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DOI:10.2478/clb-2024-0007



AUTHOR INVISIBILITY VERSUS TRANSLATOR VISIBILITY IN THE WORKS OF ELENA FERRANTE

Abstract: The main goal of the presentation is to address the topic of invisibility—in this case, applied to the role and status of the writer, i.e. Elena Ferrante—compared to the visibility of the translator(s) of her most celebrated works. I consider that the present paper provides a fresh perspective and a shifting paradigm from the more traditional approach to the translator’s invisibility, inviting a dialogue of several voices: publishers, editors, translators, readers, and writer—mediated by the text which serves as the best connector and interpreter of the stories told by the author and skillfully interpreted by a translator. Author Invisibility, in this case, plays an important role in the need to promote the book—the story itself will help circulate the original text. Therefore, the mastery of the translator (visible) will also indirectly promote the author (invisible). To sum up, the presentation sets forth a novel approach to visibility/invisibility both in authorship and translation.

Keywords: visibility vs invisibility in translation, author–translator interaction, Elena Ferrante, world literature

“Dealings with the world... are entirely ours. But the words—the written form in which we enclose them, attentive to the red margins of the notebooks—are not. We have to accept the fact that no word is truly ours. We have to give up the idea that writing miraculously releases a voice of our own.”¹
Elena Ferrante, *In the Margins*

1. Elena Ferrante, *In the Margins: On the Pleasures of Reading and Writing* (Europa Editions, 2022), 32–33.

Starting from the interplay of visibility and invisibility in translation, scholarly defined and theorized by Lawrence Venuti, the present paper sets the task of addressing a different perspective on the same topic and challenge the commonly accepted thesis that the translator's activity is primarily characterized by a degree of invisibility, despite the endeavor to enable access to the original, unlike the author's visibility as the creator of the source text. According to Venuti, invisibility is a term in reference to the "translator's situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. It refers to two mutually determining phenomena: one is an illusionistic effect of discourse, of the translator's own manipulation of English ... the other is the practice of reading and evaluating translations."² Fluent reading of a translated text in addition to the illusion of transparency created by the translator represents an endeavor to ensure "easy readability" and "precise meaning" in the rendered text: "The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text."³ Therefore, my goal to be accomplished throughout the present study is to showcase the relevance and visibility of the translator as opposed to the invisibility and apparent anonymity in the case of the celebrated female writer, Elena Ferrante.

It is essential to set forth some preliminary considerations regarding the commonly acknowledged approach to the translator's invisibility, clarifications that prove to be a prerequisite for further analysis and, particularly, for the challenging perspective I propose in the present study. Admittedly, the two opposite terms can only exist together as they mutually reveal their potential and relevance: more specifically, a certain degree of invisibility in the translation process, evinced by an absence or a diminished degree of promotion of the translator's name and effort, equally creative and scientific, correlated with the translator's contribution to the increased visibility of the translated text, with a substantial subsequent role and impact on the accession to world literature. Translation serves as connector, between the center and the periphery, as well as linguistic and cultural mediator, imbued with notions related to inequality of power relations, hierarchy, domination; hence translation is tightly connected to world literature as defined by Helgesson and Thomsen: "literature belongs to the world at large not confined to its cultural

2. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995), 1.

3. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 2.

origin but speaks to people everywhere”⁴ where “connection is a minimum condition for world literature.”⁵ Furthermore, David Damrosch conceptualized world literature in one of his fundamental studies as reading texts which are inherently culture-bound where translated texts facilitate the interaction between source and target languages and cultures, mediating an accurate interpretation of textual and authorial otherness, reaching out to a distant audience as “we live today in a great age of translation.”⁶ Damrosch’s theory about translation and world literature supports the main thesis of the present study regarding the role of translation and translators in the promotion of texts and revealing the identity of the author: “Read intelligently, an excellent translation can be seen as an expansive transformation of the original, a concrete manifestation of cultural exchange and a new stage in a work’s life as it moves from its first home ... Translation is at once a linguistic and a cultural project.”⁷

Paraphrasing Maria Tymoczko with her scholarly approach to the distinction between “bringing the text to the audience” and “bringing the audience to the text,”⁸ one of the main functions and important outcomes of translating Elena Ferrante’s novels is bringing the author to the audience. Mention should be made, at this point in the analysis, that the circulation of literature worldwide is heavily influenced by the translation process, theoretically endorsed by Venuti, particularly in the definition of domestication—where the translator brings the foreign culture to the reader—and foreignization—where the translator takes the reader abroad to a foreign culture.⁹ This approach is further enhanced by Bourdieu’s notion of power in relation to the translated text in cultural context.¹⁰ Likewise, based on the idea that a translated text empowers the source culture, in this case the translator empowers the author contributing to increased visibility, in addition to performing the role as interpreter of the text and mediator of world literature circulation. Paraphrasing Elena Ferrante in her pithy set of

4. Stefan Helgesson and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Literature and the World* (Routledge, 2019), 78.

5. Helgesson and Thomsen, *Literature*, 84.

6. David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2, 66.

7. Damrosch, *How*, 66.

8. Maria Tymoczko, “Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation,” in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, eds. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (Routledge, 2002), 42.

9. See Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (Routledge, 1998).

10. See David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

essays entitled *In the Margins*, there are two equally important voices in a literary text: the “I” who writes and the “I” who translates, where the latter one should echo, endorse, enhance and second the former one, thus increasing each other’s potential.¹¹ Translation, in addition to literature in general, is the most effective means of transgressing borders to the wider realm of world literature: “In an editorial for *The Guardian* ... Ferrante pays tribute to translators as the real border-crossing artists capable of dissolving boundaries and enabling the circulation of ideas ... ‘Translators transport nations into other nations, they are the first to reckon with distant modes of feeling’.”¹²

The present study, as well as the sources consulted for my analysis, builds on Damrosch’s idea of world literature, articulating the theory of “circulation of literary texts, ideas and forms in translation beyond their culture of origin and outside their national linguistic boundaries showcasing translation as the scholarly, literary, artistic means of spreading works within a literary system outside their original culture.”¹³ Furthermore, the creative, laborious, sometimes even painstaking effort and craftsmanship of the translator makes possible such a transfer of linguistic meaning and cultural context to another area of the world, imbued with linguistic specificity, cultural otherness, and historical tradition, enabling an interaction and a meaningful dialogue between author and reader mediated by translation: “the great conversation of world literature takes place on two very different levels: among authors who know and react to one another’s work, and in the mind of the reader, where works meet and interact in ways that have little to do with cultural and historical proximity.”¹⁴

Translation plays an important role not only in dissemination of literature worldwide but also its duration, to a greater or lesser extent, both as a literary genre and through its impact on and reception by audience. A distinction should be made here between the reasons that make a literary text endure and what makes a translated text endure, therefore the characteristics contributing to an increased visibility, longer duration, enhanced interest from the audience and the readership engagement with the literary text, ultimately shaped by the translator’s craftsmanship. In the case of Elena Ferrante, there is enough evidence that the author and her entire literary output has become an integral part of world literature, a wholeness which turns

11. Ferrante, *In the Margins*, 33, 36.

12. Stilian Milkova Rousseva, *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 2.

13. Milkova, *Elena Ferrante*, 2.

14. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 298.

out to be in a most successful opposition to what she herself defined as *frantumaglia* with strong connotations of fragmentation, a painful word imbued with childhood reminiscence, fraught with collapse, contradiction and confusion, as well as an unhappy and unpleasant mood, a mysterious state of mind that proved to be the source of all misfortune and suffering.¹⁵

I believe that Elena Ferrante's *Frantumaglia* is actually a gift about her own life and writing, a prerequisite companion to reading her most celebrated and best-known novels that brought her fame, due to revealing the most personal intricacies and torments of her personal life and creative mind. The book is an embodiment of all the answers eagerly sought by readers, or any type of audience in general, facilitated by a significant dialogue with editors, publishers, journalists, and translators. Elena Ferrante's *Frantumaglia* reverses the commonly accepted interest in the role and visibility of the translator, addressing the challenging question of the author's identity, stemming from the seemingly entitled curiosity of the media regarding the real figure and the public face of the author, a curiosity epitomized by the intriguing statement that the book is meaningful though the name is apparently irrelevant.¹⁶ This is the right moment to ask an honest question: which is more important in selecting a book to read, the story itself or the fame of the author? Ferrante pleads for the story—worth reading—as prevailing over the name of the author, although this might be a totally different perspective than the one undertaken by the media, with a heightened proclivity for disclosing private details of the author's life in an attempt to raise readers' interest or curiosity in the recently released book. Ferrante is most convincing in her plea that her choice of concealing her identity works to her advantage as she feels in full control of the personal details to be consciously revealed as opposed to what will remain private regarding her life.¹⁷ All public details about a writer's life are completely the intended choice of the author, therefore, the difference between private life as an individual and the public life entailed by writing, publication and promotion will be managed by the author him/herself, despite the fact that sometimes editorial promotion tends to make a writer's life, name, image, opinions more important than the work itself.¹⁸

It is evident here that the translator of literary texts performs at least three roles: mediator of cultures, broker of meanings and

15. Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: Viața și scrisul meu* (Pandora M, 2019), 97.

16. Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 42.

17. Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 59, 176.

18. Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 78–79, 82.

dragoman with diplomatic connotations, bridging the book's connection with two fields: commerce and culture. Furthermore, André Lefevere believed that trust in and reliability of the translator are essential to the process of facilitating acceptance and reception of the translated text, hence a translated text depends on matters of authority, legitimacy and power.¹⁹ It is very important to note the method set forth and advocated by Elena Ferrante, pleading again in favor of reading the story itself rather than reading by deputy and relying heavily, i.e. subject to biases, on the other's opinions about the book proper, be they literary critics, reviewers, or even the media. Therefore, her intended invisibility strongly supports the reader's reliance on and direct, unmediated engagement with the book, exploring the story through unfiltered glasses of promotion and, even more important, unhindered by the nudging companionship of the author, hence the book will enjoy an autonomous life. To sum up, I believe this is a plea for honesty in literature, as Elena Ferrante defined it—telling the truth in such a way that only literary fiction can make possible—and it is opposed to the demands of the media for faces, real-life characters and personal details. This is very much in keeping with Elena Ferrante's quest for truth in any piece of literary writing.²⁰ Mention should be made that she entertained a relevant communication with her translators, providing insightful details or clarifications, a sine-qua-non for any accurate literary translation in view of turning the text from a potential *frantumaglia* into a coherently flowing text. The concept of *frantumaglia*, subject to multiple levels of interpretation, is reflective of the fragmentation characteristic to modernist fiction, where "the centre cannot hold"—recalling W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming"²¹—in pursuit of coherence between private and public life and equally between fiction and reality. To conclude, the author, in this case Elena Ferrante, may be invisible, but her books are alive, visible, independent, appreciated and traveling across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

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19. André Lefevere, "Composing the Other," in *Postcolonial Translation*, 88.

20. Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 296, 299.

21. W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama and Prose*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Palgrave Macmillan), 80.

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