

- 91st meridian
- (/91st/) (/)
 - Current (/91st/vol10-num3)
 - About (/91st/index.html)
 - Contact (/contact)
 - Links (/91st/favorite-links)

A MATTER OF TRUST

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Let me begin by suggesting an approach to studying translation that is distinguishable from, say, artistic approaches at one extreme (the art of translation à la Kornei Chukovsky or perhaps Gregory Rabassa) and theoretical approaches at another (the theory of translation, from George Steiner or Antoine Berman to J.C. Catford, Donald Davidson, or Emily Apter). A rhetorical approach makes questions of audience and effect the most central. Obviously political issues come into play as well, but so do questions of ethos, the positioning of the author within the target culture, the creation of literary personae, and also the positioning of the translator. This intersects with the business of translation, which is where I should probably have started, by noting the enormous quantities of books published in the U.S. in a given year (150,000 titles, perhaps more) and the simultaneous paucity of translations (maybe 450, most of those of the “classics”). I want to ask: is it any wonder that Americans tend to be insular in their thinking? How might translation have an impact on the way people perceive the world outside the borders of their own language territory?

This is a potentially very rich topic, comparable at least to Wayne Booth's task in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*. I can't do anything nearly so ambitious in a brief presentation. But I would like to note the relative absence of scholarship historically performed from an explicitly rhetorical standpoint in the study of translation, though this may be changing.

By beginning with rhetoric and putting translation within it, I am making a particular assumption and implicit claim about how translations function as social actions. Rhetoric is always concerned with moving people (ethos, or the character/persona/authority of the speaker, is just one way to do this). So my starting point might be something like a background position to that of the accompanying group of papers as a whole. To the extent that they become appropriated into a culture, translations have an impact that can always be understood as a social action. They provide outside viewpoints, they help to influence public opinion, they make available ideas, patterns of expression, ways of thinking, representations of life that might otherwise be ignored, and so on—think of the Gospels, translations of Marx or Tolstoy, of Marcus Aurelius or Stephen King.

The paucity of translations in the US is an indication, I think, of two big things—the lack of overall social commitment to them (which is due to a variety of factors), and the huge responsibility of those translators who do manage to get foreign works into the public eye such that those works might come to be more thoroughly effective in, if not appropriated by, the culture at large.

Translators take part in this (though they don't act alone) by privileging certain texts and repressing, deliberately or not, others. This is at the heart of the idea of responsibility recurrent in the present set of essays. It puts translators in a different category from, say, fiction writers and poets. Another example of what I mean by 'ethos' might make my point clearer: an author-trickster is a perfectly acceptable thing; a translator-trickster is problematic. I suspect this is what fidelity in translation means at its most basic level,

(/91st/vol5-num1)

(/91st/vol5-num1)



(/91st/vol5-num1/three-romanian-postcards)

5.1 WINTER 2007

Editorial (/91st/vol5-num1/editorial)

SPECIAL SECTION: TRANSLATION AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Introduction (/91st/vol5-num1/introduction)

Andrea Labinger on Liliana Heker (/91st/vol5-num1/to-what-end-translating-liliana-hekers-el-fin-de-la-historia-and-related-narratives)

Jonathan Cohen on Ernesto Cardenal (/91st/vol5-num1/in-bryants-footsteps-translating-nicaraguas-cardenal)

Martha Collins on Post-War Vietnamese Poetry (/91st/vol5-num1/translating-as-social-activism)

Russell Valentino on Trusting One's Translator (/91st/vol5-num1/a-matter-of-trust)

JAN PETER BREMER

Still Leben (/91st/vol5-num1/silent-life-still-life)

EWA LIPSKA

Poems (/91st/vol5-num1/poems)
STRATIS HAVIARAS

Letter from a Greek Sharecropper (/91st/vol5-num1/letter-from-a-

what it meant to Cicero, for instance, in his early usage, especially within the dual contexts of Stoicism and Roman rhetoric: having faith in the translator first and foremost, trusting that s/he is competent, on one hand, and not deliberately trying to mislead, on the other. This is where the title of my essay comes from: rather than “fidelity” of translation, I want to emphasize the “faith” or “trust” of the translator.

Nabokov is a good example of a highly successful writer-trickster. You never know what he’s trying to pull: the central mode of his writing is irony. But when he turns that same ethos to the creation of a translation, as in his infamous *Eugene Onegin*, the results are questionable. One has the impression of being pulled by the nose or led by the leg—oh, I know very well these metaphors are all wrong, but I’m going to leave them on purpose. The effectiveness of the translation, its ability to move us, engage us in social action as a translation is transformed into something else, something much more like a work of fiction. We stop reading it as a translation, in fact. Here I want to agree with Eliot Weinberger’s claim (in his “Anonymous Sources (/91st/vol1-num1/anonymous-sources)”) that, despite the adage of translations needing to read like originals, there is always a level on which we are not reading them as originals but as translations. Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* makes this clear by foregrounding the translator’s tricky personality to such an extent that we wonder what he’s up to by choosing this or that word or making the whole thing seem so, well, clunky. The effect in rhetorical terms of such a technique might be quite powerful—we are likely to look all the more carefully at Pushkin’s original after attempting to peer through such a defamiliarizing Nabokovian filter. Indeed, this might be the main point: to get us to see Pushkin’s poem with renewed attention and appreciation. Here translation would become yet another modernist ruse designed to get us to see the beauty of some aspect of the world anew—by distorting it, making it ugly to any conventional taste. A fascinating translation technique perhaps, but not one available to translators without Nabokov’s signature.

The translator’s trust can also be linked to personal connections, for instance to meeting the author or the author’s family and being encouraged in one’s work by them. This happened to me with my very first book-length translation. I traveled to Trieste and had lunch with the Istrian writer Fulvio Tomizza and his wife, over which we discussed the novel I was hoping to translate. Tomizza’s courtesy and encouragement certainly reinforced my desire to do things well. At that point, my motivation acquired an added depth. I suppose this is the “simpatico” method that Lawrence Venuti argues against in his book *The Translator’s Invisibility*. I certainly agree with him that, as a method, it fails for some kinds of literature, and his example of experimental Modernist poetry makes this most clear. But this mode can be powerful and productive in other cases, and certainly was in mine, for that book. Where before I thought Tomizza’s novel was important for its historical and literary value alone, now I was also working on it for his sake. When he suddenly died before the English translation had at last come out, my sorrow was much more profound than a single lunch together would seem to have warranted.

This sense of personal connection formed the basis of another project I undertook, the translation of a book by a Sufi Muslim from Uzbekistan, Sabit Madaliev. It would be dishonest of me to say that contemporary politics play no role in my desire to make this work available to English readers. It is a different Islam from the one we see so often, and I have to say that I see his book as something like a Central Asian version of Kathleen Norris’s *The Cloister Walk* or *Amazing Grace*. Madaliev’s rendering makes Islam both attractive and highly approachable, intimate and touching rather than threatening. But here again, meeting the author and talking about his work and life together created a sense of personal trust, *fidelity* once more, that I can no longer separate from the line-by-line rendering of the book into English. It’s a trust I intend to live up to after all.

So I want to suggest this as a starting point, the translator’s trust, with its double, perhaps triple, meaning: social trust (the impact of translations as social actions); readers’ trust (how we read translations, or how we have trouble reading them); and personal trust, as a factor in motivation for instance, the promissory connection of translators to authors and their causes.



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