

Recensione: Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani, *The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 142.

The Relocation of Culture, by the US-based literary critic Simona Bertacco and the Italian cultural critic Nicoletta Vallorani, tackles remarkably well the question of translation in the double sense of physical and linguistic displacement and relocation. It follows that the meaning and the scope of this term and discipline are broadened to the extent that “translation” then encompasses the physical movement (migration of people) and the epistemic action (migration of meaning). It also follows that, in our age of mass media *cum* migration, the theoretical and practical nexus of translation and migration must be explored by defining translation as migration and vice versa. In short, translation must be considered through the lens of migration and migration through that of translation.

Starting from the end of the book, let us immediately emphasise that, in the translative framework the authors have chosen, translation is an act, *à la* Levinas, of “establishing a call-and-response relationship between its actors and we find ourselves—always and already—responsible for the other” (121), since it is the responsibility for the other that allows the other to exist. It is perhaps with this discernment in mind that Homi Bhabha has written the forward to the book underlining how a translational “turn” is vital if we want to evaluate the location or relocation of culture, as Bertacco and Vallorani put it. Furthermore, if a translational turn is needed, it cannot be performed but by expanding the borders of this epistemic practice and choosing the borderland as the site where, as Franco Cassano wrote, the world does not end, “but where those who are different come into contact, and the relationship game with the other becomes difficult and real” (*Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, 3). This is exactly what Bertacco and Vallorani want to do with their study, playing the hard game of acknowledging and getting to know the other. In their own effective words:

This is a book about accents and borders, about people that have accents, and cultures that cross borders. It claims that language, translation, and the humanities are important tools to come to grips with contemporary affairs and to produce new forms of understanding, civility, and citizenship in response to the situations around us. The book deals with translation and migration and with the ways in which the current phenomenon of global migrations has sharply raised the currency of translation—in practical as well as theoretical terms—as an area of study. Instead of seeing translation merely as a movement of meaning across languages, cultures, and borders, we read translation as a relocating act: of meanings and texts but also of people and cultures (1).

In current usage, the word “relocation” concerning migration has a double meaning, i.e., redistribution of migrants and hospitality towards them. If so, translation as a relocating act, Bertacco explains in her section “Translation as Migration”, chooses the latter and decides not to follow the linear notion of the “ancien régime” of translation studies, which considers translation as something that happens between two distinct linguistic and cultural units. Rather, translation as a relocating act accounts for the diversity and plurality of the migration experience, where migrants cease to exist as passive “translated people” (Rushdie). On the contrary, “individual agency is crucial when we think translation through the lens of migration: migrants become/act as translators in their new communities...” (26). Only in this way, Bertacco writes, can the translational side of the world be read “outside of what Chaudhury calls the unilingualism and the monosemy of the mind that European colonialism has exported across the world” (27). Therefore, what is promoted is a “translation literacy”, and Bertacco offers close readings of creative texts and artworks by, among others, Palestinian artist Emily Jacir and Mexican-American writer Valeria Luiselli, as well as of works by Derek Walcott, Velma Pollard, Dionne Brand.

So, if there is a “postcolonial lesson”, this is translation “as a textual marker that not only highlights the internal tensions within cultures but shows what it means to write in mother tongues (in the plural), therefore serving as one of the main aesthetic principles of innovation” (50). It is a marker that points out what is still under-scrutinized in postcolonial literary studies: translational texts, that is to say, texts “written as translation, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed” (Walkowitz). As the Turkish-Cypriot poet Mehmet Yashin beautifully wrote in his poem “Wartime”: “I was often unsure in which language to shed tears, / the life I lived wasn’t foreign, but one of translation”.

As Bertacco does not fail to remind us, apropos of the “postcolonial lesson”, Walcott has called the Western scholar in postcolonial studies a “critic tourist”, who, while talking of the ghetto, may patronise its people again. Perhaps, bearing Walcott’s charge in mind, Vallorani, in her section “Migration as Translation”, chooses to turn her focus on the domestic context of mass migration in the Mediterranean. This sea is where “the idea of migration as a kind of translation” is as ancient as Odysseus and still is “the dominant trope” (70). As we have underlined from the start, the border is chosen by Vallorani as a key location where migration and translation intersect and can be investigated through an ethical lens. She insists that “translation requires the crossing of a border, a process that is as much physical and spatial as it is symbolic and epistemological” (111). And so, the border and the condition of being “born translated” is discussed through a multimodal analysis of textual and visual representations, such as the textual works of Vanessa Redgrave, David Enia, Anders Lustgarten, or the visual works of Kara Walker, Mario Badagliacca, Erri De Luca and Alessandro Gassman. Vallorani also proposes investigation not only into representation but also self-representation, as in the case of the photographer Kevin McElvaney’s project, offering the refugee seekers a tool to reveal themselves in their own ways.

All of this points to a new pedagogical approach in order to counteract the habit of ‘unseeing’ the migrants while translating them, the habit of ‘unseeing’ them while frozen in mid-journey, like the merchant’s foreign words frozen midair in the quoted episode of *Il Cortegiano* (Baldassarre Castiglione), never reaching the other shore and therefore obliged to renounce their right to relocation.

Luigi Carmine Cazzato¹

¹ Luigi Cazzato è Professore Ordinario di Letteratura Inglese presso il Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione, Psicologia, Comunicazione, Università di Bari dove insegna Culture di lingua inglese e decolonialità nei corsi di Scienze della Comunicazione e Scienze Pedagogiche. È stato vicepresidente dell’AISCLI (Associazione Italiana di Studi sulle Culture e Letterature di Lingua Inglese) dal 2016 al 2019 e tutt’ora membro del gruppo di ricerca “Un/Walling the Mediterranean”. Nord e sud sono stati i poli magnetici della sua esistenza. Nato e cresciuto in Salento, formatosi all’Università di Pisa e di Leicester (UK), tornato a sud, il nord non ha mai smesso il suo richiamo: da qui i soggiorni di visiting professor presso le Università di Georgetown e College Park (USA). Abbandonati i lidi dello specialismo letterario (lo studio della narrativa moderna e postmoderna), il senso della ricerca ha trovato una linfa nuova nello studio dei rapporti culturali fra Inghilterra e sud da una prospettiva post-coloniale, meridiana e de-coloniale (con relativi debiti verso E. Said, F. Cassano e W. Mignolo). Su questi temi ha pubblicato numerosi saggi e organizzato numerosi convegni nazionali e internazionali, il più recente: “Comunicare la (post) colonialità a sud: Europa, Mediterraneo e Sud globale” (2021). L’ultimo studio in volume è *Sguardo inglese e Mediterraneo italiano. Alle radici del meridionismo* (Milano 2017).