

## Mysteries of the Meta-Task

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Lawrence Venuti is unhappy—unhappy that one can't make a living from literary translation, unhappy that editors will not consider a theoretical approach, unhappy that translators insist on a subjective, romantic, “bellevristic” approach.

“Bellevristic” is an ugly word and subtly disparaging. Venuti uses it sixteen times (and the equally ugly “bellevrism” twelve times) to refer to those translators who appeal to a conventional standard of literary excellence that they have inherited but not examined. Venuti suggests that it might be possible, through theory, to stand outside such limiting conventions and bring an illuminating light to bear, to find a more satisfying, perhaps morally superior and progressive way to translate. In general, we understand from his essay that the publishing world is obtuse, alas, rather more so in Anglo Saxon cultures than in virtuous mainland Europe, where a great deal more is translated.

I shall leave aside the question of whether one can make a living from literary translation. It was my experience that one can, but I was accepting commissions rather than proposing work, and I restricted myself to prose rather than poetry. There are many wonderful skills and pleasant tasks for which there is no market. Any proposal of any kind to a publisher must bear in mind that publishers have limited lists; possibly a policy of loyalty to authors in whom they have already invested; a need to make a profit, or at least to avoid a loss; and a huge mailbag from eager writers and translators. Rejection is the norm, in Europe quite as much as in “Anglophone countries.” It could hardly be otherwise. Over the years I have learned that pressing an editor to explain his rejection of my proposals is merely inviting prevarication. He is not sufficiently enthusiastic. Basta.

The various statistics Venuti offers in his opening paragraphs seek to create an impression of malaise if not scandal, but they are not sufficiently contextualized to give the reader a sense of the situation. It is true that only two or three percent of literary works published in the U.S. and U.K. are translated, but it is also true that the overall number of works has increased enormously, so that far more work is

translated now than it was in the past, whose loss Venuti regrets. It is true that Germany, France, Italy, and other mainland European countries translate up to fifty percent of their published titles, but an enormous quantity of these are made up of genre fiction from the U.S. and hardly constitute a great cultural richness. It is true that the vast majority of translated titles from the past are out of print, but this is equally true of English language titles. This is simply the norm, something that the arrival of e-books will, we hope, resolve.

To go on: it is true that in the past, certain star translators translated hundreds of titles, but quite probably this was done at the expense of other equally fine translators who remained without work and of whom we know very little. I seriously doubt whether it is a good thing to have a large percentage of a country's literature all interpreted by the same man or woman (as was the case with Italian literature and William Weaver through the 1970s and 80s). If one does translate regularly, constantly, it becomes extremely hard to keep one's work alert and fresh. This is one of the reasons why I stopped translating, or at least why I chose to translate infrequently, and only when something really intriguing came up.

So Venuti's opening description of malaise cuts little ice. I even have trouble recognizing the world he describes. Rightly defending the idea that there is "theory" behind all translation, he remarks, "Translators routinely assume a concept of good literature in choosing foreign texts for translation." But my experience is that one does not choose. One is offered a book to translate and has a week or so to decide whether to accept it or not, at which point the issue of good literature may arise, but so do questions of length, difficulty, deadline, pay, and above all, affinity. I declined to translate a number of books that I thought were good literature but for which I felt I was not the right translator; I couldn't imagine an appropriate voice in English. I translated some I thought were not good literature, because I knew I could do them well and because the money was welcome (Pavese felt the same way about one or two works now considered masterpieces). If, as Venuti suggests, translators are choosing foreign texts to translate, this would imply that publishers are accepting their proposals. Maybe this happens in the world of poetry, of which I know little, but it is very rare in the context of narrative fiction. Or perhaps we are talking about self publication, which seems to me a perfectly legitimate solution when one becomes fascinated by a

medieval Italian poet for whom the publishers see no market. Nothing is easier these days than self publication.

But let us turn to the more interesting area of the paper: the insistence that translation theory be at the fore when we present and publish translations. Venuti doesn't offer a theory of his own here, so it's not easy to be entirely sure either what he means by theory in the context of translation, or whether he envisages any number of competing and equally valid theories, or assumes that through a scientific approach one might arrive at a theory superior to all others.

Here are Merriam-Webster's definitions of the word "theory."

1: the analysis of a set of facts in their relation to one another

2: abstract thought: speculation

3: the general or abstract principles of a body of fact, a science, or an art <music *theory*>

4a: a belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action <her method is based on the *theory* that all children want to learn> b: an ideal or hypothetical set of facts, principles, or circumstances—often used in the phrase *in theory* <*in theory*, we have always advocated freedom for all>

5: a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena <the wave *theory* of light>

6 a: a hypothesis assumed for the sake of argument or investigation b: an unproved assumption: conjecture c: a body of theorems presenting a concise systematic view of a subject <*theory* of equations>

Looking through this list, I suspect that Venuti was not intending numbers two, three, five, or six. There is too much purpose and preaching in Venuti's essay for me to imagine that he is interested in abstract thought, at least in this field. Here I am with him. It is hard to see what such an approach might amount to with translation. Nor can one easily imagine that he is simply after a formula, however complex, to explain the phenomenon of translation. Rather, he wants

to change the nature of the phenomenon, to change the way people translate and the way readers approach translations (“the new translator I am fashioning,” he says boldly). In particular, he appears to be encouraging translators to be unconcerned that their work seem originally written or effortlessly fluent in the language into which they translate, and encouraging readers to accept the idea that reading a translation is a different experience from reading a text originally written in their language, requiring on the contrary a more “thoughtful” rather than “spontaneous and immediate” response. (Here I have difficulty with the idea that the two responses are mutually exclusive. Many fine works of literature provoke both an immediate and a thoughtful response, the latter being largely prompted by the former.)

So, having discarded four of our definitions, we are left with “an analysis of a set of facts in their relation to each other” and a “belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action.” If this is what is meant by translation theory, it is hard to argue with Venuti’s desire for more of it. I am in agreement that talk about translation, especially by practitioners, tends to the anecdotal, anti-intellectual, and irritatingly complacent. Venuti is surely right that a translator can only gain from being aware of the tradition he is working in and of the existence of other traditions—though, again, I also appreciate that if I had waited until I was thus aware before undertaking a translation, I would never have got going at all and probably never would have become interested in the subject.

How, then, is one to analyze which facts, and what are the kinds of beliefs, policies, or procedures that might emerge from such analysis? Again, this particular essay of Venuti’s is mainly negative in approach, describing what he is against rather than what he is for. A familiarity with some of his earlier writing together with his admiring references to Pound and Derrida suggest that he continues to advocate a form of translation that sees the text to be translated at least in part as a source of inspiration for altering the way we use our own language. The endeavor is not to produce a text, according to Dryden’s old formula, such as the original author might have produced if working in our language (a rather comical idea, since we are interested in the author precisely because he comes from elsewhere and did not work in our language), or indeed to lull the reader of a translation into believing that the text was written in his or her language (something

that publishers definitely prefer, which doubtless explains their rejection of Venuti's projects). No, the endeavor is to propose something new, something perhaps progressive and subversive that galvanizes the reader's relationship with his own language. Venuti proposed these ideas rather more openly and radically twenty years ago in *Rethinking Translation*, where he tells us that "a socially aware and politically engaged translator" can develop "a discursive strategy, taking the target language on what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would call 'a line of escape' from the cultural and social hierarchies which that language supports, using translation to 'deterritorialize' it" (p. 11).

Such an approach arises from an optimistic and political vision that ascribes to translation not the task of making a product of one culture available for appreciation in another but the meta-task of constantly heightening our awareness of language and the way we use it, regardless and perhaps at the expense of the commercial and maybe even the critical success of the work. This approach is thus in line with aspects of Benjamin's famous "The Task of the Translator" and Derrida's famously abstruse commentary upon it. (What remains of Derrida is always a sense of wonder that he should have rendered a quite reasonable line of thought so strenuously obscure and nearly mystical, as if it were important that only a small group of initiates or acolytes subscribe to it.)

That a fertile "contamination" between languages can and does occur, exposure to the one sparking off something new in the other, I have no doubt. I shall be forever fascinated with Henry Green's remark that his unique narrative style was largely inspired by reading Charles Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, in which Doughty wrote, or claimed to have written, an English saturated with Arabic syntax and foregrounding procedures, an English that seemed poorly translated, if you will, or *differently* translated, from Arabic. There are also many places in Beckett's self translations, particularly when he moves from French to English, where he allows the kind of "interference" that an ordinarily competent translator would remove to create unusual effects in his English text.

But these are very special and hardly representative examples. What would it mean, one has to ask as a busy and regular translator, to look for such positive contamination as a routine strategy rather than as

occasional discovery or simply openness to opportunity? What would be the effect one was aiming at? What are the politics of Venuti's politically-engaged translator? Are they always to the liberal left? Or is it permissible to imagine a creative translator of the New Right? Is it important that the translator's politics agree with those of the author of the text he or she is translating?

If we assume that Venuti is proposing that a translated text offer a series of surprises and novelties in our language unlike those of an original text, how are those surprises generated, and how are they linked together to form a coherent whole? How do they stand in relation to the content and style (if we can ever separate the two) of the original text? What if our author had a considerable investment in the conventional forms of languages—was a member, perhaps, of a highly conservative society—and wished to have nothing to do with subversive techniques or texts that foregrounded the problematic of translation?

Venuti's position perplexes me to the point that I feel sure that there is something I haven't understood, something he could set me right on, and I wish he would spare us his litany of complaints and offer some exciting in-depth analyses of translations that he feels exemplify all he aspires to and admires; or if he has already done this (for I haven't read all he's written), then he might refer us to it so we can go away and do our homework.

Meanwhile, I would like to frame a question for him. For almost thirty years I have been teaching translation at an Italian university (Università IULM, Milano). At present I run a two-year post-grad "specialist" degree entirely dedicated to translation (not exclusively literary). Perhaps the first thing all the teachers say about each new group of students is: "Oh, if only they wrote better in their mother tongue, Italian." Their translations, at least in the early weeks, are very awkward. However, when the same students write essays for us, their Italian is good enough. They are not incompetent. It is evident, then, that "writing translations" is of a different nature than writing down one's own thoughts or ideas; the translator hasn't chosen content or style, is perhaps uncertain about how they relate to each other, and the original text thus presents itself to some degree as an obstacle not only to fluent prose but to any consistent style in the translation. The original, that is, even when written in conventional

prose, stands in the way of a conventional style in the translation (one recalls Luther's charmingly ironic remark in defense of his translation of the Bible, that Latin syntax is a considerable impediment to someone seeking to speak good German).

Some students try to overcome stylistic shortcomings by worrying less about the exact effects and achievements of the original and inventing and paraphrasing as they choose (this is likewise a strategy of many published and successful translations). Others struggle, with more or less success, to find forms of Italian that can house what they understand from the original English. Although this problem of producing a sustained, consistent, and cohesive style in their Italian translations is the most evident characteristic of my students' work, I slowly came to appreciate that these difficulties were intimately connected with their shaky grip on the strategies of the texts they were working on. What appeared to be a problem of expression—as if these students “didn't know how to write”—had largely to do with inadequate comprehension.

I set to work, then, encouraging students to ask themselves what the original texts were really up to. It was not a question of inviting them to admire or reproduce elegant or conventional literary style; rather, it was encouraging them to wonder, why does Lawrence use so many oxymorons? How does this fit into his vision of the world and his way of approaching his readers? Why does Henry Green break almost every rule of standard English deixis? Why does Beckett write some of the most spectacularly convoluted sentences in the language? And so on, author after author—Rushdie, Coetzee, Roth, Amis—encouraging students to focus on the relation between content and style, not in order to elucidate a demonstrable meaning or authorial intention, but to get a grip on the pattern of effects that produces the special experience of reading a particular author.

One might expect that when a translator achieves a deeper understanding of the original, such knowledge would be daunting or inhibiting, since the deeper one goes into any fine literary text, the clearer it becomes that, as Venuti remarks, the text can't be reproduced in another language without loss and damage, or, if you are more optimistic, without change. But happily, this is not the case. The more thorough the translator's understanding of the original (which includes of course an awareness of the context in which it was

created and the traditions that sustain it), the more he is able to step away from the form of words in which the original was delivered and start looking for a way to have the text “happen” in his own language. Understanding and appreciating, the translator now feels ready to take over and really rewrite the text in a consistent fashion in his own language, not because he “takes liberties”—quite the contrary—but because now at last he knows what he’s supposed to be writing. How this pans out in the language of translation is fascinating to watch, especially on those occasions when you have a number of talented students working in the same group, each producing convincing but different versions. At this point, one is bound to become aware of the fatality of affinity: it will occasionally happen that this or that personality simply meshes more creatively with the original voice. Two or three years ago, a student of mine who had not shone in any special way simply took off when he began experimenting with Beckett’s late and extremely arduous texts, producing a fascinating Italian at once fresh and creative and absolutely anchored in the spirit of Beckett’s project.

But to get back to my question for Venuti: when a translator works this way, each word he sets down—and of course, above all, the play of words semantically and rhythmically—has to do with what he understands of the original and the pattern of impressions it creates on his mind. I repeat: it is not a question of elegance or “bellettrism” (how I hate that word), but of trying to find a way to make a particular text, which the translator has explored in-depth, happen in his or her own language. If I ask one of my students why he chose this word or that syntactical structure, he will show me something in the original that prompted this solution; he will tell me how this fits in with what he thought was going on in the original—it is conventional or unconventional, fluent or awkward, in a way he feels was prompted by the original and appropriate in the present context of Italian letters.

My question is simple: when Venuti’s aware and progressive “new” translator chooses solutions that are provocative and non-standard in his own language, provoking a thoughtful rather than a spontaneous response, heightening awareness and alerting the reader to the translated status of the text, is he doing so in response to the pattern of effects and impressions he believes he has found in the original? Or is he imposing a predetermined strategy that could perfectly well lead



to similar effects being generated in translations of quite different originals (the case with Pound), and translating regardless of the impressions those originals created in the translator?

Of course I'm aware that my approach is based on a "theory" that underpins the cultural tradition in which I've been brought up, a belief that it is worth trying to reformulate the perceived spirit of the original in one's own language. I know it is not the only possible approach. But to understand Venuti's line, I need to have an answer to the following question: Does the distinctiveness of the kind of translations he advocates arise from a better and closer reading of the original and a desire to find ways to have it happen in translation—to recreate, as far as such things are ever possible, the same amalgam of effects—or is it the product of an independent and separate policy and a feeling that the "target language" (to use at last that ugly expression) is indeed to be targeted and changed because change is always good and the present climate in publishing is perverse?

If the latter is not the case, perhaps we might put aside discussion of translation's supposed meta-task the better to concentrate on the translation itself.