

Czech Translation Theory in Translation:

A Review of Jiří Levý, *The Art of Translation*, translated into English by Patrick Corness, edited with a critical foreword by Zuzana Jettmarová. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011, 322 pp. €95.00., \$ 143.00. ISBN 978-90-272-2445-3.

Jiří Levý's book *The Art of Translation* was definitely at the time it appeared (1963) the *Bible* of translation in Czechoslovakia, which was behind the Iron Curtain, not too much in contact with Western theory and practice but closer to Marxist aesthetics and embedded in Prague linguistics. Being a theoretical guide, Levý's book was conducted by two principles: it was extensive empirical research, deriving from practical examples, and it was based on functional structuralism. The approach is both functional, in that it seeks to explain the occurrence and nature of translation in terms of its function in the receiving culture, and structuralist, in that Levý constantly looks for patterns behind phenomena, the grammar underlying events.

As the Editor's *Introduction* to the English edition informs us, Levý was in many ways the initiator of "integrating a range of domestic and international sources and disciplines" (xv), such as sociology, psychology and informatics, literature. This is why, when setting up on analyzing the state of the art in Chapter one, Levý establishes linguistic methodology drawing on Roman Jakobson's distinction between "intra-lingual translation as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language", "interlingual translation or translation proper" and "intersemiotic translation" (9), and several co-founders of the Prague Linguistic Circle (Mathesius), as well as the leading Polish theorist Zenon Klemensiewicz, Werner Winter, Eugene Nida's *Toward a science of translating* (1964), and Revzin and Rozentsveig's *Fundamentals of General and Machine Translation*, as well as literary methodology. The starting point in laying the literary methodological background is comparative historical poetics and comparative stylistics. Whilst "illusionist" methods require a work of literature to give a simulacrum of reality, anti-illusionist ones "boldly" play "on the fact that they are offering the audience a mere imitation of reality" (20); Levý's translation theory is illusionist and the scholar's main concern is to "preserve not 'the work of art itself (*an sich*)', but rather its values for the recipient" (20).

Chapter two, *Translation as a process*, revolves around the three stages of the translator's work: apprehension, interpretation and re-stylisation. Levý considers that "if the translator becomes too closely bound up with the objective setting of the action, the work may actually become contaminated with some reflection of that environment which the author did not express in the original" (35). Such reflections are instantiated with passages from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in J.J. David's translation contrasted with a new Czech one that adulterates and distorts several passages, the Slovak translation belonging to Kuzmány-Bruothová, E. A. Saudek's version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, where the translator substituted place names from Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon with names from his own native region and the case of Whitman, who was identified in Czech with the aestheticist title "Stébla trávy" [Blades of Grass], which went against Whitman's orientation toward antiaesthetics when he named his poem "Leaves of Grass". In Levý's opinion, Marxist translators tended "to translate for the domestic

reader in the most intelligible and most effective manner possible those elements of the work which directly or indirectly voice social criticism, expressing world view and a realist mind set.” (43), which is in contrast with Ezra Pound’s “exclusive and pedantically supercilious translational position” (43). Levý would therefore attempt to set up several strategies which would show how much translation could assimilate a foreign text to the translated one, an issue that was going to be readdressed by Lawrence Venuti’s theory of domestication and foreignization later on.

Most Marxist translators, as Bohumil Mathesius acknowledged in his translation of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* (1948), focus on the idea of the work and reject translators’ subjective notions and personal conception as being out of place and leading to adaptation rather than translation. What Levý expects from a good translator is “creativity which entails subordinating inventiveness to selectivity, the capability of being selectively inventive”, “vivid linguistic imagination and inventiveness”, as well as “taste and self-discipline, avoiding the temptation to adopt an eloquent turn of phrase entailing abandonment of the translator’s reproductive goal, or to introduce stylistically inappropriate expressions” (55).

Chapter three, *Translation Aesthetics*, defines translation in the spirit of the Czech scholar and translator Otokar Fischer, as “an activity at the interface between science and art” (57) which places translation theory at the border between linguistic and literary disciplines. The main goal of translation is reproduction; regarded as a work of art, translation is “original creation”. The best comparison of the reproductive components of translation Levý finds is with performance:

The written text contains only components indispensable for its realization in sound (phonetic patterns of the words), all the rest being merely potentially present and subject to the delivery by the performer [...]. The actor, however, does not merely interpret the text by his delivery; he autonomously produces physical action not specified in his script, in order to achieve the reproductive goal of his performance. (58)

Levý considers that any reproductive art is based on two norms that are not synonymous: one has to both reproduce and create; there are two methods that translation complies with, being either “faithful” when the goal of translation is to keep the text within the spirit of the original work, or “free” (the method in this case being called “adaptive”), “an approach seeking to achieve above all beauty, in other words the closest possible aesthetic and cognitive rapport with the reader, in order to create an original work of art in the target language.” (60). Thus, according to Levý, one can exclude neither Julie Nováková’s translation of Musaios’s lyrics in rhymed verse and Hesiod in four-foot trochaic verse, nor the Czech Král-Stiebitz School’s concern to preserve classical metres, as both are justified to their respective goals (70), translators being both in the position “to preserve national characteristics in a work in total or in part” and to “educate readers and enhance their apprehension of foreign literature.” (70). For instance, Ophelia’s Song from *Hamlet*’s Act IV in Štěpánek’s as well as in V. Sládek and J. Malý’s translations are examples of “faithfulness” (83), since they preserve the English name of St. Valentine’s Day (14th of February) in the spirit of Schleiermacher’s urge that the translator should be subordinated to the original; at the other pole, Saudek’s translation of the same fragment analyzed by Levý, transforms *St. Valentine* into the Czech *John the Baptist’s Day*, 24th June, which has magical connotations for the Czechs. In the same direction goes Molière’s *Tartuffe* translated by the “unfaithful” translator António Feliciano de Castilho as taking place in Lisbon; all

French names are changed into Portuguese ones (85). Examples are many and they echo the divorce between Russian and Czech formalist aesthetics; while the former is purely Kantian, the later draws on other sources, among which Hegel's dialectics, Ingarden's phenomenology, Marx's historicism and Bühler's psychology, and theories on sociology such as Durkheim's and Weber's.

Chapter four, dedicated to the poetics of translation, occasions an especially revealing glimpse of what artistic styles achieve over and beyond mere 'translation' styles, i.e. mediocre translations impregnated with translator's jargon. The dichotomy between artistic translation and grey "translationese" is illustrated with variegated examples that originate in his own experimental work with a group of trainee translators at Palacký University in Olomouc. In the series of experiments that supply the data, Levý pioneers two directions in comparative translation quality assessment: on the one hand, comparative bilingual translation assessment, as showcased by twenty four parallel translations of a passage from Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, and on the other hand, comparative multilingual translation assessment, which relies on the back translation from Russian, German, English and French of a few excerpts from Karel Čapek's work. Focusing mainly on processes of source text impoverishment via generalization, "nivelisation" (see 111) and limited lexical variation in translation, as well as on the perils that may beset the translator's endeavour (logicalization, explicitation, inadequate re-arrangement of syntactic forms), Levý upholds a non-monoreferential approach to translation evaluation. He is equally interested in matters of authorial style and culture-specificity as he is in lexical and grammar choices. A balanced view is adopted when translation tendencies are discussed, so that both negative poles are exposed (e.g. inappropriately toning down the vocabulary of the source text and unjustifiably intensifying it). Thus, the in-depth analysis of literary excerpts or book titles has the merit of grounding some translation misfires in novice translators' psychology.

Drawing on his theatre studies at an academy of performing arts, and resonating with a solid contemporary interest in actor training and theatrical art, in Chapter five Levý proposes a theoretical and practical excursion into drama translation. He readily signals to the reader the specificity of the dramatic text, whose translation is bound to marry literary and representational goals. Extensive samples from world famous and national plays are included in his overall plea for the performability of the translated text. Acceptability of a theatre text translation is judged at the acoustic level according to speakability and intelligibility, at the stylistic level according to various degrees and directions of stylisation, and at the semantic level according to concordances between exophoric reference or meaning determinacy and the text itself. Since language is perceived to be only one of the semiotic codes, it must necessarily accord with action, and should be "determined by the character, and not vice versa" (158). The translator's role in the communicative circuit is thus more than that of a mediator between source text and target audience, the dialectics of drama placing great demand on the translator to proceed to stylisation based on "his conceptualization of the character and its development" (158). Aware of the numerous and forceful constraints on drama translation, Levý finally postulates the "principle of selective accuracy" (162), whereby the translator's task is to intervene on a flexible and dynamic text, "the means rather than the end", preserving mainly features that are of paramount importance in each case.

In an attempt to map the history of translation practice at home and abroad, Levý makes an inventory of hallmark contributions to the tradition of translation studies. He

readily expresses his call for “systematic research into the history of Czech translation practice”, to which he had earlier given an impetus in his 1957 monograph *České teorie překladau* [Czech Theories of Translation]. His keen awareness of the existence of valuable instructive material usable in methodological surveys is doubled by the realization of the complications that arise in tracing any translator’s creative process, be they connected to second-hand translations, translation filters, genre conventions or the translator’s personal style evolution. Particular emphasis is laid on re-constructing and defining each translator’s method and conception, whether explicitly formulated or deduced from the translator’s work, a process in which, ahead of present-day technological advancements, Levý assigns an important role to the statistical computations of text features.

Given the broad scope of Levý’s approach to the functions of translation, his insights on translation in national and world literature remain most relevant today. He distinguishes two opposite forces: a centrifugal one accounts for translation as a covert means of mass communication, a factor that stimulates the evolution towards a world literature, whereas the centripetal one is beneficial for national literature. The effects will therefore range on a full-blown scale from variety to uniformity; this is the conclusion of an early awareness of globalization and alienation between authors and their audiences. Unfortunately, when translation as a crucial factor in the ideologization of literature and culture in general is concerned, Levý fails to address the point sufficiently and only expresses a vague complaint about the “cultural and political leanings of Czech literature” (184) under the influence of translations from Lenin.

Another major line of inquiry in Levý’s work is poetry and versification – his texts in this field outnumber his output in translation theory (see XVI). This is mirrored in Part Two of *The Art of Translation*, where the main concern is the translation of verse. Starting from an overview of structural oppositions between verse and prose (judged according to the presence of ambiguity, syntactic configurations, imagery, figurative language, length of words, specific genres), the scholar adduces poetry samples from English, French, German, Russian, Czech and Polish – although he frequently quotes generalizations concerning European, Slavonic, Germanic or Romance poetry – to reveal how prosodic technicalities connected to rhythm, rhyme, tempo, caesura, word stress, intonation, metre are either preserved or adapted, felicitously or not, into the target language (throughout his entire career as an academic, the Czech scholar was constantly preoccupied with verse rhythm in dramatic interpretation and with the evolution of the Czech theatre blank verse). He heavily relies on the crucial distinction between cognate and non-cognate versification systems; alongside the language typology division and the destination of the poem, which can be recited or included in a theatrical performance, this distinction is claimed to be a guide in the translation process. This second part contains multiple references to other disciplines such as phonetics, metrical phonology, statistics, morpho-syntax as well as the history of the relaxation of versification. Above all, Levý is interested in treating the poem as a systematic whole, in carefully apprehending the aesthetic values of the original and not disturbing them according to contemporary or national poetics norms. He rightfully feels that, at the time, there was a gap in the research on free verse transposition.

The theoretical-methodological approach proposed by the Czech scholar in *The Art of Translation* construes translation as a locus of in-betweenness, a Janus-headed

concept oriented both towards the self and the other, the old and the new, the national and the global sphere. “Translation-ness” (see Toury, 1995: 213) is a semiotic mode made possible in three salient conditions: a positive one, where “exoticizing is applied, and original works may simulate foreign provenance or be presented as translations”, a neutral one, where “creolization is the most likely method”, and a negative one, resulting in “content localization, modernization or adaptation” (xxiii). The translator’s decisions are themselves an intricate complex in which world-views, world knowledge, ideologies, values, cognitive or psychological features, aesthetics and audience factors intermingle and position the outcome, i.e. the translated text.

Speaking of the translator’s pronouncement and the art of translation, Karel Hausenblas (the editor-translator of Levý’s book) had to make his own choices: to distance himself from the author’s own idiosyncrasies of language and to practice “back translation” (as Karel Hausenblas asserts, it is “back translation”, because the German edition was based on Levý’s Czech manuscript, unavailable to him) when it came to the German text into Czech (the German text which had been written for a different readership and a different linguistic community had to be integrated in the final English translation). Nevertheless, the German edition was based on Levý’s Czech manuscript, which was unavailable to Karel Hausenblas (see XIII). Passages which were omitted in the German edition, were not excluded in the present English edition. Aware of all these shortcomings, the translator thinks that Levý’s premature death can be added to the causes of the text’s limitations (had he been alive, Levý would have definitely produced a third edition of his work and would have brought examples from contemporary literary works), yet hopes that the book will be inspiring to specialists.

Indeed, the book proves to be valuable to translators, researchers, students and teachers in the field of Translation and Literary Studies who could not read the Czech or the German version of the book. The English version of Levý’s book will be a major contribution to our understanding of the extent to which translation studies emerged as a new academic field in the twentieth century.

References

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