THE BURDEN OF IDENTITY: TRANS-LINGUAL AUTHORS NGUGI WA THIONG'O, JUAN RODOLFO WILCOCK AND JOSEPH CONRAD

O ÔNUS DA IDENTIDADE: . AUTORES TRANSLINGUAIS NGUGI WA THIONG'O, JUAN RODOLFO WILCOCK E JOSEPH CONRAD

Daniela Dorfman[1]

ABSTRACT
At a time when globalization questions the legitimacy of organizing literary traditions based on national categories, the decision by some authors to write in a second language gains importance as an expression of uneasy subjectivities. By virtue of their translingualism they evade the imposition of a national identity built on a linguistic basis.This paper focuses on the cases of Ngugi wa Thiong'o [1938] – Kenyan writer who forsakes English and turns to his native Gîkûyû–, Juan Rodolfo Wilcock [1919-1978] –an Argentine writer who abandons Spanish and goes to Italy to write in Italian– and Joseph Conrad [1857-1924]– a Polish writer who employs English to write about Africa. It analyzes the transactions these shifts entail and the presence of traces of an underlying language so as to view these author's works as "contact zones" where different cultures overlap and coexist.

KEY WORDS: Globalization. Nacionality. Tradition. Translingualism. Identity.

RESUMO
Num momento em que a globalização questiona a legitimidade de organizar tradições literárias a partir de categorias nacionais, a decisão de alguns autores de escrever em uma segunda língua ganha importância como expressão de subjetividades inquietantes. Em virtude de seu translingualismo, eles fogem da imposição de uma identidade nacional construída em uma base linguística. Este artigo concentra-se nos casos de Ngugi wa Thiong'o [1938] - escritor queniano que abandona o inglês e se volta para o seu idioma nativo Gijkyû–, Juan Rodolfo Wilcock [1919-1978] - escritor argentino que abandona o espanhol e vai para a Itália para escrever em italiano - e Joseph Conrad [1857-1924] - escritor polonês que emprega o inglês para escrever sobre a África. Analisa as transações que essas mudanças acarretam e a presença de traços de uma linguagem subjacente, de modo a ver as obras desse autor como "zonas de contato" onde diferentes culturas se sobrepõem e coexistem.

Palavras-chave: Globalização. Nacionalidade. Tradição. Translingualismo. Identidade.

Introduction

In November of 2004, in Rosario, Argentina, there were two conferences. The "International Conference on the Language," sponsored by the Royal Spanish Academy and attended by Spain's royal family and by well-known writers; and the "Conference on

[1] Latin American Literatures PhD (Boston University), Universidad de San Martin (UNSAM), dorfman1@bu.edu

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Languages," a counter-conference organized by indigenous associations as a reminder that the Americas are in fact multilingual. At the first, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes compared the "practicality" of English with the "profundity" of German, the "elegance" of French, Italian's "grace", Russian's "anguish". For Spanish he reserved the privilege of being "the most constant, the most vocal language."

This statement, in addition to lacking in any solid linguistic foundation, obliterates the problem of translingual writers, whom Steven Kellman defines as those "whose linguistic medium is a matter of option" (KELLMAN, 1996, 162). If we accept Fuentes' suggestion, the decision to start writing in another language —a decision made by some of the most intriguing authors of the past two centuries— could be explained by the suitability of the linguistic instrument with respect to the aesthetic object. This notion is not only reductionist, but it also domesticates what might otherwise be read as a gesture of self-determination. Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, on the other hand, rejects the idea that different languages might be more or less expressive and raises a more complex question: if by virtue of their arbitrariness all languages are equally inexpressive in their own way, what might motivate a writer to write in a language other than his or her native tongue?

In different periods, countries, and circumstances, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-), Argentine writer Juan Rodolfo Wilcock (1919-1978), and Polish writer Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) all decided to write in a language other than their native one. What led them to make that decision? Does it matter which languages they left behind, and which languages they took up? What impact did these decisions have on their aesthetics, on their oeuvres, and on their place in their respective national canons?

Language and Colony

In 1977, Ngũgĩ was imprisoned in his native Kenya for putting on a play in Gîkûyû, his African language, rather than in English. More motivated than dissuaded by the punishment, Ngũgĩ decided to stop using English and write his literary works exclusively in Gîkûyû, writing the first novel in the history of that language while in prison and on toilet paper. In 1982, he went into exile in England and later in the United States, announcing four years later that he would no longer write anything at all in English. Nonetheless, he noted that he hoped that "using the time-honored tradition of

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translation he could continue his conversation with the world" (xiv). This remark points to the acute difficulties faced by African writers while also problematizing the effectiveness of Ngũgĩ's decision: why change languages if you know that you will need to be translated?

In a debate between writers in Australia, Ngũgĩ maintained that it was important to re-inscribe the mind in a non-colonial language in order to keep up non-colonized communications with other Africans. A South African writer then answered him in Zulu, to which Ngũgĩ was unable to respond. Ngũgĩ believes that literature in English is not African literature, and he calls into question the capacity of a language to be the bearer of an experience that was not originally had in that language. He suggests that language creates mental images that serve as the foundations for all of our conceptions, and that it can thus be wielded in precisely that formative capacity as a kind of anti-colonial weapon. Thus African writers debate the dilemma between the vision of their own world and the ability to communicate it to others.

By changing languages, African writers are fighting for their identity, returning to their own mother tongue, to their roots, and resisting the external imposition of an identity that they do not perceive as their own. That is their essentially political act. The cases of J. R. Wilcock and Joseph Conrad are different because the language they depart from is, in fact, their mother tongue. J. R. Wilcock and Conrad opt to write in a second, third, or even fourth language, challenging the presumed basis of national literatures and cultures in language and territory.

Language and Community

Juan Rodolfo Wilcock (1919-1978), son of an English father and an Argentine mother of Italian descent, wrote and published in Spanish while he lived in Argentina. Then he moved to London and then again to Italy. In 1957, he wrote to his friend Antonio Requeni: "Me voy a Italia a escribir en italiano. El español no da para más" [I'm going to Italy to write in Italian. Spanish is used up] (Aguirre, 2012). This notion of being "used up" is expanded upon in his "Introduzione a la poesie Spagnole," where Wilcock refers to the wearing down of inherited language and to a few poets who attempted to write "in the most far-fetched dialects" (WILCOCK, 1980, 168) as a radical way to break free of the waste matter of language.

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Samuel Beckett—the Nobel-Prize winning Irish writer who also wrote in French and whom J. R. Wilcock translated into Spanish—explained his decision to write in another language saying that "in French it's easier to write without style" (KELLMAN, 1996, 163). This is why J. R. Wilcock claims that Beckett "is almost writing in Latin; his poem 'Sans,' from 1970, goes farther back in time, seeming Sumerian, seeming more like a pictogram" (BIANCIOTI, 1998, n.p). J. R. Wilcock's aesthetic quest led him to undertake a similar process, abandoning the grandiloquence of his writing in Spanish and writing, instead, an unsettlingly bare prose, in Italian, causing critics to speak of a sharp divide between the J. R. Wilcock who wrote poetry in Argentina and the one who wrote primarily prose and drama in Italy.

In Italian, Wilcock wrote *The Stereoscope of Solitary Beings* and *The Temple of Iconoclasts*, anthologies of lives of imaginary people that subvert the most basic principles that organize reality: a scientist who abolishes gravity; the inventor of underwater trains; a writer that proposes to return the world to the year 1580, eliminating everything that came after (elections, weekends, Belgium) and restoring everything that had been lost (scholasticism, banditry, typhus). Absurdity, irony, black humor, and cruelty are just some of the elements present in the Italian writings of Juan Rodolfo Wilcock.

Wilcock's reference to the stereoscope in his title is noteworthy: stereoscopes, like translingual writers, allow for a single object to be seen from two different perspectives. While the stereoscope blends two points of view into one unified image, writers who change languages never really leave the previous language, always speaking both, one against the other. This invests their literature with a sense of multiplicity, a doubleness, a distinctive profundity. Wilcock enacts this multiplicity writing sometimes using his real name and sometimes under a pseudonym, even engaging in public debates with himself, as well as in his job inventing writers on demand for publishers.

Because of that sensation of a hidden truth in their works, that "something more" that can just barely be glimpsed, these writers have often been thought of in terms of Sigmund Freud's notion of the *unheimlich:* that which ought to remain concealed but which instead appears, uniting the strange and the familiar in an oscillation. In Wilcock's novel *The Engineer,* the eponymous youth is hired to work on the reconstruction of the Transandine Railway in the Argentine province of Mendoza, which leads him to live in the middle of the Andes for around a year. In the novel, we read the letters the

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protagonist sends to his grandmother. The letters tell of a life that is extremely tranquil and uneventful, whose day-to-day happenings do also include, every so often, the mysterious disappearance of some child or other. In a cold and distant language, the text almost imperceptibly suggests, with an ambivalence that gives rise to the *unheimlich,* that the engineer has been eating the children. That J. R. Wilcock himself was in fact an engineer who lived in the Andes while working on the reconstruction of the Railway also provides a certain –disturbing– level of multiplicity of reference.

This sort of narrator, who elusively speaks of experiences in inhospitable universes and who has problems with communication, is typical of translingual writers and evidences their shared concern with the possibility of transmitting new experiences.

Language and Exile

As in the case of Beckett and Wilcock, Joseph Conrad's expressive potential also derives from the use he makes of silence, from what he does *not* say. Conrad (1857-1924) wrote in his fourth language: in addition to the Polish into which he was born, he had learned Russian and French prior to the English in which he later wrote. The reasons for his choice of English for his writing have often been speculated on, political and even psychological factors being sometimes mentioned, and he himself also addressed this issue, discussing—curiously enough—the choice he made between English and French, never mentioning the idea of writing in Polish or in Russian.

Conrad's "distinctively non-native" English and the presence in it of traces of Polish contribute to his enigmatic "foreign flavor" (Morzinsky-Pauly, 2009) and produce in his writing an "aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness" (Said, 2002). Conrad himself told a Polish newspaper in 1914: "English critics –for indeed I am an English writer— (…) always add that there is something incomprehensibly impalpable, ungraspable in me. You alone (i.e. the Poles) can grasp this ungraspable element, comprehend the incomprehensible. This is my Polishness" (Gillon, 1966, 431).

That ungraspable element is thematized in Conrad's work, where inability to communicate is frequently endless and fatal. All of the intensity and menace found in the story "Amy Foster" resides in the inability to communicate and the devastating consequences of this. In this story, Yanko—a Central European whose ship is wrecked en

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route to America, just off the coast of England—lives misunderstood and feared by the entire community in which he winds up, except for Amy Foster, whom he marries and with whom he has a child. Yanko eventually does learn English, but one day, as he is carefully holding his son in his arms, he begins to make him fall asleep with a lullaby from his native land; Amy snatches the child away from him in fright. Shortly thereafter, Yanko comes down with lung trouble and, in his high fever, he begins to make strange sounds and speak strange words. As his fever continues to go up, he asks his wife for a glass of water in what he believes is English. Amy does not, however, go to fetch it. His fever rises further, and he can't understand Amy's immobility. He demands his water, voice raised. Delirious from fever and from rage, he gets up and says something, a word she doesn't understand but that frightens her so much that she runs away with the child, abandoning her husband. Yanko spends the night on the floor, parched and suffering. At dawn, wondering why all of this has befallen him, he cries out and dies.

For Edward Said, Conrad's own exile causes him to exaggerate the differences between Yanko and Amy, and to write the most uncompromising representation of exile ever written, in the form of that "solitary death illuminated, so to speak, by unresponsive, uncommunicating, eyes" (Said, 2002, 180). Conrad took the neurotic fear of the exiled person of not being understood and made of it an aesthetic principle: no one is able to communicate with or understand each other in Conrad's world.

In *Heart of Darkness* a narrator recovers Marlow's account of his trip to Africa. Marlow is unable to fully communicate his experience, unable to describe what he has seen, and he beats around the bush, zigzags, and ultimately tells an inconclusive story that provides only a very diffuse sense of what actually happened. This type of narrative vacillation, of irresolution, gives his story "the provisionality that came from standing at the very juncture of this world with another" (Said, 1994, 24) the best example of this being the fact that Conrad's approach to English imperialism in Africa is still the subject of heated debate, even now. Conrad, a Pole living in England and writing on Africa, gets closer and then rapidly retreats from the English vision of the world. He is simultaneously inside and outside, whence the indeterminability of his position.

Like Wilcock, Conrad also uses lonely narrators, alienated from society and for whom communication is difficult. These narrators thematize the translingual writers' concern with language, identity, and social relationships.

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Conclusion

In his short story "Averroës' Search," Borges writes of the confusion felt by Averroës, a student of Aristotle and of Islamic philosophy, who comes across the words "tragedy" and "comedy" while working on the *Poetics.* Having no idea what these words mean, he tries out various possible interpretations until he is distracted by a noise from outside. When he goes up to the window, he sees a group of children play-acting. Yet Averroës, who sees this scene from within the cultural framework of Islam, which lacks any conception of theatrical representation, is unable to identify the children's game as theater. He goes back to work and defines the concepts incorrectly: Aristotle "gives the name 'tragedy' to panegyrics and the name 'comedy' to satires and anathemas. There are many admirable tragedies and comedies in the Qur'an" (Borges, 1998, 116). Averroës is unable to understand the children's game, which actually provides the solution to this problem, and, in a movement that replicates in his action his intellectual modus operandi, he shuts his windows and returns to the books he knows.

This story reflects on the interwoven quality of language and culture, on our cultural parameters as a limitation that restricts our access to other kinds of knowledge, while also asking a question about the necessity, the possibility, and lastly, the desirability of a definitive translation, one that would fully overcome the distances between languages and cultures. In a typically Borgesian twist, the narrator notes toward the end of the story that Averroës, trying to translate "tragedy" from within a cultural framework that does not include any notion of "theater," is no more absurd than he is, trying to imagine Averroës on the basis of just a few readings about Islam. The impossibility of exhausting difference, then, not only results in the continued necessity of translating, yet again, Aristotle's *Poetics,* but also inspires reflection on culture.

German philosopher Walter Benjamin maintains that the task of the translator is to reveal the untranslatability, the impossibility of carrying over. The same could be said of translingual writers, who do not try to carry over, but rather remain oscillating between languages, cultures, and literatures, jealously protective of their right not to belong. In this way, they resemble the "stranger" that Georg Simmel defines as he who is within a group without having originated in it, and who, by virtue of coming from elsewhere, always has the potentiality of leaving. Even if he does not leave, the stranger positions

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himself in a liminal space that makes it possible to regard everything with distance. Like the stranger, translingual writers are simultaneously inside and out, near and far, in a relationship of oscillation with this (linguistic, cultural, and literary) group they don't ever fully integrate into but that they also don't ever fully leave, either.

If, as George Steiner suggests, there is no exile that is more radical than linguistic exile, then those writers who do not feel at home in the language in which they work write like guests, always displaced. This is, to my mind, what makes them interesting, because their linguistic displacement creates an aesthetic that is based on the challenge to the limits of language.

In "In Praise of the Accent," Argentine literary critic, essayist, and writer Alan Pauls describes the guilty pleasure he took as a child in listening to the Italian Nicola di Bari or the Brazilian Roberto Carlos sing in Spanish. Their pop songs, written for export, written to be universal, became—by virtue of their foreign accent— "small masterworks of particularity, unique musical objects" (Pauls, 2006, 174). Pauls recalls feeling a kind of fascination in knowing that something that was not completely right, that infringed upon the standards of correctness, might be the source of a certain pleasure: "What I was hearing, I thought, was not right. It's not Italian, it's not Argentine: it is a language that has been misprinted, a language carved out inside by some other language" (Pauls, 2006, 176) Pauls understands in hindsight this pleasure in the accent, in a "Spanish that goes against nature", as an intuitive valorization of "identities that are distant, oblique, indirect." (Pauls, 2006, 178). The foreign accent rendered his own language strange, questioning the absoluteness, the incontestability, of full identities.

By means of the "accent" of their writing and by resisting simple national classification, instead requiring terms such as "Italian-Argentine writer," "multilingual Russian writer," "Anglophone African writers," etc., translingual writers refuse to be subject to the despotism of traditional categories of identity. This is the efficacy of the accent, of writers who write in a language haunted by another language: they shed the demands of identity and display a unique nuance. It is in this way that "linguistic exiles" cling to their difference and fight identity, maintaining their right not to belong. This is what Fuentes' statement characterizing various languages would never allow us to see, were we to accept it. The writing of translingual authors manifests an oblique identity that does not submit to complete identities because, in the words of Theodor W. Adorno,

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"the True and the Better in every people is much more likely that which does not adapt itself to the collective subject but, wherever possible, even resists it" (Adorno, 2011, 121)

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