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Compte rendu

Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*. London and New York, Routledge, 1995. xii + 353 p.

The translator's proverbial desire to remain invisible, the author claims, results from a strategic, indeed ideologically motivated, decision on his part. This means that the shadowy role customarily assigned to the translator by the publishing industry as well as the reading public–and, more importantly, often accepted without demur by the professional translator himself–has nothing whatsoever to do with the nature of translation itself. It is Venuti's central contention that the ideology in question is however largely confined to and typical of contemporary Anglo-American culture. The author traces the genealogy of this ideology to as far back as 17th century England. Elsewhere, says he, especially in the Continent of Europe, another equally forceful strategy has been brought to bear on the task of translation–and with completely different implications, cultural as well as geo-political. This latter strategy consists in keeping intact as far as possible the essential "foreignness" of the foreign text, rather than assimilating it beyond recognition into the culture of the target language, as is standardly done by anglophone translators. The author's motivation for delving into the history of these distinct traditions is thus partly, if not wholly, political: in his own words, he has undertaken the task "from an oppositional standpoint, with the explicit aim of locating alternatives, of changing the situation" (p. ix).

Why should a translator wish to remain invisible or anonymous? On the strength of extensive and painstaking research, Venuti establishes that the translator's desire to efface himself stems from his belief–needless to say, ideologically induced–that the ideal translation is one that, paradoxically enough, does not present itself as translation. In other words, the translator strives to make his work seem so transparent as to give the reader of the translated text the illusory impression that what is being read is the original work itself. But this illusion can only be created by the translator by ensuring that the translated text is fluent and easy to read, which in turn means making appropriate and, in many cases, decisive changes in the very "texture" of the work in the foreign language that is being translated, especially as

regards its often peculiar syntax and other textual characteristics, that hinder fluent reading and readily give away its foreignness. Thus we are up against the biggest of all the paradoxes: the translator's invisibility is the direct result of his persistent presence throughout the process of translation, making constant revisions in the original text–indeed, literally manipulating it–in order to make it perfectly readable in the target language. In Venuti's own words, "What is remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's *crucial intervention* in the foreign text." (emphasis added) (p. 1).

The ideological agenda that informs the wide-spread belief in and fuels the desire for the invisibility of the translator comes to the fore as soon as we perceive that, in opting to translate the foreign text with the single-minded aim of making it readable in the target language, what the translator effectively does to the foreign text is "domesticate" it. That is to say, he not only deprives it of its foreignness but also re-interprets it in accordance with the norms and value system of the culture associated with the target language. "Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader." (p. 18).

Now, Venuti is fully aware that some amount of domestication is the inevitable price one is required to pay in the case of *any* translated work. The diametrically opposed alternative of presenting the foreign work "as in itself it really is" is self-defeating; it defeats the very purpose of translation because, instead of making the foreign text accessible to the readers in the target language, it presents them with a text that is infused with total unintelligibility. To put matters simply, there is no translation without violence.

What then can constitute a viable alternative to the translator's most cherished ideal of invisibility? Venuti claims that such an alternative has been pursued outside of the anglophone world. As a case in point he cites Friedrich Schleiermacher's 1813 lecture *Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens* ("On the different methods of translating"), wherein the great German scholar pleaded that translation be viewed as an important practice in the Prussian nationalist movement. Schleiermacher's point was that foreignizing translation might help enrich the German language without at the same time threatening its

essential native "genius". Venuti concedes that such an approach to translation is riddled with its own problems for, among other things, it "rest[s] on a chauvinistic condescension toward foreign cultures". (p. 99).

Schleiermarcher's influence was felt even in England, where Francis Newman (1805-1897) championed the cause for some time until such influential figures as Matthew Arnold intervened to offset the impact. The advocacy of foreignizing translation again gathered strength in the early decades of the 20th century, thanks to the advent of modernism. But Venuti argues that such attempts were sporadic and by and large marginal in the English-speaking world. In Venuti's opinion, there is something inherently subversive about the very idea of foreignizing translation. "Foreignizing translation is a dissident cultural practice, maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal linguistic and literary values at home, including foreign cultures that have been excluded because of their own resistance to dominant values." (p. 148). Venuti calls attention to the dissident nature of foreignizing translation by discussing at some length the work of the Italian writer Iginio Ugo Tarchetti (1839-1869) and the Milanese movement known as *scapigliatura (scapigliato* means "dishevelled") of which he was a leading member.

As already noted, Venuti makes no attempt to camouflage his own preference for the foreignizing approach to translation. He approvingly cites Deleuze and Guattari (1986) to the effect that more and more people are today being forced to "live in a language that is not their own" thus becoming "a normad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language." Whether one approves of it or not, foreignizing is already at work in these circumstances, "resist[ing] the hegemony of transparent discourse" and this takes place "from within, by deterritorializing the target language itself, questioning its major cultural status by using it as a vehicle for ideas and discursive techniques which remain minor in it, which it excludes." (p. 305). The author goes on to underscore the political use of translation insofar as it can, if properly conducted, help destabilize and subvert the dominant discourse, by creating a discursive space for the cultural other to emerge and bear constant testimony to "the unbridgeable gaps between cultures" (p. 306).

The Translator's Invisibility is divided into 7 chapters. Chapter 1, entitled

"Invisibility" explores the central theme of the book and how the notion keeps coming up repeatedly in the literature about translation in the English-speaking world, especially in Great Britain and the U. S. Under the title of "Canon", Chapter 2 looks into the genealogy of the idea of fluency as the cherished ideal of translation. Chapter 3, called "Nation", discusses how foreignizing translation was advocated in Germany in the 19th century and the repercussions, albeit short-lived, that were felt in Britain. Entitled "Dissidence," Chapter 4 discusses the political role of foreignizing strategy. Chapter 5 bears the title of "Margin" and concentrates on attempts by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to advocate foreignizing translation as part of Modernism's avowed aim of cultivating increasingly heterogeneous discourses. Chapter 6 is presented under the title of "Simpatico." The choice of the Italian word meaning "agreeable" or "congenial" was motivated , as the author says, by a remark by a translator friend who advised him to look for authors of his own generation to translate. Venuti teases out the implications of the underlying principle and concludes that it is wedded to the ideal of total transparency in translation. The last chapter declares its political tone in its very title: "Call to Action." Venuti exhorts fellow translators, especially in Britain and America, to make their own presence felt and openly espouse the important political role that they have refrained from playing, thus inadvertently serving an ideological agenda marked by ethnocentrism and chauvinistic domestication of foreign cultures.

The Translator's Invisibility is somewhat misleadingly sub-titled 'A History of Translation'. No doubt, the book does trace the origins of translators' invisibility and kindred notions to as early as the 17th century. But the investigation is neither systematic nor exhaustive. The author is, as already noted, primarily interested in developing a genealogy of such concepts à la Foucault and, on the basis of his findings, in making a political case for change and reform. True to its declared purpose, *The Translator's Invisibility* does give the reader a nudge in the ribs. The book is highly instigating and goads professional translators as well as theorists of translation into rethinking some of the fundamental beliefs about translation and looking at the activity of translation from a political perspective.

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