mightier than I could bear" (Doten, xix).

There is no doubt, when reading for example some extracts of *Life*, that the poem was written by constantly quoting fragments or lines from Shakespeare's works such as *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Love's Labour's Lost*... or by making references to those works:

(...) No **Macbeth** there,
Mad with ambition, plotteth damning deeds;
No **Hamlet**, haunted by his father's ghost,
Stalks wildly forth intent on vengeance dire. (Doten, 1863, p. 87)

(...) No hay **Macbeth** alguno,
loco de ambición, maquinando actos infames;
ningún **Hamlet**, atormentado por el fantasma de su padre,
acecha decidido a consumir su terrible venganza.

Therefore, it is vital for the translator to be extremely well familiarized with the works by Shakespeare in English, but also to take into account any previous translation of them if necessary.

4. Robert Burns

In *Poems of the Inner Life* there are two poems inspired by Robert Burns. Although Robert Burns is a major author for the Anglo-Saxon literature in general and the Scottish in particular, its influence in Spain is scarce. The majority of his works are not translated into Spanish—for example, the only of his books that are hardly available on the Spanish market are two anthologies: a selection of poems written from 1759 to 1796 published by Ediciones Luis Revenga in 2008 and translated by Susana Torres Prieto-Hay, and an anthology called *Caledonia y otros poemas* translated by Juan Manuel González and José Fernández Bueno and published by Olifante Ediciones in 1998.

Briefly analyzed, the main problem we must take into account before translating them is the linguistic variation. *For a' That* is a version of the famous *A Man's a for a' That*, and *Words o' Cheer* imitates the cheerful mood of a Scotch ballad. In this latter case, Doten uses words such as 'cantie', 'chittering', 'muckle', 'grousome', 'agley', 'hoolie', or 'loun'. They appear followed by a footnote in which they are translated into Standard English: 'cheerful', 'trembling', 'great', 'gloomy', 'astray', 'stop', and 'fellow'. We cannot know who added this notes—Doten, the spirit of Robert Burns or the editor.

But how can the translator express these Scotch marks in the poem? There is not one right solution which did not involve losing the distinctive dialectal variation of the original poem or adapting it. Many authors have studied the translation of dialectal variation (Mayoral, 1999, for example, offers a vast study of many different methods), so we are not going to dig deeply in the topic, due to the limitations of this paper. However, in this case

the translator should know the theory and consider if it is more important to translate the supposedly spiritual connection of the poems or the dialect.

Newmark was one of the first to give some guidance in relation to the translation of dialects:

If dialect appears metalingually, i.e. as an example of language, you normally transfer it, translate it into neutral language, and clarify the reasons why it is cited. [...] As a translator, your main job is to decide on the functions of the dialect. Usually, this will be: (a) to show a slang use of language; (b) to stress social class contrasts; and more rarely (c) to indicate local cultural features. (1988, p. 195)

In Doten's poems the function of the dialect is slightly different –it tries “to indicate local cultural features” through imitation. So, due to the importance of the mediumship imitative process of these poems, we think that it is better to prioritize poetic and spiritual voices over the Scottish distinction.

5. Edgar Allan Poe

Poe is the poet who more often ‘wrote’ through Doten: *Resurrexi*, *The Prophecy of Vala*, *The Kingdom*, *The Cradle or Coffin*, *The Streets of Baltimore*, and *Farewell to Earth* are the six poems included in *Poems from the Inner Life* inspired by Poe. We can explain Doten's interest on Poe with the following reasons: first, Poe's popularity; second, Boston being the city where both poets lived; and third, the importance of the supernatural in Poe's literature. Those supernatural recurrences were primarily used and manipulated by Doten as a way to justify her own religious beliefs:

In a reciprocal dynamic, mediums helped Poe gain a foothold in the realm of immortal fame, while his visitations lent credentials to mediumistic literary performances [...] Spirit-mediums reported his posthumous transformation from the troubled earth-being ravaged by sin [...] into an inversion of himself that espouses the spiritualists' optimistic vision of heaven as a place where every sinner may become a luminous angel. (Richards, 2004, p. 126)

Doten argued that she had never read any of Poe's poems, with the exception of *The Raven*, and that she had “never made the style of any author a study” (p. xxi). However, *The Raven* is always present in those poems. In *The Streets of Baltimore*, for example, its influence is unquestionable: “And there comes no ghostly raven / Tapping at my chamber door!” (Doten, p. 132), we read at the ending of the poem.

Metrics, musicality and alliteration in Doten are clearly imitations of Poe's poetry. Richards says: “‘Sympathy with spirit’ is thus a secular synonym for spiritual telegraphy” (2004, p. 121). This spiritual telegraphy explains well Doten's poems: they are oral constructions with a fix metric pattern focused on a series of basic ideas on religion repeated once and again, and supported by famous quotations of the poets she imitates:

Doten evokes a recurrent scenario from Poe's fiction in which the narrator tries to communicate across life's threshold [...]. His message doubles as the medium's description of her spirit conversations while waiting for Poe's spirit to arrive. By occupying his speaking position, Doten showcases her affinity with Poe and claims access to otherworldly powers. Her “phantom voice,” which haunts his utterance, underscores the process by which textual signs project a ghostly subjectivity. (2004, pp. 122-123)

The content of these poems is the process itself, an open defense of Spiritualism through selected verses, or as Rudy asserts, “the act of its own transmission” (2009, p. 173). Doten explains the poem *Farewell to Earth* saying that it can't be “comprehended in human speech” (p. xiv). Thus, if we want to do a faithful translation of Poe-through-Doten's poems, our translation should not be heard, but spiritually felt:

In order to be fully realized and understood, the soul must be transported to that sphere of spiritual *perceptions*, where there is no *audible* “speech nor language,” and where the “voice is not *heard*”. (Doten, 1863, p. xiv)

Therefore, Doten's translators must not only know how Poe sounds in English but how Poe sounds in the target language, so the readers can ‘feel’ his voice from beyond. Thus, and as we said before, we can find one of the best examples of this in the final verses of *The Streets of Baltimore*:

(...) And there comes no ghostly raven,

Tapping at my chamber door!
 Calmly, in the golden glory,
 I can sit and read life's story,
 For my soul from out that shadow
 Hath been lifted evermore. (Doten, 1863, pp. 132-133)

Facing the translation of this extract and in order to imitate what we previously called "Poe's voice", it is inevitable not to go to the original Poe's *The Raven*, where we read:

(...) Suddenly there came a tapping,
 As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
 "This some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
 Only this, and nothing more."

This said, it is also necessary to know how Poe "sounds" in previous attempts of translating his voice in our target language (in this case Spanish) so we can play with the concept of intertextuality and with the reader's preconceptions. For this purpose, and taking the same example of *The Raven*, we find most interesting the translations made in the 19th century by Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde and by Julio Cortázar in the 50's:

(...) De repente a mi puerta oí llamar;
 Como si alguien, suavemente, se pusiese con incierta mano tímida a tocar:
 "¡Es —me dije— una visita que llamando está a mi puerta:
 Eso es todo, y nada más!" (Pérez Bonalde)

Oyóse de súbito un leve golpe,
 como si suavemente tocaran,
 tocaran a la puerta de mi cuarto.
 "Es —dije musitando— un visitante
 tocando quedo a la puerta de mi cuarto.
 Eso es todo, y nada más." (Cortázar)

We see obvious differences. In the first case, Pérez Bonalde prefers musicality and rime. On the other hand, Cortázar is faithful to the original alliteration of sounds and tries to transfer the meaning hidden in the arrangement of words and their allusions in Poe's poem, but also innovative in adapting the form. This is obviously a matter of time and trend, being one of the translations a text written in the late 19th century and the other in the middle of the 20th, but what it is also evident is that these translations have created a "Poe style" in Spanish language throughout the last 125 years. If our objective is to correctly translate an authoress that was one of the best in copycatting Poe's writing in English through being influenced by him (or maybe reading his works) we therefore should do the same with the previous publications of Poe in the target language.

6. Concluding remarks

For us, as translators, in order to deal with this unique form of translation, it is necessary to consider the following general characteristics of the poems, all of them derived from the tangled process developed between the spirit and the medium:

Firstly, their oral condition. The poems were made to be spoken and heard, not to be read. And more importantly, they were created in oral events, in front of an audience. Their rhythm and rhyme are related to those of the popular poetry, recalling of ballads or songs. Translators should therefore adapt their translator to these oral conventions.

Secondly, as the verses were technically created out of the blue, they have a very repetitive rhythm and a sort of telegraphic vibe, something that Rudy defines as the "spiritual-tapping" (2009: 15-16). Translators need to accordingly give priority to the transmission of the spiritual-poetic process over the specific meaning of each poem.

Thirdly, intertextuality. We find constant allusions and quotations from Shakespeare's, Burns' and Poe's works, either modified or as they were originally written. Thus, the translator will need to be familiarized with those previous works in order to tackle this intertextuality, not only in terms of verses, but also regarding imitations in metric, rhymes, or tags.

And finally, we could say that the translator should operate as a medium in the way in which he or she, just like Lizzie Doten, is a channel through which the voice of another author is heard, serving as an agent between this metaliterature and the reader, acquiring the role of another link in the transmission chain.

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