

The Translator's Invisibility

A history of translation

Lawrence Venuti



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The Translator's Invisibility

The Translator's Invisibility provides a thorough and critical examination of translation from the seventeenth century to the present day. It shows how fluency prevailed over other translation strategies to shape the canon of foreign literatures in English, and it interrogates the ethnocentric and imperialist cultural consequences of the domestic values that were simultaneously inscribed and masked in foreign texts during this period.

In tracing the history of translation, Lawrence Venuti locates alternative translation theories and practices which make it possible to counter the strategy of fluency, aiming to communicate linguistic and cultural differences instead of removing them. Using texts and translations from Britain, America and Europe he elaborates the theoretical and critical means by which translation can be studied and practiced as a locus of difference, recovering and revising forgotten translations to establish an alternative tradition.

Lawrence Venuti is Professor of English at Temple University, Philadelphia, and has been a professional translator for the past fifteen years. He is the editor of *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*.

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The Translator's Invisibility

A History of Translation

Lawrence Venuti



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General editors' preface

The growth of translation studies as a separate discipline is a success story of the 1980s. The subject has developed in many parts of the world and is clearly destined to continue developing well into the twenty-first century. Translation studies brings together work in a wide variety of fields, including linguistics, literary study, history, anthropology, psychology, and economics. This series of books will reflect the breadth of work in translation studies and will enable readers to share in the exciting new developments that are taking place at the present time.

Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulative processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us toward a greater awareness of the world in which we live.

Since this series of books on translation studies is the first of its kind, it will be concerned with its own genealogy. It will publish texts from the past that illustrate its concerns in the present, and will publish texts of a more theoretical nature immediately addressing those concerns, along with case studies illustrating manipulation through rewriting in various literatures. It will be comparative in nature and will range through many literary traditions, both Western and non-Western. Through the

concepts of rewriting and manipulation, this series aims to tackle the problem of ideology, change and power in literature and society and so assert the central function of translation as a shaping force.

Susan Bassnett
André Lefevere

Preface and acknowledgements

The Translator's Invisibility originates in my own work as a professional translator since the late 1970s. But any autobiographical elements are subsumed in what is effectively a history of English-language translation from the seventeenth century to the present. My project is to trace the origins of the situation in which every English-language translator works today, although from an opposing standpoint, with the explicit aim of locating alternatives, of changing that situation. The historical narratives presented here span centuries and national literatures, but even though based on detailed research, they are necessarily selective in articulating key moments and controversies, and frankly polemical in studying the past to question the marginal position of translation in contemporary Anglo-American culture. I imagine a diverse audience for the book, including translation theorists, literary theorists and critics, period specialists in various literatures (English-language and foreign), and reviewers of translations for periodicals, publishers, private foundations, and government endowments. Most of all, I wish to speak to translators and readers of translations, both professional and nonprofessional, focusing their attention on the ways that translations are written and read and urging them to think of new ones.

A project with this sort of intention and scope will inevitably come to rely on the help of many people in different fields of literary and critical expertise. Assembling the list of those who over the past several years read, discussed, criticized, or otherwise encouraged my work is a special pleasure, making me realize, once again, how fortunate I was: Antoine Berman, Charles Bernstein, Shelly Brivic, Ann Caesar, Steve Cole, Tim Corrigan, Pellegrino D'Acierno, Guy Davenport, Deirdre David, Milo De Angelis, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, George Economou, Jonathan Galassi, Dana Gioia, Barbara Harlow, Peter Hitchcock, Susan Howe, Suzanne Jill Levine, Philip Lewis, Harry Mathews, Jeremy

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All unattributed translations in the following pages are mine.

Come la sposa di ogni uomo non si sottrae a una teoria del tradurre (Milo De Angelis), I am reduced to an inadequate expression of my gratitude to Lindsay Davies, who has taught me much about English, and much about the foreign in translation.

L.V.
New York City
January 1994

Chapter 1

Invisibility

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections—scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself.

Norman Shapiro

I

"Invisibility" is the term I will use to describe the translator's situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. It refers to two mutually determining phenomena: one is an illusionistic effect of discourse, of the translator's own manipulation of English; the other is the practice of reading and evaluating translations that has long prevailed in the United Kingdom and the United States, among other cultures, both English and foreign-language. A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original." The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the

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more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text.

The dominance of fluency in English-language translation becomes apparent in a sampling of reviews from newspapers and periodicals. On those rare occasions when reviewers address the translation at all, their brief comments usually focus on its style, neglecting such other possible questions as its accuracy, its intended audience, its economic value in the current book market, its relation to literary trends in English, its place in the translator's career. And over the past fifty years the comments are amazingly consistent in praising fluent discourse while damning deviations from it, even when the most diverse range of foreign texts is considered.

Take fiction, for instance, the most translated genre worldwide. Limit the choices to European and Latin American writers, the most translated into English, and pick examples with different kinds of narratives—novels and short stories, realistic and fantastic, lyrical and philosophical, psychological and political. Here is one possible list: Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1946), Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1955), Heinrich Böll's *Absent Without Leave* (1965), Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1968), Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970), Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980), Mario Vargas Llosa's *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1990), Julia Kristeva's *The Samurai* (1991), Gianni Celati's *Appearances* (1992), Adolfo Bioy Casares's *A Russian Doll* (1992). Some of these translations enjoyed considerable critical and commercial success in English; others made an initial splash, then sank into oblivion; still others passed with little or no notice. Yet in the reviews they were all judged by the same criterion—fluency. The following selection of excerpts comes from various British and American periodicals, both literary and mass-audience; some were written by noted critics, novelists, and reviewers:

Stuart Gilbert's translation seems an absolutely splendid job. It is not easy, in translating French, to render qualities of sharpness or vividness, but the prose of Mr. Gilbert is always natural, brilliant, and crisp.

(Wilson 1946:100)

The style is elegant, the prose lovely, and the translation excellent.

(*New Republic* 1955:46)

In *Absent Without Leave*, a novella gracefully if not always flawlessly translated by Leila Vennewitz, Böll continues his stern and sometimes merciless probing of the conscience, values, and imperfections of his countrymen.

(Potoker 1965:42)

The translation is a pleasantly fluent one: two chapters of it have already appeared in *Playboy* magazine.

(*Times Literary Supplement* 1969:180)

Rabassa's translation is a triumph of fluent, gravid momentum, all stylishness and commonsensical virtuosity.

(West 1970:4)

His first four books published in English did not speak with the stunning lyrical precision of this one (the invisible translator is Michael Henry Heim).

(Michener 1980:108)

Helen Lane's translation of the title of this book is faithful to Mario Vargas Llosa's—"Elogio de la Madrastra"—but not quite idiomatic.

(Burgess 1990:11)

The Samurai, a transparent *roman à clef*, fluently translated by Barbara Bray, chronicles Ms. Kristeva's—and Paris's—intellectual glory days.

(Steiner 1992:9)

In Stuart Hood's translation, which flows crisply despite its occasionally disconcerting British accent, Mr. Celati's keen sense of language is rendered with precision.

(Dickstein 1992:18)

Often wooden, occasionally careless or inaccurate, it shows all the signs of hurried work and inadequate revision. [...] The Spanish original here is 10 words shorter and incomparably more elegant.

(Balderston 1992:15)

The critical lexicon of post-World War II literary journalism is filled with so many terms to indicate the presence or absence of a fluent translation discourse: "crisp," "elegant," "flows," "gracefully,"

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"wooden." There is even a group of pejorative neologisms designed to criticize translations that lack fluency, but also used, more generally, to signify badly written prose: "translatese," "translationese," "translatorese." In English, fluent translation is recommended for an extremely wide range of foreign texts—contemporary and archaic, religious and scientific, fiction and nonfiction.

Translationese in a version from Hebrew is not always easy to detect, since the idioms have been familiarised through the Authorized Version.

(Times Literary Supplement 1961:iv)

An attempt has been made to use modern English which is lively without being slangy. Above all, an effort has been made to avoid the kind of unthinking "translationese" which has so often in the past imparted to translated Russian literature a distinctive, somehow "doughy," style of its own with little relation to anything present in the original Russian.

(Hingley 1964:x)

He is solemnly reverential and, to give the thing an authentic classical smack, has couched it in the luke-warm translatese of one of his own more unurgent renderings.

(Corke 1967:761)

There is even a recognizable variant of pidgin English known as "translatorese" ("transjargonisation" being an American term for a particular form of it).

(Times Literary Supplement 1967:399)

Paralysing woodenness ("I am concerned to determine"), the dull thud of translatese ("Here is the place to mention Pirandello finally") are often the price we more or less willingly pay for access to great thoughts.

(Brady 1977:201)

A gathering of such excerpts indicates which discursive features produce fluency in an English-language translation and which do not. A fluent translation is written in English that is current ("modern") instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialized ("jargonisation"), and that is standard instead of colloquial ("slangy").

Foreign words (“pidgin”) are avoided, as are Britishisms in American translations and Americanisms in British translations. Fluency also depends on syntax that is not so “faithful” to the foreign text as to be “not quite idiomatic,” that unfolds continuously and easily (not “doughy”) to insure semantic “precision” with some rhythmic definition, a sense of closure (not a “dull thud”). A fluent translation is immediately recognizable and intelligible, “familiarised,” domesticated, not “disconcerting[ly]” foreign, capable of giving the reader unobstructed “access to great thoughts,” to what is “present in the original.” Under the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work “invisible,” producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems “natural,” i.e., not translated.

The dominance of transparency in English-language translation reflects comparable trends in other cultural forms, including other forms of writing. The enormous economic and political power acquired by scientific research during the twentieth century, the postwar innovations in advanced communications technologies to expand the advertising and entertainment industries and support the economic cycle of commodity production and exchange—these developments have affected every medium, both print and electronic, by valorizing a purely instrumental use of language and other means of representation and thus emphasizing immediate intelligibility and the appearance of factuality.¹ The American poet Charles Bernstein, who for many years worked as a “commercial writer” of various kinds of nonfiction—medical, scientific, technical—observes how the dominance of transparency in contemporary writing is enforced by its economic value, which sets up acceptable “limits” for deviation:

the fact that the overwhelming majority of steady paid employment for writing involves using the authoritative plain styles, if it is not explicitly advertising; involves writing, that is, filled with preclusions, is a measure of why this is not simply a matter of stylistic choice but of social governance: we are not free to choose the language of the workplace or of the family we are born into, though we are free, within limits, to rebel against it.

(Bernstein 1986:225)

The authority of “plain styles” in English-language writing was of course achieved over several centuries, what Bernstein describes as

"the historical movement toward uniform spelling and grammar, with an ideology that emphasizes nonidiosyncratic, smooth transition, elimination of awkwardness, &c.—anything that might concentrate attention on the language itself" (ibid.:27). In contemporary Anglo-American literature, this movement has made realism the most prevalent form of narrative and free, prose-like verse the most prevalent form of poetry:

in contrast to, say, Sterne's work, where the look & texture—the opacity—of the text is everywhere present, a neutral transparent prose style has developed in certain novels where the words seem meant to be looked through—to the depicted world beyond the page. Likewise, in current middle of the road poetry, we see the elimination of overt rhyme & alliteration, with metric forms retained primarily for their capacity to officialize as "poetry."

(ibid.)²

In view of these cultural trends, it seems inevitable that transparency would become the authoritative discourse for translating, whether the foreign text was literary or scientific/technical. The British translator J.M.Cohen noticed this development as early as 1962, when he remarked that "twentieth-century translators, influenced by science-teaching and the growing importance attached to accuracy [...] have generally concentrated on prose-meaning and interpretation, and neglected the imitation of form and manner" (Cohen 1962:35). Cohen also noticed the domestication involved here, "the risk of reducing individual authors' styles and national tricks of speech to a plain prose uniformity," but he felt that this "danger" was avoided by the "best" translations (ibid.:33). What he failed to see, however, was that the criterion determining the "best" was still radically English. Translating for "prose-meaning and interpretation," practicing translation as simple communication, rewrites the foreign text according to such English-language values as transparency, but entirely eclipses the translator's domesticating work—even in the eyes of the translator.

The translator's invisibility is also partly determined by the individualistic conception of authorship that continues to prevail in Anglo-American culture. According to this conception, the author freely expresses his thoughts and feelings in writing, which is thus viewed as an original and transparent self-representation,

unmediated by transindividual determinants (linguistic, cultural, social) that might complicate authorial originality. This view of authorship carries two disadvantageous implications for the translator. On the one hand, translation is defined as a second-order representation: only the foreign text can be original, an authentic copy, true to the author's personality or intention, whereas the translation is derivative, fake, potentially a false copy. On the other hand, translation is required to efface its second-order status with transparent discourse, producing the illusion of authorial presence whereby the translated text can be taken as the original. However much the individualistic conception of authorship devalues translation, it is so pervasive that it shapes translators' self-presentations, leading some to psychologize their relationship to the foreign text as a process of identification with the author. The American Willard Trask (1900–1980), a major twentieth-century translator in terms of the quantity and cultural importance of his work, drew a clear distinction between authoring and translating. When asked in a late interview whether “the impulse” to translate “is the same as that of someone who wants to write a novel” (a question that is clearly individualistic in its reference to an authorial “impulse”), Trask replied:

No, I wouldn't say so, because I once tried to write a novel. When you're writing a novel [...] you're obviously writing about people or places, something or other, but what you are essentially doing is expressing yourself. Whereas when you translate you're not expressing yourself. You're performing a technical stunt. [...] I realized that the translator and the actor had to have the same kind of talent. What they both do is to take something of somebody else's and put it over as if it were their own. I think you have to have that capacity. So in addition to the technical stunt, there is a psychological workout, which translation involves: something like being on stage. It does something entirely different from what I think of as creative poetry writing.

(Honig 1985:13–14)

In Trask's analogy, translators playact as authors, and translations pass for original texts. Translators are very much aware that any sense of authorial presence in a translation is an illusion, an effect of transparent discourse, comparable to a “stunt,” but they nonetheless assert that they participate in a “psychological” relationship with the

author in which they repress their own "personality." "I guess I consider myself in a kind of collaboration with the author," says American translator Norman Shapiro; "Certainly my ego and personality are involved in translating, and yet I have to try to stay faithful to the basic text in such a way that my own personality doesn't show" (Kratz 1986:27).

The translator's invisibility is thus a weird self-annihilation, a way of conceiving and practicing translation that undoubtedly reinforces its marginal status in Anglo-American culture. For although the past twenty years have seen the institution of translation centers and programs at British and American universities, as well as the founding of translation committees, associations, and awards in literary organizations like the Society of Authors in London and the PEN American Center in New York, the fact remains that translators receive minimal recognition for their work—including translators of writing that is capable of generating publicity (because it is prize-winning, controversial, censored). The typical mention of the translator in a review takes the form of a brief aside in which, more often than not, the transparency of the translation is gauged. This, however, is an infrequent occurrence. Ronald Christ has described the prevailing practice: "many newspapers, such as *The Los Angeles Times*, do not even list the translators in headnotes to reviews, reviewers often fail to mention that a book is a translation (while quoting from the text as though it were written in English), and publishers almost uniformly exclude translators from book covers and advertisements" (Christ 1984:8). Even when the reviewer is also a writer, a novelist, say, or a poet, the fact that the text under review is a translation may be overlooked. In 1981, the American novelist John Updike reviewed two foreign novels for *The New Yorker*, Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* and Günter Grass's *The Meeting at Telgte*, but the lengthy essay made only the barest reference to the translators. Their names appeared in parentheses after the first mention of the English-language titles. Reviewers who may be expected to have a writerly sense of language are seldom inclined to discuss translation as writing.

The translator's shadowy existence in Anglo-American culture is further registered, and maintained, in the ambiguous and unfavorable legal status of translation, both in copyright law and in actual contractual arrangements. British and American law defines translation as an "adaptation" or "derivative work" based on an "original work of authorship," whose copyright, including the

exclusive right “to prepare derivative works” or “adaptations,” is vested in the “author.”³ The translator is thus subordinated to the author, who decisively controls the publication of the translation during the term of the copyright for the “original” text, currently the author’s lifetime plus fifty years. Yet since authorship here is defined as the creation of a form or medium of expression, not an idea, as originality of language, not thought, British and American law permits translations to be copyrighted in the translator’s name, recognizing that the translator uses another language for the foreign text and therefore can be understood as creating an original work (Skone James *et al.* 1991; Stracher 1991). In copyright law, the translator is and is not an author.⁴

The translator’s authorship is never given full legal recognition because of the priority given to the foreign writer in controlling the translation—even to point of compromising the translator’s rights as a British or American citizen. In subscribing to international copyright treaties like the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, the United Kingdom and the United States agree to treat nationals of other member countries like their own nationals for purposes of copyright (Scarles 1980:8–11). Hence, British and American law holds that an English-language translation of a foreign text can be published only by arrangement with the author who owns the copyright for that text—i.e., the foreign writer, or, as the case may be, a foreign agent or publisher. The translator may be allowed the authorial privilege to copyright the translation, but he or she is excluded from the legal protection that authors enjoy as citizens of the UK or US in deference to another author, a foreign national. The ambiguous legal definition of translation, both original and derivative, exposes a limitation in the translator’s citizenship, as well as the inability of current copyright law to think translation across national boundaries despite the existence of international treaties. The Berne Convention (Paris 1971) at once assigns an authorial right to the translator and withdraws it: “Translations, adaptations, arrangements of music and other alterations of a literary or artistic work shall be protected as original works without prejudice to the copyright in the original work” held by the foreign “author,” who “shall enjoy the exclusive right of making and of authorising the translation” (articles 2(3), 8).⁵ Copyright law does not define a space for the translator’s authorship that is equal to, or in any way restricts, the foreign author’s rights. And yet it acknowledges that there is a material basis to warrant some such restriction.

Translation contracts in the postwar period have in fact varied widely, partly because of the ambiguities in copyright law, but also because of other factors like changing book markets, a particular translator's level of expertise, and the difficulty of a particular translation project. Nonetheless, general trends can be detected over the course of several decades, and they reveal publishers excluding the translator from any rights in the translation. Standard British contracts require the translator to make an out-and-out assignment of the copyright to the publisher. In the United States, the most common contractual definition of the translated text has not been "original work of authorship," but "work made for hire," a category in American copyright law whereby "the employer or person for whom the work was prepared is considered the author [...] and, unless the parties have expressly agreed otherwise in a written instrument signed by them, owns all the rights comprised in the copyright" (17 US Code, sections 101, 201 (6)). Work-for-hire contracts alienate the translator from the product of his or her labor with remarkable finality. Here is the relevant clause in Columbia University Press's standard contract for translators:

You and we agree that the work you will prepare has been specially ordered and commissioned by us, and is a work made for hire as such term is used and defined by the Copyright Act. Accordingly, we shall be considered the sole and exclusive owner throughout the world forever of all rights existing therein, free of claims by you or anyone claiming through you or on your behalf.

This work-for-hire contract embodies the ambiguity of the translator's legal status by including another clause that implicitly recognizes the translator as an author, the creator of an "original" work: "You warrant that your work will be original and that it will not infringe upon the copyright or violate any right of any person or party whatsoever."

Contracts that require translators to assign the copyright, or that define translations as works made for hire, are obviously exploitative in the division of earnings. Such translations are compensated by a flat fee per thousand English words, regardless of the potential income from the sale of books and subsidiary rights (e.g., a periodical publication, a license to a paperback publisher, an option by a film production company). An actual case will make

clear how this arrangement exploits translators. On 12 May 1965, the American translator Paul Blackburn entered into a work-for-hire arrangement with Pantheon in which he received “\$15.00 per thousand words” for his translation of *End of the Game*, a collection of short stories by the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar.⁶ Blackburn received a total of \$1200 for producing an English-language translation that filled 277 pages as a printed book; Cortázar received a \$2000 advance against royalties, 7.5 percent of the list price for the first 5000 copies. The “poverty level” set by the Federal government in 1965 was an annual income of \$1894 (for a male). Blackburn’s income as an editor was usually \$8000, but to complete the translation he was forced to reduce his editorial work and seek a grant from arts agencies and private foundations—which he failed to receive. Ultimately, he requested an extension of the delivery date for the translation from roughly a year to sixteen months (the contracted date of 1 June 1966 was later changed to 1 October 1966).

Blackburn’s difficult situation has been faced by most freelance English-language translators throughout the postwar period: below-subsistence fees force them either to translate sporadically, while working at other jobs (typically editing, writing, teaching), or to undertake multiple translation projects simultaneously, the number of which is determined by the book market and sheer physical limitations. By 1969, the fee for work-for-hire translations increased to \$20 per thousand words, making Blackburn’s Cortázar project worth \$1600, while the poverty level was set at \$1974; by 1979, the going rate was \$30 and Blackburn would have made \$2400, while the poverty level was \$3689.⁷ According to a 1990 survey conducted by the PEN American Center and limited to the responses of nineteen publishers, 75 percent of the translations surveyed were contracted on a work-for-hire basis, with fees ranging from \$40 to \$90 per thousand words (Keeley 1990:10–12; *A Handbook for Literary Translators* 1991:5–6). A recent estimate puts the translation cost of a 300-page novel between \$3000 and \$6000 (Marcus 1990:13–14; cf. Gardam 1990). The poverty level in 1989 was set at \$5936 for a person under 65 years. Because this economic situation drives freelance translators to turn out several translations each year, it inevitably limits the literary invention and critical reflection applied to a project, while pitting translators against each other—often unwittingly—in the competition for projects and the negotiation of fees.

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