

LANDMARKS OF TRANSLATION STUDIES (A. F. TYTLER, M. ARNOLD AND E. NIDA). A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

The present article takes a critical look at a few landmarks of translation studies focusing on aspects of literary translation, such as equivalence and reader-response, fidelity and freedom, the translator's predicament of constantly having to keep the right balance between contradictory yet inseparable requirements (e.g. manner vs. matter, letter vs. spirit).

Well aware of the vast, ever-expanding area of translation studies that will make any single writing on any subject of translation theory appear partial, limited, provisional or already dated, we have, from the very beginning, set ourselves the objective of examining just a few major themes of translation theory with the help of a minimum number of concepts and a subjective choice of authors spanning three centuries of intellectual debate in the Anglo-American cultural environment (Alexander Fraser Tytler, Matthew Arnold and Eugene Nida), apart from passing references to other writers whose influential works we consider relevant to our topic. The article aims to emphasize the relevance of both new and old translation theory to present-day translation practice, and at the same time to point to various challenges posed by literary translation that may be helpful to future translators.

Keywords: literary translation, fidelity, equivalence, naturalness, translatability

1. 18th-century thinking on translation and translatability:

Alexander Fraser Tytler, or the questions of faithfulness to the original, naturalness and equivalent effect

One of the landmarks of traditional translation theory that integrates and summarizes a century and a half of translation studies is, without doubt, Alexander Fraser Tytler's 1791 *Essay on the Principles of Translation*. Its systematic treatment of the main requirements of a "good translation", as well as its focus on the challenges of translation, supported by a multitude of examples of translation successes and failures, are well served by its author's familiarity with history and classical literature (he was a Professor of Universal History, and Greek and Roman Antiquities).

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Building upon the foundation of previous translation theory and practice, Tytler lays down, in Chapter I of his *Essay*, three “general rules” or “laws” of a good translation: 1) “a complete transcript of the ideas of the original” based on a perfect knowledge of the language of the original and familiarity with the subject-matter; 2) a “style and manner” similar to those of the original; 3) naturalness, or “ease” comparable to that of the original (Tytler, 1900: 9). He provides numerous examples of what he views as successful and failed translations judged by the extent to which they comply with the above rules. The translator’s literary talent and intellectual prowess, he notes, does not guarantee the success of a literary translation, a point he illustrates by Alexander Pope’s less than perfect translation of the *Iliad*, which he thinks is due to the translator’s tendency to censor Homer’s verse, and, at the other extreme, by Ben Jonson’s version of Horace’s *Art of Poetry*, whose “rigid fidelity” (Tytler, 1900: 38) to the original he also criticizes.

So, according to the first two traditional requirements of translation, faithfulness to the original and stylistic adequacy, the successful translator is supposed, on the one hand, to convey the “ideas and sentiments of the original author” (and is even allowed, according to Tytler, a certain measure of intrusion into the original text with the aim of correcting its flaws, “improving upon” it or “embellishing” it, without, however, “impairing or weakening” the original thought), and on the other hand, to follow the original author’s “style and manner of writing” by preserving the accidental “blemishes and defects” of the original (Tytler, 1900: 8). This contradiction between relative freedom and extreme rigour can only be solved, in Tytler’s opinion, through moderation and compromise.

The very debatable idea of allowing even slight interventions on the part of translators for “improving” the original while at the same time staying faithful to the author’s original thought is rather paradoxically justified by the great respect the translator – he assumes – must owe to the overall excellence of the original work (apart from the implicit reverence paid to poetic masterpieces, especially Latin and Greek verse, by Tytler himself): “I conceive it to be the duty of a poetical translator never to suffer his original to fall” (Tytler, 1900: 45). On the other hand, Tytler is prompt in cautioning against the risks of freedom “abused” in the hands of less gifted translators: “...if authors, even of taste and genius, are found at times to have made an injudicious use of that liberty which is allowed in the translation of poetry”, he admits, “we must expect to see it miserably abused indeed, where those talents are evidently wanting”. (Tytler, 1900: 61) Even with this little correction, Tytler’s argument in favour of improving the original writing can certainly find little favour with present-day theorists of translation.

Tytler thinks stylistic resemblance between the original and the translation (the second general rule of translation mentioned above) is more difficult to achieve than semantic faithfulness, due to the special qualities the translator must possess: a “just taste”, as he calls it (Tytler, 1900: 63), and “discernment” are needed to easily identify and imitate the style of the original, be it ‘grave’, “elevated”, “easy”,

“lively”, “florid or ornamented”, or “simple and unaffected”, as permitted by the “genius” of each language (Tytler, 1900: 64). As in the case of the first rule of translation, Tytler offers examples of translation triumphs and failures considered from the point of view of stylistic adequacy, and elaborates on the idea of the different “genius” of each language (with some languages admitting of greater brevity of expression, or more frequent use of inversion, ellipsis, etc., compared to others).

However, the most difficult task for the translator is to successfully conform to the third rule of translation – that of maintaining the “ease”, fluency or naturalness of the original text – for the simple reason that he or she has to deal with the constraints of a target language that may differ greatly from that of the original.

In keeping with the entire tradition of translation theory, Tytler acknowledges the difficulty of meeting contradictory translation requirements at once, but his *Essay* only touches on the idea that the pursuit of naturalness it advocates is very likely to run counter to the principle of faithfulness. The only way to accomplish the “difficult union” of fidelity and ease is, according to Tytler, the translator’s identification with the author of the original work: “... [the translator] must adopt the very soul of his author, which must speak through his own organs” (Tytler, 1900: 114). The proof of naturalness is the impact of the translation upon its readers. At this point, Tytler introduces the interesting notion of an identical effect that the translation should have on its readers – an effect that should be equal to the one the original must have had on its own readers, and closely dependent on the naturalness of the translated text. As Tytler explains with the help of a pictorial metaphor, even though the translator does not use “the same colours with the original”, he is expected to “give his picture the same force and effect” (Tytler, 1900: 113) without copying the “touching of the original” but through “touches of his own” (Tytler, 1900: 113-114), and, very importantly, without disregarding the other two rules of translation (i.e. semantic and stylistic fidelity). This third requirement is, in his view, easier to meet in translations of poetry than in prose, considering the greater degree of freedom that (according to his theory of the acceptable violation of the original for the purpose of improving it) should be allowed in translating poetic works, especially lyrical verse.

Last but not least comes another supplementary condition for a good translation, which seems even harder to fulfil than naturalness. The title of Chapter XV of the *Essay* reads, “the genius of the translator should be akin to that of the original author” (Tytler, 1900: 204), which, however, as Tytler further explains, does not mean the translator of Cicero’s works must be an oratorical genius himself but rather a man with a discerning mind, capable of noticing the “full merits of the original”, of following the “reasoning” of the original, and of probing “with warmth and energy of feeling” into the beauties of the original composition (Tytler, 1900: 204-5), so that he may render them into the target language. This is fully achievable under certain circumstances. Even though a translator’s own merits as

an author of original works in his own right may not necessarily be conducive to a good translation of other authors' works, Tytler notes that the best literary translators are themselves authors of works belonging to the *same* literary species as the originals. To prove it, Tytler mentions Cicero's excellent translations from Plato, which he contrasts with Voltaire's failed translations from Shakespeare (due, on the one hand, to the great difference in the "character of [Voltaire's and Shakespeare's] poetical genius" (Tytler, 1900: 207), and on the other hand, to the great differences in "national character" (Tytler, 1900: 212) between the French and the English - the result of such disparities leading to the unacceptable transformation of "pious and superstitious Hamlet" into a "modern *philosophe*" (Tytler, 1900: 211), a "thorough sceptic and freethinker" (Tytler, 1900: 210). It is interesting to note Tytler's brief passing remark on the new (and quite modern-sounding) element of cultural differences that might influence the quality of translation when there is considerable cultural distance between author and translator. This intuition makes Tytler a predecessor of a long series of modern and contemporary scholars and writers on translation who affirm the necessity of combining linguistic skills and cultural competence for successful communication across cultures. At the same time, it anticipates linguistic anthropologists' debates centering on the late 20th-century concept of "languaculture" (Agar, 1994) that we have discussed elsewhere (Dumitrescu, 2012).

Despite the fact that his entire theory is built on the assumption that translation is a perfectly achievable task, Tytler admits there may be linguistic disparities between languages (such as the lack of equivalent resources – e.g., equivalent idioms) that can make it impossible for the target language to do justice to the original, or, in extreme cases, can even make the original untranslatable. This is apparent in epigrams, where the "point of wit" (Tytler, 1900: 148) around which the entire text is built may lie exactly in a well-chosen idiomatic expression, or a pun based on it, or in such prose writings as *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, which make abundant use of proverbs and idioms). Tytler exemplifies his statements on the difficulty of translating idioms by comparing various versions of the same original. Two translations of *Don Quixote*, one by P. A. Motteux and one by Tobias Smollett, the Scottish writer, lead him to reiterate his idea that the translator's literary talent (in this case Smollett's) does not necessarily ensure a translation superior to one done by someone with no "inventive genius" and no "great abilities" (Motteux) (Tytler, 1900:151). As in most books focusing on both the theoretical and the practical aspects of translation, Tytler's essay analyses a variety of linguistic aspects that may pose a serious challenge to translators. Next to idiomatic expressions he places obsolete vocabulary ("antiquated terms"), "simplicity of thought and expression" or "naïveté" (Tytler, 1900: 183), "vagueness", "parody" (Tytler, 1900: 198) – all of which require a lot of knowledge and discernment, as well as very good taste and moderation. Tytler's overview of the linguistic pitfalls that a good translator has to avoid clearly anticipates the rigorous linguistic approach taken by subsequent authors closer to our times, especially academics or translators, on the

technicalities of translation – two of the most notable examples from the Romanian academic environment that immediately come to mind being Leon D. Levițchi (Levițchi, 1975) and Domnița Dumitrescu (Dumitrescu, 1980), and their extremely useful handbooks of English-Romanian and Romanian-Spanish literary translation published decades ago.

2 The “Good Translation”. Towards a reader-response translation theory. Alexander Fraser Tytler, Matthew Arnold, and Eugene Nida

Even though Tytler’s ideas on the main requirements of an adequate translation may not radically differ from those of his contemporaries and most predecessors, and may only be accepted selectively if considered by today’s standards, it is interesting to note where his emphasis lies, and how his thinking (still apt to stimulate critical debate) reverberates beyond his time, into posterity. What is, after all, the essence of what he considers to be a “good translation”? He defines it in the very first chapter of his *Essay* as “that in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language as to be as distinctly apprehended and as strongly felt by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work”. (Tytler, 1900: 8-9)

The third general rule of translation (naturalness) laid down by him, and especially its corollary, the practical consequence of its application (the similar effect produced by the translation and the original on their respective readers, referred to in the above quote), have been recurrent themes in the theory of translation over the past centuries and are still being brought up, either re-formulated and updated or polemically re-examined, in present-day translation studies, as are the fidelity/naturalness or faithfulness/freedom pairs of opposites. One century later than Tytler, Matthew Arnold quotes Frances W. Newman, allegedly another supporter of naturalness and similarity of effect (whom he otherwise criticizes for not living up to his own theory in his translation practice), as saying that the reader should be “lulled into the illusion that he is reading an original work” and not a translation, and a poem translated into English should affect its readers “as the original may be conceived to have affected its natural hearers” (Arnold, 1914: 245). This is very close to both Tytler’s description, and more recent re-formulations by Peter Newmark or Eugene Nida (both of them prominent figures of 20th-century translation studies in the English-speaking world). In Newmark’s opinion, “the overriding purpose of translation should be to achieve an ‘equivalent effect’, i.e. to produce the same effect (or one as close as possible) on the readership of the translation as was obtained on the readership of the original” (Newmark, 1988: 48). The point of view expressed by Nida revolves around the centuries-old concept of semantic “equivalence”, eventually re-formulated by him as “dynamic equivalence”, which practically amounts to the notion of similar effect (both concepts being already present in Tytler’s work). Dynamic equivalence, conceived by Nida as the governing principle of Bible translation, involves the

priority given to the adequate rendering of the meaning of a text from one language into another (which is supposedly expected to produce an equivalent effect on the reader), at the expense of strictly literal, metaphrastic accuracy and the maintenance of the original grammatical structure that are likely to prevent the clear understanding of the original meaning. In his 1991 essay *Theories of Translation*, Nida adds a few nuances to the old concept by linking the possibility of equivalent effect to the cultural and linguistic differences existing between the original text and the translation, thus vaguely echoing Tytler's visionary mention of culture as a possible obstacle to perfect equivalence; ideally, he argues, readers should respond to a translation emotionally as well as cognitively in much the same manner as the original readers did, but this requirement is hard to fulfil if the cultures involved have too little in common – as in the case of English readers of a translation of West African healing incantations (Nida, 1991: 26). At the same time, Nida, like many other writers on translation both before and after him, admits that it is difficult to determine either the effect of the original or that of the translation on their respective readers.

Indeed, the numerous conceptualizations of equivalence and equivalent effect have been far from receiving unanimous approval over time, exactly for that reason: the impossibility of knowing exactly what that effect is (and was). In his lectures delivered at Oxford University in 1860, Matthew Arnold, one of the most authoritative critical voices of the 19th century, dismisses F. W. Newman's above-quoted statement (that a translator's task is to produce a version of the original that should ensure the same effect on its readers as the one the original must have had on its readers or listeners) with the same argument that anticipates Nida's and other writers' intuitions: there is no way one can ever know what that initial effect was. Instead of agonizing over uncertainties and impossibilities, Arnold suggests a solution to the problem by bringing a new element into the equation: the informed opinion of specialists. The translator can trust neither his own thoughts on how the original must have impacted its audience nor the opinions of the "ordinary reader" – and certainly not his own judgment of his work. What he can do instead is to seek competent guidance from scholars, for instance, university professors, people with a good knowledge of Greek – in the case of translations from Homer – and with "poetical taste and feeling", who are able to tell how *they* are affected by Homer's work, and whether the translation's effect on *them* is comparable to that of the original (Arnold, 1914: 246-247). Arnold obviously views translation through the lenses of his own intellectual and professional background: as a reputed literary critic and professor of poetry, he is justified in making recommendations and setting standards, and is certainly fully qualified to express informed opinions on the literature of the distant past, providing valuable guidelines to translators, as proved by his brilliantly terse definition of Homer's style (a style which a translator like F. W. Newman seems to have misconstrued), a rare combination of "plainness", "straightforwardness" (Arnold, 1914: 258), and "nobleness" (Arnold,

1914: 268): “Homer is not only rapid in movement, simple in style, plain in language, natural in thought, he is also, and above all, noble”. (Arnold, 1914: 273)

Arnold considers that a good translation can only be achieved by removing the barrier (i.e. different ways of thinking, of feeling and of using language) that usually stands between the translation and the original text, or between the translator and the original author, producing such effects as Pope’s “artificial manner” in his translations from Homer, which is at odds with the “plain naturalness” (Arnold, 1914: 251) of the original, or Cowper’s distorted view of Homer’s manner, which he wrongly compared to Milton’s. Like Tytler, Arnold seems to be implying that excellence in the translation of poetry is not conditioned by the translator being a great poet himself. The barrier standing in the way of a successful translation can only be broken by relying on scholarly opinion about the style and manner of the original, especially if the original belongs to the distant past and its proper understanding requires competent research.

Arnold also insists in a way reminiscent of Tytler on the fact that “manner” is as important as “matter”, and semantic fidelity is not enough if unaccompanied by stylistic faithfulness (Arnold, 1914: 253). To future English translators from Homer, he recommends a “Greek virtue” (i.e., “moderation”), or rather a convergence of “English vigour” (by which he means a special type of vigour which Homer is also said to have possessed) and “Greek grace” that may lead to capturing that “liquid clearness of an Ionian sky”, which he thinks is characteristic of Homer’s writing (Arnold, 1914: 312).

3. Modern translation theory. Eugene Nida, and the translator’s predicament

Eugene Nida adds his own contribution to clarifying the translator’s predicament and role, as well as the status (art vs. science) of translation. He is mainly interested in the specific problems raised by Bible translation, but his insights, opinions and conclusions may apply to other categories of translation as well. He writes about the problems, frustrations and dilemmas the translator has to deal with, starting from the commonsensical observation that “languages differ [so] radically from one another” that some people claim they “cannot communicate adequately in one language what has been said originally in another” (Nida, 1964: 2). A further difficulty any translator must come to terms with is the very dynamic nature of the linguistic medium, which is being shaped and re-shaped by a continuous process of change.

According to Nida, the greatest challenge posed by translation is the difficulty of constantly having to make the right choice between contradictory yet inseparable aspects of rendering a message from one language into another, such as the “conflict between form and meaning”, “the letter” and “the spirit”, or fidelity and freedom. Like many writers of the past and present, Tytler included, Nida

understands the difficulty of keeping the right balance between fidelity and freedom, and the dilemma of privileging one term of these oppositions over the other without affecting the quality of the translation: “If he attempts to approximate the stylistic qualities of the original, he is likely to sacrifice much of the meaning, while strict adherence to the literal content usually results in considerable loss of the stylistic flavor” (Nida, 1964: 2).

Finally, the translator is called upon to decide on his or her own role, and therefore on the status of translation among other intellectual pursuits – in other words, is translation an art or a science? Nida’s position is quite clear: to the extent to which the “transference” of a text from one language to another is governed by a number of “principles and procedures” (like the “rules” mentioned in the present article) and can therefore be the “subject of scientific description”, translation is undoubtedly a science; to the extent to which any “first-rate translation” of a literary work requires a great deal of “artistic sensitivity” on the part of the translator, it can certainly be considered an art, governed, in its turn, by specific aesthetic principles. He therefore concludes that the translation of literature is both an art and a science (Nida, 1964: 3).

4. Final remarks

The vast, ever-expanding area of translation studies, including a multitude of approaches from ancient times to the present day, will make any single writing on any subject of translation theory – the present article included – appear partial, limited, provisional or already dated. The above critical account of just a few major themes, based on a minimum number of concepts and a subjective choice of authors spanning three centuries of intellectual debate in the Anglo-American cultural environment (Alexander Fraser Tytler, Matthew Arnold and Eugene Nida, with passing references to a few others, both foreign and Romanian, whose influential works seem to be relevant to our topic), is certainly not exhaustive. Its aim has been, on the one hand, to contribute to a clearer understanding of the various challenges posed by literary translation that may be helpful to future translators, and on the other hand to emphasize the relevance of both old and new translation theory to present-day literary translation practice.

Although traditional triadic models (semantic fidelity, stylistic adequacy, and naturalness, plus their entire array of synonyms that have gained currency over the centuries) seem to have been relegated as truisms to the background of present-day translation theory, and replaced by more elaborate conceptualizations and a broader, more interdisciplinary perspective, they are still apt to stir intellectual debate (as proved by Nida’s effort of bringing the classic notion of equivalence back to the fore) and produce beneficial effects on translation practice (as demonstrated by their influence on a multitude of more recent handbooks of translation, two of which have been mentioned in the present article) – in other

words, they have not lost either their validity or their reverberating power, and may continue to be used as general guidelines by translators of literature.

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