Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation, by Naomi Seidman, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006, 312 pp., US$55.00 (hardback), ISBN 0-226-74505-8, US$22.00 (paperback), ISBN 0-226-74506-6

"My primary audience is Jews and those we can count as friends (including our friends in the contemporary churches)", writes Naomi Seidman, Professor of Jewish Culture at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, in the Epilogue of her fascinating new book *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (p. 277). Published in the series *Afterlives of the Bible*, this book was clearly not written for Jewish eyes only but for each and every reader interested in theology, history, literature, sociolinguistics and, of course, translation studies. It makes use of postcolonial translation theories, focusing on the dominant position of Christian civilization in the West, as target literature and language, versus the minority linguistic culture represented by the Jewish source text (the Bible) and its afterlives (Jewish literature in Hebrew and Yiddish). It relies heavily on concepts developed by queer studies and sexual politics in sociolinguistics and literature, which is not surprising since Naomi Seidman has published some specific studies in the field of feminist readings of Jewish texts.

This book explores the breakdown of cultural borders in the process of translating, a topic first analyzed in an essay, partially reproduced here in chapter five, about Elie Wiesel's own translation from Yiddish to French of his novel *Night*. But as Seidman extended the scope of her study, "the discussion – and thus exposure – of those aspects of Jewish texts and culture not intended for public consumption became less dominant" (p. 277). What has emerged from a long quest is an outstanding and valuable contribution to translation studies and a description of Jewish approaches to translation throughout history.

As a matter of fact, the assertion made in the "Epilogue" intends to invalidate in advance Jewish complaints concerning many of the comments made in this book about what Seidman calls, after Scott, the "hidden transcript" of the Jews (pp. 4, 277). Seidman admits that she reveals here what was traditionally concealed in intimate Jewish discourse. Undoubtedly, she was hurt when some critics accused her of "informing" on Jewish "double talk" in her previous essay (pp. 235–36). However, she later realized that the "transactions" made by Wiesel while self-translating his book ought to be recontextualized "within a tradition of safeguarding Jewish privacy". After all, self-censorship or reformulation have been routine strategies used by Jewish translators throughout history: in order to both remain faithful to their communities and protect their survival, they were usually "unfaithful" to the original text (p. 235), by erasing "a potentially offensive and inflammatory dimension of Jewish discourse if uttered in earshot of its non Jewish targets" (p. 254). Seidman, therefore, introduces her new book with three examples of what she calls "double talk" and deliberate "mistranslation" (in religious text, in real life and in film), in order to illustrate how these "manipulations" are "linked with the integrity of the borders of the Jewish community in the face of external threat" (p. 13).

The lengthy introduction is a discussion of the role of the "Translator as Double Agent" (pp. 1–35). The traditional question of fidelity is asked in a new setting – neither the linguistic problem of letter and sense, nor the literary strategies applied in order to produce an equivalent text that "reads like the original", but rather a new understanding of translation in its historical and political dimensions as

crossing the borders between cultures, acknowledging their differences, and modifying identities through contact (by repulsion or influence): "Translation more particularly appears as negotiation of an unavoidably asymmetrical *double*-situatedness" (p. 9). Jews are both the target of Christian missionaries and the keepers of a precious exegetical knowledge, Judaism being the "original" of that of which Christianity is a "translation" (p. 8). And indeed, the first corpus of written Jewish translation, the Greek Septuagint (dated to the third century BCE for the Pentateuch) has become the original Old Testament (OT) of Christianity. Seidman reinterprets the Church narrative of Jews as "falsifiers" of the OT, and asks herself if one can speak of a distinctive Jewish approach to translation: "Do Jews resist translation or are they exemplary translators? What might make a translation Jewish? Are Jewish translations simply those that are directed toward Jewish audiences or which rely on Jewish sources, or which reflect Jewish analysis?" (p. 17). The book answers these old-new questions only for the Western/Ashkenazi sphere, not in the Oriental/Sephardic context, where Jews were mainly in contact with Islam (see p. 18).

Announcing the plan of her book, Seidman explains that she explores such controversial concepts as translatability, fidelity, and the translator's invisibility, and concludes that the mainstream in translation studies was formed by a Christian approach articulated through Jewish-Christian polemics. Each chapter could stand for itself, but all converge and show the specificity of Jewish approach to translation and how it could contribute to translation theory in the West. The wordplay in her title (*Faithful Renderings*) "is meant to suggest that the very phantasm of the faithful translator both obscures and hints at the degree to which the equivalence of a source text and its translation is a matter of faith rather than evidence, ideology rather than technique" (p. 31).

Chapter one presents the diverging interpretation of the Hebrew tradition and the emerging Christian faith around the development of dogmas stemming from canonized translation. The Virgin Birth dogma relies on a prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, where the Hebrew text does not use *betula*, a virgin, but *alma,* a young woman. The word becomes first *parthenos*, through the Greek Septuagint as quoted by Matthew 1:22–23, and then *virgina* in the Vulgate. Similarly, the Greek persona of the Holy Spirit replaces the Hebrew *Rua'h hakodesh* (breath, wind, spirit of Sanctity/Holiness). Seidman draws a striking parallel between the Immaculate Conception (Mary giving birth from/with the Holy Spirit) and what she calls the Immaculate Translation: "the conception of a perfect reproduction of God's Word in both the Septuagint and the figure of Jesus Christ" (p. 33). In fact, Christianity affirms the primacy of the Spirit and its capacity to be transferred, reborn, reincarnated into a new receptacle. In contrast, Judaism rejects the possibility of a purely spiritual transmission detached from a corporeal frame, denying also the possibility of conveying the message, the sense, the spirit, without connection to the form, the word or the letter. This opposed approach of *Rua'h*/the Spirit becomes the main theme of chapter two, where the concepts of literalism, fidelity, loyalty and servility are clarified through the diametrically opposed Jewish and Christian discourse about Aquila's Greek retranslation of the OT. In the eyes of Christianity, Aquila's text is the image of a barbarian, unreadable, word-for-word transposition of the letter of the Bible. The Talmud praises Aquila for having "imported" the beautiful Greek language, using it to interpret the Word of God (pp. 89–90). Seidman also compares

conversion (Aquila is a proselyte) with circumcision and translation. She shows how the convert is suspected of betraying his native language and his people, but is considered by his new milieu as an asset and a spiritual hero. (She could have added that in Hebrew *brith milah*, or "circumcision", also means "*Brith*/a covenant of *Milal* the Word".)

Conversion remains the main theme in chapter three. We discover the contribution of Jewish apostate-translators to theological "disputations" (a kind of trial) organized by the Church or the Crown against Jewish texts and faith. It is Seidman's claim that apostates "translated" themselves into "another" identity. Moreover, by giving their new co-religionists the key to Jewish grammar and exegesis, they furthered the emergence of Christian Hebraism (Humanism, Reformation). Released from their dependence on Jewish knowledge, Luther and modern Christian translation could fully develop an approach of "domestication" and "appropriation" of the Bible and other cultural assets. Chapter four examines the evolution of German-Jewish identity through the lens of Bible translation, as cultural encounter, exchange, and dialogue (pp. 155–56). Moses Mendelssohn – the emblem of the enlightened Jew, convinced of the possibility of a symbiotic egalitarian co-existence – praised both Hebrew and German as noble and pure languages of culture, and juxtaposed them in his elegant Pentateuch translation (1780–1783), where the German is still, as was common practice, transliterated into the Hebrew alphabet. By comparison, the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible (1925–1929), in which the Hebrew original is "visible" under the German, manifests "colonial resistance" instead of "deference". Though strange and difficult to read, it seemed modern and innovative, in accordance with the German Romantic translation theory which hoped to enrich German language through an encounter with the foreign (p. 178). Seidman concludes this chapter with a new reading of Walter Benjamin. She insists on inserting him into Jewish translation history, but affirms that there are substantial differences between his theory of the full translatability of all languages and of "divine writ" and the rabbinic approach based on the indissolubility of form and content, letter and meaning (p. 193). (In my own view, Benjamin's theory is in fact fully consistent with Jewish Mystical views on languages.)

Chapter five, as mentioned above, reproduces and develops Seidman's earlier essay on Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1996). The core of this chapter is the question of the translatability or untranslatability of Holocaust discourse (Anne Frank, Primo Levi, Roberto Benigni). A translation of this Jewish experience "in every tongue" is required in order to insure memory transmission to future generations and the physical survival of Jews. But it must adapt itself to the expectations of the recipient. Self-censorship and rewriting are necessary strategies if one wants to be heard and to survive.

The sixth and last chapter is devoted to a fascinating study of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Yiddish writing in America as resistance through "assimilation". Yiddish culture has been assassinated together with the people who practised it. One can perpetuate a language only by continuing to write in it, but without its natural readership Yiddish will be understood mainly through translation. Singer partially escapes this dilemma by recreating a "second original" in English. This second text is authentic, though it erases the marks of the "hidden transcript" of the Jews (p. 277), of what "Weinreich calls *lehavdl loshn*, the 'differentiating language' that

distinguishes between what is Jewish and what is not. This semantic field is untranslatable" (p. 253).

Seidman does not pretend to be comprehensive, either in her historical survey or in her theoretical approach (p. 32). It is thus unfair to regret the absence of such an episode as the "Alba Bible", a translation of the OT into Castilian, commissioned in 1422 by Don Luys de Guzman from Rabbi Moses Arragel. Aware of the dangers at stake in translating the Jewish Bible for a Christian, Arragel, who worked under the control of two ecclesiastics as well as of his master, succeeded in introducing some rabbinic interpretations through the iconography (Fellous 2002). It would also have been interesting to see a study of the function of Jewish languages at the border of two cultures and identities, using the Hebrew alphabet (a cryptic device excluding intruders), mingling Hebrew words for the religious sphere, and embedded in a vernacular idiom. But Seidman has, I believe, rightly chosen to limit herself to the languages and numerous domains she knows and masters, without the screening involved when using second-hand material. Her book is already rich and dense enough, enhanced by illuminating notes and a very useful index. Since the 1990s, more and more interdisciplinary researchers, coming from the fields of theology, literature, psychology, philosophy, history and more, have been connecting their domains with translation theory and with Jewish Studies. A bibliography of Jewish translation history was recently published (Singerman 2002). *Faithful Renderings* is an invaluable and illuminating contribution to the knowledge of this emerging field.

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