

WRITING WITH AN ACCENT: A MARGINAL MULTILINGUAL VOICE SEEKING A PLACE IN ACADEME

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“Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.”

Rumi

Beginnings

I speak, read, and write with an accent. Accent is not merely what linguists would describe as a suprasegmental feature of spoken language; it is the speaking subject’s pose par excellence. Considered even more closely, this concept demands that we should think of an eye/I focused on a particular place for accent to fall; an eye/I, in which active and interpretive forces operate, and, more importantly, through which seeing becomes seeing where exactly the accent falls. Accent also tells us that there is no natural way of seeing, that seeing is socially constructed. As Friedrich Nietzsche tells us, “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing . . .” (119) [Nietzsche’s emphasis].

Put in the context of bilingualism, accent, as a unique perspective of seeing, derives pleasure from its own being, for it gives the bilingual speaking subject the right to want to see things differently in the richness of language; it gives him/her the rare opportunity to compose a rhythmic pulse of otherness that reflects not only an individual characteristic, but also a regional, social, and cultural history. Additionally, at the confluence of two or

more cultural streams, particularly at the level of text production, with linguistic signs constantly crossing over, accent, rather than resulting in an inferior text product, provides a fruitful, mutable, and more malleable corpus with a rich pool of cultural signs.

In medieval imperial city of Fes, Morocco, I grew up in a rich multilingual environment for accent to develop. Fes is celebrated in modern Moroccan history for its fierce political and intellectual resistance to the French protectorate that ruled the country from 1912 until 1956. Despite the cold rain and mud in the winter, and the cruel Shergui and dust in the summer and fall, the city proudly keeps its poetic beauty throughout the year. And even throughout those cruel months of the year, the inhabitants of Fes manage to keep the slow, uninterrupted rhythm of their lives going. In this dream city, I learned to speak, read, and write in classical Arabic, French, and English.

I vividly remember the day I was thrust into this multifarious linguistic and cultural situation. It was October 1st. On that day, my mother, who could only speak colloquial Arabic, took me to the only elementary public school in the neighborhood. In those days, there were no private schools, and if there had been any, my mother, being a single parent, would not have been able to afford to send me to one. There were several men and women at the school gate trying to take a last glimpse at the scared first-graders who were gathered at the schoolyard, before they were herded into their classrooms. My mother could not get me through the crowd so that I could join them. Her cousin, a big soccer player who happened to be there, lifted me up and soon I was carried over heads and shoulders and put safely on the ground on the other side of the gate. I did not know then that that crossing was going to be the beginning of a long journey into a fascinating realm of languages and cultures. Nor did I know that exile could take such a subtle form and begin at such a tender age. But things happened so fast and I was terrified; that is all I can remember now.

I must pause here a little and say a few words about my mother, for she has been a faithful companion to me throughout

my academic career. When two of my graduate students at the University of Northern Colorado met my mother once, while she was visiting me in the US, they could not help being shocked at how tiny she looked. Yet this tiny little woman, who is literally illiterate, for she cannot read or write in any language, saw me through school and gave me all kinds of moral support I needed to go through college. Indeed the power that my mother still has over me is so enormous. One word, one look from her and I immediately realize that whatever I do will never make her forget that she was betrayed when I left Morocco. The pain that she feels for having lost me to a foreign country still runs so deep between her and me. Sometimes both of us secretly wonder what fate snatched me away from her and from the familiar surroundings of my hometown.

My elementary school days were divided between Arabic and French. In the mornings, I studied classical Arabic grammar and rhetoric, theology, history, and poetry. In particular, the direction of writing was from right to left, reflecting a system of cultural values that attached importance to the use of the right hand and going from right to left in daily social practices. For example, even today Muslims, following the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, eat and drink with the right hand. When I was little, my mother would make sure that I slept on my right side first before I could turn to my left side. In the afternoons, I studied French elocution, dictation, reading, grammar, arithmetic, geography, and French civilization. Interestingly enough, in the French class, the direction of writing was from left to right, which was totally new to me. I did not know then that the whole western world wrote from left to right. The only thing I knew was that the culture I grew up in frowned upon the use of the left hand and upon anything moving from left to right.

After school, I would switch back to colloquial Arabic to communicate with my mother, my sister, my grandparents, and my friends. I oftentimes found myself “straddling” three languages, not just two, and I would often fall among three “stools.” That is, the journey from colloquial to classical Arabic

and then to French was an intense moment of displacement not just in terms of the sound and syntactic features of the three linguistic systems, but also in terms of values and world-views. However, today I look back and see that moment as a magnificent display of magic. I was a juggler playing with two immense languages at once, tossing up Arabic words like *kitabun*, *madrasatun*, and *fataatun* and catching the equivalent French words *un livre*, *une ecole*, *une fille*. I would laugh at my grandparents' amazement at the stretch of my linguistic ingenuity. A few years later, when as a secondary school kid I started adding the English language to my juggling tricks, they began to think that the devil got my tongue. Of course, they were speaking from a comfort zone in which they and people of their generation were sustained through the Arabic language by a deeply felt religious faith that permeated their lives and in which values were more clearly defined and universally shared. To my grandparents, the world outside this comfort zone was totally remote and never interfered with their imagination.

Before I went to school, I tremendously enjoyed the company of my mother and grandparents in their comfort zone. For the Friday noon prayers, my mother would meticulously dress me in traditional Moroccan clothes and my grandfather would take me to the mosque with him and I would float around in a space of spiritual serenity. On Saturdays, my grandfather would take me with him to *the souk* (the market) and I would fully indulge myself into the pleasure of watching magicians, snake charmers, jugglers, and comedians perform before spellbound crowds. In particular, I would draw immense pleasure from listening for hours on end to storytellers relate fairy tales from the Arabian nights about enchanted castles, charmed princes, and wicked spirits.

The French and English Pharmakon

But as the French language started to make its way into my intellectual consciousness, like a pharmakon, things began to take a different dimension. The soft, glossy color pictures in the

French textbook, known at school as *le livre*, illustrated a landscape that looked distant, yet inviting and people who were foreign, yet appeared friendly and charming. In the book, *René*, a French boy who was about my age, his little sister Catherine, his parents Monsieur and Madame Vincent, and the dog Miro soon became part of my dream world. Every afternoon, I would pore over the book for hours on end and gaze intently at pictures that showed the Vincent family eating good meals, playing with the dog, and enjoying a happy lifestyle in a nice and cozy home. I did not have any of the things that René had, and yet I did not feel any resentment or envy, because he was my French friend. Oftentimes I would dream of being a member of this happily constructed French family. However, in my dreams, I did not realize that although I was not one of the Vincents, I was actually going through a rapid process of assimilation into the French language and culture. When I was eight, the fables of La Fontaine already occupied a good part of my memory and a few years later the works of Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Honoré de Balzac, Molière, Racine, Camus, and Sartre firmly expanded the French linguistic and cultural territory in my imagination and made pre-Islamic poetry, the Koran, and the Hadith look sadly outdated in an emerging modern Morocco. I stopped going to the mosque on Fridays and the visits to *the souk* became rare. And little by little, I started to drift away from the folk wisdom of my mother and grandparents, which seemed more and more remote and archaic. Metaphorically, I soon found myself moving away from the narrow alleys in Fes to les Champs Elyses, Montmartre, and le quartier latin in Paris.

North African writers Assia Djebar, Kateb Yacine, and Abdelkébir Khatibi acknowledge the same process of acculturation vis-à-vis the French colonial school. In his novel, *Le polygone étoilé*, Tunisian writer Kateb Yacine equates his educational experience with being thrust into “la gueule du loup” (the jaws of the wolf) (181). Moroccan writer Abdelkébir Khatibi uses autobiographical fragments combined with poetry and parable in his work *La mémoire tatouée* and *Amour bilingue* to express his uneasy alliance

with the French language and culture. Algerian writer Assia Djebar came to believe that the process of western acculturation, resulting in her mastery of the colonizer's language and access to public space, excluded her from most, if not all, aspects of the traditional woman's world.

French was the second official language after classical Arabic in Morocco. It was used on the radio and television, and in government offices. *Le Petit Marocain* (The Little Moroccan) was a national newspaper published in French for *les petits gens* (the little people) of Morocco. The word *petit* must be emphasized here, for it concealed a secret, malicious, and vulgar intention from the part of the French to belittle my fellow Moroccans. In fact, a whole town of brave, proud, and magnanimous people was nicknamed *petits gens* (little people) during the French protectorate. At high school and particularly in college, I was continually aware of the difficult historical circumstances that made me part of a universal colonial project which gave itself the authority to name and "civilize" its colonial subjects in Africa, Asia, and South America. Most of the colonial literary works that I studied in college portrayed the colonial subjects of Europe as foxy, untrustworthy children (*A Passage to India* and *Kim*) or lazy, unreliable savages showing a gruesome drive for cannibalism (*Heart of Darkness*). I felt I was not alone, for there were other people from various parts of the world who were dragged into this messy and shameful colonial enterprise that deprived them of their lands and dignity and distorted their histories.

At high school, I encountered the English language, which exerted a tremendous seductive power over me. In Moroccan public circles, English was known as "the first international language," for it was the language of diplomacy, and science and technology. For me, it was the language of magic that would open up the entire Anglo-Saxon world to me. Unlike classical Arabic and French, English was a language to which I was intensely attracted. For example, I was fascinated by the musical quality of the English nasal sounds. They made French sound like a deaf language to me. Also I loved how the English 'r' sounded

to the ear. The French 'r' was relatively new to me, but still it produced an almost grating sound in the ear and, of course, I grew up with the harsh and thunderous trill of the Arabic 'r'. But the English 'r' sounded gentler and even more musical, especially in the lyrics of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Carol King. More importantly, in addition to being described as "bilingual," since French was my second language, I would now be labeled a "nonnative speaker of English" or "ESL student." Not only was I taking immense pleasure in acquiring a third language, but, as Claire Kramsch puts it in a remarkable essay titled "The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker," I was also "trespassing someone else's territory, becoming a foreigner on [my] own turf, becoming both invisible and differently visible" (365).

At high school and later at college, I read almost every French and English book I could lay my hands on. Some French and Anglo-Saxon authors exerted an enormous fascination over me. For example, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, who lived in self-imposed exile in Paris and chose to write in French, taught me that the world was an absurd linguistic fabrication in which humans had to live with the dramatic split between words and actions. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir tells Estragon, "Let's go," yet the two don't move. They wait for Godot who never shows up. And while they are waiting, which is their only *raison d'être*, all they can do is to talk about the condition of waiting. From Joseph Conrad, the Polish young man who moved to England, started learning English at the age of twenty, and wrote his first piece at the age of thirty-five in his third language, I learned that language was far from being neutral or innocent; that it was a powerful tool of representation.

In fact, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was one of the most influential western canonical texts that opened my eyes to colonial imagination. Khatibi tells us that the strategy of colonialism is "to juxtapose, compartmentalize, militarize, divide the city up into ethnic zones, and silt up the culture of dominated people" (46). This tactic is primarily based on the intention of colonial discourse to create for itself a solid and homogeneous theoretical terrain. In

this manner, colonial discourse proceeds with lumping numerous and enormous differences together into one unified cultural identity which can be easily reified and measured according to western epistemological standards. This reification, which Mary Louise Pratt describes as “a hegemonic form of othering,” is oftentimes done through the representation of non-European colonized subjects as “oriental,” “non-western,” “non-Judeo-Christian,” or “primitive” (130).

Moreover, in the context of western representation of colonized subjects, the “Other” is given very little or no space at all to speak. For example, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow confers speech to the African natives on two occasions only: first, when a servant comes out to announce the death of Kurtz: ‘Mistah Kurtz—he dead,’ and second, when one African native is portrayed as a beast showing a hideous drive for cannibalism:

‘Catch ‘im,’ he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—’catch ‘im. Give ‘im to us.’
‘To you, eh?’ I asked; ‘what would you do with them?’ ‘Eat ‘im!’ he said curtly (42)

Clearly, in the eyes of Marlow, such a degraded form of language corresponds to a shameful corruption of the value system of the natives. Not only does colonial discourse deny the colonized subjects the right to participate in defining the terms of their relationship with the colonizers, but it also dehumanizes them by putting words of savagery in their mouths. As Albert Memmi explains, “in the colonizer’s supreme ambition, the colonizer should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e., be transformed into a pure colonized” (86).

Obviously Conrad’s distorted form of representation angered Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe who screamed racism and called for the removal of *Heart of Darkness* from the English canon, because, as he puts it, the novella “projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and

refinement are mocked by triumphant bestiality” (252). Achebe’s response to Conrad’s work is evidently informed by the idea that literature is taught not only as poetics, but also as ideology. Stuart Hall and Donald James define ideology as “concepts, ideas, and images which provide frameworks of interpretation and meaning for social and political thought” (36). And the task of ideology is, as Catherine Belsey quite appropriately explains, “to present the position of the subject as fixed and unchangeable, an element in a given system of differences” (90).

In fact, Achebe opened my eyes to the political necessity for the colonial subjects to appropriate the language of empire in order for them to speak back and write their own national narratives. In his novel *Arrow of God*, Achebe takes us to the village life of Ibo people in the early times of colonial encounter in the 1920s and shows the impact of the colonial presence upon the lives of the African people. Its central theme being the relationship between Ezeulu, priest of God Ulu, and the white man, the novel dramatizes for us an important moment in African history. In particular, the novel articulates the significance of the impact of colonial experience on the people of Ibo land and ultimately offers an interpretation of an African situation in a more complex manner than the description one finds in a colonial narrative such as *Heart of Darkness*.

Right at the beginning of the novel, we are plunged into Ibo life. In this manner, Achebe succeeds in laying the first foundations of a new form of linguistic communication by resisting translation or explanation of Ibo words: *obi*, *ogene*, *alusi*, *okposi*, *ofo*. In effect, the use of native terms, whether individual lexical items or whole chunks of discourse such as proverbs and sayings, engages in cracking open the boundaries of language and offers tremendous possibilities for the writer to mix linguistic and cultural codes. Thus the African writer creates a third voice, that is, a voice that gives us an English syntax charged with an African idiom. In fact, the African vernacular undermines the authority of the English language, and the African form of story telling disrupts the authority of the western narrative. One can safely say that by

writing in a western language, Achebe engages in a special relationship with language and justly earns the special position of post-colonial writers to whom one should direct attention because they have embarked on this difficult task of creating, to use John Erickson's terms, "a double of the traditional narrative" (103). That is, the alternative discourse that Achebe has managed to create lies somewhere below the surface of the master narrative, and is ready to emerge and disrupt the authority of the metropolitan form.

Hello America!

With this already multiple non-western identity, I came to seek out American English and fall in love with the language of Thoreau, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Flannery O'Connor, Eugene O'Neil, and several other American writers I had encountered at college in Morocco. In addition to the thirst for more knowledge that I had brought with me from the old country and in addition to a handful of books in Arabic, French, and English that I had packed in my suitcase, I had especially treasured in my heart Walt Whitman's concept of identification with fellow humans from all walks of life. I was particularly captivated by the good old gray poet's fascination with himself as a member of the human carnival, a theme I saw working as a unifying thread throughout *Leaves of Grass*. I still have vivid memories of the first time I was rocketed in a matter of a few hours from Casablanca airport to JFK in 1990. When I saw the crowds in New York, the opening lines in Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" rushed into my mind:

I celebrate myself;
And what you assume I shall assume;
For every atom belonging to you, as good belongs
to me. (61)

I decided then that every sound of the English language that belonged to all Americans also belonged to me, since Whitman's

poetry had already given me an extraordinary sense of openness of form and theme. Whitman's poetry was as large as life and therefore it created for me a large intellectual space which, as a freshly established immigrant, I inhabited with hope for tolerance and acceptance.

Today much as Whitman imagined a cosmic unity with me and for me, a fusion of poet and subject, a single, multilingual voice to celebrate, he must stand aside and be at once a part of and apart from me. When he is apart from me, I put the accent on difference and detach myself from America to nurse this persistent guilt toward my family that I had to leave in order to become who I am today. And what compounds this sense of guilt is the vague feeling that in leaving those loved ones, I would be leaving my Third Worldness behind as well, in order to end up in a space that is neither Third World nor First World, a world in-between, an imaginary homeland. Eleven years after my first encounter with America, I still experience a deeper feeling of sadness perhaps peculiar to immigrants; a sense of being cast in a strange, vast world where the rules are such that it is actually not easy for me to observe them without an overwhelming self-consciousness. For example, although the statement "Your English is excellent" is often meant to be a compliment by people I meet outside of the academy, it still puts me right on the other side of the English language. Knowing that there is nothing necessarily strange or frightening about being on the other side, I welcome the compliment with a smile, but the smile is usually mixed with slight unease. To be on the other side implies that I have to be constantly watchful for what I say, which can be extremely exhausting. A mispronunciation of a word or, God forbid, a grammatical error would destroy me completely. When such blunders happen, I feel like I want to die. I feel like a guest who is inadvertently knocking things over at his hosts' home. And this feeling of embarrassment is distressing, especially when I sense that my colleagues are watching and that I am an outsider who is breaking rules of a language that has a long history behind it. Every moment I enter this risky order of discourse in English,

anxiety sets in, because I am fully aware of the social materiality of academic language, the production of which is, as Michel Foucault puts it, “at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures” (216).

However, in my attempt to be part of Whitman’s America, to belong more specifically to the academic culture in the US, I bring my Third World accent with me. That is, I bring views and a sensibility with me only to see them grate against the western rationality of the first world. The arena in which these world-views collide is now my new home. It is a rich and complex nation that hosts the green-card holder, the alien resident, and all categories of fellow immigrants who are fingerprinted, numbered, labeled, classified, distributed, and controlled.

Every time I express a deep sense of frustration that results from being thrown into the marginality of the borderland, into what Gloria Anzaldua calls “the constant state of transition,” I get comments like: “You don’t have to stay, if you don’t like it here. You can always go back home.” True, I dream about the old country, the old self, the old me. True, as often as I can, I surrender to the magnetic pull of home and make the journey back even for a second to make sure the places, the faces, and the memories I left behind are still there. But every time I actually go back even for a short visit, I feel the urge to return to the borderland. I have never realized that homecoming is another form of departure. The fear of going back to the old country, of opening old wounds of oppression and persecution, or simply the fear of not being taken back eats the soul of every immigrant. It is that same fear that gave me the guts to get out and seek refuge in the borderland.

Borderlands: A Rich Contact Zone

In this borderland, the fusion of Arabic with French and English has significantly created a complex zone of contact for me where, as Mary Louise Pratt puts it, “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). Contact zones can

oftentimes cause a severe form of epistemological displacement which, to put it in Arif Dirlik's words, "'decenters' intellectuals . . . who, as it were, learn to live in two cultural worlds without belonging in either one completely" (413). But contact zones also allow for debates to be staged, for unique perspectives to materialize, and for new accents to fall differently from those of old. For example, in the American university, I find myself pulled into an arena where serious debates are staged over burning issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other social and cultural categories. In these debates, language and education are definitely not neutral or innocent and I certainly cannot afford to stand by and watch.

For example, in the heated debate over the history of rhetoric, a discipline that has for over twenty-five hundred years shaped western education, I feel drawn to particularly put the accent on the place of the Near-Eastern cultures in the construction of the western rhetorical tradition. This position is essentially informed by the following assumptions: that the Greco-Roman world was a multicultural one; that medieval thought was far from being essentially European and Christian; that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western culture was to a large measure influenced by its preoccupation with the Orient, Africa, and South America; and lastly, that in our modern society, more and more barriers are falling and boundaries are continually blurred between nationalities and cultures. The aim of this position is clearly to undermine our most cherished views of tradition as an authentic construct, of history as a collection of facts occupying neutral grounds.

In this perspective, I see anthologies of rhetoric as histories, whether or not they consciously choose to be so, for they are written with an intention to create a discipline that has a solid and homogeneous theoretical terrain. Anthologies are histories by nature, since they are primarily concerned with displaying some sense of order and continuity. It would be naive to consider anthologies as mere compilations of texts, without any desire to make sense of history, without any ideology behind them.

Rather, they are selections governed by the structure of a master narrative whose function is to shape world-views for us. As John Schilb reminds us, histories of rhetoric are themselves works of rhetoric, since they are “reflective of particular compositional choices, with alternative master-tropes and narratives available” (31).

The Rhetorical Tradition, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, is a good case in point, for it illustrates the desire to historicize the study of rhetoric from an essentially western perspective. The anthology presents the medieval period as a harmoniously unified world governed by a coherent and solid Christian doctrine with absolutely no connections with other cultures and traditions outside of Europe, which clearly expresses a rather limited view of medieval society in Europe. However, historians like David Aers and James Murphy have seriously disputed such views in their discussion of some challenges that any historiography of the Middle Ages faces. For example, Aers argues for a revisionary history of the Middle Ages which exposes the contradictions, the conflicts, and any discernible forces of changes that lie beneath an apparently “homogeneous, uncontested clerical tradition embedded in a static culture” (221). Aers brings to the attention of critics important issues of social, political, and religious conflict in medieval society as serious areas of study. In his work on medieval rhetoric, particularly *Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography*, *Renaissance Rhetoric: A Short-Title Catalogue*, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, and his essay, “The Historiography of Rhetoric: Challenges and Opportunities,” James Murphy points to several possibilities for those who want to study western rhetoric in a broader cultural context, indicating that the interest many European and American historians express in the Greco-Roman tradition has often led them to overlook the Arabic language and culture which in some time, as he admits, “actually served as a bridge between Hellenic and European rhetoric” (6). What Murphy calls “a bridge” is in effect a significant historical, linguistic, and cultural moment of rupture in the complex chain of

knowledge that current histories of western rhetoric tend to neglect.

The accent that I specifically seek to put in our reading of the history of rhetoric is that Arabic constituted in medieval times an important historical conduit in the transmission of Greek philosophy into the western world. What would the perception of our students be of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* if the commentaries of Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes were part of the curriculum in the rhetoric and literature programs in the United States? What would happen to the frame of reference of our students once they discovered the meanderings and detours (and the transformations resulting from those detours) of the Aristotelian intellectual tradition as it traveled from classical Greece to the medieval Near East and back to Europe through North Africa and medieval Spain? Such questions are obviously consistent with the notion of critical literacy that is called for by critics, such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Ira Shor and that is more and more indispensable in the American academy today. To use Shor's terms, critical literacy involves "questioning received knowledge," bearing in mind that the forces [of this received knowledge] are "very old and deeply entrenched" (11).

From the ninth till the eleventh century A.D., Muslim translators and commentators, many of whom were NeoPlatonists or NeoPythagorians showing great admiration for Greek philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, were actively involved in the transmission of Greek thought into Arabic. Some, like Al-Kindi (801-866), took upon themselves the task of translating directly from the Greek language works in philosophy, medicine, and astrology and wrote commentaries on them. In fact Al-Kindi was the first Muslim philosopher who translated Aristotle's works directly from Greek and Syriac into Arabic and wrote commentaries on them in the first half of the tenth century A.D. Other philosophers, such as Al-Farabi (870-950), Avicenna, and Averroes based their commentaries and treatises on translations already available to them in Arabic.

Al-Farabi's first major contribution to Muslim philosophy was his work *Ihsa al-ulum (The Catalogue of Sciences)*, in which he offered a classification of Aristotle's works into two categories. In the first one, he included the *Categoriae, De Interpretatione, Analytica Priora, Analytica Posteriora, Topica, Sophistica, Rhetorica, and Poetica*. That Al-Farabi included the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* in this first category is quite significant because, as Deborah Black explains, "Aristotle's *Organon* represented the main source of logical speculation for the philosophers of the Middle Ages, and was a major inspiration for their epistemological doctrine as well" (1). In the second category, Al-Farabi put Aristotle's eight books on physical matters and also included the three books on *Metaphysics, Ethics, and Politics*. Also he devoted a whole series of commentaries to the *Organon*. In sum, Al-Farabi's work on Greek philosophical texts gave him an honorable position in Islamic philosophy from which he earned the title "the second teacher," after Aristotle.

Besides an important work in philosophy and medicine, Avicenna (980-1038) produced scholarly commentaries on Greek texts, among which the most valuable for students of rhetoric and criticism was his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Right after Al-Farabi and Avicenna came Averroes, who showed keen interest in Greek philosophy. Averroes was born in Cordoba in 1126 A.D. He was appointed magistrate in Seville and Grand Magistrate in Cordoba by the Almohad Sultan Abu ya'qub, which were high juridical positions in Andalusia. Toward the end of his life, he experienced a bitter moment of disgrace that culminated in his exile to Lucena, a small town near Cordoba. He died in Marrakesh in 1198. Averroes's wide learning in jurisprudence, theology, medicine, eloquence, and poetry attracted the attention of Ya'qub Yusuf, the ruler of the Almohad dynasty, who encouraged him to explain the work of Aristotle. He wrote several commentaries on Aristotle's work that made him known as "the Commentator" in the Islamic, Hebrew, and Christian academic circles in medieval times.

Particularly in these difficult times of political conflict between the West and the Arab and Islamic world, our students need to be engaged in a more open intellectual conversation with thinkers like Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes over issues of philosophical and rhetorical discourse. A careful study of the complex character of the textual transmission of Aristotle's treatises on the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* from Greek into Arabic and then into Latin, for example, would certainly open up new horizons for fruitful research in the rhetoric and the literature programs in this country. There is a large body of Arabic scholarship on the Aristotelian tradition that still needs to be translated and edited. The inclusion of such work will definitely constitute a tremendous contribution to the history of rhetoric and poetics in the Humanities because it will indicate a good appreciation of the academic effort that Muslim philosophers demonstrated by working closely with Greek translators and commentators, such as Themistius and John the Grammarian, with whom they engaged in an academic debate over Aristotle's works as well as the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias, a well-known Aristotelian commentator at that time.

Translation is traditionally defined as an operation that takes place in the realm of equivalence, but this operation becomes even more fascinating when it announces the play of difference at the threshold of untranslatability. Translation allows the translator to construct an open frame of reference, open cultural spaces, and open systems of thought. If a translation traditionally seeks to be a copy of the source language text, if it attempts to become the other by achieving proximity to and similarity with the primary text, it consciously or unconsciously works as a strategy that generates difference and meaning. In this perspective, translation opens up the source language text to an outside world teeming with multiple views and values. In this way, a translation is not reduced to a mere task of communicating information, nor is it considered a secondary reading that is subservient to the primary text; rather it is an act of creativity inside and between languages and cultures.

Through a process of transformation and renewal of signs, translation also allows the primary text to live longer, for it generates a debate over the primary text, which over the years constitutes a sort of history of ideas. Moreover, in translation, the target language undergoes significant changes, since it has to accommodate the source language text in its cultural space. As George Steiner appropriately observes, translations enrich the target language by allowing the source language to penetrate it and modify it (65). That is, when a translation takes place, ideas and views from the target language and culture have to be shuffled and reshuffled to give room to new ideas from the source language and culture.

Accent on Writing

Today translation continues to be a working metaphor in my academic career, since it allows me to constantly define my role as an academic worker. To be an academic worker is to activate a kind of translation in such a manner as to introduce change not only in the thinking of those I interact with in the classroom, but also in my own thinking. To be an academic worker is to get to think other things than the ones I used to think before. It is to engage myself in a complex dialogue with students and faculty over the nature of language and culture.

To undermine the higher mode of western consciousness and rationality, to do away with duality upon which this western rationality is based, I also put the accent, especially in my teaching of writing, on the principle of discourse community as an arena in which multiple local social groups clamor for attention. As Ira Shor explains, “all of us emerge from local cultures set in global contexts where languages from multiple sources shape us” (2). In this sense, the public sphere is a multivocal discourse phenomenon in which every cultural sign is a prism that is constructed by multiple conflicting views, all of which are clamoring for attention and all are having a claim to truth.

My experience with the teaching of writing at the University of Arizona and at UNC in Colorado has given me a new insight

into the ways most American students view discourse, discourse communities, and writing. Several students have approached me and have genuinely expressed their desire to learn how to write. “I want to learn how to write,” some students would tell me, and I would indeed find this a sincere expression of a legitimate desire. However, the problem I have with this statement is that there is no ready-made recipe to give to students. There is no magic wand that teachers of writing can touch the students with to turn them into writers. But teachers must still inspire their students and create for them a safe learning environment in which they are given the opportunity to achieve this goal. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard tells a remarkable story of a well-known writer who experienced an interesting exchange with a college student who asked,

“Do you think I could be a writer?” “Well,” he writer said, “I don’t know . . . Do you like sentences?” The writer could see the student’s amazement. Sentences? Do I like sentences? I am twenty years old and do I like sentences? If he had liked sentences, of course, he could begin, like a joyful painter I knew. I asked how he came to be a painter. He said, “I liked the smell of the paint.” (70)

I would like to see teachers of writing create a community of writers in which students are invited to love the sounds of words and the rhythm of sentences and appreciate what the words do to one another—for example what adjectives do to nouns and the amount of freedom of mobility that adverbs have in sentences. I firmly believe that we only care about something when we truly love it. Annie Dillard’s painter would not care for his art if he did not love the smell of the paint with which he worked. Today we simply cannot teach love for discourse in an environment of fear of the grade and of embarrassment of being proved stupid. I would like to turn the statement “I want to know how to write” into “I want to know what writing is about.” The statement “I want to know how to write” is severely limited by its

instrumentalist intention, and it badly conceals a conclusion that students do not write. Whereas the statement “I want to know what writing is about” opens a whole new world for us. It does not exclude the possibility that students write. It does not exclude reading either. In fact, the statement “I want to know what writing is about” articulates an intimate relationship between reading and writing. In this context, reading will not be a matter of letting the words glide over our eyes, but an operation performed on language. It will be a matter of deciding which type of reading will work for us. It is also a matter of discovering that every reading is a misreading, that there is no such thing as a perfect reading. Moreover, the reading subject does not assume a detached, contemplative stance before the text she/he is reading. She/he is active, mobile, multiple, collectivist, and participatory. In a sense, the reader participates in various degrees in the act of writing.

Between reading and writing I bring stylistic analysis to encourage students to see the various shapes language takes in the interpretation and production of texts. A text may be spoken or written; but in either case, it is a stretch of language material that may be one word, a letter, a book, an ad, or an encyclopedia. A text has formal properties, such as domain, purpose, function, topic, and tone. To be able to appreciate these properties, student writers should be able to look at discourse in the rhetorical situation for which it is composed. They should be able to identify interesting features of language in any given text and try to explain them in relation to the rhetorical situation in which the text operates. Also they should be able to see how the social categories of race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation dictate the stylistic choices of a writer. Equally important they should be able to recognize the kinds of audiences a writer is addressing and which stylistic choices are effective in addressing those audiences. And finally students should be able to understand how these elements of the rhetorical situation interact with each other and make up what is traditionally known as Context to complete this picture of a rhetorical situation. Context limits the

freedom of choice and brings into focus the meaning of the text to be delivered by a writer to an audience.

In this perspective, a theory of varieties of language is of paramount importance in the study of style. Varieties of language are styles of language that are related directly to the social setting or circumstances in which the language is used. They include technical language, the language of telegrams, newspaper headlines, advertisements, scientific, legal, religious, literary discourses, and other varieties of language. Varieties of language are not, to use G. W. Turner's words, "isolated little boxes of language" (168). Language is a heterogeneous phenomenon. More importantly, language is, as Bakhtin puts it, "social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (259).

What I am learning more and more throughout this journey into the complex realm of language and culture, is that, in theory as well as in practice, culture does not exist in a vacuum. Equally important, I realize more and more that my students bring to the classroom their world-views only to see them grate against firmly established academic discourse conventions. They, just like me, bring their own accent to the classroom and end up speaking, reading, and writing with an accent, which makes every student a potentially marginal voice trying to find a niche in the academy. In this context, my responsibility as a teacher is to enable students to acknowledge the social nature of discourse, to criticize and question its rhetorical moves, and, more important perhaps, to formulate a counter discourse. And this means to encourage them to accept historical responsibility and to acknowledge the political and social relation between themselves and the world around them.

I started this essay with a line from a poem by medieval Persian poet Rumi. As a matter of fact, I began writing this piece out of nostalgia for home, my first linguistic and cultural space that hosts memories, friends, and loved ones. But every time I go to Morocco to visit, after a few weeks, I start missing my other

home in the US, which is another important space that hosts memories, friends, and loved ones. The same longing pulls me into two opposite directions. To come to terms with this constant pull, I imagine myself outside of language, in many places at once, and I watch the words bubbling out of people's mouths, creating a sweet confusion.

Some may ask what it is that drives me away from the old country. I say: oppression. Others may ask what it is that makes me escape, even through dreams, the harsh reality of being an immigrant in the US. I say: oppression. Others still ask me in what language I dream. Before I answer this question, let me first say what I dream of. I dream of what Min-Zhan Lu characterizes as "an ideal literate self" working in the context of social justice. Lu defines literacy as that which "might bring us hope and courage as well as vision and analysis for negotiating the crucial crossroad in the history of this nation" (173). In what language do I dream? I dream in the language that Adam and Eve and the angels spoke before the curse of an angry God fell upon the tower of Babel and splintered the human tongue into a multitude of languages.

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