The hard question is this: Are some translations better than others? People certainly seem to think so – at least in the world of publishing, reviewing, and prize-giving. In the UK, the British Comparative Literature Association runs the John Dryden Competition to honor particularly deserving translation achievements. In Stockholm, the international literary prize of Kulturhuset Stadsteatern goes both to the writer of the book and its Swedish translator. And in almost any review of a published literary translation, there will be some comment – however brief or poorly motivated – on the merits of the translation.

Beyond the confines of the academic world, then, there is a general consensus that it is possible to assess the quality of a translation. This consensus is vague and often common-sensical, but it is there. Translation scholars, however, tend be more agnostic on the issue. Often with good reason: the rise of translation studies, which began in the 1970s and 1980s, occurred when the field turned from a previous prescriptive tendency to a descriptive paradigm, succinctly summarised in Gideon Toury’s assertion that “translations are facts of target cultures.”¹ Instead of the naivety of earlier fault-finding translation criticism, DTS (descriptive translation studies) coolly asserted that there is no such thing as a correct translation – there are just translations, in the plural, that employ a number of different strategies to make the translation acceptable (or not) in its target context.

The general wisdom of this approach is beyond debate. Paying attention to literary translation – as I found when I first engaged with DTS some twelve or thirteen years ago – gives the lie to claims of literary autonomy. Embedded in language, consisting of language, literary texts are completely dependent on their contingent sociolinguistic conditions of reception. And as time passes, the greatness of, say, a Shakespeare, a Cervantes, or a Dante, becomes increasingly reliant on an elaborate network of institutions to make this greatness perceptible to new generations – even in their “own” linguistic environments. Chaucer needs to be rewritten in standard English for contemporary students. The source text of Beowulf is completely inaccessible to the non-specialist English reader today.

Lawrence Venuti’s bracing polemic Contra Instrumentalism is written entirely in the spirit of such a contextual understanding of translation. Dismissing thoroughly and completely what he calls the “instrumental” model of translation, which assumes that
the source text is a semantic invariant that can be transposed to a target language, he opts instead for what he calls the “hermeneutic” model. The gist of this idea is evident already in his manifesto-like introductory statements:

STOP assuming that translation is a mechanical substitution.
START conceiving of it as an interpretation that demands writerly and intellectual sophistication.

STOP evaluating translations merely by comparing them to the source text.
START examining their relations to the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving culture.

STOP asserting that any text is untranslatable.
START realizing that every text is translatable because every text can be interpreted.2

As I’ve just argued, of course, scholars in DTS – Venuti among them – already started doing this quite some ago. Venuti’s book can therefore be read less as a fresh start than as a summation and synthesis of insights that have accumulated over the last few decades. Indeed, he even acknowledges that the instrumental and hermeneutic models have co-existed for quite some time – at least since the German romantics. What he does, however, is to rhetorically dramatize the difference between the two models, and what he sees as the confusion of the two also among well-regarded commentators. Indeed, as a “polemic,” Contra Instrumentalism documents a long trail of disagreements Venuti has with colleagues in both comparative literature and translation studies. Some of his attacks seem wide of the mark, such as the dismissal of Jahan Ramazani’s A Transnational Poetics for its perpetuation of “the aggressive monolingualism of the U. S. academy”3 – although Ramazani certainly makes no secret that his field of competence happens to be English-language poetry (and he has, moreover, branched out into other languages).4 It seems back-to-front to blame the structural dominance of English on such a sensitive and innovative reader of poetry. Other criticisms, however, such as Venuti’s close and careful scrutiny of Barbara Cassin’s and Emily Apter’s “untranslatables” reach their target. Intriguingly, Venuti’s instrumental/hermeneutic binary also leads to a number of rebuttals of people working within translation studies proper, such as Jan Pedersen, Brian Mossop, and even André Lefevere, one of the most respected scholars in the early phase of DTS in the 1980s and 1990s.

The slightly abrasive rhetorical stance notwithstanding, I am in wholehearted agreement with most of the premises of Venuti’s argument. Semantic invariance is a mirage. Translation commentary is still bogged down with clichés. Studying translation requires not less but more linguistic competence (this point is directed at comp lit colleagues in the USA). But the very fact that Venuti detects instrumentalism everywhere, even among experienced translation scholars, makes me suspect that the instrumental/hermeneutic binary might not be as useful as it first seems.5

This brings me back to the problem of evaluation. The word figures in the manifesto that I quote above, yet Venuti often seems to foreclose on the issue. If I read him correctly, Lefevere was simply wrong to censure Brecht’s early American translators for sloppy rhymes and misreadings. This despite the fact that Lefevere, in that delightful essay on Brecht, ultimately argued that it was those early American translations that made Brecht acceptable in the USA and paved the way for later and – yes – better translations.6

But raising the question of quality in translation confronts us with an aporia, at least if we are hermeneutically inclined. To simply say it “all depends” can, taken to its logical conclusion, devolve into a sheer anything-goes position. But to resist such relativism will inevitably force us back to the source text – which, supposedly, is an instrumentalist position. No matter how diligently we examine translations’ “relations to the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving culture,” the source text remains an inescapable point of reference and orientation.7 But we need to ask ourselves what this inescapability consists of. Rather than just using Foucauldian archaeology, which is Venuti’s chosen theoretical framework, it seems necessary to supplement the discussion with a medium-specific theory of textuality.

Let us begin with “text.” A textual anthropologist such as Karin Barber very usefully defines textuality in terms of citability. Texts, she writes, are “detachable from the flow of conversation” and “accorded a kind of independent and privileged existence.”8 The interesting point here is that Barber’s primary focus is on oral cultures, not print. Drawing on Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, she thereby sees oral cultures engaging in entextualisation where “instances of discourse […] are made available for repetition or recreation in other contexts” – notably, but not only, as proverbs, a form which Venuti in fact discusses. This process obviously bears comparison with entextualisation in script, print or digital media. But conversely, Jerome McGann taught us years ago that the “textual condition” is in fact a changeable one. “As the process of textual transmission expands,” he writes, “the signifying processes of the work become increasingly collaborative and socialized.”9 Interestingly, Barber and McGann seem to be on the same page here (no pun intended), even though they approach the problem of textuality from the vantage points of two different media, speech, and print. Both negotiate conceptually between fixity and fluidity rather than erect a straightforward binary. To use Venuti’s terms, it seems then that “invariance” must be acknowledged – not as an absolute but as one enabling aspect of textuality.

If we add a media-historical dimension to this theoretical perspective, it becomes clear that the emergence of print technology dramatically reinforced the invariance aspect of texts. The mass-reproduction of texts as identical material things created an extremely powerful effect of invariance, making texts more detachable across time and space than through orality, and more laterally distributable than through script. If pre-Gutenberg notions of invariance could depend on notions of divine inspiration – as in the legend of the 72 Alexandrine translators of the Septuagint who independently produced identical versions of the text – print culture replaced God with another trinity: the impersonal authority of the machine, the individualist author function, and the abstraction of
commodification. It is this, I claim, that more than anything underwrites our continuing problems with the instrumental model of translation. But it also means, conversely, that the model is part of our cultural condition.

To put it in the strongest of terms, “literature,” as it is published, copyrighted, received, and conceived in the modern era, always assumes a general invariance effect. Abandoning that effect entirely would mean to abandon literary culture. In other words, we – Venuti included – participate in a literary regime which is oriented towards invariance, even though we know that context will always disallow full invariance. Instead of trying to stamp out every trace of this orientation by denouncing it as “instrumentalism,” it makes more sense to consider it as one historically contingent factor in the translation equation. To avoid reverting to simplistic notions of invariance, however, McGann’s critique of “textual idealism” distinguishes usefully between the linguistic and bibliographic codes that together constitute print texts. He sees this, intriguingly, in terms of a distribution of authority:

So far as editors are concerned, the chief (but not sole) authority over the linguistic text is the author, whereas the chief (but not sole) authority over the bibliographical text normally falls to the publishing institution within which an author is working.¹⁰

One could play around with this in relation to translation. For instance:

So far as translators are concerned, the chief (but not sole) authority over the linguistic source text is the author, whereas the chief (but not sole) authority over the bibliographical target text normally falls to the publishing institution within which a translator is working.

Or like this:

So far as publishers of translations are concerned, the chief (but not sole) authority over the linguistic target text is the translator, whereas the chief (but not sole) authority over the bibliographical target text normally falls to the author name behind which the translator is working.

Highlighting the network, hierarchy, and distribution of agency in the production of translations in this way seems to me to be fully in the spirit of Venuti’s hermeneutic desire. But riffing on McGann’s distinction between codes has the added advantage that it accommodates the orientation towards invariance rather than writes it out of the picture. By doing so, it might possibly also allow for quality in translation to be discussed more openly also in the academic world.

I say this partly based on my own limited experience as translator. A few years back, the philosopher Marcia Schuback and I translated Primeiras estórias (1962), a collection of short stories by the Brazilian modernist João Guimarães Rosa, into Swedish. This version, published in 2018 under the title Förberättelser, turned out to be one of the

hardest things I have ever done, not least because Rosa’s style is challenging also to Brazilian readers and consistently invites multiple interpretations. The hermeneutic task was therefore constantly at the forefront of our collaborative work, first in the reading of the source text and secondly in the writing of the Swedish version. Even more to the point, we found that writing the target text was, in itself, an act of interpretation. When performing that labour, it was certainly clear to us that we were responsible for the linguistic code of the translation. Importantly, that sense of responsibility had dual vectors: it was directed both towards the source stories that we returned to so obsessively, and towards the independent integrity of the stories as texts in Swedish.

“That we returned to”: but to what does one return to if everything, in the hermeneutic river, is fluid? Let us be very empirical and literal: we returned to the unchanging linguistic code of Primeiras estórias. The interpretation of that code is not unchanging, and the target text underwent numerous, sometimes dramatic changes as we pushed ahead, but that does not in any way contradict the invariance of the source text’s linguistic code. We could of course hypothesise that different editions of Primeiras estórias presented such significant differences in the bibliographic code that it unsettled this basic invariance. We could even imagine a completely different media regime under which Rosa’s stories were delivered orally and then memorised, which would have made it impossible to return with any certainty to an externally fixed linguistic code. But none of this applied in our case, nor, I daresay, in the absolute majority of translation endeavors. Instead our sense of the quality of our efforts — highly variable throughout the project — was generated through this persistent return to the linguistic source code, a return which was firmly inscribed in the hermeneutic circle.

The invariance of the linguistic code, understood as the raw material of what later becomes the translation, can be described as an “interpretant,” to use Venuti’s terminology.11 It is one of the conditions under which translation is performed in our day and age. There are of course other circumstances where invariance does not apply in the same way. In the case of subtitling, the topic of one of Venuti’s chapters, it is significantly weakened, since spoken language (even when recorded) lacks the spatial objectification operative in print.

What I’m suggesting is certainly not that the source text should be “the sole justification for a particular translation.”12 But to see it as an inescapable justification is not the same as saying that it is the only justification. Translation is a particularly dramatic event in the textual condition of a literary work. If, as McGann acutely observed, different editions in the same language will always produce changes in the bibliographic code, translation rewrites the linguistic code completely. Understanding and assessing this transformation will at some point need to engage with the linguistic code of the source text. The theory and practice of such assessment can certainly still improve, which is one of Venuti’s concerns. But it can’t do so without acknowledging source-text invariance, not in terms of signification but on the level of linguistic code, as a key factor in the translational exchange.

1 Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995), 29.

2 Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), ix-x.


4 See Ramazani, “Persian Poetry.”

5 A separate but minor quibble I have concerns Venuti’s use of the term “hermenutic.” As his reliance on Foucault and Derrida shows, he is really furthering a poststructuralist approach. In my book, “hemeneutic” retains a minimal faith in individual subjecthood and would require an engagement with Gadamer (whom Venuti dismisses) and Ricoeur (whom he mentions in passing).


7 Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*, x.


12 Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*, 18.