



Reviewing Translated Literature— Through a Glass Darkly?

By Anne Milano Appel

On a recent Sunday, I was sipping my French roast and enjoying the book review section of my local paper when I gradually became aware of a disconcerting trend: though four of the books reviewed that particular day were translations, in each case, there was no mention of the fact that the book under review was a translation. Of course, this was not the first time I had noticed a reviewer wearing blinders when it came to treating a translated work, but it started me thinking seriously about the issue of how a translation is reviewed.

To be sure, a distinction should be drawn between literary analysis based on critical theory and reviews aimed at the general public—us! While the former represents an attempt to intellectualize the process of translation (despite the lack of a critical tradition specifically aimed at reviewing translations), reviews intended for the ordinary reader are inclined to focus (appropriately?) on the product rather than the process. As I see it, reviewers fall within a range of categories: those who are translation-blind, either intentionally or by default; those whose comments tend to be of a general or banal nature; those who seem to take pleasure in blaming the translator; and those who are, fortunately, more translation-sensitive.

I first became interested in how reviewers treat works in translation when I came across two separate book reviews in *The New York Times Book Review* of November 16, 2003, in which the reviewers (Brent Staples reviewing Edith Grossman’s translation of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Living to Tell the Tale*, and Richard Lourie reviewing Paul Vincent’s translation of Harry Mulisch’s *Siegfried*) referred to the works they

were examining as “gracefully translated by....” Does “gracefully” really tell us anything about the quality of a translation? Or is it just a cliché, something for the reviewer to say, as when a would-be art critic uncritically refers to a painting as “interesting”? Thereafter, I started keeping a file of comments found in various reviews, thinking they might prove helpful to an eventual understanding of the critical approach (or lack thereof) toward translated works. My questions were (are) fundamental: How does the

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reviewer understand, analyze, and judge the translator’s accomplishment? I soon came to realize that the reviewer’s task is perhaps as impossible as that of Borge’s fictional Menard, who set out to “write” (not “rewrite” or “recreate”!) parts of *Don Quixote*. This turned out to be an impossible task that was never realized (we are told that not a single page survived the bonfires to which Menard subjected his notebooks).

Indeed, most reviewers take the easy way out, and simply avoid mentioning the fact that the work under review is a translation! This might be a positive commentary on the part of the reviewer if he were, in fact, reading the translation as a translation, that is, as a work in its own right. Instead, what it usually signifies is that the object he chooses to look at is the original work, lying beyond the

glass whose existence he ignores. To be fair, the reviewer cannot possibly read a translation with a complete sense of how fully the foreign work draws on its native culture and is unavoidably steeped in it. Most reviewers (and readers) do not, and cannot, undertake a thorough comparison of the translation to the foreign text. According to Lawrence Venuti, who offers five rules for “How to Read a Translation” (*Words Without Borders*, July 2004), “a translation ought to be read differently from an original composition precisely because it is not an original.” It is indeed undeniably difficult for reviewers who most likely have not read the original work: what they end up reviewing, then, is a work “filtered” through the translator’s “lens.”

A recent article regarding Michael Henry Heim’s new translation of Thomas Mann’s novella *A Death in Venice* (“A Hero Found in Translation,” *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, June 6, 2004) raises the \$64,000 question, adjusted for inflation, regarding the critical evaluation of a translation. To be sure, the article’s author, Michael Cunningham, is concerned with different translations of the same book when he asks: “How can we possibly decide, unless we’re fluent in both languages, which is more faithful to the author’s intent?” The question is equally valid, however, when applied to any review of a translated text. How can the reviewer possibly know whether the translation is faithful to the author’s intent, unless he is fluent in both the source and the target language and has read both versions of the book? And what does “faithful” mean anyway? Is the proper object of the reviewer’s gaze a “gracefully” translated recreation, or the original work seen “through a glass darkly?” A practical approach to the lack of ➡

consistency regarding this subject among reviewers of translated works would appear to be a descriptive rather than prescriptive one. My intention in this piece is to approach an understanding of how translations are reviewed by taking a close look at reviews intended for the ordinary reader, and organizing them into three major categories that I will call translation-blind, translation-aware, and translation-sensitive.

Translation-blind, intentionally or by default

I mentioned earlier that the path of least resistance for a number of reviewers is to don blinders when it comes to writing about a translated work. Such translation-blind reviewers adopt a tactic of avoidance (sometimes for marketing reasons) by never mentioning the fact that the work they are reviewing is a translation. In addition to the four reviews that diminished my coffee pleasure that particular Sunday morning, numerous other instances of “translation-blind” reviews can readily be found. The December 21, 2003 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, to name just one example, contained a review of *Sepharad*, written by Antonio Muñoz Molina and translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. As in other instances, the reviewer, Theodore Roszak, made no reference to the fact that he was reviewing a translation, thereby tacitly underscoring the all too commonly held notion of the translator’s invisibility.

In a recent editorial in *Translation Review* (no. 67, 2004), Rainer Schulte characterized this translation-blindness as “a yawning absence.” Referring to a special centennial issue of *The New York Times Book Review* published on October 6, 1996, containing reprints of 76 reviews from the years 1896 to 1991, Schulte wrote: “Any reader who

approaches these reviews would have to assume that all of the books listed in this retrospective were written by English-speaking authors. There is no indication anywhere that some of these books were originally written in a foreign language. Not one of the titles carries the name of a translator, and in only one of the reviews is the translator mentioned.” He added: “In that respect, the practice of reviewing or not reviewing translations has not changed much during the last two decades.”

Translation-blindness can have a positive or negative slant depending on how and why it is employed. A more positive perspective on this approach was offered by Steven Wasserman, editor-in-chief of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, speaking at the 2004 annual conference of the American Literary Translators Association. At a session entitled “Spreading the Word: The Art and Importance of Reviewing Literature in Translation,” Wasserman reported that his bias is to read the translation under review as if it were a work in the English language, that is, to experience it as he would any other work written originally in English. His reasoning is unassailable and represents a proactive rationale: because that is how the reader (you and I!) will experience it. He perceives his job as that of advising the reader on the work that is before him, “not to grapple with the midwifery or alchemy or magic” of how that work came to be, or enter into comparisons with the original. Gregory McNamee, writer and frequent reviewer for *Kirkus* and other journals, reported a similar tendency, citing the editor of a book review journal as saying: “I am reviewing the English version, I am not making comparisons.”

Indeed, consider the typical reader,

generally monolingual, who might read the Sunday book review section of his local newspaper. To say that this person will only read books written in his native language is to state the obvious. For him, in fact, the enjoyment of a book will have little or nothing to do with whether or not the work is a translation. Such a reader will regard a translated work as exactly the same as any other book he may read in his mother tongue; that is to say, as not any different at all. In this sense, one might say that, in the best of cases, the reader assumes without thinking about it that the translation is “perfect” (without fully comprehending what that may mean), and in the worst of cases, doesn’t care to know that the book was translated in the first place. All he knows is that he is reading a book in his own language (in this case, English), no matter what its origins may have been. His expectations, plainly and simply, are that it read like “good” English.

Translation-aware, for better or worse

Other reviewers, whom I categorize as translation-aware, seem to feel an obligation to say *something* about the translation they are writing about, but not knowing what to say or how to approach the task, they resort to generalization, usually saying something nice enough, but banal. Going back to Michael Henry Heim’s translation of Thomas Mann’s *A Death in Venice*, consider some of the comments made by reader-reviewers on the amazon.com site: “A wonderful translation that lets us forget that it is not Mann’s own words and is, in fact, a translation.” This is clearly a vote in favor of the invisible hand of the translator! And then there are the generalities that are less discriminating just

because of their lack of specificity: “Mr. Heim’s translation of *A Death in Venice* is excellent” (Why so? Can you elaborate?); “Heim’s translation ranks as one of the best I’ve encountered” (According to what criteria?); “His command of the language is evident and the story is fresh and appealing” (In what way is it “fresh”? Linguistically? And does that necessarily mean that it’s a good translation?). One reviewer admits to never having read Mann’s work, but nonetheless feels qualified to make a comment since “I’ve read many translations of other works.” And “Heim didn’t get bogged down as so many translators do. Instead, he gave this work wings so a new audience could be reached.” What does that mean? How do translators get bogged down, and how did this translator avoid doing so? Clearly, these online reviews are a far cry from the more thoughtful and, therefore, more insightful comments found in “translation-sensitive” reviews, as we will see further on.

Another type of translation-aware reviewer, feeling the same obligation to say *something* yet not knowing what to say, takes a different tack by finding fault with the translation and blaming the translator for what may well be the sins of the author. Kevin Smokler’s review (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 21, 2003) of Thomas Hettche’s *The Arbogast Case*, translated from the German by Elizabeth Gaffney, is a case in point. The last two paragraphs of the piece read:

Hettche’s limping, sluggish sentences leave the enterprise wanting for excitement. Affairs between members of the defense team and Arbogast are both unnecessary and out of character. These

are critical errors, making it strenuous for the reader to invest in the novel’s outcome as the writing sends the message that it’s not all that important anyway.

It should be mentioned here that *The Arbogast Case* is translated from the original German and perhaps hasn’t gone according to the author’s intention. Moreover, there’s nothing inherently wrong with using flat, functional prose as the masonry of a thriller. But there must be a rigorous sense of dramatic potential, a deft organizing of character, mood, and plot so that the thrills seem surprising yet earned. This cannot be said for *The Arbogast Case*, where Hettche mistakes a leaden delivery for gravity and slows his thriller down to the tempo of a Sunday stroll. The result is a novel of substantial ambition that is no fun to read, a story worth telling but not worth making a case for.

I found myself wondering why the reviewer might think that the translation had perhaps not “gone according to the author’s intention.” If the author deliberately chose to make his prose “flat, functional,” I would assume the translator tried to reproduce that flatness. Certainly it would not be the translator’s job to “fix” the “limping, sluggish sentences,” since the author may have had a valid reason for employing them. A colleague suggested that perhaps the critic had not read the original and was hedging his bet: “he’s blaming the author for the prose style, but saying that just maybe it’s the translator’s fault.” Indeed, it is difficult to say whether the reviewer is holding the author or the translator responsible for what he perceives to be a “leaden delivery.” What is certain is that the “jab” at the translator seems

unjustified unless it was indeed based on an examination of the German text.

A further example of a gratuitous “thrust” at the translator is found in Lenora Todaro’s review (*The New York Times Book Review*, November 7, 2004) of Lawrence Venuti’s translation of *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed*. Writing about the runaway Italian bestseller by Melissa Panarello Todaro had this to say: “Books written by teenagers and billed as the next big thing often suffer from grand ambition hampered by immature writing. A first-timer’s literary allusions infiltrate the prose—Dante, ‘The Bell Jar,’ and Dante again. Cringe-inducing euphemisms abound here: lance, stake, scepter, Secret, River Lethe, erupting volcano. (Perhaps these words are more euphonious in Italian than in Lawrence Venuti’s translation.)” I wonder why Todaro assumed that the words in question might be more “euphonious” in the Italian original than in the translation? At the very least, she might have provided the words in the Italian so that the reader could judge for himself how agreeable they sound to the ear, even without knowing their meaning.

An unusual window on how one reviewer perceives his task (translation-aware with an Anglocentric twist?) is offered by a piece in *The Atlantic Monthly* (in the January/February 2004 issue) by book review editor Benjamin Schwarz. In his article, entitled “Why We Review the Books We Do,” Schwarz states that *The Atlantic* rarely reviews translations because it is difficult to focus on “prose style” when dealing with translated works. As he puts it:

Some readers think they detect an Anglocentrism in our books coverage, especially in our fiction ➡

reviews. This charge of parochialism is half right. We tend to focus on prose style in our assessment of fiction. It's obviously far more difficult to do so when reviewing literature in translation, because both the reviewer and the reader of a work encounter not the author's writing, but the translator's rendering of it. Hence, we run fewer pieces on translated works than do comparable book review sections (although the essays on Proust and Cervantes in this issue testify to our attentiveness to major new translations of essential works). And we're therefore particularly interested in books written originally in English.

As might be expected, such a red flag generated considerable consternation and comment among members of the translation community. Indeed, Schwarz's mention of the essay on Cervantes was in reference to Terry Castle's review of Edith Grossman's translation of *Don Quixote* in the same issue of *The Atlantic*, and Ms. Grossman herself (in a letter that *The Atlantic* did not publish) took Schwarz to task for his "groundless assumption that the work of literary translators, who somehow lack 'prose style,' is generally not worthy of serious review in *The Atlantic*." Moreover, she expressed concern over the fact that Schwarz's misconceptions regarding translation meant that both he and his readers would be denied "the deep pleasure and esthetic value of books originally written in languages he [and they] may not know." Steven Wasserman takes a different approach than that of Schwarz. Speaking at the aforementioned conference of the American Literary Translators Association, the *Los Angeles Times* book review editor

stated that he commissions reviews based on whether or not a book interests him (admittedly subjective), regardless of whether it is a translation or not. Unlike Schwarz, who regards his role as that of a critic rather than a news source, Wasserman seems to consider reviewing works in translation as "giving readers the news from elsewhere," a way to break through the provincialism that persists in our country despite the hype of globalism.

Translation-sensitive, the glass and what lies beyond

Despite the Menardian nature of the reviewer's task and the odds against it, some reviewers do succeed in perceptively, if at times telegraphically, capturing the essence of the translation they are examining. For example, in Ken Kalfus' review (*The New York Times Book Review*, August 8, 2004) of Vladimir Voinovich's novel *Monumental Propaganda*, the reviewer writes: "In his translation, Andrew Bromfield deftly shifts his tone and tools as required, remaining true to Voinovich's Vonnegut-like playfulness and appreciation of the absurd." And Diane Anderson-Minshall, reviewing Maryellen Toman Mori's translation of *Lonely Woman* by Takako Takahashi (*San Francisco Chronicle*, March 14, 2004), focuses on the translator's attention to the task: "In each of these stories—translated with great care by Maryellen Toman Mori—there is an almost surreal glorification of female criminality and madness." Sometimes a single sentence from the reviewer can be enough to set the reader on the right track, making him aware that this is a translation while at the same time commenting on the original author's narrative method and style. For example, Pietro Cheli, reviewing

Luca Conti's translation of James Sallis' *Cypress Grove Blues* in *Diario* (June 11, 2004), writes: "[James Sallis] knows how to carry the reader along, thanks to the fine translation by Luca Conti, who for years has been engaged in making this narrative genre known in Italy, even in its darkest moments." In all of these cases, of course, the qualifications of the reviewer come into play. For a translation-sensitive review to be meaningful, the reviewer must be linguistically and otherwise credentialed to be able to draw discerning comparisons and make meaningful pronouncements, positive or negative.

One reviewer who addressed the issues associated with reviewing a translation head-on is Peter Brooks. Writing about new translations of two works by Marcel Proust (*The New York Times Book Review*, January 25, 2004), Brooks points out the differences in reception wrought by time, as different issues have come to preoccupy the readers in our culture. Following a general statement ("A new translation of Proust is a major event, since it promises to make his novel more readable"), Brooks goes on to examine not only the new translations (of Lydia Davis' *Swann's Way* and James Grieve's *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*), but the original translation of *In Search of Lost Time* as well, noting that C. K. Scott Moncrieff might be forgiven for thinking of the early parts of the novel as a series of tone poems, since he began his work before the final two volumes were in print and, therefore, "couldn't know...the rigorous architecture of the novel as a whole." Of Lydia Davis' translation of *Swann's Way*, Brooks has this to say:

Lydia Davis, an experienced translator of much difficult French

fiction, gets Proust nouveau off to a fine start, from the famous first sentence: “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.*” She translates: “For a long time, I went to bed early,” capturing some of the intentional awkwardness of the original. You can see on Proust’s manuscripts how he crossed out a more conventional lead-in, choosing to start with that floating, unanchored “for a long time.” Scott Moncrieff regularized the sentence by putting the verb in the tense of habitual action: “I used to go to bed early.” But Proust chose the “*passé composé*,” the tense compounded of past and present, which both produces an abruptness inconsistent with literary “stylishness” and points to the crucial issue of temporal structure.

Brooks’ observation that Davis’ use of the past tense modified the phrase “for a long time,” thereby “capturing some of the intentional awkwardness of the original,” perceptively calls attention to the question of what might be termed a “seamless” versus a more awkward or “imperfect” approach to translation. Earlier, I alluded to the invisible hand of the translator implicit in the praise “A wonderful translation that lets us forget that it is not Mann’s own words and is, in fact, a translation.” Thilde Barboni, writing in *Le Monde* (November 12, 1999), refers to this invisibility or anonymity of the translator as a “paradoxical existence,” in that the better a translation is, the less one thinks about the translator, while the more defective it is, the more the translator is criticized. Indeed translators, myself included, usually consider the attribution of an invisible hand high praise. Is this because we have been conditioned to mistake invisibility for perfection? Lawrence

Venuti (“How to Read a Translation”) thinks it is: “Publishers, copy editors, reviewers have trained us, in effect, to value translations with the utmost fluency, an easy readability that makes them appear untranslated, giving the illusory impression that we are reading the original. We typically become aware of the translation only when we run across a bump on its surface, an unfamiliar word, an error in usage, a confused meaning that may seem unintentionally comical.”

Although the awkwardness made up of those “bumps on the surface” is no guarantee of perfection any more than seamlessness is, there is a cultural imperative that couples the visibility of the translator’s hand with respect for the dignity and autonomy of the foreign text and its culture. I quote from the theme of a recent conference on the role of contemporary literature in English translation (University of Oxford, April 17, 2004): “The idea that the act of translation should be visible in the finished work has come to dominate academic discussions of translated literature. This imperative arises from largely ethical considerations: the English language should not subsume the original, the reader should be made to confront the otherness of the foreign culture.”

In contrast to Peter Brooks, who appears to be familiar with both the source and target language (as well as intermediary versions of the text), Allen Barra, reviewing a new Dostoevsky translation by Pevear-Volokhonsky (*Salon*, May 27, 2004), admits to not knowing any Russian, but says that “even as a freshman in college, I knew something about bad English.” The subheading of his review reads: “Forget Constance Garnett—the Pevear-Volokhonsky translation makes the most cryptic of existential cult classics stranger, funnier and more alive

than ever;” and indeed Barra goes on to describe earlier translations by Englishwomen Constance Garnett and Jessie Coulson. About Garnett he says: “she made Russians sound like Edwardian Englishmen.” He continues: “Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* is one of the first characters in literature infected with the modern disease of alienation, but rendered in such stilted English prose, it’s amazing that he seemed modern at all to us.” Reading Barra’s review, one wonders which of Dostoevsky’s translators hit the “real” mark better. The new translation may certainly be more appealing because it seems to “flow” better, but does it “flow better” only to readers familiar with an American versus British way of speaking? We may like it better, but is it a better translation? How do we know what the original *really* says, if we don’t know the source language?

Barra’s remark about Garnett’s Edwardian English reminds me of what dramaturg Paul Walsh had to say about re-translation when he spoke at a general meeting of the Northern California Translators Association in February 2004. The director of humanities for the Bay Area’s American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.), Walsh was commissioned by A.C.T. to re-translate Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. The obvious question, he said, was “why re-translate a play?” His response was equally direct: because the markers by which we read behavior have changed, and because the experiences the audience brings to the play have changed. Michael Cunningham, writing about *A Death in Venice* in the aforementioned article “A Hero Found in Translation,” put it this way: “When I’d finished reading the Heim translation, I couldn’t tell whether the difference resided in the new version ➡

or in my own mind. There is this, too, about the mutability of literature—the books we read at 20 are not the books we read at 50, because we are not the same people.” Walsh noted that people think of Ibsen’s play as a Victorian drama because the people who translated it were British; the original Norwegian wasn’t “Victorian” at all, but direct and straightforward. Walsh wanted to make the language fresh and neutral...contemporary. This seems to be what Barra was getting at in his review of the new Dostoevsky translation. In its purest form, re-translation is translation as *transformation* in the sense that Shakespeare used the word in *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream* (“Bottom thou art translated”).

Terry Castle’s above-mentioned review of Edith Grossman’s translation of *Don Quixote* (*The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2004) is a fine example of a translation-sensitive review because the reviewer never loses sight of the fact that she is dealing with a work in translation, while at the same time managing to look at the original and its author along with numerous issues that informed the specific work and the culture of its day. Grossman is mentioned at various points along the way (for example, “Edith Grossman actually makes it easy for [the reader]...because she has produced the most agreeable *Don Quixote* ever.”), and her work is referred to as a “superb new English version.” There are also more specific comments, such as the one reminding us that Grossman doesn’t often use “bits of antiquated translatoresque like ‘pate.’ That this version of *Don Quixote* is virtually twee-free is one of its signal strengths.” (For those as curious about the word as I was, “twee” means affectedly dainty or quaint, and apparently derives from

“tweet,” a child’s way of pronouncing “sweet.”) But Castle looks beyond the translation to a broader view of the work, taking up such diverse themes as: the history of the novel, with Cervantes at its source; the passage of Western civilization from a world inhabited by gods to one deprived of them (“one might call *Don Quixote* the first great Western story without gods”); the desolation of the modern world reflected in the bleak, “almost post-nuclear *emptiness* of the fictional landscape”; the physical mismatching of the protagonists and how this “Cervantean innovation...extends down through the centuries”; the author’s respect for other people and his challenge to Western xenophobia; the book’s moral vision, “inextricably bound up with its warmth and humor” and with “Cervantes’ *friendliness* as a narrator”; the device of shared authorship by which Cervantes pretends that he is not the real author, but has simply had the work translated; and so on. In short, the review paints a complete world in which the author, his work, and the culture of his times co-exist with the translator and her work.

Finally, to round out this smorgasbord of translation-sensitive reviews, some of the reader-reviewer comments (on the amazon.com site) in reference to Michael Henry Heim’s translation of Thomas Mann’s *A Death in Venice* were more reflective and therefore more sensitive and discerning than those noted earlier as being “generalizing.” For example: “The new translation is well done; while not making the style of the author less terse, it adds back much of the original emotional intensity in a way that previous translations made seem much too academic.” Or this one that addresses how the reader thought the translator felt that Mann might have wanted his reader to view

the character Aschenbach: “In past translations, he [Aschenbach] was viewed as tight fisted and as being wound tight as a watch. Mr. Heim has given him a vulnerability that was very enjoyable.” From a professional standpoint, Michael Cunningham, in the above-cited review in the *Los Angeles Times*, echoes this reader’s view, observing that Heim “subtly but clearly extends and alters previous translations,” and noting a change in how Aschenbach is characterized: “I remembered Aschenbach as a figure of pure pathos... Although the Aschenbach of Heim’s translation ends up every bit as gaudily dressed and made up, and every bit as alone, he felt to me this time less clownish and more tragic; more like a man whose desperation and delusion are not only sad, but also heroic.”

So What’s a Reviewer to Do?

I stated at the outset that my intention in this piece was to approach an understanding of translation criticism by taking a close look at reviews written for popular publications and aimed at ordinary readers, as being distinct from a more intellectualized type of critical literary analysis. Though the approach taken by translation-sensitive reviewers is far from the rigorous critical methodology espoused by theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Antoine Berman, or Henri Meschonnic, to name a few, it does afford a range of discerning views by individuals who, in some cases, are familiar with both the target and source texts, and who are able to draw judicious comparisons. Their work attests to the fact that the reviewer of a translation has an enormous responsibility, not just to the reading public, but to the work being reviewed and to the author of that work. For one thing, the reviewer’s critique may very well

determine the way in which the work is received by the target culture, and this reception may differ significantly from that received by the original work in the home country. Indeed, this “transformational” role is a function that critical reviews share with translation itself, since in both cases shifts in perception and reception may be brought about. Just as the translator can transform features of the original text by highlighting, reinterpreting, recontextualizing, and rewriting them, so, too, the reviewer can shape perceptions about that text. In this sense, both acts may be considered powerful manipulative tools that can create new or revised images of the work in question.

As anticipated, most of the reviews I looked at were more concerned with the *product* of translation rather than with the process that produced it. Even limiting the scope of the reviewer’s task, however, surely we cannot expect every reviewer to be familiar with both the source and target languages and cultures and to have read both the original and the translation—much less any prior translations that may exist, in the case of a re-translated work. The bar would have to be set awfully high. So what is the less-than-perfect reviewer to do? How can he know if the translation is true to the intention of the original if he cannot know that intention except through the translation? It seems to

me that the earlier questions I posed (How should a reviewer treat a work in translation? Should the proper object of the reviewer’s gaze be the original or the translation, or both? What should our expectations as readers of reviews reasonably be?) may be considered, if not fully resolved, within the context of translation-sensitivity.

In the end, there may be no sure, perfect way to review a translation, or at least no one, single formula that will work in all cases, since each reviewer will bring a different set of abilities to the task. Perhaps we as readers may have to set our expectations lower, developing a greater tolerance for imperfection and going along with the notion of impossibility while, unlike the fictional Menard, refraining from setting bonfires and tossing book reviews into them. Perhaps in the final analysis all we can ask for is a heightened awareness on the part of the reviewer. That he not ignore the fact that he is reviewing a translation (an alternate work that has its own autonomy) and that he be conscious of the fact that he is encountering, if I may alter Benjamin Schwarz’s phrasing in the aforementioned article, “not *only* the author’s writing, but the translator’s rendering of it.” (The “*only*” is my addition and significantly alters Schwarz’s meaning.) This heightened consciousness (translation sensitivity, if you

will) may be all we can expect because the reviewer cannot know what the author intended (any more than the translator can).

Pouring yet another cup of French roast, I decided I liked the way Matt King resolved the issue in his review of Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts & Wide Hips* (Arcade, 2005): “And as rendered by translator Howard Goldblatt, Mo’s prose is often pastoral and guttural, evoking a Manichean world of human ugliness and redemptive natural beauty...” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 9, 2005). King is not saying that Mo’s prose is pastoral and guttural, but that Mo’s prose, *as rendered by the translator*, is pastoral and guttural. Unless he reads Chinese, he has no way of knowing if Mo’s prose is pastoral and guttural. As Cunningham, writing about the change in the character Aschenbach, put it: “That may or may not be exactly what Mann had in mind. There’s no way of knowing.” Indeed. My only conviction is that the proper object of the reviewer’s gaze is the original work seen not “through a glass darkly,” but “face to face” through the clear glass of a translation that possesses what Emilio Mattioli (“*Per una critica della traduzione*,” 1996) calls “the dignity of an autonomous text,” and whose existence informs the reviewer’s vision.

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