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OUR SPECIAL INSERT

PARADOXICALLY INVISIBLE: THE LITERARY TRANSLATOR'S PROVIDENCE

It is one of the oldest dilemmas in literary translation: if it is the translator's mission to remain invisible, how does one recognize—and value—the translator's work?

BY ANNE MILANO APPEL

"Good humor is a paradox," writes humor aficionado Mel Helitzer. "The unexpected juxtaposition of the reasonable next to the unreasonable." The literary translator must indeed be equipped with good humor to be able to hover in that paradoxical and perpetual state between visibility and invisibility. If I needed yet another reminder of this chronic condition (which I don't!), it came in the form of a recent article by Umberto Eco in the Italian weekly *L'espresso*. In it the well-known semiotician, philosopher, medievalist, and writer (perhaps best known for his ambitious novel *The Name of the Rose*) makes a statement whose obviousness on the surface may seem equivalent to *aria fritta* (fried air), as the Italians say when they mean "so what else is new?" Something that is *fritta e rifritta* (fried and refried) is an old story, old news. As Eco puts it (I'm translating, of course):

"The translator's job is therefore difficult and paradoxical, since he should do all he can to make himself invisible ... and yet

he would (justly) like this invisibility to be rewarded with a certain visibility. Yet the translator's success lies precisely in achieving invisibility ..."

Now I have two reactions to this statement. The first is the duh-uh factor: so the translator's job is difficult and paradoxical. Tell me about it. The second and more serious issue has to do with the use of the word "rewarded" (*premiati*). As I see it, the "certain visibility" sought by the translator should not be considered a "reward," but something he rightfully deserves for his success at being "invisible." Eco himself uses the word "justly" in describing the translator's desire for visibility. Indeed, it seems to me that a distinction should be maintained between the invisibility of the translator's hand in the work he produces—something that is decidedly desirable—and the fair, just and merited attribution of the work that is rightly due him. There is a vast difference between striving for invisibility in the act of translation (not letting your hand show through) and being treated as invisible when it comes to having your name identified with the work you've produced. Unfortunately, the "invisibility" that is most associated with the translator is all too often not his skill in hiding his hand but rather the lack of attribution. For example, some publications, here and abroad, regularly neglect to include the translator's name when referring to a book, and many publishing houses refuse to put the translator's name on the cover. As a

colleague recently put it: this type of recognition should not be considered a "reward" but, given the circumstances, it often ends up being regarded as such. And therein lies the intriguing paradox: if the translator is invisible ("good," in Eco's world), who then is able to notice him, and presumably accord him some form of visibility?

Erasing the tracks

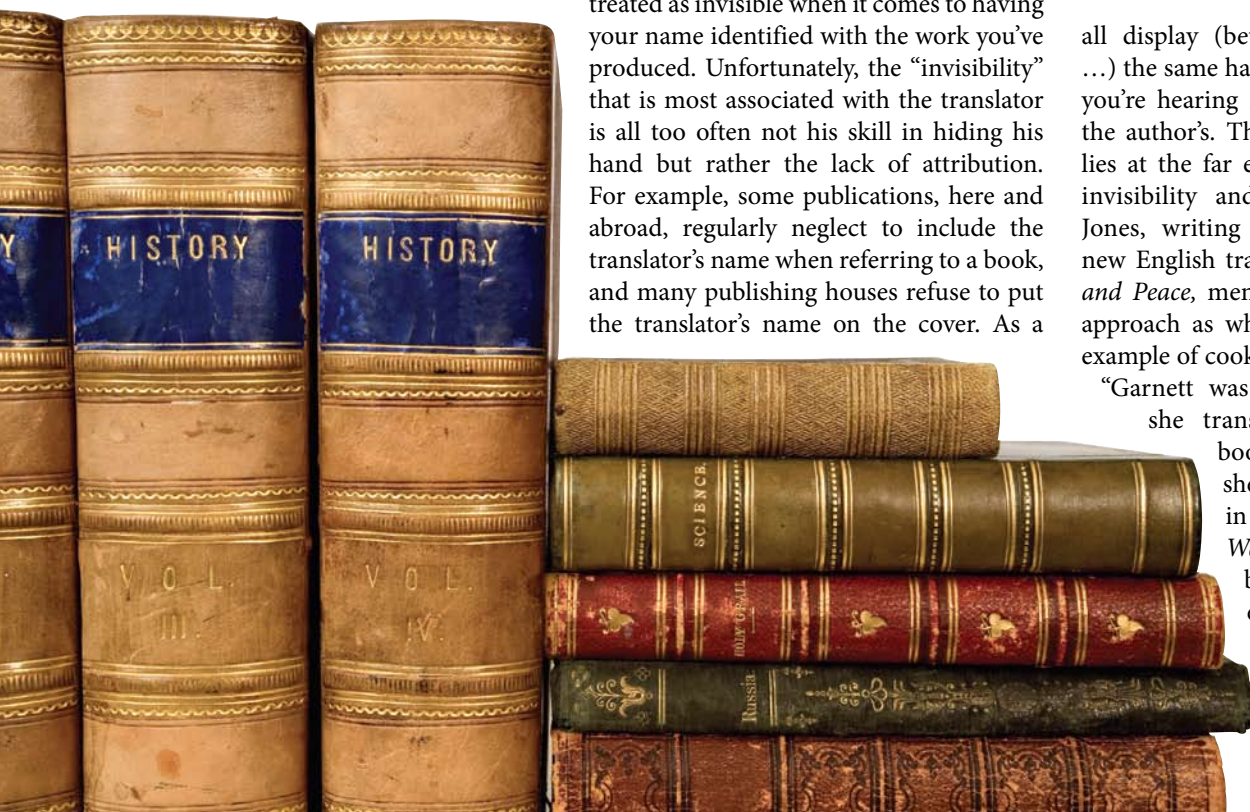
Invisibility in the text is certainly something to strive for. One way to see if a translator has "erased" his own tracks is to check his body of work. If the translations are of works by different authors yet they

It has been said that the act of translation allows the translator to have a love affair with the author's words.

all display (betray? *traduttore, traditore* ...) the same hand, chances are the "voice" you're hearing is the translator's and not the author's. This cookie-cutter approach lies at the far end of the spectrum from invisibility and transparency. Malcolm Jones, writing in *Newsweek* about two new English translations of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, mentions Constance Garnett's approach as what may be considered an example of cookie cutting:

"Garnett was a woman in a hurry—she translated some 70 Russian books into English—but what she gained in speed, she lost in subtlety. Her version of *War and Peace* isn't bad, but it's not exactly Tolstoy either. It has a one-size-fits-all quality."

Invisibility in render-



ing the author's text is prized and justly so. Wyatt Mason, for example, reviewing in the *New York Times* Margaret Jull Costa's translation of Javier Marias' *Your Face Tomorrow: Dance and Dream*, notes that Marias' style is "faithfully rendered by Margaret Jull Costa, his principal English translator, who achieves a rare feat: presence and near invisibility." More recently, Kathryn Harrison's review in the *New York Times Book Review* of a new work by Mario Vargas Llosa praised translator Edith Grossman as having produced "the fluid artistry readers have come to expect from her renditions of Latin American fiction." The reviewer goes on to speak of "a remaking rather than a recycling," and though she is referring to Vargas Llosa's recreation of Emma Bovary's story, the words could readily be applied to the translator's craft as well.

"The genius of 'Madame Bovary,' as Vargas Llosa describes it in 'The Perpetual Orgy,' is the 'descriptive frenzy ... the narra-

Indeed, there is a sensual component to the process, since words appeal to the senses and have a voluptuous quality.

tor uses to destroy reality and recreate it as a different reality.' In other words, Flaubert was a master of realism not because he reproduced the world around him, but because he used language to create an alternate existence, a distillate whose emotional gravity transcends that of life itself."

The writer creates an alternate existence, much like that created by the literary translator. Just as A is to B (the real world is to the author), so C is to D (the author's text is to the translator). By engaging in a form of rewriting or re-creation of the original text (while remaining invisible) the translator gives the writer a voice in another language. It has been said that the act of translation allows the translator to have a love affair with the author's words. Indeed, there is a sensual component to the process, since words appeal to



the senses and have a voluptuous quality. On one level it is all about seduction and attraction. It is paradoxical then that the translator should vanish after weeks and months of living in close, intimate contact with the author, attempting to render the subtle meanderings of his mind ... after the "I" has become "we" and distinctions have blurred.

Part accomplice

The invisibility of the translator in the text stands in contrast to the invisibility that is all too often represented by the denial of due recognition for the work he has produced—a recognition that is not only fair but merited. In his article Eco also writes: "For years one of the battles translators have waged has been that of having their name on the title page (not as co-author but at least as an essential intermediary)..." This "not as co-author" is interesting and telling. Certainly many authors (and many translators) would agree with Eco. Others, on the other hand, are more acknowledging. For Claudio Magris, for example, the translator is a co-author. In Ilide Carmignani's interview of Magris which I translated for *Absinthe: New European Writing* (March 2007), the writer states: "unquestionably, both when one translates and when one is translated, there is a strong sense that the translator is truly a co-author, part accomplice, part rival, part lover ..."

Accomplice, rival, lover ... heady stuff. Definitely at the other extreme from the

prosaic intermediary, middleman or go-between. There is perhaps a second paradox to be noted here. Without the translator, the author would be invisible! José Saramago, the Portuguese novelist and winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for literature, once stated that writers create national literatures with their language, but world literature is written by translators. French filmmaker Robert Bresson, whose films were characterized by a profound intensity, wrote that his aim was to "Make visible what ... might perhaps never have been seen." The translator too "makes visible" the author.

Another way to think about how the translator brings visibility to the author while remaining in the shadows is to imagine the act of translation as a mask. The mask as an age-old form of disguise and masquerade is worn over the face to conceal an individual's identity and, by its own features, create a new persona. In this metaphor, when the wearer (translator) is attired in the mask (engaged in the act of translation), there is a loss of his previous identity and the birthing of a new one (the author's new voice). And so we have the masquerade of translation.

If there is indeed a second paradox to be found in the literary translator's craft, the words of physicist Edward Teller come to mind: "Two paradoxes are better than one; they may even suggest a solution." Solutions, anyone? ✓

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