Translating Traumatic Memories: What is forgotten in the English translation of Mercè Rodoreda’s El carrer de les Camèlies?

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Abstract. This working paper explores trauma, memory, translation, and loss. The paper discusses the extent to which traumatic events impact memory retelling and the ways in which this can be conveyed in literary fiction, exploring how this also affects the narrative and its portrayal in translation. Through the analysis of extracts from the novel El carrer de les Camèlies by Catalan author Mercè Rodoreda (1908–83) and its English translation, the paper considers how the retelling of traumatic memories impacts a text, leading to repetition, fragmentation, and the breakdown of a linear narrative. Rodoreda’s work depicts women as victims of trauma and male violence, often against the background of the Spanish Civil War, with female protagonists who struggle to come to terms with or voice their experiences of trauma. Both personal and collective trauma is apparent within the texts, which are engaged with to varying degrees in translation. The paper will focus firstly on how trauma and its memory affect the literary narrative, considering then how this is conveyed and retold in translation. By drawing on the work of Siobhan Brownlie on memory studies and translation, and Sharon Deane-Cox and Helena Buffery on the role of the translator and the representation of trauma in translation, I consider how the English-language versions of Rodoreda’s work attempt to (re)create or (re)narrate the traumatic memories of the source text, and whether this contributes to a sense of loss.

Siobhan Brownlie’s 2016 work, Mapping Memory in Translation, outlines the links between memory and translation, demonstrating how translation can perpetuate memory or, conversely, contribute to the forgetting of texts. Brownlie writes:

All interlingual translation is a matter of textual memory, since the translation embeds the memory of its source text. Even if a translation can also be conceived as forgetting the source text in the sense of effacing it through the act of replacement or reproducing it selectively, a translation maintains at the same time the role of perpetuating memory of its source text.¹

The question I will explore in this paper is the extent to which translation leads to the forgetting of the source text, by effacing, altering, and adding to its narratives, or whether the very existence of a translation contributes to the remembering of said text. Forgetting is itself inherent to the process of remembering, as we cannot remember everything, thus the choice to remember something necessitates forgetting something else. This process of remembering is reflected in translation, as the rewriting of the text in another language causes elements of the source text to be forgotten. In particular, I will explore how texts that feature a traumatic narrative, which I will here refer to as traumatic texts, can be remembered in translation, and how the renarration of trauma in translation can lead to the forgetting, or loss, of these memories.

Catalan writer Mercè Rodoreda’s novels frequently feature women protagonists as victims of trauma and of male violence, often against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, who struggle to come to terms with and voice their experiences of trauma. This is manifest within the texts through disruptive narrative strategies. Personal and collective trauma is apparent in Rodoreda’s works, which translators then engage with to varying degrees. I will therefore consider how the memory of trauma leads to the breakdown of a linear narrative, turning then to how this is conveyed in translation, and the extent to which such trauma is indeed remembered or forgotten.

Traumatic Texts as Memory Sites

Mercè Rodoreda is the most translated author in Catalan literature.2 Her most celebrated and well-known novel is La plaça del Diamant (1962), which has been translated from Catalan into over thirty languages (including three English translations) and forms part of the Catalan literary canon.3 Brownlie claims that classic novels can constitute cultural beacons or ‘memory sites’, defined as ‘a phenomenon that has acquired a special memorial status for a particular social group’.4 In linking this concept to translation, Brownlie proposes that ‘because interlingual translation involves different languages and possibly different cultures and time periods, it will entail transformation, including the proliferation of different interpretations that renew the memory site’.5 I propose that Rodoreda’s novels constitute memory sites, namely of Catalan society and culture both during and after the Spanish Civil War, whilst also featuring collective female trauma. Buffery notes that La plaça del Diamant is now a ‘potent place of memory both of Catalan cultural trauma and of the social alienation and oppression of women in twentieth century Spain’.6 There

2 Neus Real, ‘Mercè Rodoreda, the most translated author in Catalan fiction’. Catalan Historical Review, 14 (2021), pp. 89–103 (p.89).
3 Mercè Rodoreda, La plaça del Diamant, (Barcelona: Club Editor Jove, 1962).
4 Brownlie, p. 76.
5 Brownlie, p. 77.
6 Buffery, p. 203.
are several English translations of Rodoreda’s work; the first English translation of *La plaça del Diamant* was carried out by Irish translator Eda O’Shiel in 1967, under the title *The Pigeon Girl*, David Rosenthal then translated this novel, entitled *The Time of the Doves*, which was published in 1986, and the most recent translation is by Peter Bush, *In Diamond Square*, published in 2013.\(^7\) The numerous fruitful studies on *La plaça del Diamant* invite us to consider another of Rodoreda’s popular novels, *El carrer de les Camèlies*, which has also been translated into several languages including English, French, Italian and Chinese.\(^8\) The novel portrays the protagonist, Cecília Ce, as a woman who experiences trauma and abuse throughout her life. Brownlie notes that ‘the kind of memory that leaves its mark the most heavily in an individual is the memory of traumatic events’.\(^9\) It is therefore worthwhile to reflect on how such powerful memories of trauma are narrated in the source text, in comparison to how they are depicted in translation, and how this impacts the reader’s distance from the text. These traumatic memories are thus unavoidably forgotten or replaced when the text, a memory site, is translated.

The question of whether trauma can be successfully translated has been addressed by Bella Brodzki, Sharon Deane-Cox, and Helena Buffery, amongst others.\(^10\) Deane-Cox studies the translation of trauma in relation to Holocaust memory retellings, arguing that ‘the task of the translator as a listener and responder to traumatic narratives has too long been overlooked’.\(^11\) She introduces the concept of the translator as a ‘secondary-witness’ to the trauma, as someone who will necessarily rewrite the trauma that is present in the source text.\(^12\) Buffery has also focused on the translation of ‘cultural trauma’, with specific reference to Rodoreda’s *La plaça del Diamant*, in which she considers what the English translations of the novel ‘can tell us about the shifting functions of the past in contemporary Catalonia’, as they ‘retrace the limits of translatability of cultural trauma’.\(^13\) According to Buffery, there is a constant tension present between translation and ‘the impossibility of translating trauma into language’.\(^14\) It is this ‘impossibility’ of retelling, or remembering trauma, that I would like to further probe, first by focusing on how traumatic experiences may be expressed via a literary narrative, and

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\(^7\) Eda O’Shiel’s translation was published by André Deutsch in 1967, but is no longer in print.
\(^8\) Mercè Rodoreda, *El carrer de les Camèlies*, (Barcelona: Club Editor, 1966).
\(^9\) Brownlie, p. 6.
\(^11\) Deane-Cox, p. 321.
\(^12\) Deane-Cox, ibid.
\(^13\) Buffery, p. 200.
\(^14\) Buffery, p. 215.
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then turning to how this is carried out in interlingual translation. In contrast, Brodzki, in her assessment of translation and the survival of cultural memory, offers the view that translating ‘elicits what might otherwise remain recessed or unarticulated’, linking translation ‘to a concept of survival’.15 Brodzki offers that as all representation of trauma is translated and transformed, this enables the memory to survive: memory is translation, and translation is memory.

I propose that whilst the existence of a translation may indeed perpetuate the memory of the source text, by introducing the work to new audiences across different time periods, the specific case of traumatic texts is different. Traumatic memories, as retold by the female protagonists in Rodoreda’s works, are portrayed through the loss of a linear narrative, introducing fragmentation, repetition, and non-standard language to the text. In translation, however, the impact of trauma in the source text is at times lost; the translator standardizes the language and therefore subdues the impact of trauma. Consequently, the memories of both personal and collective trauma are effaced for an anglophone audience, leading to the replacement, and ultimately the forgetting, of the original narratives.

Tensions in Translating Personal Trauma

Trauma is not easily translated. Buffery explores the depiction of trauma within texts and their translations, specifically in reference to Rodoreda’s novel La plaça del Diamant. In this novel, the protagonist, Natàlia, lives in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, where she experiences extreme poverty and the loss of her husband in the war. Buffery states that ‘in translations we see a tendency to normalize the narrative voice’, as ‘we are faced with the tension between the need to translate and the impossibility of translating trauma into language’; there is thus a shift from the mimetic to the diegetic in the representation of trauma.16 Rather than the trauma being demonstrated through disruptions within the text, in translation it is explained and narrativized. It is this normalization or standardization of the narrative voice on which I focus on in my analysis.

Antoine Berman outlines the ‘deforming tendencies’ present in literary translation in his classic essay ‘La traduction comme épreuve de l’étranger’, of which the most relevant for my analysis are rationalization and clarification.17 Berman explains that in translation, ‘rationalization recomposes sentences and the sequence of sentences’, and in doing so, ‘rationalization makes the original pass from concrete to abstract’.18 This takes place in the translation of traumatic

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15 Brodzki, p. 2; p. 4.
18 Berman, p. 251.
texts, as translation necessitates movement from concrete depictions of trauma to those which are more abstract, impacting how such trauma is received and remembered. The second tendency identified by Berman is ‘clarification’, which he offers ‘is inherent to translation, to the extent that every translation comprises some degree of explicitation’.19 These tendencies can be observed in the English translations of Rodoreda’s works, and impact how the textual trauma is transmitted and therefore forgotten.

Mercè Rodoreda’s *El carrer de les Camèlies*, originally published in 1966, depicts the trajectory of the life of Cecília Ce. She is abandoned on a doorstep as a baby on the eponymous street — with only a note pinned to her denoting her name — and lives on the margins of society, later forced to rely on abusive men for survival. One crucial scene depicts Cecília living in one such man’s flat, confined day and night, unable to leave. This scene, as with the rest of the novel, is told from Cecília’s point of view through a stream of consciousness. The scene features Cecília hallucinating, experiencing nightmarish visions with flashbacks to sexual abuse. Here it is often difficult for the reader to comprehend whether events have really taken place or if they exist solely in Cecília’s imagination. The extract depicts Cecília self-harming, culminating with the realisation that she is pregnant. The physical body and the trauma enacted upon it is central to the narrative and further links to memory, as her scars leave a visual reminder and trace of her trauma, whilst also being written into the text. As Navajas observes, ‘la única posesión de Cecília es su cuerpo’, and yet despite this, her body is exploited by others, just as the body of the text is also altered and appropriated.20

Throughout my analysis of the English translation of this work, entitled *Camellia Street*, by American translator David Rosenthal (originally translated in 1993 and republished by Open Letter in 2008), I explore how Cecília’s trauma is translated. As mentioned above, Deane-Cox describes the translator as a ‘secondary witness [who is] one step removed from the lived experience being recounted, but nevertheless plays an essential and generative role in its telling’.21 By building on this concept in relation to translating literary fiction, I argue that the translator is therefore actively involved in renarrating the trauma, as the translator will necessarily adapt the text, leading to differences in the depiction of the traumatic memories. As the translator occupies a position in which they have not experienced or written the trauma themselves, the tension between witnessing and narrating these memories is brought to light.

The translator David Rosenthal follows the tendency to normalize the narrative voice in *Camellia Street*; his translation standardizes the language and introduces punctuation which is not present in the source text. Rosenthal

19 Berman, p. 252.
21 Deane-Cox, p. 312.
states in the introduction that ‘everything is presented from Cecília’s point of view, in a stream-of-consciousness similar to that in The Time of the Doves’. While Rosenthal forewarns the reader of the style of the text, his translation and renarration still includes interventions which render the text easier to follow. For example, in the scene referred to above, Cecília is in a hallucinatory state, with visions of men coming into her room at night, and she asks Eladi in the morning what has happened. The original Catalan reads: ‘vaig preguntar a l’Eladi plorant què feien amb mi a les nits, què feien amb mi’. This is translated by Rosenthal as ‘I started crying and asked Eladi what they did to me at night, what did they do?’ The introduction of the question mark here adds a sense of a two-way conversation with Eladi, rather than Cecília recounting her inner thoughts, whilst the phrase ‘I started crying’, expanded upon from the Catalan ‘plorant’ (crying), and moved to the start of the sentence gives more context to the phrase and creates a logical order to the sentence, which is not the case in the source text.

Similarly, Cecília recounts voices she hears, and it is unclear if these come from a real person who is present in the room, or if they are a figment of her imagination. For example, the Catalan text reads as ‘has de dormir deia una veu sense parar’, and later in the same sentence, ‘has de dormir deia sense parar una veu’. Rosenthal adapts this in his translation, rendering these phrases as ‘“you have to sleep”, a voice kept repeating’. The addition of speech marks here creates the feeling that there really is someone talking to Cecília, removing the ambiguity that is present in the source text, and reducing the sense that Cecília, in hearing voices which are not there, is hallucinating and experiencing psychosis. Rosenthal’s translation, in adding punctuation and explicating sentences and phrases, at times softens or weakens the effect of the stream of consciousness style in the source text. Rosenthal renarrates the recounting of Cecília’s personal trauma by standardizing the language, which reduces the uncertainty and eases comprehension for the anglophone reader.

Rosenthal not only follows the rationalization and clarification tendencies observed by Berman, and described by Buffery as ‘strategies of explicitation, standardisation and disambiguation, often considered to be universals of the translation process’, but also introduces slight changes of meaning in his rendering of the text. After Cecilia self-harms and begins to cut a vein in her wrist, losing consciousness, perhaps signalling a suicide attempt, the Catalan reads as ‘em van fer viure i estava embarassada’. This is translated by

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23 Rodoreda, p. 167. ‘I asked Eladi crying what they did with me at night, what they did with me.’ (a gloss translation).
24 Rodoreda, p. 167. ‘you have to sleep said a voice without stopping’, ‘you have to sleep said without stopping a voice’ (a gloss translation).
26 Rodoreda, p. 168. ‘they made me live and I was pregnant’ (a gloss translation).
Rosenthal as ‘they brought me back to life and I was pregnant’. This difference in meaning, whilst seemingly minor, loses the sense that Cecília is forced — against her will — to live. The English translation, however, gives the sense that Cecília was saved, and that her near death experience was an accident or unintentional tragedy. As such, not only does the translation remove the ambiguity in Cecília’s hallucinatory account, but also alters the meaning of certain phrases, which serves to reduce or remove Cecília’s sense of desperation and hopelessness after the trauma she has experienced. Cecília’s body, as a site of trauma, reflects the body of the text, as her words are adapted, and her original description is effaced. Likewise in the translation, the trauma enacted upon her by others is altered, and the text is ultimately transformed.

Rosenthal’s translation also seems to confirm some of Lawrence Venuti’s arguments about the norms of the literary translation market: Venuti argues that ‘a translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent’.27 Whilst this may account for the justification or reasoning behind such translation decisions, the effect this has on the translated text should also be further explored, in particular in relation to the depiction of trauma and its memory. To return to Buffery’s statement, this extract demonstrates an ‘impossibility’ in translating trauma, revealing the tension between what is ‘forgotten’ or ‘remembered’ in translation, as the strategies of normalizing the style of the text conceal the subjective nature of the process of remembering. In rendering the English text easier to comprehend and follow, Rosenthal makes the trauma present in the Catalan text more palatable: firstly, by making the text itself less ‘traumatic’, or difficult to read and navigate, and also by removing the hallucinatory and delusionary nature of the text. The personal narrative of trauma in the source text is renarrated, the sense of Cecília’s desperation is forgotten to a degree, and the impact of the literary trauma on an anglophone reader is lessened.

Representative Trauma in Rodoreda’s work

The analysis above focused on the effects of trauma on the individual body of Cecília; at this point it is necessary to reflect on the collective or representative trauma depicted through her character and what this represents regarding memory and loss. As outlined above, the English translation renarrates the traumatic source text to varying degrees, as these memories of trauma are left in the Catalan and thus forgotten in translation, replaced with new memories for a new audience. The character of Cecília has been read by many as a representative figure, embodying larger marginalised groups, including the

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precarious status of many women in twentieth-century Spain, as well as the position of Catalonia as a nation. Navajas claims that ‘Cataluña se enfrenta a su situación insegura con actitudes y procedimientos similares a los de la narradora de El carrer de les Camèlies’, constructing a parallel between the individual and the nation. In addition, Ernst observes that ‘although the novel focuses upon Cecilia’s subjectivity, Cecilia’s vision, it does not grant her freedom from the confines of the patriarchal power system’. Both of these readings perceive the character of Cecilia as being representative of an oppressed group, as one who is often powerless and vulnerable to the actions of others.

The powerlessness of Cecilia and the fact that her life is controlled by the men she meets is further exemplified in this scene with Eladi, as she recounts ‘va fer amb mi el que li va semblar’, translated as ‘he did what he wanted with me’. Whilst the rest of the scene, as discussed above, relates the sexual abuse to which Cecilia is subjected, this phrase epitomizes the extent to which she is controlled by external forces and the men in the novel. Cecilia describes how disorienting and confusing the trauma and its effects were, as she recalls ‘però això que sembla tan clar quan em va passar semblava tèrbol i com més clar ho volia veure més tèrbol se’m feia’. Rosenthal renders this as ‘what sounds so clear seemed so blurry when it happened and the clearer I tried to see it the blurrier it got’, maintaining the stream of consciousness present in the Catalan. This phrase both reflects Cecilia’s attempts to voice her trauma despite it being repressed by her subconscious, and underlines the tensions present in translating traumatic literature. This struggle between clarity and blurriness reflects Berman’s argument that the clarification tendencies which occur in translation transform the text from concrete to abstract. In Rosenthal’s reformulation of the text, memories of trauma are altered and adapted between source and target text; the translation attempts to make the text clearer, yet ultimately the memories remain unclear and vague.

Translation as Memory, or a Means of Forgetting?

To return to the question posed at the beginning of the paper, I conclude with some thoughts on whether the very existence of a translation can contribute to the perpetuation of the memory of the source text, or whether the inevitable renarration of the text, specifically one depicting trauma, makes it more vulnerable to being forgotten. Brodzki posits that a translation ‘enabl[es] the source text to live beyond itself’ and is a ‘testimony to the power and persistence of cultural memory’, yet I consider that, as in the examples demonstrated, the act

28 Navajas, p. 852. ‘Catalonia faces its insecure situation with attitudes and methods similar to those of the narrator of El carrer de les Camèlies’ (my translation).
30 Rodoreda, p. 165; Rosenthal, p. 112.
31 Rodoreda, p. 165.
32 Rosenthal, p. 112.
of translating trauma in fact contributes to its forgetting. As Deane-Cox labels the translator a ‘secondary witness’, the translator will indeed be secondary to, or removed from, the original traumatic narratives. A translator may then only attempt to retell the trauma, and furthermore ‘the risk of appropriation is compounded’ as they have not experienced the events themselves. In the case of literary fiction and the translation of traumatic texts, I propose that the translators are in this instance secondary narrators, as they are renarrating Rodoreda’s fictional narratives, thus they are even further removed from the trauma depicted in the text, as to witness and to narrate do not connote the same level of proximity.

There is, therefore, an inevitable or unavoidable tension between the act of translation as an attempt to memorialize and conserve the memory of the source text, and the rewriting of the text as contributing to the effacement and erasure of the original narratives. I reach the conclusion that, specifically in the case of trauma (both personal and collective), translation necessarily leads to the forgetting or a re-remembering of events, as the traumatic memories are renarrated and transformed. This is due to the translator’s attempts to make sense of the source text for a new audience, to standardize the language and reformulate the depictions of trauma. Whilst this strategy may help the reader to understand the narrative, it also necessarily leads to an inability to experience the original depictions or memories of trauma, as the text shifts from the mimetic to the diegetic. While Rodoreda’s novels depict female physical and psychological trauma, often through confusing, hallucinatory narratives, the English translations restructure and reconfigure them. Despite the translations’ attempt to keep the traumatic memories alive, this is a process that inevitably leads to their forgetting and loss.

33 Brodzki, p. 6.
34 Deane-Cox, p. 312.