TOWARDS A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE TRANSLATOR'S LEGACY*

HACIA UNA CONCEPTUALIZACIÓN DEL LEGADO DEL TRADUCTOR

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Abstract

This article investigates ways of theorizing the figure of the translator and its legacy within translation studies. It focuses on contemporary theoretical approaches, largely drawn from poststructuralist perspectives, which find the question of the translating subject to be a crucial one for translation and literary studies and propose important ways to approach it. It interrogates notions such as the idea of the sacralized original, the relationship between authorship and property, the ideal of transparent meaning, and the tension between translation and original writing. Particular attention is given to the importance of historicizing the translator's practice, recognizing the translator as a visible agent, and conceptualizing translation as a form of writing that unfolds within complex interactions and negotiations.

Keywords: *translation studies*, *translator*, *translator's visibility*, *translator's legacy*, *translator's ethics*.

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Resumen

Este artículo se propone investigar el aporte de perspectivas traductológicas para el estudio de la figura del traductor y su legado. Se centra en enfoques teóricos contemporáneos, principalmente aquellos basados en perspectivas postestructuralistas, que consideran el papel del sujeto traductor como un aspecto crucial en la traducción y los estudios literarios, y proponen maneras interesantes de abordarlo. A lo largo del artículo se cuestionan nociones como la idea de un original sacralizado, la relación entre autoría y propiedad, el ideal del significado transparente, y la tensión entre la traducción y la escritura del "original". Se presta especial atención a la importancia de ubicar históricamente la práctica del traductor, reconocer su papel como agente visible, y conceptualizar la traducción como una forma de escritura que se desarrolla en medio de complejas interacciones y negociaciones.

Palabras clave: *traductología*, *traductor*, *visibilidad del traductor*, *legado del traductor*, *ética del traductor*.

THE TRANSLATION APPROACHES that have developed in the field of translation studies in recent years have increasingly recognized the importance of studying the translator's active role in the production of texts and knowledge. Although the work of several established literary translators is well-known, the extent of their works' influence and the complexity of the socio-cultural circumstances that surround their practice remain largely unexamined. There exist theoretical works that focus on the work of individual translators, but accounts of translators' histories are often structured in an anecdotal and descriptive fashion, and constitute records of accomplishments or, frequently, discussions of translation "errors" and infelicitous decisions. Nevertheless, recent perspectives in the field are increasingly addressing the complexities of the role and legacy of the translator[1]. Acknowledging the presence and participation of the translator in shaping literary traditions and institutions leads us to pose the questions of how to theorize the translating subject and how and in what terms to speak of the translator.

In this article I focus on the theoretical question: "How Do We Speak of the Translator?" I start out by presenting an overview of traditional conceptions of the translator's figure in translation studies. Then I focus on contemporary theoretical approaches, largely drawn from poststructuralist perspectives, which find the question of the translating subject to be a crucial one for translation and literary studies and propose important ways to address it. I interrogate notions such as the idea of the sacralized original, the relationship between authorship and property, the ideal of transparent meaning, and the tension between translation and original writing. I pay particular attention to the importance of historicizing the translator's practice, recognizing the translator as a visible agent, and conceptualizing translation as a form of writing that unfolds within complex interactions and negotiations[2].

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1   A number of recent publications offer a more critical, historiographic perspective about the lives, works, and translation practices of individual translators. For a list of titles see bibliography.

2   This article is part of the theoretical basis of my study about the legacy of translators of Latin American literature into English. The center figure of my investigation has been North American translator Gregory Rabassa, who during the past five decades has translated over fifty Latin American novels from the second half of the 20th century —*Cien años de soledad* among others. An abbreviated version of the discussion on contemporary theories that appears here is included in my article "Gregory Rabassa: el rastro de un traductor visible" (see bibliography). My book *Gregory Rabassa's Latin American Literature: A Translator's Visible Legacy* will be soon published by Bucknell University Press.

My research is inspired by contemporary theories of translation which do not follow a normative logic nor seek to theorize translation in terms of rules or standards. Theories such as those founded in cultural and literary studies —which led to the so-called "cultural turn"[3] in translation studies— attempt to find ways of conceptualizing translation by generating spaces of reflection and exploring dynamic and interdisciplinary directions of critical inquiry. In line with the non-normative character of these theoretical orientations, I am interested in finding ways to study translators beyond translating styles and strategies and to move beyond a discourse limited to issues of faithfulness to an original, of linguistic accomplishments and impossibilities, to view them as social agents.

Historically, as it has striven to establish the grounds upon which translation ought to be theorized —and as it has searched for its aim as an area of inquiry in its own right— translation theory has treated the translator as an object of study in very different ways. Depending on the theoretical approach or perspective at play, we have translators performing different tasks, responding to various "missions", and complying with differing characterizations. The most widely recognized images of the translator are those associated with absence and invisibility. Traditionally, translation theory has constructed the image of the translator as a scribe, a copier, or the neutral messenger of a stable message. According to these perceptions, translators and their works are secondary and their place in relation to the author of the original work, and to the work itself, is subordinate. These prevailing, widely accepted conceptions of the translator pose a theoretical dilemma: If translators are invisible, any attempt to theorize them will be inescapably elusive. How do we theorize an absent subject? How do we speak of the translator and place her/him at the center of critical inquiry? It is my belief that, in order to theorize the translator as a presence, that is, as a subject, it is necessary to begin by problematizing notions about translation that are at the core of the translator's alleged invisibility.

On the one hand, the translator has not been traditionally considered a major subject of study by most of translation theorists. Translation has most commonly been theorized from the perspective of the study of languages as systems that exist for the purpose of the neutral communication of messages. On the other hand,

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3   Term coined by Mary Snell-Hornby in the collection of essays *Translation, History and Culture*, edited by Lefevere and Bassnett (1990), in which the need to address 'the larger issues of context, history, and convention' (p. 11) in translation studies was stressed and presented as a collective initiative for the first time.

when s/he is addressed, the translator is often seen as a *means* to understand the translating process, that is, what happens between two clearly differentiated texts in two clearly differentiated languages. The study of translation has been closely connected to linguistics, and linguistics-oriented approaches have constructed the translator, chiefly, as an instrument of the particular linguistic operations with which they associate the translating practice. As a result, the portion of translation theory that holds linguistics as its main theoretical foundation has traditionally focused on meaning transfer, and problematizations of the very notion of meaning or of the subject who performs such linguistic operations have been secondary.

Perceptions of the translator's "persona" such as those proposed by linguistics-oriented translation studies since the 1940s and 50s, suggested that the translator's role was that of a problem-solver and that meaning transfer was the translator's most clearly defined task. According to theorists like Georges Mounin and Vinay and Dalbernet the main question translation theory was to address was the question of identity between source and target units, that is, of *equivalence*, the source text being a stable, finished object, whose meaning was to be transferred and preserved in the target text. This possibility of total meaning recovery presupposes that translation *is* possible. This empirical view conceives of language as communicative, rather than constitutive, of meaning —i.e., referential. Thus, theorizing translation in this light becomes a task about answering the question of "how" to translate to communicate meaning and how to do it well. As Lawrence Venuti (2000b) has remarked, one of the main contributions of linguistics-oriented approaches was to enable translation theory to move away from notions of translation as impossibility and loss and address the issue of translatability by analyzing specific translation problems and describing the methods that translators have developed to solve them (p. 69).

The ideas of linguists such as Roman Jakobson, for instance, contributed to this challenge to the "dogma of impossibility". In his canonical essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translating"[4], Jakobson explains translation as a decoding operation whose product is the recoding of a particular sign or set of signs. Translation scholar Eugene Nida has, from a linguistics perspective, contributed to challenging this notion as well. In his essay "Principles of Correspondence", Nida states that there can be no fully exact translations and that the total impact of a translation may be

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4   This essay was first published in the collection *On Translation*, edited by Reuben Brower (1959).

"reasonably close to the original, but there can be no identity in detail" (p. 196). He believes the process to be more complex than a mere "decoding" and "recoding" and states that rather than mere decoding and recoding "competent translating involves the linguistic operation of analysis, transfer, and restructuring" (p. 79). Jakobson affirmed that translation should not be assessed in terms of loss, betrayal, or failure (p. 146), and both theorists supported the idea that everything can be translated —even traditionally "untranslatable" genres, such as poetry. Jakobson and Nida coincide in opening a space of possibility for translation beyond the traditional understanding of it being defined in terms of its impossibility. Several other theorists have studied translation from this perspective; linguistics was the first discipline to offer translation the promise of a kind of rigor and systematicity that would turn it into a discipline in its own right. However, linguistics-oriented approaches overlooked the study of translators by viewing them as merely problem-solvers; they have limited their study to explaining the mechanics of the translating practice under the assumption of a clear-cut separation between languages, working on the basis of an alleged transparency in people's understanding of language, translation, and difference.

Contemporary translation theorists that do not belong to this school of thought comment on the fact that mainstream linguistics continues to be seen, in some quarters, as the solution to help translation achieve a rightful academic and institutional space. Rosemary Arrojo, for instance, has discussed the fact that, by being rooted in the belief of absolute equivalence, linguistics-oriented theories continue to promise "a body of allegedly objective data" that could be applied "regardless of the peculiarities, the interests and the circumstances of those involved" so as to fulfill a scientific ideal by providing the study of translation with a "totalizing metadiscourse" ("The Ethics of Translation" 4). In focusing on translation as message transfer and in seeing it as merely instrumental, these theories construct a translator who—if accomplished—is a neutral mediator and whose task or mission is to be the faithful messenger of a stable, finished message.

Other approaches in modern translation studies, such as those emerging from philosophical perspectives, have offered the study of translation a different framework from that proposed by linguistics; these approaches have generally given more attention to the question of "the translator", and to the translator's role and mission. Often, philosophical approaches, as well as those associated with literary criticism, have been more interested in recognizing and exploring the interpretive character of translation, and have provided a space to reflect on translation as

a creative endeavor and on the translator as a more visible subject. One of the most influential texts about translation from this perspective is Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Task of the Translator"[5]. In his works, Benjamin recognizes the complexity of the study of translation, especially if it is undertaken from the perspective of theories of language, and highlights its importance as he states that "it is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought" (1996, p. 72). In "The Task of the Translator" it appears clear that, for Benjamin, a translation is both a work in its own right and the completion of the original work: "The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations" (p. 73). Translation is thus the afterlife of the literary work and the means through which it is inscribed in history.

When Benjamin speaks of "translatability", he does not speak of equivalence or correspondence, for he believes that a work's "translatability" is determined by its historical relevance. Translation is a necessary result of the life of the literary work and is relevant to —or *is*— the value of the work in history. As Antoine Berman[6] (1992) remarks in speaking of "The Task of the Translator", translation for Benjamin is transformative, and part of its very definition is also the impulse, the drive to translate, motivated by the work, which "*calls for* translation as a destiny of its own" (p. 126).

The contribution of Benjamin's essay to translation theory is undeniable, mostly for his understanding of translation as creative performance —his perspective departs from the notion or ideal of "faithfulness", which is so commonly emphasized in discussions about translation— for according to Benjamin the translator's "task" is not to be faithful in the sense of staying close to the original. For him translation is the necessary and expected outcome of the very existence of the work, and the translator's mission is the work's survival. Benjamin's view acknowledges the translator's existence and presents translation as a practice that goes beyond the mechanical activity of reproducing or of copying. His essay is relevant when it comes to understanding the development of translation studies

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5   Originally published as a preface to his own translations of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* in 1923.

6   Berman's work, particularly his book *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romatic Germany,* has also been influential in the tradition of linking philosophical ideas with literary translation.

because, besides being a key referent in the work of many translation theorists to this day —it is foundational to Steiner's *After Babel*, for instance, and is also at the core of Venuti's critique— it both represents and challenges important notions and theoretical positions about translation in tradition. On the one hand, it contributes to the recognition of translation as transformation and to the fact that translation is indispensable to enabling the passage of the works from their life to their afterlife —i.e., it is the condition for the works' very possibility of survival. On the other hand, Benjamin's essay has been critiqued mainly on the grounds that it is founded on certain traditional notions which have contributed to keep translation in a marginal cultural space. In the essay "Des Tours de Babel", Jacques Derrida offers his reading and commentary of Benjamin's text and questions Benjamin's understanding of the translator's performance understood as a "task":

> From the very title Benjamin situates the *problem* in the sense of that which is precisely *before oneself* as a task, as the problem of the translator and not that of translation. He names the subject of translation, as an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in the position of heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of sur-vival. The survival of works, not authors. Perhaps the sur-vival of authors' names and signatures, but not of authors. (p. 179)

Derrida aptly understands Benjamin's "task" as commitment, and stresses the fact that Benjamin sees this task as the translator's duty —a mission and a debt. He points out an important implication of the conception of translation as being associated with a "duty", which is that, according to this view, translators appear to themselves and to others as indebted subjects, whose task is "to *render,* to render that which must have been given" (p. 176). We might say that what Derrida sees as a problem is the fact that both the original text and the mission of translation itself are a debt, for which something must be given in return.

In Benjamin's terms, translation calls for transformation. This idea is not a taboo, for the original is translatable if it calls for completion and survives in transforming itself. Derrida sees that, for Benjamin, translation is creative, for "the debt does not involve restitution of a copy or a good image, a faithful representation of the original: the latter, the survivor, is itself in the process of transformation. The original gives itself in modifying itself […] it lives and lives on its mutation" (p. 183). However, despite these possibilities of mutation and transformation in Benjamin's view of translation, Derrida sees that the translation remains secondary to the

original, or rather, that the original remains "remote" in it —i.e., sacred. Derrida believes this is particularly true in regard to the notion of "pure language", since for Benjamin translation is possible also because, for him, there is a possibility for a language beyond languages, a "true" language that can overcome its conventionality, a possibility of language *as* truth, which, to him, takes the form of "the *pure language* in which the meaning and the letter no longer dissociate" (p. 203). Benjamin's notion of "pure language" is universalizing: it leaves the translator with the task —i.e., duty— to attain the "reconciliation" of languages on the basis of a promise of a language beyond the untranslatability of languages: "This kingdom is never reached, touched, trodden by translation. Something remains untouchable, and in this sense the reconciliation that translation offers is only promised" (p. 191).

Derrida's critique revolves around Benjamin's illusion of linguistic harmony for, despite the fact that he describes translation as necessary and possible, at the end of the operation the original remains "intact and virgin in spite of the labor of translation, however efficient or pertinent that may be" (p. 192); this perspective suggests a nostalgia for reaching a "pure" essence, something "before" Babel. According to Derrida, although Benjamin shifts the traditional roles of the original and the version to a certain extent, he still maintains their strict duality, that is, the duality between the translated and the translating (p. 180), which allows the original, and the author, to retain their unique (and undebatable) authority. As a result, the translator is still absent, or at best in an ambiguous position. In his reading, Derrida shows the limits of Benjamin's view mostly in that, by leaving the notion of origin untouched, Benjamin reproduces the foundation of what makes translation derivative and secondary.

Nevertheless, Benjamin's text offers numerous readings and is insightful, particularly in regards to the relevance of translation for the afterlife of literary works and also for its emphasis on the transformative nature and potential of translation; it is also a powerful invitation to pushing the conventional limits of language and to embrace the foreign. The fact that Derrida chose to discuss precisely this text of Benjamin's is significant; as he himself explains, it is a "singular example, at once archetypical and allegorical, that could serve as an introduction to all the so-called theoretical problems of translation" (p. 74). He does not look so much at Benjamin or at his "task" in themselves but, rather, at the discourse that his essay represents as theory, at the theorization in itself, in order to problematize its limits and possibilities *as* conceptualization: "No theorization, inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian [sic] performance" (p. 74). This

realization constitutes an important reminder that any statement about translation is bound to the production, location and circumstance of the statement itself. Inasmuch as the theorization stays in language, it will remain particular; thus it should not be taken as a univocal response.

Philosophical reflections around questions of translation have constituted, for translation studies, one of the spaces to think about the translator as a present subject and about translation as an interpretive process and a form of writing (as compared to copying or transferring). Since the "cultural turn" in translation studies, critical inquiry has shifted the attention from the discussion on texts and meaning as detached subjects of observation to questions of translation in culture and of the translator as a participant in complex processes of cultural production. Examples of these are the contributions made to translation theory from post-structuralist perspectives and from cultural studies. Revisions of the notions of authorship and originality such as those emanating from the work of such theorists as Foucault and Derrida, for example, are at the core of contemporary understandings and theoretical attempts to define translation in such a way that the translator can become visible and that a text in translation can be viewed as a work in its own right.

As Venuti (1995) —the most prominent advocate of the importance of the translator's visibility— explains, the implications of the ideas of invisibility are complex because the illusion of transparency "eclipses" the mediations between and within copy and original with the illusion of authorial presence (p. 290). Along the same lines, Rosemary Arrojo (1997) states that, if the conscious presence of the author is expected to be found in her or his writing, and "if the original is seen as the true recipient of its creator's intentions and expression, any translation is, by definition, devalued since it necessarily represents a form of falsification, always removed from the original and its author" (p. 21). According to this author, in any culture in which authorship and property are equated, and which perceives writing as a site for the conscious presence of the producer, the translator's activity is always related not only with secondariness and failure but also with "indecency" and "transgression" (p. 21). This image contributes to the conception of translations as illegitimate copies or forgeries. Consequently, on the basis of these conceptions, the image of the translator is conceptualized in those same terms. This is one of the reasons why the translator has come to be thought of as being invisible or inexistent: because besides the need to make translation look "seamless" in writing —a translation should not be read like a translation; this is a matter of standards and taste— translators themselves hide in order to avoid being associated with the form

of forgery that translation represents. Arrojo's suggestion to think of the author as a regulating element[7] and a "functional principle" in the process of meaning production (p. 30) —as opposed to the author as a sacred entity carrying an essential meaning— can be instrumental to understand translation in the terms Derrida proposed in *The Ear of the Other,* that is, as "regulated transformation" —of one language by another, of one text by another (p. 20).

There needs to be a fruitful theoretical recognition of the dynamics of difference in translation and of its transformative nature. Such recognition would prevent translation from being understood as a neutral reproduction of texts independent from the translator's circumstances. Views about translation that propose ways of radically revising the conventional notions of originality, authorship, and interpretation provide possibilities to inquire what is at stake in hiding or concealing the translator as a subject. In general, these views share the belief that it is neither possible nor desirable to try to reach any pure origin that would be univocal and beyond any perspective, and that interference (i.e., writing) is inevitable. As a result, if we conceive of translation as a creative agent, it will no longer be seen as a form of forgery, since transformation is inherent in the process.

Along with the increasing attention paid to the translator in recent years, greater attention has also been paid to the discussion of the importance of studying translation as an intellectual endeavor and a legitimate practice of textual production —i.e., a form of writing. Douglas Robinson (2001) discusses the peculiarities of translation as a form of writing by comparing authors and translators in light of the writing practice that they each perform. He suggests that translation is a form of writing which —like most writing— has rules, limits, and possibilities, and frames the question of the translating subject underscoring the ideology underlying it by asking:

> Who translates? Who is the subject of translation? Is the translator allowed to be a subject, to have subjectivity? If so, what forces are active within it, and to what extent are those forces channeled into it from without? Who translates/writes? Who controls the act of writing/translating? Whose voice speaks when we write or translate? (p. 3-4)

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7   This notion is based on Foucault's idea of the "author function".

Robinson presupposes that translation is writing and that the translator is a writer and, on the basis of this assumption, problematizes common conceptions and expectations about translators, in terms of what they are to achieve if they translate an author's work. He focuses on the relationship between the translator and the author, on translators' images of themselves, and on the set of values that underlie what he identifies as the expectations imposed on the translator. He proposes that the notions of faithfulness and ideal equivalence presuppose such connection between the translator and the author that translators are subject to the expectation that they must "channel" the author, have access to the author's "spirit", to know what s/he wanted to say. He asks: If a translator in the present would claim "to be psychically channeling the dead spirit of Homer and thus to know exactly what Homer wanted to say in the target language" (p. 7), what would be our reaction to such claim? Probably suspicion and amusement. But as he shows, however strange and extravagant the claim may sound, that the dead writer can "inspire" or "overshadow" the translator's work on his or her text, or that "the translation is a joint project undertaken by the translator's body and the author's spirit", this turns out to be a very common claim indeed.

Robinson presents, through "post-rationalist reformulations", a provocative image to examine the relationship between an imagined author and a translator as a real-life, organic body. He exemplifies succinctly the hidden thought or desire to be the author's intermediary or "medium", or to "channel" the author's spirit, latent both in common-sense views of what translation is about, and in what translators themselves believe their ultimate goal to be; in general terms, translators claim that they "know" or aspire to know (i.e., attain complete understanding). And so perhaps this claim is a precondition of translation, for if the author's "invisible hand" is not granted (or a least promised) to be the same writing the text, the translator is at fault. The argument that the translation can be backed up, or somewhat "signed", by the author seems to be particularly persistent; but, given that the translator cannot channel the author's spirit, Robinson asks:

> Who does the translator channel? What "spirits" or "ghosts" or "demons" does the translator channel? Who (all) is the translator when s/he translates? […] Just what sorts of channel is the translator allowed to be, encouraged to be, expected to be, required to be? (p. 7)

Robinson directs attention to the translator's subjectivity and to the way it manifests itself in common perceptions of translators and of translators' ways of thinking of and representing themselves. Certainly, the complicated implications of what Robinson calls the translator's "desirable subordinated or instrumentalized subjectivity" (p. 7) turn out to be a key element in translators' awareness about their role in the production of meaning. Along with the question of invisibility, this type of problematization —which associates translation with the expectations that surround it and with the translator's self-awareness— as well as the exploration of the translator's "task", can inform a reflection on the translator's role framed in terms of ethics.

The contribution of this type of contemporary approach in translation studies has been widely recognized. Largely, these views are grounded on poststructuralist thought which, as Venuti (1992) has remarked, is critical for a translation strategy that acknowledges complex and unavoidable notions in translation such as "the concept of meaning as differential plurality" (p. 12). These views confront us with the conflicts and contradictions that the figure of the translator embodies and which are embedded in the practice of translating as a "task". In turn, such conflicts and contradictions seem to be at the core of the elusive character of the translator's figure that has prevailed in theories of textuality. But why exactly is rendering the translator present —and not only the "translation"— so important? And why should s/he be rendered as a creative subject and not as a faithful scribe or as a messenger?

It is important to note that challenging the translator's invisibility and problematizing conceptions of translation that define its practice, exclusively in terms of processes that are deemed to fail and/or that ought to be neutral, does not aim to construct a sacred translator or do away with originals. It is not an attempt to substitute other frameworks either; rather, it serves to diversify and expand theoretical boundaries and contextualize reified ideas of texts and subjects, by constantly emphasizing the need to recognize that translation is exchange, not a one-person enterprise, and that it occurs in and among collective spaces. Umberto Eco (2003) offers an interesting example of this type of theoretical move: He proposes to modify Jakobson's definition of "translation proper" —i.e., interlingual translation (between languages)— and add the notion of "negotiation" to it. Although he endorses Jakobson's definition, Eco believes that such a definition ought to include such elements as law (e.g., copyright), trade, and general institutional and commercial criteria (p. 4). With this characterization, Eco explicitly and usefully indicates

that the translator participates in an inherently collective exchange, which ought to be called a "negotiation" so as to mark it as an act that is never disinterested.

Recognizing the translator as a visible and historical subject is crucial not only for translators to be granted their rightful place as professionals and institutional agents in the production of culture, but also to unveil the real negotiations and disparate interests that may be at stake in the translating exchange. This is one of the ways in which Venuti articulates the importance of historicizing conceptualizations and practices of translation. He clearly and explicitly positions himself in his spatial-temporal context; his thinking is rooted in the position of the translator in contemporary Anglo-American culture.

Venuti's views about translation also presuppose that translation is much more complex than what is conventionally called a "communicative act". According to him, translation inevitably inscribes the original text within the values of the receiving culture. He states that "[t]ranslation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there" (2000b, p. 469). Venuti speaks most of the time of "the translator" —rather than focusing on "language" or "texts" alone— because, for him, the study of translation is inseparable from the study of the translating subject. Venuti's way of thinking about translation has provided a space to reflect on translation in terms of attitudes and gestures which he understands to be, by definition, ideologically and politically bound. Like Berman and other speculative theorists[8], he highlights the ethical, political, and ideological dimension of the translating practice, of which the finished product —i.e., a completed translation— is a testimony. Venuti's own preference is for translation strategies that displace standard linguistic values and defy the canon of fluency by preserving the foreignness of the text. His definition of "foreign" encompasses both what is geographically or linguistically remote and what is socially or institutionally marginalized. Following this interest, he proposes translation as a site to displace language and literature by means of strategies that introduce variations from the privileged forms of standard

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8   In her entry "Speculative Approaches" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, Marilyn Gaddis Rose states that these are characterized by their skepticism *vis-à-vis* the scientific method, which is commonly the basis for empiric-analytic theories; these theories, which rely on experiment and validation, are often related to works about translation "foregrounded explicitly as linguistic phenomena in inter-language transfer" (p. 238).

language —regional or group dialects, jargons, archaisms, neologisms, and so on— in order to find and/or create analogues of foreign forms in rewriting the text in translation. For Venuti, translation is always ideological; the translator's work is conditioned by public and institutional perceptions, taste, and standards; these will, in turn, inform the translator's ways of seeing, reading and writing, and influence a community or communities to welcome and consume —that is, authorize— a translator's version, or not to do so.

Venuti's ideas are illuminating for thinking about translation as a practice that is not —and cannot be seen as— produced, practiced, or consumed by ahistorical subjects, but one that should be studied, instead, in relation to the community or communities in which it is produced, occurs, and circulates. He also leads us to think of the power tensions embedded in the relations between the communities that interact in translation so as to see how these communities not only assign a text-translation its meaning at given spaces and times, but also determine its value, and even allow for its very existence. Venuti also remarks that the potential translation has to open up the "local" language and take it to unfamiliar or unprivileged places and forms has an ideological function. A translation thus marked by domestic interests is a potential means to challenge existing domestic values. In this sense Venuti sees translation (both translating, in terms of practice and strategies, and translated texts) as utopian: it has the potential to create imagined communities around that which is considered foreign (2000b, p. 484). Moreover, as a product and a member of a given community, the translator also participates by helping potential narrative and interpretive communities[9] unfold.

Recognizing this potential of translation for the formation of communities has significant implications, among which is the recognition that it is necessary to address the complex questions that surround the translator's self-understanding and self-awareness, for we may see, for instance, how translators may choose to engage actively and consciously in exploring this potential. Thinking of these capacities is also relevant when it comes to articulating the ideological dimension of the choices made in translation at all levels; for instance, choosing one translation strategy or another may have the effect of producing translations that will establish

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9   As Stanley Fish (1980) understands it, an interpretive community is a meaning making entity in which texts are realized as a function of interpretation. The community 'authorizes' a finite number of interpretive strategies and determines how a text is produced. The community has the authority to establish core meanings which will constitute the normative, public, what he calls the 'institutional way of making sense' (p. 320).

a common understanding between domestic and foreign readers, but it can also have the opposite effect and block this understanding.

The work of a self-aware translator will be informed and regulated by such type of questions and reflections. Venuti recognizes that, although he calls this community-formation projection "utopian," it is not really so, for it is not inconsistent with the social realities and circumstances that surround translating: "The inscription can never be so comprehensive" or total in relation to domestic constituencies to be able to create a community of interest without hierarchy; "the asymmetry between the foreign and domestic cultures persists even when the foreign context is partly inscribed in the translation." ("Translation, Community, Utopia", p. 485).

Despite the fact that Venuti's ideas are controversial and often contested, the ways in which he thinks about the translator as a subject placed in history is a radical departure from idealized —often unrealistic— images of the translator's performance upon which theorizations have traditionally been founded. The critical approaches to translation that respond in one way or another to Venuti's work, help us find ways to "name" the translator. Moreover, these approaches underscore the relevance of the socio-political hierarchy of languages, of the translator's role as an active agent who is also part of communities and their interactions, and of all the variables and implications that lie behind what is usually seen as simple decision-making. For the purpose of a theory of the translator, these views foreground questions such as those posed by Suzanne Jill Levine (1991)[10], who wonders what it means to be a translator in the context of "the formal and linguistic complexities of twentieth-century fiction" (p. xii): "How is it determined that (a certain) literature, or a certain work, is worthy of translation? Why? Do the problems involved in translating it deserve our attention?" (p. xiv).

As I indicated earlier, when thinking of the translator's self-understanding and awareness and of his/her subjectivity and historical agency in particular, the question of ethics comes to occupy center stage. Speaking of the translators' agency leads us to articulate an image of the translator as an ethical subject and look at translators in terms of the social implications of the writing practice they perform, of the texts they produce, and of the effects they produce in and through discourse[11]. As a consequence, by seeing translators as producers of texts, the fact that

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10   Levine discusses in particular the role of English translators of Latin American literature such as herself.

11   As Arrojo (2005) has indicated, partly as a result of idealized notions of equivalence and

they are responsible for the translating/writing they perform becomes apparent. If it is true that translators cannot escape their own presence and inevitably inscribe the text in their own selves, then it is also true that whether they are represented as visible or invisible, their texts result from the conceptions of language and of translation according to which they operate. Consequently, they bear the ideologies that underlie such conceptions. Is a particular translator unaware of her/his circumstance? Does s/he act with an aim or a purpose? To which structures and laws is s/he conforming? Which ones is s/he challenging?

It is necessary to define translators in terms of presence, rather than absence, in order to find concrete ways to theorize them. Some of the revised notions I have described in this article engender the possibility to discuss the question of translation in terms of ethics. Greater attention can be ascribed to such ideas as the nature of the translator-author relationship, the translator's motivations and self-awareness, and the tensions caused by the power asymmetries at play in the translating encounter. In that context it becomes possible and legitimate to discuss, for instance, how someone's translations have influenced particular standards of rhetoric and taste, or how someone's translations have affected the literary canon in a certain place and at a certain time. These questions become relevant if we realize that, however contradictory or vague its nature is commonly believed to be, translation is undoubtedly a key instrument in history, as can be seen, for instance, in the way it has been rightly and explicitly associated with encounters of peoples and communities, often very unequal and conflictive, as occurs in (post)colonial contexts. Translation is an instrument in people's invested interactions. Hence the relevance of examining it as a mediated act and of unveiling the translator's presence.

Michael Cronin (2003) suggests that one necessary step toward rethinking perceptions about translation is to stop looking at it as a detached object of study —about which we ought to speak in factual terms— and instead recognize it as embedded in our everyday experience, so that we can face the fact that translation matters in everybody's lives (p. 3). If we understand translation as "mediation", says Cronin, and given that mediation, understood as a presence that is not disinterested, has far-ranging consequences in local and global dynamics, we can see the presence of the translator very clearly, especially if we think, as he puts it, in terms

authorship, the ethical position of the translator is often conflicted and seen with suspicion; translators are seen as unwelcome intermediaries and "agree to practice an activity which perversely associates excellence with invisibility" (p. 3).

of contemporary "global" politics (p. 3). For Cronin, translation is by definition the enactment of the fact of language contact, and in that sense it relates to our ideologically-bound relationship or dialogue with our living space and with the world at large, what he calls our "active sense of global citizenship" (p. 6). Cronin links an individual's experience of translation with collective histories, and underlines the relational nature of both temporal and spatial relationships of language contact. On the basis of his analogy between translation experiences and everyday exchanges, we may say that, if translation is (like a) dialogue, then what happens in "real life" translation is similar to what happens in "real-life" dialogue: there are misunderstandings, silences, interruptions, refusals to understand, distortions, voices that impose themselves over one another. We see that translation may well be a site to see who is invited to speak and who is not, or even who is allowed to have a voice. This perspective brings to the fore questions about power structures and tensions as inherent to translation. It expands the critical potential of the study of translation since, as Rose believes, translation exhibits realities about cultural and political history at large and about the "oscillations" of cultural history; it should be seen in its organicity and as part of the (human) cultural continuum (p. 24). For Cronin,

> [o]ur narrative imagination —our ability to try to imagine what it is like to be someone else from another language, another culture, another community or another country— is itself a mere figment of the imagination if we have no way of reading the books, watching the plays, looking at the films produced by others. In other words, if citizenship is seen as no longer exclusively defined by nationality or the nation-state. (p. 5)

Associating the practice of translation with the ongoing emergence of a global narrative imagination foregrounds, once again, the role of translators as ethical subjects. If we relate Cronin's —and Venuti's— views to the translator's task in order to understand the translator's responsibility or "mission", we see that they offer a radically different perspective from the kind of "task" that can be found in Benjamin's essay. The translator's mission is thus determined by the collective space and time in which s/he exists and interacts. As a consequence the translator becomes defined also by her/his being one of the agents involved in the writing and circulation of the narratives that construct culture in very concrete ways, whether that results in enabling the circulation of those narratives or obscuring or blocking them. In any case, translation is never and cannot be innocent. Whether perceived

as a "positive" or as a "negative" force in society, translators are part and parcel of the social. They are participants in the construction of the narrative imagination of which they are themselves a part.

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