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ONTOLOGY AND SACRALITY – THE TWO TRANSLATIVE DOMINANTS OF THE WORKS BY THOMAS PYNCHON

Abstract: The article deals with the concept of *dominant* with regard to the translation process and various definitions of this term (e.g. *the translative dominant* as defined by Bednarczyk). Then the study presents the works by Thomas Pynchon, a leading postmodern American writer, stressing the possibility of applying a wide spectrum of translative dominants to his multifaceted fiction, which explores the aesthetic ambiguities within the postmodern literary convention. Finally, the article offers two main translative dominants as adequate for the analysis of Pynchon's works in translation i.e. the ontological dominant and the sacral dominant. The description of the ontological dominant draws heavily on McHale's understanding of this concept, while the discussion of the sacral dominant involves the possible analogy of approach to translation between texts within the postmodern convention such as Pynchon's and sacral texts e.g. the Bible.

Key words: dominant, postmodern literature, ontology, sacrality.

The dominant

One of the useful tools which might be used for the purpose of translation analysis is the concept of *dominant*: a certain hierarchical arrangement, performed by a translator/translation scholar in the process of source text interpretation according to which the target text adequacy can be assessed. An animated debate is in progress as to the scope of the meaning of this concept: whether a dominant can be perceived as a textual invariant, whether there can be multiple dominants depending on a given translator's standpoint, to what extent it is subjective, how environmental factors can influence it and how the source text conditions its choice.

Barańczak offers his own definition:

One of the [translator's] first decisions, which often decides about the success of the whole translation, is to notice in the original its 'semantic dominant', a basic organising principle of the whole and more important than other features of the work. It is an essential decision the more so that in the process of translation the translator will be forced to various eliminations or substitutions of stylistic features of the original; this what the translator deemed to be the semantic dominant has to be always carefully watched and they cannot quit trying to preserve the domination of this feature in the translation (1994:112, trans. Ł.B.).

Or more succinctly, he defines *the semantic dominant* as *the element of the structure of a poetic text that constitutes the key to the entirety of its senses* (Barańczak 1990:36, trans. Ł.B.), maintaining the position of one overwhelming dominant for each text.

Bednarczyk states that the dominant is difficult to establish as it is not possible to *surgically* separate one textual tissue from another. She defines the dominant as *the element of structure of the translated work, which has to be translated (recreated) in the target work in order to preserve the whole of its subjectively relevant features* (1999:19, trans. Ł.B.), differentiating the translator's dominant (*the conscious motivation of the translator*) from the translative dominant (*the determinant of the equivalence of the whole translated text or of its chosen element to the original*), and that of the author's or the reviewer's one (1999:145-146). In the above definition she stresses the phrase *subjectively relevant features* to indicate the relativity of the selected dominant dependent on many linguistic and extralinguistic features (a given culture of historical period) (1999:16). She treats the ST and TT as *associemes (asocjemy)* where the ST possesses a wide range of both complex and basic associations and the TT evokes the basic ones but only a limited number of the complex ones. She attributes this fact to the subjective and idiosyncratic focus of the translator, who interprets the text in a necessarily biased way (1999:47-48,65). Additionally, she comes to the conclusion that various elements of the original structure can play the role of the dominant to preserve *the subjectively relevant features* (1999:47-48) and discerns *the intersemiotic dominant* related to non-linguistic elements (1999:143).

In view of the above considerations, it may be assumed that for a singular literary work it is possible to establish a multiplicity of *translative dominants*, as a consequence of the inherent subjectivity of the interpretation process. The term *translative dominant*, understood as the perceived hierarchy which prioritizes sense-productive elements in the text, subjectively selected by a translation scholar who analyses a given translation, will be utilised for the purpose of the analysis of the works by Thomas Pynchon, an American postmodern novelist.

Pynchon - the Postmodernist

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon is one of the leading figures within the postmodern convention. It is frequently asserted that he *is to postmodernism as James Joyce is to modernism*. His works can be deemed *unprecedented* and *representative* of the whole literary age (Nicol 2009:189) and the critics seem to agree that *in contemporary literature there is hardly any writer who could excel [him] in daring, wit and exuberance* (Niedziela and Rokosz-Piejko 2012:131). The comparison to Joyce stands as Pynchon's works teeming with multiple references, coded messages, ambiguous leads have generated legions of interpreters and a vast body of critical texts with ever-growing *Pyndustry* of hermeneutical guides promising to comprehend the writings of this veritable *prophet of doom* (Berressem 2012:169-170).

The ontological dominant

It seems a challenging, if not impossible, task, to say the least, to determine one dominant tendency in Pynchon's novels, the epitome of literary multiplicity. McHale attempts to explain the inner workings of Pynchon's fiction using the term *ontological dominant*, which results in the focus on issues of existence, identity and subjectivity in these texts. McHale asserts that *an ontology is a description of a universe, not of the universe* (1987:27), and emphasises the indefinite article. He highlights the shift in Pynchon's writing that occurred between his most renowned novels *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although, generally speaking, Pynchon's oeuvre is considered to be postmodern, for McHale *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to be still partly rooted in modernism as the textual evidence *hesitates between the epistemological and the ontological lines of explanation, without finally resolving the hesitation* (1987:24). In *The Crying of Lot 49* the protagonist does not break *the closed circle of solipsism* (Oedipa is waiting for the revelation if the patterns she sees in the world are solipsist or actually exist – the novel has an open ending) and Pynchon does not exceed the framework of epistemological premises of modernism. It is *Gravity's Rainbow* that proves to be a *breakthrough*: fiction where *anarchist miracle* can happen i.e. *another's world intrusion into this one like a kiss of cosmic pool balls* (Pynchon 1972:88,92). The epistemological cul-de-sac of modernism: solipsism is finally transcended – from Oedipa's confused cry *Shall I project a world?* (Pynchon 1972:59) to the *unconstrained projection of worlds in plural* in *Gravity's Rainbow* (McHale 1987:24-25). According to McHale the dominant of Pynchon's other novels is ontological (including the historiographic metafiction of *Mason&Dixon*), although the epistemological quest returns in *Inherent Vice* (2012:104). After the admittance of equally believable versions of truth, the following epistemological crisis can only be overcome by admitting the parallel existence of multiple worlds and their mutual comparison.

The ontological aspect of the postmodern dominant could be summarised by the considerations of Sidney Stencil, a character in Pynchon's early novel *V*, which are paradigmatic of the confusion experienced by Pynchon's both characters and readers:

Short of examining the entire history of each individual participating... short of anatomising each soul, what hope has anyone of understanding a Situation (emphasis – mine)? (Pynchon 1963:433).

Indeed, the ambiguity of a *Situation* (an existential condition in which nothing can be taken for granted) experienced not only by Pynchon's characters, but also readers, is the consequence of the lack of any certainties in the worlds of his depiction, which is the primary effect of Pynchon's writing (Schaub 1981:3-5). All narratives produce a plurality of possible worlds: *potential states of affairs, subjective realities, plans, expectations, dreams, fantasies*, not orbiting a single actual world. Pynchon's characters are especially inclined to hallucinations, fantasy, dreaming (Prentice, Slothrop, Enzian and Tchitcherine in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Doc Sportello in *Inherent Vice*, Mason in *Mason&Dixon*) or are paranoiacs *suffering systematized delusions and projecting hostile forces* (Siegel 1976:50). Except for the proliferation of *subjective realities*, Pynchon produces also *multiply objective alternative worlds*: "lost" worlds (the Hollow Earth in *Mason&Dixon*, Lemuria in *Inherent Vice*), *parallel worlds* (the heterotopian multi-world space of the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow*, eleven days lost in calendar reform in *Mason&Dixon*), *passages between worlds* (the water-logged construction site in *Inherent Vice*), *visitations form other worlds* (otherworldly visitations in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Mason's ghostly haunting in *Mason&Dixon*), *cameo visitations from historical figures* (e.g. Mickey Rooney in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Benjamin Franklin in *Mason&Dixon*) etc. taking advantage of the clashes between them (McHale 2012:104-105).

Ambiguity in Pynchon's works seems to be even more reinforced by strange loops in the narrative i.e. the worlds of various ontology can be juxtaposed, layered and stacked on each other – one plane of narrative is located inside another. One narrator tells a story, in which a *second-order narrator* again tells a story, within which another narrator is nested etc. Additionally, *remediation* to various works of art is applied (e.g. Remedios Varo in *The Crying of Lot 49*). Such proliferation combined with remediation creates multiple paradoxes that emphasise the story's ontology (*trompe l'oeil* – an inset level is mistaken for the primary level or *mise en abyme* – an inset text or artwork mirrors the primary narrative). *The heterodiegetic narrator* (not existing on the level of the world in the novel) seems to speak directly to the characters (at a level lower than his) or to the reader (at a higher level) (McHale 1992:87-114). *Gravity's Rainbow* begins with what can be assumed to be the actual world, but is later revealed to be Prentice's nightmare and ends with the revelation that the novel might be in fact a movie watched by the readers, *old fans who've always been at the movies* (Pynchon 1973:760).

Another ambiguity involves an element of play with the metaphorical and literal meaning of words, making it difficult to tell the difference between the hierarchy of senses in a particular expression (e.g. Nefastis makes the metaphor of Maxwell's Demon literal in *The Crying of Lot 49*). McHale focuses on the phenomenon he calls *worlds under erasure* i.e. making and unmaking the worlds depicted in the narrative by destabilising devices of world *deconstructing, unnarrating or rescinding* (2012:108). The erasure seems to be particularly easy in worlds full of *endless simulacra and drifting signifiers* as presented in the Californian hyperreality of *The Crying of Lot 49* (Kolbuszewska 2000:86). To conclude, the haunting spectre of the ontological erasure looming in Pynchon's works seems to substantiate the claim that the ontological dominant can be seen as one of the translative dominants of his fiction.

The sacral dominant

Another perspective which might offer an insight into what is dominant in Pynchon's novels is that of *territorialised* literature offered by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who inscribes books into a larger political system, their code being a form of power and control. The regular, *territorialised* literature works within the systems/instruments of codification: by means of laws, contracts and institutions. Books of law include holy texts, books of contract – lay literature in regular distribution and books of institutions – all texts perpetuating the institutionalised power (Deleuze 1977:161-162).

There seems to be a marked resemblance between the perceived attitude towards the translation of Biblical texts (as *a book of law*) and the translative dominant that might be applied to Pynchon's works (as *a quasi-sacral text*): the underlying presumption that every bit of textual matter carries a meaning or meanings, the entirety of which might be beyond the perception of a single translator/exegetist or the whole human kind as known only to the divine being. The resemblance is founded by the mode of reading implied by Pynchon in his works (especially in *Gravity's Rainbow*) i.e. *creative paranoia*:

Of course a wee-developed They-system is necessary – but it's only half a story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative Paranoia means developing at least as through a We-system as a They-system. (...) [They-systems are] what They and Their hired psychiatrists call 'delusional systems' (Pynchon 1973:638).

Gravity's Rainbow plays with the possibility that *everything is either deeply significant or entirely meaningless* (paranoia or anti-paranoia) (Nicol 2009:96-97) and is structured to emphasise the focal point of paranoia: *the onset, the leading*

edge of the discovery that everything is connected (Pynchon's emphasis) (Pynchon 1973:703). In Pynchon's works, where the endless patterns of signifiers lead only to more signifiers, each part of the textual tissue can be equally meaningful (creative paranoia – each signifier contains meaning – zero textual redundancy) or completely meaningless (anti-paranoia – no signifier contains meaning – maximum textual redundancy). Pynchon's novels seem to mock pleonastic fiction, simultaneously offering two modes of reading, favouring the former one since anti-paranoia is *a condition not many of us can bear for long* (Pynchon 1973:434). Readers are required to read *Gravity's Rainbow* in a *rhizomatic* way, like *a vast network of potential symmetries and correspondences*, and even though there is a distant promise of some sort of *coherence*, it is not possible to find conclusion in the *oversignified* worlds of Pynchon's heroes. Such a reading allows making connections on *both a temporal and a spatial level*, where any point of the narrative *can potentially lead to any other* (Nicol 2009:97-98).

Early translators of the Bible, in turn, in their exegesis for the purposes of the translation process, followed the religious presumptions that the Word came directly from God and as such was not supposed to be tampered with. The resultant approach towards Bible translation varied with time: Romans focused on sense-for-sense translation (Cicero), which influenced the Middle Ages (Jerome). However, towards the late Middle Ages a new tendency towards literalism becomes ascendant, which was reflected in Jerome's occasional statements that stray away from his general standpoint. As Metzger (1993:143) says,

Jerome clearly advocated two different methods of translation, depending on whether the original is a secular or a sacred text. In the Bible every word is sacred. In his letter to Paulinus, Jerome wrote, "The Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words," and these mysteries must be preserved in the translation. Since the order of words transcends human understanding, a change in the order of words not only destroys this mystery, but it also endangers the profundity of the sacred texts.

Tymoczko attributes the late medieval shift towards literalism in terms of power struggle: Western European religion (church), commerce and governments wanted to *maintain the verbal, conceptual and epistemological authority intact* (2010:136). So the preconception of *translation as semantic transfer* has become deeply rooted in Western thought, which stems from the sacralisation of the word, *itself a consequence of the early Christian translation of 'the logos' of God in New Testament Greek as 'verbum', 'word (Word)', in Latin translations of the Bible, with the result that Jesus became equated with the Word become Flesh* (Tymoczko 2010:109).

The mode of reading (and translating) of Pynchon's books can be deemed similar to holy texts in the sense that it requires focus on the utmost importance of every

word, and the homogenising (rationalising) tendencies seem to fail as the infiniteness of text productivity will not allow the reader/interpreter to grasp the entirety of the textual meanings. Moreover, the homogenising tendencies can lead to shifts on the micro-level of the text leading to serious deviations on the macro-level.

Pynchon, *almost a mathematician of prose, who calculates the least and the greatest stress each word and line, each pun and ambiguity, can bear, and applies his knowledge accordingly and virtually without lapses, though he takes many scary, bracing linguistic risks* (Sissman 1973:128-140), thus becomes a point of tangency of two remote worlds, apparently having nothing in common: the world of holy texts and postmodern aesthetics/poetics, which might be seen as yet another argument of the hybridity of all texts. Pynchon's novels lie at the intersection of two drastically contrasted linguistic realms, the intersection being the extreme focus on *every* bit of textual substance.¹ The paradox here is that in Pynchon's case this focus aims to preserve multiplicity of the textual message, but in case of a holy text its goal is to preserve its unity. In Deleuze's terms: Pynchon's novels seen as nomadic texts (deterritorialising, escaping established codes, rhizomatic and anti-arborescent) paradoxically find a point of tangency with holy texts (non-nomadic, territorialising, governed by the holy law) in the way of their exegesis. This point of tangency is presented in Fig. 1 and called *the sacral dominant*, which might be deemed as one of the operative translative dominants for Pynchon's texts. The sacral dominant, resulting from the intensely paranoiac mode of reading, seems to be so aptly applicable nowhere in non-religious literature *absque Thomas Pynchon ubi et uerborum ordo mysterium est* (to paraphrase Jerome)² and possibly several other notable cases e.g. *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce.

From this perspective, literature in its postmodern incarnation seems to have come full circle. The initial rule of translation faithfulness, sacralised by its application to Holy Texts of the Church, was later transposed to any other seemingly profane texts and desacralised in the 18th century. The dominance of faithfulness in translation has put the author of the ST on pedestal and the translator in the shadow. Faithfulness was also reinforced by the apotheosis of the author as the creator or the demiurge, guided by outbursts of inspiration. Consequently, a translator started to be seen as a mere craftsman in comparison to the virtually divine ST author, an opinion, which has become so deeply rooted in the general subconsciousness that it does need even any intellectual substantiation (Skwarczyńska in Bukowski and Heydel 2013:130-136). Paradoxically, postmodern focus on the word, its logocentric momentum and its paranoiac undertones might stimulate a translator to undertake a stance similar to the one undertaken by medieval (and other) translators of the Bible.

¹ It has to be mentioned that a special focus on the structure of a text (both form and content) is characteristic of all aesthetic texts but here the focus takes unprecedented proportions fuelled by the unique motivation underlying the choice of the mode of reading, i.e. *creative paranoia*.

² *Except in the case of Thomas Pynchon, where even the order of words contains mystery.*

The notion of zero redundancy, indicated in Fig. 1, seems to resemble *maxmax* reading of literary works as opposed to *minimax*. Boase-Beier makes a cognitive distinction between literary and non-literary texts by means of Relevance Theory: the mini-max principle is how the reader operates in non-literary texts, using the minimal effort to produce maximum meaning; the max-max principle is how the reader operates in literary texts, using maximum effort to produce maximum meaning – the bigger effort is required from the readers to unravel the textual stylistic devices, the greater pleasure they derive from it (ambiguous, contradictory meanings become the main function of the literary text, allowing the simultaneous multiplicity of meanings in the special cognitive state of a reader’s mind) (Boase-Beier 2006:46-48). Several authors have defined the reward for maxmax reading as *cognitive gain* (MacKenzie 2002; Gutt 2000). Indeed, without the cognitive gain defined in this way, Pynchon’s novels seem to lose much of their sparkle and the exhaustion of maxmax reading appears to be *the* mode of reading them.

| The analysed text | Motivation behind the choice of the dominant | The common element | Examples of the resultant approach |
|-------------------|---|--|---|
| The Bible | Religious motivation: the preservation of <i>mysterium</i> in the Word of God, resulting from the inability of humans to understand the entirety of the Divine message (which can be hypothetically achieved by the external influence of the Holy Ghost as the Bible contains one eternally unchanged God’s message) | <u>The sacral dominant</u> : no element of the textual tissue is considered meaningless; | For the purpose of translation: in the early Middle Ages – sense-for-sense translation (Roman influence); towards the late Middle Ages - literalism (as a result of power struggle and the sacralisation of the word) |
| Pynchon’s novels | Creative paranoia as the interpretative mode of the postmodern aesthetics: the preservation of textual idiosyncrasies, resulting from the human inability to grasp the entirety of infinite sense-production of the text ³ (which can never be achieved as the text never stops its productive operation) | the text is perceived as having absolutely <i>zero redundancy</i> , which treats each item as potentially having a meaningful role | For the purpose of translation analysis: <i>maxmax</i> reading providing <i>cognitive gain</i> |

Figure 1. The sacral dominant as the common element in the translative dominants in case of Bible and Pynchon’s novels.

³ Additionally, paranoia is strongly related to Pynchon’s theme of Puritan ancestry: *a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible* (Pynchon 1973:188), which may be seen as a historical point of tangency between holy texts and Pynchon’s writings.

The implementation of the sacral dominant in translation practice seems to be limited by the inexorable fact of interpretation of a literary work. Because of temporal limitations the process of interpretation must be locked at some point, thwarting the infiniteness of meaning production in the original and countering a translator's efforts for precise ST recreation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that the ontological and the sacral dominant seem to be possible translative dominants, which might be applied to appreciate and adequately analyse Pynchon's multi-faceted fiction in the translation process. Both attempt to captivate the infinite meaning production potential within Pynchon's postmodern works. However, it has to be stated that they by no means exhaust the interpretative potential of his novels. Hopefully, more and more inventive translative dominants will be applied to Pynchon's works in the future, providing an enriched and invigorating experience of Pynchon's oeuvre.

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