

Lost and Found in Translation

Melek Ortabasi, Simon Fraser University

Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own (Benjamin, 75).

What is translation? Is it simply substituting one word for another in a different language? WL404 Literature and Translation sets as its task the exploration of literary translation, both in theory and in practice. While examining the various ways in which the translator's role has been defined, students work on their own translation projects: some elect to focus on the process of translation as a philosophical, social and theoretical concept, while others undertake literary translation projects of a compelling and worthy texts. The results reveal that the process of moving from one language to another is anything but mechanical.

Many still think of translation as a non-intellectual process of producing a "copy" from an "original." However, some of the main readings in this course, the influences of which readers will readily see in the work that appears here, directly challenge narrow definitions of translation and, indeed, of language itself. Translation studies scholar Lawrence Venuti, for example, points out that although we have translators to thank for much of the communication between cultures over time, the history of translation has been marked by its "invisibility" (1). This lack of appreciation for the translator's craft is, he argues, due in large part to fairly modern conventions of authorship, which automatically distinguish between texts as "originals" or "copies." In this thinking, a translation is always a "second-order representation...derivative, fake, potentially a false copy" (ibid., 6-7). However, his argument, which is endorsed by many of our contributions either explicitly or implicitly, is that the translator should be considered on a par

with the “author” as a creator of texts and discourse. His point is that any translation radically reshapes the text it acts upon, whether it seeks to or not: “[t]he aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar” (ibid.,18). Venuti ultimately seeks to bring the translator into the realm of the “visible,” thus restoring a sense of agency and responsibility to the role. The translator can -- and should, he argues -- use her craft to positively affect the relationship between cultures.

The articles and translations included here do exactly that, in a variety of ways. Those who selected a passage to translate chose complex texts that resist translation, or else overlooked texts in need of exposure. Some of the critical essays take as their focus the history of translation by examining various iterations of the same “original.” Other essays examine the problem of translation on a more theoretical level, taking as their focus literary texts that center on the miscommunications and silences that inevitably emerge from gaps in inter- and intra-lingual communication. All the contributions, however, make the convincing case that what is lost in translation is always found again, in some other form.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator.” Trans. Harry Zohn. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. 71 – 82.

Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London; New York: Routledge, 1995.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

©Melek Ortabasi, 2018

Available from: <http://journals.sfu.ca/courses/index.php/wl404>