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Review of *Contra Instrumentalism: a Translation Polemic*, by Lawrence Venuti

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Contra Instrumentalism: a Translation Polemic, by Lawrence Venuti. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 216 pp., $25. ISBN 9781496205131 (pbk), 9781496215925 (ebook). https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvgc62bf

This short book lives up to its subtitle, and to the title of the book series in which it is located: 'Provocations'. The target of Venuti's broadside is a model of translation he calls instrumentalism, which '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). It is in accord with such a model that certain translations are said to be faithful because they succeed in transferring such invariants as the critic identifies within the source text, or unfaithful because they do not.

In Venuti's analysis, instrumentalism is opposed to an alternative model of translation that he calls the hermeneutic model, whereby translation is 'an interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture' (p. 1). In the hermeneutic model, a translation embodies a particular interpretation of the source text, and seeks to make sense in its own time and context rather than that of the source text.

The book consists of a brief preface ('Provocations', pp. ix–x), an introduction ('Start/Stop', pp. 1–40), three chapters, a short conclusion ('Stop/Start', pp. 173–77), and bibliographical endnotes. The first chapter, 'Hijacking Translation', identifies evidence for the instrumentalist model within recent academic writings, particularly in the fields of comparative literature and world literature. The second chapter, 'Proverbs of Untranslatability', focuses on particular catchphrases that encode the instrumentalist model, notably the Italian proverb *traduttore traditore* ('a translator is a traitor'), the metaphor of aspects being 'lost in translation', and the suggestion that translation is impossible. Venuti traces the origins of such *bon mot*s and shows how their continued use perpetuates instrumentalist thinking.

It is clear from the first two chapters why Venuti is unhappy with instrumentalism. Instrumentalism reduces translators to artisans who succeed only if they become invisible. Criticising translations is like shooting fish in a barrel: the critic can always find aspects of the original that are absent from the translation, and can thus imply that he or she could have done a better job. Translation is falsely blamed for encouraging people not to learn languages. Translators are not appreciated as interpretive readers or as contributors to current thinking in the receiving culture. The drawbacks of instrumentalism are evident. But at this stage of the book I had two issues.

The first issue stems from Venuti's method. He proceeds by extrapolating what writers think about translation from the ways in which they talk about it, rather than by finding particular instances where instrumentalist theories of translation have been expounded or defended. It is in this sense that instrumentalism is only a model. It is not clear that the writers Venuti accuses of instrumentalist thinking would actually subscribe to any developed instrumentalist theory, and some of them might feel misrepresented or traduced by Venuti's attempts to present them as instrumentalists, especially where this is to present them, by implication, as opposed to a hermeneutic model of translation. Instrumentalism seems to be less a theory and more a way of speaking; but I am not sure that anybody could be expected to avoid it.

Venuti's stone-throwing is conducted from within a glass house. When he discusses the works of writers in languages other than English – Benjamin, Rilke, du Bellay, Derrida, and others – he is often engaged in a genealogical project, tracing the history of ideas, and thus what the writer's words meant in their own context is very much the point. But Venuti kindly presents the words of such writers in English translation for the benefit of the potentially monoglot reader. For the purposes of the genealogical project, the translation must purport to express what the writer expressed in the original context; yet according to the hermeneutic model to which Venuti subscribes, the translation is conditioned by, and only makes sense in relation to, the later context of *its own* presentation. If the hermeneutic model is adopted, then a translation cannot serve as evidence in an argument about what the writer did with his original words, since that argument may already be forcing the translation so as to make it look like *good* evidence. There will thus be circularity unless the writer is only quoted in the original, without translation, thus shrinking the readership. It is one thing for Venuti to say that when Benjamin wrote XYZ in German, Venuti interprets him as saying such-and-such. It is rather another thing for Venuti to say that when Benjamin wrote XYZ* (an English translation of the XYZ that Benjamin wrote), Venuti interprets him as saying such-and-such. Once it is admitted that the translation itself is interpretive, the second and more explicit of the two interpretive stages is no longer supported by Benjamin's text.

This critique is prompted by Venuti's general argument but is barely anticipated or countered (he says on p. 33 that 'my English version below aims to maintain a semantic correspondence'), and perhaps it cannot be. Perhaps instrumentalism is a necessary model of translation, and Venuti's book is a polemic because it could not be a proper argument in answer to a research question. What is translation for, if not to transmit the salient aspects of the original to those who cannot otherwise access it? The impossibility of that project does not make it any less necessary. The instrumentalist model is 'heavily cathected with desire' (p. 39), but is it a desire that one might do without?

When Venuti opposes the two models, he somehow fails to show that either excludes the other. It may seem natural to say that the more a translation is conditioned by the original, the less it is conditioned by the translator's purposes and context, and *vice versa*. But at the same time, the translation is obviously conditioned by both of these things. Who would argue, against the hermeneutic model, that a translation is *not* conditioned by the translator's purposes and context? Surely not even the writers whom Venuti shows to be implicitly instrumentalists would do that.

My second issue is that the supposed opposition between the two models would be clearer if convincing examples could be given of how translation practice differs depending on which model is favoured. Do the two ways of talking about translation imply two ways of doing it? Towards the end of the second chapter, Venuti answers this question in the negative (p. 119):

> The varied uses of the proverbs show that no necessary connection exists between a model of translation and a translation strategy. Instrumentalism can coincide with a strategy that departs from the lexical and syntactic features of a source text ... while a hermeneutic understanding of translation can be put into practice through close adherence to those textual features ...

In contrast, Venuti's third chapter, 'The Trouble with Subtitles', seems to suggest a positive answer. In this chapter, Venuti complains that the pedagogical literature for the training of film subtitlers presumes an instrumentalist model. But he goes on to discuss instances where subtitles have deliberately drawn attention to, for example, themselves as texts in their own right, or as constraints upon the viewer's interpretation of the film, or to the chronological gap between the production of the film and the addition of the subtitles. In such instances, the subtitler is deliberately playing with the aspects that the hermeneutic model highlights. Alongside this, Venuti also discusses how viewers *au fait* with the hermeneutic model might view a film as a collage where the subtitles are performing the subtitler's own artistic and interpretive project, and might critique subtitles in ways that instrumentalists would not.

But the reader must understand the film's original language in order to appreciate all the complexities and creativities of this multi-semiotic situation as Venuti describes it. And more to the point, the viewer must understand the film's original language in order to appreciate what the subtitler is doing and why. Venuti's analysis tends towards a discussion not of the production of subtitles for the benefit of viewers ignorant of the original language (this being the *prima facie* purpose of subtitles, to expand the film's audience), but of the production of subtitles for the benefit of viewers who know the original language but watch

the film with a creative commentarial overlay (this being an obscure purpose of subtitles, to create an amusing collage for a restricted polyglot audience). Thus Venuti can only illustrate the difference that the translation model makes by aligning the hermeneutic model with examples that seem to betray the basic purpose of translation. If at one extreme we have translators who are impossibly invisible because even readers who know the source language cannot see how the original text has been transformed, at the other extreme we have translators who obtrude by drawing undue attention to their own creative role, and to their assumptions about their audience.

Yet Venuti does not convince us that the hermeneutic model necessitates such moves. His earlier statement that 'no necessary connection exists between a model of translation and a translation strategy' (p. 119) seems right, and is all the more convincing for being clearly stated. So where does this leave us? While making his polemic, Venuti focuses on numerous fascinating and consequential circumstances that can only be made visible by means of great philological care and acumen, in the discovery and in the communication. Accordingly, I think this book is best received not as polemic or as argument, but as a demonstration of the role and value of translation and translation studies in the contemporary academy. Venuti's cogent complaint against the instrumentalist model is that it downplays the importance of translators and, accordingly, of studying what they do. But I would also caution readers not to overdo the hermeneutics. Translation and its study are important because although translation involves linguistic skill, textual criticism, interpretation, commentary, political intervention, and creative poetics, it is also necessarily something more than even the combination of these things can encompass – something requiring a love for the other that is perhaps, in the end, theological.

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