

Translating Memories Into Words.

The Speckled People and *Il cane che abbaia alle onde*

Elisa Armellino

Università di Torino (elisa.armellino@unito.it)

Keywords: Hamilton, translation, memoir, culture, languages

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Introduction

The purpose of the present essay is to study how the linguistic dimension of Hugo Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People* – both in the form of specific linguistic choices and as a symbolical space inside the narrative – is dealt with by its Italian translator, Isabella Zani (who for *Il cane che abbaia alle onde* received the Premio Berto in 2004) and what are the differences in terms of the overall perception of the narrative(s).

Translation is always a rendering, in another language, of a text which was thought and written in another linguistic and cultural background. As Peter Newmark says: «Translation is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in another language. Each exercise involves some kind of loss of meaning, due to a number of factors. It provokes a continuous tension, a dialectic, an argument based on the claims of each language»¹. However, the language in which the original text was written is also inscribed in a definite cultural context, language and culture being not distinct entities and linguistic choices being always influenced (if not shaped) by the culture in which they were made.

Thus, a gap always exists not only between the language of the source (T1) and of the target text (T2), but also between the culture in which T1 was written and the culture of T2 in which the translator operates. One of the main distinctions between the different translation strategies which can be adopted when facing the task of translation has been drawn by the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. He defines as «foreignizing» the translation which brings the reader nearer to the text by preserving its cultural difference and avoiding cultural homologation (this being the best method in his opinion) and as «domesticated» the translation which brings the text nearer to readers by conforming it to the culture of the target audience. However, even when a translator is perfectly aware of the need to respect the cultural dimension of the source text, s/he has to cope with the unavoidable differences between it and her/his own linguistic and cultural context.

The translating task is even harder when language is not only the writing tool with which a text is composed but is at the very core of the book itself, as one of its main themes and issues at stake, like in Hugo Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People* (2004)². In my opinion, the Italian translation, despite being of value, has the tendency to domesticate the source text by adopting translation strategies which make it nearer to the culture of the target audience even when this could be avoided.

The idea of speckledness is at the very core of Hugo Hamilton's memoir. The sense of being «speckled» or, as the narrator also says, of being «spotted» and «flecked» haunts his memories and is deeply linked to the fact of his having two languages and two cultures (his father is Irish and his mother German). There is also a third linguistic and cultural identity in his life – English – which is banned from his house because of his Irish nationalist father's hatred for the English. In *The Speckled People*, the author (who also wrote a sequel, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, published in 2006) tells about his upbringing in Dún Laoghaire, a suburb of Dublin, the city where he was born in 1953 and where he still lives. The story is told through the eyes of his childhood self and makes all the contradictions of the world he grew up in emerge through his voice. What the narrator constantly communicates is his sense of alienation and his sufferings at being discriminated against by others, who see him as a foreigner and call him a Nazi. Thus, his 'speckledness', like the 'speckledness' of his brothers and of his sister, is like a brand of infamy for him. To be different means to be the target of insults and to know nothing about one's place in the world. A deep sense of loss is also inherited from his parents – his mother, Irmgard Kaiser, arrived in Ireland on a pilgrimage she made to forget the brutality of the Nazi period and a shocking event in her life (she was raped by her employer, in Germany). His father, Jack Hamilton, repudiated his father for serving in the British Navy and became a fervent Irish nationalist, obsessed by the need to win the 'language war' against English. As he says: «[Y]our language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag» (*SP*, 3). By banning English from his home, he imposes on his children an unnatural clear-cut division between English, on one side, and Irish (and German) on the other. This also means that they are divided from the world outside, which the young narrator associates with English and with a dimension which is not 'home': «I look out of the window and see the light changing [...]. Out there is a different country, far away. There's a gardener clipping a hedge and I can hear the sound of his shears in English, because everything out there is spoken in English» (*SP*, 8).

Indeed, language in the book has a double nature. On the one hand, it is a burden, something forbidden and dangerous: for singing a song in English the narrator's brother, Franz, is violently beaten by their father; the boys in the street insult the Hamilton children by shouting Nazi salutes in German at them). On the other, language is perceived, through the lenses of child-

hood, as an extremely powerful element of the world, which exists through language and for which language is all. English will be, for Hugo Hamilton, the language of the rebellion to his father's rules and the language used when becoming a writer.

At the end of the memoir, the narrator manages to overcome his fears and states: «I'm not afraid anymore of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between» (*SP*, 295). It can be inferred that he succeeds in coping with the idea of being 'speckled' and that this is no more felt as a limit to his life.

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The Speckled People – Il cane che abbaiva alle onde

The following examples from T1 and T2 (that is, from the source text and the translation respectively) are chosen according to different aspects of translation which are relevant for the present essay.

The first is linked to the multilingual dimension of the work and to the way the translator decides to cope with it. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of Hugo Hamilton's memoir is that several languages coexist in the narrative. The story is told in English but there is a frequent code-switching to German and Irish (this means that there are several words and expressions which are given in these two languages, depending on the context and the memories which are being retrieved by the author)³.

In the English edition of the book, the words in German and Irish are never translated into English and are given in italics. The Italian translation is very faithful to the original in this respect, but explicatory notes are appended to the text to suggest the meaning of the German and Irish terms. Sometimes, mere literal translations are given. For example, for the expression in German used by the narrator's mother «Mein armer Schatz» (*SP*, 30), the note says: «In tedesco, *che impudenza*»⁴. However, there are also longer and more complex comments, as when the note explains the meaning of an historical allusion in T1 («To Hell or Connaught», *SP*, 25) by explaining that it is linked to Oliver Cromwell's fight against Catholicism. As the note says: «Si riferisce alla politica attuata da Oliver Cromwell in Irlanda contro i cattolici e riassunta nella frase "To Hell or Connaught". Dopo aver vinto la guerra civile contro Carlo I, nel 1649 Cromwell sbarcò in Irlanda a caccia degli eserciti monarchici alleati ai ribelli cattolici...» (*Il cane*, 260). As can be noticed, the explanation goes much beyond the need of suggesting the meaning of the words in the source text. There is an apparent didactic intent, which somehow makes the text to be seen from the outside, that is, from a perspective which enables readers to understand it and to reason on it, instead of being drawn inside the fictional realm created by the author when telling his story. The fact that the terms for which an explanation is offered are those which are in strong connection with culture specific elements in the source text also suggests that the book is being

perceived as ‘foreign’ and that an effort is made in order to make it understandable to readers. Interestingly, there is also a word – *lederhosen* – which is not in italics in T1, whereas it is so in T2. The word is not so uncommon in English – that is, it is used in the English language (an entry can be found on the Webster on-line dictionary) even though it is German. In addition, the author resorts to it when explaining what his mother usually made him and his brothers wear («I ran out wearing *lederhosen* and Aran sweaters», *SP*, 2) in order to make them look German and Irish at the same time. Though the type of trousers which is defined by the word «*lederhosen*» is strongly linked to German identity, the fact that it is not given in italics suggests that it is not sensed as ‘foreign’, that, somehow, it belongs to daily life. In Italian, to give the word in italics reinforces the idea of it as being ‘different’ and belonging to another culture.

There are also expressions which are typically Irish, expressions which link the characters immediately with the society they live in and with the local flavour of words given by the speaker’s linguistic habits. At the very beginning of the book, the child tells a non-sensical story (a sort of dream) about waking up in Germany and seeing Ireland from his window. Then, he remembers going out to the beach with his parents and, while running, falling over a sleeping man on the grass who reacts by exclaiming: «What the Jayses?» (*SP*, 1). Further on in the narrative, the narrator will explain that his brother Franz and he are trying to be Irish and to behave like all other children by pointing out: «We stand at the railings and look at the waves crashing against the rocks and the white spray going up into the air [...]. We’re Irish and we say ‘Jaysus’ every time the wave curls in and hits the rocks with a big thump» (*SP*, 5). Thus, the word «Jaysus» is linked explicitly to the idea of Irish identity; in fact, it is almost included in the picture the narrator gives of all the things that a good Irish boy is supposed to do. In this sense, the expression also applies to a stereotypical picture of Irish childhood and ‘Irishness’, words and cultural identities being always bound together. To translate «Jaysus», the Italian translation uses the Italian imprecation «Cristo», thus writing: «Siamo irlandesi e diciamo ‘Cristo’ ogni volta che l’onda si arriccia e colpisce gli scogli con un gran botto» (*Il cane*, 18). However, the ‘difference’ which is implied by the word «Jaysus» is totally lost. The word is not linked to Irish identity anymore, «Jaysus» being the way the word «Jesus» is normally pronounced in Dublin. It would have not been incorrect to preserve the word as it is in the source text («Jaysus»), by adding also – if needed – a foot-note on its meaning (an unwelcome strategy for being understood which, in my opinion, should be avoided each time this could be done). The importance of keeping the expression as it is in T1 can be explained by the fact that the meaning of this word in the narrative context depends on its form, that is, that there is also an implicit suggestion as to how the children are trying to be and to look as Irish as possible (thus speaking like all Irish children and Irish people in general).

Another interesting aspect is also offered by culture-specific words⁵. In order to render the word «Kraut», the translation provides the word «crucchi» in Italian. The term in T1 is derogatory when used in English («Kraut» in German referring to herbs but also to a type of traditional German food), exactly as the term in Italian is. Thus, the translation succeeds in conveying the same idea that was in the source text, even though, in order to do it, it resorts to a word which has a totally different origin from «Kraut». «Crucchi» does not come from German; it comes from the Slavic word «kruch», which means «bread»; it was applied by Italian people to the Germans during the Second World War. Therefore, the effect conveyed by T2 is the same of T1 but an Italian culture-specific word has been used. Thus, in a sense the translation has also operated a cultural shift from the English to the Italian culture.

However, the most interesting case – as far as culture-specific terms are concerned – is the definition given by Hugo Hamilton's father of his children, a definition the narrator remembers by saying: «[W]e are the speckled-Irish, the brack-Irish. Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins» (*SP*, 7). The adjective «brack» comes, as is explained in the text, from the Gaelic word «breac» and means «speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured» (*SP*, 7). By using a term which is derived from Gaelic for his children, Jack Hamilton links them manifestly to Irish culture, even though he is suggesting that they are the 'new Irish', that is, that they are «half-Irish and half German» (*SP*, 7). The «barm brack» mentioned by the narrator is a metaphor for speckledness and this metaphor is again in strong connection with Ireland and Irish culture, the barm brack being an Irish bread (with raisins or sultanas). In English, 'brack' is used only in association with 'barm', that is, as 'barm brack'. Thus, it was no use for the translator to search for the meaning of 'brack' in an English-Italian dictionary. The final decision made by Isabella Zani was to translate the sense of the metaphor (that is, the implied meaning conveyed through it, the idea of speckledness), by resorting to a different image – the image of a dog and, more precisely, of a «bracco maculato» («speckled hound»). She explains her decision in *La nota del traduttore*:

Sono state le orecchie a suggerirmi la possibilità di una soluzione. Brack, brack, brack: come “bracco”. Un sostantivo al posto di un aggettivo è un cambio di valuta nel quale non si perde moltissimo, e il bracco è un animale, e un animale pezzato, maculato, punteggiato. Brack, però, non significa “bracco”: come giustificare una scelta del genere?⁶

Thus, there is a double reason for translating «brack» as «bracco»: these words are phonetically akin to each other and Irish hounds can be speckled, so that the idea of speckledness is somehow preserved. The translator also searched for an etymological root in common between the two terms but could not ascertain it. However, she observes that the word «brach» in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is used for a female hound: «Mi è venuto in

parziale soccorso William Shakespeare, che in *Re Lear* nomina per bocca del Buffone una segugia: “Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink” (Atto I, scena IV). Insomma mi è parso che da un punto di vista letterario, se non strettamente filologico, la mia scelta si potesse difendere».

Therefore, in T2 the statement in T1 («[W]e are the speckled-Irish, the brack-Irish. Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins», *SP*, 7) is rendered as: «[N]oi siamo gli irlandesi maculati, i bracchi irlandesi. Pandolce irlandese fatto in casa, con uvetta tedesca» (*Il cane*, 20). Though the solution offered is interesting, there is no correspondence between the image offered in T1 and the image in T2 (and no etymological correspondence between «bracchi» and the Gaelic «breac» either). The translating strategy applied succeeds in preserving the idea of speckledness (what is speckled is the dog's coat), that is, the sense of the metaphor, but cannot be compared to the procedure for translating metaphors that Peter Newmark defines «conversion of metaphor to sense»⁷ since a new meaning is also added which was totally absent from the source text.

We do not know why the image of the «barm brack» was retrieved by the narrator but, no matter why, it was certainly what came to his mind when remembering his father's definition of him and the other children as «the new Irish» (*SP*, 7).

Furthermore, words and memories are strongly linked together in this work, sometimes words triggering recollections of past events and sometimes standing for entire sequences of events and deeper implicit meanings (as when, from the adjective «bald» in the song sung at school by the author when he was a child we come to know about his slapping his teacher on her face and being praised by his mother, this leading to a digression on the injustices suffered by his mother's family under the Nazi regime).

Therefore, to change a word means to act upon the images of which the memoir is informed and which are the very texture of the narrative. In addition, the translation spells out what is a mental association made in the text between the narrator's condition (his sense of displacement and 'difference' from others) and the image of a dog, which, like him, is described as being in front of the sea, barking at the waves as he shouts at them⁸. This association is never made explicit but it is likely that it is perceived even as more important than it is by reading about the «bracchi maculati» (this translation also establishing a further relation between the image of a hound and the idea of speckledness, which is of central importance in the book).

The translator is aware of having added a new meaning to the text, since she says: «Credo di non aver sottratto nulla al testo originale, alle parole dell'autore, alla descrizione intima e sofferta di quei bambini più ricchi e insieme marchiati per la mescolanza della loro origine; e credo, anzi, di aver loro regalato qualcosa».

Interestingly, by deciding to translate «barm brack» as «bracco», the target text has also applied to the word «bracco» a meaning that this word

does not have: «Un “bracco” dolce è un pane con dentro l’uvetta» (*Il cane*, 20). The fact that the two words sound in the same way is no reason enough for explaining the change in T2, though sounds are often important in a text both from the rhythmic and from the semantic point of view. As Kim Ballard notices, after listing the words «grub», «grumble», «grunt», «grudge», «grumpy», «gruff», «grubby»:

It is not unreasonable to propose that, since five of these seven words carry suggestions of impatience or irritability, there is some semantic link between those negative associations and the sound ‘gru-’ at the beginning of ‘grudge’, ‘gruff’, ‘grumble’, ‘grumpy’ and ‘grunt’. It may even be that this meaning of ‘gru-’ has come about because we clench our teeth when we feel irritated and ‘gru-’ is a natural sound to produce in this position⁹.

However, this is not the case of «barm brack», which is of use in the author’s attempt at representing his idea of speckledness for its semantic content and for the fact of deriving from Irish culture, the phonetic level being less important.

In order to translate the words in the source text, the translator has decided to resort to inventions again, as when she translated with «barra fonda» the expression «topsy dirty» in the original. However, this is a different case from the previous one, in that an invention or, better, a change in the standard form of the expression had been made in the source text too and needed to be rendered in Italian. Thus, the translator slightly modified the word «baraonda», which means ‘confusion’ in Italian, more or less like the English ‘topsy-turvy’.

Finally, T2 has rendered into Italian also those sentences which were defined explicitly as being in English in T1. Thus, for example, the narrator’s brother, Franz, is caught by his father singing in English «Walk on the wall, walk on the wall» (*SP*, 29), after building a line with bricks, and his father beats him violently for this, breaking his nose, because his children had to speak only Irish. The target text translates the words in the song as: «Monta sul muretto, monta sul muretto...» (*Il cane*, 39). Similarly, Mr. Hamilton gets angry when he listens to the narrator using English for saying «stones»: «“What did you throw?”, my father asked. “Stones”. I saw my face twice in his glasses and he made a face, just like when the O’Neills were chopping wood upstairs» (*SP*, 27). In T2, this is translated as following: «“Cosa hai tirato?”, disse mio padre. “Sassi”. In inglese. Mi vidi due volte nei suoi occhiali e lui fece una faccia, come quando gli O’Neills spaccano la legna di sopra» (*Il cane*, 37). In order to make readers understand that the character was pronouncing the word in English, the translator added: «In inglese» (*Il cane*, 37). This is an effective strategy to preserve clarity and to cope with the translating task and it also reveals how far apart the world of the source and the world of the target text are.

Though all the mentioned aspects are relevant to the present discussion, it is undoubtedly true that there are distinctive structures in languages and

distinct modes of representation which cannot be accounted for by translation. As Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf asserted, by suggesting somehow what had already been said by Wilhelm von Humboldt, language is inseparable from thoughts and thoughts are influenced by language. In addition, as Valerio Fissore argues in *The Liturgy of Language*¹⁰, language and discourse organization are the ways through which a culture is codified and, for this reason, a translation should be as much literal as possible. From this perspective, it is impossible for a translator to be faithful to the source text, that is, to render it in another language without altering its meaning. Thus, for example, the idea of time is rendered linguistically in distinct ways by English and Italian. Indeed, as Harald Weinrich in *Tempus* (1964) notices, in English the idea of time is expressed by two different words (tense and time), unlike other languages like Italian (and also French, Spanish and Portuguese, for example), which only have one word for both notions («tempo», «temps», «tiempo», «tempo» respectively). What is important here is that the extra-linguistic reality of 'time' does not coincide with the intralinguistic idea of time, as this is represented by tense. As Michael Lewis points out in *The English Verb. An Exploration of Structure and Meaning*, the present tense has several different functions (Lewis 38). It can define present time but also habits, general acknowledged truths with no reference to time (e.g.: «Wood floats on water»), and also past and future events (e.g.: «In he comes and hits me»; «We leave from Paddington tomorrow morning at 7.30»).

In the very first page of Hugo Hamilton's memoir, there is an example of the way in which this gap between the system of representation of time in English and in Italian produce unavoidable discrepancies. I will provide here an extract from page 1 of the source text and, immediately after it, the same extract in translation:

When you're small you know nothing.

When I was small I woke up in Germany. I heard the bells and rubbed my eyes and saw the wind pushing through the curtains like a big belly. Then I got up and looked out the window and saw Ireland. And after breakfast we all went out the door to Ireland and walked down to Mass. And after Mass we walked down to the big green park in front of the sea because I wanted to show my mother and father how I could stand on the ball for a count of three, until the ball squirted away from under my feet. I chased after it, but I could see nothing with the sun in my eyes and I fell over a man lying on the grass with his mouth open. He sat up suddenly and said "What the Jayses?" - He told me to look where I was going in future. So I got up quickly and ran to my mother and father (*SP*, 1).

The narrator draws a dream-like picture of what seems to be one of the first memories of his life. First, there is a statement in the present: «When you're small you know nothing». The rest of the description, from «When I was small I woke up in Germany» to «So I got up quickly and ran to my mother

and father», is entirely in the past tense. However, this same tense in English can be applied both to the description of an event which occurred far in the past (and which in Italian is normally rendered by a *passato remoto*) and to an event or action which was habitual in the past (rendered by the *imperfetto* in Italian). The description remains somehow ambivalent in English, since the tense of the verbs is the same. Only by interpreting the text can the reader decide whether the aspect of the verbs suggested is perfective or imperfective. However, whatever his/her decision is, the truth is that the ambiguity persists, allowing for a double perception of the facts. Far from being limiting, this empowers the narrator's ability to suspend that clear-cut boundary between logic and fantasy which is normally possessed by the adult world.

The actions which follow («I heard the bells and rubbed my eyes and saw the wind...») may be linked to the previous sentence («When I was small I woke up in Germany») by suggesting a continuity with it (when the narrator was a child, he normally «heard the bells», «rubbed his eyes» and «saw the wind pushing through the curtains»), but they could also break the inner logic of the narrative by a sudden switch from the imperfective («When I was small») to the perfective («I heard the bells and rubbed my eyes»). This lack of logic in time representation is indeed typical of children's perception and it is accompanied, as has already been hinted at, by a lack of realism in the rendering of spatial distances. In addition, by interpreting the verbs «to hear» and «to rub» as perfective, the sense of a world coming suddenly into life is also suggested. What the narrator is describing is not just the fact that he woke up in his bed in Germany; he is also describing the awakening of his consciousness, the coming into being of the world he lives in (interestingly, this is done right at the beginning of the book, when the narrative world is brought to life too).

In hinting at all these different nuances of meaning, the English language is able to preserve them for the very reason that the perfective and the imperfective aspects are not signaled explicitly by the verbs.

In Italian, this ambiguity is immediately lost, as the following extract demonstrates:

Quando sei piccolo non sai niente.

Quand'ero piccolo io mi svegliavo in Germania. Al suono delle campane mi sfregai gli occhi e vidi il vento gonfiare le tende come un'enorme pancia. Poi mi alzai e guardai dalla finestra e vidi l'Irlanda. E dopo colazione uscimmo tutti dalla porta verso l'Irlanda e andammo a piedi a messa. E dopo la messa scendemmo al grande parco verde davanti al mare perché io volevo mostrare a mia madre e mio padre che riuscivo a stare in equilibrio sul pallone contando fino a tre, finché il pallone non mi schizzò via da sotto i piedi. Lo inseguii, ma con il sole negli occhi non riuscii a vedere niente e inciampai sopra un uomo sdraiato a bocca aperta sull'erba. Lui si sollevò di scatto dicendo: "Cristo, che è stato?" - Mi disse di guardare dove andavo, in futuro. Così mi rialzai subito e corsi da mia madre e mio padre. Gli raccontai che l'uomo aveva detto "Cristo", ma erano entrambi voltati, ridevano davanti al mare (*Il cane*, 1).

Whereas there is an identity between the first sentence in Italian and in English in terms of verb tense and aspect (present), there is no such an identity in the rest of the paragraph, where the Italian translation shifts from the *imperfetto* to the *passato remoto* very soon. While the tense in «Quand'ero piccolo mi svegliavo in Germania» describes the repetitiveness of an action which is usually performed, the tense in «Al suono delle campane mi sfregai gli occhi e vidi il vento gonfiare le tende» suggests that what is being described is a specific moment in the past, an episode or an event which occurred only once in the narrator's life. As Bernard Comrie argues in *Aspect*, the imperfective defines «habitual situations»: «Habitual situations describe a situation which is characteristic of an extended period of time, so extended in fact that the situation referred to is viewed not as an incidental property of the moment but, precisely, as a characteristic feature of a whole period»¹¹. In the Italian translation, there is no sense of the actions being repeated (except from «Quando ero piccolo io mi svegliavo in Germania») and no habitual situation is described. However, the choice of the *passato remoto* must be made in Italian because there is the description of the small accident which occurs to the boy when falling «over a man lying in the grass». Since it is more logical that this happened only once and not every single day, the translator used the *passato remoto* for the entire description. What the English language could maintain as both perfective and imperfective, the Italian language defines as perfective almost from the start.

The gap between the source and the target text does not depend on the Italian translator's choices, the different rendering of the sense of time by Italian and English being at the basis of it. As Christopher Taylor argues: «[T]he Italian translator must be on his guard so as not to fall foul of mistranslations when faced with a sentence such as "I saw him in Paris". His options could be, of course: "L'ho visto a Parigi"; "Lo vidi a Parigi"; "Lo vedevo a Parigi", and he must search for similar signs amongst time markers, context, extra-linguistic knowledge, etc.»¹². Nevertheless, even by following Taylor's advice, it is still impossible to preserve that inherent ambiguity which the English text possessed originally.

3

Conclusions

Il cane che abbaia alle onde and *The Speckled People* are two texts with two different languages and cultures. Though the Italian translator is faithful to the original, makes refined linguistic choices and applies interesting translation strategies, there is an overall tendency at making T1 as understandable as possible to readers by making it nearer to the them and to the target culture. All the elements, both linguistic and cultural, which seem potentially obscure are not only translated but also presented through explanatory notes. Though it would not be correct to define the translation as 'domesticating', the 'foreign' elements in the source text are sometimes omitted or changed. In the book,

the sense of Irish identity, which in the memoir is something which is both imposed on the narrator by his father and something for which he struggles in order to conform to society, is conveyed not just by the events recounted but by language and by the images language tries to bring into life. The «barm brack», which alone conveys the complex idea of speckledness as it is used to describe the children's condition, is linked to Irish culture in such a way that it is impossible to translate it without losing something of the original meaning. Even though the solution found by the translator can be effective, the inherent cultural value of the expression in T1 will be lost irremediably.

Indeed, as André Lefevere argues when defining «translation»:

Translation can be seen as epitomizing the ideal of 'faithful translation', so dear to the heart of those in authority, who are intent on purveying the 'right' image of the source text in a different language [...]. But translatio is impossible. An exchange of signifiers in a kind of intellectual and emotional vacuum, ignoring the cultural, ideological and poetological overtones of the actual signifiers, is doomed to failure, except in texts in which the 'flavour' of the signifiers is not all important: scholarly texts, or non-literary texts in general¹³.

Though the «flavour of the signifiers» in the original cannot always be preserved in translation, what in my opinion should be done is to accept that 'foreign' elements come into the text, even though this obliges readers to make the effort of discovering new meanings and new ideas in connection with a different culture. By asking readers to go towards the source text, that is, to become aware that they are dealing with a product from another culture, it is likely that their understanding of the text itself will be empowered.

Indeed, the most significant element in *The Speckled People*, as far as the linguistic dimension is concerned, is that the author writes it in English. The forbidden language of his childhood is transformed in the language of his creative activity as a writer. Though in the story it is often mentioned as being something which belongs only to the world outside, that is, as an unknown, far away reality, the truth is that English is always there, because it is through it that the narrative is written and the story is told. Indeed, this language has a deep symbolical significance in the book, since there is a slow coming into awareness, by the child, about his right to choose which language to speak and his right to free himself from his father's strict and oppressive rules. At the end of the penultimate chapter of the memoir, he realizes that there are boundaries in his life which he can break only by learning to look at himself from a different angle. Many symbolical elements suggest that he experiences a kind of rebirth. The dog which was seen at the very beginning of the book as barking alone at the waves seems to be drowned but suddenly re-appears: «He didn't drown after all. He must have rescued himself. He must have got up the steps, and shook the water off his back and forgotten it even happened [...]. He started sniffing around my clothes and socks scattered on the ground.

He came right over and sniffed at me, too. He didn't blame me for anything and I was able to pet him as if we were friends for life» (*SP*, 294). Then, the dog follows him while he walks towards home:

On the way home I walked along the wall with the dog behind me. My shoes were squeaking all the way [...]. The sun was starting to come through the mist and it was not going to rain after all. I looked back and saw the sun coming out. The water was so white and so full of bouncing light that I could see nothing at all. It made me want to close my eyes and sneeze. When I looked into the shadows under the trees it was so dark that I could see nothing there either (*SP*, 295).

In this almost suspended dimension, between light and darkness, the boy realizes that he can be free: «I am not afraid any more of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between. Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind. Something you dream about and sing about. Maybe it's not a place on the map at all, but just a story full of people you meet and places you visit, full of books and films you've been to. I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to speak in» (*SP*, 295).

Interestingly, his final liberation is achieved by accepting to have «no language to speak in», that is, by rejecting his father's conviction that «[Y]our language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag» (*SP*, 3). Interestingly, after this and at the end of the chapter, the narrator says: «I am walking on the wall and nobody can stop me». This sentence, which is reminiscent of the song in English for which his brother was beaten by their father («Walk on the wall, walk on the wall...», *SP*, 29), is the final comment on his new feelings about himself and the world around him. The adult voice of the author can be heard, here, coming to the surface from behind the voice of the young narrator. What he says helps us see that English is not, to him, the language of English culture only. It is a communicative tool he could not resort to during childhood and a challenge to the limits of the world he grew up in. Instead of binding him to a place, English enables him to deal with a far wider notion of 'home', as something which can be 'speckled' as much as he is.

All this suggests that English is more than a narrative tool. It is also a symbol of freedom and rebellion, the symbol of things to come which the child in the story is not able to foresee but which the author knows by speaking from his present. As Hugo Hamilton explains in his essay *Speaking to the Walls in English*: «In many ways it was inevitable that writing would become the only way for me to explain [my] deep childhood confusion. The prohibition against English made me see that language as a challenge. Even as a child I spoke to the walls in English and secretly rehearsed dialogue I heard outside»¹⁴. This explains why it is so important, in translation, to preserve the 'difference' of the source text. Though the language in which the original was written is replaced by another language, traces of it should be preserved

when possible, for example by considering the distinct ways in which English and Italian cope with the representation of time through tense. From this perspective, translation could be seen as a dialogue between the source and the target text rather than a replacement of a language with another. Indeed, the power of translations is strong and the encounter with another language is not necessarily damaging (as Lefevere argues: «Translation forces a language to expand, and that expansion may be welcome as long as it is checked by the linguistic community at large»¹⁵).

Nevertheless, there is also another aspect worth being mentioned. When the translator uses Italian for sentences which are defined explicitly by the narrative as being in English (see the examples in the previous part of the essay on the song and on the word «stones»), an otherwise half-hidden truth is revealed – that is, the translation rests on a pretension and the language which is being used is like a parallel world to which the story is transposed. By replacing English, the Italian language becomes more than a language used to tell a story which can be understandable to Italian readers. It also turns into a second dimension, a new form of the book which is at the same time akin to and different from the source text. I agree with Palma Zlateva when she states:

The pre-text and post-text problems [...] result from the profound difference in communicative situation between an author and the reader of his prototext on the one hand, and an author and the reader of the translation, or metatext, on the other. An author constructs a world based on the inventory of her native language and for an audience which shares her universe of discourse. The reader is presented with a text in her native language, which she is able to decode and judge in terms both of language and universe of discourse, no matter whether the author on occasion violates either, or both. When a translator plays the part of the reader, on the other hand, she must apply both her knowledge and her intuition to the author's universe of discourse, very conscientiously, but also very cautiously¹⁶.

In other words: «Any adequately translated literary text becomes a material fact not only in the target language, but in the target literature as well: it exists in both»¹⁷. However, this does not imply that the translator is free to modify the source text. The act of translation is always a cross-cultural act, which must avoid replacing the cultural elements in T1 with elements which belong to the target culture.

Since these elements come from another cultural and linguistic context, and since they are inscribed in a text for which another language is used (Italian in the proposed case), translations will be the product of a double process of transformation and preservation in connection with the original. The idea of speckledness which informs Hugo Hamilton's memoir is possessed also by translations, which cannot but be hybrid, composite cultural and linguistic textures.

Endnotes

¹ P. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, Pergamon, Oxford 1981, p. 7.

² H. Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, Harper, London 2004. Henceforth this work will be referred to as *SP*.

³ I have focused on the functions of multilingualism in this memoir in the essay *One Life, Many Languages. Hugo Hamilton's The Speckled People* which is forthcoming for *English Studies*, edited by R.A. Henderson and published by Trauben, Turin.

⁴ H. Hamilton, *Il cane che abbaia alle onde*, Fazi, Roma 2004, p. 259. Henceforth this work will be referred to as *Il cane*.

⁵ All words, in a sense, are 'culture-specific', since they originate in a specific culture. However, what I mean with this definition in the essay is all the words which belong only or especially to a particular culture, whether because the object they define does not exist or is less common in different cultural contexts or because it originated and is particularly used in that culture.

⁶ I. Zani, *La nota del traduttore: Il cane che abbaia alle onde*, <http://www.lanotadeltraduttore.it/cane_abbaia_alle.htm> (02/2010).

⁷ E.g.: «Gagner son pain» could be translated, according to P. Newmark, as «To earn one's living». The sense of the metaphor is respected, though the words used are different. P. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, cit., p. 91.

⁸ The first time the dog is mentioned is in the very first chapter of the book and the picture of it barking at the waves on the shore is used again and again in the narrative, until, at the end, when the narrator finally finds his own voice, it is discovered that the dog has not drowned as the child had initially suspected.

⁹ K. Ballard, *The Frameworks of English*, Palgrave, New York 2001, p. 6.

¹⁰ V. Fissore, *The Liturgy of Language*, in Id., *The Liturgy of Language. The Language of Liturgy*, Trauben, Torino 2009, p. 31.

¹¹ B. Comrie, *Aspect*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1976, pp. 27-28.

¹² C. Taylor, *Aspects of Language and Translation. Contrastive Approaches for Italian/English Translators*, Campanotto, Udine 1992, p. 26.

¹³ A. Lefevere, *Translating Literature. Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*, MLA, New York 1992, p. 18.

¹⁴ H. Hamilton, *Speaking to the Walls in English*, <<http://www.powells.com/essays/hamilton.html>> (02/2010).

¹⁵ A. Lefevere, *Translation: Its Genealogy in the West*, in S. Bassnett, A. Lefevere (eds.), *Translation, History and Culture*, Pinter, London 1990, p. 29.

¹⁶ P. Zlateva, *Translation: Text and Pre-Text Adequacy and Acceptability in Crosscultural Communication*, in S. Bassnett, A. Lefevere (eds.), *Translation, History and Culture*, cit., p. 32.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 29.

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