

**REVIEW OF MIRELLA AGORNI, *TRANSLATING ITALY FOR THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. TRANSLATORS AND AN IMAGINED NATION IN THE EARLY ROMANTIC PERIOD 1816-1830S*, BERN, PETER LANG, 2021**

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A historical approach to translation studies focusing on the ways in which perceptions and methodologies of translation and translators differed over time or developed through time remains essentially a research project within the discipline itself. The growth and consolidation of the field, however, has led increasingly to research into the specific nature and importance of translation to historical, literary or cultural problems, and this has resulted in a tentative but productive dialogue with those working in other fields and with other disciplinary methodologies. This has given rise to some work which effectively and efficaciously pushes at the boundaries of the parameters of Translation Studies.

An example of this is Mirella Agorni's *Translating Italy for the Nineteenth Century*. Her research has outlined the ways in which perceptions of translation and translation activity in literature contributed to the construction of the Italian nation. Whereas the specific literary influence on nation-building within Italy is well known, the focus on the importance of translation is relatively new. This survey of the translation of works from English (sometimes through the medium of French) and of the ways in which these translations positioned themselves on the Italian literary market through paratexts, and in particular the focus on the translation of Walter Scott, chiefly by Gaetano Barbieri, has begun to fill an important gap in field.

As such, the volume will be of particular use and interest to those working in the field of Italian literary and cultural history in the first part of the nineteenth century, and it successfully positions the history of translation within a series of issues and research paths in this area. In particular, the focus on translators and their activity in the literary milieu, above and beyond the translations themselves, opens up a new dimension to the literary history of this period. The reception of Walter Scott in France has been charted in particular by Paul Barnaby, showing how his French translator, Auguste-Jean-Baptiste Defauconpret, suppressed religious elements in the novels in order not to go counter to Catholic orthodoxy. Agorni's analysis of Barbieri's work looks at the way this translator presents Scott through his extensive use of

footnotes, designed to flesh out the many historical references in Scott's novel. These notes, she argues, take the Italian readership towards a recognition and reconstruction of historical traditions as a means of consolidating the sense of an autonomous national culture.

There are several ways in which this research, above and beyond the specific issues raised in terms of Italian cultural history, usefully contributes to areas of discussion within Translation Studies. The first is its focus on translators, on fleshing out the biographies of those who translate and their activity, moving beyond an exclusively text-based methodology. Despite the work of scholars such as Anthony Pym and Delisle and Woodsworth and that of scholars using the methodologies of Pierre Bourdieu and Daniel Simeoni to focus on the notion of agency, this is still a relatively uncharted area, and the presence of the translator often remains, substantially, the "ghostly" one indicated by George Steiner many years ago, as the author points out in her introduction. Reinstating figures such as Barbieri not only as literary figures in their own right but as playing an important part in literary and cultural development through translation, recognized not as a side line but instead as a central part of their activity, Agorni contributes to moving translators and translation nearer to the centre of the stage in cultural and literary history.

This brings us to two other issues which Agorni raises, although they remain outside the principal focus of the volume. The first is the crucial importance of publishers and publishing companies. Bearing in mind the burgeoning world of print as a crucial part of economic as well as cultural development in the early part of the nineteenth century, described in the case of France in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, the author unearths the aims and concerns of publishing houses as key factors in decisions regarding, for example, the launching of translations from English onto the Italian market. Here translation studies must, as Agorni points out, begin to work alongside the history of the book and print culture if it is to bring to light the material constraints of cultural production underlying translation. Alongside this, she also points to the literary review as an important site of translation, one which has hitherto received little attention. Work on reviews remains somewhat of a niche interest within literary studies, and the focus on translation in reviews even more so, but given their importance to the interests and concerns of publishers, and given the wealth of material in translation in them (in the form of extracts, summaries or commentaries) they constitute a crucial and as yet almost entirely unexplored source, as Agorni points out.

Finally, the theoretical framework which Agorni uses to accompany her analysis highlights an important site of tension within the discipline. The reliance of translation studies on systems theory deriving from the work of Even-Zohar and Toury in particular can lead to a hypostasising of a binary relation between cultural systems which belies the real context of much actual translation practice. On the one hand, this methodological assumption of relatively stable cultural systems turns a blind eye to the "chaos and confusion that are intrinsic to most social phenomena" (8). Historical approaches, with their customary attention to local and specific contexts, as the author suggests, require an attention to detail which responds better to the careful approaches of "thick description" promoted by Geertz (9) or the "provisional theorizing" put forward by Hermans (126). Agorni carefully avoids

hypostasising stable cultural systems in her own analysis. As she points out, whereas the terms “France” and “England” may be acceptable as shorthand references to national cultural systems in the early nineteenth century, although this too may be problematic, the term “Italy” in the period is clearly not. She attentively and repeatedly refers, in fact, to “Italian territory” and avoids understandable pressures to consider the Italian cultural context as in any way as fixed as these other two countries. Her focus, of course, is precisely on the ways in which translation functioned as one element in the construction of this cultural entity, something occurring before the foundation of the state itself. In her sensitivity to the “chaos and confusion” within what are sometimes assumed to be hermetic cultural systems, the author places her own approach alongside an increasing tendency to take a transnational approach in historical and literary studies.

This subverting of the implicit binarism at the base of much work in translation studies brings her, moreover, to stress the importance of an approach to translation which takes metonymy and circulation rather than metaphor and substitution as a methodological basis. An acceptance of this methodological framework would lead researchers to pay more attention to all those contextual elements (biographies of translators, the economic concerns of publishers, the social and cultural conditions of reading) which will enable work in translation studies to provide real contributions to wider historical and cultural questions.