

María Jesús Fernández Gil. 2013. *Traducir el horror: la intersección de la ética, la ideología y el poder en la memoria del Holocausto*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. 155 pp. ISBN: 978-3-631-62897-3.

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“Traduttore, traditore.” This famous Italian proverb becomes extremely relevant when the translation of the Holocaust comes to the fore. Can the translator fill the gap between the horrors evoked in the original language and the translated version? Or do these attempts turn the translator into a “traditore” *per se*? Many of these questions are wisely raised in *Traducir el horror: la intersección de la ética, la ideología y el poder en la memoria del Holocausto* [Translating Horror: The Intersection of Ethics, Ideology and the Power of Memory], a courageous study addressing the capacity of Holocaust representations to (re)construct memory, thus adding a new perspective to Langer’s inquiring: “To whom shall we entrust the custody of the public memory of the Holocaust? To the historian? To the survivor? To the critic? To the poet, novelist, dramatist?” (1988, 26). In this book, María Jesús Fernández Gil adds the translator to the list.<sup>1</sup>

*Traducir el horror* was published in 2013, the year from which a memory boom has been witnessed and the initial reluctance to recount the Holocaust has evolved into an upsurge of Holocaust narratives, and a growing number of thinkers have put forward the claim that “it is time to leave Auschwitz behind” (Burg 2008, 210). Although we might consider that everything has been said about the Holocaust, Translation studies offer a new insight into Holocaust memory by providing a theoretical framework that can refresh the analysis of Holocaust cultural production and emphasise the mediation of Holocaust memory through the act of translation itself.

Drawing on the evolution of Translation studies, Fernández Gil’s work stems from the cultural turn that occurred in this field thanks to thinkers like Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Tejaswini Niranjana and Lawrence Venuti, among others. Until the 1990s, the approach to translation was mainly linguistic and functional, but then the

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time arrived for its reconsideration as a discursive practice subject to power relations. Bassnett and Lefevere claimed that translation needed “to be studied in connection with power and patronage, ideology and poetics, with emphasis on the various attempts to shore up or undermine an existing ideology or an existing poetics” (1990, 10). Another ground-breaking aspect of this cultural turn was considering translation a (re)writing of literature; in fact, for Lefevere, studying literature means studying (re)writings (1992). This idea has been expanded on by subsequent translators (Baker 2005; Salama-Carr 2007), and it is used by Fernández Gil throughout her study. Bringing this cultural turn to our national context, it is worth mentioning the contributions by Álvarez Rodríguez and Vidal Claramonte (1996), Rodríguez Monroy (1999), and, of course, Vidal Claramonte (2009), whose works suffuse Fernández Gil’s attempt to demonstrate that translation “reflects the kind of society which produces it” (Vidal Claramonte 2009, 1).

As for its intended readership, this book will be illuminating both for those experts in Memory and Holocaust studies who are interested in learning about the unexplored position of translation in the field, and translation specialists concerned with the way in which Holocaust literature has paralleled contemporary evolution in translation. Alternatively, a general readership can also benefit from reading *Traducir el Horror*, as it guides the readers in establishing connections among the various disciplines that come into play when analysing the intersection between ethics, ideology and power in the construction of Holocaust memory. Regarding its form, the first chapter sets the academic framework for the study and, from the theoretical chapters to the illustrative sections, this book offers a coherent argument that culminates in posing questions for further research in the field. Also, it is worth mentioning that each chapter starts with various quotations that metaphorically allude to its contents. Whether these quotations are from philosophers, writers or Holocaust survivors, all of them create an interdisciplinary site where philosophy, literature, history, politics, translation, linguistics and ethics intermingle to provide answers to the Holocaust.

Drawing on Lefevere’s studies and the postmodernist and poststructuralist theories on the mediated construction of literature and history endorsed by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Robert Scholes and Mijail Bakhtin, Fernández Gil initiates her debate on Holocaust representation. New Historicist echoes resound strongly from the first chapter of *Traducir el Horror*, underlining the performative role of language and suggesting that language is not aimed at reflecting the world but at constructing different interpretations of it (10). Also, the plurilingual nature of this work emanates from this initial chapter, which outlines the main case studies that appear throughout the book, such as Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après* (1970), John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) and Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* (1989). Further, the focus on the role of translation in Holocaust representation launches broader reflections on the way we see ourselves as citizens of a globalised world where memory, history and reality are continuously (re)written.

Chapter two, “(Re)escribir para recordar” [(Re)writing to remember], addresses the connection between (re)writing and remembering practices. Starting from the idea that Nazism was an attack on Jewish and other minorities’ memories, it contends that all Holocaust (re)writings should be welcome. Pierre Nora’s (1997) concept of *lieux de la mémoire* is used to assert that literature is an active element shaping individual and collective identities. Indeed, revising Marcel Proust’s and Henri Bergson’s theories on memory—respectively drawn from *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913) and *Matière et Mémoire* (1896)—and drawing on Plato’s philosophy, Jacques Derrida’s theories on intertextuality and Giles Deleuze’s views on time, Fernández Gil argues that “la literatura es parte integrante de la memoria y el elemento vertebrador de la identidad” [literature is a linking element of memory and a unifying element of identity] (19), unavoidably reminding us of Jean Paul Sartre’s concept of “committed literature,” as developed in his essay *What is Literature?* (1948). She also moves onto postcolonial ideas about the power of literature to create feelings of community among subaltern groups. Their (re)writings can give justice to those *others* whose versions of history have been silenced; an argument that reminds readers of Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of alterity. Thus, although this critic voices the frequent obscurity that defines Holocaust literature, this chapter successfully underlines the main goal of both Holocaust literature and translation: to remember the *other* that Nazism wanted to kill in Auschwitz.

In chapter three “(Re)escrituras en conflicto” [(Re)writings in conflict], the main claim fostered is that Holocaust literature questions the project of modernity and the power of human reason just as translation interprets human actions by analysing the key means by which individuals and societies configure reality: language. In both cases we have to find a mechanism to recreate a reality that we have not experienced, but towards which we have developed empathy. Moreover, when translating Holocaust texts the process implies getting in touch with the *other*, trying to fill cultural gaps and shaping non-verbal meanings into words. Fernández Gil returns to the Holocaust survivors’ argument that traditional modes of representation were inadequate to depict such horror. Yet, although the traumatised subject is usually confronted with the choice of remembering or forgetting, ethics tends to impose the duty of overcoming these linguistic difficulties. Having recourse to experts within the cultural turn in translation and to those postcolonial critics who, like Bhabha (1994), defended the creation of a third space from which minority voices should be disclosed, Fernández Gil concludes that we can change what societies forget and remember through the texts we translate.

These claims are further developed in chapter four “Entre la ética y la estética” [Between ethics and aesthetics], where the main focus lies on the ethical imperative to remember. The dialogue between ethics and aesthetics is extended to the role of the translator when Fernández Gil points out the multiple moral choices materialised when the translator has to work with Nazi texts such as those by Goebbels, Goering or Himmler. These complex ethical situations are exemplified with some controversial

translations such as Pilar Gómez Bedate's translation of Primo Levi's *Si esto es un hombre* (1947). Also, she questions whether or not the Nazi language should be translated, as different countries have adopted diverse positions depending on their relationship with Germany. For example, in the UK, which has traditionally maintained tense relations with Germany, and in the US, which played a decisive role in the post-Holocaust political panorama, translations kept the original language of the Third Reich as, in order to be distant from its ideology, they felt it necessary to distance themselves from its language. The Spanish tendency until the 1990s was to translate it and provide additional information in footnotes, offering more information than that given by the victims. A good example is the Spanish translation of the three volumes of Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz et après* by María Teresa de los Ríos—*Auschwitz y después* ([1965-1971] 2003-2004)—which explains the Nazi terms in brackets and is totally different from the English translations and the original French text, which kept the Nazi terms that were unknown to the prisoners in order to keep the reader in that same darkness.

Chapter five “Ideología y poder en las (re)escrituras del Holocausto” [Ideology and power in Holocaust (re)writings] studies the construction of ideology through translation practices. Apart from the political connotations explained, another area where ideology forges ahead is religion. For example, the analysis of Elie Wiesel's *La Nuit* (1958) shows that Wiesel is described as a passive martyr, with no mention made of the critiques of the international silence present in the original text. More examples of ideological alterations are offered in the translations of Anne Frank's *Het Achterhuis* (1947), as the English and German versions suffered many modifications that Americanised and universalised her experience. Following Lefevere and Venuti's line of thought, these are only some of the examples through which Fernández Gil highlights that these manipulations do not only depend on the translator, but on all the translation agents. She finishes by pointing out that a strategy against manipulation could be Claude Lanzmann's maintenance of the original languages of the interviews that shaped his documentary film *Shoah* (1985), which minimised this mediation and mirrored the confusing nature (linguistic and non-linguistic) within the concentrationary universe of the camps (109). Lanzmann's questions were posed in French and translated by an interpreter into the original languages of the interviewees (Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew) and the inverse process was applied to their answers.

Another factor that influences the extent to which the (re)writings of the Holocaust are mediated is patronage. In chapter six “El mecenas y sus intervenciones” [Sponsors and their interventions], the author claims, again in line with Lefevere, that, if one wants to understand the circumstances where diverse acts of (re)writing occur, the sponsors and the power relations implied need to be addressed. For instance, the differences between the French and the English versions of *Mein Kampf* are exposed, and the book also shows that Hitler had some passages removed from the French version in order to obtain the Vichy government's support. In this case, the sponsor, Hitler, influenced the Nazi message which was spread around the world. But the examples

provided also show us that the sponsor's mediation also occurs in those institutions that work for Holocaust remembrance. For instance, Yad Vashem fosters mediated commemoration when the Jewish victims are remembered at the expense of other groups. Finally, the author suggests that recent multifarious Holocaust representations can help to counteract these manipulative practices.

These thoughts lead to chapter seven "Reflexiones finales" [Final thoughts], where Fernández Gil urges readers to remember that the main objective of all the (re)writings addressed is to extract new lessons from Holocaust (hi)stories so as to interpret our past, present and future. Holocaust literature has proved to be an effective way of calling critics, translators and citizens alike into action because "somos responsables, a la vez, de crear conciencia acerca de la importancia de leer las (re)escrituras que lo cuentan [. . .] Y es que no contárselo al Otro encierra el peligro de que el Holocausto se transforme en vacío, en silencio" (133).<sup>2</sup> The author has filled the silence that surrounded Holocaust translation with a work that opens a new path for those minority groups that have represented the Holocaust in languages which have not yet received proper sponsorship. *Traducir el horror* foretells future lines of action which indicate that the discussion and learning about and from Holocaust is not over at all. If there is any minor aspect for improving the research carried out in this book, I might suggest that readers would welcome further development of this project to incorporate more varied cases of study and providing clearer and more coherent criteria—original language, authors' nationality, reception of the narratives—for the selection of the works used to exemplify the theoretical points expounded.

In conclusion, Fernández Gil's defence of the power of literary practices to configure our reality, identity and memory should be welcomed, as this book attempts to fight the prevailing utilitarian society that has forgotten the necessary role of the humanities in shaping our world. When looking back at the atrocities witnessed throughout the twentieth century, we should perhaps reconsider the role of the "traduttore" not as "traditore," but rather one who becomes a reliable figure when it comes to the (re) writing of the horrors of the past, horrors which we do not want to see repeated and to which we owe a duty that they be remembered and, thus, (re)written.

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<sup>2</sup> "We are simultaneously responsible of promoting awareness of the importance of reading the (re)writings that talk about it. And this is because not telling the Other about it conceals the risk of turning the Holocaust into a void, silence" (my translation).

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