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TRANSLATORS AND THE SACRED IN WESTERN LATE ANTIQUITY: SOME REFLECTIONS

LOS TRADUCTORES ANTE LO SAGRADO EN EL TARDOANTIGUO LATINO OCCIDENTAL: ALGUNAS REFLEXIONES

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the translation approach of two Latin authors of Late Antiquity, based on a series of their paratexts: Jerome (*Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*, 57) and Calcidius (Introductory Epistle and preface of the *Commentarius in Timaeum*). Since both are dedicated to the translation of texts that could be considered "sacred" in Late Antiquity (the Bible and Plato's *Timaeus*), their translation practices are mainly met with a tension between the poles of "tradition" and "innovation", which can be re-read from a Translation Studies' perspective through the categories of "fidelity" and "freedom" / "equivalence". In short, what is at stake is the construction of discursive and moral authority (*auctoritas*), which guarantees the effectiveness of its task, on texts that project a particular character: the sacred.

Keywords: Late Antiquity. Translation. *Timaeus*. Scriptures.



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Resumen

El objetivo del presente trabajo es reflexionar acerca de la actitud traductológica de dos autores tardoantiguos latinos, a partir de una serie de sus paratextos: Jerónimo (*Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*, 57) y Calcidio (Epístola introductoria y prefacio del *Commentarius in Timaeum*). Dado que ambos se dedican a la traducción de textos que podemos denominar “sagrados” en la Antigüedad tardía (la Biblia, el *Timeo* de Platón), sus prácticas traductológicas están atravesadas principalmente por una tensión entre los polos de “tradición” e “innovación”, que pueden ser releídos desde los Estudios de Traducción a partir de las categorías de “fidelidad” y de “libertad” / “equivalencia”. En definitiva, lo que está en juego es la construcción de la autoridad discursiva y moral (*auctoritas*), que garantice la eficacia de su tarea, sobre textos que proyectan un carácter particular: lo sagrado.

Palabras clave: Antigüedad tardía. Traducción. *Timeo*. Escrituras.

1. Late Antiquity and translation of the sacred

Si ad verbum interpretor, absurde resonant; si ob necessitatem aliquid in ordine, vel in sermone mutavero, ab interpretis videbor officio recessisse.
Jerome, *Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi* 57.7

If there is an adequate metaphor to describe and understand how the world of Late Antiquity – already Christian and with a *romanitas* already fragmented, but still tied to its past by *imitatio* and the cult of tradition – articulated its cultural past with the new conflictive scenario of the time, it is that of *translation*. Its displaced meaning contains, as much as its literal meaning, all the conflict it implies to deliver a certain message from one language/culture to another, configured in a certain way. This task includes instances of innovation and adaptation, but also respect for authority and the search for continuity and recognition as part of an inherited culture. As often occurs with translations, not all these purposes are met, since the translated work usually merges as a new literary instance, becoming a new “original”. In the same way, the operations of continuity and transformation carried out by men from Late Antiquity, far from guaranteeing them the *romanitas* they sought, projected them outside the Roman world, throwing them into a new era, an era from which the principal cultural constructions have been inherited by the European West (as noted by Elsner & Hernández Lobato 2017, among others).

Yet, in addition to its metaphorical omnipresence, translation takes centre stage in Late Antiquity as a concrete practice, which acquires a central relevance as a strategy of appropriation and cultural adaptation. Just as Roman Literature is founded on translation, this Late Antique literary “refoundation” seeks to operate analogously, although there are of course some differences. Now the practice of translation responds mainly to the concrete need to be able to read works in Greek; a language that had not been common knowledge for men of Late Antiquity since the fourth century C.E., as it certainly had been in previous centuries. However, given the opportunity and the need to translate, re-readings and transformations emerge that reflect the characteristics of the new times and throw translators into conflict, as they struggle to respect *the auctoritas* and make themselves understood in the new textual space.

When the *auctoritas* of the source text is anchored in its sacred character, this conflict takes on a new dimension, which accentuates the moral aspect and also, we must not forget, the logistical aspect, derived from what a drift into some form of heterodoxy could mean at the time of the establishment of Christian orthodoxy. Let us not forget that Late Antiquity is also – as Athanassiadi (2005) points out – the beginning of a process of intolerance that does not admit deviations from a norm –which, in turn, is not completely constituted. The weight of translation adds a new dimension to the translator’s task to be dealt with.

Within this framework, our main objective is to reflect on the translation approach of two Latin authors of Late Antiquity, based on a series of their paratexts: Jerome (*Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*, 57) and Calcidio (Introductory epistle and preface of the *Commentarius in Timaeum*). Our main hypothesis is that, since both are dedicated to the translation of texts that can be considered “sacred” in Late Antiquity (the Bible and Plato’s *Timaeus*)¹, their translation practices are mainly met with a tension

1. About the “sacredness” of these texts, much could be discussed. It is clear in the case of Scripture, of course. In the case of *Timaeus*, I agree with Athanassiadi (2005): there is a parallel movement in Late Antiquity, led by Christianity and Neoplatonism at the same time, in search of the construction of an “orthodoxy”. This includes the establishment of a textual canon, and both the Scriptures and Plato’s *Timaeus* serve as canonical texts, because of their character of revelation. It is this symbolic character,

between the poles of “tradition” and “innovation”², which can be reread from a Translation Studies’ perspective through the categories of “fidelity” and “freedom” / “equivalence”, to which our authors allude in their reflections, as the epigraph of this work anticipates. These categories, which are either posed in opposition or in *continuum*, are central to reflections on translation from the earliest times and have been questioned and disarticulated from different perspectives since the creation of Translation Studies as a discipline. For example, Venuti (1992) questions the idea of the translator’s submission to the original and reconsiders the category of the original as a fixed and venerable text, considering it derivative and changing; also, polysystem theorists (such as Toury 1999) make a similar proposal.

Ultimately, what is at stake is the construction of discursive and moral authority (*auctoritas*) that guarantees the effectiveness of the translation task for texts that project a particular character: the sacred. This sacredness does not resist, as we shall see, reformulation, but requires, in order to maintain its transcendent character, a *re-creation* that does not abandon servility to the letter, but that at the same time can recreate its sacred aura in a new context.

2. Translations and translators in Late Antiquity

Late Antiquity – which we will operationally consider to develop between the third and eighth centuries C.E. and to be characterised by a continuity in the socio-political forms of Antiquity and by changes and transformations in the cultural and spiritual aspects³ — was a time in which translations from Greek into Latin proliferated, since from the fourth century men no longer read Greek as their ancestors in the *pars occidentalis* of the Empire had (Cameron 1977; Fontaine 1977). It was necessary, therefore, to translate the great philosophical and literary works to continue the construction of

which implies a connection with some hidden truth, that makes exegesis necessary, along with the development of strategies to that end (cf. also Coulter 1976; Struck 2014). Hence also the importance of translation – another form of exegesis – both of the Scriptures and *Timaeus* in this period.

2. On these concepts in relation to translation and commentary in Late Antiquity, cf. Goulet-Cazé (2000).
3. On Late Antiquity and its characteristics, cf. Brown (1971), Cameron (1998), among others.

a cultural *koine*. Unlike what happened in the first century B. C. – another great moment for translation in Rome – in this case it was not a question of assembling the Latin literary-philosophical canon, but of recovering the works of the past in a context of reconfiguration of cultural identity (Macías Villalobos 2015).

On the philosophical-spiritual level, Christianity and Neoplatonism conformed two streams of religious-philosophical thought, concerned with strengthening their sovereignty and (re)constructing their tradition departing from “sacred” texts. The (neo)platonic tradition was proposed as the authoritative exegesis of Plato’s works, while Christianity endeavoured to construct a rhetoric that was based on the classical tradition, the only tradition available in the Roman world at that time. Both shared an interest in the exegesis of previous doctrines and in the strategies and resources applied to this purpose. Since Late Antiquity is an “exegetical” stage—as opposed to a previous “prophetic” stage, in which truths would have already been proffered (Athanasiasiadi 2005)—it was essential to develop mechanisms for reading and interpreting texts that constituted the anchoring of doctrines (Coulter 1976). Likewise, Late Antiquity has been classified as “an era of prefaces” and an “era of interpretation”, alluding to the strong metaliterary turn that can be seen in the works of the period (Elsner & Hernández Lobato 2017). Works of Late Antiquity are also met with the reflections of their authors on their own practices, showing that they feel the need to explain the new strategies they brought into play to read and interpret the classical past.

In this general context, translation occupies a central place for both Christianity and Neoplatonism. Moreover, translating or commenting on a text was a way of constructing *auctoritas*, attaching one’s own name to a prestigious text. Along with translation, there is also a profuse activity of amendment, editing and commentary on texts in Late Antiquity, both by pagans and Christians, showing that translation was part of an integral approach to texts aimed at their understanding, adaptation, systematization, and dissemination (Cameron 1977). Accompanying the activity of translation itself we find metaliterary considerations about the translation task, its strategies, its function, its purpose, and its problems.

In the case of sacred texts, we must bear in mind that sacredness is not only a matter of meaning, but is constructed from the *littera*, and the

challenge of the translator, in Late Antiquity, is to *maintain* or *reconstruct* the sacred authority of the text, according to a norm of “literality” that carried great weight at that time (this is not verified for sacred texts in all epochs, since, like any norm, it is changeable). In this context, it is relevant to analyse how Calcidius and Jerome position themselves in the reading and translation of these sacred texts (Plato-the Bible), through what strategies they build their discursive authority, and which ideas about translation arise from their reflections.

3. Calcidius: translator and commentator of Plato's *Timaeus*

Calcidius was, at the end of the fourth century C.E., the author of the translation and commentary on *Timaeus* read by medieval men. This is how they became acquainted with Plato: through the Latin version of Calcidius. There was a partial translation by Cicero, which the speaker had included in another, ultimately unpublished work, but it was not very widely disseminated until later (Macías Villalobos 2005). *Timaeus* was undoubtedly Plato's most influential text until early modernity, mainly because it encapsulated one of the central points of his philosophy: cosmology.

We do not know much about Calcidius, no more than he suggests in his work and in particular in the dedicatory letter that we will analyse. Probably Christian – at least formally converted – he seems to have written at the end of the fourth century and his translation and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* is his only known work. Apparently written on behalf of Osius (who has been identified as Bishop of Cordoba) the work does not translate or comment on the entirety of *Timaeus*, nor are its sections of even length. His interpretations in the *Commentary* seem to respond more to middle Platonism than to the Neoplatonism of his time. Some critics have interpreted this as an attempt by Calcidius to distance himself from the Neoplatonism-Christianity polemics of the fourth century, taking refuge in previous debates, already overcome (on Calcidius, its identification and dating, see Waszink 1962; Villalobos 2014; Magee 2016).

The *Epistle* dedicated to Osius, which we will analyse in this section, *precedes* the partial translation of the Platonic *Timaeus* (which covers from 17 to 53c), and the *Commentary*. Since it is still a discussion of specialised

criticism whether the epistle is real or apocryphal, for the purposes of this work we will take it as part of the text, but we will add the paragraphs of the *Commentary* (of which the authorship is undoubted) in which Calcidius takes up the reflections on his translation practice⁴. As in many commentaries, although the majority of the text usually consists of an operation of copying and pasting from different sources in order to explain the author⁵, the introductory paragraphs are frequently programmatic textual spaces in which the commentator's own voice is raised.

Firstly, in the following programmatic passage at the end of *the Epistle*, the three axes of analysis that we are interested in highlighting (*Ep.* 7) are outlined⁶:

non solum transtuli sed etiam partis eiusdem commentarium feci putans reconditae rei simulacrum sine interpretationis explanatione aliquanto obscurius ipso exemplo futurum.

[Not only have I translated but I have made a commentary, convinced that the reproduction of an intricate subject without an explanation of the interpretation would result in something darker than the original itself.]

At the beginning of the *Commentary*, Calcidius expands on his double task, presenting these same ideas (*In Tim.* 1.4):

sola translatione contentus non fui ratus obscuri minimeque inlustris exempli simulacrum sine interpretatione translatum in eiusdem aut etiam maioris obscuritatis vitio futurum. Et ea quae mihi visa sunt in aliqua difficultate sic interpretatus sum.

[I was not satisfied with mere translation, considering that the reproduction of an obscure and unclear model, translated without interpretation, would result in a defect of equal or even greater obscurity than that of the model, and thus, what seemed to me of some difficulty, I interpreted.]

First, let us consider the notions of difficulty and obscurity (*obscuritas*) associated with the source text, but also with the translation, which would result in the same darkness if not done properly. Although we cannot forget

4. We are not denying the originality of commentary as a genre, since the organisation of the topics, the choice of sources, and the arrangement of the information respond to the layout of the commentator.

5. I follow Bakhouché's (2011) edition for the Latin text, and the translations are mine.

6. The bold type is mine in all cases.

that these qualifications fall within the framework of the topic of modesty, typical of prologue texts, they are still significant with respect to the translation task. The difficulty associated with *obscuritas* is, at the same time, an excuse for the action of translating (and commenting), and a way to avoid disrespecting the *auctoritas* of the source text. We translate (and comment on) a text that is valuable, but at the same time difficult and opaque, due to either the language or the content (Goulet-Cazé 2000). The association of these challenges with the notion of obscurity (a tireless metaphor of translators and commentators in Late Antiquity, according to García Jurado 2007) is a way of linking difficulty to a rhetorical virtue, that of *brevitas*. That is to say that there is not, deep down, a flaw in style or expertise (as would be impossible to attribute to Plato) but a temporal, cultural, and linguistic gap that must be filled. This is what the translation seeks here in its double aspect of translation and commentary. In fact, at the beginning of the *Commentary*, Calcidius indicates that (*In Tim.* 1.1):

Timaeus Platonis et a ueteribus difficilis habitus atque existimatus est ad intellegendum, non ex imbecillitate sermonis obscuritate nata –quid enim illo uiro promptius?— sed quia legentes artificiosae rationis, quae operatur un explicandis rerum quaestionibus, usum non habebent stili genere sic instituto...
[Plato's *Timaeus* was regarded and valued as difficult to comprehend also by the ancients, not because of an expressive inefficiency born from obscurity—for who could be more ingenious than that man [Plato]? —but because readers were not familiar with this ingenious method, which is concerned with explaining questions of content...]

The double difficulty of facing the translation of *Timaeus* is evident here: the difficulty in expression (which was not the case for Plato's contemporary Greek-speaking interlocutors, but rather in the fourth century C.E. in the West); and the difficulties related to its contents, which Calcidius attributes to the multiple disciplines, sciences, and theories presented in this work.

Secondly, translation is characterised here by the idea of *simulacrum*, which can be understood as “reproduction” in an empty or misleading sense, as an image; an almost ghostly appearance. In this term – which bears great semantic weight in the Platonic tradition – we find the idea that translation without explanation is simply a superficial *copy*, which does not account for

the *truth* (that is, the original and its revelation)⁷. In connection with this idea of *simulacrum*, the counterpart of the *explanatio interpretationis* appears, that is, the development of an explanation, of an interpretation, which the *Commentary* itself embodies. There are two ideas of translation here, if we understand this concept in a broad sense: that of the *verba*, that of the *sensus*. In these statements of Calcidius we find the idea that commentary is a type of translation, cultural, intralingual, and diachronic, in line with modern theories (as in Steiner 1997). This concept is so relevant that Calcidius uses the word *extricatio* (“explanation”, “solution”) documented here for the only time in the Latin language, when at the beginning of the *Epistle* he says, alluding to the idea that his friendship towards Osius will make him overcome the difficulties of the task:

Eadem est, opinor, vis amicitiae parque impossibilium paene rerum extricatio.
[This is, in my opinion, the strength of friendship and identical is the capacity for the explanation of almost impossible things.]

Finally, there are also some elements related to the character of the commented work, which Calcidius repeatedly describes as “impossible” or “almost impossible” because of their difficulty (as in the previous quotation), and also as “sacred”, or of divine inspiration, when he points out in the *Epistle* (1.7):

Itaque parui certus non sine divino instinctu id mihi a te munus iniungi.
[Surely you have entrusted me with this task not without divine inspiration.]

The character of the original here is an inescapable force, since this force comes from its sacredness, from its very character of revelation. Within the Platonic tradition, texts are successive discursive elaborations on a truth once pronounced (by Pythagoras, by Plato; by God in the framework of Christianity), but now incomprehensible, distant, and in need of reworking. However, the guarantee that these discursive reworkings are “true” is their degree of agreement with the previous texts. The deviation or interpretation in a different direction is, in essence, an act of discursive falsehood since agreement with previously spoken words conforms a circle of validation

7. We will shortly see what the “sacred” character of the original consisted of, which translators were not supposed to ignore.

(as proposed by Eon 1970). Translation is subject to these very same rules, according to which a deviation is not only a literary or linguistic issue, but a moral and doctrinal one. Therefore, translation borders on the field of the heretical (in the case of the Scriptures, no doubt; and in a broad sense, also in the case of the Platonic doctrines). Somehow, if the *littera* is respected, this sacred character of the original flows towards the translation – or so Calcidius hopes – when he qualifies his work as something never done before⁸ by saying that Osius had conceived “a work not attempted until now” (*operis intemptati ad hoc tempus*, Ep. 1.5). The problem with this “emanation” of the sacred – which is, incidentally, very Neoplatonic – is that it does not guarantee understanding, or it proposes another form of understanding, which is not rational per se, but which does concern Calcidius enough to add a comment. In brief, the problem of translation is also that of exegesis and of understanding the texts to be translated.

4. Jerome: *interpre*s and *orator*

We know much more about Jerome than about Calcidius, of course, since he was the translator of the Bible into Latin in the fourth century, and from him we have inherited many reflections on translation in several of his letters, such as the one dedicated to his friend Pammachius, which we will analyse (*Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*, 57). Jerome describes his procedure and method of translation much more explicitly than Calcidius. The letter is based on Cicero’s text *De optimo genere oratorum*, in which the Arpinate – a prolific translator of Greek texts – lays down a series of basic rules so that orators are able to understand the speeches of the great Greek figures. Here Cicero argues that the orator cannot translate a text word for word but should focus on reproducing the *eloquence* of the original text and, of course, its *meaning*. He classifies the person who translates literally as *interpre*s, that is, the figure of the translator (5.14)⁹:

8. Although we know that Cicero had completed a partial translation of *Timaeus*, as we have already discussed. However, perhaps the allusion of Calcidius has to do with the way in which he translated, completing his work with the *Commentary*, making it more accessible to other kinds of people who were not “specialists”.

9. I follow the text of Yon (1964) and the translations are mine.

nec converti ut interpres, sed ut orator, sentiis isdem et earum formis tamquam figuris, verbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis. In quibus non verbum pro verbo necesse habui reddere, sed genus omne verborum vimque servavi.

[And I did not translate as an interpreter, but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and forms, or figures of thought, but in a language that suits our usage. In these [translations] I didn't find it necessary to render word for word, but I preserved the overall style and strength of the words.]

Jerome, in *Epistle 57*, following the Ciceronian model, asserts that there are two ways of translating, the enunciation of which we will take as objects of analysis. One of them is to translate word for word, that is, literally; and Jerome specifically says that the Holy Scriptures must be translated in this way because of their dogmatic character. However, he says that in translating any other writing, it must be done according to the meaning and not the words¹⁰. The proposal is enunciated by Jerome when he defends his own translation of the letter for which he is accused (*Ep. 57.5*)¹¹:

Nunc vero cum ipsa epistula doceat nihil mutatum esse de sensu, nec res additas, nec aliquod dogma confictum, faciunt ne intelligendo ut nihil intelligent et dum alienam imperitiam volunt coarguere, suam produnt. Ego enim non solum fateor, sed libera voce profiteor me in interpretatione Graecorum, absque Scripturis sanctis ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est, non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu.

[But the truth is that the same letter shows nothing of the meaning has been changed, nothing has been added, nor any doctrine has been invented; with which it is seen that those, "by dint of understanding, do not understand anything at all"¹² and wanting to argue the ignorance of others, betray their own. For I not only confess, but proclaim out loud that, except for the Holy Scriptures, in which even the order of words contains mystery, in

10. As Brock (1979: 70) points out, the dichotomy between literalness and freedom in translating experiences a rupture from the advent of Christianity and the translations of sacred texts. On the medieval fate of Jerome's proposal, cf. Schwarz (1944). On the broader theme of translation in the Middle Ages, cf. Copeland (1991).

11. I follow the Latin text of Labourt (1949), and the translations presented here are mine. The bold type is also mine in every case.

12. The quote corresponds to Terence, *Andria*, Prol., 17. It is interesting to note how a quotation of authority – in this case, from a Roman comedian – also functions as a resource to construct the discursive *auctoritas* that Jerome seeks.

the translation of the Greeks, I do not express word for word but meaning from meaning.]

Jerome also warns of some translators—apostles and evangelists, he tells us—who did not fulfill their task *ad litteram*, and who sometimes sought to convey meaning more than words (*Ep.* 57:9):

Ex quibus universis perspicuum est apostolos et evangelistas in interpretatione veterum Scripturarum sensum quaesisse, non verba, nec magnopere de ordine sermonibusque curasse, dum intellectui res pateret.

[From all these things, it is evident that, in the interpretation of the ancient Scriptures, the apostles and evangelists did not seek words so much as meaning, nor did they care much about construction and terms, as long as what was to be understood was accessible.]

However, Jerome also recognises that this can be a problem that threatens the task of translation, if we reread the epigraph with which this work began: “If I translate to the letter, it sounds bad; if, out of necessity, I change something in the order of speech, it will seem that I am leaving the office of interpreter” (*Si ad verbum interpretor, absurde resonant; si ob necessitatem aliquid in ordine, vel in sermone mutavero, ab interpretis videbor officio recessisse*)¹³. In a more provocative tone than Calcidius, our author makes clear what the problem is. The translator is intended to do the impossible: to respect the letter and to respect the meaning. Despite the centuries that separate us from this text, we can recognise familiar problems of modern Translation Studies hinted at in this sentence, such as the “impossibility” of translation from a strictly linguistic perspective, where exact equivalents are not found between two languages (and of course at the other, more philosophical, extreme, we have the position that “everything can be translated”). However, for Jerome, in the case of the sacred text, this “deviation” of which the translator may be found guilty if he does not stick to the letter, does not have the character of an error, but instead acquires a moral nature, and thus mistranslating is considered a crime (“*crimen*”) (*Ep.* 57.2):

ut inter imperitos concionentur me falsarium, me verbum non expressisse de verbo, pro “honorabili” dixisse “carissimum”, et maligna interpretatione – quod

13. Jerome, *Ad Pammacchium de optimo genere interpretandi* 57.7.

nefas dictu sit – αἰδουσιμώτατον Παππαν noluisse transferre. Haec et istiusmodi nugae crimina mea sunt.

[They proclaim among the unlearned that I am a forger, that I did not express word for word; for “honourable” I put “dearest” and, with malignant interpretation—which is not lawful to say—, that I did not want to translate the superlative *aidesimótaton* [= most reverend]. This nonsense and the like are my crimes.]

The *interpretatio* is *maligna* and it is a “bad translation”, not because of its errors, but rather because it implies a bad intention. That is to say that the freedom provided by less literal translation generates space for distortions and evils, for falsehoods and deception¹⁴.

At some point, it is the very same difficulty or obscurity of the source text that warns of its simplification *ad sensum*: a text as complex, mysterious and obscure as the Scriptures – or at least sections of it – presents some danger if we want to translate freely, since we run the risk of modifying it. Again, exegesis appears as an essential element: the difficulty of the text can cause the translator to misunderstand it, or, if he understands it well, his terminological changes can sow confusion or modify the message. Better, then, stick to the letter. Like Calcidius with Plato, Jerome cannot ignore the almost “untouchable” character of the source text when it comes to the Scriptures. This is because sacredness is encoded not only in sense, but also in form.

In addition to the rational comprehension of the text – which Calcidius tried to alleviate with his *Commentary* – Jerome also mentions the presence of “mystery” (*et verborum ordo mysterium est*) also contained in the form, enclosed in the words. There is something related to the order of the transcendent, of the magical, of the hypnotic, that language produces, and which is also part of the “understanding” of the sacred text. Almost as it happens with hymns, the linguistic arrangement has an effect that is not only stylistic but is also a *guarantee* of its sacredness.

14. As an extremely interesting and representative case of the transformations involved in a translation, we need only recall the reference to the translation of the Epistle of Paul by Jerome, analysed by Ginzburg (2013). According to this author, the Pauline maxim “*noli altum sapere*”, went from being a warning against spiritual arrogance, to being an admonition against the knowledge of “high” things in Jerome’s translation.

5. *Vertere* sacred texts, translating Literature

In the reflections of both authors, “fidelity” to the sacred text, which would become “literality” when translating, finds coherence in the framework of the exegetical thought of Late Antiquity. The truth has been previously revealed, and its successive discursive reworkings (among which translation is one more) should not make any deviation from this first moment of revelation. Pythagoras, Plato, and the Scriptures are all revealed truths that have been distant in time, space, and code; and although translation is a bridge to bring them closer, that is not its only function. It is not merely utilitarian. The most important function is to repeat them, reiterate them, *re-present* them in our current space, time, and code. It is not only a question of making them understandable for the reader, but of bringing this truth back before their eyes, almost as in a new performative or theatrical act. In order to do that, the form and not only the meaning must be *re-presented*. Fidelity does not only mean literality but acquires a moral dimension according to which deviating from the original letter is an affront to tradition, to *auctoritas*, and to the truth of revelation. The idea of translation as “transformation” – which in our times we find in proposals of a more functionalist nature, such as Polysystem Theory¹⁵ – is not acceptable, and embodies, in fact, everything that one desires to avoid when translating the sacred.

However, the problem of the possible unintelligibility derived from this attachment to the letter does not escape the reflections of our authors who are – after all – translators. Jerome places himself at the centre of the conflict with his considerations. Calcidius’ proposal is to complete the translation with an interpretation, which gives real essence to this *simulacrum*, that is, the text expressed in another language. It should not escape us that the Scriptures and *Timaeus* were among the most commented on and explained texts of Late Antiquity, if not by their translators, by commentators, exegetes, and teachers. The conflict of unintelligibility is answered by multitudes of exegetical strategies and literary genres concerned precisely with clarifying and explaining. Translation as we understand it today was, then, embodied

15. Specifically, present in the texts of Even-Zohar (1999) and Toury (1999).

in several forms (translation, notes, commentary...) which had different types of relationships with the original text.

This sacred aura, so evident in the philosophical and religious texts of Late Antiquity, is not entirely absent in other cases, closer in time and space to our own translation practices. Is it not true that certain literary texts project, by their cultural place, this sacred halo before which the translator feels, at times, that s/he must yield with total attachment, submission, and “fidelity”, or at least doubt his/her judgment in this regard while performing the task, feeling that s/he lacks some more or less imaginary dignified moral obligation? Of course, Translation Studies offer other reflections and alternatives to this perspective, in which the translator need not be a marginal or subordinate figure, nor should his/her own work be marginal as it is, in the end, creation, and not mere *simulacrum*. However, beyond the character of Platonic demiurge that translators have conquered in recent years, the conflictive relationship with the original is not absent in almost any of the theoretical reflections on translation practice.

Calcidius and Jerome were aware of the problems that this morally faithful way of approaching translation implied, and their choices were conditioned by cultural and conjunctural elements: literalism was necessary in the case of sacred texts, but not in all cases. They knew why they did it, when they did it, and what problems they were facing as a result of these choices. And they also developed strategies to solve or deal with these problems derived from “literal” translation. Perhaps we can aspire, then, as their readers and heirs, for our practices always to be the product of our choices – situated, limited, and restricted by our historical context – the consequences of which we know and are prepared to face.

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