

Compte rendu

Lawrence Venuti. *The Scandals of Translation. Towards an Ethics of Difference*. Routledge, 1998, 210 p.

Lawrence Venuti begins this collection of essays with a harsh critique of the emergent discipline of translation studies. He disagrees with the blurb Bassnett and Lefevere have affixed to their Routledge collection which says that translation studies has been “a success story of the 80s”. Translation studies has not become an academic success, though its status as a young “interdiscipline” should clearly have made it so. Why? Because translation scholars have succumbed to methodological fragmentation and been reluctant “to engage more deeply with the cultural, political and institutional problems posed by translation”.

As in all of Venuti’s work, this strong statement is amply buttressed. He provides, first, an exposition of his own, very self-conscious process of translation. Then he critiques linguistics-oriented approaches (the Gricean model) and finally Gideon Toury’s influential polysystem model with its seemingly archaic insistence on “value-free” paradigms.

From the point of view of publishing prominence and of institutional recognition, Venuti’s assessment is only too accurate. Translation studies does not yet figure on the map of compelling scholarly trends. Despite the surge in publications, translation studies remains largely isolated, confined to a small corner of the academic world, its power of attraction seemingly limited to specialists.

This being said, Venuti’s neglect of some important counter-examples weakens his argument. Venuti’s perspective is an Anglo-American one. For a critic who is extremely sensitive to ethnocentrism and takes pains to be inclusive on all issues, Venuti seems to have limited his vision here drastically. Although he seems to read French (proposing a sensitive reading of Pierre Louys), this reading does not seem to have extended to translation studies material. Had Venuti included in his outline the work of prominent theorists like Jean Delisle, Barbara Godard, Barbara Folkart and Annie Brisset (mentioned only very briefly in relation to another point), his assessment would have been more nuanced. Delisle, for example, uses a pragmatic model which also assumes that the subjectivity of the translator will intervene. Folkart uses a rigorous semiotic analysis to prove that the translator, and the

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site of translation, is always present in the act of enunciation. Barbara Godard and Annie Brisset present complex readings of the values negotiated in translation.

It is not my aim to fault Venuti for less than encyclopedic breadth in an article whose aim is largely polemic. And Venuti would be justified in replying that work in French, or work not published by major houses, remains largely unknown in the Anglo-American world. Yet Venuti gives short shrift to precisely the sort of work he would like to see : work on translation which engages with the cultural issues of its context. This is true of the work of Michael Cronin in Ireland, of the Canadians I have mentioned, of Lydia Liu in China, of the growing body of translation studies work in India, and, generally speaking, of the work of gender issues.

Where translation studies have not yet “caught on” is in the fast-moving high-profile world of cultural studies. Despite the powerful work of Venuti himself, the influential writing of Gayatri Spivak and of Derrida, and the rhetoric of translation prominent in the writing of Homi Bhabha, language and translation issues remain largely marginal to this universe. The reasons for this seem more difficult to fathom. Venuti and Spivak would surely point to the persistent monolingualism of Anglo-America, where scholarly interest in transnational issues meets the reluctance to engage with the obstinate alterities of foreign languages. One interesting counter-indication is the new rubric called “Etymologies” in the journal *Public Culture* which has examined, for instance, the translations of “civic society” and “democracy” into Chinese.

Venuti’s work, though it promotes a vigorous version of a “cultural studies materialism”, makes no concessions to a culture studies audience. He remains focused on his objectives, which are resolutely translational. Most significantly, there is no backsliding into metaphor. Venuti remains focused on questions for which he provides concrete examples, opening his research into ever larger areas of cultural life.

The strength of Venuti’s writing comes from his tenacity. Never content to simply throw out ideas or engage in speculation, Venuti pursues complex and sensitive issues through detailed discussions of examples. What more difficult notion is there in translation studies than that of the ethics of translation? How exactly is the idea of the “foreignizing”

move in translation to be enacted? Venuti grounds his discussion of “The Formation of Cultural Identities” in an analysis of the translation of contemporary Japanese literature. He discusses first the choices which are offered the translator, insisting on this initial choice of text as part of the ethics of translation. Carefully pointing out the elements of quaintness, as well as the heterogeneity in mixing American slang with Japanese terms, Venuti presents Megan Backus’s English version of *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto as an example of what he considers a successful translation project, a project that “can deviate from domestic norms to signal the foreignness of the foreign text and create a readership that is more open to linguistic and cultural differences – yet without resorting to stylistic experiments that are so estranging as to be self-defeating” (p. 87). In detailing the publishing history of the *Don Camilo* stories, Venuti tells a fascinating story and shows how original research into translation archives can build alternative literary histories.

This is the book of a pedagogue. It is full of suggestions and recommendations. On language requirements for students, on how they can better learn to read translations. On copyright law. The need to conclude each chapter with a lesson becomes tedious however. After a rich and interesting discussion of some notions in Wittgenstein, Venuti includes a few comments about Plato and Heidegger, only to conclude with recommendations for “better” philosophical translations. The range of discussions needed here is much more vast than that provided. The very notion of style in the philosophical text as formulated by Nietzsche and by Derrida should be much more clear. Also, the specific role of concepts in translation as well as the historical role of translation as reinterpretation should be considerably more developed.

In introducing the notion of “the remainder”, Venuti proposes a useful and rich concept for understanding the unpredictable effects of translation. He defines the remainder as : “The collective force of linguistic forms that outstrips any individual’s control and complicates intended meanings” (p. 108). In clear opposition to the norm as a central explicative term, the remainder allows for the disturbing and stimulating effects of translation. It accounts for the productive nature of translations.

Lawrence Venuti’s latest book is an encouraging antidote to his own pessimistic

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assessment of translation studies. Vigorous and innovative, it opens new fields of discussion, suggests a wealth of new areas of research. In this volume, as in his previous book, Venuti never loses sight of his political aims. It is important to note, however, that the nature of these aims has become considerably more complex in the unfolding of Venuti's research. It is true that the vocabulary which has been available to describe cultural contact and its effects has been drastically limited, frozen into impoverished binaries. We need to develop accounts of the commerce between cultures that reveal the complexities of its generative and destructive processes, that analyze the intricate processes of cultural contact, fusion and disjunction. This is a large project, barely begun. And Venuti's book helps us to envisage the work to be done.

Source : *TTR*, vol. XII, n° 2, 2° semestre, 1999, p. 193-196.