

## PETER NEWMARK RIDES AGAIN!

Sergio Viaggio  
United Nations

In issue No. 3 of the *Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione* Peter comes up with one of his juiciest pieces on the all-important subject of the need to teach translation theory at translation schools. I must begrudgingly concede that I found myself in bewildering agreement with most of his statements, starting from the very first immaculate stabs:

[T]he global public relations obsession with the future is quite artificial. But, as far as translation is concerned, some kind of 'mission statement', bogus as the expression may be, is now more appropriate than the literary critic's study of the various aberrations of translation in the past; and the business translator's concern with 'the real world', the present, where whatever is, is right.

Yessir!

"On the one hand, we have the literary translation scholar's preoccupation with objective and descriptive studies, and so with conformity to the translation norms of various historical periods and cultures [...] and again, the pronouncement that whether a translation is good or bad is of no consequence, is a matter of taste, and tastes change all the time [...]; or the idea that if a translation works for a particular time and place, nothing much else matters; or that translation is rewriting undertaken in the service of power, a patron, a sponsor a commissioner. And on the other hand, you have the [...] functionalists' grovelling devotion to the customer, to empirical practice [...] which is the real world [...] of the professional, who, if he is well paid, and the customer is well satisfied [...] must have done a good job."

Hear, hear!

However, perhaps something [...] startling and idealistic is now desirable as a programme for the translator of the future [...] A prospective, not a retrospective policy, which assumes that translation is a noble profession, and that words like 'true', 'accurate', 'faithful' and even sometimes 'literal' and 'traditional' are not dirty words.

And amen to that! I believe it is high time we opened that bottle of Bordeaux, Peter. Let me hasten to add that although I agree with the above statements, I

regret their not always totally off the mark *ad hominem* address (but then it wouldn't be Peter, would it?). Then, of course, Peter and I part ways sometimes (I still do not agree with his to my mind obsolete treatment of the dichotomy between free and literal translation), but that notwithstanding, I nod in agreement when he states:

I believe that the two central issues in translation [...] are the same now as they have always been, since the essence of translation [...] is permanent. The first issue is the ancient one of free versus literal translation. [...] Certainly any teacher of translation has to take a stand on this issue. [...] The second issue [...] is the definition of the translator's responsibility for his translation. [If, in the translator's opinion, the text is not sound (trustworthy, true to the facts) and well written] then it is the translator's responsibility to intervene, outside or within the text as is appropriate, not subjectively and only with good reasons, in accordance with the five universal and objective medial criteria which potentially negate the eternal dualisms of translation [factual, logical, aesthetic, moral value, and linguistic truth].

Except that, much as I would like to agree with the last part of this statement, the reality of the real world is such that most translators have no way of intervening in any significant way. The issue is not merely one of a fearful practitioner meekly accepting any 'translation brief', however preposterous, from any commissioner, but that even when a translator rebels, and even if he manages to keep his job or the client, no trace of his revolt is likely to appear in the published text. I fully agree with Peter's statements elsewhere (which, incidentally, Gerald Parks mentions a few pages down in that very issue) that translators have a moral responsibility, but I submit that such responsibility cannot be translator-specific (which was one of my points in our epic exchange over issues Nos 0 and 1). In principle, all human beings have a moral responsibility to be useful members of society and strive for the common good, whatever their trade or activity, whether as airline pilots or architects, farmers or physicians, poets or postmen, businessmen or workers. I do not like the reality that – to Peter's and my own chagrin – most German functionalists seem to accept a-critically, where he who pays the piper can call any which tune to be played any which unmusical way, so that whatever is OK with him is professionally quite OK. But that is, unfortunately, the only reality that exists, and it is in it that today's students will eventually have to swim or sink. Schools cannot but prepare students to deal with (NB not to 'accept') that reality – and to uphold the profession against the many odds that it is bound to face them with. Be that as it may, I fully concur (again!) that

translation has to be framed within certain principles, bearing in mind that if the principles cannot be 100% attained, this does not mean that they must be abandoned [...] It is precisely the framework principles that literary and non-literary translation have got in common – there is nothing much else [...] Subject to the framework principles there are a hundred translation topics, and they are the life and stuff of the subject.

This is, indeed, the crux of theory: the establishment of such general principles that govern translation as such, that will tell any practitioner or student what to do in order for a translation to exist, and how to determine how good it is from the standpoint of the best scientific assessment of the task, i.e. of the most developed professional norms. No instruction (no practice!) can eschew this basic question (a teacher simply cannot fail to take a stand), and it had better be put forward as objectively, comprehensively and open-mindedly as possible, from the very beginning, and then systematically reassessed in the light of each specific task, and not as a casual afterthought – if at all.

Peter goes on to assert that

translation should not become the plaything of the market forces, which are merely the forces of supply and demand in the social and economic sectors, since translation is often an 'invisible' asset in the economic sense, and has to be considered proactively, on the basis of human need, where supply has to be assessed and judiciously and prudently stimulated, and will not come automatically in response to demand.

Indeed! The assessment of human needs (if as distorted through the prism of a market where money is thicker than blood) must be at the basis of any academic endeavour. Except that if the market knows that it needs translation and translators and what for, it cannot tell what is the best, the scientific way to cater to such needs. The market can only put forth expectancy norms, and experience tells us that these norms tend to be maddeningly naive. It is thus the responsibility of translation schools to impart apt professional norms, so that practitioners can uphold and develop their practice on the basis of a scientific assessment of the market needs from the standpoint of effective communication. And, outlandish as it may seem, here comes the political role of translation theory. By conceptualising their own praxis, i.e. by being able to define, describe, explain and uphold their profession with ever more refinement, thus separating the expert wheat from the incompetent chaff, translators will be better armed to wage the crucial battle to claim their legitimate right: control over the product of their honest expert labour in view of the human needs it is meant to serve in the end. Theirs is not that far removed from countless similar quests by all other salaried or freelance workers or professionals who have nothing to sell in that market but their own ability to work. The physician

defending every person's right to adequate and affordable care whatever the financial interests of the 'health business,' or the teacher standing for every person's right to accessible and adequate instruction whatever the terms of the 'education business,' or the journalist safeguarding truth and objectivity whatever the policy of 'media business' are, for all practical purposes, engaged in different fronts of the same struggle: satisfying human need over human greed. I find profit for the sake of profit (and, worse, for the sake of profit for the very few at the expense of the toil and misery of the countless many) profoundly immoral and revolting, but that is the name of the only remaining game in town, and the translator, as any other member of society, cannot but play it or not play at all, if – as in my case – looking at the same time for effective ways of changing it. I do not know how to go about it (I thought I did!): there must be some effective and moral way. Meanwhile I can at least denounce the sickness and feel the pain and misery of those it afflicts. I do not know whether this relegates me, in Peter's view, to the humourless bunch of 'conspiracy theorists', but I certainly would not object to being acknowledged as a stubborn Marxist.

Let me end by fending off Peter's punch aimed at my own personal proboscis (what an honour to be so singled out on a par with the likes of Hermans, Bassnett and a few other luminaries!):

There is an excellent essay on radio monitoring [...] but I can't leave the following passage, which Sergio Viaggio and many others would applaud, unchallenged: 'Predilection for literalisms among monitors stems [...] from inexperience, the irrational fear of departing from the original, misplaced preoccupation with [...] spurious accuracy [...] Literalisms should be avoided not [...] because they violate the established norms and usage of English but [...] because overliterary (*sic.*) Renderings [...] lead to a distortion of the original.

Well, I am not familiar with radio monitors so I cannot tell whether they do have such a predilection for literalisms and then for the causes invoked – although experience tells me that it must certainly be the case. Indeed, the only 'enlightened' defence of literalism that I know of has come from Peter, Nabokov and, to a lesser extent, Wilss. The inverted commas around 'enlightened' are not meant derogatorily, but in opposition to the 'obscurantist' inquisitors who not only do not give a hoot about the established norms or usage of any language, but who, out of inexperience, irrational fear of departing from the original, misplaced preoccupation with spurious accuracy and outright arrogant ignorance, value semantic symmetry more than sheer intelligibility. Such was not long ago the case of a conceited Spanish-speaking delegate at the UN, who publicly scolded the English interpreter who dared have him put the cart before

the 'horse' (rather than the semantically and zoologically faithful 'oxen'). But that is an old argument between Peter and I – and, indeed, many others. It was nice to spar with you again, Peter, and much nicer to see that, when it comes to basic moral values, we see so much eye to eye.