

Invisible Deceits

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I hold a book in my hands, slowly flipping over the rough, yellowish pages one by one. I stop on the page where the narration begins, and I read the first two lines, which stretch across the page in black, tiny letters: “I sing of arms and of a man: his fate / had made him fugitive . . .” (Mandelbaum 1). And here I stop, interrupting the beginning of what anyone with just a little knowledge of Latin literature could identify as the proem of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. I stop because something is bothering my reading: an inexplicable but still familiar feeling of falsity and betrayal is making the words of this Latin masterpiece bitter on my tongue.

I want to read Virgil’s *Aeneid* to understand his thoughts, his ideas—to form an opinion of him as an author—but I cannot get rid of the disturbing feeling that this is not what I am doing by reading the book I have in my hands. I move on to another book, flip over a slightly larger introductory section, and start reading the big, bold letters at the bottom of a much smoother, whiter page: “Wars and a man I sing—an exile driven on by Fate . . .” (Fagles 47). This is again Virgil’s proem, yet—and here lies the problem!—it is again *not* Virgil. If I took this version of the *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fagles, or the previous one, translated by Allen Mandelbaum, from my desk and asked people who its “author” is, most would have no problem proclaiming that it is Virgil, even before looking at the name printed on the front cover. But what do we really mean by “author”?

According to the *Pocket Oxford American Dictionary*, an “author” is “a writer of a book or article,” to “write” is to “compose a book or another written work,” and, taking one step further, to “compose” is to “form a whole by arranging parts in an orderly or artistic way.” So, by definition, the author of a book is the person who arranged the words (the “parts”) of that publication to form the text we hold in our hands and read (the “whole”). But did Virgil arrange the words “I,” “sing,” “arms,” or “man” in those first lines of the books that are, ostensibly, “his”? Surely he did not, considering that those words belong to the English language. One by one, Mandelbaum and Fagles chose

the words that stretch out on the page in front of me while I read, and still, I would not call either of them the author. They are the translators. *Just* the translators.

We tend to overlook the name of the translator on the back of the cover and take for granted that we are reading the words of the foreign author marked on the front, but the choices translators make can significantly change our experience of the text. Writing is an ancient and powerful means of communication, but it's also fragile: changing one word can change a whole idea. In the past, it was often acceptable to readapt and reinterpret a text to make it suitable for foreign readers: in 17th and 18th century France, no reader would have been shocked if a writer had plagiarized—rather than translated—a foreign work, readapting it to relevant social issues or a popular point of view. This led to the production of so-called “*belles infidèles*”—translations both beautiful and unfaithful. In his book *Translation and Language*, linguist Peter Fawcett explains that these non-literal translations were specifically crafted for people who “belonged to a social class which (in theory, at least) ordered its life according to concepts of *honnêteté* (decency) and *bienséance* (decorum)” (117). So, for example, it was correct and honest to turn “Othello’s straightforward, soldierly *Her father loved me,*” into “the highly sedate and mannered circumlocution *J’avais eu l’honneur de me faire estimer de son père*”—“I had had the honor of being held in her father’s esteem”—which was what French readers would have expected to hear from a tragic hero (117). In her essay “Between *Version* and *Traduction*: Sterne’s Sentimental Journey in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France,” Susan Pickford explains how at first, Joseph-Pierre Frénais’s translation of Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* was a major success precisely because it was not a loyal translation of the original text. It was just the opposite: “Frénais’ approach to translation was typical of his day: *belle mais infidèle*” (54). It was a loose, altered version made to satisfy the French public’s taste for works that gave a positive outlook on their culture.

But later on, many translators started to distance themselves from this unfaithful approach, trying to convey Sterne’s words more exactly, and it is these versions that are still republished. In modern times, in fact, a “modest, *mot à mot* approach to literary translation” is preferred, mainly in an effort to avoid misreading (Pickford 65). Now, the dominant ideology of translation demands that a translator be as non-intrusive as possible and try to make the experience of a translated text as close as possible to its original version. What we picture is a translator who only works as “a ‘*bumble serviteur du texte*,’” an unnoticeable instrument that eases communication between author and read-

er without adding or subtracting anything from the message (65).

In his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Lawrence Venuti surveys the different theories that have dominated the field of translation since the 17th century. Now, the working standard calls for fluency, where “the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’” (1). When we read a fluent translation of this kind, we are left with the impression that the words we see are the ones the author would have chosen.

But this impression is deceitful. To imagine that translators match words with other words is to ignore that thoughts, ideas, and messages themselves must also be translated. This is why two translations of the same text can be simultaneously loyal to the original and very different from each other. Each version of Virgil’s text creates an illusion of originality when read by itself, but a side-by-side comparison of the two highlights the translators’ different understanding of their priorities. “I sing of arms and of a man” more fluently and naturally follows English sentence structure (subject, verb, object) (Mandelbaum 1), but “Wars and a man I sing” more closely resounds the Latin original “*Arma virumque cano*” (Fagles 47). One is meant to sound familiar, the other poetic. *The Aeneid* was both familiar and poetic for its Roman readers, so which translation is more faithful?

As Fawcett highlights in his chapters about linguistics and sociolinguistics, every word is a “sign” that is made up of two parts: the signifier and the signified. He explains that “the signifier is a mental image of the physical sound that you make when you say, for example, *cat* or *kosbka* . . . while the signified is a mental concept of representation of physical cats in the real world” (5). These structures appear to be arbitrary and socially contingent, but they are more deeply rooted in our minds than we realize. According to Fawcett, in translation we cannot simply “identify the signified, strip away the source-language signifier, and replace it with the target-language signifier. . . . The words *cat* and *kosbka* don’t have the same range of meanings [in English and Russian], so their value is different” (6). Translations can leave behind enough meaning, enough nuance, to warrant a 10-page footnote for one word.

Take the Latin word *pietas*, which Virgil uses to encapsulate his heroic protagonist’s qualities of piety, respectfulness, and moral strength. Mandelbaum translates it as “goodness,” while Fagles translates it as “devo-

tion.” We assume that these are words Virgil might have chosen had he written his text in English, but in neither of the corresponding terms can you perceive the full sense of pious respect—for the gods, family, traditions, the Roman Empire—that the Latin word carried for Virgil. Besides, if you are a modern Western reader, you are probably more likely to picture the kind of “goodness” or “devotion” that derives from Christianity. The original author, the translator, and the receiving public all have the burden of a cultural background that they cannot renounce, and that makes its way into every word.

When Virgil defined the protagonist of his epic poem as famous for his *pietas*, he charged that word with a cultural burden. That burden is much harder to grasp for a modern reader than it would have been for a Latin. In his essay “The Burden of the Translator,” Bernard Hoepffner attributes this difficulty to the idea that “our world is formed by our language.” Two languages, therefore, are “two worlds, and traducing one into another is bound to produce problems, errors, mistakes” (193). Surprisingly, however, Hoepffner calls it a “clogging but also . . . pleasurable” burden; in his view, it is not only impossible to create a perfect translation, but also undesirable (193). The cultural differences that constitute a “burden” can thus be seen not only as an obstacle, but as a source of enrichment that can “help the understanding of other people, other cultures, other forms of expression” (197). Hoepffner thinks that “some foreignness ought to remain, reading a translation ought to be more difficult, more active than reading a book originally written in one’s own language” (197). The translator should not aim to be invisible. He must try to keep the readers aware that they are dealing with a translation and that they need to make an effort to understand the context of the original author, rather than ignoring it.

Of course every reader brings a unique cultural background to bear on the understanding of a text, but that should not be perceived as an obstacle. It should be thought of as a gift, as an opportunity to compare our own culture with the author’s and the translator’s, to derive from that comparison our *own* authentic experience. If our understanding of “goodness” and “devotion” were still the same as Virgil’s, the translation of his word *pietas* would probably be an easier task, but it would be so plain that nobody would feel the need to spend a thought on it. The discrepancy, instead, creates a dialogue—it makes us think of what devotion represented in the Latin world as opposed to now, and pushes us to challenge both conceptions. The praise of a “correct” or “faithful” translation ought not be assigned on the basis of how well that translation can deceive us into thinking we are reading an original. Such a deception deprives us of the awareness that every translation is the interlac-

ing of two different cultural universes and is unique and valuable for that reason.

I hold my two translations of the *Aeneid* side by side, comforted by the sweet realization that reading in translation is more than a deprivation. Satisfied by my consideration of translational practices, I can now labor happily over my two *Aeneids*, confident that I will eventually know more about Virgil and his world than I could have ever known with a deceptively fluent single text.

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