

Venuti's Visibility

Anthony Pym

Review article of Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Prefatory note (2010): The following is a slightly revised version of the article published in *Target* 8/2 (1996), pp. 165-177, with the original page breaks indicated in square brackets. Revisiting the text now, in 2010, I am a little surprised to note the extent to which it was read as being overly "sarcastic" (Munday 2001: 155), as poking fun merely for the sake of fun. At the time, in 1995-96, I sincerely appreciated Venuti's work for the intellectual space it legitimized: I would have hoped that the last sentence of my article would carry significantly more weight than the opening gambit. Venuti was a lot more engaging than the technocratic would-be scientists of the day. I was certainly not trying to be sarcastic in any gratuitous sense – if I had, I would have had a field-day with Venuti's decidedly retro triple-substantive titles, and the like – and I was seriously trying to make a few points about the sociology of translation. But we are not able to control the way we are read; readers see more beginnings than ends. So here is the text, more or less as it was.

I'm a fan of Lawrence Venuti. Through his essays, his editing of *Rethinking Translation* (1992), and now his big book *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti, perhaps more than anyone else in recent years, has created debate about the politics and aesthetics of English-language translation. More important, he seems to have done so from within the relatively well-heeled world of American universities. So I'm a fan of Venuti. Who wouldn't be? Some of the interest he generates might trickle down my way, and perhaps your way too.

As the closest thing to a hero that Anglo-American Translation Studies can currently produce, Lawrence Venuti is invited to conferences; the paperback version of his latest book, in shiny pink and orange, is carried into other conferences; he is cited as an authority in minor texts I read from Brazil to Barcelona; and here he is again, voicing historical reason and translative subjectivity in response to pedantic translation critics in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1995b, 1995c). Whatever he has to say, Venuti is visible. More to the point, although a translator, he is anything but the invisible translator he gets such good mileage from. The theorist-translator is seen and talked about; the figurative practical translator is apparently not. This is my first point of interest. Why should a transition theorist suddenly be so much in view?

Could it have something to do with what he says? I take four themes from the opening section of *The Translator's Invisibility*: (1) in contemporary Anglo-American culture (whatever that is) translators are judged successful when their work is most fluent and they are thus most invisible to the reader of [166] the translation; (2) copyright contracts discriminate against translators, failing to give their authorship full recognition; (3) the percentage of translations into English is very low compared with translations into other languages. All of this leads to (4) "a complacency in Anglo-American relations with cultural others, a complacency that can be described — without

too much exaggeration — as imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home” (p. 17). I’ll follow anyone who can save us from all that! If only I really understood the argument.

Let’s accept that these four things characterize contemporary Anglo-American culture, even if I personally cannot see the limits of the culture in question. As an Australian producing Euro-English I have no authority in the matter. Venuti is in a far more central position, *TLS*, New York and all; he can surely see the limits, so I bow to his vision. Now, all four evils appear to be in cohorts, functioning together like a diabolical machine that has to be stopped. I am faintly reminded of the machines E. P. Thompson (1978) used in order to illustrate Althusser’s social models many years ago, with neat instructions like “For Revolution X, pull lever B”. The image is strangely apposite, given Venuti’s sometime allegiance to Althusser, and our theorist does, after all, seem to know which lever to pull: if translators refuse to produce fluent texts, if they make themselves visible through the use of “resistant” strategies (negating evil 1), all the rest will surely change too. Such would appear to be the gung-ho reasoning that makes Venuti so visible.

Does Venuti actually say this? I am not sure. I want him to say this — in keeping with the logic underlying his “call to action” at the end of *The Translator’s Invisibility* —, but if you read the fine-print it all becomes rather complex and vague. Consider the verbs relating the above features: number 1 “contributes to” 2; number 3 “underwrites” 4; number 1 “is symptomatic” of 4 and “conceals” 2, 3 and 4, and so on (all from pp. 16-17). Are these causal relationships, such that a radical change in any one factor will overturn all the others? Considered in detail, no, it is all rather muddy. Perhaps I just do not understand Venuti’s language correctly. I admit there are strings of peculiar substantives that I struggle to grasp: the bit about national percentages of translations over non-translations is described in terms of a “trade imbalance,” as if translations were cars; translation is repeatedly described in terms of “violence” (lots of it), which does not leave me many words for the kind of violence where people bleed and die as a result of transcultural relationships; translators are advised to “negotiate difference”, as if negotiations [167] were never about settling differences; and theorists are called on to “intervene” in all this, as if they were on the outside in the first place. Then there are touchy bits like the term “homosexual relationship” being “an anachronism, a late nineteenth-century scientific term” (p. 33), along with strange praise for Berman’s insight when translating Schleiermacher’s *Geist* as *esprit* (p. 110) (what else might he have used?). I am not at all sure I speak the same language as Venuti here. Could this be why I cannot see the causality? Am I right to suspect that Venuti wants one almighty “intervention” that will change translators’ strategies and suddenly overturn the whole lot? Superficially, perhaps. In detail, not really. He seems more in favor of making minor reforms all round. In fact, he does little more than rephrase the central question of what is to be done:

Would this effort establish more democratic cultural exchanges? Would it change domestic values? Or would it mean banishment to the fringes of Anglo-American culture? (p. 41)

I read the whole of *The Translator’s Invisibility* looking for answers to those questions. Nowhere did I find any description of what “democratic cultural exchanges” might be; nowhere did I find a translator who had successfully changed “domestic values” in a way worthy of Venuti’s unambivalent praise; everywhere I found Venuti’s few resistant translators “banished to the fringes” of not just Anglo-American culture but of whatever culture they were involved with. If Venuti’s book were any kind of object lesson, I would have to answer all three questions in precisely the opposite way to what Venuti seems to want (translational resistance has not brought more democracy, has not

changed domestic values, and has been banished to the fringes). Unless of course Venuti himself, as a visible and currently unbanished translator, is an exception to historical rules. Hence my interest in his visibility.

Perhaps I am just not reading on the right level of theory. After all, the third of the above questions (“banishment to the fringes”) might be answered on the very page where it is formulated, precisely where Venuti justifies his focusing on literary translation “because it has long set the standard applied in technical translation” (p. 41). That’s it! The filter-down theory of elite cultural practices! No class distinction, no possible sidelining: intellectuals lead the way and literature can by definition change the rest. You see, the theory answered the questions so quickly and so definitively that there was no real need to search through the whole book in search of historical models. [168]

Trade Balances for Translations?

Venuti reveals that “British and American book production increased four fold since the 1950s, but the number of translations remained roughly between 2 and 4 percent of the total” (p. 12). Notice the “but”. Venuti obviously wants the number of translations to be higher. To help his argument, he presents graphs where the numbers of published books are very tall black columns and the published translations are very short white counters. Yes indeed, 2 and 4 percent are very small proportions. The argument looks convincing, especially since the graphs make the differences highly visible. Unless one stops to think about the things being represented. According to Venuti’s graphs, the number of translations increased almost threefold (my calculations give 2.92) over the period concerned. That is, book production increased and translation production increased. “And”, not “but”.

Venuti justifies his “but” by comparing the low English translation percentages (2% to 4%) with much higher percentages in France (9.9%) and Italy (25.4%). But what do those figures actually say? Do they mean English-language cultures are deprived of translations? Consider the quite compatible fact that for the years central to Venuti’s period of analysis (1960-1986), the *Index Translationum* lists more than 2.5 times as many translations in Britain and the United States (1,640,930) than in France (624,830) or Italy (577,950). That is, risking a fair extrapolation, there were far more translations into English than into French or Italian. This is something Venuti does not make visible, and yet it is surely just as significant as the percentages of total books published. Remember that texts are not cars; we are counting titles, not the numbers of physical books. Despite having much lower ratios of translations to non-translations, English readers can still have many more translations available to them than do French or Italian readers. So who is worse off?

Since Venuti’s statistics indicate an apparent “trade imbalance” in translations to and from English, one might assume he wants a world of perfectly balanced translational trade. What would this look like? If all languages were used to about the same extent, would Venuti happily command something like a 25% translation rate all round? The world’s translators would be overjoyed, then overworked. And yet, since languages are very unequal in the extent of their textual production, there is absolutely no reason why their translation percentages should be at all comparable. In fact, it seems safer to hypothesize that, all else being equal, the more restricted the written use of a language, the [169] higher the ratio of translations to non-translations in that language (language A has 100 texts, language B has 10 texts; 25% of all texts are worth translating and are translated; you work it out). I cannot see how planetary paradise is to

be found by imposing a standard translation rate in the interests of any “trade balance”. Of course, what really scandalizes Venuti is the fact that English occupies a much larger publication space than do its rival languages. So why is this precisely the factor that he excludes from his visible calculations?

Copyright

Venuti is good on copyright (especially in 1995d). Yes, translators are discriminated against. Yes, our role is underrated and underpaid. Yes, the idea of limiting the author’s translation rights to a short period of perhaps five years sounds like an excellent practical way of stimulating translations. Yes please, give me more recognition, more money and easier legal conditions. But is our complaint really that “the translator’s authorship is never given full legal recognition” (p. 9)? Do we have to do away with the distinction between author and translator, or even with copyright altogether?

My doubts are due to a section where Venuti makes much of the nineteenth-century Italian writer Tarchetti for plagiarizing rather than overtly translating Mary Shelley: “Because his Italian translation was a plagiarism, it was especially subversive of bourgeois values” (p. 166), “a violation of the individualistic notion of authorship on which copyright is based” (p. 165). This was in 1868. Several things cloud my mind here. First, anyone who has spent a few years working on nineteenth-century literature should realize that undeclared translations were a fairly run-of-the-mill event, scarcely of revolutionary import. Second, Tarchetti’s translation was marked as “dall’inglese” (from the English), which as far as I am concerned indicates translational status (albeit more commonly suggestive of a pseudotranslation). Considered carefully, what is missing in Tarchetti’s text is not a sign of its derivative nature (nor, in this case, a commercial agreement) but merely an author’s name (i.e. “Mary Shelley”). True, names are an important feature of translational paratexts (an interesting test case is the 1914 issue of the German poetry periodical *Blätter für die Kunst*, where all names are omitted and I logically cannot classify anything as a translation). Yet does this mean that names are automatically sources of repression? Is bourgeois individualism-and-property the only value at stake? [170] I admit suffering from the illusion that name-bound copyright also has something to do with the ethical question of taking responsibility for an utterance. Surely the author should be named just as the translator should be named, in a tradition of attribution that can be traced back to the Arabic *isnad*. No one is paying me for this text but I still put my name on it. Venuti has his name on the copyright to his works. Visibility again. Let’s all do plagiarizing translations of him in the year 2000, just to see if we get prosecuted.

There is also a more mundane problem here. Copyright grew in the nineteenth century but the English tradition of translative invisibility apparently became no worse. Further, copyright is now a very international phenomenon, and yet translative invisibility is supposed to be “radically English” (p. 6). So what kind of causal relationship can be claimed between copyright and invisibility? Do we really have to pull this particular lever?

An English Invisibility?

Like almost everyone else these days, Venuti is interested in the effects that translations have on the target culture, in this case the culture somehow formed by Britain plus the United States, the culture studied by American professors of English (perhaps as good a

definition as any). At several points Venuti suggests that the worst possible effects are brought about by the most “fluent” translations, those where the translator is most invisible. The best effects must logically ensue from the opposite strategies. What I struggle to understand, however, is why this terrible reign of fluency should be described as “radically English”. As opposed to what?

Here I have an interesting paper by Maria Helena Luchesi de Mello, a Brazilian who puts a bit of Venuti to work in her survey of contemporary literary translations in Brazil. Not surprisingly, she finds that the Brazilian press praises fluency just as much as the American and British press cited by Venuti (pp. 2-4). Venuti is thus applicable in Brazil, so the regime of invisibility could be just as strong there (I might say the same for Spain or France) as it is in Anglo-Americandom. However, all the other factors are widely off-target: the proportion of translations must be somewhere above 50% (in 1993, eight of the ten most sold works of fiction were by non-Brazilians) and the culture would appear to be remarkably heterogeneous at home and scarcely imperialist abroad. So how can invisibility be linked causally with the other factors [171] Venuti makes so much of? This kind of comparative analysis upsets not only the assumed solidarity of evils but also the assumed Englishness of invisibility.

Venuti seeks to demonstrate this Englishness by writing “a history of translation” (his subtitle, not mine) in which all the more invisible translators are indeed English or American. Of course, the few non-English-language characters (Schleiermacher, Tarchetti and the standard French theorist heroes) are decidedly resistant in one way or another. More to the point, virtually all the theorists supporting *invisibility* are English or American, and virtually all the theorists arguing for resistance are non-English. In fact, Venuti at one point claims that “resistance is specific to the German cultural tradition” (p. 309), which suggests he has read far more German theory than German translations. But since I have commented elsewhere on Venuti’s lip-service to nationalist translation theory (Pym 1995: 25-28), let’s move on.

As long as one writes this kind of history, focusing on individual theorists rather than indulging in any quantitative empiricism — so much for Venuti’s critique of bourgeois individualism! — any given feature can be made visibly specific of one culture or another. None of Venuti’s black-and-white characterizations are based on any actual measurement of “resistance,” which nevertheless sounds close enough to what descriptive theorists call “acceptable interference” to be tested and explained in shades of grey. The matter might even have something to do with Gideon Toury’s suggested law that tolerance of interference — and hence endurance of its manifestations

tends to increase when translation is carried out from a ‘major’ or highly prestigious language/culture, especially if the target language/culture is ‘minor’ or ‘weak’ in any other sense. (1995: 278)

If this is really a law, one would expect fluency (“non-tolerance of interference”) to come to the fore in any target culture in a relatively superior or prestigious position with respect to a source culture. Further, thanks to the mathematics evoked above, the ratio of translations to non-translations — and thus the chances of translations interfering in anything — logically decreases in relatively large cultures. So should we be surprised that a culture as relatively major, prestigious and big as Anglo-Americandom tends toward fluency in its translations? There is nothing “radically English” about the phenomenon. Anglo-Americans are not the only ones to have had their culture in such a position. Yet theirs seems to be the only case the professor of English is professionally inclined to see. [172]

The refreshing thing about Venuti's guided tour of English-language translators and theorists is that most of them are tagged with notes on their political connections, religious beliefs and occasional dalliances. All the bad ones are associated with liberal humanism, imperialism, sexism and/or individualism. The few good ones generally oppose such nasties, in the same way as they oppose fluent translations. In some cases, particularly in the account of Newman's opposition to Arnold, this background material is much needed and appreciated, since we at last have a glimpse of the people behind the theories. Yet the detail sometimes goes too far for Venuti's theses. What are we to say, for example, when we find that Denham brought this "radically English" translation method from France (p. 48)? What are we to make of minor deviations like Nott's background as a traveler (p. 79), which surely took him beyond radical Englishness? And how is it that Frere, who is written off as a liberal humanist fluency-seeker, was somehow resistant enough to help establish the *ottava rima* in English verse? Or can fluency bring about change? More to the point, why are things like the *ottava rima* not mentioned by Venuti?

Like any history written to prove a thesis, Venuti's account of Englishness is highly selective. At the same time, precisely because he lends his characters rather panoramic backgrounds, one cannot help notice certain minor contradictions. Are not most of these people, as translators or translation critics, aware of cultural otherness in a way that non-translators tend not to be? Are not they thereby just a little removed from the monocultural centers? Could they even be seen as members of intercultural groups in touch with other intercultural groups, rather than constrained by any axiomatic Englishness? This might explain why we find fluency in non-English cultures, and debates about visibility in English cultures. Venuti has no interest in these possibilities. The spikes of his theory point elsewhere.

The Theorist's Revenge?

I actually read one of Venuti's translations, of Tarchetti's *Passion*, and was quietly scandalized to find nothing loudly scandalous in the translational discourse. Had my knowledge of Romance languages simply inoculated me from visibly translational English? But now, having seen Venuti theorize his translating in *The Translator's Invisibility*, I am convinced I missed a lot. Here, for example, is the way he explains his rendering of a poem by the Italian De [173] Angelis:

My interpretation of "L'idea centrale" argues that it reflects Heidegger's concept of "being-towards-death" but that De Angelis submits this concept to a Nietzschean revision. (p. 293)

With some embarrassment, I confess that I did not quite catch this on my first reading of the translation. Sure, I should have seen Venuti's use of 'careful' for *premuroso* as a reference to the term 'care' used to render Heidegger's *Sorge* (why does this sound like a Woody Allen script?). And the strangely subjectless 'there was choosing' (for *si sceglieva*) should have immediately made me think back to Nietzsche (pp. 293-294). But it didn't. Perhaps this is why I fail to experience such poetry as a "sort of liberation" (p. 305). Liberation from what?

Thankfully, inadequate readers like myself can now refer to the translator's explanations. It is all there, in the big book, in the theory. In fact, if we did not have the theory we would have to rely on the translations themselves, thus foolishly falling into what Venuti identifies as the "anti-intellectual assertion of aesthetic value as self-evident" (p. 222). Just imagine, if aesthetic value were really self-evident, we would probably just read the translations without even referring to the theorist's explanations.

We would even remain oblivious to Venuti's battles in the *TLS*. Perhaps we would not buy and read his translations. Happily, since the theory is there, we can now read the translations and know what to look for. Because of the theory, the translator becomes visible. In fact, as a theorist Venuti can even explain translations that were originally banished from the realm of publication because they were considered too intellectual (p. 301). Too intellectual?

That is fine. Some translators have more effect on the world as theorists. More power to them (and to me)! My only worries are about what will happen if ever this kind of intellectual literature comes to "set the standard applied in technical translation" (p. 41).

What Does Venuti Want?

Venuti's recipes have changed over the years. His ideals have developed through at least three stages:

1. In his first published reading of Schleiermacher (1991), Venuti argues that some kind of liberation can come from bending the target language [174] toward the source language, in keeping with informed literalism or, more fashionably, through "abusive fidelity." This is nothing new and the arguments would not merit further comment had they not edged into something more interesting.

2. In *The Translator's Invisibility* shades of this literalist penchant remain but are occasionally outshone by a new recommendation: now the translator's language can be non-fluent, non-standard and heterogeneous quite independently of any fidelity to the source. Venuti is looking for a mode of English translation able to incorporate a wide diversity of English usages, mixing and conflicting registers, giving value to the marginal (hence his defense of the Zukofskys). This major ideological move is enunciated almost as a slip of the tongue. It could blossom into a critique of the role played by translations in the centering or standardizing of languages, since there is indeed the peculiar assumed convention that our target language should be as neutral as possible. This is close to home: as an Australian I once rendered half a Spanish novel into Australian English (full of "mates" and "chooks") but abandoned the project because no one took it seriously. Similarly, when I translate children's stories into English, most of the expressions that come to me from my own regional childhood are automatically self-censored because I have no idea what kind of English my target readers will be speaking. My target language is nowhere, and this worries me. More could be made of the point.

3. In his letters to the *TLS*, Venuti shifts to a slightly different ideal. He decides to take up the cause of Helen Lowe-Porter, the translator of Thomas Mann whose work has been criticized by academic Germanists. Venuti is not interested in justifying the translator's mistakes (of which there are many), nor can he really defend any abusive fidelity or joyous linguistic deviance. He simply wants the academics to realize that Lowe-Porter was a living person who might have had legitimate reasons — work conditions, ideologies, and readership — for translating the way she did. Her translations thus should not be measured against any absolute academic ideals. Although Venuti could no doubt have picked a more competent martyr, he certainly means well. Further, his point follows logically from his call for non-standard language, since one of the main reasons for linguistic deviance (such as my hypothetical use of Australian English) must surely be the personal identity of the translator. I have no

problems at all with this aim, bland and vague as it is. If only Venuti would name it in as many words. [175]

In sum, Venuti obviously wants to liberate translators from some kind of servitude. He does this as a highly visible theorist prepared to free and guide the less enlightened. He does it as a university professor, a professional reader of difficult texts whose most immediate addressees are also professional readers of difficult texts. It is only fitting that the path of liberation should also lead through the land of difficult texts (ideas 1 and 2 above), calling for the production of translations with non-standard language of all kinds. As long as the translations are kept distant from the masses' cheap understanding, the professors will be employed to read and talk about those translations, in the same way as pedantic professors once exploited claims to untranslatability. Not surprisingly, Venuti concedes that the prime place to foment change is in academic institutions and their reading practices (p. 312).

There is more to this than the self-interest of an intellectual class. Ideologies are also at work. What Venuti wants to avoid is not just fluency and invisibility but also the ideas behind such ideals. He repeatedly names his opponent as "liberal humanism." At one point he glosses this ideology as "subjectivity seen as at once self-determining and determined by nature, individualistic yet generic, transcending cultural difference, social conflict, and historical change . . ." (p. 79). This is exquisite analysis. The liberal humanist idea of subjectivity is precisely the kind historically harnessed to the belief that the world is understandable and can be made understandable to everyone, hence plain prose and plain translations. It also has something to do with the growth of modern democracy, with the belief that all individuals can participate in the life of a society, and with attempts to make laws and knowledge accessible to all. As the bedfellow of imperialist evils, liberal humanism saw a soul in the savage and constitutionalized one justice for all, for instance. We thus find fluency, plain prose, in the key texts of bourgeois democracies and peoples' revolutions.

Venuti can wipe all that off as illusory, if he likes. The trouble is, I can't see how the ideology he wants to replace it with can avoid drawing on the same traditions.

When seeking the incorporation of non-standard language in translations, Venuti takes part in what might be called a linguistic search for multicultural America, in keeping with the need to respect minorities or repressed groups. Note that he does not miss a chance to point out discrimination against homosexuals, women, foreignness of all kinds — the notion of invisibility itself recalls the feminist critique of "women's invisibility as language producers" [176] (cf. Kramarae and Treicher 1985, s.v. "Dictionary"). This is wonderful. But then, the ideological bases for a non-repressive multicultural society are surely to be found in liberal humanism and its great tradition of tolerance. In his sociological projection, Venuti is accepting the fruits of this tradition: he wants to incorporate marginalized groups into a greater and even more democratic regime. In his political discourse, though, he still retains Althusser's anti-humanism and the insistence on hard, uncompromising Theory, in the great Leninist tradition that was good on intellectual-led revolutions but somewhat wanting on cultural diversity. What remains patently invisible is how Venuti's anti-humanist thought can at the same time defend the ideological bases of a multicultural society. In the absence of such thought, we have no more than the visible theorist-translator, who is himself the best example of what he wants.

I am a fan of Venuti. Seriously! For all his sophistication, he does enable us to talk about translators as real people in political situations, about the quantitative aspects

of translation policies, and about ethical criteria that might relate translators to the societies of the future. At last we can talk about how one *should* translate, without getting stuck in petty prescriptiveness and its negation. Although I personally would not follow his “call to action” on any of the fronts he names, I willingly give the reaction Venuti most clearly wants and deserves, namely public debate on issues that are being sidelined by the linguistic and systemic technocrats of contemporary Translation Studies.

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