

# Translation and illusion

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THE PRACTICE of literary translation and theorization in the field of Translation Studies do not always walk side by side. Here is a good example: in the last decades several important theorists have highlighted the relative autonomy of translation from the original, some going as far as challenging the idea that translation is somehow secondary in its relation to the original text.<sup>1</sup> The notion of faithfulness has been criticized, relativized and deconstructed in articles, theses and books.<sup>2</sup> And today there is a whole line of research in the area, that of descriptive studies, which analyzes translations and the role they play in the literary system in which they are included, without even taking into account the originals related to them. Nonetheless, paradoxically literary translators today tend, in general, to take the issue of faithfulness to the original more seriously than it was common fifty or sixty years ago. Such is the conclusion of recent studies comparing translations in Brazil in the mid-twentieth century with others, more recent, from the same original texts.<sup>3</sup> And when we examine translations from the nineteenth century the difference is even more striking. No one is saying, of course, that there were no translators in the past whose work was guided by the goal of reproducing, as faithfully as possible, the characteristics of the original as regards meaning, form and style; or that there are no translators today who take excessive liberties with the original. But it seems clear that nowadays a typical literary translation by a recognized translator tends to remain closer to the original in several respects than a typical translation from the mid-twentieth century or even from more distant times.

More precisely, to use the current terminology coined by the influential American theorist Lawrence Venuti, literary translations today tend to be more *foreignizing*, when in the past the dominant translational strategy was essentially *domesticating*.<sup>4</sup> Although these terms are recent, the two conceptions of translation were distinguished two hundred years ago by the German thinker Friedrich Schleiermacher (2001). Domesticating translation aims to facilitate the work of the reader by modifying whatever might seem strange to him, thus bringing the text closer to the linguistic and cultural universe that is already familiar to him. The foreignizing strategy does the opposite: it maintains many of the original characteristics of the text – references that not obvious to the reader of the translated text, stylistic features unknown in the target culture, and even some elements of the source language - in order to bring the reader closer to the linguistic and cultural universe of the original work. If the domesticization of the text tends to make the translated text seem to have been written in the language of the translation, foreignizing keeps the reader permanently aware that what he

is reading is a version of a foreign work, which entails the natural difficulties of all that is strange and alien.

While drawing this distinction, Schleiermacher vehemently advocated the foreignizing strategy. Believing that German culture and language had a lot to learn from French, Greek, Spanish and other languages and their respective literatures and cultures, he called for translations that brought into German some of that wealth. Schleiermacher's argument is convincing, but there is a point at which accepting it becomes difficult: the author claims that the distinction between the two strategies is absolute, that the translator chooses either the domesticating or the foreignizing solution. For just a moment of reflection is enough for us to conclude that an absolutely foreignizing translation would be that which maintained the text as it is in the original language; from the moment we replace the words in the original for lexical items in a foreign language, we are already incurring a certain degree of domesticization. Similarly, a radically domesticating translation would result in something that could no longer be considered a translation, but rather an adaptation.

Two hundred years later Venuti resumed the distinction established by Schleiermacher and argued that translations into English should be foreignizing for a different reason: their aim is to reduce the insularity of the English-speaking reader, often monolingual, for whom the centrality of English seems to require the knowledge of other languages and cultures. The situation of Brazilian translators, however, is precisely the opposite. Portuguese is a peripheral language (although it is the sixth most spoken in the world); the vast majority of books published here were originally written in English; and the influence of Anglophone culture is very strong in Brazil, as in many other countries. Following Venuti's reasoning one would expect that in an attitude of cultural resistance a domesticating tendency would be more common in Brazil, at least among the more conscious translators. But this is not what we see: on the contrary, translators who practice their craft responsibly and are interested in thinking about it critically are perhaps more inclined to adopt the foreignizing approach. How to explain that? To advance the discussion of the problem we should take into account another distinction between the two translational strategies established by Jiří Levý. In *Umění překladau* ["The Art of Translation"],<sup>5</sup> the Czech theorist notes that the translator can adopt two different approaches. First, the *illusionist* approach, that in which the translated text is meant to be read in lieu of the original, representing it before the public unfamiliar with the language in which it was written; therefore, it is about giving the reader the illusion that he is reading the original. In the *anti-illusionist* strategy, in turn, the translator "does not intend to offer the original work, but rather to comment on it, occasionally addressing readers with personal and topical allusions" (Levý, 2011, p.20). Levý compares the two strategies, respectively, to that of the conventional actor who embodies the character he is playing, and to that of the Brechtian actor, who

insists on distancing himself from the character he is playing. Although he does not reject experimental anti-illusionist translations, Levý states that it must be recognized that “normal” translations are the illusionist ones – i.e., often readers who resort to a translation, while aware that they are not reading the original require the translation to preserve the characteristics of the original, so as to pretend that they are reading it.



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*Friedrich Schleiermacher*  
(1768-1834).

Levý’s categories do not coincide with Schleiermacher’s, although at first sight there seems to be an affinity between the illusionist and the domesticating strategies, on the one hand, and between the anti-illusionist and the foreignizing strategies on the other. If for the German thinker what was at stake was the priority given to the authenticity of the original as opposed to the reader’s convenience, the Czech theorist contrasts a strategy that aims to *present* the original in a foreign language through an effect of verisimilitude - “illusionism” – with the proposal of *commenting* on the original through translation. Well, we can accept the arguments in favor of foreignizing translation to some extent - that is, as long as it is close enough to the original for readers to know that they are reading a translation - and is also a presentation of the work and not a comment on it, in the sense attributed by Levý to these terms. I would even say that an ideal translation is precisely that: somewhat foreignizing, as described by Schleiermacher and Venuti, but also illusionist, according to Levý’s categories. When

I read a novel by Dostoevsky in Portuguese I want to find in the text a number of markers that identify it as a Russian text - distances expressed in verst, amounts denominated in rubles and kopecks, characters addressing one another on a first-name basis and using patronyms or second or third degree diminutives - and as a book by Dostoevsky - the plurality of voices, the emotional intensity, and even the excessive vehemence that some critics point out in the author's work. But at the same time I want the text in Portuguese to be somehow a presentation, a version of Dostoevsky, and not a comment, a parody, a gloss of the original novel. In short: a translation that respects what is foreign and strange in the original, giving me the illusion that I am reading a novel by Dostoevsky, but that is also a novel in Portuguese and not a metalinguistic text - and therefore a non-novel - built on Dostoevsky's text.

It is not difficult to understand why Levý notes that "normal" translations are necessarily illusionists, and that anti-illusionist translations are, by definition, "experimental". An anti-illusionist translation of a given foreign work in a given culture only becomes possible when the original has circulated in that culture in such a way that the public is prepared to appreciate comments and variations around it. But how else can a foreign work have circulated previously in a culture except through illusionist translations? A Brechtian production of Hamlet, in which actors critically stray from their characters, in which allusions to contemporary events are incorporated into the performance, assumes that viewers already know something close to Shakespeare's original text through illusionist performances - or from reading reasonably faithful translations. Without this prior knowledge the audience of an experimental production of Hamlet would not be able to properly appreciate the contribution of the creative director and of the actors, as he is unable to distinguish it from the original text. The situation is analogous to that of parody. A successful literary parody presupposes that the style of the parodied author is widely known, to the point that readers can perceive in it what is an imitation per se of the original style, and what is its exaggerated distortion that causes laughter. Or - to give an example perhaps even clearer - it is like a caricature, which will only be effective if the caricatured personality has an easily recognizable face, so that one can appreciate both the similarity between the drawing and the face and what is particularly caricatural in the caricature; the mood effect will result from the precise dosage between the degree of similarity and the degree of distortion. Therefore, it is the so-called illusionist translations that will bring to the target-audience the translated author, allowing him to become indirectly known by those who cannot read him in the original. However, once the author's style and theme have become familiar, because his works have circulated widely in the form of illusionist translations - and foreignizing enough to actually represent the author's style - it becomes possible to render an anti-illusionist translation for the purpose of commenting, criticizing, caricaturing, parodying, imitating or adapting that original as a form of creative intervention in the literature of the target culture. Therefore, the anti-illusionist

translation is a special and atypical case in the translational activity, which lies on the border between translation itself and authorial writing.

However, we have not yet answered the initial question. Why do today's demanding readers require a translation that brings them as close as possible to the foreign work and its cultural context, while readers from the past preferred more domesticating versions? I believe the answer has to do with the changing profile of fiction readers. If in past centuries reading fictional works was a major source of entertainment, today television plays this role in a way that no competitors can match. In turn, today's less intellectual public when reading tends to favor genres other than fiction: self-help, pop history, the revealing biography or autobiography of a celebrity. Thus, the act of reading fiction is becoming increasingly restricted to a differentiated audience with more strictly literary interests. For these more demanding readers it is important that the experience of reading the translated text be as close as possible to the experience of reading the original. With regard to foreign movies, these readers probably prefer subtitled over dubbed films, so that they can hear the voices of the actors who are a vital part of the character construction work. Their taste for literature will be closely associated with an interest in knowledge of the world, of other literatures and cultures; an excessively domesticating translation that erases the markers of otherness from the text would seem inauthentic to them. And authenticity tends to be one of the qualities valued by those readers who search in books something more than just mere entertainment.

The mismatch between the positions advocated by some important theorists who propose an autonomous translation disconnected from the original, and the tendency to produce faithful translations – foreignizing, yes, but illusionist as well - can be explained by the difference between the objectives sought by academics in the area of translation studies and the goal pursued by those working in the market of literary translation. Translation researchers who advocate radical positions and are interested in asserting the importance of the translator's work emphasize what is authorial in it, sometimes going as far as denying that the translation is secondary writing in its relation to the original text. (This is a theoretical position, which obviously is not followed in practice by any of them. For not even the most radical advocate of the autonomy of the translated text vis-à-vis the original decides, by ideological coherence, to share the authorship of a book or even of an academic article, with its translator). Literary translators, in turn, know that the readers to whom their work is intended expect to be offered the closest experience possible to reading an original text written in a language that they do not master. They also know that the experience of translating someone else's text is qualitatively different from that of producing a text of their own; that is why they do not yield to the rhetoric of anti-illusionism, striving as much as possible to produce texts intended to replace, and not comment on or criticize, the originals.



For translation to replace the original, an effect of verisimilitude needs to be achieved: the goal is to give readers the illusion of reading a text other than the one they actually have in their hands, i.e., a foreign text. Paradoxically, this illusionist strategy is aimed at authenticity: “authenticity” as the effect of a calculated strategy, of course, and not the thing itself - as the authentic text, the original, was written in a language to which readers have no access (for if they did, they would not resort to translation). In the world of translation studies there are those who accuse illusion of being an artifice - and therefore a fraud. But every art is precisely that – an artifice; and literary translation, as in the title of Levý’s previously mentioned work, is an art. The translator’s illusionism seeks something of the same nature as the verisimilitude effect pursued by the novelist; the faithfulness of illusionist translation is neither less artful nor less true than the truth of fiction.

#### Notes

- 1 Here’s an example: “When translation is concerned not only with the relationship between two languages but between two text systems, literary translation becomes a text in its own right, so that the traditional boundary set up to separate original works from their translations collapses” (Godard, 1990).
- 2 See, for example, Arrojo (1993).
- 3 See, for example, Martinez (2007).
- 4 In *The Scandals of Translation. Towards an Ethics of Difference* (Lawrence, 2002).
- 5 I use the English translation Jiří Levý. *The art of translation*. Org. Zuzana Jettmarová, transl. Patrick Corness. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011.

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*ABSTRACT* – Despite the existence of powerful currents in the field of translation studies that emphasize the autonomy of the translated text vis-à-vis the original, today’s literary translators produce versions that are far more faithful to the original than in the past. Availing ourselves of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s concepts of foreignization and domesticization in translation, and of Jiří Levý’s notions of illusionist and anti-illusionist translation, a possible explanation emerges for this mismatch between theory and practice.

*KEYWORDS:* Literary translation, Foreignization and domesticization, Illusionism and anti-illusionism.

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