

Compte rendu

Lawrence Venuti (ed.) *Rethinking Translation—Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, 235 p.

This is a timely collection of diverse and sometimes provocative essays which seek to extend the boundaries of contemporary reflection on the context and process of translation. In a brief but excellent introduction, Lawrence Venuti points out how, despite its ubiquity, translation continues to be invisible, and therefore undervalued. The reasons for this are complex. All too often, observes Venuti, the precarious social and cultural conditions of their work have prevented translators themselves from questioning more aggressively the public representation of the translator as a “paradoxical hybrid at once dilettante and artisan” (p. 1). Within the academic community, the development of a more critical approach to translation theory has been inhibited by the conception, grounded in a Platonic metaphysics of the text, of translation as a derivative activity coming well behind other more valued forms of cultural practice. Even more unfortunately, and this is where Venuti places his emphasis, existing models of translation theory based on the glorification of the original and the valorization of transparency have themselves contributed to the invisibility of the translator by concealing “the manifold conditions under which a translation is produced and consumed” (p. 4). Building on poststructuralist readings of translation, the aim of this anthology is precisely “to provoke a rethinking of translation that is philosophical, but also political, engaged in questions of language, discourse, and subjectivity, while articulating their relations to cultural difference, ideological contradiction, and social conflict” (p. 6).

Philosophical questions dominate the initial essays in the anthology which owe much to the work of Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida. Touching on various translation issues raised by Freud, Andrew Benjamin addresses in particular the “process named within psychoanalysis as *Nachträglichkeit*, a term which at this stage can be translated as ‘deferred action,’ or ‘action at a distance’” (p. 18). At stake is not so much a clarification of the origin, present in consciousness already in translation, but the nature of its repetition. In psychoanalytic theory, suggests Benjamin, the temporal process of *Nachträglichkeit* offers a conception of repetition which cannot be dissociated from interpretation and reworking:

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“The starting-point, the translation, is reworked within the field of associations to which it gives rise. Each association does itself become the site of a further reworking. It must be added that there are associations which, potentially at least, are always to come” (p. 35). This framework allows Benjamin to postulate a more active, revitalised status for translation: “Any attempt to fix a meaning, translation, interpretation by its inscription into homology and classical epistemology will always fail, for what can never be precluded is the futural possibility—a possibility that defines by opening up the future—for a different site of translation” (p. 38). John Johnston also disputes the “traditional view of translation as an imitation or copy of an original text in a second language” (p. 43). Returning to Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Task of the Translator”, Johnston compares Benjamin’s ambiguous use of the “model-copy relationship (or that of prototype to model)” (p. 47) with Deleuze’s reversal of the Platonic valorization of the copy (as repetition of the same) in favour of the simulacrum (which values difference): “Translations that accomplish something different by maintaining the original difference in and through translation [...] that thereby manifest something new in the language” could be called simulacra in this new, positive, sense, while the derogatory Platonic sense of the word would be reserved for translations which render the original faithfully without challenging the previously established cultural meanings of the target language.

In the following two essays, the focus shifts to a feminist critique of translation theory. In a lively overview of gender politics in what she calls the “metaphorics” of translation, Lori Chamberlain sets out to determine “what is at stake for gender in the *representation* of translation: the struggle for authority, and the politics of originality informing this struggle” (p. 66). In this context, the preoccupation with fidelity to the source language or mother tongue, can be likened to the fundamental problem of patriarchy in general: “how to regulate legitimate sexual (authorial) relationships and their progeny” (p. 60), how “to guarantee that the child is a production of the father, reproduced by the mother” (p. 66). In fact, “the reason translation is so overcoded, so overregulated, argues Chamberlain, is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is essential to the establishment of power” (pp. 66-67). In the latter part of the article,

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she identifies several issues which should be explored in the development of a feminist theory of translation. In “Translation as (sub)version: on translating *Infante’s Inferno*,” Suzanne Jill Levine pursues some of these issues, in the context of her own feminist praxis of translation: word play as the locus of the “faithfully unfaithful translator” (p. 75), the conscious choice of subversive texts for translation, translation as a “(w)rite of passage” (p. 85).

Mistranslation as subversion is the central theme of two other articles. Jeffrey Mehlman uses Merrill’s “Lost in Translation” and his subsequent mistranslation of Valéry’s poem, “Palme,” to illustrate both the interpretative and creative implications of Walter Benjamin’s theory of translation. In a close reading of Hélène Cixous’ *Vivre l’orange*, a text conceived as a side-by-side English-French translation, Sharon Willis offers a reflection on translation as fault, in the many meanings of the word. “A book of auto-translation seeks a space *avant toute traduction*, a return to an originary moment, a drama of fully inhabiting the body of the mother tongue,” she argues, only to display the feminine as inhabiting the fault (divide) in a “perpetual translation effect—body to language—body and language always missing each other” (p. 116).

With the exception of Tom Conley’s article on “Colors in translation: Baudelaire and Rimbaud”, the remaining essays in the anthology focus on issues of cultural appropriation, and the power relationships which inform translation between specific linguistic communities. Starting from a comparison of George Steiner’s plurilingual experience with that of Moroccan writer, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Samia Mehrez points out the importance of the political conditions under which such language acquisition takes place. Using examples from francophone North Africa, she shows how the postcolonial plurilingual text challenges “both its own indigenous, conventional models as well as the dominant structures and institutions of the colonizer” (p. 122). Integrating translation within both the writing and the reading experience, drawing on “more than one culture, more than one language, more than one world experience, within the confines of the same text,” such texts also defy “our notions of an ‘original’ work and its translation” (p. 122).

Working within a “political economy of translation”, Richard Jacquemond offers a

particularly informative comparison of “French literary production translated and published in Egypt and Egyptian literary production translated and published in France” (p. 140) over the last century. The trends he establishes demonstrate the importance of economic, political and cultural criteria in translation strategies, both at the level of what is translated and how. With reference to Antoine Berman’s work on the ethics of authorization, Sherry Simon examines three particular moments in Canadian translation: 1) C. G. D. Robert’s translation of *Les Anciens Canadiens* and Blake’s translation of *Maria Chapdelaine*, 2) translations of *joual*, and 3) recent translations of experimental writing, such as Barbara Godard’s rendering of Nicole Brossard’s *Désert mauve*. In each of these cases, the translation process “can be seen as guided by differing conceptions of cultural difference and its relation to language” (p. 160). In the final article of the anthology, Lawrence Venuti analyses the cultural politics of I. U. Tarchettu, whose relatively free adaptations (including plagiarism) of foreign Gothic writers enabled him to “question the hegemony of realist discourse in Italian literature” (p. 197).

Edited volumes almost inevitably suffer from some unevenness in quality of focus. This anthology is much better than most in preserving a unity of purpose within a divergence of applications. Contributing to this sense of coherence is the poststructuralist reflection on translation which underlies, to a greater or lesser degree, each essay. One, but not the only, merit of the anthology is to demonstrate, through an analysis of a variety of culturally, linguistically and politically diverse contexts, how this reflection can indeed extend the boundaries of our understanding of the theory and the practice of translation.

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