

Preamble

Mann's fate

Thomas Mann knew exactly why translation mattered. Every language in the world is a minority language because no single language is spoken by the majority of the world's population. If you happen to be a writer working in one of these minority languages, especially if it is not one of the larger minority languages like English or Chinese but a smaller one like German, your books need to be translated if they are to find a readership beyond the confines of their original tongue. If your work is translated, especially if it is translated into several languages or into one of the world's larger languages, it can reach audiences many times the size of that of the original publication. But there is a corollary. For those potentially vast audiences who read your work in translation because they are unable to read it in the original, the translations determine the impression those readers will form of you as a writer. Through translation writers can escape the prison house of their language, but they are then dependent on translators for the perception of their work in the wider world. Books which are translated may carry the original writer's name on the cover, but the actual words between the covers are written by translators.

Realizing this, Thomas Mann showed a keen interest in the translation of his books into English. His first and highly successful novel, *Buddenbrooks*, had come out in German in 1900; by the time his most ambitious work till then, *The Magic Mountain*, appeared in 1924, the American publisher Alfred Knopf had acquired the exclusive right to distribute Mann's work in the United States. There is grim irony in the fact that in the course of the 1930s the Nazis would suppress Mann's books in his native Germany and even deprive him of his German citizenship. In 1938 he emigrated to the US. There, a German writer in exile with no prospect of having his books distributed in Germany, he was more dependent on translation than he could ever have imagined. It was Mann's fate to be translated.

How well was he served by his main translator into English, the American Helen Lowe-Porter, who would be responsible for English versions of *Buddenbrooks* (1924), *The Magic Mountain* (1927), the four volumes of *Joseph and His Brothers* (1934–44), *Doctor Faustus* (1948) and other titles? The question recently received a pretty decisive answer, even though the

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arbiter's conclusions caused a brief flurry of controversy. Let us look into the issue for a moment.

In a page-long article in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 13 October 1995 Timothy Buck wiped the floor with Helen Lowe-Porter's translations. He subsequently made his case at greater length in a virulent but well-documented essay in a scholarly journal (Buck 1996). The *TLS* article drew several responses. First Lawrence Venuti criticized Timothy Buck's criticism of the Lowe-Porter translations, then David Luke, himself a translator of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, leapt to Buck's defence, Venuti responded again, so did Luke, and finally, in January 1996, the two surviving daughters of Helen Lowe-Porter added their contribution.

There are some interesting things to be learned from Timothy Buck's attack, and from the responses to it. Buck begins by stressing that Helen Lowe-Porter produced "the authorized translations of nearly all of Mann's *oeuvre*, so that in most cases it is on her mediation that anglophones unversed in German are dependent for access to Mann's work" (1995:17). He recognizes that the translations proved commercially successful. Over a hundred thousand copies of *Doctor Faustus* were printed for the Book of the Month Club edition alone. On the whole, they were received favourably to very favourably by the critics. Buck also concedes that Lowe-Porter's prose generally reads well and that she "would often come up with imaginative, idiomatic renderings" (1996:910). But that is as far as it goes. The overall verdict is devastating. The translations are "seriously flawed", "unsound, erratic", marred by "unnecessary, arbitrary deviations from the author's texts" and an "extraordinary number of major or even catastrophic errors", the work, in short, of "an ambitious, startlingly underqualified translator, who plainly did not know her own limitations" (1996:919). The judgement is backed up with abundant evidence. Buck details Lowe-Porter's inadequate grasp of German by listing numerous omissions and blatant mistranslations (of the kind: *breitbeinig*, meaning 'with his legs apart', rendered as 'with big bones'). He denounces the unwarranted liberties she takes when she refashions Mann's syntax and roughly chops up the carefully crafted German sentences, adds touches or entire phrases of her own, and puts an insidious slant on some passages, altering the reader's perception of who does what in particular scenes. While young Tadzio in *Death in Venice* is described as 'turning his profile towards the watching Aschenbach', in Lowe-Porter's version it is Aschenbach who is 'sitting so that he could see Tadzio in profile' (Buck 1995:17; 1996:914). The imprecision and licence of Lowe-Porter's translation, Buck observes, "patently calls in question the very use here of the term 'translation'" (1995:17).

Buck also delves into the background of the whole affair. He points out that it was the American publisher Alfred Knopf and not the author who had the right to choose the translator, and that Knopf expressly overruled Mann's preference for another candidate. He contrasts the very different views which Mann and Lowe-Porter held on the subject of translation.

Mann himself, who, incidentally, doubted in 1925 that a woman would be up to the task of translating so intellectually demanding a novel as *The Magic Mountain*, once wrote in a letter to Lowe-Porter that in principle he favoured translations of his work that were “as literal and accurate as the foreign language will allow”. Lowe-Porter took a much freer approach and declared in the Translator’s Note to *Buddenbrooks* that she had set herself “the bold task of transferring the spirit first and the letter so far as might be” (Buck 1996:901–902). Nevertheless, Mann publicly praised her efforts, expressing his reservations only in private or in guarded, ambivalent statements. Perhaps, Buck suggests, he knew the publisher would not replace her anyway, perhaps he was too busy with other things, or reluctant to endanger the flow of dollar royalties, or maybe his personal feelings of friendship for his translator outweighed his misgivings about her competence. Whatever the reasons, Buck concludes, we are landed with ‘a pseudo-Mann’, English versions undeserving to be called translations. Which only highlights the need for a fresh, reliable translation. Alas, the new translation of *The Magic Mountain* by John Woods published in 1995, though better than Lowe-Porter’s, is still not good enough. The solution lies with the publishers. They should provide an ‘English Mann’ that does justice to the real Mann (Buck 1997).

The details of the brief polemic that followed Timothy Buck’s *TLS* article do not need to detain us. In speaking up for Lowe-Porter, Lawrence Venuti focused on two points. Our contemporary standards of accuracy in translation, he argued, differ from those in the past; and translation always involves re-interpretation according to the values prevalent in the here and now of the translator. David Luke, siding with Timothy Buck against Venuti, replied with examples showing that the unacceptable frequency of basic howlers in both Lowe-Porter’s and Woods’ translations were not a matter of interpretation but simply of a defective command of German grammar and a failure to make proper use of the dictionary, demonstrating *en passant* Venuti’s own less than firm hold on the German language. Venuti wisely kept his silence after this, but in a final contribution Lowe-Porter’s daughters quoted at length from a 1943 letter by their mother in which she spoke about her endeavour to produce in her translations an overall effect comparable to that of the original, reminding the reviewer that he “has to look at the whole, not pick out sentences, if he means to judge the translation at all”.

Who won the argument in the end? Not Lawrence Venuti, so much is certain. His point about interpretation blew up in his face, and the one about changing canons of accuracy remained a dead letter. The way Helen Lowe-Porter’s daughters used their mother’s own words to highlight her philosophy of translation (their term) was cunning and timely but overshot the mark, failing to address the central objection concerning grammar and the dictionary which Buck and Luke had raised. No, there can be little doubt that Buck and Luke emerged the clear winners. Luke’s conclusion that “[t]he continuing circulation of debased versions of one of the great German writers of this century is a continuing scandal” therefore

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also stands. New and better renderings are required. The wish to see the debased versions replaced with adequate translations provided the motive for Timothy Buck's public attack in the first place. If as a result the publishers are shamed into appropriate action, culture will have been done a good turn and the world will be a better place. So the case is closed.

Or is it? If it were, this book would end here. Why go on if there are no more questions to be asked? But maybe there are further questions that are worth asking. After all, however deplorable they may be, Helen Lowe-Porter's translations exist. They were and are read. We cannot simply wish them away. Whether we lament or applaud their presence and their impact, they are facts of life, an undeniable part of history, like East Enders, or Margaret Thatcher's memoirs, or Van Meegeren's forged Vermeers. Even if we wish the Lowe-Porter translations had never been produced, the mere fact of their existence, and of their effect on generations of readers, should be reason enough to take a closer look at them, not just in order to damn them but to try to account for their appearance.

That means approaching them from a somewhat different angle. Critical evaluation, the apportioning of praise or censure, need not be the exclusive or even the primary aim. Perhaps explanation can be. If we take this other path, we could begin by taking stock, not of what we feel there should have been, but of what, for better or for worse, there *is*. Applied to the Lowe-Porter translations this might mean accepting them as they are, warts and all, and then trying to figure out why they look the way they do, what factors and conditions account for their production, why they were received as they were, what actual impact they had, why there are some – Timothy Buck among them – who think they should not be called translations at all.

Specific questions that could be asked about this case include the following:

- What about the publisher Alfred Knopf's right to pick a translator of his own choosing, against the author's wishes if necessary? How did such legal arrangements come into being? How do they affect the selection of translators in other cases? What were the relations between publishers, authors and translators at the time, or at other times?
- Assuming we can differentiate between plain grammatical errors and interpretive choices (can we?), what do we make of Helen Lowe-Porter's more deliberate omissions, additions and alterations? How much room for manoeuvre did she in fact have, and who determined this? Should we not, before passing judgement on the translator, compare her position and her performance with that of some of her contemporaries? Why is it that she apparently worked so slowly – are there personal, social, economic reasons for it? Is it at all relevant that despite Mann's misgivings about a woman translator's ability to cope with *The Magic Mountain* she saw herself, in her own words, as “a confirmed and express proponent of what in those long-ago days was called ‘woman’s rights’” (Thirlwall 1966:11)?

- Considering that the Lowe-Porter translations were generally well received by the critics and proved commercially successful, could it be that the translator was correctly anticipating reader expectations? Can we perhaps account for the nature of the translations in these terms? How common or idiosyncratic were Helen Lowe-Porter's views on translation at the time? How does her output compare with that of other translators working for the same publisher, with other literary translators working from German, with other translators generally?
- Is it at all possible to gauge the effect of translations on actual readers, in this case for example by comparing German readers' impressions of Thomas Mann in German with the responses of Anglophone readers of Lowe-Porter's versions? Are there other ways of measuring the real impact of her translations? What if, as Lawrence Venuti suggests but fails to substantiate, there are differences between what was permissible in translations in the 1920s and '30s and what we want to see in a translation today? How can we find out about these things?
- Should we also try to assess the assessors? Timothy Buck tells us unambiguously what he associates with 'faithful translation': the translator should neither add to nor subtract from the content of the original, respect the author's intentions and refrain from offering 'wild interpretations' (1996:904, 911, 914). Could it be that his criticism of Helen Lowe-Porter's practice reveals little more than the clash between diverging conceptions of what translation is or should be? Is translation possible without adding or subtracting or interpreting, wildly or not, and who is to judge? What if we set this case against translations from other times and places in which the original content was added to or subtracted from, authorial intentions were violated and wild interpretations were rife – and the texts in question were still called 'translations'?

The list is obviously not exhaustive, but it gives an indication. In all these cases, the questions are geared not so much to gauging the quality of individual translations, upholding particular principles as to what constitutes a good translation, or guaranteeing the quality of new translations to be made. Rather, the aim is to delve into translation as a cultural and historical phenomenon, to explore its context and its conditioning factors, to search for grounds that can explain why there is what there is.

If we set out on a course of this kind, other, more general questions readily follow. Questions such as:

- If there are conflicting views on whether a given text is a translation or not, how do we resolve the matter? Can we distinguish between what is translation and what is not? On what basis? How do we know a translation when we see one?

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- If we want to analyse a given translation and characterize its relation with the original text, how do we go about it? Are there set procedures, methodologies, rules of thumb that we can apply?
- Can we measure or otherwise assess the impact of translations? Are there models for doing this? How do we handle the values and connotations, the tell-tale signs of interpretive moves, the ideological slant entering translation, *any* translation, whether it is labelled ‘good’ or ‘bad’, praised or damned?
- What about ideas about translation – where do we find them, what determines their nature, how do they change and develop? How do we read, interpret and account for them – and where do we then place our own ideas, my own ideas about translation? What is their relevance for the practice of translation anyway? And to what extent do ideas about translation and translatability have cultural significance?
- What about the interrelations between these various questions? For example, can we study individual translations without taking into account ideas about what constituted (good) translation at the time? Can we study translations one by one, or should we look at larger wholes, other translations (which ones?), the broader context? How much context do we need? Are there ways of determining the historical significance of translation at a given time, for a given community?

It is with questions like these that the present book is concerned. Not all of them will be answered. As will become clear, some of the questions themselves are more complex and challenging than may appear at a first glance. Others rebound on the questioner. Of course, they may not be the correct questions to ask of translation – who can tell? But they are both productive and realistic, in that they take translation as it comes rather than as we might have wished it. They focus less on what translation should have been, could have been, or might have been, than on what it *is* – or better: how it appears to be, how it presents itself to us.