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**Engaging with Translation.**  
**New Readings of**  
**George Steiner's *After Babel***

Marco Agnetta  
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[eds.]

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**Review of: VENUTI, Lawrence (2019): *Contra Instrumentalism. A Translation Polemic*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 200 p. ISBN: 978-1-49620-513-1.**

Translation studies occasionally resembles Don Quixote tilting at windmills, fighting a non-existent enemy: did anyone ever think that translations render “the source text unaltered” (Venuti 2019: 3)? Surely we agree that “no translation can be understood as providing direct or unmediated access to its source text” (p. 3), and we will therefore wonder who thought such access was possible. Yet *Contra Instrumentalism* isn't a quixotic exercise in combatting straw-man opponents. Venuti's argument is that translators and translation theorists frequently do think translation should be a transparent medium and render the source-text's meaning intact.

Venuti's book targets instrumentalism: “It conceives of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning, or effect” (p. 1). Instrumentalism retains mimetic exactitude as its regulatory ideal, despite allowances for less-than-perfect replications. Consider Eugene Nida's “equivalent effect” (p. 7) and his proposal that “the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message” (p. 8). Venuti remarks that “the equivalent effect is an invariant because it is assumed to be capable of replication regardless of the linguistic, cultural, and historical dif-

ferences that distinguish between the source text and the translation” (ibid.). For Venuti, the fetish for equivalence breeds the desire for translations un-inflected by linguistic, cultural, and historical difference. Nida might invoke Biblical translation, however—shouldn’t God’s Word remain unaltered whatever the translation, and whatever theological changes might have been prompted by historical or cultural circumstance?

But theological desiderata aren’t Venuti’s concern, and, besides, they aren’t unfulfillable in practice. So it goes for Biblical translation, so it goes more broadly: faced with what translation cannot practically accomplish, we devolve to hand-wringing despair over inevitable loss-in-translation. Whence, moreover, scenarios of economic compensation, or translators enjoined to (impossible) ethical activities of reparation. Consider also the conventional translation studies essay where translations are evaluated according to their ‘accuracy’ or ‘fidelity’: this is instrumentalism because it boils down to assuming that good translations preserve something intact of the source-text, and bad translations don’t. For some, the desire for equivalence is so ardently expressed that we even encounter talk of reincarnation and transubstantiation (George Steiner, for example). For others, the ideal is that of translator-painters depicting the source-text’s lines, colours and hues intact. Or translators likened to Savile Row tailors, suiting up source-texts with new clothes that fit exactly.

Enough. “STOP assuming that a source text possesses an invariant form, meaning, or effect; START assuming that a source text can support multiple and conflicting interpretations and therefore an equally heterogeneous succession of translations” (p. 174). “STOP thinking of source texts in terms of translatability and untranslatability and of translation as involving loss or gain; START thinking of translation as an interpretive act that can be performed on any source text” (p. 175). Venuti’s stop/start proposals address film subtitling, American comparative literature, Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature*, and Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Venuti is alert to the glib shibboleth, the facile truism. Take Frost’s “poetry is what gets lost in translation” (cited by Venuti, p.

109). But what is “poetry”? Is it fair to castigate translation for losing something that remains so ill-defined? Too often is translation stigmatised for losing something, but when one asks for a specification of what is lost, the answers are vague or complaisant: translation loses a putative truth, betrays the original’s aesthetic essence, its *je ne sais quoi*, its singularity, idiomaticity, or signature style. Metaphors, misleadingly, take up the slack: Benjamin’s source text, likened to a fruit and its adhesive skin, is a case in point. Consider also: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light” (Benjamin 1996: 260). Invocations of transparency, Venuti argues, reveal an instrumentalist strain in Benjamin’s thinking.

“Isn’t it time that we acknowledged instrumentalism to be a hoax,” Venuti writes, “born out of the fear that translation contaminates and falsifies when it ought to reproduce or transfer a source invariant?” (p. 172). Exposing the hoax partly involves critiquing “proverbs of untranslatability” like the haplessly glib *traduttore traditore*. Another “proverbial” utterance, which I permit myself to paraphrase: Derrida’s *nothing (or everything) is translatable* and *nothing (or everything) is untranslatable*. I agree with Venuti that Derrida is routinely invoked without enough understanding of what he means. But I slightly disagree with Venuti, or at least would wish to be more patient with “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”. So let’s cite a relevant passage:

If to a translator [...] you give all the time in the world, as well as the words needed to explicate, clarify, and teach the semantic content and forms of the text to be translated, there is no reason for him to encounter the untranslatable or a remainder in his work. If you give someone who is competent an entire book, filled with *translator’s notes*, in order to explain everything that a phrase in two or three words can mean in its particular form [...] there is really no reason, in principle, for him to fail to render – without any remainder – the intentions, meaning, denotations, connotations and semantic overdeterminations, the formal effects of what is called the original. (Derrida 2013: 356)

For Venuti, instrumentalism emerges when Derrida speaks of translation without remainder. But the key emphasis, I think, is that overcoming untranslatability is possible if one *gives* the translator all

the time in world. Ideally, the translator would be given (or gives herself) infinite time and infinite space to assess every nuance residing in every word. If one could give (oneself) that, then nothing is untranslatable. *In principle*. For translators have never been given that gift of time, nor allowed to proliferate their notes to such vast extent that their translations could measure up to the original. For then one would need time and space that is *measureless*—infinite time, infinite space. Whence the problem of infinity contending with the “economic” logic to which translators are ineluctably beholden: untranslatability persists because time and space are *rationed*. Thus, whatever creative licence translators are granted, one yardstick hinders such licence: “A kind of translating that is not *word-to-word*, certainly, or *word-for-word*, but nonetheless stays as close as possible to the equivalence of ‘one word *by* one word’ and thereby respects verbal quantity as a quantity of words” (Derrida 2013: 357). Translators may have liberated themselves from verbatim dogmas, but they’re not yet free of the requirement that they keep to the approximate word-count of the original text. One can’t spend and expend millions more words in the zeal to translate *without remainder*. The gift of an infinite number of words has never been given to translators, any more than they have been granted infinite time. Perhaps, one day, translators will be granted such things, which is why the overcoming of untranslatability, the possibility of translation without remainder, remains to-come as well. That’s how I understand Derrida. Derrida never forecloses upon the *à-venir*, which is the horizon against which his reflections on translation and (un)translatability should properly be assessed.

Venuti’s purpose is to “ferret” (p. 26) out instrumentalist assumptions and propose that “the hermeneutic model offers the most comprehensive and incisive understanding of translation” (p. 26). Hermeneutics and instrumentalism are “heuristic” (p. 93) models for understanding translation, but it’s not a matter of opposing such models since that opposition collapses once instrumentalism admits that all translations imply acts of interpretation. Instrumentalism must grant (albeit *nolens volens*) the universality of

hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> “A hermeneutic model,” Venuti writes, “conceives of translation as an interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture” (p. 1). Venuti dispenses with the objection that, for instance, the translation of a legal contract mustn’t allow variation to emerge: that may be the translator’s contractual obligation, but it doesn’t mean the translation cannot find itself recontextualised as the document is variously used by whomever commissioned the translation. And, to return to Biblical translation, while a translator might wish to ensure that God’s Word remains invariant (it always means what it means), that doesn’t entail, for example, that Luther’s translation didn’t have the receiving culture’s intelligibilities and interests in mind. But I’m inclined to ask Venuti about philosophy. Wouldn’t philosophy mistrust interpretive variations if the matter concerned philosophical truths? If truths travel in translation, and possibly alter in transit, would they still be truths? Are truths impervious to hermeneutic discussion? Alain Badiou would say so. Take logocentric philosophy, moreover: must the *logos* remain intact, whatever languages philosophers might be using? These are questions for “world philosophy” – a notion that has begun to concern philosophy as it looks at the “world literature” debate. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, the question is whether philosophy should resist itineraries of “worlding” and avoid the vagaries of translation or else idealise a translation model that would not lose what makes a truth a truth, or diminish the primacy of the *logos*.

But that, Venuti would doubtless observe, implies an instrumentalist translation model. And he would observe (with Derrida and *pave* Plato) that philosophy often travels via written texts, much as it might prefer not to. Texts are subject to context, and hence to recontextualisation and decontextualisation (i. e. to interpretation and translation). Hardly a congenial situation for a philosophical *truth*. But, away from philosophy and in any event, all this entails

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1 I allude to Grondin’s *L’universalité de l’herméneutique* (1993).

2 See my essays “The World, the Text, and Philosophy: Reflections on Translation” (O’Keeffe 2020) and “Worlding Philosophy” (forthcoming 2021).

thinking about the “horizon” (a term Venuti doesn’t use, however) of translations—their time and place—and also about the independence of translations, namely treating translations without automatic reference (or deference) to their source-texts. At issue is a translation “intervening into a particular cultural situation at a particular historical moment and for that reason relatively autonomous from the source text it translates” (p. 69). And also that translations’ signifying processes are “related to but distinct from those of the texts they translate” (p. 82). *Relatively* autonomous, *related* but *distinct*.

I’ll return to this question of relation and relativity later. But, for now, let’s attend to Venuti’s hermeneutic model and speculate on the response of adherents of Translational Hermeneutics. They will be greatly encouraged by Venuti. But no sooner is hermeneutics invoked, then it’s relayed to poststructuralism and semiotics:

The modern episteme that generated the hermeneutic model of translation among Romantic thinkers like Schleiermacher has been modified by semiotics and poststructuralism, incorporating concepts of language, textuality, and interpretation that signal an epistemic shift toward postmodernism. (P. 26).

Although Venuti’s book is written to provoke instrumentalists, I suspect specialists of the hermeneutic approach will be provoked as well: how many of these “modifications” would Translational Hermeneutics be willing to embrace? Moreover, “In developing a hermeneutic model of translation that draws its key concepts from semiotics and poststructuralism,” Venuti writes, “I am deliberately setting aside the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, particularly as exemplified by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Both Heidegger and Gadamer formulate theories and methods of translation, but despite appreciable advances, notably their attention to the intellectual and cultural conditions of interpretation, their thinking ultimately devolves into instrumentalism” (p. 4f.). Let’s take Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*:

Every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original. Even if it is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original. (In rare cases of masterly re-creation the loss can be made good or even mean a gain – think, for example, of how

Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* seems to acquire an odd new vigour in Stefan George's version). (Gadamer 1996: 386)

Note “flatter”. And if poetry is what gets lost in translation, then what it loses is perhaps whatever poetry (opaquely?) opposes to translation’s “clarity”—whence Gadamer’s notion of translation as highlighting. Always poetry deemed to be the untranslatable art-form, moreover: translations *must* lack the original’s overtones. And even masterly re-creation (which Venuti might approve of) is compromised by the “economic” language of loss, making good, and putative gain. So there is instrumentalism in Gadamer. Still, we can mildly wonder whether Gadamer is *right* to say that poetic translations are lesser than the originals (Nabokov, naturally, would say so). Much depends, moreover, on whether “re-creation” subverts Gadamer’s instrumentalism by way of an embrace of “creativity” not even a text entitled *Truth and Method* can turn into a method, precisely. Creativity isn’t methodological, and that’s a good thing (whatever one thinks of George’s Baudelaire translations). In any case, Gadamer’s brisk dismissal might provoke, in Translational Hermeneutics, a sense of unease whatever obeisance it does and doesn’t make to Gadamer.

But what about Venuti’s own hermeneutic model? Can Venuti set aside Gadamer and Heidegger, shift to poststructuralism, and still describe his translation model as “hermeneutic”? It is, I acknowledge, somewhat remiss to cite someone else entirely to explain matters, as if on Venuti’s behalf, but let’s divert to Venuti’s *Teaching Translation*, which also advocates for the hermeneutic model, and examine Karen Van Dyck’s essay, entitled “Translating a Canonical Author: C. P. Cavafy”—it discusses how canonical authors are subject to different strategies of translation and adaptation. In this connection, she invokes Barthes’ death of the author thesis: “dead,” authors cannot control what is made of their texts. As for her students, faced with this “death”, she remarks: “Confronted with a host of retranslations and multimedia adaptations, all bound in myriad relations to the receiving culture, students cannot rely on the intentional fallacy to control the possibility of endless interpretation” (Venuti 2017: 110). Some, perhaps inspired by



instrumentalism, will still assume (fallaciously?) that authors prefer a degree of exactitude in view of what they originally wrote. Some, inspired by Barthes, might venture towards postmodernism and take total poetic licence with that original text (and, moreover, query the notion of “originality” a priori). The question, however, is whether only a *radical* hermeneutics of translation can accept the prospect of “endless interpretation”. Ricœur, less radical, might hesitate. Gadamer too, in the name of his classic, traditionary texts. Hermeneutic theologians like Fuchs and Ebeling as well, I think. When Van Dyck observes that “Translation is the door that opens this Pandora’s box” (quoted in Venuti 2017: 111), one might imagine a desire to close it again—to reassert the author’s intentions, deny the “fallacy”, and reanimate the dead author. But is the Pandoral consequence hermeneutic chaos or magnificent novelty, myriad translations and adaptations, uninhibited creativity and poetic licence? Should we throw on the straitjacket of instrumentalist equivalence in order to rein in translation lest it become free-wheeling “adaptation”? We might worry, like Dryden, about situations “where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty” (Schulte/Biguenet 1992: 17) to vary and forsake both words and sense. *If now he has not lost that name*. would that loss be the dread consequence of translation’s hermeneutic liberties?

For Van Dyck, “the death of the author is the life of the reader, the translator, the adaptor ... and the work” (quoted in Venuti 2017: 116). Yet while the author’s death licences myriad translations and adaptations (assuming we can still mark the difference between translation and adaptation), she adverts to Venuti, and says that “Translation studies [...] can show how to read a translation as a transformation, relatively autonomous from the source text” (Venuti 2017: 112). But having just opened Pandora’s box, isn’t that autonomy more than *relative*—isn’t it really utter autonomy? Compare Venuti: “STOP reading translations as if they were or could be identical to their source texts; START reading translations as texts in their own right, relatively autonomous from the texts they translate” (Venuti 2019: 175f.). “Relatively”, I confess, is the word that provokes me. How relative is relative? It’s a slightly querulous

question, I admit. But Venuti, I hope, would willingly hear that admission, since it makes his point: *Contra Instrumentalism* is designed to provoke, and so he asks “Where is your desire?” (p. 177). Why querulous? What does that say about my desire—am I trying to defend instrumentalism, or a different model of hermeneutics? If so, why so? Perhaps I should STOP here and START again, inspired by Venuti’s powerful, bracing book.

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