

INTRODUCTION

This book gathers a selection of essays I have published since 2000. Although several were occasioned by invitations to contribute to journals and edited volumes, the issues I address are wide-ranging and consistently engaged with current trends and debates in translation studies as well as in literary and cultural studies. These issues include basic concepts like equivalence, retranslation, and reader reception, sociological topics like the impact of translations in academic institutions and in the global cultural economy, and philosophical problems like the translator's unconscious and translation ethics. Some essays propose guidelines for how to read and teach translations as translations, as texts in their own right, relatively autonomous from the source texts they translate. Others comment on trends in translation research, in translator training, and in publishing. Still others develop historical perspectives which extend from antiquity to the present. Every essay provides detailed case studies that seek to establish connections between theoretical concepts and their material realization, so that the discussions all have a bearing on practice, whether writing, publishing, reviewing, teaching, or studying translations. A number are devoted to considerations of my own translation projects. The genres and text types are varied, both humanistic and pragmatic. They include poems, novels, drama, philosophy, sociology, travel guidebooks, and advertisements. The translating language is English, for the most part, but the cases also involve such other languages as Catalan, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, ancient Greek, Italian, Latin, Russian, and Spanish.

Despite the appearance of randomness, the essays do not constitute a typical miscellany. Taking roughly the past decade as the time frame, the selection I present is intended to serve a dual purpose: to sketch the trajectory of my thinking about translation and to intervene into the main trends in translation research and commentary. These two aims are interrelated in the sense that they have exercised a reciprocal influence upon one another, but each is sufficiently distinct that it can be described separately. Insofar as they establish the overall coherence of this book, I will

2 Introduction

offer an account of them that also glances at future directions for my own work and for translation studies.

Abandoning instrumentalism

The essays reflect a significant change in my thinking. By the end of the 1990s, I had formulated an approach to translation that tried to synthesize divergent theoretical concepts. The core of the approach was Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion of a translation method that signals the linguistic and cultural differences of the source text, subsequently revised in Antoine Berman's notion of a translation ethics that respects cultural otherness by manifesting the foreignness of the source text in the translation (see Schleiermacher 1813 and Berman 1999, originally published in 1985). In my view, however, this respect was most effectively shown in an indirect way by questioning and upsetting the hierarchy of linguistic and cultural values in the receiving situation, where dominant values tend to suppress differences through assimilation or to marginalize them through neglect. I located two strategies of "foreignizing" (defamiliarizing and interrogating) these values: a selection of source texts that runs counter to the canon of the source literature already translated and a translation method that does not necessarily adhere closely to the source text, as both Schleiermacher and Berman had advocated, but rather cultivates an experimentalism as practiced by the nineteenth-century Italian writer I. U. Tarchetti and the modernist poet Ezra Pound (Venuti 2008: 15–16, 18–20, 125–26, 176–78).

These strategies were based on my understanding that, as the twentieth century unfolded, translators worldwide came to work under a discursive regime that values a narrowly defined fluency secured by relying on the most familiar form of the translating language, usually the current standard dialect. Hence innovative variations on the standard or the appropriate use of nonstandard items can release a foreignizing "remainder" (borrowing Jean-Jacques Lecercle's concept), effects that exceed a semantic correspondence according to dictionary definitions and register linguistic and cultural differences in the receiving situation (Lecercle 1990; Venuti 1998: 10–11; see also below: 37–38). My idea was not so much to abandon fluent translating as to widen its boundaries beyond the restricted lexicon and syntax allowed to translators. When the discursive regime involves a major language like English or French, "major" in terms of its cultural authority or prestige in the global hierarchy of languages, an experimental translation strategy can produce a minoritizing effect, "minoritizing" in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's sense of "deterritorializing" the major language and culture, taking it on an "escape" that challenges its authority (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: chapter 4; Venuti 1998: 9–13). As applied to translation, the concept of minoritizing situates foreignizing practices in national and transnational frameworks.

I have no intention of abandoning the pursuit of foreignizing effects, whether in translation research or in my translation projects. The idea of mobilizing such effects to question dominant values in the receiving situation remains a pressing concern – or, more precisely, it has become for me the very definition of humanistic translation

insofar as it traffics in linguistic and cultural differences and should not work to diminish them so as to sustain a status quo, regardless of whether the translating language and culture are central or peripheral, major or minor. No language can afford the stagnation that results from restricting or excluding contacts with other languages. No culture can afford the complacency of allowing the hierarchy of values that structure it to go unexamined and uncriticized (Venuti 2008: 19–20).

Nonetheless, I came to recognize that the Schleiermacher–Berman line of thinking, although apparently hermeneutic in its approach, although apparently treating translation as an interpretation, rests uneasily on an instrumental model of translation. Here translation is seen as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant contained in or caused by the source text, whether its form, its meaning, or its effect. For Schleiermacher and Berman, the foreignness of the source text is an invariant that inheres in its lexicon and syntax, style and genre, theme and discourse, and it is this foreignness that the translator must reproduce or manifest by adhering closely to those textual features. Thus Schleiermacher describes what he calls “the true goal of all translation” as “the fullest possible unadulterated enjoyment of foreign works” and as “the most direct enjoyment of the works themselves,” where “unadulterated” and “direct” indicate that the translator provides not an interpretation of the source text but rather unmediated access to that text (Schleiermacher 1813: 61). Berman similarly argues that a translation ought “to disclose [d’ouvrir] the Foreign as Foreign in its own linguistic space,” whereby he draws on Martin Heidegger’s concept of truth as the disclosure of “being” (Berman 1999: 75, where the phrase is italicized; see below: 186–87). The assumption of the instrumental model in Schleiermacher and Berman sets up an unexpected resemblance to the rather different thinking of theorists like Jerome and Eugene Nida, whose respective notions of “sense-for-sense” translation and “equivalent effect” continue to be widely influential (see Venuti 2012a: 483–85).

Such formulations posit an unchanging essence inherent in or produced by the source text and freely accessible to the translator, regardless of the time and place in which the translating occurs. Instrumentalism does not take into account the transformative difference that translation inscribes in the source text, the ratio of loss and gain that can be glimpsed only indirectly, in the terms of the translating language and culture (hence my recourse to a literary discourse like modernist experimentalism to make the translator’s work visible). Any sense of foreignness communicated in a translation is never available in some direct or unmediated form; it is a construction that is always mediated by intelligibilities and interests in the receiving situation. The linguistic and cultural differences that make up a source text are inevitably diminished and altered, even when the translator maintains a fairly strict semantic correspondence, because that text is much more than any such correspondence: its distinctive linguistic features are the support of meanings, values, and functions specific to its originary culture, and these features do not survive intact, without variation, the move to a different language and culture. Instrumentalism is, in a word, a falsehood that cannot offer an incisive and comprehensive understanding of translation.

4 Introduction

I began to develop a more rigorously conceived hermeneutic model that views translation as an interpretive act, as the inscription of one interpretive possibility among others. This model assumes that the source text, regardless of whether its genre or text type is humanistic, pragmatic, or technical, is radically variable in form, meaning, and effect. The extent of variation is always controlled by the materials used to interpret the source text and by the institutions where the translation is carried out. In the case of technical texts in law and science (e.g. contracts and patents, medical research and pharmaceutical treatises), it is only the routine application of idiomatic usage, standardized terminologies, and precisely defined functions that serves to limit or preempt variation by fixing the form and meaning of the source text. I subsequently redefined the remainder as the creation of a new context: a translation recontextualizes the source text in the translating language and culture by applying a set of formal and thematic interpretants to inscribe an interpretation. Following Jacques Derrida's concept of inscription, I saw the source text not only as coming to the translation process as always already interpreted, traced with a cultural discourse, but also as undergoing a further, perhaps divergent inscription when translated; following Charles Peirce's concept of interpretant, I saw the translation process as the application of formal and thematic mediators that perform the inscription, turning the source into the translated text (Venuti 2012a: 495–99). The inscription and the interpretant became the key factors in a hermeneutic model that eschews the German tradition of hermeneutics – notably the work of Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer – where the aim is to disclose an essentialist meaning in the source text. The different model I began to imagine opens up the interpretive possibilities of translation, allowing them to vary with the nature of the interpretants applied by the translator but enabling the interpretations to be described and evaluated with clarity and precision in the conditions – linguistic and cultural, social and political – under which the translation is produced and circulated. The concepts of inscription and interpretant increase the explanatory power of the remainder by refining it, facilitating an exact account of the different effects that a translation releases in the receiving situation – an account that of course is itself an interpretation grounded on a reconstruction of the values, beliefs, and representations that define that situation.

Treating translation as an interpretive act in this more flexible approach led me to an ethical reflection that acknowledges the inevitable loss of source-cultural difference as well as the exorbitant gain of translating-cultural difference, a trade-off that exposes the creative possibilities of translation. To reformulate a translation ethics, I turned to Alain Badiou's notion of the "event," the emergence of an innovative form or practice that breaks with cultural and social institutions by pointing to a lack in them (Badiou 2001: 67; see below: 184–85). The translation that sets going an event introduces a linguistic and cultural difference in the institution, initiating new ways of thinking inspired by an interpretation of the source text. As a linguistic and cultural practice, furthermore, translation is unique in initiating events on an international scale, potentially affecting not only the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving situation, but also the global hierarchy of symbolic capital that

theorists like Pascale Casanova (following Pierre Bourdieu's sociology) see as structuring relations between national literary traditions (Casanova 2004).

Recovering history, textuality, and agency

Over the past two decades, translation studies has undergone a phenomenal growth as an academic field. Linguistics-oriented approaches remain prevalent in the *training* of translators, where their formidable analytical tools are used to devise solutions to translation problems that arise primarily with pragmatic and technical texts. Corpus linguistics in particular has proven useful in analyzing translated texts and in building databases to assist translators. Yet since 2000, as even a cursory survey of journal articles, edited volumes, and book-length studies makes clear, various forms of literary and cultural studies have come to dominate translation *research* around the world. The most productive approaches in terms of methodology and findings have been social in orientation.

Sociological theories, notably the cluster of concepts formulated by Bourdieu, have increasingly been applied in translation studies. This trend appeared first in franco-phone sites, Quebec and France, where such scholars as Jean-Marc Gouanvic and Gisèle Sapiro have researched the important place of translations in the French literary field. The focus here is on large-scale or systemic trends, examining huge corpora of translations, tabulating publishing statistics, and considering the assimilation of specific genres into French literary traditions. Gouanvic (1999; 2007) has studied two genres of United States literature, science fiction and the realistic novel, translated into French during the twentieth century. Sapiro has taken up such issues as the extent to which translation patterns promote "linguistic and cultural diversity" and "indicate a tendency toward denationalizing literary production in the world market of translation" (Sapiro 2010: 313–18).

Within literary studies, a second, related trend has coincided with the reformulation of the Goethean concept of "world" literature by such scholars as Casanova and Franco Moretti. Here too the focus is systemic: translation is seen as internationalizing literary relations, which are structured hierarchically according to an uneven distribution of symbolic capital among languages and literatures. World literature has also been treated as the production of a distinctive form of textuality (foreign form joined to local content) and as a mode of reception (an accrual of meanings as texts cross linguistic and cultural borders). Translation figures prominently in both practices. Theorists of world literature have tended to avoid the close reading of texts for what Moretti calls "distant" reading, paying attention either to the transmission of micro features like tropes and themes or to the development of macro structures like genres and traditions (Moretti 2000: 56–58).

A third research trend is frankly political, advocating translation practices that are activist, intervening in social and military conflicts and advocating a particular side. Mona Baker's effort to isolate ideologically charged narratives embedded in translations, working from a concept of narrative formulated by social and communication theorists, has given a strong impulse to this line of inquiry (Baker 2006). The

difficulty that the translator faces in maintaining neutrality in conflictual situations has been illuminated by Moira Inghilleri's theoretically nuanced exploration of the ethical and political stakes involved in interpreting in asylum adjudication and in war zones (Inghilleri 2011). Using a similarly sophisticated approach, Vicente Rafael has traced the repressive history by which a uniform American English was enforced in order to understand the compromised position of Iraqi interpreters during the United States military occupation (Rafael 2009).

The social orientation of these trends has made a significant contribution to translation research, not only advancing the field but also attracting the attention of scholars outside of it. Nonetheless, their commanding influence has meant that certain areas have been studied much less, in some cases neglected entirely. This unevenness is all the more conspicuous because translation is a linguistic as well as a cultural practice that has given rise to long traditions of theory and commentary around the world. The areas that have received less scholarly attention include history, textuality, and agency.

The past decade has witnessed relatively few projects in which translations have been studied in specific cultural situations at specific historical moments, contextualized with the help of extensive archival research. The prevalence of sociological applications and the concern with activism, driven by continuing conflicts and cataclysmic events, have instilled a presentism in translation studies whereby the emphasis has been placed squarely on recent publishing practices, political tensions, and military struggles. On the whole, the leading research trends have shown little interest in translation theories and practices, or in texts generally, produced before the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. As a result, the use of the past not merely as a source of theoretical concepts and practical strategies but as a means of understanding and criticizing the present has been less and less pursued.

The nature of the translated text, so important for practice as for training, and the implications that translated textuality carries for reading and analyzing translations, so important for research and teaching, have not been studied much at all. Close readings of translations are explicitly excluded in some recent theories of world literature. Most importantly, the shift to systemic explanations grounded in sociological concepts has tended to suppress the text as a unit of analysis, sometimes deliberately so (see, for example, the rejection of "interpretative" approaches in Heilbron and Sapiro 2007: 93–95). The emphasis on narrative in the ideological critique of translations has not so much remedied the neglect of translated textuality as drastically limited the possible interpretants that might be applied both in translating and in analyzing translations. If "narrative theory," as Baker states, "allows us to piece together and analyze a narrative that is not fully traceable to any specific stretch of text but has to be constructed from a range of sources," that theory demands an aggressive interpretation of translated texts which excludes other theoretical and critical discourses (Baker 2006: 4). We still do not understand the cultural and social implications of the translator's verbal choices, and no consensus has developed as to how translations might be written and read or even what sort of communicative act translation is.

Without a historical sense of the translated text, produced and received in a particular culture at a particular period, our understanding of the translator's agency has been impoverished. The study of broad developments through notions of the cultural and social field and various forms of capital has considerably illuminated translation patterns, showing how intercultural relations are structured hierarchically, whether between individual linguistic communities or on a global scale. Yet that approach has occluded the role played by the translator's specific verbal choices in favor of treating networks of agents in institutions as most important in the circulation of translations.

In this respect, the repeated invocation of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, an embodied "system of cognitive and motivating structures" that generate practices in a field, has not brought a finer discrimination to the translator's actions (Bourdieu 1990: 52). On the contrary, the application of the concept in translation studies has been extremely reductive, perhaps because the concept itself oversimplifies human behavior. Thus Gouanvic asserts that

Translation as a practice has little to do with conforming to norms through the deliberate use of specific strategies; in other words, it is not a question of consciously choosing from a panoply of available solutions. Norms do not explain the more or less subjective and random choices made by translators who are free to translate or not to translate, to follow or not to follow the original closely. If a translator imposes a rhythm upon the text, a lexicon or a syntax that does not originate in the source text and thus substitutes his or her voice for that of the author, this is essentially not a conscious strategic choice but an effect of his or her specific *habitus*, as acquired in the target literary field.

(Gouanvic 2005: 157–58)

Gouanvic is right to distinguish translation norms from conscious deliberation: norms are more likely to be dominant linguistic and cultural values that the translator learns and applies in a manner that is preconscious or unconscious, and therefore they may be assimilated to the Bourdieusian *habitus* (see below: 54). Yet to assume that the translator's verbal choices or strategies *all* lack deliberation or intentionality, as the reliance on the *habitus* implies ("The *habitus* is a spontaneity without consciousness or will" [Bourdieu 1990: 56]), betrays an utter lack of familiarity with the act of translation, with the myriad choices made during the composition of any literary translation. Gouanvic has in effect collapsed the translator into the literary field, although not without contradiction. The translator may indeed choose to impose a rhythm, lexicon, or syntax, but because such linguistic and literary forms are likely to be selected from the resources available in a literary field, they can be considered trans-individual elements which can hardly be identified with an individual voice. In the end, the recourse to the *habitus* strips the translator's agency of the full complexity of human behavior, which encompasses not only intended actions but also a self-reflexive monitoring in relation to rules and resources (e.g. translation norms), not only a degree of consciousness but also an unconscious composed of unacknowledged

conditions and unanticipated consequences (cf. Giddens 1979: chapter 2; see chapters 2 and 5).

Essaying a new approach

The fourteen essays that follow try to profit from concurrent research trends but tacitly take them in more productive directions by compensating for their limitations as I have defined them. Using a reconceived hermeneutic model as their base, the essays maintain the social and political orientation in translation studies, a feature of my work from the very beginning, while theorizing the translator's agency and the translated text in case studies that reconstruct the contexts of production and reception. My assumption has been that translation studies must work to link the social and the textual so as to advance, but that this link must be rooted in the concept of translation as an interpretive act.

The essays should not be read, however, as building a coherent argument in a sequence of chapters. They are rather essays in the strong sense of the word, discrete attempts to develop a recurrent set of theoretical concepts and to consider their practical implications. Hence each essay stages a different argument through the examination of various cases, and key concepts are formulated more than once, restated with differences that suit the changing contexts. Although the arrangement is chronological (the date of first publication appears within square brackets at the end of each text), the essays can be read individually, apart from any chronology. But if the reader chooses to proceed in chronological order, an intellectual trajectory emerges: a movement away from instrumentalism towards a hermeneutic model of translation, an abandonment of the remainder and an adoption of the inscription and the interpretant, and a rethinking of the ethics of respect which argues that the most decisive way for a translation to show respect is to make the source text the ground of an ethics of innovation in the translating culture.

Throughout, I have lost no opportunity to worry the questionable distinction between translation theory and practice, whether that practice is research or translating. In "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1972), an essay that has been viewed as instituting the field but has come to be criticized as limited, James Holmes unfortunately divides research into three categories, "descriptive," "theoretical," and "applied" (Holmes 1988: 71, 77; see Chesterman 2009). He finally acknowledges that these "branches" are not as "distinct" as he makes them seem because the relations between them are "dialectical" or mutually determining (Holmes 1988: 78). He explains:

Translation theory, for instance, cannot do without the solid, specific data yielded by research in descriptive and applied translation studies, while on the other hand one cannot even begin to work in one of the other fields without having at least an intuitive theoretical hypothesis as one's starting point.

(Ibid.)

Here Holmes makes the empiricist assumption that knowledge is merely given to observation rather than constructed on the basis of theoretical concepts. Thus

descriptive and applied research are said to supply “solid, specific data” from which theories are inferred: Holmes’s model is scientific, deploying the inductive method. Not only is theoretical speculation reduced to a “hypothesis,” but Holmes also seems not to have recognized that a conceptual basis is necessary even to determine which textual features, translation strategies, and pedagogical practices can be classified as data. In treating translation theory as derived from empirical fact, he shows no awareness that the same data can be processed with – and in support of – differing theories. Nor could he have anticipated subsequent developments in translation studies: over the past half-century, most of the theoretical discourses that have informed research have come from outside the field, mainly from such disciplines as linguistics, philosophy, and literary and cultural studies.

A similar sort of empiricism can be perceived in translators’ comments about their work, where it devolves into an antipathy towards theory. A recent interview with Jonathan Galassi is especially pertinent since his work straddles so many cultural practices: he is a poet, a translator of Italian poetry, and the president and publisher of perhaps the most distinguished literary press in the United States, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. To the question “Are there particular types of translations or ways of thinking about translation that you’re not interested in or find antithetical to your approach?” Galassi responded:

I’m afraid I’m not very interested in the theoretical aspects of translation. I think that it’s really a hands-on artistic practice – of course there’s the business of translation, the economic business of it, but that doesn’t really enter into what we’re talking about. We’re talking about vocational work here – the extension of the poet’s work via an engagement with another writer in another language. And it’s a really interesting question you’re asking me. I think Mark Strand is a very wonderful translator. He has some of the same ability that [Elizabeth] Bishop has. His style is so cool that again, it’s like looking through water.

(Fitzgerald 2012)

Despite Galassi’s demurral about translation theory, his response rests on certain assumptions about poetry translation, and I would call these assumptions a definite theory. He values not only the work of poets whose poetry informs the style of their translations, but a particular poetics that he finds in Strand and Bishop. Just before this response, Galassi had praised Bishop’s translations of Brazilian poetry: “I would say that the limpidity of her own writing comes through in her translations really very beautifully. It’s like seeing something through very clear water” (*ibid.*). This image of transparency points to Ezra Pound’s modernist poetics, which he developed partly through his translations. In his essay “Cavalcanti” (1928), Pound indicates the linguistic features that attracted him to the work of the thirteenth-century Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti:

We have lost the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies “*mezzo oscuro rade,*” “*risplende in sé*

perpetuale effecto,” magnetisms that take form, that are seen, or that border the visible, the matter of Dante’s *Paradiso*, the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror, those realities perceptible to the sense, [...]
(Anderson 1983: 208)

“The glass under water”: the resemblance to Galassi’s comment is remarkable. Following Pound’s example, Galassi’s translation theory evidently assumes modernist philosophical and poetic values like logical positivism and linguistic precision, perhaps ultimately the empiricist notion of language as direct expression and reference.

The thinking about translation that I would like to encourage is suspicious of any attempt to draw a sharp distinction between theory and practice. No practice of any kind can occur without theoretical concepts; every practice is at once enabled and constrained by assumptions that may remain unexpressed or unthought, but that nonetheless constitute the immediate conditions that make possible that practice. In the case of translation, the categories of “theory” and “practice” are closely inter-related and reciprocal in their effects. Innovative research in translation, whether theoretically or historically oriented, can lead to new translation practices, at once inspiring and justifying different ways to translate, while innovative practices, whether spurred by a specific cultural situation, the appearance of a unique text type, or the invention of a communications medium, can lead to new theoretical concepts and research. Without a theoretically based self-consciousness, translation research and practice remain incapable of developing their methods and of submitting their projects to a probing critique.

Finally, a word about my title. It points to a basic assumption that underlies every essay and is realized in the case studies: translation carries the potential to bring about multiple transformations. Translation changes the form, meaning, and effect of the source text, even when the translator maintains a semantic correspondence that creates a reliable basis for summaries and commentaries. Translation changes the cultural situation where the source text originated through an investment of prestige or a creation of stereotypes. Translation changes the receiving cultural situation by bringing into existence something new and different, a text that is neither the source text nor an original composition in the translating language, and in the process it changes the values, beliefs, and representations that are housed in institutions. Translation deals in contingencies open to variation. To cling to an instrumental model of translation, to insist on the existence of a source invariant, to suppress the translator’s interpretation, and to neglect the cultural situation to which it responds must ultimately rest, then, on a fear of change.