

Norwich Papers

STUDIES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

Volume 11 September 2003

*Translation
and
Metaphor*

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Of Originals and Pods: *The Body Snatchers* as a Metaphor of Translation

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On a quiet fall evening in the small, peaceful town of Santa Mira, California, Dr. Miles Bennell discovers an insidious, horrifying plot. Silently, subtly, almost imperceptibly, alien life-forms are taking over the bodies and minds of his neighbours, his friends, his family – the world as he knows it.

Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* (1955) tells the story of an alien invasion. But it is also an insight into the problematic nature of humans, and the anxiety concerning the definition of 'identity' when it comes to be threatened by the acknowledgement of 'otherness'. The story is pervaded by allegorical meanings: mysterious pods arrive from some unknown source, and each of them transforms itself into a body identical to the nearest human being. The product of this transformation is then to have a new personality, which overlaps and merges with the original one, giving birth to a completely new identity. 'At first glance, everything looked the same', says Dr. Bennell at the beginning of the story. 'There is something missing' we are told. At the same time, we will discover, something else has been 'gained' (Finney 1955: 170).

I have chosen this story of 'originals' being turned into something else, yet still remaining apparently 'the same', as a metaphor to talk about the process of translation and the breakdown of distinction between original and copy. Indeed, the heart-broken cry of the little boy confronting a pod-version of his mother - 'this is not my mommy'- parallels the cry we often hear when discussing translation: 'this is not like the original'. Or, in film translation, 'this is not like the book'. The act of renarrating a story is perceived as a form of transgression, what is at stake is the contamination of the original and the impossibility of preserving the authority of

the text. A parallel can be drawn between the alien duplication of human bodies - a transformation that implies both a changing and a strict resemblance to the originals -and the destiny of the text, subjected across the years to subsequent manipulation, yet able to preserve its identity. In *The Task of the Translator* (1955/1969), Walter Benjamin reformulated the relationship between the 'original' and its translations, making a distinction between the life of the original text and its after-life, its power to survive (*fortleben*, 'to live on') its specific temporal dimension. In the survival of the literary work, the original itself undergoes a change, adjusting itself both to historical circumstances and to the language chosen to re-express it.

Written originally in the form of a short story, *The Body Snatchers* has been able to expand its nucleus, to renew its voice over and over, enjoying a rich after-life thanks to its successive translation. The story has been rewritten several times, both by its author and by various scriptwriters. These rewritings have to be considered as a 'translation', an act that brings the text across its temporal dimensions. The process may imply many losses, and form is often severely sacrificed to the spirit of the text, but it is through this transformation that the text is able to survive its contingencies.

From the short-story serialised in the American *Collier's Magazine* (1954), the plot was expanded into a novel published in 1955. At the same time, the author supervised the script for a cinematic version directed by Don Siegel in 1956. The year 1978 saw both a remaking of the film by Philip Kaufman, and the re-writing of the novel. Finally, director Abel Ferrara re-made the film in 1993, using the original plot as a starting point to create a wholly new atmosphere. This article is an attempt to prove that, although completely different from each other, all the versions have faithfully translated the 'invariant core' of the original story.

The Invariant Core

It is possible to deconstruct the story-elements of *The Body Snatchers* in order to detect its 'invariants', and to highlight the essential lines that form its kernel. Finney's story belongs to a precise genre called 'science fiction', because it satisfies the characteristics of 'scientificity' and 'counterfactuality' considered essential to the genre. But the story is also linked to the horror genre, in the sense that it subtly excites the 'terminals of fear' hidden in the reader's mind. One powerful way to arouse terror is to ground a story in absolute reality, building a scenario that will appear familiar to the reader, and then to insert a series of elements that will progressively alter and erode the façade of normality. In his 1919 *Das Unheimliche*, Sigmund Freud analyses the quality of feelings that are aroused by certain works of art. There are novels, he says, that present certain aspects of reality as normal, yet are able to generate inexplicable feelings of dread and terror. This core of feelings is labelled *unheimlich*, a word that can be translated as 'unhomely' or 'unfamiliar', or 'uncanny'. Relying upon etymology, Freud first analyses the word in opposition to *heimlich*, underlying that the expression bears different shades of meaning, and it is used to identify

two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight. [...] Unheimlich is [...] used as the contrary only of the first signification of heimlich, not of the second. (Freud 1919: 345)

Freud then uses Schelling's words: 'Everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' (1919: 372). To Freud, a feeling of the uncanny arises when a particular element of the story elicits some psychological aspect that the reader's mind had repressed or censored. He provides us with a 'theme-index' that includes living automata, with all the connections to the fear of

inanimate objects believed to possess the secret power of coming to life - animism, waxwork figures, doubles, alter egos and 'mirror selves', the fantasy of being buried alive, the constant recurrence of the same thing or same action. These are the devices through which literature deals with frightening elements that have been repressed. Assuming that we react to literary inventions as we would react to real experiences, his conclusion is that 'an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (1919: 345).

Combining horror and science fiction in a 'supernaturalisation' of everyday life, *The Body Snatchers* appears to be a summary of the dreadful themes that started to 'come to light' in opposition to the Enlightenment faith in the explanatory power of reason and science. The novel seems to have taken as a model the discourse on the uncanny that lies at the very heart of the psychoanalytic exploration of our modern era. The elements of fear and horror that are characteristic of our culture are disassembled, re-assembled, and explored in their philosophical values, to provide a meta-horror, a novel that epitomises all the themes that are canonical in fantastic literature. Many are the elements drawn from the literary genre of the fantastic: the haunted house, vampirism (the aliens can survive only by sucking up their victim's life), the *danse macabre* – with the recurring representation of theories of human bodies turned into emotionless automata walking along the streets, each of them carrying a mortal pod in his hands; necrophilia, in the scene of Dr. Bennell kissing the simulacra of Becky (Kaufman's filmic translation adds a touch of horror to a scene showing Becky's body decomposing when he kisses her). Also, the key element of the narration refers to a broader idea of horror seen from an anthropological point of view - the act of sleeping, considered as a privileged *locus* of the communication between life and death.

Translation as a Mirror

The Body Snatchers follows the 'aliens' formula prevalent in the popular culture of the 1950s, when Russia and America were exploring the possibility of interplanetary voyages. Stories about the conflict between our own species and alien life forms were common at that time, a scenario brilliantly described by Susan Sontag (1976: 116) as 'the imagination of disaster'. In these stories, the narrative evolves through a predictable pattern; the arrival of the alien has to be witnessed or suspected by the hero, male, usually young, often a scientist, always unmarried. The hero must have a girlfriend, sweet and sympathetic - who eventually finds herself in great danger, and must lead a quiet, normal life in some ultra-normal middle-class environment. Suddenly, someone starts to behave strangely, and after some sort of investigation the evil plot is unveiled and plans have to be made to destroy the enemy. The hero is then supported by his endless faith in human superiority, be it scientific, technological or moral. Aliens *must* be vulnerable to something, after all.

In spite of the easy criticism that places him as an exponent of 'trash' culture, Finney created a work that is considered a classic of the science fiction genre. If a classic is, borrowing Steiner's definition, 'an oeuvre that endlessly demands an active anticipation' (Steiner 1977: 22), *The Body Snatchers*, with its five different endings, seems very much a product of the Borgesian Total Library, that 'vast, contradictory Library, whose vertical wildernesses of books run the incessant risk of changing into others that affirm, deny, and confuse everything like a delirious God'. (Borges 2000: 216).

What it may be interesting to note is that the original story became a classic precisely *in virtue* of its successive translations, and not *in spite* of them. In *The Body Snatchers*, the original text has always remained the same, and the different intervention on its form has only enhanced its unique characteristics. Translation is a mirror then, bearing in mind that the function of a mirror is not only to reproduce a certain