

**Judith Woodsworth. 2017. *Telling the Story of Translation. Writers Who Translate*. London/ New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 248 pp.**

**Reviewed by Roxana Bîrsanu\* \*\***

Judith Woodsworth's book, *Telling the Story of Translation. Writers Who Translate*, focuses on three writers – George Bernard Shaw, Gertrude Stein and Paul Auster – whose activities in translation have not been sufficiently researched. With this book, Woodsworth aims to pay closer attention to this often ignored part of their literary activity.

In "Introduction: 'One More Possession of Beauty'" (pp. 1-8), the author explains why she chose these particular writers: they belonged or moved to multicultural spaces, which forced them to live in a constant linguistic and cultural in-betweenness; they all approached multiple literary genres; they tried their hand at translation, which they also conceptualised in various texts and paratexts.

Woodsworth's study begins with "Lost masterpieces: Bernard Shaw and translation" (pp. 11-115). In the author's own words, the objective of this chapter is to look into "his association with his translators, his conceptualization of translation and his own achievement as a translator" (p. 12). The part dedicated to Shaw's relationship with his translators focuses largely on the collaboration with his German translator, Siegfried Trebitsch, whose translating activity contributed significantly to Shaw's fame abroad.

The main problem with Trebitsch's translations was that they abounded in errors, both linguistic and cultural; this was due to the fast pace of the translation, but also to his insufficient knowledge of colloquial English and English customs (p. 21). Consequently, at the time, scholars and translators alike criticised the quality of the translations and even published lists of errors.

The French versions of Shaw's works had basically the same fate. The translators, Augustin Hamon and Henriette Hamon, were chosen by Shaw merely on grounds of shared political ideas and not on account of their professionalism. Consequently, the reception of Shaw's works in France enjoyed little popularity, precisely because of the poor quality of the translations.

The correspondence between Shaw and his translators proves that he was actively involved in the translation process. He would proofread the German and French versions and often assisted his collaborators by explaining various subtleties related to language and intertextual references.

Woodsworth claims that the obvious question that arises is why he put up with such inexperienced translators. Her assumption is that he was overly concerned with the issue of control (p. 30). In selecting these translators, he could freely interfere with their work, correcting and recorrecting them, so as to make sure that the works were not significantly altered.

Another topic of this first chapter is Shaw's own approach to translation. Shaw largely used paratexts in order to gloss his own writings, literary creed and opinions. Translation was no exception. His attitude towards translation can be extracted from his vast correspondence with his translators, but also from the "Translator's Note", which accompanies Shaw's own English translation of Trebitsch's play, *Frau Gittas's Sühne*.

In Shaw's opinion, translation is a secondary art as compared to original writing. He did not think that knowledge of the source language is a must when translating. He made this very clear by vouching for translators who were not proficient in English, whose translations he revised with the help of dictionaries, and by setting up to translate Trebitsch's play although he spoke little German (p. 36).

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However, Shaw had one opinion on translation which reminds the reader of the cultural turn in Translation Studies: that linguistic transfer should be accompanied by cultural translation, or in his own words, that one should translate “the audience, as well as the play” (Shaw quoted in Woodsworth, p. 37). Thus, Shaw proved to be well-aware of the relevance of taking into account the literary customs of the target readership in order to attain a high degree of acceptability in the literary polysystem of the target culture.

According to Woodsworth, Shaw had a sophisticated, dualist perspective on translation, which varied “depending on whether Shaw’s own work was being translated or [...] whether, on the contrary, he was the one who was doing the translating” (p. 37). Although he criticised Trebitsch for the errors that abounded in his German translation, Shaw himself took the liberty to completely alter the ending of Trebitsch’s play when he translated it into English.

Shaw’s translation of *Frau Gittas’s Sühne* is actually the focus of the last part of this chapter. In the analysis of the text translated by Shaw, Woodsworth provides examples which illustrate how he performed this task. The purpose of the analysis is, according to Woodsworth, not to carry out a critique of the translation proper, but to illustrate Shaw’s approach to translation. Indeed, the analysed samples reveal the fact that Shaw intervened massively in the source text, not only at linguistic and cultural levels, but also by playing the author himself when he decided to transform the play from a tragedy into a comedy.

The main reason why Shaw chose to interfere with the ending of the play was to accommodate the expectations of the British readership. If we were to refer to Venuti’s (1995) translating strategies of foreignisation versus domestication, Shaw imprinted a deeply domesticating orientation on his translation. Woodsworth claims that, actually, Trebitsch’s play became famous precisely due to the fact that it was translated by Shaw, who became thus an agent of cultural capital transfer.

The second chapter, “Gertrude Stein and the making of translations” (pp. 67-118), focuses on the personality of Jewish American writer Gertrude Stein. Woodsworth expands the perspective on translation, approached here from a more philosophical angle, since it is used to reflect the process of *transducere*, i.e. of taking one thing from one place to another. The chapter centres on Stein’s “hybrid identity” (p. 68), constructed around a number of ambiguities: “her sexual and religious identities, her audiences, her mother tongue and her homeland” (p. 68). According to Woodsworth, her translation projects included an alleged translation of Flaubert’s *Trois contes*, several poems signed by French poet Georges Hugnet and several speeches of Maréchal Henri Pétain, plus a few examples of self-translation.

A significant part of this chapter is dedicated to the contextualisation of Stein’s works. The first translation project which Stein completed (since no evidence has been found that she actually translated Flaubert into English), albeit in her own creative manner, was a token of gratitude towards one of her French translators, young poet Georges Hugnet. In 1929, Hugnet had published French excerpts of Stein’s *The Making of Americans*; in 1930, he also translated and published a selection of Stein’s “portraits”, entitled *Dix portraits*. Woodsworth asserts that Stein exerted a very tight control over how her works were rendered into French (p. 92). But when she performed the translation of Hugnet’s poems into English, she took the freedom to “adapt the text and subvert it for her own purposes” (p. 93).

In order to illustrate Stein’s translating style and the extent to which it generated authorial confusion, Woodsworth draws a comparison between the source text and the translation of three of Hugnet’s poems. The analysis reveals that not only did Stein completely alter the form of the poems, but she also “makes little effort to preserve Hugnet’s imagery, themes and stylistic devices” (p. 95). Woodsworth quotes a number of critics (such as Posman and Will) who consider that Stein’s efforts resulted simply in a “bad translation” (p. 95). One reason could be that Stein

simply rejected the idea of being “a secondary author [...] and asserts her identity as Gertrude Stein, the author of a poem” (p. 96). According to Woodsworth, although the quality of the translation performed by Stein constitutes the object of critical debate, what remains clear is that the greatest advantage of her translation endeavours was that they represented an impetus for her own originality, “a genuine ‘exercise’ and preparation for original work” (p. 91).

The last of Stein’s translation projects, highly controversial and reflecting badly upon her image even long after her death, was the English translation of the speeches of Maréchal Pétain, chief of state of Vichy France. The texts were intended for an American readership and were preceded by an introduction in which Stein spoke of Pétain in highly laudatory terms. Woodsworth says that the selection of Stein as the translator and the highly favourable introduction she wrote for the English version were “intended to make the American audience more favourably disposed to the Vichy Regime” (p. 108). The English versions of the speeches translated by Stein were never completed, nor published.

Woodsworth’s conclusion to the chapter dedicated to Stein is that the American writer’s translating efforts can be deemed unsuccessful for two reasons: one is that her endeavours failed to represent a means of “cultural capital” transfer (Lefevere 1992: 11), while the other refers to the fact that the historical context in which she undertook the translation of Pétain’s speeches actually reflected badly on her own image.

The last chapter of the book, “Paul Auster: The writer and his double” (pp. 169-173), focuses on the translating activity of American writer Paul Auster. The justification for the selection of Auster is, according to the author, the fact that his works have been translated into more than forty languages and that the act and process of translation is interwoven in the fabric of his entire fiction.

Woodsworth follows the same investigation lines she applied in the case of Shaw and Stein: the materials translated by Auster, how he performed his tasks and the approach to translation expressed in various texts and paratexts. The author of *Telling the Story of Translation* indicates that the beginnings of Auster’s literary career were under the guise of translation. In Auster’s youth, but also later on, translation was a means of survival, which helped him cope with his financial difficulties. The source language was French, from which he translated both commercial assignments and serious works such as poetry, art books and fragments of Sartre and Foucault’s works (p. 125).

His first published book of translations, *A Little Anthology of Surrealist Poems*, appeared in 1972 and included poems signed by ten surrealist French poets. It was followed in 1982 by another anthology, *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*, which Woodsworth considers “if not Auster’s crowning achievements in the realm of translation, then certainly one of his major accomplishments” (p. 127). The anthology is a collection of poems from forty-eight poets, translated by eighty-four translators.

Another translation performed by Auster which is analysed in this chapter is Pierre Clastres’ work of political anthropology, *Chronique des Indiens Guayaki*. The English version of the French anthropologist’s work revived the public’s interest in his work, perhaps because of the public’s attention to the story of the lost and found manuscript of the translation rather than to the work itself. According to Woodsworth, the story of the lost manuscript might suggest that Auster’s translation ensured the afterlife of this text, which is one of the main functions and roles of translation (p. 141).

In 2014, Auster, together with Hoyt Rogers, published another anthology of translations from the French poet André du Bouchet entitled *Openwork. Poetry and Prose*. The anthology was revised by poetry editor Peter Riley in 2015. The main fault he found with the two Americans poets’ translations is that they interfered significantly with the source text, the result being

“creative translations” (Riley quoted in Woodsworth, p. 149). In order to analyse whether this label could truly be applied to the translations, Woodsworth makes a comparative analysis of several fragments. Her conclusion is that, at least in Auster’s case, “he takes an almost word-for-word approach that follows the original text closely [...] even down to the punctuation and spacing of the words on the page” (p. 145).

In the epilogue entitled “What is translation for?” (pp. 169-173), Woodsworth summarizes the approach to translation of the three writers researched. She herself has a double interpretation of how these writers saw translation. On the negative side, according to Woodsworth, Shaw experienced translation in terms of loss and anxiety; Stein’s experience with translation is materialised in “stories of abandonment, broken friendship and forgeries” (p. 170), while for Auster translation is drudgery, labour similar to the one carried out by prisoners. On the positive side, the three writers recognized the importance of translation as a means which contributed to the international circulation of their ideas; they also used the process of translation as a means to boost their creative powers, while turning it into an important topic of their original works (see Auster’s case in particular).

The book ends with a few observations on three recent writers (Jonathan Safran Foer, Rachel Cantor and Idra Novoy) and their respective novels in which translators, their activities, dilemmas and struggles are the main focus. Woodsworth concludes that, however subservient it may seem, translation endures, which is equally proven by the increasing attention it receives in fictional works where it holds the central position.

The authors investigated by Woodsworth stand next to other modernist writers who were involved with the process of translation such as Pound, Joyce or Eliot. The main strength of the book is that it sheds new light onto a less-researched part of the literary career of three “literary decathletes” (p. 5) as she calls Shaw, Stein and Auster, i.e. their approach to and activity in translation. Therefore, it is useful not only to students and researchers in the field of Translation Studies, but also to those interested in literary and cultural studies, since it also touches upon issues related to identity, dislocation/relocation and intercultural exchanges.

The idea of translation applied to the three writers mentioned above reflects the tenets of the cultural turn in Translation Studies initiated by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere; these include the concept of translation as rewriting, and the importance of the translator being bicultural not only bilingual (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990). In her analysis of the three writers’ methods and strategies of translation, Woodsworth relies on Venuti’s idea of the translator’s visibility and on his pair of translating strategies, i.e. foreignisation and domestication.

A minor shortcoming of the book is the title, *Telling the Story of Translation*, which is slightly misleading. Without the subtitle, *Writers Who Translate*, potential readers might be led into thinking that the book deals with the history of translation. Another drawback is the small number of fragments analysed comparatively (source text versus target text). Although the author’s intention was not to evaluate “the skill of each translator or the adequacy [...] of the translation [so much] as to indicate the approach that the translator has taken in each case” (p. 6), a larger corpus of analysed texts would have supported a more detailed analysis of the respective translators’ strategies and style.

The merits of the book include the comprehensive and well-documented notes at the end of the book, which complete the content of the chapters. The extensive bibliographic apparatus is particularly useful since it is up-to-date and covers both the area of translation studies and that of literary studies.

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