Upgrading the Downgraded

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Lawrence Venuti makes a very valid point: literary translation into English is not a booming business these days. Few indeed could hope to earn a living from being *only* an English literary translator. Literary translation has, therefore, become the domain of people who pursue it on a part-time basis—summers, evenings, Sunday afternoons—and largely for pleasure: learned folks, professors, literati. They translate writers whose work they personally know, select, and enjoy; seldom are they commissioned to translate anything more.

Venuti also describes the process well: he has encountered the work of his Catalan poet, decides to translate it, presumably in his time off, since publishing translations does not "count" as a valid scholarly activity in today's English-speaking universities, and then he tries to place the poems here and there in the hope of later, perhaps, persuading a publisher to do an entire collection. We have all been through this. It is frustrating because we are excited about the work we wish to share, and the rejection letters, if they are even received, are disappointing, the scant reviews and slow sales of the translations even more depressing. I experienced such scenarios trying to get U.S. and British publishers to take an interest in Herta Müller, the current Nobel Laureate, in the late 1990s.

But this is our choice: we love translating, we love the play with words across cultures and languages, we love the puzzle of understanding and interpreting that other sensibility and its twists and turns and making it available in our own idiom. We can be enthusiastic teachers and disseminators of foreign cultural work.

The problems arise when we expect our compatriots to take an interest, or worse, when we set ourselves up as grandly altruistic pedagogues who resolutely seek to break down the "insularity and complacency of English hegemonic culture" by fearlessly introducing foreign cultural traditions, trends, and names for the enjoyment and "enlightenment" of other members of our society. This discourse, which comes precisely from that other life many of us lead as noisy

academics, is perturbing and distasteful. In academia, we are successful and can garner attention; paradoxically, "translation studies" in English is a burgeoning field, with the MLA even devoting a recent congress to the topic, while translation itself is hardly flourishing. As translators, then, we are failures, and it piques our pride when the attention we easily attract in academia does not transfer to the domain of actual literature—much like the translators/scholars Venuti attacks for their "belletristic" approach. In my view, both the "enlightenment" and the "belletristic" discourses on translation stem from the hurt pride and "ressentiment" experienced by powerful and productive minds, highly-educated, cultivated, literary, and multilingual people, whose talents and interests find almost no echo in today's English-speaking worlds, where the numbers of informed and interested readers are not on the increase.

In fact, literary translation in English is not really a profession. It is a leisure activity. And although it requires considerable knowledge, patience, and multi-linguistic finesse, and although it involves dealing with every single word in a text—even the meaningfulness of punctuation marks (and making reasoned decisions on them)—it is underpaid and undervalued. Small wonder that some of its practitioners *have taken refuge* in what Venuti calls "belletrism." There is little else at stake.

Brower's collection *On Translation,* which Venuti cites on several occasions in his article, is a good example of the belletristic space where such translators could—fifty years ago—flaunt their erudition, commenting on the minute details of various English versions of an ancient Greek play (or as in Venuti's more recent Borges example, niggling over small textual differences), thereby parading their knowledge—and revealing, in the process, a surprising dismissiveness toward their own work. Is it decadence or a kind of inverse snobbery when a translator/scholar and literary specialist begins one such belletristic text on his own work of translation as follows: "This study starts from a remark which a great teacher of Greek was fond of repeating to his classes. 'A translation,' he would say, 'is like a stewed strawberry.' Everyone familiar with translations *and* stewed strawberries will appreciate the perfect justice of this criticism." (Brower, "Seven Agamemnons" 1959). I imagine the gentleman

holding up a flaccid brownish-red stewed strawberry between two prim fingertips for all to consider.

While I do not appreciate the "perfect justice" of this remark, I suggest that this depreciative attitude and other related views that proliferate in Brower's collection (the Muirs' article on translating Kafka is surreal for its final comments on "the German sentence") come from this embattled position where publicly ineffective and neglected translator/scholars pay clever and snooty lip service to the general culture and the general reader, all the while basking in the golden light of a dying art in these now almost unreadable texts. Venuti presents them as somehow responsible for the degradation of English literary translation, but I think they are symptoms of the problem rather than sources of it.

One final observation may further underline the decadence of the current situation: because English literary translation is not a profession, and because so many translators work at their leisure, they seldom discuss money or deadlines. How much they earn per word, per page, or per letter (including punctuation), or in royalties, is not a topic; nor are questions of time pressure. The annual meetings of ALTA (American Literary Translators' Association) to my knowledge have no forum that addresses these points. In Canada, things are only slightly different. In Europe, on the other hand, such professional questions are constants at translators' annual meetings, with the Norwegians a few years ago even deciding on work-to-rule: in order to exert pressure on publishers, they refused to submit digitized versions of their translations and turned in only hard copy, an unthinkable tactic in the English-speaking world.

Theoretical Upgrades

Would a good dose of translation theory improve this dire situation? Would it temper the effects of one hundred years of belletrism? Although some of those texts, viz. "Seven Agamemnons," are not so untheoretical, their ideas are expressed in such arrogant and condescending terms that they defy serious reading. To whom and how would such theory be administered? And what kind of translation theory should it be? Venuti asserts that "hermeneutic"

translation is the solution, which, I presume, would involve theories of interpretation, perhaps as described in this recent book blurb:

> The book presents the hermeneutical theory of translation focusing on the translator as a person. Translation is a dynamic task to be performed on the basis of a deep understanding of the original and an adequate strategy for authentic reformulation in another language. The theoretical foundations of hermeneutics laid by Schleiermacher, and later on developed by Heidegger, Gadamer and the phenomenologist Husserl, are presented, combined with a critical discussion of current theories in Translation Studies. (Stolze 2011)

Hmmm. Perhaps … but what else? Theories of reading and reader-reception? Perhaps some material on intercultural communication from the area of cultural studies? These have their uses, of course, but I would suggest at least three other approaches that do not theorize methods of "how to translate" but instead recognize the phenomenon of literary translation as a *social event*—an activity that is usually well beyond the control of the individual "translator as a person," and is carried out for specific reasons, in specific ways, and at specific times. I'd like to recognize theories that promote an understanding of translation as an intentionally and purposefully performed group activity that always occurs in a social system and context—theories that explore translation as a productive activity but also describe and analyze it with those social and interactive aspects in mind.

Systems theories: In my view, the so-called belletrism is a systemic problem, a feature of modern English-language cultures that developed over the twentieth century, and that will pass. The application of systems theory, which is gaining ground in the study of translations, provides useful tools for understanding translation as both a system in its own right and with its own properties, and as a social subsystem, one of the many interacting and competing systems at work within a society that also affects the way a society interacts with other, foreign societies. Understanding and using such theory to provide insights into the decline and relative decadence of English literary translation today would doubtless make more sense and provide more knowledge than laying blame on a series of easy (though doubtless deserving) targets (Tyulenev 2011).

Recent attempts to consider translation as a system were made in Europe in the early 1990s when new theoretical models were sounded out for studying cultural and literary history and, more specifically, the history of literary translation. These attempts were based on the systems paradigm originally suggested by the Russian formalists and developed for translation by Even-Zohar in Israel and a number of Belgian scholars. This Israeli/Belgian work, coming in the wake of the massive translations of European works of literature, philosophy, and culture into modern Hebrew in the 1950s—as part of a nation- and language-building exercise—first used early systems theory to consider the dynamics of literary translation in relation to the target culture and society. The idea was that the Israeli implementation of translation could not be adequately explained only in terms of literary aesthetics or "belletrism."

Today, sophisticated systems theories derived from Niklas Luhmann help map the social involvements of translation and appreciate the role of translation as a boundary phenomenon. They theorize translation as a channel that is necessary for social evolution; examples include (1) work on early Bible translations into European vernaculars that show how these translations were crucial in the foundation of national literatures and languages, and (2) a study of the translations of Western European technical knowhow into Russian in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (promoted by both Peter and Katharine the Great) and their influence in fostering and promoting socio-economic development (Tyulenev 2009).

In other words, the focus is on understanding and showing translation's social and literary place and role. If, in Anglo-America today, literary translation plays no role, as Venuti seems to say, then this is doubtless a situation that systems theories can help elucidate more clearly than a rant against aesthetes or crass "anti-intellectualism."

Skopos theory and "fonctionnalisme": Long established in translation studies and operating closer to the actual text, these theories start from the *intentionality* of translation, its *purposefulness*. Seldom are translations done and published only for pleasure. The current situation in Anglophone countries is exceptional in that regard: we

operate in one of the few cultures where some people can spend days and weeks translating texts for which they will never earn a decent wage and which hardly anyone wishes to publish or read. It is far more usual for a translation to be commissioned, completed, and marketed for specific reasons—with a purpose.

My current translation project (being carried out under typical Anglophone conditions) provides a good example of this intentionality of translation and its effect on the finished product. Originally one of the few novels written in German in the young GDR around the political and personal tensions leading up to the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, *Der geteilte Himmel* by Christa Wolf (1963) was translated into English in East Berlin in 1965. That English version made the book a statement *for* socialism, removing all ambiguities, hesitations, and ambivalences that confront the young woman who chooses to stay in East Germany and not join her lover, who has remained in the West after an academic conference. In the translation (prepared and published in East Berlin), the woman's decision becomes a clear vote *for* this new, better, German society and *against* the corrupt capitalist other. Given the English disregard for the details of such translation, this has remained the only version available. Now, fifty years later, I have the leisure to produce an English text with another intention: to restore these uncertainties as well as the first-person narrative excised by the earlier text and, in the process, rehabilitate the work of one of the great writers of that now-extinct Germany.

The German Hans Vermeer first used the term "skopos" to get at this intentionality of translation; in French, the reference is often to "fonctionnalisme." There are, of course, differences between these two theoretical approaches to understanding translation—the German focuses on what the translation sets out to do, and the French on what it effects—but they are certainly related and address a point made several times by the late André Lefevere in his perspicacious *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), notably that "patronage" seriously affects translation. Recent examples of *purposeful* translation, where the intention of the patrons is clear, abound:

- the glut of "Western" texts of political theory, philosophy,

literature, historiography, and social sciences translated into the languages of East Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and financed by various "Western" sources, the Soros Foundation important among them. The purpose was influence through ideology; the effects are still being measured (Mihalache 2005).

- the translation into English of a large body of women's writing from various cultures over the course of the 1970s and 1980s as Anglophone feminisms gained power and sought inspiration as well as "sisterly" collaborations; similar massive translations of women's writing occurred in many other countries.
- the hundreds of translations into various languages funded and published by the CIA in the 1950s and 1960s—among them Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*—that were part of what was then called "psychological warfare" (Saunders 2000) and is now termed cultural diplomacy
- most recently, an exercise in this new diplomacy headed by Laura Bush and entitled the "Global Cultural Initiative" (September 2006). The program announced funding for translation, first and foremost, among other arts. The translation of *poetry* by American writers into Arabic and by Pakistani and Arabic writers into English was the very first project. More information has been hard to come by. Probably nothing more happened.

Research and writing in such areas can be of great interest to promoters, teachers, students, and readers of literary translation because such work recognizes and provides the tools with which to examine the role assigned to translation by the "patrons of the moment," and to study its effects, which may well diverge from those intended. It seems that in the realm of English literary translation today, the lack of enterprising patrons with a purpose might be posing the problem. The altruistic purposes of a few translator/scholars hardly matter.

Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS): The set of theories and research methodologies incorporated in DTS (Toury 1995) engage more deeply with the individual translated text than do the preceding ones, examining it through contrastive analyses with the source text and other translations and assessing it as a product of its time,

translator, publisher, marketing system, etc. Descriptive translation studies often start from the premise that since translation involves many different players and interests, studying these sheds light on socio-cultural power struggles otherwise left unobserved and undetected. Further, DTS recognize and tease out the manipulative and transformative powers of translation. There is little room here for translation as an "independent literary work"; rather it is often found to be ruled by series of contemporary norms, spoken or unspoken, personal or public. The use of descriptive translation studies (by students and many others) provides insights about how texts change in the move from one place and language and time to another, and perhaps finally and forever wipes out the notion that translation provides an equivalent other text. Descriptive translation studies have been applied to many types of work:

- Feminist analyses of Lattimore, whom Venuti deems an accomplished translator, have shown that in his desire to have his translation "stand on its own as a poem in the translating language," Lattimore filled in the blanks that time had worn into the ancient Greek poetry of Sappho, and rather inappropriately, with misogynist material.
- Studies of Bible translations into English (and many other languages) have revealed the enormous impact the power differentials between women and men have had on the translations of these ancient texts, as well as on the liturgy, which suddenly, in the late-twentieth century, could be read differently. Radical re-translations ensued, removing the term "virgin" for the mother of Jesus, or changing "Lord God" to "God the Mother and Father," or translating the name assigned to the first woman of the creation myth in Genesis II as "Life" with all that connotes (and not just transliterating it as Eva)—radical translations that caused the Vatican to issue a brief entitled "Liturgiam authenticam" (2001) dictating rules for Bible translations.
- Close comparative descriptions of translations that Borges himself published have recently unveiled the extent of his interventions in these texts. In his translation of *The Wild Palms,* for instance, Borges brings Faulkner's protagonists Harry and Charlotte (whose personalities and behaviors are stereotypically associated with the "opposite" gender) back in

> line with his own heteronormative ideals. To do so, he actually switches the dialogue between the two characters, putting Charlotte's aggressive words into the mouth of the passive, dependent Harry (Leone 2011).

This final example comes from a doctoral dissertation at The University of Iowa, a contra-indication to Venuti's lament that American translation programs, students, and teachers do not address translations as "interpretive acts." That is really not where the problem lies. It is much, much broader, and goes far beyond the effete, or perhaps defeated, "belletristic" approaches that Venuti has singled out. It has to do with general culture, a declining reading culture, insularity, disinterest in others, or disdain for others—all of which and more may be tucked beneath the heading of Anglo-hegemony, but which require research—research to arrive at the difficult explanations as well as to identify the exceptions (because they exist and are important)—rather than harangues and admonitions.

The first place to promote the "translation culture" that Venuti dreams of is probably not a university classroom or another collection of essays examining the effects of English hegemony on the attitudes of English translators, publishers, reviewers, and readers caught in the system. A confident*, interesting*, gritty, scandal-ridden, and arresting regular column on the *act* of translation and on historic moments in translation, published in an intelligent magazine with a *huge* circulation and readership would probably be more useful. A first topic could be "translating erotica for mainstream America" and include a look at Venuti's own recent English version of such a text, *100 Strokes of the Brush before Bed* by Melissa P. (2003/2004) (Venuti 2010). One question could be: "What hermeneutic strategy did the translator use to make Italian teenage porn accessible to the mainstream English reader?" Another, more telling, one: "What social and cultural conditions made it possible not only to publish an English translation of this book but to sell over 100,000 copies?"

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