

**Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice.** By Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), x + 271 pp. £25.99. Paperback.

This is a collection of 14 essays written by Lawrence Venuti since 2000, promoted by the publisher Routledge as “incisive” and “essential reading for translators and students of translation alike”. In most of the essays, Venuti speaks eloquently as a literary translator working in the United States, explaining the aims of his various projects, his reviews and rejections by publishers, and his strategies for a more pro-active and politically engaged translation culture. That discourse should be welcomed by literary translators: it reveals numerous ways in which translation is still sidelined in the United States, and helps to give translators a voice in a culture that would otherwise keep them silent.

For students of translation, however, and thereby for the international academic discipline of Translation Studies, the scorecard is more mixed. Venuti puts forward three basic propositions: that translations bear traces of the translator’s unconscious (fine in theory, but questionable in Venuti’s practice), that translators should engage in more theory (ditto), and that translations themselves should no longer be either fluent or resistant, but should instead function as events (where I could be the only scholar prepared to agree with him, almost).

The problem with the psychoanalysis is that Venuti spots things that no one else sees. For example, the Chilean Neruda’s “los ojos más extensos del mundo” was rendered by the American translator Walsh as “the sky’s most spacious eyes”, which is fair enough except that the English makes Venuti think of a line from “America the Beautiful” (I asked 23 other translators in the US, and none made the association), so the translator Walsh was unconsciously promoting the CIA’s infiltration of Allende’s Chile. Wow! That kind of analysis probably tells us more about Venuti’s own unconscious, or his frustrated desire for literary translation to be overtly political invention.

As for literary translators engaging in more explicit theory, rather than just writing in the shadows, the idea is great and connects with Venuti’s previous calls for visibility. The argument, however, is not well served by his belittling of all non-theorizing translators as being locked into historical “bellettrism”, which is a huge self-interested reduction (and a rather strange label to throw around anyway, in an age where many literary translators are also academics, like Venuti himself). And then, when Venuti claims that some up-front theorizing would add “precision” to the discourse of translators, one might legitimately worry that Venuti’s own theoretical terms are now not particularly precise – we used to understand what he meant by good “resistant” versus bad “fluent” translations, but now even that opposition had disappeared. To be replaced by what, precisely?

By “events”, it seems. Never one to miss out on the latest French Theory (in this case quite old theory, newly discovered by Americans), Venuti refers to Badiou in order to conceptualize translations in terms of an ethics of the event as non-representative truth. Thus a translation “should not be faulted merely for exhibiting features that are commonly called unethical: wholesale manipulation of the source text, ignorance of the source language, even plagiarism of other translations” (185). All those things are now more or less secondary, it seems, as long as a translation’s “interpretants initiate an event, creating new knowledges and values by supplying a lack that they indicate in those [knowledges and values?] that are currently dominant in the receiving situation” (ibid.).

As long as there is permanent revolution in the here and now, don't worry too much about representing a past that was elsewhere. I will go along with that, I think: far worse to have a translation that is accurate, correct, boring, and forgotten.

Venuti's attempts at translatorial events nevertheless seem a little comic: he turns a twelfth-century Italian poet into a rap artist (to entertain his students), and a Catalan's commentaries paintings by Edward Hopper are converted into a "nourish" gangster-like discourse that Venuti considers appropriate to Hopper himself – flaunting domestication and eclipsing the Catalan.

The problem here is that the Western translation form is only specific in terms of representation – since translations are texts that represent other texts, their status as self-contained truth-generating events seems compromised from the outset. After all, if you really want to write incisive political texts, revealing your inner nourish gangster and/or part-time student rapper, perhaps you should go straight to original creation and critical theory, and forget about the translation bit?

So why did Venuti get those rejection notices? Hadn't the publishers read up on the truth value of events? Or did Venuti happen to mention that "translation changes everything"? And so they wondered if he was still a translator?

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