

## Where Is My Desire?

CHANTAL WRIGHT

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"Translators [are] the jazz musicians of the literary world. They are there because they love the music and because they like playing together and improvising."

Maureen Freely<sup>1</sup>

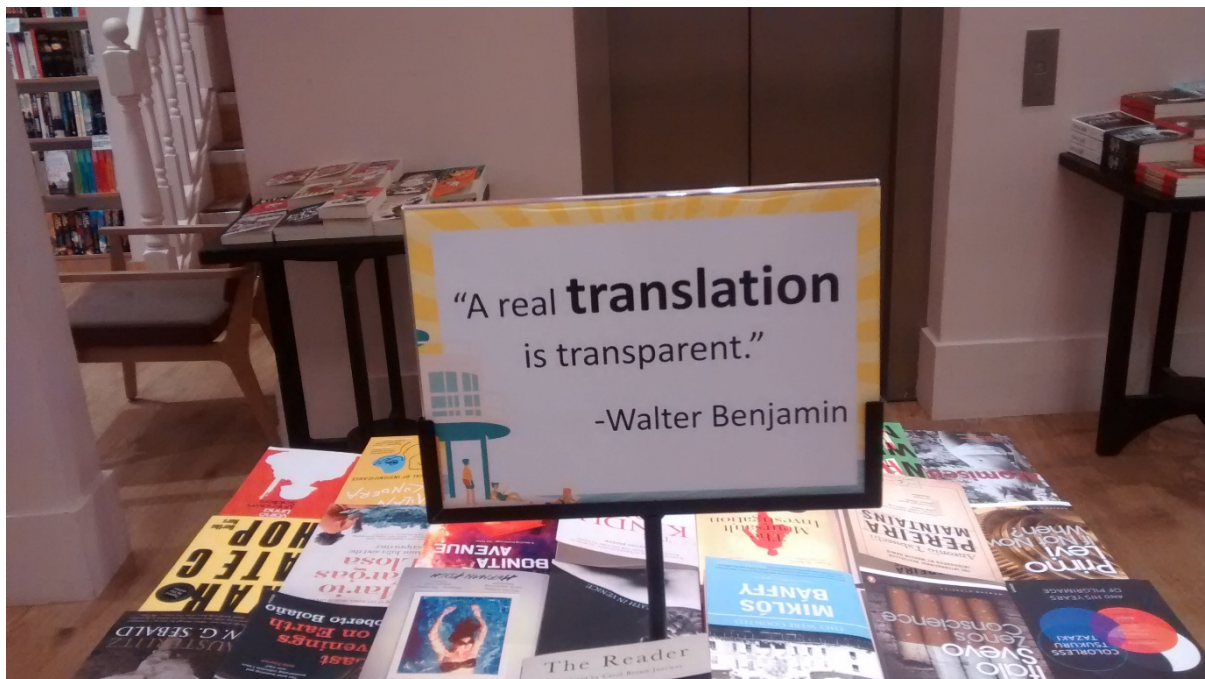
### 1. Blue Train, Yellow Car OR Translation as jazz

It is a provocation, I know, to open a response to Lawrence Venuti's *Contra Instrumentalism – A Translation Polemic* with a metaphor for translation, given the book's substantive discussion of translation proverbs and their dangers. Why risk "belletrism" from the outset? But bear with me. Translator Maureen Freely's comparison of the translator and the jazz musician, her metaphorical mapping of one domain (jazz) onto another (translation), allows us to see one thing in terms of something else, a situation that successful metaphors always facilitate, and hence to see differently. And who wouldn't want to be mentioned in the same breath as John Coltrane, and have their work compared to his spiritual saxophonic soarings – and don't we translators also lock ourselves in the room above the garage for weeks on end, to then emerge with our masterpiece, as Coltrane did with *A Love Supreme*? And isn't, or shouldn't, translation be something like Patricia Barber's composition "Yellow Car" (surely itself a nod to "Blue Train"): a musical meditation on a melody (which is not an invariant, more of a stimulus or an impulse) resulting in a series of pieces that all appear under the same name, with one of the series a winkingly-entitled "Yet Another in a Long Series of Yellow Car" (for which, see Barber's early album *A Distortion of Love*)?

To run with the metaphor: the hermeneutic possibilities exemplified by the endless metamorphoses of the jazz standard and the Great American Songbook are also certainly a more useful way of thinking about translation than the classical pianist's instrumental interpretation of a Beethoven sonata. When I hear Madeleine Peyroux or Holly Cole sing a classic, I of course recognize the source, but it's *their* take on it with which I'm engaged. And when I hear Joshua Redman blow the roof off Cheltenham Town Hall with a new composition, as he did this past spring at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival, I notice and appreciate the quotes (*salt peanuts, salt peanuts*) but my focus is on the fibers of new sound being shaped by the fired-up musicians on stage.

Above all, though, jazz musicians are cool. They are sexy. They wear cool clothes, they pull funny faces as they jam, listen and respond to their fellow musicians. They have attitude. Patricia Barber kicks off her shoes when she plays the piano at the Green Mill in Chicago, a trademark glass of cognac always to hand, or to foot. On recordings, Keith Jarrett can be heard eccentrically da-da-da-ing along with his questing piano, voice somewhat out of tune, as though he were at home in the bathtub rather than in the recording studio or the concert hall. Attitude goes a long way. Attitude is sexy.

I digress, perhaps, but thinking about what is sexy may be the unavoidable outcome of talking about desire. “Where is your desire?” Lawrence Venuti asks as he closes his polemic against instrumentalism in translation.<sup>2</sup> Like him, I am tired of the fossilized translation proverbs (deeply unsexy), the endless recycling of unhelpful statements like Robert Frost’s, and the decontextualization of others, such as Walter Benjamin’s “Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend,”<sup>3</sup> recently seen emblazoned above a table of translations in British bookshop Waterstone’s as “A real translation is transparent,” which may very nearly be the opposite of its meaning since translucency and transparency are quite different concepts.<sup>4</sup> Whatever Benjamin might have been trying to express with this statement – and with Benjamin one can of course never be sure – when presented out of context like this, on an advertising placard above a bookseller’s table, it could mean anything at all.



*Or translucent. Or translucid.*

As Lawrence Venuti says, proverbialized statements such as these are so empty as to run the danger of meaning everything and nothing. In a similar vein, translation theorist Jean Boase-Beier has pointed out that Norman Shapiro's now infamous "A good translation is like a pane of glass"<sup>5</sup> could mean the precise opposite of what it is commonly interpreted to mean, so that rather than bolstering the widely held view that a translation should aim for clarity by assimilating the text to target cultural norms, it could in fact imply that translation should act as a mirror for the foreignness of the source text.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the vacuous ambiguity of the proverbialized translation cliché was one of the things that Derrida, whose work is never without a sense of humor, was referencing when he wrote "Rien n'est intraduisible en un sens, mais en un autre sens tout est intraduisible."<sup>7</sup> So like Lawrence Venuti, I am very much tired of the hackneyed thinking about translation that is buttressed by the regurgitation of translation proverbs such as *traduttore traditore* and (yawn) "lost in translation." But I do not automatically despair of the possibility that a fresh metaphor can capture something new about translation, and I do know what I desire, and I think it exists, if only (currently) on the fringes of our translational consciousness.

Translation needs to be sexier. It needs to be more creative, more experimental; it needs an avant-garde. It needs to jam, and see what comes out in the wash. Just as "the provocation of polemic has become necessary to release and redirect [the desire for instrumentalism]" (*Contra Instrumentalism*, 39), so a radical artistic and intellectual push is needed in the world of translation to show the world the possibilities of the form, or the mode ("Übersetzung ist eine Form," says Walter Benjamin (9), in glorious opacity) and, like all good avant-gardes, to effect a shift in the parameters of the mainstream in its wake. We translators need to take ourselves seriously – more seriously – as intellectuals, as highly trained readers, and as artists. And I believe there are models for this out there, artists and intellectuals who are pushing the boundaries of what translation can be.

Back in 2000, Clive Scott, who is now retired from his professorship at the University of East Anglia, wrote the following:

Much continues to be said, and with justification, about the translator's lack of literary credibility, about the translator's invisibility, about the impossibility of any translation worth the name. All these symptoms of a condemned condition can, however, be turned around, if we are prepared to change our expectations and our prejudices. The translator must be allowed to take possession of his/her work, even if this involves textual intrusions—why has translation been for so long blighted with 'La note en bas de page est la honte du traducteur' [The footnote is the translator's humiliation] (Aury in Mounin 1963:xi)?—and creating new settings for translations (translations as part of a diary of reading, translation as an inbuilt supplement to literary criticism, translation as the destination of a creative meditation).<sup>8</sup>

I found then, and still find, the idea of "new settings for translations" incredibly exciting, and I have tried and am still trying to think through the implications of Scott's

“manifesto” for my own work. Scott has gone on to develop his ideas about translation in a number of books, his output becoming even more prolific with retirement from active teaching. *Translating Baudelaire*, the book in which Scott first began to experiment with translation’s possibilities, has been followed by *Translating Rimbaud’s Illuminations*,<sup>9</sup> *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading*,<sup>10</sup> *Translating the Perception of Text: Literary Translation and Phenomenology*,<sup>11</sup> *Translating Apollinaire*,<sup>12</sup> and most recently by *The Work of Literary Translation*.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of these books, Scott has put forward a number of controversial – avant-garde – ideas, many of which stem from the radical principle that translation should not (necessarily, primarily, or in all circumstances) be carried out for the “ignorant reader,” i.e. for the reader who does not have linguistic access to the source text. Rather, in Scott’s vision, translation is carried out for the reader who *is* able to read the source text alongside the translator’s version or versions. The translator is not, however, asking this knowledgeable reader to judge the translator’s success in “accurately,” “lyrically,” or “faithfully” rendering the source text. This is *not* an instrumental translation project (in the sense that Venuti uses the term instrumental) since for Scott post-structuralism has of course long since deconstructed the notion of textual essence. Rather the reader is asked to consider the nature of the artistic and intellectual project, to try to understand what it is the translator is doing, their hermeneutic moves, their subjective engagement with the text.

This simple but radical move, which extracts translation from the realm of the “documentary,” i.e. the need to give an account of the source text for the reader who cannot access it, paves the way for other moves.<sup>14</sup> In removing the commonly accepted *raison d’être* of interlingual translation as a linguistic service to those who cannot access the text in its original language, Scott blurs the lines between interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic translation, as famously delineated by Jakobsen.<sup>15</sup> Suddenly translation can be much more than a journey from one language and culture into another, the transformation of one text into another. Suddenly translation has material possibilities other than the conventionally observed and neatly typed line at its disposal, and these can include the exploitation of font, colour, page layout, photography, collage, doodling, sound, multiplicity (versions rather than a version) and intermedial (rather than strictly intersemiotic) shifts. If there is no longer a need to serve the ignorant reader, there can be space for autobiographical input and for the phenomenology of reading to find their way into translation, for the translator to experiment. Yes, on the one hand this seems outré, like Albert Ayler’s free jazz, and like all avant-gardism it can be accused of being elitist, but Scott is not proposing a wholesale takeover of translation as the humanist project that it is generally understood and will continue to be. And what could be more elitist than presuming to know what will appeal to a certain section of society with a certain educational level. Scott’s is an experimental model, a pushing at the boundaries, a seeing where we might go, where translation might take us if we give it space to breathe. It will not erase all other forms of translation.

There are others, influenced by Scott, who are doing much to expand translation’s horizons. Manuela Perteghella and Eugenia Loffredo, whose edited volume *One Poem in*

*Search of a Translator: Rewriting ‘Les Fenêtres’ by Apollinaire*<sup>16</sup> is part of the “creative turn” that emerged from literary translation studies at the University of East Anglia in the 2000s,<sup>17</sup> curated a ground-breaking 2017 exhibition entitled *transARTation*<sup>18</sup> with Anna Milsom, funded by Arts Council England. The exhibition featured works of art and projects including one entitled “Translation Games” that was conceptualised by Ricarda Vidal and Maria-José Blanco. For “Translation Games,” a poem by Denise Riley, “Still,” was translated into twelve different images by twelve different artists, each image being created as a response to the previous image, rather than to the source text. The final image in the chain was then translated back into poetry, with these poems being solicited via a public competition. The visual and textual translations produced during the “Translation Games” project were collected in a book that formed part of the *transARTation* exhibition. *transARTation* also featured photographs, objects, and videos of conceptual art events and performances, such as a recording of artist Heather Connelly’s 2016 polylingual project that involved participants from different language communities performing experimental sound scores in different locations around the Library of Birmingham. *transARTation*, which exhibited in both Norwich and St. Andrew’s, was accompanied by workshops, performances and artists’ talks, giving artists, translators and the public an opportunity “to be involved with translation in all its dimensions.”<sup>19</sup>

Manuela Perteghella continues to carve out a unique role for herself as translator-artist-activist-curator, going on to curate a further Arts Council-funded translation project, *Talking Transformations*, with Ricarda Vidal.<sup>20</sup> In this conceptual response to the cultural crisis of Brexit, an English- and a Polish-language poem were sent on translational journeys around Europe, moving into other languages but also into film form before returning, transformed, to their points of origin. The project featured translation workshops and exhibitions, including a pop-up exhibition at Tate Exchange, and forms the basis of an anthology, *Home on the Move* (2019). *transARTation* and *Talking Transformations* open up the subjective, hermeneutic, artistic modalities of translation for the general public in a ground-breaking manner. Their “challeng[e] [to] the idea of artistic compartmentalisation” (*transARTation*) echoes Scott’s call for “new settings for translations.”

## **2. If this isn’t Jazz it will have to do, until the real thing comes along OR How not to get your Knausgård in a twist**

A few years ago, a colleague witnessed an intellectual altercation at an academic conference which they related to me afterwards with fascination. An English-speaking academic was giving a paper that focussed on Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård’s *Min kamp* [My Struggle], his bestselling six-volume autobiographical series. A particular argument in the academic’s paper hinged on linguistic evidence taken from the English translation; the Scandinavian-language specialists in the room soon pointed out to the speaker that the words upon which the argument in question pivoted were not

present in – were in fact completely absent from – the Norwegian source text, and that the argument was therefore null and void. I imagine that this was an awkward moment for the person in question. My initial thoughts upon hearing this anecdote were that the speaker should have known better. Close reading of a translated text has to be approached with caution – not suspicion or rejection, but caution. The failure to realize that the translated text cannot be confused with the source text displays a staggering lack of sophistication, particularly coming from somebody who is a professional reader. But as I thought about this incident more, I realized that the smart thing to do, in the face of criticism from specialist readers with access to the source text, would be to fully embrace one's misreading, which is not a mis-reading at all but a reading of the translator's interpretation of Knausgård's text, a reading of one particular passage against the background of a wider interpretation: in this case the interpretation by translator Don Bartlett that is inscribed in the full text.

There is undoubtedly a tension here, and it is one that I have noticed in my own thinking. In 2016, I gave a paper at the University of Birmingham in which I reflected upon the English-speaking world's reception of Elena Ferrante between 2013, when critic James Wood's *New Yorker* article "Women on the Verge," which is generally credited with kickstarting the Ferrante craze, appeared, and 2016, when Ann Goldstein's translation of Ferrante's *The Story of the Lost Child* was shortlisted for the Man Booker International.<sup>21</sup> I had noticed that reviewers of Ferrante in the UK and North America struggled both to categorize her books in terms of genre and to contextualize their feminism. Where the latter was concerned, reviewers could only situate the novels' feminism in terms of its similarities and differences to the Anglo-American and French traditions, those feminisms with which the English-speaking world is most familiar; only rarely did a critic think to wonder about the Italian tradition. And on the genre front, reviewers looked to established models that were either drawn from a common European literary heritage or that were historically tied to a particular nation – the epic, the Bildungsroman, the soap, the realist novel, auto-fiction. Nobody paused to consider if there might be anything specifically Italian about the Neapolitan Quartet and its stand-alone predecessors. I felt that this was problematic, but upon reflection I think that one has to be able to read Ferrante's novels-in-translation – and for that matter, any text-in-translation – in several ways: as cultural artefacts that grow out of a certain context (national, temporal, socio-cultural) and that need to be comprehended in terms of that context – a context that is generally more difficult for readers of a translation to access – but also as cultural artefacts that speak to the contemporary context of the reader, that address our own concerns and desires, literary and other, and that are the result of a translator's interpretation. It has to be possible to read one way, both ways, or to pursue a mixture of the two. But we have to know which context(s) we are reading for, and to recognize that there might be limits on our ability to access the source context; to accept that certain kinds of statements cannot be made on the basis of a reading-in-translation. While I don't want to discount the fact that journalist Rachel Donadio, who stated of Ferrante that she is "the most powerful and enigmatic writer to emerge from contemporary Italy," might have an excellent knowledge of the contemporary Italian literary scene, this statement is fairly typical of the unsubstantiated hyperbole that one

encounters elsewhere in reviews of translated books.<sup>22</sup> The fact is that most half-way educated English-language readers would be hard pressed to name an Italian writer other than Dante, Umberto Eco and the author – what’s his name again? – of the Montalbano novels (the late, great Andrea Camilleri). What is available to us in English translation is hardly an accurate representation of the Italian national bookshelf.

Poor reviewing of translations – which is predicated on not knowing how to read translations – is a major problem and one that several of my colleagues, Lawrence Venuti among them, have persuasively addressed in the past.<sup>23</sup> I don’t know how we would go about re-educating the current crop of reviewers, but I do think we can make a start on the next generation of critics, artists and intellectuals by improving translation literacy at universities. At the University of Warwick in the UK, I teach a one-semester module for second- and third-year undergraduates studying English Literature called “How to Read a Translation.” The title is of course borrowed from Lawrence Venuti’s essay of the same name.<sup>24</sup> No knowledge of a language other than English is required, even if in practice many of the students who elect to take this course are pursuing a joint honors degree that involves a modern language. Here is the blurb from the module’s webpage:

If you are an undergraduate in English & Comparative Literary Studies at Warwick, then by the time you reach your second year, you will already have read a wealth of literature in translation, from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (translated over the centuries by everybody from philologists to poets) to Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (translated from Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies). In “How to Read a Translation,” we will delve into the issues surrounding the reading of translated literary and intellectual texts. How does reading a translated text differ from reading a text that was originally written in English? Why does nobody ever remember the translator’s name? How and why do the differences between multiple translations of the same foreign text come into being? How can we construct a literary critical argument on the basis of an unstable text composed by two authors: a writer and a translator? What are the effects of translation on texts, readers, languages and cultures? And finally, we often hear that something has been “lost in translation,” but can the act of translation be viewed more positively, as a process of gain? We will explore all this and more through a series of case studies of translated texts drawn from a variety of genres, time periods, source cultures and languages, and through two hands-on translation workshops.<sup>25</sup>

Over the course of nine weeks, students consider theoretical arguments about the nature of the translated text, look at controversies such as that surrounding H.M. Parshley’s translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and consider how this translation has affected de Beauvoir’s reception in the English-speaking world. They also practice close reading of the opening of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* in various translations and think about what kind of English or American child Emil Kästner’s Emil has become. Crucially, they participate in two hands-on translation workshops in which several short, usually German-language (since this is my primary foreign

language) poems are presented in glossed form alongside existing translations. I talk to the students about how I, and others, view the challenges of the source texts, where their instabilities and points of resistance lie, and how translators have interpreted these. On the basis of this discussion and working from the glosses and translations provided, the students produce their own English-language translations which we then workshop together in class. I include this element because I believe that students have to experience the process of translation for themselves in order to gain a fuller understanding of what is involved and what is at stake.

There are many ways to teach a course such as this. It could be adapted for students of history or philosophy, or for creative writers. Students of modern languages would also benefit (which modern languages student has not read a text in translation for efficiency's sake and based an essay on their reading?). Any number of discipline- or area-relevant texts could be employed to help students hone their translation reading skills and to illustrate the theoretical issues under debate. This training in translation literacy would, ideally, be a compulsory part of a liberal arts or humanities education, influencing tomorrow's book reviewers and bloggers so that in ten or twenty years the tired statements and proverbs that Lawrence Venuti rails against in his polemic will hopefully meet with an equally tired groan.

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In "If This Isn't Jazz," Patricia Barber offers a witty Chicago response to New York jazz critics' high-handed dismissal of her contribution to the form: "If this isn't Jazz it will have to do, until the real thing comes along."<sup>26</sup> Translations are, for most of us, most of the time, what we have to work with. By "have to," I do not wish to imply inadequacy but simply to mark access. *If this isn't Literature it will have to do, until the real thing comes along.* We should properly engage with this form – or this mode – and as practitioners, we should also push its limits. Translation, like jazz, should have room for improvisation, deconstruction, experimentation. Let's listen, and jam, and see what comes out in the wash. The more people who know how to listen, the more exciting the translational form will become.



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- <sup>1</sup> Maureen Freely and Chantal Wright, “Translators are the jazz musicians of the literary world: Translating Pamuk, literary translation networks and the changing face of the profession,” *The Translator*, 23, no. 1 (2017): 95 – 105 (101).
- <sup>2</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 177. All further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” in *Gesammelte Schriften IV.I.*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 18. All further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>4</sup> See Chantal Wright, *The Age of Translation: A Commentary on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”* by Antoine Berman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 181.
- <sup>5</sup> Norman Shapiro, as cited by Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Jean Boase-Beier, *A Critical Introduction to Translation Studies* (London: Continuum, 2011), 80.
- <sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l’autre ou la prothèse de l’origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 103.
- <sup>8</sup> Clive Scott, *Translating Baudelaire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Clive Scott, *Translating Rimbaud’s Illuminations* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006).
- <sup>10</sup> Clive Scott, *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- <sup>11</sup> Clive Scott, *Translating the Perception of Text: Literary Translation and Phenomenology* (London: Legenda/MHRA/Maney, 2012).
- <sup>12</sup> Clive Scott, *Translating Apollinaire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2014).
- <sup>13</sup> Clive Scott, *The Work of Literary Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- <sup>14</sup> On the nature of documentary translation, see Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997), 46-48.
- <sup>15</sup> Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959), in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Lawrence Venuti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 127.
- <sup>16</sup> Manuela Perteghella and Eugenia Loffredo, eds., *One Poem in Search of a Translator: Rewriting “Les Fenêtres” by Apollinaire* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).
- <sup>17</sup> Clive Scott’s graduate seminar at UEA, entitled “Process and Product in Translation,” was instrumental here in inspiring a generation of students and practitioners. The term ‘creative turn’ was coined by Paschalis Nikolaou, a UEA alumnus, in “Notes on Translating the Self,” in *Translation and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies*, eds. Manuela Perteghella and Eugenia Loffredo (London: Continuum, 2007): 19 – 32 (19).
- <sup>18</sup> Virtual tours of the *transARTation* exhibits are available at the exhibition’s website: [www.transartation.co.uk](http://www.transartation.co.uk); accessed 16 October 2019.
- <sup>19</sup> <http://transartation.co.uk/about/>; accessed 16 October 2019. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>20</sup> Images and sound recordings from the different phases of *Talking Transformations* are available at the project’s website: <http://www.talkingtransformations.eu/>; accessed 16 October 2019.

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<sup>21</sup> James Wood, “Women on the Verge,” *The New Yorker*, 21 Jan. 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Rachel Donadio, “Italy’s Great, Mysterious Storyteller,” *New York Review of Books*, 18 Dec. 2014.

<sup>23</sup> See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995) and *The Scandals of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1998); Esther Allen, “Lost in the Book Review,” *In Other Words*, 44 (2014): 26 – 33.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “How to Read a Translation” in *Translation Changes Everything* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 109 – 115.

<sup>25</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/howtoreadatranslation/>; accessed 16 October 2019.

<sup>26</sup> <http://patriciabarber.com/ARCHIVE/lyrics/lyrics/companion-iftthisisntjazz.htm>; accessed 16 October 2019.