

Traducing the Author: Textual (In)fidelity in E.A. Goodland's Translation of *Macunaíma*¹

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In a short essay on translation, Margaret Atwood makes a series of perceptive yet troubling observations about the practical and political ramifications of striving to render one text from one language and culture into another. Atwood begins by noting that while the word translation can suggest “a transportation” to another realm, its French equivalent, “*traduction*” has, for English speakers, a more sinister connotation: to be *traduced* is to be defamed by someone who is telling lies about you” (1999b, p. 154). Moreover, she adds,

every translation is, in a sense, a traduction. It tells lies about the original text, lies it can't help telling, because it must omit the flavors and sounds and textures of the original in its attempt to reproduce the sense (or, of course, vice versa). So every translation is also a critical reading of a text, in which the translator must make his or her own choices about the meanings and aural values, and therefore the best rendering, of the original. What could be more frustrating? How to convey the subtle taste of a piece of language? What do you do with plays on words, jokes that have no counterparts, concealed rhymes, colloquialisms? Are footnotes cheating? (1999b, p.154).

Atwood concludes that, since a translation is always a reading and thus “approximate,” the most a translator can achieve is to “create a parallel text. It will always defame, it will always lie. But if it is a good translation, it will convey the text across the indefinite space that separates one world from another” (1999b, p. 154). Atwood's argument is problematic because, after stating that all translations “lie,” she proceeds to differentiate between “good” and, presumably, not good translations. Does this mean that some translations lie more, or better, than others? Also, why does it matter? Perhaps most important, are there incompetent translations and, if so, how can one tell? The question of linguistic competence is one that I will pursue in my essay as I analyze E.A. Goodland's translation of Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*. As befits a Modernist classic, Andrade's novel is extremely difficult. Yet Goodland can differ so much from the work he is ostensibly converting into English that, at times, his text is not “parallel” to Andrade's but utterly disconnected from it.

Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, translation remains an elusive subject. I tend to agree with William Deresiewicz that translation is “inherently populist” and that the “contempt for translation partly reflects a desire to keep literature away from the grubby hands of the great unwashed, who don't know how to appreciate it anyway.” As he states, the typical argument is that, if one were truly cultivated, one would read the work in the original language and not need to rely on a translation. Again like Deresiewicz, I also feel that the generally patronizing attitude toward translation is quite hypocritical. As he asks, “Has there ever been a writer who actually preferred not to be translated?” (2005, p. 36). The answer is of course yes. There have long been writers who have refused to grant

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permission to have their works translated into dominant languages, the very tongues they feel oppress them and their peoples (Robinson 1996, p. 173). Still, it is obvious that it is not always self-evident what is meant by translation. At the heart of the dilemma of translation, I believe, is the question of authorship. Translation is often considered “a profoundly destabilizing activity” because “it can make us question who a text’s owner is” and bring to the fore the whole matter of “intellectual property rights” and the links between textuality and power (Hemmungs Wirtén 2004, p. 56). Yet, even if one does not share Isaac D’Israeli’s conviction that a “Translator is a Painter who [. . .] must carefully reveal the *traits* of his model,” it is difficult to dismiss his assertion that authorship in translation is unique and that, when one begins to “compose,” instead of copying, one “ceases to be a *Translator*, and becomes an *Author*” (1791, pp. 227-28). The ambiguous authorial status of the translator is illustrated in a recent account of a meeting of international translators in Porto Alegre. According to the writer, unlike in Brazil, in Germany translators are “considerados criadores de obra original” (Michahelles 2007, p. 56). Yet she then proceeds to assert that, the reason translation “não pode ser perfeita” is that it is “a recriação de um texto em outra língua, com outros meios de expressão, outros códigos” (Michahelles 2007, p. 58). In fact, I would argue that, by definition, translation precludes the possibility of full authorship. Translation demands some form of transculturation, requiring that one artifact be transported from one culture to another (Braz 2007, p. 17). Consequently, the moment a translator becomes an author proper, in the sense of producing a domestic creation, no translation seems possible, since one is not transmitting another culture’s artifacts into one’s own.

Goodland’s failing in his version of *Macunaíma* is not that he strives to displace Andrade by creating an autonomous work but rather that he does not always capture the subtleties of the Brazilian text and so is unable to reproduce crucial parts of it. To be fair to Goodland, at least one critic contends that his translation has “descriptive passages of considerable eloquence” (Coleman 1985, n.p.) Also, as I mentioned, Andrade’s novel is extremely complex, not the least because of its extensive incorporation of Aboriginal stories and words. In fact, the Brazilianist David Haberly deems it an “utterly untranslatable book” (1983, p. 146). *Macunaíma*, which is generally considered one of the “greatest works” in Brazilian literature and its “modernist book par excellence” (Haberly 1983, p. 191; Martins 1965, p. 191), is in many ways already a translation. Part of a tradition of self-conscious indigenization in Brazilian literature, it relies extensively on found texts, notably ethnological ones, such as Theodor Koch-Grünberg’s celebrated collection of Amazonian tales *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco*. Soon after completing his text, Andrade actually wrote to the poet and critic Manuel Bandeira that his most difficult task “foi traduzir pro português as palavras brasileiras do livro” (Andrade and Bandeira 2000, p. 473). Andrade’s reasoning is somewhat disingenuous, since his own letters to his writer friends, including those to Bandeira, are usually composed in orthodox Portuguese, which by his logic would make them un-Brazilian. That being said, there is no question that much of the difficulty in understanding *Macunaíma* arises from its wide appropriation of Brazilian, or more correctly, Amazonian Indigenous culture. Andrade labelled his text a “*rapsódia*” presumably because it is “a light diversion” as well as an attempt to transform “contemporary and historical events into authentic literary expressions of the popular mind” (Haberly 1983, p. 146). For the sake of simplicity, I will follow the example of most other critics and call it a novel. Whichever way one classifies it, though, *Macunaíma* has been described as “the first and most salient case of [Aboriginal] intertextuality” in the Americas (Sá 2004, p. 4), something that is particularly evident in the figure of its protagonist, the Amazonian trickster or shape shifter Macunaíma. Andrade’s text basically relates a journey by Macunaíma from the heart of the Amazon rain forest to São Paulo and back to the Amazon, before he ascends to the heavens to become the Big Dipper. However, the text is extremely subversive discursively, often calling into question its own status. This is never more so than in the Epilogue, when the narrator reveals that the whole narrative is based on information provided to him by a parrot (1928, pp. 134-35).

While many of Goodland's difficulties in conveying Andrade's text have to do with his failure to grasp its Aboriginal origins, this is not the case with all of them. For instance, the first major difference between the two works involves the title. Andrade names his novel, *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter*, which translates as *Macunaíma, the Hero without Any Character*.² Goodland, in contrast, simply labels his translation, *Macunaíma*. Yet by dropping the subtitle, he loses a pivotal clue to the personality of the protagonist. After all, Macunaíma is an Aboriginal trickster, someone who can be simultaneously a "culture hero" and a "selfish buffoon" (Carroll 1984, p. 106). More specifically, he not only has the power to transform himself at will into almost anything he desires, whether human or nonhuman, but lacks any fixed character, or any character at all. Andrade himself claimed in another letter to Bandeira that his protagonist is defined by his self-centredness or egotism. In the author's words, "Macunaíma vive por si, porém possui um caráter que é justamente o de não ter caráter" (Andrade and Bandeira 2000, p. 363). In the novel proper, Andrade has his narrator tell us that Macunaíma is "muito safado e sem caráter" (1928, p. 98), which one might translate as "very naughty and without character." Yet Goodland describes him as "a shameless knave, entirely without common decency" (1984 p. 119), not only using rather anachronistic language but again effacing the allusion to the protagonist's lack of a moral centre. In any case, considering that Macunaíma has long been interpreted as a symbol of the Brazilian in particular and the Latin American in general, the centrality of the subtitle seems unquestionable.

The matter of Macunaíma's character, or absence thereof, is also illustrated in a phrase that the protagonist utters throughout the text, and which Goodland once more fails to convey. When asked to do anything, Macunaíma usually responds: "Ai! que preguiça! . . ." (Andrade 1928, p. 9 ff.)—a remark that translates literally as: "Ah, what laziness," but which could perhaps be more idiomatically reproduced as: "Ah, I'm pooped!" or "I feel so lazy." Goodland, though, renders it as: "Aw! What a fucking life!" (Goodland 1984, p. 3 ff.). The problem with Goodland's choice is not so much that it is not a literal translation, or that it is unnecessarily vulgar, but that it does not capture the stereotypes about Brazilian or tropical "listlessness, laziness, and sloth" so clearly evoked by Andrade (Ribeiro 1999-2000, p. 75). For one of the reasons Macunaíma lacks character, and thus is such a problematic national or regional hero, is that he is incorrigibly lazy. Indeed, not only does Andrade's "hero" not apply himself but he does not approve of anyone else who does. As he shouts after he returns to the Amazon, "Diabo leve quem trabalha!" (1928, 123), which Goodland for once translates correctly as: "The devil take people who work" (1984, p. 151).

Another instance in which Goodland fails conspicuously to reproduce Andrade's text is with his version of Macunaíma's most popular slogan. Throughout the text, Macunaíma makes the prophet-like declaration:

POUCA SAÚDE E MUITA SAÚVA, OS MALES DO BRASIL SÃO!
(1928, p. 56 ff.)

This is an expression whose closest equivalent in English is probably: "POOR HEALTH AND TOO MANY ANTS ARE THE ILLS OF BRAZIL." However, in addition to (frequently) replacing the capital letters with lower case ones, Goodland incomprehensively translates it as:

With fewer ants and better health
Brazil will lead the world in wealth! (1984, p. 64 ff.)

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Portuguese are mine.

The significance of the saying is evident when, in the “Notas” he wrote in 1930 to Margaret Richardson Hollingsworth, for an English translation that did not materialize, Andrade stresses that the “frase é muito importante na significação satírica do livro e está criada ritmicamente à maneira dum provérbio” (1930, p. 487). But Goodland completely loses Andrade’s satire when he transforms a fatalistic prognosis of Brazil’s nature into a *ufanistically* cheerful forecast of its future, changing the text in fundamental ways. The consequences of Goodland’s reading become almost comical when Andrade tinkers slightly with his slogan and writes: “Pouca saúde et muitos pintores os males do Brasil são” (1928, 90), or “Poor health and too many painters are the ills of Brazil,” but which Goodland reproduces as: “With fewer painters and better health, Brazil would lead the world in wealth” (1984, 109). His English translator notwithstanding, what Andrade seems to be suggesting is that, rather than being the country’s salvation, Brazil’s artists may be one of the causes of its underdevelopment.

Goodland, in fact, appears to be extremely uncomfortable with the political implications of Macunaíma’s lack of character, particularly when the trickster is interpreted allegorically as a symbol of Brazil. Andrade himself makes conflicting statements about the links between his protagonist and his nationality. At one point, he states that the reason the infant Macunaíma is more fully developed than the adult one is that “a criança está caracterizada *justamente porque inda não é homem brasileiro*. Fiz questão de mostrar e acentuar que Macunaíma como brasileiro que *é não tem caráter*” (Andrade and Bandeira 2000, p. 359). Yet, at another time, he asserts that “Macunaíma não é símbolo do brasileiro,” but “nele se revêem algumas características do brasileiro” (Andrade and Bandeira 2000, pp. 363-64). Then, while discussing the proposed Hollingsworth translation, he confides that it is possible that “*Macunaíma* ganhe em inglês por muito secreteamente o que me parece é que a sátira além de dirigível ao brasileiro em geral” is “também uma sátira mais universal ao homem contemporâneo, principalmente sob o ponto-de-vista desta sem-vontade itinerante, destas noções morais criadas no momento de as realizar, que sinto e vejo tanto no homem de agora” (Andrade and Bandeira 2000, p. 473). Anyhow, whether one perceives Macunaíma as a symbol of Brazil or of modern man, there is no escaping his lack of character. Yet it is precisely this ethical void that Goodland systematically resists. Thus, early in the text, Andrade has his protagonist invoke a dream god:

Acutipuru,
Empresta vosso sono
Pra Macunaíma
Que é muito manhoso! . . . (1928, p. 24)

Goodland, though, renders the quatrain rather differently:

O Acutipuru!
Lend the priceless boon of sleep
To Macunaíma,
For his heart is wounded deep! (1984, 23)

That is, once again, he deemphasizes the protagonist’s lack of integrity, turning a suggestion of his crafty nature into a capacity to love another individual and, more correctly, to be wounded by that love.

There are many other examples where Goodland’s text differs radically from Andrade’s, some of the more compelling ones usually occurring when he inserts additional information into the narrative in an attempt to make it more culturally accessible to his readers. For instance, he renders Andrade’s “Exu diabo” (1928, p. 45) as “Exu, the powerful devil from Africa” (1984, p. 50) and “terra dos ingleses” (1928, p. 76) as “British Guiana” (1984, p. 90). Likewise, when Andrade describes “o bicho Pondê um jucuruto do Solimões” (1928, p. 110), he writes that “the creature known as Pondê, the great horned

owl of the Solimões, as the Amazon River is known in its upper reaches” (1984, p. 135). However, not all of Goodland’s textual interpolations are as disinterested as these. Thus Andrade states that this “mundo tem três barras que são a perdição dos homens: barra de rio, barra de ouro, e barra de saia” (128, p. 86), which Goodland reproduces as: “In this world there are three bars that are the ruination of mankind: the sand bar in a river—where the washerwomen are endlessly quarreling; the bar of gold—over which both friends and thieves fall out; and the bar of a skirt that won’t come off” (1984, p. 103). Needless to say, when it comes to describing the reasons the three bars supposedly undermine men, Goodland is not translating Andrade but producing his own text. Perhaps even more blatant is his commentary on a Portuguese classical writer, whom he obviously has never heard of but less read. In Goodland’s translation, after Macunaíma arrives in the alien but alluring metropolis of São Paulo, he decides to kill some time in a park by reading “a novel by Eça de Queirós, a well-thought-of woman writer of romances” (1984, p. 106). But this is not quite what the source text tells us. In fact, all Andrade writes is that, before Macunaíma goes to the park, he “agarrou num romance de Eça de Queirós” (1928, 88). There is a good reason why Andrade does not say anything about Queirós being a “woman writer of romances,” famous or otherwise, since the nineteenth-century novelist was not a great specimen of womanhood, as one can discern from his full name: José Maria Eça de Queirós.

In conclusion, E.A. Goodland’s *Macunaíma* raises a series of issues not only about the question of linguistic competence in translation, and the very nature of translation, but also about the idea of world literature. World literature has been described as comprising “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin” (Damrosch 2003, 4). For the vast majority of the world’s writers, who work in non-imperial languages, such a step is possible only through translation. This reality may explain why the desire for translation seems to be almost universal among writers. Yet, while there is a general consensus that translation is essential for the dissemination of literature, it still tends to be seen as a necessary evil. As William Deresiewicz asserts, “One is tempted to misquote [Oscar] Wilde: the only thing worse than being translated is not being translated” (2005, p. 36). The question that invariably seems to bedevil any translation is, how much of the source text is really there? For example, if a translation, like Goodland’s, differs noticeably from the work on which it is supposed to be modelled, what is its purpose? More important, if it fails to transport an artifact across cultures, does it really constitute a translation? Similarly, does the original text enter world literature or is it simply displaced by a new creation concocted in the imperial centre? The question of the relationship between a translation and its purported model is particularly germane in the case of *Macunaíma*. In her novel *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, the British-Guyanese writer Pauline Melville has Macunaíma take to task his “biographer, the noted Brazilian Senhor Mario [sic] Andrade,” accusing him of getting his story “wrong” (1997, p. 1). Melville’s response has been echoed by the critic April Shemak, who claims that texts like Andrade’s are “(mis)translations of indigeneity” (2005, 354). Yet what both Melville and Shemak fail to acknowledge is that significant portions or what they consider to be Andrade’s work are really Goodland’s.

I hope it is self-evident that I do not share the common view that “translators [. . .] are in the business of turning gold into lead” (Mason 2005, p. 26). Still, the fact remains that while Andrade’s *Macunaíma* is a classic in Brazil, Goodland’s translation has had almost no impact in the English-speaking world. Thus one cannot help but ponder if Andrade has succeeded in Brazil for cultural and political reasons, notably self-indigenization, or because of his style? In contrast, has Goodland failed because he is dealing with material from another culture or because he is unable to reproduce Andrade’s work, as is most conspicuously evident in his departures from the original? I suppose, in a way, I am conceding that linguistic competence may not be enough to ensure the integrity of a translation. I of course do not believe in translation through “telepathy of the heart,” to quote the expression used by Milan Kundera to describe those works produced by translators who do not know the language in which the source text is written (qtd. in Mason

26). Still, the translator's writing ability seems essential to the success of a translation. As Margaret Atwood has noted about the phenomenal success of L.M. Montgomery's children classic *Anne of Green Gables* in Japan, one of the main reasons the beloved Canadian text has been so warmly embraced by the Japanese is that it was translated by a "well-known writer," who produced "a very good translation" (1999a, p. 167). Needless to say, that has not been the fate in English of Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma, the Hero without Any Character*.

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