

Paratexts as an Instrument of Power. German Translations of Icelandic Prose around 1900

Los paréntesis como instrumento de poder. Las traducciones alemanas de la prosa islandesa en torno a 1900

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Abstract: Josef Calasanz Poestion was an influential author and translator from Icelandic into German. Among his translations was the first Icelandic novel, which he published several times. His translations are always accompanied by a series of paratexts, in which the translator's presence is unusually strong. In these texts, he provides his readers with extensive knowledge of Icelandic culture and literature and positions himself as an authority on Iceland. Through frequent references to other writings, which he incorporated into annotations, introductions and other peritexts, he produced an extensive array of epitexts. He not only positioned himself as a figure of pedagogical authority vis-à-vis his readers, but also towards the Icelandic nation. His attitude toward Iceland is that of the center toward the periphery and is marked by an intra-European exoticism and orientalism.

Key words: invisibility; paratext; peritext; epitext; Orientalism; Icelandic literature.

Resumen: Josef Calasanz Poestion fue un influyente autor y traductor del islandés al alemán. Entre sus traducciones se encuentra la primera novela islandesa, que publicó varias veces. Sus traducciones siempre van acompañadas de una serie de paratextos, en los que la presencia del traductor es atípicamente fuerte. En estos textos, proporciona a sus lectores un amplio conocimiento de la cultura y la literatura islandesas y se posiciona como una autoridad sobre Islandia. A través de frecuentes referencias a otros escritos, que incorporó en anotaciones, introducciones y otros peritextos, produjo una extensa gama de epitextos. No solo se posicionó como una figura de autoridad pedagógica ante sus lectores, sino también ante la nación islandesa. Su actitud hacia Islandia es aquella que va del centro hacia la periferia y está marcada por un exotismo y un orientalismo intraeuropeos.

Palabras clave: invisibilidad; paratexto; peritexto; epitexto; orientalismo; literatura islandesa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, a discourse on the invisibility of the translator has emerged within the field of translation studies (Venuti 1995, Simon 1996). Attention was drawn to the tendency to conceal the work of the translator, at least in translations into English, by using translation strategies that would not make the text immediately recognizable as a translation and applying the aesthetic principles of the target culture rather than the source culture. This inspired a call for resistance and for translations to be made identifiable as such, e.g. through strategies of alienation or via discussion of the translation process in paratexts, whereby the process might be made transparent. In the context of this discourse, translations that run contrary to the aforementioned tendency are of particular interest.

In the late 19th century there was an increase in translation from Icelandic into German. Not only Old Icelandic texts, but also texts in modern Icelandic were now being translated. One productive contributor was the Austrian philologist and archivist Josef Calasanz Poestion (1853-1922), who devoted tremendous time and energy to Icelandic culture and literature. He wrote a widely respected work on the geography and culture of Iceland (1885), translated Icelandic folk tales (1884), compiled anthologies of contemporary Icelandic poetry (1897, 1904, 1912), composed a two-volume course on the Icelandic language (1882, 1887), wrote numerous articles and translated prose. Of particular interest is the novel *Piltur og stúlka* (Eng. *Lad and Lass*) by Jón Thoroddsen (1850, 1867), which is considered the first Icelandic novel (Sæmundsson 1996). Poestion's translation of this novella was first published in 1883 by Verlag Oscar Parrisius, but from 1884 onward it moved to the distinguished publishing house Reclam Verlag, which issued three revised editions between 1884 and 1900 (Thóroddsen 1883, 1884-1900).

A glance at the Austrian's translations reveals that he was by no means an invisible translator; quite the contrary. Poestion always attached a series of paratexts to his translations and their extent grew over the years. He published his translations with extended titles, dedications, introductions, forewords, footnotes, endnotes and lists of his own publications. This paper scrutinizes his translations of *Piltur og stúlka* under the microscope and considers to what extent the voluminous paratexts illuminate Poestion's objectives, his self-perceived function as a translator, and his role as a cross-cultural communicator. How does Poestion perform the role of the translator? To what does he ascribe value? How does he communicate with the readership? This article focuses on the novel's paratexts and relates them to the paratexts of other publications by the same translator. Analysis of the target text itself and a detailed comparison of source and target texts are reserved for a later occasion.

2. PARATEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

One of the fundamental works on the subject of paratexts, *Seuils* by Gérard Genette, was published as early as 1987 and appeared in English as *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation* (Genette 1997). Genette rarely mentions translation in connection with his ideas about paratexts. In the study, he refers to translations only in a few peripheral remarks, for instance as an occasion for a dedication by the translator or the addition of a belated foreword (1997, 130, 174). In his closing chapter, Genette hints at the paratextual relevance of translations, insofar as they are the author's own work or have been inspected and controlled by the author (1997, 405). According to Genette, such a translation can be viewed as a belated paratext that merely comments or expands upon the actual work, i.e. the source text. He does not give consideration to translations as self-contained publications with a responsible author. Genette thereby asserts the derivative and subordinate position of the translated text and clings to the traditional hierarchy of source and target text, as Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar has noted (2002). There is also the problem that Genette views paratexts as «characterized by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility» (1997, 3). This understanding breaks down when certain types of paratexts are examined, e.g. press releases. In the context of translation studies, where a target text is considered to have independent functions in a new environment and for a new readership, Genette's premises are not a particularly fruitful point of departure. It is nevertheless worth investigating the use of paratexts with translations using Genette's comprehensive system of analysis. The translator must then assume the position of an author, who communicates with the public and potential readers in a new environment by means of paratexts.

Genette defines the term «paratext» as that which «enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to the readers, and more generally, to the public» (1997, 1).

He considers the paratext less a boundary than a threshold or vestibule, through which the reader passes to reach the text. Empirically speaking, a paratext consists of a series of historically formed practices and discourses that serve the reception of the text. Individual paratextual elements are determined through their position relative to the main text. Those that occur «within the same volume», such as the title, foreword, motto, dedication, notes, etc., are classified by Genette as peritexts (1997, 5). Those elements that, «at least originally, are located outside the book», such as interviews, letters, diaries, articles, etc., he calls epitexts (1997, 5). The distinguishing criterion here is location. While a peritext is bound materially to the book, an epitext circulates freely. To prevent it from being completely unmoored, however, it must be linked to the main text. Natalie Binczek (2004) observes a conceptual problem here. If peritexts can be «defined and differentiated based on where they appear within or around a book», then discussion of epitexts will revolve only around their paratextual relevance and effects that must be hunted down with a magnifying glass (Binczek 2004, 118). As such, they are dependent on authorial discourse to even be recognized as paratexts. Genette's arguments about peritexts are media-technical in nature, but when it comes to epitexts he returns to the will of the author and applies the concept of paratext to the work rather than the medium. In spite of this, the outer boundaries of epitexts are quite blurry.

What follows is an investigation of paratexts in Josef Calasanz Poestion's German translation of *Piltur og stúlka* using concepts influenced by Genette.

3. TITLE AND DEDICATION

Apart from standard information on the publisher, the time and place of publication and, where appropriate, the edition or printing (edited, revised, expanded, etc.), a title page contains various additional information that can serve to attract attention. Genette assumes that the text of a book is aimed at the reader, while the title is directed at the public (1997, 75). The latter is a broader category, as this group will not necessarily read the text but still plays a role in its reception through distribution and sales.

Both original Icelandic editions of *Piltur og stúlka* stick to bare essentials: «Lad and Lass. A brief tale by Jón Þórðarson Thoroddsen» (Icel.: *Piltur og stúlka. Dálítill frásaga eftir Jón Þórðarson Thoroddsen*), i.e. the title, a modest attempt at genre classification, and the author's name. The German editions are considerably more detailed and advertisement-oriented. The title page from 1883 reads as follows: «Lad and Lass./ A Tale/ of/ Icelandic contemporary folk life/ by/ Jón Thórdarson Thóroddsen. Translated from the Icelandic and with an introduction/ and notes on the country and its people/ by/ Jos. Cal. Poestion» (Ger. *Jüngling und Mädchen./ Eine Erzählung/ aus dem/ isländischen Volksleben der Gegenwart/ von/ Jón Thórdarson Thóroddsen. Aus dem Isländischen übersetzt und mit einer Einleitung/ und Anmerkungen über Land*

und Leute versehen/ von/ Jos. Cal. Poestion). This includes the literally translated title, a self-confident genre classification tailored to the target language, and the author's name. The story is situated in time and place and interpreted as a tale of folk life, a reference that will prove important for the overall interpretation of the work. The title page also highlights that this is a translation from the original language, and reference is made to accompanying texts by the translator, whose name is provided. The title page thus presents substantial additional information that comes from the translator or his work. The fourth edition from 1900 is somewhat more concise: «Lad and Lass./ A tale/ by/ Jón Th. Thóroddsen./ Translated from the Modern Icelandic, introduced and/ annotated/ by/ J.C. Poestion» (Ger. *Jüngling und Mädchen./ Eine Erzählung/ von/ Jón Th. Thóroddsen./ Aus dem Neu-Isländischen übersetzt, eingeleitet und mit/ Anmerkungen versehen/ von/ J.C. Poestion*). The fact that the translation is directly from modern Icelandic is explicitly emphasized. It may be inferred that the details on the title page are meant simultaneously to inform and arouse interest, and to highlight the competence of the translator.

Poestion opened a number of his publications with a dedication. He dedicated his translation of Icelandic folktales, *Isländische Märchen*, to his wife. His anthology of contemporary Icelandic poetry, *Isländische Dichter der Neuzeit*, he dedicated to the Icelandic people, no less. It may be assumed that a dedication, while of course also directed at the dedicatee, is first and foremost a message to the public or the readership. It is, as Genette puts it, a form of «moral, intellectual or aesthetic backing» (1997, 136). The first edition of *Jüngling und Mädchen* from 1883 is dedicated to the poet Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, not to be confused with the book's author: «To the excellent Icelandic poet/ Steingrímur Thorsteinsson/ Professor at the Latin School of Reykjavík/ dedicated in friendship/ by the translator» („Dem trefflichen isländischen Dichter/ Steingrímur Thorsteinsson/ Professor an der Lateinschule zu Reykjavík/ in Freundschaft gewidmet/ vom Übersetzer«). The references to friendship and to the poet's position as a professor are interesting. There may be more than friendly gratitude at work here; the translator may hope to benefit by association from the dedicatee's authority as an academic, for Poestion himself held no academic position. The dedication also stresses the Austrian's close personal ties to Iceland, which implicitly lends more credibility to his work. In later editions of *Jüngling und Mädchen*, the close connection to the poet was still emphasized, although the rest was abbreviated. The fourth edition from 1900 read thus: «To the excellent Icelandic poet/ Steingrímur Thorsteinsson/ dedicated anew/ by/ the translator» (Ger. „Dem trefflichen isländischen Dichter/ Steingrímur Thorsteinsson/ aufs Neue gewidmet/ vom/ Übersetzer«). The publisher may have exerted an influence here.

4. FOREWORD AND INTRODUCTION

Forewords and introductions can be rewarding sources for translation theory. Sherry Simon (1998) highlights the importance of historical consciousness, as discourses in forewords vary considerably between periods. She interprets the presence of a foreword primarily as indicating that the translator has been permitted some prominence, and finds them a useful object of analysis because they contain traces of the translator's convictions and attitudes and the sociopolitical context in which the literary exchange takes place.

Poestion makes frequent use of introductory texts in his publications and often includes more than one, i.e. foreword and introduction, in the same book. These texts are also strikingly long (43 pages in *Isländische Märchen*, for instance) and typically signed and even dated by the translator. Poestion usually begins with a reference to the exotic nature of his topic, for instance explaining that Icelandic literature is all but unknown in Germany and almost exclusively studied for academic purposes (1883, 5). This opening is frequently followed with expressions of pity for the Icelandic people, living on their «sad, isolated island in the northern ocean», who seldom attract the attention of the world (*Isländische Märchen* 5) and lead a «lonely, poor, depressed folk life, all but excluded from the traffic of the world» (Poestion 1897, II).

Poestion's introductory texts generally oscillate between admiration, due primarily to the supposed isolation of the Icelandic culture and conventional contemporary discourse on a small nation in a hostile natural environment, and a well-intentioned yet unconsciously condescending attitude of pity. The translator also seems to harbor doubts about the quality of the literature to which he has devoted himself, but wishes to absolve himself of responsibility. In the introduction to *Jüngling und Mädchen* he states that novel-writing is still a young and weak branch of contemporary Icelandic literature, and that the tale at hand is a fairly simple one, with flaws in both structure and characterization (1900, 8). In the first edition, he even warns readers that the novella will not always meet «the heightened expectations that we bring to such compositions» (1883, 8). Although Poestion's criticism may be justified in part, it raises the question of why, then, the Austrian made the effort to translate this particular book into German. Poestion himself supplies the answer. He considered the novella to be suitable for «making Icelandic literature known beyond its small place of origin» (1900, 8). He is thus more interested in providing an introduction to Icelandic literature in general than in this particular work. Finally, Poestion maintains that the old Saga style, which he believes these stories employ, and «their setting and the description of local circumstances» give them their particular charm. «We», he says, can become better acquainted with the people of the country, their ways and customs, through these novellas than the best descriptions of the country (1900, 8). The translator's work is evidently motivated by an interest in geography and ethnography. He is primarily interested in presenting Iceland and its

people; the individual literary work is of secondary significance. Indeed, the information on the title page had already indicated as much.

5. FOOTNOTES AND ENDNOTES

Equally as extensive as Poestion's introductory texts are the annotations with which he punctuates his translations. Remarkably, he employed the same strategy with both prose and poetry. In poetry, the annotations are even more present, because they are presented as footnotes, which sometimes take so much space that parts of the poem are forced onto the following page (1904, 24-25; 1912, 108-109). In *Jüngling und Mädchen* Poestion uses footnotes to present a small number of endnotes by the original author and short notes to aid comprehension, such as explanations of nicknames. The first edition of the novella was accompanied by 58 endnotes from the translator. In the second edition, they have multiplied to 91. These endnotes sometimes comprise only a few words of explanation, e.g. of place names, proverbs or locations. More commonly they are long texts, sometimes filling entire pages. The notes increase in number and length from edition to edition, and Poestion also adds considerably more contextual information and refers to a number of other publications, which he occasionally even comments upon. A number of his annotations read like short essays on a given phenomenon or encyclopedia entries, for instance the notes on the wrestling form *glíma* (1900, 192-3) or the headpiece *faldur* (1900, 194-5), which could easily belong in a travelogue or an ethnographic text. The provision of additional knowledge reaches near-absurd levels in a chapter set at Bessastaðir, the only secondary school in Iceland at the time. Here Poestion attaches a two-page endnote containing a history of the Icelandic educational system and information on the school's location, structure, and even its curriculum and faculty (1900, 193-4).

Some of the notes clearly add nothing to the reader's comprehension of the story and must therefore serve a different purpose. The opening lines of the novella situate its events in the district of «***hérað» (Thóroddsen 1900, 13), with the ellipsis or asterisks indicating that the setting is fictional. This is followed by a reference to Síðu-Hallur, a historical figure from around 1000 CE, suggesting the district is in East Iceland and has seen better days by the time the events of the novella occur. This would have been more or less clear to readers of the source text. It is doubtful, however, that they would have known the biography of Síðu-Hallur, nor do they need to, for the only relevant information is the setting in East Iceland. The translator, however, immediately adds his first endnote and explains who Síðu-Hallur was, when and where he lived, for what he is known; that Iceland was divided into farthings, one of which was the East Farthing; and so on (Poestion 1883, 188). Furthermore, he makes reference to his own books, *Island. Das Land und seine Bewohner* («Iceland. The Land and its Inhabitants»)

and *Einleitung in das Studium des Altnordischen* («An Introduction to the Study of Old Norse»), with bibliographical details. As this note adds hardly anything to the reader's understanding of the story, its inclusion may be interpreted to indicate the translator's desire to supply extensive contextual knowledge, reaching far beyond the text itself. The pride of the specialist, who has amassed impressive knowledge through hard work, also shines through.

By referring to other texts, often his own, in the peritexts of his translations, Poes-tion made them into epitexts of the publication in question. Extensive lists of his own works, which he attached to his translations, also helped create these connections. Over time he created a network of interconnected texts, an entire system of epitexts.

In both the introduction and the comments, the translator makes the significant choice of subsuming himself and his readers under a common «we». He thereby connects himself with a German-speaking, Central European community, as distinct from Icelandic society. The positioning of this «we»-community relative to the Icelandic nation shows hints of hegemony and authority, which enable the translator not only to present explanations, but also value judgements:

Coffee, spirits and tobacco were viewed by the poor Icelander of this period as the greatest pleasure, and he would quite often fritter away his hard-earned or carefully saved money on these things, instead of spending them on clothing or other essentials, which then had to be provided by the community [...].

It is interesting that the Icelanders, who are otherwise so natural and simple and have taken relatively few foreign words into their language, have nevertheless until recently used several titles that sound strange and foreign to us; [...] (1900, 189).

When these remarks are viewed alongside the combination of pity and faint praise in the introductions, an unmistakable image of inequality emerges. A member of the larger, wealthier and more powerful community of Central Europe looks with goodwill, yet from a position of strength and superiority at the Others, who appear to him underdeveloped, simple, naïve, unspoiled and backward. This is an intra-European form of Orientalism (Said 1978), which was commonplace in travelogues and ethnographic writings about Iceland and other peripheral regions and extends into the modern-day tourism industry (Lerner 2015). The conspicuous power differential between the writer and those he writes about is implicitly presented as natural.

6. CONCLUSION

Joseph Calasanz Poestion did not express himself much about his actual work as a translator. However, extensive paratexts he provided with his translations offer insight into his attitudes and objectives. Notably, he made an effort to be present in his translations as the writer of illustrative and explanatory paratexts. His overarching goal as a translator may be characterized as ethnographic and literary-historical. He wished to introduce Iceland and its people to readers and chose examples of Icelandic literature for this purpose. The chosen texts were subordinated to this intent. This placed the main text, i.e. the actual translation, at risk of being overshadowed by a vast corpus of supplementary materials.

The translator Poestion appeared as an inviting authority, who supported readers' access to the texts or – to borrow Genette's image of a vestibule – received readers at the door and directed them inside. But Poestion did not only take a didactic position toward his potential readers. He also placed himself in a culturally preformed dominant position vis-à-vis the Icelandic culture. His gaze at Iceland was characterized by great interest and goodwill and grounded in extensive, detailed knowledge. But he was simultaneously condescending and his perspective skewed by exoticizing and Eurocentric elements. This relationship shows clear indicators of inequality in favor of the target culture.

Over the course of his career as an extraordinary expert on Iceland, Poestion produced a number of texts of various types, which he linked with each other through references and citations, thereby creating an extensive corpus of epitexts in addition to the peritexts in any given book. Together these works comprise a remarkable Poestion oeuvre on Iceland, wherein the author Poestion and the translator Poestion are rendered indistinguishable.

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