



## Academic Business as Usual: A Reply to My Critics

Lawrence Venuti

Lawrence Venuti, "Academic Business as Usual: A Reply to My Critics" (2023), pp. 46-52.

To read through the “counter-provocations” to *Contra Instrumentalism*, each statement bristling with criticisms, is a bracing experience. But it is also somewhat discouraging to see that, among the respondents, my book has not provoked reactions that would develop in some productive direction the project I was trying to formulate. If my respondents had evaluated the book for a university press and I revised it to incorporate their responses, it would certainly have been much stronger as a work of scholarship. The genre would have been quite different, less polemical, less abrasive in attempting to change thinking about translation and more committed to exhaustive, even-handed research, more balanced in its criticisms and less theoretical in its pronouncements, less hit-and-run in singling out targets. Genre aside, the counter-provocations reinstate certain orthodoxies (the invariant, untranslatability, the creative writing model) that stray from my main project: to foster a hermeneutic approach to translation, in theory, history, and practice, where the aim is to illuminate the translator’s inscription of an interpretation and to articulate it with increasing precision.

At the start of the new millennium, as the fledgling field of translation studies was burgeoning worldwide in academic institutions across a range of fields and disciplines, research into translation came to be dominated by cultural studies, sociologically oriented and often devolving into ideological critique and political activism amid globalized technological developments, notably the internet. I grew interested in more fundamental issues of interpretation, mostly as a form of semiosis that is second-order, taking a prior semiosis as its object or point of departure. This line of inquiry was also a means of exploring translation in different media where critical discourses were riddled with metaphorical but largely unexamined uses of the term “translation,” particularly in connection with film adaptation and ekphrasis.<sup>1</sup> I decided to construe as a hermeneutic process the relations between different levels or orders of signification in cultural objects and practices, insofar as any such distinctions among levels or orders can be drawn.

This project was a bid to raise the cultural and institutional status of translation by casting it as both scholarly and creative, as a practice that deployed performative uses of the translating language to develop and inscribe an interpretation that is relatively autonomous from the source material being interpreted. I mean “performative” in the Austinian sense to describe language use that performs an action, such as interpreting a text (which Austin defines as an “expositive” action, “the clarifying of reasons, arguments, and communications”), while taking into account Derrida’s concept of “iterability” as the change in meaning that occurs when language is used in a different context.<sup>2</sup> Thus a translator makes verbal choices that interpret the source text in a different language, bringing into existence a second text that changes the form, meaning, and effect of the first text but is received as indistinguishable from it. A translation creates the source text for readers who cannot read the source language and for whom it would otherwise not exist except in farther removed accounts.

The turn to interpretation was also an effort to galvanize the current state of translation discourse, both in and outside of the academy, to make it more sophisticated and compelling by formulating conceptual tools to analyze translation theory and commentary as well as translation practice. The aim was to introduce new ways of talking about and doing translation so as to advance it in the face of trends and debates—the orthodoxies—that keep it back, in my view, maintaining its marginality, its incomprehension and neglect, its exploitation. A hermeneutic approach is a contingent formulation, derived from defects and limitations located in dominant discourses on translation, entirely provisional, although an alternate approach that might be equally forward-looking currently remains unthought.

What has come to interest me most about translation are those moments when or where a verbal choice transforms into an interpretive move. At what point do detailed descriptions of the source text—careful accounts of source-text “invariants” (“linguistic codes” for Stefan Helgesson, “the text itself” for Lisa Foran)—set going a discursive procedure that is properly called interpretation and therefore subjected to endless variation?<sup>3</sup> How does a word, phrase, or sentence in the translation, selected to establish an equivalence to a corresponding feature of the source text, simultaneously constitute the various forms, meanings, and effects of that text in a different language and culture? The very same language that goes under the title of the source text eventually comes to support multiple and conflicting interpretations for diverse and disparate readerships, some interpretations inscribed in translations, others articulated in commentary. but all bearing a resemblance to the meaning and style of the source text.

Consider any text that has achieved canonicity in some linguistic and cultural community, a text that may be sacred or secular, literary or more broadly humanistic in genre and discourse, and that, because canonicity licenses interpretation, has given rise to histories of reception disseminating through institutions with their own forms and practices of regulation, extending for decades, centuries, millennia. The stream of significant variations in interpreting and translating a text belies any notion of accuracy couched in terms like “semantic correspondence” and “stylistic approximation,” although from time immemorial translators have predominantly sought to establish these kinds of equivalence to the source text and still do so on this planet. It seems useless to isolate a moment in the translation process or a point in the translated text at which the inscription is made; there’s just the resulting translation, an always-already-interpreted source text. The translator’s interpretation—if it is inscribed with any consistency, whether deliberately or unconsciously—is noticed and articulated after the fact, after the translator has done it and some reader has perceived it. If this reader can understand only the translating language and not the source-text language, then the translation, the interpretation that it inscribes, as well as its reception in different media, take the place of the source text for that reader (pace V. Joshua Adams).<sup>4</sup> This displacement doesn’t annihilate the source text, of course, which continues to exist in the vagaries of its circulation. But the translation has irreparably conditioned the understanding of that text for the reader who can’t read it.

The basic notion of translation as the reproduction of a source-text invariant can be found everywhere, in documents since antiquity, unfolding around the world in varying redefinitions. It moves from Cicero and Zhi Qian to Jerome and Dao’an to Dryden and D’Alembert and Tytler. A hermeneutic approach emerges rather late, in the eighteenth century, and since then it too has offered a series of competing and dissenting concepts of translation, conceiving it primarily as variable inscription, although often with a residual instrumentalism. From Schleiermacher to Heidegger to Derrida with Pound, Borges, and Lu Xun. When read with these epistemic traditions in mind, a particular document in the history of translation theory and commentary can disclose contradictions at different discursive levels (concepts, arguments, cases), symptomatic of different models of translation. This should come as no surprise: instrumentalism is likely to be underwritten—as Helgesson incisively remarks—by a contradictory variety of metaphysical and material bases.

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.<sup>5</sup>

We haven't yet moved past the notion of invariance in translation, although today the theoretical frameworks that support it can turn out to be such unlikely discourses as poststructuralism. What lies on the other side of the mirror?

The translator's desire is easy enough to find in the shifting signifying process of a translation, floating among competing interpretations of the source text.<sup>6</sup> With the scholarly commentator, desire is apparent in the jargon. We want so much to respect ("capture," "preserve," "retain," "reproduce," "transfer") the invariants of the source text. But we acknowledge we finally can't realize that kind of respect, so we turn the invariants into "untranslatables" like Derrida's homonyms or Barbara Cassin's philosophical terms. The invariant is irreducible, whether defined as linguistic code or the text itself, but it is never unmediated. Something can only be untranslatable on the basis of a concept of translation, one that can't deal with the structural differences between languages and therefore dreams of one-to-one replicas that always lay out of reach, like the "singularity" of literature.<sup>7</sup> Untranslatability ironically admits continual translation—you can't stop (not) translating, says Cassin—but it is likely to treat the translator's inscription as "loss," "distortion" or "misinterpretation," repressing it with the fear that the translation is not true—"truth," however, defined as an essentialism, either an empiricist adequacy to the reality of the source text (Locke) or a phenomenological manifestation of its being (Heidegger). Those transformative moments, the when or where of the translator's inscription, form the ground of value in a translation, gauged according to the impact of its interpretation in a particular institutional field. The crucial question then becomes: How much of an appreciable difference does a translation make in relation to or against prevailing values in the translating culture?

The value of a translation hinges on how it jazzes the handling of source material, as Chantal Wright (and Maureen Freely) might say, taken with the improvisatory exuberance of translating.<sup>8</sup> Even jazz on street corners is caught in a relation to an institution, however, so that the significance of the translator's improvisation is always enabled and delimited by a cultural field. Translations should be assessed against previous translations from the language and literature of the source text, to start with, as well as in relation to the current literary scene in the translating language. Readers normally read translations against what is accessible to them, the literary traditions and currents in a language they can read. The idea is to read translations against other

images of the source language and culture, other translations of its literature and arts, other interpretations.

A translation project can be conservative in reinforcing familiar readings of the source literature that have become stereotypical through patterns of reception. Or, insofar as translation trafficks in linguistic and cultural differences, the translator's work can marshal them to question the status quo, foregrounding new and unexpected aspects of the source literature which have so far been suppressed or excluded. If the aim is to produce a compelling translation of a work that a reader can access only through the translating language and culture, the means to achieve it are basically twofold: first, select a distinctive source text that enriches what has already been translated from the source language and, second, inscribe an interpretation that is innovative yet not arbitrary, that is noticeable against the backdrop of previous translations but establishes its necessity in terms of the meaning and style of the text it translates.

A retranslation raises these interpretive stakes. The translator must also take into account previous versions of the source text, which now compete against the new translation for the reader's attention. Some translators today studiously avoid any examination of their predecessors' work, at least at the beginning. But a retranslation needs to justify its very existence, at some point, although the most effective justification can only assume the form of a fresh interpretation. The most strategic intervention is to challenge the interpretive moves through which a previous version acquired cultural authority, the discursive strategies that facilitated its acceptance as the right or true version of the source text or even—for many readers—as that very text itself. Because an authoritative translation has effectively attained the status of a literary institution, setting standards by which retranslations are evaluated, the translator might further ask whether the authority of an interpretation derives from its validation of dominant values in the receiving situation. To what extent does it exclude values that remain marginal but can nonetheless result in a striking retranslation, presenting a different understanding of the source text?

I have been thinking about this axiology of translation as I retranslate the modern Italian writer Dino Buzzati (1906-1972) for New York Review Books. I recently produced a new version of Buzzati's most famous work, the novel *Il deserto dei Tartari* (1940), long known in Stuart Hood's English translation as *The Tartar Steppe* (1952), now available in mine as *The Stronghold* (2023). My engagement with Hood's version became a conflict of interpretations: I had to manage his complicity with the prevalent reading of the novel as an allegory of existentialist humanism, although heavily inflected by the Cold War (as well as by the translator's own WWII experiences with the Italian

partisans).<sup>9</sup> I countered by historicizing, tapping into Italian histories of dissent under the Fascist regime, specifically Milanese intellectuals affiliated with the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, where Buzzati worked as a journalist and wrote the novel in the 1930s. I wanted to bring out the critique of Fascist nationalism in the Italian text, how it subtly questions the ideology of heroic militarism and the cult of virility—the political unconscious of an Italian middlebrow writing of soldiers trapped by their futile hope of military glory. Will this interpretation fly among anglophone readers now, particularly those who know (and cherish) Hood’s version? Twitter’s already grumbling about the change in title.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “Adaptation, Translation, Critique.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6.1 (2007), pp. 25-43, and “Translation Trebled: Ernest Farrés’s *Edward Hopper* in English,” in *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 209-229.

<sup>2</sup> See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 6, 8, and Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 320. Cf. the comments on translation as a performative in my essay, “Translation, Interpretation, Canon Formation,” in *Translation and the Classic: Identity as Change in the History of Culture*, ed. Alessandra Lianeri and Vanda Zajko (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Helgesson, “The Invariance Effect: A Response to Lawrence Venuti,” *Provocations* 4 (2020), p. 15; Lisa Foran, “Where is your desire?,” *Provocations* 4 (2020), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> V. Joshua Adams, “Contra Polemic: A Response to Lawrence Venuti,” *Provocations* 4 (2020), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Helgesson, “The Invariance Effect,” pp. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> For the translator’s desire, see, for example, “The difference that translation makes: the translator’s unconscious” (2002), rpt. in *Translation Changes Everything*, pp. 32-

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56, and “Genealogies of Translation Theory: Schleiermacher” (2016), rev. in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 4th ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 486-500.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Wright, “Where Is My Desire?,” *Provocations* 4 (2020), pp. 1-2, 8.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss the retranslation in “Crossing *The Tartar Steppe*: A New Buzzati,” *Public Books*, forthcoming in May 2023.