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Response by Palmer to “Betraying Empire: Translation and the Ideology of Conquest”

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For anyone familiar with the history of linguistic colonization in Ireland, Vicente Rafael's assertion that "translation [is] a kind of conquest" seems uncontroversial. For Irish speakers, *translatio imperii*, English-style, entailed the wholesale translation of a hibernophone country into an anglophone one. A process set in motion by Tudor, Jacobean and Cromwellian plantations and culminating in the Great Famine (1845–52) left the Irish, in the words of the nineteenth-century nationalist and translator, Thomas Davis, "adrift among the accidents of translation" (quoted in Lloyd 1982, 145). The real interest of Rafael's move, therefore, lies in its implicit insistence that we use the past to interrogate and inform (perhaps even reform) the present; to go beyond retelling the old story and succumbing, as Rancière fears that cultural historians increasingly do, to "the infinite work of grieving" (2007, 17). With that in mind, we need to think not just about colonial translation, but about its afterlife and how its "radically reductive attitude towards language" (Rafael) continues to shape the present.

Evangelization, in one way or another, is central to the stories of cultural encounter which Rafael, Trivedi and Shamma tell. Rafael shows that, for the Spanish, Catholicism was as much the "compañera" of conquest as Castilian was.¹ Trivedi traces Buddhism's more irenic journey from Sanskrit to Chinese. Shamma characterizes the exchange between the Abbasid Caliphate as a cosmopolitan negotiation between Arabic and the Persian and Hellenic world. What is distinctive about first-wave English colonization, in Ireland and North America, is that English was so intrinsic to English Protestant identity that the colonists became evangelists for *English* as much as for God. To Anglicanize the natives meant to anglicize them. In Ireland, the colonial administration showed no urgency in translating the Bible or Book of Common Prayer; nor was any great effort made to cultivate an Irish-speaking clergy (Palmer 2001; Cronin 1996). But if the anglicizing imperative ceded the religious ground to Catholicism, it won the battle for the vernacular. Legislation such as the "Act for the English Order, Habite, and Language" (1537) and treaties mandating Irish lords to "bringe uppe their childern [in] thuse of thEnglishe tonge" set the agenda (*Statutes*, 121; *CCM* 1, 184); war, dispossession and famine turned those aspirations into reality.

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The Tudors made a “quite deliberate decision to minimise the distinctiveness of Gaelic culture as an entity in itself” (Brady 2002, 245): a strategic inattention to Irish was the necessary corollary of the evangelizing and legislative privileging of English. The busy work of translating and interpreting on which so many encounters between native and newcomer depended is largely hidden in the voluminous colonial record (Palmer 2004). Irish leaves its trace only occasionally, as little more than ruffled syntax: when a colonial official ponderously specifies that “which words so by me uttered and delivered at my request to some of them hath undoubtedly bred no small terror in their minds”, we can infer the presence of an interpreter in the space between (English) utterance and (Irish) delivery (quoted in Palmer 2001, 190).

The distinctiveness of English colonial translation is captured by a macabre addendum to John Derricke’s *Image of Irelande*, a jingoistic celebration of Sir Henry Sidney’s campaigns against “Sathanys ympes” in Ireland ([1581] 1883, 44). Just as Derricke was completing his text, he received the news for which he had “so long thirsted”: the severed head of Ruairí Óg Ó Mórdha, the leader of anti-colonial resistance in the Midlands, had been dispatched to Lord Deputy Sidney. Ó Mórdha had resisted the plantation of Laois and Uí Failghe (renamed – not translated – “Kings and Queens counties”); Sidney had stopped at nothing, including massacre, to advance the conquest. Now, he paid 1000 marks in “head-money” from his own pocket and had Ó Mórdha’s staked head “set up upon the Castle of Dublin” (Brady 2002, 101). Derricke – a far better candidate for the title of “arse-licking poet” than Marx’s actual target, Edmund Spenser – dashed off a celebratory coda. He invites his reader to

suppose that you see a monstrous Deuill, a trunckelesse head ... mounted vpon a poule
(a proper sight, God wot, to beholde) vanting it self on the highest toppe of the Castell of
Dublin, vttering in plaine Irishe the thynges that ensewe. ([1581] 1883, 92)

Then, the head speaks:

All men that heare this, take warnyng by me,
Least that ye fall in like predicanment;
The arte of treason, see likewise ye flee,
Wisely forecastyng, whereto ye consent:
Against the Crowne royll doe nothyng attempt,
For if against it, ye, fayling at odde,
Doe feele as I felt, the strength of the rodde. (*Ibid.*, 97)

It is a revealing moment of colonial “translation” precisely because it is not a translation at all. Derricke ventriloquizes an enemy who had resisted to the death into necro-confession; “Rory Oge’s” words, advertised as “plaine Irishe”, come out as stuttering tetrameter, *in English*. A translation without a source doesn’t just erase the language which it invokes only to suppress; it allows the projection of new colonial meanings into the vacuum created by that erasure. Moreover, the fact that the ventriloquist’s puppet is a death’s head reminds us that “the exercise of power” (Rafael) on which colonial translation rests includes the power to kill.

Colonial translation didn’t just operate under the sign of violence; it was an essential accessory to violence. Translation was central to both intelligence gathering and to cultivating the “art of war”. Sir George Carew who helped bring the Elizabethan conquest to its brutal end – a man who preferred his severed heads “in a bag” rather than on a pole – was both a translator and a patron of translation. While campaigning in

Munster in the 1590s, he took time out from storming castles and burning crops to translate Ercilla y Zuñiga's *La Araucana*. An avid collector of military handbooks (he oversaw a translation of Mendoza's *Theorica y Practica de Gverra*), he ransacked Ercilla for lessons in Spanish counter-insurgency techniques. In so doing, he reduced Ercilla's complex meditation on the moral hazards of conquest to an army field manual (Palmer 2013).² At the same time, his team of Irish translators winnowed from prophecies, poems and genealogical tracts insider perspectives which Carew turned to tactical advantage.

Carew's contemporary in Munster, Edmund Spenser, also has something to tell us about the distortions of colonial translation. His avatar, Irenius, explains that he "caused divers [bardic poems] to be translated unto me". But when he uses the slippery formula, "one of their Bardes will say", to suggest that the scandalous paean to arson, rape and rapine that follows is a paraphrase, we know that we are once again in the realm of travesty rather than translation (Spenser 1997, 77).

At the end of his article, Rafael wonders whether "a different politics of translation", one that subverts translation's complicity with empire, is possible. In answering that question, it's worth remembering that interpreters – who constitute, in every conflict, translation's frontline – have always practised discreet acts of resistance. Irish interpreters became infamous for their readiness to spike their masters' messages. Sir Henry Wotton saw their machinations first-hand when attending negotiations between the Earl of Essex and O'Neill's confederacy in 1599; he told the poet John Donne that

[w]hatsoever we have done, or mean to do, we know what will become of it, when it comes amongst our worst enemies, which are interpreters. I would there were more O'Neales and Macguiers and O'Donnells and MacMahons, and fewer of them. (Smith 1907, 1:308)

But if interpreters worked on the interface, translators, too, were shaped by the conflict. One spin-off of conquest was the number of Irish exiles propelled into working between languages on the continent. They mounted resistance not just practically, by making Counter-Reformation propaganda and just-war theory available in Irish and Latin (Carroll 2001, 124–134), but also creatively, in ways that chime with von Flotow's examples. Nothing could be less sympathetic to the logocentrism which, for Rafael, defines colonial translation than Cervantes's pervasive ironizing of linguistic essentialism; it's easy to see, therefore, why Thomas Shelton, fleeing colonial absolutes in Ireland, was drawn to translate *Don Quixote* while in exile in Brussels. Richard Stanihurst, replacing the "invisibility" of colonial translation with all-too-evident obduracy, turned the medium itself into a form of resistance. We can see Venuti's concept of "resistancy" (1995) take on a political valence in the way Stanihurst systematically transforms imperial confidence into a lexical logjam. By its density and strangeness, the hexametrical friction of his *Aeneis* stalls the onward momentum of imperial epic (Palmer 2015). The difference between colonial and anti-colonial translation is exemplified by the contrast between Stanihurst's version of Jupiter trumpeting the *Pax Romana* (Virgil 1999, 294–296) and George Sandys'. First, Stanihurst:

Thee gates of warfare wyl then bee mannaclled hardly
 With steele bunch chayne knob, clingd, knurd, and narrolye lincked.
 Heere within al storming shal Mars bee setled on armoure
 With brasse knots hundred crumpled; with sweld furor haggish
 Lyke bandog grinning, with gnash tusk greedelye snaring. (Stanihurst [1582] 1933,
 1.301–05)

Now, Sandys:

The doores of horrid warre
 Huge links of brasse and iron bolts shall barre.
 Dire Fury, breathing blood, within shall sit
 On heapes of armes, his hands behind him knit. (Sandys 1632, 1:539)

The fluent onward roll of Sandys's couplets fits the colonial context of their production: whereas Stanihurst had fled imprisonment in London, Sandys proffered his translation as a calling card when seeking preferment to the Virginia Company (Ellison 2002, 101).

When it comes to the long aftermath of colonial translation, Irish writers' continuing engagement with an experimentation inseparable from translation (Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) or with translation itself (Beckett and Mahon's movement between French and English, for example) constitutes an ongoing resistance to the hegemony of Global English. Equally, contemporary English-language poets' obsession with translating poetry in Irish is, however gestural, as much a figuration of loss as an act of resistance.³

But what of the former colonial power? It could be argued that Derricke's fantasy – a fantasy that other languages don't really exist, that "plaine Irishe" really *is* plain English – continues to vex England's engagement with the world beyond English. As curriculum "reforms" encourage state-school pupils to drop foreign languages at 14, as the National Health Service replaces face-to-face translation with privatized "technology-enabled language solution providers",⁴ as university language departments approach meltdown, it's possible to see in the push to exit the European Union not just post-imperial disorientation but the isolationism which comes from living, even amidst Babel, as though in a monophone world.

Notes

1. Antonio de Nebrija (1492) famously declared that "Siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio" in the prologue to his *Gramática castellana* (Aldrete, [1606] 1972–75, 39).
2. In similar vein, he translated the Anglo-Norman "Song of Dermot and the Earl" the better to understand the origins of the conflict.
3. On an important debate around the problematic nature of such translations, see De Paor 1996, Jenkinson 1991 and Ní Dhomhnaill 1996.
4. <http://www.thebigword.com/>

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Response by Rafael to the responses to “Betraying Empire: Translation and the Ideology of Conquest”

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In the last section of my article, “Betraying Empire”, I raised the question of seeking alternatives to the long tradition of logocentric translation that has accompanied the expansion of the West. I stressed the importance of seeking sites where, like empire itself, translation fails to yield to the commands for meaning. Instead, it turns against the intentions of those who seek to control it for imperial purposes. The five responses take up this call and provide a series of extraordinarily insightful rejoinders

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