Rethinking the Task of the Translator

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In his article The Task of the Translator Walter Benjamin claims that, just as 'no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener,' so no translation can serve a 'transmitting function' (Benjamin 1972). On the contrary, the purpose of translation is to manifest the essential 'kinship' between languages and to grope towards that 'pure language' of which all existing languages are merely fragments.

Apart from the extraordinary presumption Benjamin displays here in denying different poets and artists different intentions in the genesis of their work by submitting them to an overall determinist 'purpose' greater than themselves (and thus tinkering with the meaning of the verb 'intend'), one is also struck by the transcendentalist inherent in his idea of a 'pure language' that somehow unites all other languages. The loaded word 'pure' in particular is used in his essay to establish a sort of determinist moral high ground for all those works, and in this case translations, which go outside the standard use of the target language to generate, as Benjamin would have it, some kind of 'fusion' (presumably to be distinguished from 'confusion') between two languages. Benjamin thus gives us the famous example of Holderlin's translations of Greek tragedy which Blanchot later described as being neither German nor Greek but having 'the simplicity of a total and pure language' (Blanchot 1971: 73).

The translator's task, according to Benjamin, thus ceases to be that of transferring a text from one language to another. This apparently is merely an alibi for the true task of using the source text to bring the target language closer to some hypothetical purity.

Of course the existence of a 'pure language' or of a determinist purpose behind literature and its translation is in no way demonstrable, nor of the slightest help to a translator presented with the task of, let us say, rewriting a given text in a different language, choosing between one word and another, one structure and another. Yet, remarkably, Benjamin's ideas and others which, for all their contemporary camouflage, clearly derive from them, have become pervasive even in apparently respectable and determinedly intellectual articles on the craft of translation. The unfortunate result of this is that in academic circles the art of literary translation has been at once mysticized and politicized to the extent that a professional translator eager for enlightenment as to the exact nature of his task would be ill-advised, one suspects, to spend much time reading the would-be appropriate literature on the subject. A recent collection of essays, Rethinking Translation (Venuti 1992), indicates the extent to which many academics continue to base their arguments on assumptions similar to Benjamin's and equally unfounded.

Consider the following remarks: in his essay in the collection, Translation as Simulacrum, John Johnston quotes Hugh Kenner on Pound's translations from the Chinese and in particular Kenner's claim that Pound never translates into something 'already existing in English', but on the contrary sees translation as an opportunity to make the target language 'say something new' (Kenner 1963). Following on from this, Johnston concludes that Pound 'intended to expand the expressive possibilities of the English language' (Venuti 1992: 45). Aside from the fact that if Pound was able to say certain things in the language it means, logically and inevitably, that the possibility was already there latent within it, one can't help wondering here at the kind of moral superiority being attached to the notions of 'newness' and 'expansion', and then at the tendency
to ignore the original text from which Pound was working. As much as to say: since nobody understands Chinese anyway, what does it matter what Pound did with it in English? That is, there seems to be a denial here of any difference between the idea of an author being inspired by a text to write an original work in his own language (a perfectly respectable enterprise), and a translator actually translating a text. Even a superficial reading of Pound’s Chinese translations alongside examples of his original poetry (from both before and after) will suggest that the kind of deviations from standard English locutions found in his translations had more to do with Pound’s ear and individual technique than with the Chinese. At the end of the day the Chinese offers an exotic authority and an excellent stimulus for a project Pound himself had long since, and with considerable success, embarked on.

I mention Pound, because just as Benjamin’s claims that a translation, in bringing together two languages, approaches a new purity and is thus somehow superior to its original, so the use modern critics like Johnston make of Pound usually has the intention of praising projects that ‘enrich’ the target language regardless of the nature of the original text they were working from. That is, while the transcendental claims to a pure language are now muted, the piety that translation is engaged in some kind of meta-task of improving the language remains. The implied diminution of the original and the consequently raised status of the translation is an inevitable corollary of this attitude and has become something of a trend. Lawrence Venuti, in his introduction to Rethinking Translation is clearly pleased to be able to announce that Derrida and Paul de Man have ‘exploded the binary opposition between “original” and “translation”’ (Venuti 1992: 6). Quoting Derrida’s no more than common sense formulation that, in language, ‘the signified is an effect of relations and differences along a potentially endless chain of signifiers,’ and that therefore any final or unified meaning is impossible, Venuti goes on to claim that ‘this means that the original is itself a translation, an incomplete process of translating a signifying chain into a univocal signified’ (Venuti 1992: 6). Such a situation, continues Venuti, ‘releases translation from its subordination to the foreign text and makes possible the development of a hermeneutic that reads the translation as a text in its own right, as a weave of connotations, allusions, and discourses specific to the target-language culture.’ (Venuti 1992: 8)

Remarkable in Venuti’s essay is, first, the assumption that literature (or translation) necessarily strives toward a ‘univocal signified’ when many writers obviously thrive on ambiguity and in general on that super-abundance of meaning that slippery language can generate (so that even if a ‘univocal signified’ were possible, they would steer clear of it). The fact then that language does not offer a ‘univocal signified’ should not lead us to suppose that the original is an incomplete process, since the kind of completion Venuti is thinking of was never intended and quite probably neither imaginable nor desirable. Rather than freeing the translation from its subordination to the original, one might say that this state of affairs merely means that the translator is faced with the task of trying to convey in the target language the same kind and degree of ambiguity to be found in the original.

The second curious assumption Venuti makes is that since the fluid nature of language makes exact equivalence impossible (something no intelligent translator has ever doubted), this necessarily means that one can (and, the implication is, should) renounce the quest for approximate equivalence. Yet when we compare different translations of the same text, we are perfectly aware that some are closer to, others further from, the letter and/or spirit of the original. On what authority are we to turn our backs on such closeness?

In short, as with Benjamin, one senses in Venuti’s essay an impatience to jettison the restricting attitude that translation should be a question of transmission. And if we ask ourselves why this impatience, the answer is not long in coming: because these translators, or perhaps I should say these thinkers, have other and more important projects.

Venuti makes the political underpinning behind his views quite clear when he begins to attack notions of ‘faithfulness’ and ‘fluency’ (transmission) as merely the hallmarks of Anglo-American hegemony in the world of translation, and of bourgeois imperialism in general. A ‘socially aware and politically engaged translator,’ he says, ‘will choose which text to translate with the idea of developing a discursive strategy which would take the target language on a “line of escape” from the
cultural and social hierarchies which that language supports...’ Translation is thus seen not only (or hardly at all) as an opportunity to make a foreign text available to the target language audience, but most importantly as a chance to subvert that language and free people from the conditioning it implies. In this respect ‘translation,’ Venuti claims, ‘can play an important geopolitical role.’

Of course there are all sorts of reflections one might make about this kind of talk. I shall restrict myself to the following:

1. For those of us engaged in translation it usually appears that fluency and fidelity (in the simplest sense of fidelity to the exact semantic sense) are at loggerheads; hence to attack both as somehow equivalent (and without considering the level of fluency of the original) is extraordinary.

2. Like Walter Benjamin, Derrida and many others, Venuti seems driven by the desire to give the translator a protagonist’s role. His whole paper is dedicated, as he makes clear at the beginning, to rescuing the translator from ‘invisibility’ and awarding him a major part in ‘precipitating social transformation’.

3. It is remarkable that ‘newness’ in the language is assumed to be necessarily liberating, and anti-establishment. This is most clear in Derrida’s Living On when he blames ‘the University’ for doing nothing possible to suppress a transformation of the language brought about by ‘subversive translation’, because any subversion of the borders of language ‘threatens the juridico-political contract that it guarantees.’ It is assumed, that is, and we shall come back to this later, that subversion is always politically correct, and at the same time that if we do not ourselves deliberately subvert it, language will remain somehow static, in the thrall of an authoritarian establishment. Neither of these assumptions would appear to be born out by experience. That ‘subversion’ might occasionally be pernicious, or merely incompetent, is not discussed, just as Benjamin does not distinguish between a fusion of two languages and mere interference of one in another.

Other theorists, equally eager to undermine the status of the original, and promote ‘subversion’ (and hence the translator’s independence) have other strategies. In her essay Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation, Lori Chamberlain claims that ‘Theories of intertextuality... make it difficult to determine the precise boundaries of a text and, as a consequence, disperse the notion of “origins”; no longer simply the product of an autonomous (male?) individual, the text rather finds its sources in history, that is, within the social and literary codes, as articulated by an author’ (Venuti 1992: 68).

Here, extraordinarily, the fact that a text inevitably or deliberately quotes from other texts, is made more important than the fact that a particular individual selected, consciously or unconsciously, particular texts to refer back to. As if there were no difference between The Wasteland and a random collection of quotations. Certainly cases of intertextuality create huge and sometimes perhaps insuperable problems for a translator, but one does not see how they ‘make it difficult to determine the precise boundaries of a text,’ which remain, immovably, the front and back covers of the book. Of course what is in-between finds its sources in history, literary codes, etc. - how could such a thing ever have been doubted? - but it is the individual author’s manipulation of those codes, his decision as to what to place between those two covers and in what order, that constitute the originality of the work. To tag on ‘as articulated by an author’ at the end of the sentence and hope that nobody will notice, or attach any importance to the fact, is little short of disingenuous.

Taking a different but convergent line in her Translation as (Sub)version, Suzanne Jill Levine claims that the writer’s ‘memory is a text translated into another text (Venuti 1992: 83). The translation is thus a translation of a translation and should be as free as the source text is in its handling of its material.’ Quite astonishing here is the way terminology is manipulated in order to get what one wants (much as with Venuti’s claim that in its failed search for a ‘univocal signified... the original is itself a translation’). Clearly memory is not a ‘text’ in the same way that a piece of literature is. The practical nature of writing, for example, an autobiography forces one to select, consciously and in a certain order, from the vast and disordered source which is memory. Certain patterns will be imposed, or an effort will be made to avoid imposing them; most of all, a lot of things will be deliberately left out, since memory is notoriously bigger than any book could afford to be.
Some things may be added in the interests of structure or of some particular fiction the author is eager to establish. Many things most certainly will be left out. Now, although translating one text into another does indeed require endless adjustments and very occasionally certain omissions and additions, it most certainly does not involve that comprehensive organization of an entirely unstructured body of thought and feeling which is the effort involved in presenting one's memories.

In any event, the thrust behind such undisciplined reflections is soon clear enough. Chamberlain concludes her essay by quoting Carol Maier's notion that women translators must 'become independent "resisting" interpreters who do not only let antagonistic works speak but also speak with them and place them in a larger context by discussing them and the process of their translation' (Maier 1985). Levine talks more openly about her having subverted the sexist elements in the writing of Cabrera Infante. It is interesting that none of these theorists reflect on the blank cheque this theory of translation would give the less politically correct to subvert politically correct texts in any way that seemed suitable. That is, they, and here we go back to Derrida again, see themselves as in direct opposition to an establishment that never uses the language in an inventive way and that operates a kind of mind police to prevent others from doing so. Any subversion of the language is thus politically correct, or feminist (which is the same thing), or enhances the expressive powers of the language, etc. The whole enormous problem (and excitement) of translation is thus reduced to the most ingenious of visions of the relationship between language and society.

In his more measured Translation as Simulacrum, John Johnston appears to be aware of all the dangers involved in the notion of the translator's enjoying complete 'creative' freedom controlled only by something as nebulous as the goal of Benjamin's 'pure language' or other equally elusive projects. However, having stated the problems with admirable forthrightness, he is nevertheless loath to return to traditional notions of faithfulness and thus reaches a conclusion whose chief merit is that it hardly even tries to conceal that pious wishful thinking and desire for a protagonist's role which informs the attitude of Venuti et al: 'A translation aiming at fidelity and accuracy, one that renders the original 'faithfully' into a second language, but in so doing only reconstitutes this target language in its vehicular aspect, reterritorializing the changes that occur in the process through reference to the already written, to previously established cultural codings, is a simulacrum, but in the negative or Platonic sense: it is merely a bad copy, 'and the target language remains the same' (my italics). With the headiness that seems to infect all these writers, he then goes on to praise the idea of a translation, 'diverging from the original, but also resonant with it, bringing to fulfillment or pushing along further what the original carried only as a precursor. In these terms, translations could be said to effectuate a 'becoming of language' as important as ... the becoming of literature itself.'

Again one notices the assumption that all changes of the language are in some way progress rather than just change (a notion surely belied by any reading of the classics), and again that language usually changes from the elite down rather than from the vernacular up (while this might have been the case when culture was driven principally by literature, the thesis would be hard to sustain in our contemporary film or video driven culture). In general we might say of all the essays quoted that a great deal of specialized vocabulary is used to lend authority to a dubious thought process leading to a predetermined, ideological and it must be said self-serving conclusion: translators are supremely important because their job is to improve the language and consequently the world. I shall be using the second half of this essay to develop a less inebriated, though by no means modest vision of the translator and a hopefully useful theory of what a 'good' literary translation involves.

I began by quoting Benjamin's assumption that, 'no poem is intended for its readers.' Of course Benjamin is able to say this kind of thing without fear of contradiction because the intention behind a poem is traditionally shrouded in mystery. Indeed literary criticism lives and thrives in the splendid mist of the artist's intentions. Had Benjamin said the same of any other kind of text, from tourist brochures to technical manuals, we could immediately object, but no, a tourist brochure is intended to bring people to a particular place in order to increase the income of a range of people offering goods and services; or, a technical manual is intended to help someone to use a product, and as
such forms part of the strategy of selling that product, etc. The function of a commercial text is its raison d'être and can hardly be argued with. Hence when we translate it we know what we must be faithful to: its function in a commercial situation, and we 'reterritorialise' it (such is the jargon) accordingly.

But a poem is a different matter, of course, and it is precisely the absence of a clearly definable intention and function behind the work of literature that allows Benjamin to fill the gap, as it were, with his mystical and transcendental purpose. He can then go on to claim that such a purpose (the approach to some transcendental idea of pure language) makes traditional notions of a translator's faithfulness to the words and local meaning of the original irrelevant. His real faithfulness should be towards the intention latent in every piece of literature and in the language itself, its striving towards the 'pure language' (i.e. he should be faithful to Benjamin's philosophy). How a translator is to use such notions in weighing up, for example, the choice between two words is never made clear. Quite simply, one suspects, he must be, like Benjamin, inspired. He must know what is best.

In any event, the important thing to note in this whole argument is the way 'faithfulness, as a positive quality, is now seen as faithfulness to the perceived function of the text. Suzanne Jill Levine says something similar when discussing her translation of Cabrera Infante. Given that the source text is itself subversive, she says, her own subversiveness of it becomes a form of fidelity (ignoring the obvious fact that subversion can go in many directions). Such a formulation was likewise implicit in the remarks quoted from John Johnston. The purpose behind literature is the 'becoming of language' and the translation 'pushes this process on' (and hence must be superior to the original).

Now, the idea that one should be faithful to intention rather than to any particular syntactical structure or purely superficial meaning would seem to be no more than common sense. But is there any way we can establish the intention of a literary text and thus feel fairly confident of what we should be faithful to? Here we arrive at the problem which is central to all literary translation. As has been said, with commercial texts, we know what their intentions are and thus never feel in too much difficulty when we have to make changes in order to achieve the same effect in the target language. On the other hand, we didn't really need Seven Types of Ambiguity to tell us that literature revels in the confusion of intention. The thought-provoking and refreshing aspect of literature is precisely its ability to make the reader aware of a range of possible meanings and hence intentions. We might almost say that its intention is to avoid being seen to have a merely limited intention, to avoid preaching, to aspire to a vision of life that is sufficiently complex and many-sided to be convincing.

But how do literary texts achieve this effect? And is there any way that we can feel confident about recreating the same effects, or nearly, or as nearly as possible, in the target language (a desire to do this being naturally based on that admiration for the original which surely lies behind the decision to translate)?

Perhaps a good way to approach this problem is to consider the generally accepted distinction between genre novels (or popular music, or popular painting) and works which are considered works of art. We say a work is a genre novel when it adheres to a particular and well-known model, for example the detective story, exploiting the ability of that form to generate an entertainment which is in no way thought-provoking. In such cases, there is a clearly identifiable intention - uncomplicated entertainment - and as long as a similar form exists in our target language we will experience no more than the ordinary difficulties in translating the work and if our translation is as entertaining as the original we will feel our job has been well done. Conversely, we could say that a novel aspires to be literature when it departs from genre, when it declares its difference and in so doing both surprises and challenges.

There are all kinds of forms that the difference of a work of art from a genre can take. Perhaps the subject matter has been changed, perhaps the way the plot functions has been altered, perhaps the traditional attitude towards chronology has been subverted, or different kinds of characters are introduced, or a different diction, or unusual syntax, or unusual combinations of perhaps lyrical elements (alliteration, rhyme) with an apparently inappropriate diction, etc. There are a thousand ways a novel or poem can choose to differ from the novels or poems preceding it, from other works of literature or from genres. The intention of a work
of literature, we might say, and even Benjamin one suspects might agree with us thus far, is to be found in the difference between itself and other literary texts. Leaving aside the question of whether this difference constitutes 'progress' or 'improvement', my suggestion is that a translator should be sufficiently familiar with the literature of the source language and above all with its standard usages as to be aware of those differences, and should concentrate his efforts on reproducing the same kind of difference, which is to say the same kind of identity in relation to other texts, as far as possible, in the target language.

Naturally such a project will present endless problems; indeed, if it did not, it would hardly be interesting. But before going on to look at some examples, it's worth making the following reflection: the attempt by many translation theorists to diminish the role of the original author, stressing instead the importance of social institutions, traditions, genres, and above all the determining element of the language itself, has obscured the obvious fact that a work while, yes, to a very great extent undeniably determined by these elements, is made interesting and different from other works because it is mediated by an individual author. The author stands in relation to society as his text stands in relation to that body of texts produced before and around it and to the language in which it is written (one is doing no more here than going back to Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*). The difference and the quality (where there is quality) is the author. This explains the fact that whereas writers tend to produce a limited number of texts, all of which can usually be seen to share some elements of style and vision, the translator, who does not have the problem of originating the text and manipulating the plot, and finding a style that suits his vision, etc., can produce a much greater number of works which will not share the same elements of style, or at least to a much lesser extent. This is by no means to belittle the work of the translator. Quite the contrary. It is merely to remind ourselves why we use different words for 'author' and 'translator'. It is because they do different jobs.

To return more specifically to the task of the translator, having now assumed that the 'intention' of a literary work, or at least its distinction, resides in its difference from other works and in general from standard forms of discourse, our problem is how to establish the nature of that difference and above all how to reproduce it, if such a thing is possible. I shall be considering the problem through a series of examples from English and Italian translations of novels written in those two languages, and if I choose the novel rather than poetry, this is primarily because the novel is the field I know, the art I have for better or worse practised, both as an author and as a translator, and above all because the novel offers a mix of standard and non-standard discourse, genre and departure from genre, which will make it easier for me to illustrate my point.

Our first example is sublimely elementary. As I have just said, in most cases the novel is to a certain extent made up of standard discourse. This is frequently used in the literary novel to establish a backdrop against which subsequent deviations can be understood, in much the same way that some writers will apparently open in some particular genre, to then subvert it entirely (one thinks of the French avant-garde writers of the 1960s who so enjoyed subverting the detective form). So that when a writer offers us a simple sentence like: 'Questa è la prima volta in vita mia che viaggio in aereo,' it is clear that he is using a standard locution of the kind we utter every day to transmit information without drawing attention to the medium it is couched in. To translate this, as one translator does1, with, 'This is the first time in my life that I am travelling on a plane,' may or may not bring something new and Italian into the English language, but what it does most of all is to introduce a certain awkwardness into the text which draws attention to the medium. As a result, when the writer later begins to use unusual locutions to coincide with rising intensity and a sense of revelation, the change will be less detectable in the English.

The first rule, then, so far as rules can be established, is that what is perceived as standard discourse should be translated as such, what is fluent should be rendered as fluent, because its fluency is part of its function, its role within the huge number of locutions that make up a novel. In the case of the sentence here discussed, it would surely have been wise to write: 'This is the first

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1 The example is taken from a major Italian novelist, but there is little point in naming the text and embarrassing the translator over such a simple example.
time I have ever been on a plane.' To object, as Benjamin no doubt would, that the languages intend different things by 'ever' and 'in my life', may or may not be to make a valid point. The fact is that in the two languages these statements have become standard locutions of approximate equivalence. To draw attention in one language to the different way a concept is rendered in another would prevent us from establishing a play of usual and unusual elements within the translation similar to that in the original. What's more, if we choose to shadow the source language in this way our deviations from standard discourse will not be felt to have any relation to the action at any particular moment. They will be arbitrary and disturbing in quite a different way from the way the original text disturbs us (indeed they will risk losing the original's power to disturb or stimulate us altogether).

Let us move on to a very short piece of English from D.H Lawrence's Women in Love.

In a few minutes the train was running through the disgrace of outspread London. Everybody in the carriage was on the alert, waiting to escape. At last they were under the huge arch of the station, in the tremendous shadow of the town. Birkin shut himself together - he was in now' (Lawrence 1982).

This short passage may appear at first glance to offer us no more than the usual liberal consciousness's objection to big ugly cities, but closer attention soon shows that something else is going on. The first sentence appears to proceed as an entirely standard locution, until Lawrence introduces an abstract noun, 'disgrace', where we were expecting a simple physical description ('running through the disgracefully ugly suburbs', perhaps). He then further surprises us with the unusual adjective 'outspread', unusual in its own right but all the more unusual because it is not the word we expected to explain and qualify the abstract noun 'disgrace'. We are used to cities being referred to as disgraces because they are ugly or poverty-stricken, but not merely because they are outspread.

In the second sentence there is the slight disturbance of having the word 'escape' unqualified at the end of the sentence, so that as well as referring to the passengers' eagerness to leave the carriage it might take on more portentous overtones - escape from this dreadful situation, the city, a certain state of mind. The portentousness is then confirmed by a sentence that is syntactically standard, but whose diction is extravagant. The huge arch of the station is projected into the tremendous shadow of the town, reminding us of that word outspread. The station becomes, as it were, the centre of the disgrace that is outspread London.

But the most extraordinary locution of all is yet to come: 'Birkin shut himself together'. Here the English reader will be vaguely aware of the idiom 'pulled himself together', indicating a positive reaction to difficult circumstances, but at the same time disturbed by the negative word 'shut', here indicating withdrawal into self. The sentence may be suggesting that in order to face the town Birkin has to isolate himself. But more obviously it quite dramatically draws attention to the fact that some complex psychological transformation is taking place, something that standard discourse is inadequate to describe. The remarkable, 'he was in now' then picks up the spatial metaphor running through the text (the train coming into the outspread town) making it all the more portentous by not qualifying 'in' and thus, once again, suggesting some spiritual as well as physical imprisonment.

Clearly any translation of a piece like this is going to face all kinds of difficulties. Most of all, a literal translation of 'Birkin shut himself together' will be impossible, since the sentence draws its meaning from its distance from that which it nevertheless points back to (in this sense it is emblematic of my assumption that a text's intention lies in its difference from an assumed point of reference). But beyond these details, the key concept to grasp, surely, is that the original text is not fluent, the medium is not transparent, it draws attention to itself, it provokes thought and uneasiness, it is not entirely clear. The translation, if nothing else, must avoid entirely standard locutions and total transparency, and this not in order to subscribe to some nebulous project of enlarging or bettering the Italian language, but merely in order to remain faithful to the intention of the original which is using its own language in an unusual and not merely mannered way (that is, there is clearly a single strategy behind the curiosities in the English; they are not random, nor