

**Poetry as a heuristic object of discourse in translation theory.  
Preliminary notes for the resurrection of  
poetry translation in the age of globalization**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, especially since the sociological turn and the advent of globalization in Translation Studies, very few academic articles or book chapters on literary translation have focused on poetry as a literary form. A major shift to prose has mirrored the recent trends on the international translation market. However, in his introduction to a guest-edited issue of *Translation Studies*, Lawrence Venuti rightfully argued that poetry should be “moved closer to the center of Translation Studies” (2011, p. 127), as “[it] is more likely to encourage experimental strategies that can reveal what is unique about translation as a linguistic and cultural practice.” (p. 127) The present article looks at how this literary form has been exploited by a number of scholars pertaining to various schools of thought, in an attempt at demonstrating its heuristic value for the academic discourse in Translation Studies. The analysis suggests that the potentialities of poetry translation are countless, both from a discursive and from a conceptual point of view.

**Keywords**

Poetry translation, discourse analysis, metadiscourse, Translation Studies

## 1. Introduction

No matter how long-standing the controversy related to the untranslatability of poetry, its undeniably translatable character is demonstrated by the sheer number of translated poems; poetry has been and still is translated in all literatures. What we find interesting in relation to poetry translation is the fact that, even if most criticism on this topic has been centered on the difficulty or impossibility of adequately translating a poetic text, the discourse of Translation Studies has often used poetry as a literary form and poems as textual instances to make the case *for* translatability (Pound, 1960; Bellos, 2011; Jones, 2011; etc.).

The aim of this paper is then to examine how the academic discourse<sup>1</sup> in Translation Studies—be it normative, descriptive, functionalist, etc.—was formulated around a genre that has been traditionally considered the epitome of untranslatability. We will hopefully add to the existing scholarship on the metalanguage of translation (Gambier & Doorslaer, 2009; St. André 2010; etc.) an approach which seeks to counter the popular untranslatability fallacy in relation to poetry and to demonstrate the effectiveness of this literary form as a heuristic device. We will see at what point during the articulation of a translation theory the author brings poetry into the research argument as a forceful persuasive tool and what discursive strategies are employed in doing so. To this end, we will use Louis Kelly’s structure of a complete theory of translation, which ideally “has three components: specification of function and goal; description and analysis of operations; and critical comment on relationships between goal and operations.” (Kelly, 1979, p. 1)

The analysis is based on the first edition of Lawrence Venuti’s *Translation Studies Reader* (2000), a wide-ranging collection of classic essays and important recent statements on the theory and practice of translation. Our paper examines the role played by poetry in contributions signed by various authors, like Hans Vermeer and Roman Jakobson, but it draws mainly on three seminal and widely cited essays in the field: Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” (translated into English by Harry Zohn), Eugene Nida’s “Principles of Correspondence”, and Antoine Berman’s “The Task of the Translator” (into English by L. Venuti). Our choice was influenced by several factors: first, by the traction they gained in the discourse of our emerging discipline during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; second, by the very diverse profile of their authors: Bible scholar Nida, critic and philosopher Benjamin, and philosopher and theorist of translation Berman—and all, at the same time, translation practitioners; and finally, by the diversity of languages and cultures in which these articles were originally written (German, English, and French).

Although “native speakers of English wrote relatively little of the Western translation theory that has proved influential during this century” (Venuti, 2000, p. 3), it is arguably through English that most texts originally written in other languages have been influencing Translation Studies discourse. Therefore the present metadiscourse analysis, especially the examination of those passages related to intentionality, informativeness, and situatedness, is carried out on the English translations of the German and French originals; however, we shall refer to the original texts in order to verify the rightfulness of our stylistic analyses (mainly in relation to authors’ lexical choices).

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘academic discourse’ we understand essays that have contributed to the emergence and development of Translation Studies as a discipline, although some of their authors have never been part of the academia (i.e. Walter Benjamin).

Before performing a discourse analysis on a selection of texts in *The Reader*, we take a short detour which is meant to bring more evidence in support of the non-dysphoric nature of poetry translation, of utmost importance for the present study. If theorists have talked about this naturally unpleasant feature either in relation to translation seen as a task (Berman, 1985) or as excluding the self (translating *le sens des autres* – Augé in Brisset, 1998), then we may safely assume it could be also interpreted in relation to translation as a process which involves loss. And where is loss more likely to appear than in poetry translation?

For his 2007 *La traduction en citations*, Jean Delisle selected 3117 citations, divided into 106 categories, with an average number of 29 citations per category. Obviously, there is an unequal distribution of citations, which results in some categories with as few as 7 entries (e.g. *adaptation*) and others with as many as 178 (e.g. *métaphores de la traduction*) or 100 (*métaphores du traducteur*). Under *poetry*, Delisle grouped a fairly high number of citations (84), which is striking in the context of almost zero representation of other literary forms as categories (only 24 citations under *traduction théâtrale* and 20 under *vers/prose*). After we cross-referenced *poème*, *poésie* or *poète* in the index with the dysphoric categories of *art ingrat* (26 entries), *art difficile* (56 entries) or *problèmes de traduction* (20 entries) we did not get any results. Nor did we after cross-referencing the same three terms with the categories of *traduisibilité* (29 citations) or *intraduisibilité* (43).

We examined in what categories in Delisle's book the words *poésie* and *poème* appear, apart from the corresponding categories of *Poetry* or *Verse/Prose*. The only occurrence of the word *poésie* is under *Bible* and refers to the non-poetic style of French translations of the Scriptures (cf. Paul Claudel as cited in Delisle, 2007, p. 25). As far as *poème* is concerned, it appears under *mauvaises traductions*—as the most likely victim of bad translation (cf. Henri Meschonnic as cited in Delisle, 2007, p. 167); under *nature de la traduction*—as the epitome of a translation which might very often remain unfinished (cf. André Pézard as cited in Delisle, 2007, p. 209); under *perte, entropie*—to illustrate the risk of loss in poetry translation; under *promotion, valorisation de la traduction*—the imperfectly translated poem as a much better alternative to absolute silence (cf. Arthur Miller as cited in Delisle, 2007, p. 237); and, finally, under *rapport auteur/traducteur*—as the literary form which places translators in a difficult position not only in relation with the author of the poems, but also in relation to themselves (cf. Philippe de Rothschild as cited in Delisle, 2007, p. 249). Delisle's dictionary might not be the most exhaustive source, yet we think it is a relevant one, one which contains only two definitions which mention the potentially dysphoric nature of poetry translation.

If a literary form is not particularly (un)translatable, it means there is no reason to mention it in an argument on (un)translatability. Then why is poetry as a form of literature mentioned in various theories in Translation Studies, if not for the difficulty or impossibility of adequately translating it? What is it that determines Translation Studies scholars and literati in general to talk about poetry in contexts exclusively related to translation as a process, but to avoid it in essays, monographs or studies on literary translation in the context of globalization, for example? While its "tenuous position in the process of commodification" (Venuti, 2011, p. 127) makes poetry fall behind as a research topic in the context of global translation flows, its potential as a heuristic discourse device needs to be explored further.

## 2. Poetry in The Translation Studies Reader (the 1st edition)

Our interest in the recent underrepresentation of poetry in Translation Studies had also been pursued from a more technological point of view. A statistical survey<sup>2</sup> run on 39 issues of the reputed Canadian Translation Studies journal *META : Journal des traducteurs* with the help of TextStat 2.0 and its built-in concordancer had showed that only 6 articles between 2001 and 2010 were dedicated to poetry translation *per se*, while 53% of the words naming various literary forms were related to poetry. This was an indication that although poetry translation was a minority research topic in itself, the translation of poetry was helping researchers in their rationalizations. Therefore, we moved on to an analysis of the metadiscourse in Translation Studies, that is, to the very subject of this article.

According to the first edition of *The Reader*, it appears that poetry has always been part of the academic discourse in Translation Studies. If the high number of *métaphores de la traduction/du traducteur* in Delisle's repository makes the case for a certain poetic discourse on translation, we are now endeavoring to see how much of that has been adopted by the academic discourse in Translation Studies, a fairly young discipline. If "[o]ver the past decade or so, academic writing has gradually lost its traditional tag as an objective, faceless and impersonal form of discourse and come to be seen as a persuasive endeavor involving interaction between writers and readers" (Hyland, 2005, p. 173), Translation Studies could not have been an exception. Let us just recall how Theo Hermans started his 2003 essay titled "Cross-Cultural Translation Studies as Thick Translation": "This essay springs from irritation and disbelief." (p. 380) That is anything but impersonal and faceless.

The 2000-edition of the reader is a collection of 30 articles that span over the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century. A search run in the text of this volume with the morpheme "poet-" shows 298 occurrences, of which "poetry" accounts for 90, "poetic-" for 80<sup>3</sup>, and "poet" for 18. The same search run for "prose" and "novel" leads to 81, respectively 108 results—significantly in the case of "poetry". Just as Venuti mentions in his introduction, "[p]oetry [...] is at the center of the texts by Benjamin, Pound, and Nabokov, but also those by Levý, Frawley, and Gutt" (2000, p. 7); however, there are in fact 9 more contributors who mention in a relevant way poetry as a literary form in their essays: Jorge Luis Borges, José Ortega Y Gasset, Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida, Katharina Reiss, Hans Vermeer, Phillip E. Lewis, Antoine Berman, and Lawrence Venuti<sup>4</sup> himself; by 'relevant' here we mean conducive to more arguments to support the research they carry out and the theory they propose.

Most translation theorists who do not focus their research on poetry translation and not even on literary translation in general resort to poetry at the peak of their research argument—therefore towards the end of their essays, just before the conclusion. For example, in Katharina Reiss's "Type, Kind and Individuality of Text. Decision Making in Translation" (translated from

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<sup>2</sup> "Is Poetry for the Happy Few?: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Translation Studies Articles after 2000 in *Meta: Journal des traducteurs*"—an assignment carried out during the *Developments in terminology, lexicology and technologies* doctoral seminar at University of Ottawa's School of Translation and Interpretation in April 2014. Unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> We have excluded the term *poetics* from this count, as it appeared mainly in André Lefevere's "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature" with the general meaning of "code of behavior".

<sup>4</sup> Even if there are two occurrences of the lexeme *poet-* in Gayatri Spivak's and Appiah's essays, we chose not to include it in the present analysis, because we deemed their use of it as being incidental and not important for their argument.

German by Susan Kitron) poetry is listed under text types as ‘expressive’—the most difficult type of equivalence to achieve, and also under *problematic cases*, in an “if...then” type of rationalization pattern, followed by a recommendation. This is what we would call a common occurrence of poetry as a discourse object in Translation Studies: during description and analysis of operations performed by the translator, most often as a special case or exception from the general rule, which usually leads to a prescriptive type of discourse: “**If, for instance**, elements of **poetic language** are used when content is conveyed (informative type)—the so-called loan structures (Hantsch, 1972)—**the translation ought to strive for an analogously poetic form** for those elements.”<sup>5</sup> (Reiß as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 169, emphasis mine<sup>6</sup>)

Similarly, Ortega Y Gasset (translated by Elizabeth Gamble Miller) uses the example of poetry when talking about loss in the translation process. Using evaluative modifiers like *no more than* or *ever*, Y Gasset places poetry on a higher level in comparison to translation, which is in fact another way to word untranslatability, as we will see later on in Jakobson’s essay: “The simple fact is that the translation is not the work, but a path toward the work. If this is a poetic work, the translation is **no more than** an apparatus<sup>7</sup>, a technical device that brings us closer to the work without **ever** trying to repeat<sup>8</sup> or replace it.” (as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 61)

In Vermeer’s “Skopos and Commission<sup>9</sup>” (translated into English by Andrew Chesterman), for example, poetry is at the core of his answer to the first objection against the highly functionalist Skopos theory, according to which literary texts have no aim. After a first set of theoretical arguments which showed that, if an action is not assigned a purpose, then it is not an action, Vermeer brings to the front an irrefutable argument: poetry, thought to be the ultimate non-lucrative, aimless affair, has a purpose. He builds his argument on two levels: an imaginary one, narrated like an impersonal story, but interspersed with his own comments in brackets, meant to keep the so-called story linked with the second level, the argumentative one:

“For instance, assume that a neat rhyme suddenly comes into one’s mind. (This is surely not an action, technically speaking.) One then writes it down. (Surely an action, since the rhyme could have been left unrecorded.) One continues writing until a sonnet is produced. (An action, since the writer could have chosen to do something else—unless the power of inspiration was simply irresistible, **which I consider a mere myth**.)” (Vermeer as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 224)

The stake of the paragraph is high, but the tone is almost informal, even mocking in the end, where poetical inspiration is presented as a *mere myth*—a metaphor preceded by a strongly evaluative negative adjective, marking the overt engagement of the author in the discourse. Vermeer does not even use the word *poetry*, but employs *rhyme*, a word which is even less likely to occur in an argument on skopos.

<sup>5</sup> The translation published in *Poetics Today* (Vol. 2, No. 4, “Translation Theory and Intercultural Relations” [Summer – Autumn, 1981], pp. 121-131) contains the following note: “Translated from a German manuscript by Suzan Kitron.” The original book by Katharina Reiß—*Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik. Kategorien und Kriterien für eine sachgerechte Beurteilung von Übersetzungen*. Munich: Hueber—does not contain the paragraph above.

<sup>6</sup> All emphasis mine, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> Sp. *sino más bien un aparato* (Ortega Y Gasset 2013, p. 40).

<sup>8</sup> Sp. *sin pretender jamás repetirla* (Ortega Y Gasset 2013, p. 40).

<sup>9</sup> It was impossible for the author of this essay to locate the original text by Hans Vermeer. Its unavailability point at the influence it gained through its English translation and hopefully justifies the analysis performed solely on its translation.

The second part of his argument becomes again formal in tone and grounds poetry in the reality of the publishing industry, making us believe his rationalization will come to a close, but the text again makes a loop and sends us back in history—when one would think literature was not so much a matter of purpose—only to make the reader doubt about it once more. If the first part of this paragraph is written in a plain argumentative style, when he turns back to poetry, the style becomes again more playful, more rhetorical, as if mimicking a lawyer's discourse in court:

“If we accept that the process of creating poetry **also** includes its publication (and maybe **even** negotiations for remuneration), then it becomes clear that such behaviour as a whole does indeed constitute an action. Schiller and Shakespeare **undoubtedly** took into account the possible reactions of their public as they wrote, as **indeed** anyone would; must we actually denounce such behaviour (conscious, and hence purposeful), because it was in part perhaps motivated by **such base desires as fame and money?**” (Vermeer as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 224-225)

The discourse is emotionally charged (*undoubtedly*) and the evaluative language (*such base desires*) is used in such a manner that it achieves a highly satirical effect, even mockery and sarcasm. After this rationalization, his argument ends abruptly, with a paragraph that consists of one complex sentence, as if his use of this particular example was more than sufficient and his point was made.

Roman Jakobson's “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” is another example of an essay which uses poetry at a critical stage of its argument. In the 50s and 60, the seemingly never-ending debates around literal and free translation were replaced by the new debate around certain key linguistic issues, among them those of meaning and equivalence, discussed by Jakobson in 1959. According to him meaning is given by the signifier, which is the signal of the signified (the concept) and there is no full equivalence between code-units of different languages. The result/conclusion of such a forensic analysis is that translators should substitute not words, but messages, with only one exception—poetry, considered ‘untranslatable’. We can see again that poetry comes into play at the very end of his argument, after another example in which the difficulty of translating the Slavic *Evangelarium* was given by the *poetic obstacle*. When strictly referring to poetry, the discourse takes a more definitive turn (*poetry by definition is untranslatable*) and we can sense a shift in the linearity of the academic discourse through appositions—*in short, any constituents of the verbal code, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps a more precise term*—as well as a higher number of arguments concentrated in a very condensed paragraph. At the same time, he uses a verb that would have been very unlikely to occur in such a text—to *reign*, which in a linguist's scientific language would commonly be the equally metaphoric, but perhaps less connotative *to govern*.

“**In poetry**, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features)—**in short, any constituents of the verbal code**—are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. The pun, **or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term**—paronomasia, **reigns** over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, **poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only** creative transposition is possible [...]” (Jakobson as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 117-118)

Just like in Vermeer's case, poetry is the last card Jakobson plays, and a decisive one for that matter, a card that determines the result (i.e. conclusion) of his analysis. And when we thought

the role of poetry in a linguist's argument has ended, here it comes again, more powerful, more speculative, attacking one of the best established common places in Translation Studies—the Italian adage *Traduttore, traditore*: “If we were to translate into English the traditional formula *Traduttore, traditore* as “the translator is a betrayer,” we would deprive the Italian **rhyming** epigram of all its paronomastic value.” (Jakobson as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 118) Jakobson ends his essay with two open-answer (false?) rhetorical questions, which perhaps invite the readers to look at his essay again and reach naturally the same conclusions as he did. We would also argue that a translation like *Translator, traitor* would very likely put an end to this seemingly very problematic issue of translating this proverbial saying appropriately. It is hard for us to believe that Jakobson did not think about such a simple solution. That may be another example showing that the so-called dysphoric nature of poetry translation is often overstated.

Another subcategory of essays are those showing a dysphoric perception of poetry translation. For authors like Frawley and Lewis, poetry is not necessarily part of an argument towards a theory in Translation Studies, but more like an appendix that causes problems, something that stands in the way of a coherent articulation of a possible theory—“So, as a translator rendering “bride in her veil of sea,” Tarn can be neither praised nor chided; those judgments come only to Tarn as a poet and **poetic evaluation is too lugubrious a topic** for any systematic semiotics.” (Frawley as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 259)—or in the way of translators for that matter: “In his studied writing practice, Derrida plays masterfully on the associative, poetic resources of French, generating articulatory structures that a reader of the French can hardly miss. He thus creates, to be sure, **many a problem** for the translator.” (Lewis as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 276)

In his “The Measure of Translation Effects,” Lewis places the particular example of poetry in the middle of a very dense paragraph; yet it stands out from the multitude of concepts because of the inversed syntax, the presence of complementary opposites (*no less than...*, *much more*), and of veiled repetition (*fidelity...to*). Although there is no negative adjective or context associated to it, poetry translation appears as a complicated process, which requires more steps to be taken towards appropriate completion: “**No less than** in the translation of poetic texts, the demand is for fidelity to **much more** than semantic substance, fidelity also to the modalities of expression and to rhetorical strategies.” (Lewis as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 270)

But apart from being the object of various controversies in Translation Studies (e.g. translatable vs. untranslatable, poetry translation vs. prose translation, etc.), poetry is a literary form that calls for innovation and offers the starting point (or at least one of them) in shaping the discourse of the discipline. Perhaps the three most renowned essays in the 2000 edition of *The Reader* are the essays by Benjamin, Nida, and Berman. All of them treat poetry not as predicament or translators' nemesis, but as an ultimate challenge that crafts the skills of translators, much the way “The Craft of Translation”, edited in 1989 by John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte, does, for example, by focusing more than half of the contributions around poetry translation.

### 3. Benjamin or writing in style

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s all translation approaches had focused on lexical choices and grammatical constraints. Benjamin's text moved beyond such formal restrictions, away from literalness, and shifted readers' attention towards a more productive attitude of language enrichment through translation. If "the task of the translator [is] to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his recreation of that work<sup>10</sup>." (Benjamin as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 22), there should be little wonder about Benjamin's use of poetry at the center of his theory. We have seen so far that poetry is usually more or less brutally inserted in the textual flow, creating a fissure in the conceptual unity of essays focusing, for example, on linguistics or semiotics. In Benjamin's case, his "utopian vision of linguistic "harmony"" (Venuti, 2000, p. 11) in translation reflects fully in the way he words his theory. Therefore, talking about poetry in the context of an attitude towards translation that distances itself from the current usage of language appears as natural.

The tone of the essay strikes as prophetic and exalted, which probably stems from the German aesthetics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—"the aesthetic theories of pure visibility and of empathy" (Mundt, 1959, p. 287) which had deep roots in Kant's notions of beauty and form, or in the sensualism and idealism that strived to find a place in the dry academic discourse—"rarified by abstractions" (p. 289) of the time.

"Indeed, as you read this text, you will have been struck by **the messianic tone**, by a figure of the **poet** as an almost **sacred figure**, as a figure which echoes **sacred language**. All references to particular poets in the text put this much in evidence." (de Man, 1985, p. 15).

The poetic form is also part of the content that needs and should be translated, because "content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin" (Benjamin as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 19): "For **sense in its poetic significance**<sup>11</sup> is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it." (p. 21)

The way Benjamin uses poetry in his text—which can definitely be regarded as poetics, a theory of poetic language—is by no means submissive to the cautiousness of more recent academic discourse in Translation Studies or in any other discipline. Hedging—used to tone down and mitigate arguments and assertions (Kreutz & Harres, 1997, p. 181)—is a modality marker and academic discourse feature that is nowhere to be found in his text. He uses poetry to show not necessarily what translation is, but mainly to emphasize what translation is not (e.g. "Although translation, unlike art, cannot claim permanence for its products..."; "translation [...] is midway between poetry and doctrine", etc.) and he does it in a very unswerving way, which reminds readers that are very familiar with his whole work of "his total intransigence vis-à-vis any contradictions" (Ritter, 1996, p. 595) and that "There was little to which [he] was more unreceptive than interference in his work." (p. 595)

The first occurrence of the word *poem* is in an enumeration of three elements: "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener," (Benjamin as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 15) which is an argument against the idea of translating for the audience. This enumeration of three arts by means of their resulting work of art or, in stylistic

<sup>10</sup> Ger. Jene reine Sprache, die in Fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist die Aufgabe des Übersetzers (Benjamin, 1972, p. 19).

<sup>11</sup> Ger. dichterische Bedeutung (Benjamin, 1972, p. 17).



terms, by synecdoche (poem—literature, picture—painting/photography, and symphony—music) triggers by association the image of a translated literary text as another art form. The placement of the image at the end of the first paragraph makes it even more powerful and gives it the character of definitive truth, emphasized by the presence of the negative adjective *no*. The ineffable language of poetry is therefore presented from the very beginning in extreme terms and also mirrors the “author-oriented German writing style” (Kreutz & Harres, 1997, p. 181): just like no poem is meant for its reader, no essay is either.

The next paragraph associates the “essential substance of a literary work” with the poetic, a feature which pertains not only to poetry as a genre, but to any form of literature. The word *poetic* appears again in an enumeration of three elements that goes in a crescendo: *unfathomable—mysterious—poetic*.

“But do we not generally regard as the **essential substance of a literary work** what it contains in addition to information—as even a poor translator will admit—**the unfathomable, the mysterious, the “poetic,”** something that a translator can reproduce **only** if he is **also a poet?**<sup>12</sup>” (Benjamin as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 15)

*The poetic* is associated with words whose main feature is elusiveness, doubled by the presence of the indefinite pronoun *something* immediately after. Even if the essay circles around the “central reciprocal relationship between languages” (p. 17), it points beyond this, to a recognition of something “overpowering and alien” (p. 19)—the poetic. The ideal condition of a translator being a poet is emphasized, just like in other theoretical texts in Translation Studies, by the adverb *also* and enforced by the presence of the adverb *only*. *Only* is not necessarily undermining the status of translators who are not poets, but is meant to add to the repository of recommendations for good translation. Moreover, everything is framed like a rhetorical question—a form of syntactic emphasis, sparingly used in English, but still often used in German, the language of the original, in the early 1900s—a reminiscence of the German romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*A poet’s words* (p. 16) are for Benjamin the epitome of resistance to one’s language, whereas things are essentially different for a translator, who has to incorporate the novelty of many languages into one’s own. Poetry here has a double role: as we have seen, it owns that rare quality that makes it difficult to translate, but also entails a behavior from the translator’s part that all translators should strive for: attention to details, language nuances, pure language. On the one hand, this is a notion on which Benjamin centers his proactive attitude towards translation and the foreign literary text. But on the other hand, the very same notion helps him make his case against poets as translators as an exclusive choice. The task of the translator is opposed to a poet’s task, just as the aim of a literary work differs from the aim of a translation:

“There is abundant evidence that this sense is not necessarily most pronounced in a **poet**; in fact, he may be least open to it. **Not even literary history suggests the traditional notion that great poets have been eminent translators and lesser poets have been indifferent translators.**<sup>13</sup>” (p. 19)

<sup>12</sup> Ger. Was aber außer der Mitteilung in einer Dichtung steht – und auch der schlechte Übersetzer gibt zu, daß es das Wesentliche ist – gilt es nicht allgemein als das Unfaßbare, Geheimnisvolle, “Dichterische”? Das der Übersetzer nur wiedergeben kann, indem er – auch dichtet? (Benjamin, 1972, p. 9).

<sup>13</sup> Ger. Nicht einmal die Geschichte legt das konventionelle Vorurteil nahe, demzufolge die bedeutenden Übersetzer Dichter und unbedeutende Dichter geringe Übersetzer wären. (Benjamin, 1972, p. 15-16).

(one can easily notice here the emphasized assertion by litote—negation of the opposite, hence the passion and almost religious tone of his argument centered around poetry), or better yet in

**“Not only does the aim of translation differ from that of a literary work—it intends language as a whole, taking an individual work in an alien language as a point of departure—but it is a different effort altogether. The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work.”**<sup>14</sup>  
(p. 20)

Poetry and translation are presented in rhythmical contrastive series of qualifiers: *spontaneous, primary, graphic* vs. *derivative, ultimate, ideational*. All occurrences of poetry in his essays are marked either by inversed topic (e.g. *not only*), or by various emphatic (negative) adverbs (e.g. *(not) even*) or negative pronominal adjectives (e.g. *no*).

This essay, still part and parcel of nowadays academic discourse—the language of power and authority—in Translation Studies, surprises by the power and authority with which it undermines the claimed objectivity and neutrality of academic discourse and asserts persuasiveness. His discourse is a reflection of his attitude towards the sacredness of the literary language—“Benjamin is [...] frequently praised as the one who has returned the dimension of the sacred to literary language, and who has thus overcome, or at least considerably refined, the secular historicity of literature on which the notion of modernity depends.” (de Man, 1985, p. 17)—and while the text lacks the concrete examples which could have illustrated and could have led to a better understanding of *pure language* and of how the translator could incorporate “the original’s mode of signification” into their translation, his text can actually be considered an illustration of that.

#### 4. Making the case of Bible translation through poetry

In Eugene Nida’s text, poetry has an overt utilitarian function; while content is of primary importance, as he “considers the problem of translating between different realities” (Venuti, 2000, p. 69), poetry is ‘the exception that proves the rule’, an example for which translating the form is of great importance, an instance when translators should pay more attention to form than to content. Nida builds carefully his theory, by accumulating relevant facts and offering and analyzing actual examples, something rare in translation theories.

The first occurrence of our morpheme (“poe(t)-”) is in the section dedicated to various types of translation and refers to a highly formal and constrained type of writing—acrostic poetry.

“[B]ut in some messages the content is of primary consideration, and in others *the form must be given a higher priority*. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, **despite** certain important **stylistic qualities**, the importance of the message far exceeds considerations of form. **On the other hand**, *some of the acrostic poems of the Old Testament are obviously designed to fit a very strict formal “strait jacket.”*” (Nida as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 127)

<sup>14</sup> Ger. Ihre Intention geht nicht allein auf etwas anderes als die der Dichtung, nämlich auf eine Sprache im ganzen von einem einzelnen Kunstwerk in einer fremden aus, sondern sie ist auch selbst eine andere: die des Dichters ist naive, erste, anschauliche, die des Übersetzers abgeleitete, letzte, ideen hafte Intention. Denn das große Motiv einer Integration der vielen Sprachen zur einen wahren erfüllt seine Arbeit. (Benjamin, 1972, p. 16).

Although in his view “[translation] works to reduce linguistic and cultural differences to a shared Referent” (Venuti, 2000, p. 69), Nida dedicates the whole next substantial paragraph to analyzing more in detail the importance of form in poetry as opposed to prose. When writing about poetry and emphasizing its special qualities, his discourse becomes more persuasive, punctuated by various rhetorical devices, such as inversion (“only rarely can one...”), placing the most important element in prime position (“In poetry,”), emphasis by modulation (“obviously”, “necessarily”, “normally”), starting the sentence by a negation (“not that...”), or repetition (“necessarily”):

“**In poetry** there is **obviously** a greater focus of attention upon formal elements than one **normally** finds in prose. **Not that** content is **necessarily** sacrificed in translation of a poem, but the content is **necessarily** constricted into certain formal molds. **Only rarely can one** reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content. **On the other hand**, a lyric poem translated as prose is not an adequate equivalent of the original.” (Nida as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 127)

The existence of 5 stylistic devices on a 6-line span shows a rush of the discourse, which starts to branch out (“On the other hand...”), to acknowledge interstices in translation (the very rare instances when both form and content are rendered in the target language), to compare and differentiate (“a greater focus [...] than in prose”), to conclude (“Only rarely can one reproduce...”), and finally to indirectly prescribe (“a lyric poem translated as prose is not an adequate equivalent of the original”). Prescription then spawns another reasoning that proliferates in two directions (by the adverbial sentence connector “however”) and produces more examples (Homer’s epic poems), thus extending the argument and grounding it on hard facts:

“**Though** it **may** reproduce the conceptual content, it **falls far short** of reproducing the **emotional intensity** and **flavor**. **However**, the translating of some types of poetry by prose may be dictated by important cultural considerations. **For example**, Homer’s **epic poetry** (etc.)” (p. 127)

Even if poetry as tool of research arguments entails the use of restrictive, negative terms, such as the face-threatening (cf. politeness theory) phrase “falls far short” in this case, or modal verbs that express uncertainty (e.g. “may”), one can easily notice that it also improves the supposedly stern academic language in the field by implicitly evaluative words and expressions like “emotional intensity” or “flavor”. This is most visible in Benjamin’s poetry-centered text—let us remind ourselves of *Nachleben* (i.e. the afterlife of a literary work), and if one argued that it would be expected from Nida, a Bible scholar, to have a penchant for using such terms, let us also recall how Jakobson, the linguist, uses the verb “to reign” or how Translation Studies as a discipline uses metaphors in order to define its field of study.

In Nida’s essay, poetry also triggers the inclusion of further citations on the matter (from Jackson Matthews and Richmond Lattimore), both focused on prescriptions for good poetry translation, both adding to his defense of dynamic equivalence. When he moves to describing the difficulties of such an approach, poetry is again singled out:

“**No** proper definition of translation can avoid some of the basic difficulties. **Especially** in the rendering of poetry, the **tension** between form and content and the conflict between formal and dynamic equivalences are always **acutely** present. **However**, it seems to be increasingly recognized that adherence to the letter may indeed **kill the spirit**. William A. Cooper (1928:484) deals with this problem rather realistically in his article on “Translating Goethe’s Poems,” in which he says: (etc.)” (Nida as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 131)

We may notice how the structure and texture of the previously analyzed paragraph is almost perfectly reproduced in the one above: negative terms (“no”, “difficulties”, “tension”, “conflict”), emphasis (“especially”, “acutely”), and metaphorical expressions (“kill the spirit”).

Nida continues his argument towards a more general formulation on translation and translation evaluation with the same generous help of poetry:

**“It must be recognized** that in translating poetry there are **very special problems** involved, for the form of expression (rhythm, meter, assonance, etc.) is **essential** to communicating the spirit of the message to the audience. **But** all translating, whether of poetry or prose, must be concerned also with the response of the receptor; hence the ultimate purpose of the translation, in terms of its impact upon its intended audience, is a fundamental factor in any evaluation of translations.” (p. 132)

Just like in the previous paragraph, where “however” marked a return to the values and implications of poetry translation, in this paragraph “but” plays the same role of applying the findings to a more general approach on translation. Then Nida takes again a discursive twirl by quoting Ezra Pound, just to make then another generalization on translation and get to his real focus, Bible translation. However, even if his research draws mainly on observations and data collection carried out by the American Bible Institute and, more importantly, although he was criticized for using Bible translation in order to formulate a general theory in Translation Studies (Simon, 1990), it may be safe to argue that this essay places a great importance mainly on poetry: “The resolution of the conflict between literalness of form and equivalence of response seems increasingly to favor the latter, **especially in the translating of poetic materials.**” (Nida as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 132) In fact, we think that Nida’s discourse does what we would call ‘poetry overbidding’—a kind of overemphasis that throws more light on poetry than it does on Bible translation, because the first helps him build his rationalization, offers him more relevant examples, as well as paths towards further rationalization (i.e. on translating Biblical content):

“The translating of poetry **obviously involves more** adjustments in literary form than does prose, for rhythmic forms **differ far more radically** in form, and hence in esthetic appeal. **As a result**, certain rhythmic patterns must often be substituted for others, **as when** Greek dactylic hexameter is translated in iambic pentameter. **Moreover**, some of the most acceptable translating of rhymed verse is accomplished by substituting free verse. In Bible translating (etc.)” (p. 139)

## 5. Berman—La Traduction-Poésie

Antoine Berman’s 1995 essay *The Task of the Foreign* (translated into English by Lawrence Venuti) advocates for literalism as a tool for preserving the foreignness of the source text. Poetry is a very important part of his discourse—quite surprisingly so, as one may have a very hard time trying to associate literal translation and this particular literary form.

It goes without saying that one cannot speak about destructions of rhythms without mentioning poetry, but one can certainly find one’s titles, at least, in other literary forms. However, when a theorist like Berman follows in the footsteps of other translators and theorists like Hölderlin, Schleiermacher, or Meschonnic, it is very likely that he does find his title in a poetry-related context. Berman sees the ultimate enactment of translation as a trial in a poet’s work on a foreign text—“Now, in the poet, this trial is essentially enacted by translation, by his version of Sophocles, which is in fact the last “work” Hölderlin published before descending into madness.” (Berman as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 284) —and uses this

example in order to emphasize the extent of the metaphor he advances. The entire textual staging around this example is dramatic: the adverb “essentially<sup>15</sup>” offers a high degree of polarity, followed by the use of “work” (the translation) between inverted commas, and finally by the climactic “descending into madness<sup>16</sup>”. It is one of those rare cases in which poetry is used during the first stage of a translation theory—the specification of function and goal. Berman relies on the power of such example and presents it as an overture, the first act of a historical drama, the focal point of one of the greatest moments in the history of western translation, the ultimate illustration of translations seen as trials:

“In its own time, this translation was considered a **prime manifestation** of his madness. Yet today we view it as one of the **great moments** of western translation: not only because it gives us **rare access** to the Greek tragic Word, but because while giving us access to this Word, it reveals **the veiled essence** of every translation.” (p. 284)

Not only does this first passage formulate the goal of his theory (in Louis Kelly’s sense), but it also announces the conclusion, and although the essay does not refer very often to the example of poetry during the body of the argument, it is still safe to consider it a text that revolves around this form. The tone is definitely poetic and suggests reverence: “prime manifestation” (Fr. *premières manifestations*), “great moments” (Fr. *des grands moments*), “rare access” (Fr. *c’est l’une des seules à nous ouvrir l’accès*), or “veiled essence” (Fr. *l’essence voilée*).

Berman also refers to poetry when he quotes, for example, Alain on the topic of translation—

“I have this idea that one can always translate a poet—English, Latin, or Greek—exactly word for word, without adding anything, preserving the very order of the words, until **at last you find the meter, even the rhymes**<sup>17</sup>.” (Alain in Berman as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 285)

—or when he talks about shapelessness in novels. Berman does not use poetry to emphasize its special nature and the effect it has on translation practices (even though the quote from Alain does, employing the example of poetry as an extreme case in which literal translation is still possible, to the extent to which even meter and rhymes are achieved). Berman uses poetry to argue against large pieces of prose that are shapeless, hard to manipulate in translation, and which do not allow the easy detection of faulty translation. His rationalization is built on a comparative pattern, one that favors poetry as a more versatile genre, but also one that must satisfy aesthetic requirements:

“Traditionally, this shapelessness has been described negatively, that is, within the horizon of poetry. Herman Broch, for example, remarks of the novel that “in contrast to poetry, it is not a producer, but a consumer of style. [...] It applies itself with much less intensity to **the duty of looking like a work of art**<sup>18</sup>. [...] The novel does not submit, like **proper poetry**<sup>19</sup>, to the criteria of art” (Broch, 1966, p. 68).” (Berman as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 287)

The comparison between novels and poetry continues, but any differences between poetry and prose translation are this time attenuated, as they are both presented as posing serious problems to translators:

<sup>15</sup> Fr. *essentiellement* (Berman, 1985, p. 67).

<sup>16</sup> Fr. *sombrer dans la folie* (p. 67).

<sup>17</sup> Fr. *tant qu’enfin on trouvera le mètre et même la rime* (p. 67).

<sup>18</sup> Fr. son devoir de représenter un œuvre d’art (p. 70).

<sup>19</sup> Fr. la poésie proprement dite (p. 70).

“The Babelian proliferation of languages in novels pose specific difficulties for translation. If one of the principal problems of poetic translation is to respect the polysemy of the **poem** (cf. Shakespeare’s Sonnets), then the principal problem of translating the novel is to respect its shapeless polylogic and avoid an arbitrary homogenization.” (p. 287)

Only that the attenuation in praising poetry is only apparent, because it resurfaces in the next paragraph, when poetry appears again as queen of literary forms by indirect reference: “Insofar as the novel is considered **a lower form of literature than poetry**<sup>20</sup>, the deformations of translation are more accepted in prose, when they do not pass unperceived.” (p. 287) Any deformation in poetry translation is perceived as a massacre, while in novels such deformations might go unnoticed. This is how poetry, by means of comparison and deduction, favors the advancement of the argument and calls for immediate action: “The deforming system functions here in complete tranquility. (sic!) This is why it is urgent to elaborate an analytic for the translation of novels.” (p. 287)

Berman includes poetry only in three out of his twelve deforming tendencies: ennoblement (a classic translation fault, more likely to appear in poetry, where it is also called ‘poetization’), qualitative impoverishment (under which poetry is listed, along with prose, as a literary form that produces what he calls ‘surfaces of iconicity’), and destruction of rhythms (for all the obvious reasons), but when he does, he does it because he feels that his analysis could not have been otherwise complete. He even calls for further insight from “poeticians” (his quotes), along with linguists and psychoanalysts, who would provide invaluable experience for the completion of a comprehensive list of deforming forces that intervene in translation: “To be systematic, it requires the input of translators from other domains (other languages and works), as well as linguists, “**poeticians**” and... psychoanalysts, since the deforming forces constitute so many censures and resistances.” (p. 286)

Departing from examples revolving around poetry translation, Antoine Berman’s discourse on translation gains in emotional overtones, once in a while becoming even almost ‘religious’. Such an emotionally charged discourse ‘betrays’ a strong authorial presence, one which does not make itself visible by overt engagement strategies, but by textual voice acts which seek to align the reader to what is advanced by the text.

## 6. Conclusion

We hope to have shown in this analysis that the presence of poetry in several reputed translation theories materializes in two ways, which we could describe as follows:

**Poetry as a problematic issue.** These are descriptive occurrences—most often dysphoric—under *problematic cases* (e.g. Katharina Reiß’s essay)—which do not contribute to the advancement of the theory, but only to its illustration, usually during the second stage of the argument, while describing the operations to which the translator endeavors. However, such cases do not represent the majority and discourage to a certain degree the pursuit of poetry translation. In such essays, poetry produces a kind of chasm in the supposedly straight line of the argumentative discourse, a dead end that theorists seem to head inevitably to and that only makes the rationale more intricate. The theory appears as a kind of graph with many edges, and with poetry being not just anyone of them, but maybe the most important, and also one that cannot be fully grasped. The reader of such a text, especially if they are scholars in the field and so much the more translators, will bear in mind only the dysphoric feel of what

<sup>20</sup> Fr. une forme moins haute que la poésie (p. 70).

is lost or supposedly cannot be achieved in translating poetry. Discretion in this kind of approach should be strongly advised.

**Poetry as the exception that proves the rule.** These are also descriptive occurrences, but they have a heuristic value, as they advance the analysis and eventually lead to prescriptions, adding valuable insight to the research argument.

What we found striking while analyzing—although not exhaustively—the first edition of the *Reader* was the relative lack of hedging in the academic discourse of Translation Studies (at least in its written form) compared to other disciplines, especially natural sciences, where the existence of a physical proof in support of the argument could have made the discourse more assertive. Unlike in real sciences, where there is “a greater degree of rigidity in discourse conventions, especially as far as textual macrostructure is concerned” (Siepmann, 2006, p. 131) and where the tone is expected to be impersonal and objective, discourse in Translation Studies is assertive and it becomes even more so when poetry comes into play. We could easily notice the lack of any recurrent volitional modality (e.g. *would like to*), modal expressions of ability (e.g. *what can be said is...*), inherently weak illocutionary forces (e.g. *suggest, suspect*), and even a relative absence of any tokens of politeness to other authors or sources (e.g. *we can agree that*, etc.). We would argue that poetry as discourse object in Translation Studies has helped maintain a non-conflictual, non-critical discourse in our field, because scholars have used the power of example in order to make a point rather than overtly arguing with their peers. While the discourse in Translation Studies asserts, poetry is a tool that helps scholars to camouflage *ad hominem* criticism and mitigate their authorial presence, but at the same time it is a tool which invites to open academic confrontation based on a ‘the-text-talks-back’ approach, one that confers discourse objectivity.

But apart from the lack of hedging, the most important discursive strategy that seems to be recurrent in Translation Studies when talking about poetry is what we would call *reinstatement* or *resurrection*: after it is singled out and pointed at either as *l'enfant terrible* or the luminary of the field (one with a dysphoric effect nonetheless, since translating poetry is a craft difficult to master), it is usually reinstated and presented as the literary form whose translation provides most of the answers the theorist (and the practitioner, for that matter) looks for. At the textual level, the reinstatement is realized either by various conjunctions, such as “but”, “however”, “yet”, etc. or by using more connotative words or metaphors than it would otherwise happen. At the discursive level, the argument gains in persuasiveness by opposition (by “rather than”, “however”, “on the other hand” types of discourse), by weakening the claim and then offering counterexamples from poetry translation, by adjacent examples that are brought to prove the rule, to advance the argument, to further investigation, by judgment followed by appraisal. The research argument that focuses on poetry is never digressive, because poetry serves very well defined purposes during rationalization. Talking about Louis Kelly’s structure of translation theories, Venuti notices that “[t]he component that receives the greatest emphasis [...] often devolves into a recommendation or prescription for good translating.” (Venuti, 2000, p. 4) It so happens that poetry is at the core of many of these prescriptions, since it is used at key moments during the argument.

We maintain that the ongoing presence of poetry in the more recent theories is triggered by the distance taken by scholars from the “traditional dichotomies between “sense-for-sense” and “word-for-word” translating which date back to antiquity, to Horace, Jerome, Augustine” (Venuti, 2000, p. 122). The former “either-or” approach tended to undermine poetry translation, qualifying it as almost untouchable, because it could not solve issues that went

beyond such simplistic dichotomies. The example of poetry translation serves very well the functional approach of the 1960s or the more recent takes on translation, yet it generates more and more analysis, as poetry can never be confined by the boundaries of one theory or another. Translation Studies is largely defined by its corpus, by the texts on which translation is performed, of which poetry is integral part. In the context of several new approaches to text, such as computational analysis or text mining, to name only a few, the absence of poetry translation in the ongoing Translation Studies discourse is simply unexplainable and, with the risk of showing a prescriptive bias, should trigger reconsideration.

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