BETWEEN TRANSLATIONS: MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S *EL HABLADOR*

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Although many scholars point to storytelling as the central issue in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *El hablador* (1987), none have mentioned the presence of cultural translation throughout the work.[1] And yet as the title of the book foreshadows[2], translation and the complexities involved in the translation process permeate every aspect of Vargas Llosa's novel. In fact, *El hablador* suggests that every attempt to interpret implicates a transference of meaning from one place to another, whether it be within the same sign system or across disparate languages. In this sense, *El hablador* even portrays the process of storytelling as an act of translation. More interesting is the manner in which *El hablador* engages in a multidimensional exploration of translation against the backdrop of encounter between "el Peru moderno y el Peru primitivo." Centering on one writer's desire to translate the culture of the Machiguenga within a novel, Vargas Llosa revitalizes the central issues of the Peruvian *indigenista* literary movement[3], invoking and complicating, as is his trade, new questions and old ones.

In so far as the writer-protagonist belongs to the occidentalized culture of Lima and the Machiguenga are a nomadic indigenous tribe living in the Amazon[4], *El hablador* revisits the conflictive heterogeneity[5] which lies at the heart of *indigenista* literature and the national space, Perú, which this literature has traditionally attempted to embody. In a country where literature has been used as the primary medium through which to create cultural awareness and political change, the project of cultural translation has played a central role in the Peruvian literary tradition and could be viewed as a quest or journey that takes another step with Mario Vargas Llosa's novel. Like earlier *indigenista* novels, El hablador articulates a vision of indigenous cultures which is rooted in the metropolis.[6] From the metropolis, the novel attempts to culturally translate the Machiguenga and their cosmovision by incorporating myth, song and oral history. And yet a self-reflexive narrative about the writer's struggle to perform this translation within a novelistic structure replaces the political narrative which defines *indigenismo*.[7] What interests me here, is the manner in which *El hablador* approaches the translation of indigenous cultures differently than *indigenista* novels of the past by incorporating a translation of the Machiguenga language. Yet as I suggest at the end of

this article, the power of this translation is compromised for *El hablador* offers cynecism rather than resolutions to the dilemma of cultural translation inherent in *indigenismo*.[8]

In what follows I map the different levels of cultural translation in *El hablador*. One of the root definitions of the word "translation" is to transfer from one place to another. In *El hablador* the narrative structure continually requires the reader to move from one place to another: the novel consists of three interdependent texts which move back and forth in time, across geographies and through cultures. The first and last chapters comprise a travelogue composed by a Peruvian writer in Italy. These brief chapters serve as a frame for the inner six chapters which are divided into two alternating texts: a novelistic narrative, which continually moves back and forth between Latin America and Europe, and a transcription of an *hablador* performance which supposedly takes place in the Peruvian Amazon. Then, in so far as the two central texts attempt to partially interpret reality and explain specific events, the core of the novel engages in the making of meaning, which according to George Steiner and Octavio Paz is a fundamental form of translation.[9]

In less abstract terms, *El hablador* also engages in several forms of linguistic translation. The term "el hablador" coined by the Schneils, two U.S. linguists studying the Machiguenga language in the hopes of translating the Bible and ultimately converting the Machiguenga, is the result both of an object-referant translation and an interlingual translation.[77] The transcripted oral performance of an *hablador* also constitutes an example of interlingual translation in so far as it is rendered from Machiguenga into Spanish and apparently provides a literal translation of the myths, legends, history and daily events that shape the Machiguenga culture. *El hablador* also explores the efficacy of intralingual translation[77] in the attempt to communicate across cultures. In other words, the novel not only explores translation across sign systems but also across value systems. Finally, both of the two central protagonists, the writer and his university colleague, Saúl Zuratas, involve themselves in translation projects albeit of very different sorts. The writer attempts to write a novel that would culturally translate the Machiguenga *habladores*. However, his long time friend, Saúl Zuratas, who originally hopes to preserve Machiguenga traditions, crosses over into the Machiguenga culture, trains to become an *hablador*, but, as I will discuss shortly, begins

translating European stories into his performances. The underlying purpose of these multiple translations in the novel is to ask the following question: is it effectively possible for the writer to translate the Machiguenga *habladores*, or does such translation constitute an impossible project? In addition, the novel poses a second question, although indirectly: can Saúl translate into the Machiguenga culture without changing it, or does his cross over disturb the culture he so desperately wants to preserve?

El hablador answers the above questions in a circuitous manner. The writer never actually witnesses an *hablador* but becomes obsessed by the task to capture him in a novel after learning about the figure from the Schneils on an expedition into the Amazon. He turns for approval and advice to his friend Saúl who has long studied the indigenous cultures of Péru and developed a passionate sense of solidarity with "esos compatriotas"(15). But when the writer learns that Saúl has disappeared from Lima he gives up on his endeavors: "Inventadas por mí, las voces de los habladores desafinaban. Así que me resigné a escribir otras historias"(104). Years later during a second visit with the linguists, the writer learns that Mr. Schneil has had two opportunities to witness *el hablador* in action since the narrator's last visit. The news stuns the narrator. In one encounter, Mr. Schneil reports, *el hablador* was clearly not a Machiguenga, but an odd looking foreigner with red hair and a large birthmark covering half of his face. The narrator immediately recognizes this figure to be Saúl, for Saúl's large birthmark has marked him his entire life; while he is lovingly called "Mascarita" by those who are intimate with him, others refer to him as a monster and in public people are repelled by his looks. As soon as this important detail has been revealed, the position of the novel *vis-à-vis* the questions it poses begins to solidify; If all along Saúl was the *hablador*, then the apparently indigenous performative narrative, was at best the translation of a translation.[10]

But before taking a strong stand regarding this once removed translation, the final performative narrative further problematizes the translation projects initiated by Saúl and the writer. Toward the end of the performative narrative *el hablador*, now revealed as Saúl, tells a story about Gregor Tasurinchi, a Machiguenga who unexpectedly transformed into an insect one morning. This intralingual translation of The Metamorphosis could only be produced by a bilingual *hablador* who has read Western literature, an unlikely scenario within the hermetic

Machiguenga community. At this point the writer's project to "to provide an intimate portrayal of the Machigugenga" has come undone. An imitation of the Machiguenga hablador might have served the writer's purpose had it been veritable. Yet, the quality of the imitation becomes questionable precisely because Saúl drew on Western forms foreign to the Machiguenga culture to embellish his storytelling.

Directly following this climactic scene a second breakdown occurs, this time rendering vulnerable Saúl's translation project. Now recognized by the reader, Saúl--*el hablador*--attempts to tell the Machiguenga that he was born with the red marking on his face, fully aware that the Machiguenga will not believe him. According to the Machiguenga culture the mothers must drown their babies if they are born with any type of abnormality or disfigurement. In such a culture, Mascarita never would have lived his life. Nonetheless Mascarita tries to translate his survival with a birthmark through signs that are internal to the Machiguenga culture. He begins by stating that the God Tasurinchi created the discoloring. The Machiguenga listeners refuse to believe this and grow angry. For them to accept that Saúl was allowed to live with such a marking would mean that they would have to question a practice of killing babies they consider "impure." This is inconceivable, yet Saúl makes a second effort to convince the Machiguenga. This time he attributes the discoloring to the God Kientibakori. But the Machiguenga refuse to suspend their beliefs. They grow angry again and Saúl resolves to drop the subject and relates a story about his parrot instead. This telling end closes the performative narrative.

Saúl's failure to culturally translate his condition demonstrates the difficulty of communicating certain beliefs across cultures. In order for translation to occur, the receiving group must be open to ways of thinking that are unlike their own. Whereas in one case, translation may not challenge the values that hold a culture together despite the differences that it introduces, in another case translation may pose too great a threat to the fundamental structures of that culture.

By the end, the novel has answered its own questions leaving the reader with the following final points. The Machiguenga cannot be adequately translated by an occidentalized writer, only imitated. According to the writer's symbolism in the novel, such imitation constitutes nothing more than a masking or a parroting, which are poor forms of representation. Furthermore Saúl can never fully join the

Machiguenga because the conditions of his own identity conflict with the foundations on which the Machiguenga culture is built. In addition the novel suggests that translation is never pure; the motivations and desires of the translator and the internal structures of power and value connected with the language create intractable threads within the translation. In effect, the novel reaffirms the skepticism of *traduttori, traditttori*.

In summary Mario Vargas Llosa reveals this scepticism regarding translation in his very title. In Spanish *hablador* carries a pejorative meaning and generally refers to someone who talks too much, a charlatan. The novel flirts with this definition of the word but through its first half the novel elevates the Machiguenga *hablador* to a more respected status, that of a sacred speaker. By the end of the novel the pejorative meaning of *hablador* has been reinscribed when Saúl reveals in his final story that he donned the parrot he carries Mascarita, his former nickname. Parroting and masking express the most "intimate portrayal" of the Machiguenga by two occidentalized storytellers.

But for the reader who unknowingly traveled the length of the novel to discover an imitation, this view of cultural translation rings too negative. In traveling the passages that translated the Machiguenga culture, the reader catches the glimpse of a culture whose history, values, beliefs, customs and stories all provide a small window into a world and way of living and perceiving reality that challenges and sheds new light on her own cultural reality. Yet as Mario Vargas Llosa's travel warnings suggest, translation cannot recuperate all. As "an echo of the original,"[11] translation still opens a space for cultural interaction that might otherwise be lost. Or as Rogelio Reyes has stated: "Not to translate, which is tantamount to surrendering to the forces of a smug monologism, constitutes a betrayal whose consequences go far beyond the availability or lack...of a fine narrative."[12]

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[1] See for example Jean O'Bryant, *The Story of the Storyteller* (Atlanta: Portada Hispanica, 1995) or Keith Booker, *Vargas Llosa Among the Postmodernists*, (Tampa: Univ. Prss Florida, 1994). The

focus on storytelling in these texts underscores the "universal" rather than the local, consequently mirroring an occidental perspective that all but erases the local discourses of the text.

[2] As I discuss further in the closing paragraphs, "El hablador" is a troublesome Spanish translation for a Machiguenga storyteller/messenger.

[3] For the most part the categorization of *indigenista* literature and its variants, indígena and indianist literatures, has not diverged from the formulations set forth by José Mariátegui in the chapter "El proceso de la literatura" of his foundational text, *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana*, first published in 1928. According to Mariátegui, three types of literature attempt to translate indigenous cultures. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, attempts to present the indigenous people and their culture, were exotic at best, but mainly they were distortional and dehumanizing. Mariátegui refers to this literature as part of the criollo *costumbrista* tradition which evoked "el indio" in an attempt to ground and color a nascent national sentiment. This literature appropriates "el indio" as "un tipo, un tema, un motivo, un personaje"(304) otherwise stripped of his own race, cultures, traditions, and plight.

Indigenismo distinguishes itself from the "exotismo" of this earlier literature in several ways. To begin *indigenismo* is first and foremost a political movement; *indigenista* literature centers itself on issues of specific political import, citing "el indio" as representative of particular political positions. As a result*indigenista* literature recreates Peru as a social-national imaginary which includes and even depends upon the presence and predicament of the indigenous people, although not necessarily their culture or language. According to Mariátegui a true translation of the indigenous culture would exist only when the indigenous people wrote literature: "Una literatura indígena, si debe venir, vendrá a su tiempo. Cuando los propios indios estén en grado de producirla."(306) *Indígena* fiction has been associated by some critics with the works of José María Arguedas. Arguedas was raised among the quechua and he dedicated his literary life to the project of representing the indigenous world within the Spanish language and within a bourgeosie European form.

[4] While much of Vargas Llosa's novel is ficticious, the Machiguenga, or *Matsigenka*, are a veritable tribe. See for example P. Andres Ferrero, O.P., *Los Machiguengas*, (Lima:Editorial OPE, 1966).

[5] My concept of conflictive heterogeneity draws from Antonio Cornejo Polar's "Heterogeneidad y contradicción en la literatura andina". *Nuevo Texto Crítico* V.9-10 (1992).

[6] Efraín Kristal has emphasized the "situadedness" of this literature by underscoring that indigenismo is an urban movement, primarily shaped by the political imaginations and utopian desires of *limeños*. In other words the translative capacities of *indigenista* literature are in many ways limited by this urban vision of the indigenous cultures. See Efraín Kristal, *La visión urbana de los Andes*, (Lima: Instituto de Apoyo Agrario, 1991).

[7] In the novel, the writer dismisses the politics behind *indigenismo* as antiquated. On the other hand, Saúl Zuratas, another protagonist in the novel shares to many of the central concerns of this early twentieth century movement.

[8] For further discussion of the ideological issues at stake here see José Castro Urioste, "*El hablador*: la construcción del sujeto como alegoría de la modernidad," ed. José Antonio Mazzotti, *Asedios a la Heterogeneidad Cultural*, (Philadelphia: Asociación Internacional de Peruanistas, 1996), 395-409.

[9] See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 294; Octavio Paz, *Traducción: literatura y literalidad*, (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1971): 16.

[10] As the term suggests, object-referant translation describes the process of assigning a name (referant) to an object. Interlingual translation refers to the conversion of a sign in one language to that of a sign in another language. Interlingual and intralingual are both terms coined by Roman Jakobson in his "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in Reulan Brower, ed., *On Translation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 232-39.

[11] Ibid.

[12] At worst this crisis implies a fabrication of *el hablador*. For such a discussion see Alicia Andreu, "El discurso matsigenka en *El hablador* de Mario Vargas Llosa," *Hispanic Journal*, Fall 1996, 17:2.

[13] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), 76.

[14] Johnathan Tittler, "Translating Translation: Manuel Zapata Olivella's Chambacú," *Translating Latin America: Culture as Text*, (Binghamton: Center for Research in Translation, 1990), 300.

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