Humor and Translation
Mark Herman

Fictional Translators and Interpreters

The May 2012 edition of this column was about fictional translation—original work masquerading as translation. This is covered to some extent in Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction, edited by Klaus Kaindl and Karlheinz Spitzl (John Benjamins, 2014), but the book consists mainly of articles about translators and interpreters who appear as characters in novels and films.

Unusually for a scholarly book, Transfiction includes the warning:

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Are translators and interpreters often depicted fictitiously? According to this book, more times than most of us might imagine. Nitsa Ben-Ari’s article “Reaching a dead-end—and then?” lists four types of novels that include translators or interpreters as characters: 1) post-colonial novels in which the protagonists are east-west hybrids fully at home nowhere; 2) post-structuralist novels with “death of the author” themes; 3) best-sellers, including thrillers and love stories; and 4) parodies.

The problems of fictional translators and interpreters can be depressingly familiar. In “From La dolce vita to La vita agra,” Giovanni Nadiani quotes:

And then you had to work every day of the week, including Sundays, so many pages a day to meet all your obligations and, if you fell ill and had no . . . [health insurance], you would have to pay out hard cash for the doctor and the medicines and, as your earnings would cease, you would be doubly in the soup. (Nadiani: 133; quoting and translating Luciano Bianciardi’s La vita agra [The Harsh Life], 1965:128)

Natalia Olshanskaya, in “From a faltering bystander to a spiritual leader: Re-thinking the role of translators in Russia,” writes:

For several centuries, the immediate impact of translated literature on Russian culture has promoted a variety of ideological debates … from Pushkin’s famous 1830 diary entry, “Translators are the postal horses of the enlightenment” … to [Turgenev’s 1854 letter about a translator of one of his novels], “What a shameless Frenchman!” to [Nabokov’s 1981 rant about “the three grades of evil” committed by translators], “errors due to ignorance, … [omission of words or passages,] … [and patting] a masterpiece … into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public. This [last] is a crime, to be punished by the stocks as plagiarists were in the shoe buckle days. (Olshanskaya: 142-43)

In “The apocalyptical interpreter and the end of Europe: Alain Fleischer’s Prolongations,” Dörte Andres tells of novels that satirize international conferences, “drawing on barely conceivable, but all too real incidents” (272). He quotes from A Heart So White (London: Vintage, 2003) and Margaret Jull Costa’s translation of Corazón tan blanco (London: Vintage, 1992), by Javier Marías:

… the task of the translator or interpreter of speeches and reports is boring in the extreme, … because of the identical and fundamentally incomprehensible jargon universally used by all parliamentarians, delegates, ministers, politicians, deputies,
ambassadors, experts, and representatives of all kinds from every nation of the world. (Andres: 278; quoting from A Heart So White, 2003: 47)

As has often been mentioned in this column, translation has historically been an endeavor open to women even when other forms of writing were not. At least one misogynist could not abide even this, at least not if the translator were independent, educated, and feminist: “She opened her jaws and swallowed him comfortably” (Woods: 288). So said Wyndham Lewis in his 1930 novel The Apes of God, about a fictionalized Willa Muir, swallowing up her supposedly emasculated husband Edwin Muir. The Muirs were the first English-language translators of Franz Kafka. The quotation is taken from “Willa Muir: The ‘fictional’ translator: How Muir self-fictionalized her translations of Kafka’s work,” by Michelle Woods. Muir was not only fictionalized by Lewis but also fictionalized herself in Mrs. Muttoe and the Top Storey, a novel which, according to Woods, reveals more about her life as a translator than does Belonging, her non-fictional memoir.

The role of women is the main subject of Daniela Beuren’s “Neither is a translator, unless they’re trans-authers [sic]: Confusion and (re-) gendering in feminist fiction/translation.” Beuren discusses two translators:

Cassandra Reilly, in Barbara Wilson’s Gaudi Afternoon (1991), who is puzzled by the ever-changing gender composition of her social environment, and Reta Winters, in Carol Shields’s Unless (2002), who is at a loss in her role as mother and finds comfort in her work as author and translator—a transauthor, or, in a re-gendered construction: Transauthor. (Beuren: 316)

Alice Casarini, in “Magical mediation: The role of translation and interpreting in the narrative world of Harry Potter,” considers translation within the Potterverse. She writes:

… the frequent need for mediation between non-magical English and the languages of the wizarding world, and on the actual diegetic role of mediation [that is, as explicitly used by one or more of the characters] as a powerful tool to escape from dangerous situations, to complete elaborate tasks, and to foster the characters’ process of self-definition. (Casarini: 329)

According to Casarini:

The empowering, literally life-infusing effect of translation fits perfectly in Rowling’s attempt to portray a world in which language is the ultimate form of magic. (Casarini: 341)

Of course, translation in the real world was also important for the success of Harry Potter:

The seven volumes of the saga … have been translated into seventy-three languages … Some translations have also been revised to accommodate the saga’s increasingly experienced readers, who started to advocate a less domesticated rendition as they grew more and more acquainted with the story. (Casarini: 329)

No book on fictional translators would be complete without mentioning their role in science fiction. In “Future imperfect: Translation and translators in science fiction and films,” Monika Wozniak states:

All the translators featured in works of fiction are fictional, but somehow, in science fiction, they seem just a bit more fictional than in other genres. (Wozniak: 345)

In addition to discussing translation machines, and the tacit implication in many stories and novels that a “single language will in some way replace the multilingual world of today” (349), Wozniak argues that:

… in the majority of science-fiction works the issue of translation is not considered so much as an interesting linguistic or philosophical problem, but as a kind of nuisance that must be somehow dealt with efficiently and rapidly in order to preserve the plausibility of the imaginary world. The creativity of the proposed solutions as to how [to] overcome communication problems with extraterrestrials is quite impressive if not always based on a scientific foundation, and ranges from highly unrealistic to outright stupid. (Wozniak: 349)

It is interesting that the two most discussed novels in Transfiction are both about the Holocaust. Each has an entire article devoted to it and both are also mentioned in other articles throughout the book.

The first is Даниэль Штайн, переводчик (2006) by Людмила Улицкая, translated into English in 2011 by Arch Tait as Daniel Stein, Interpreter, by Ludmila Ulitskaya, for which Tait won the PEN Literature in Translation award. The article devoted to it is entitled “Interpreting Daniel Stein: Or what happens when fictional translators get translated,” by Brian James Baer.

The second, Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated (Harper Perennial, 2002), is discussed in the article “Translation as a source of humor,” by Waltraud Kolb. Despite its subject matter, this novel does indeed contain much humor and will be the subject of next month’s column.