

Translating *Triomf*: The Shifting Limits of “Ownership” in Literary Translation Or: Never Translate Anyone but a Dead Author

Leon de Kock

Summary

This essay teases out the paradoxes inherent in competing notions of (1) authorial “ownership” of a text and of its modes of signification in acts of translation, (2) the claims upon that text by a translator, and (3) the senses in which imaginative texts are “co-owned” by readers, specialists, critics, teachers, reviewers and editors. Based on anecdotal evidence – in this instance, an incomplete case-history of translating the Afrikaans novel *Triomf* into English – the essay builds an argument about the nature of translation in more general terms.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel pluus die paradokse uit wat inherent is aan die kompeterende begrippe van (1) outeurs “eienaarskap” van die teks en van die betekenisgewing daaraan deur vertaling, (2) die aansprake op die teks deur die vertaler, en (3) die sin waarin oorspronklike tekse “medebesit” word deur lesers, spesialiste, kritici, leerkragte, resensente en redakteurs. Aan die hand van anekdotiese gronde – in hierdie geval ’n gedeeltelike gevalbeskrywing van die vertaling van die Afrikaanse roman *Triomf* in Engels – voer die essay ’n argument aan omtrent die aard van vertaling in meer algemene terme.

Literary translation is a curiously double-edged process. It is a noisy, difficult, messy and vertiginously unstable practice, yet it conventionally aspires to the appearance of seamless certainty, to a weirdly silent, humming invisibility. It is this paradox which led translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995: 1-9) to typify mainstream translation practice in the English-speaking world as a form of *illusionism*. The strange illusion created by translation, says Venuti (1995: 1) is that the work is “not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’”. Venuti adds: “What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made” (p. 1).

Venuti, along with like-minded poststructuralist translation theorists, holds that the illusion of invisibility in literary translation requires rupturing. It is in this spirit that I draw the curtains, to some extent, on my own process of

translating Marlene van Niekerk's multi-award-winning novel, *Triomf*,¹ into English. My essay uses anecdotal elements to build a theoretical context for reflections on literary translation in general.

Because of its linguistically hybrid nature, *Triomf* was long regarded by many, including the author, as untranslatable. However, about three years after the novel's publication in Afrikaans, the author asked me whether I would consider translating it into English. For some reason, it was precisely *because* of the extremely difficult nature of the translation that I decided to do it. Previously, I had tended towards the feeling that translation was a secondary form of writing, a derivative act in service of a higher order of originality. There does, in fact, exist a widespread notion that translation is little more than copying from one language to another. As Douglas R. Hofstadter, in his *magnum opus* on translation, *Le ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language* (1997), has argued, translators themselves have played no small part in fostering this impression by their often excessive displays of humility. (Displays, I would argue, that are frequently rhetorically deceptive, calling attention to the translation by pretending to call attention away from it.)

On the contrary, in my case it was not humility but hubris that led me to the discovery that literary translation is a comprehensively engaging creative act. I accepted the challenge of translating the near-untranslatable *Triomf* because it gave *me* scope for an exercise in deep and difficult creativity. Without such challenges, what are we all doing in this business? That was more or less my feeling. And this is where the present essay begins to take shape. I was, to start with, a hubristic translator. I did not approach the author of this novel and ask her whether I could translate it. She approached me. The author regarded me as a writer in my own right, and at this stage of the game her position in the supply-demand equation was precarious. She had been seeking a translator for some time; at least one attempt had already foundered. So, I went home to re-read her novel, and found myself captivated by it. I wanted to become part of that novel's recreation. I wanted to *write* that novel. Translation gives one scope to become a participant in a grand act of literature, to share in the moment of its creation. (This, by the way, is also what strong reading allows, which is to say that translation is a form of strong reading – in my view, the strongest form of reading possible.)

In my response to the author's appeal, I made it clear to her that I would need to have a lot of latitude and a free hand, since her novel presented several severe problems to a translator. At this stage of high hubris, I even told her that I might have to shorten the novel a touch, since I felt it was occasionally overwritten, and I distinctly remember her nodding her head in agreement over tea one morning during our initial negotiations. She said to me: "It will have to be a new text; I appreciate that it will have to be redone." Words to that effect. In my mind, I saw it not as "translating" as such, but as "reworking" the

novel into English. The untranslatable Afrikaans word, *verwerking*,² comes to mind. At this stage of the game, I was highly visible and in a commanding position. Demand exceeded supply, and the author appeared to agree that I should have licence to cut and rework the text into an English "version" rather than do a slavishly exact translation, which in this case appeared impossible anyway.

I therefore took the work on because I saw it as a *co-creative* venture. It would be as much *my* next book as it was destined to be the author's. If Robert Pinsky could get his name printed on the spine as well as the cover of the Pinsky version of Dante's *Inferno*, in a typesize only slightly less prominent than that accorded the great Italian master himself, then why couldn't I get my co-creative role recognised in a similar, if less dramatic, manner? If that was the nature of the business, I thought, then it would appear to be a worthwhile literary pursuit. Then it would be a game in which the odds were even, and in which one could come out feeling that the huge investment of time, thought and life-space had been worth one's while. After all, without me, there would be no *Triomf* in English; or, at least, it would take a lot longer – and it wouldn't in any case have my particular stylistic stamp on it. Thus went my thoughts.

Now, apart from the anecdotal value of this story, I'm interested in some of the submerged processes which appear to be going on here. In what follows I shall, where possible, universalise the scenario and talk merely about "the author" and "the translator" in general. A key element in the transaction described above appears to be a slackening of the author's customarily strong egotistical bond with a text publicly associated with her name. To put it crudely, the ego of the source-text author, which is often overwhelming, would appear to be giving way, to some extent, to that of the translator. Perhaps one should call this person not the translator but the *producer* of the text in a new linguistic and cultural framework. Since the recreation of the text in an entirely new body of language and cultural reference is not a job to be trifled with, "producer" seems an entirely appropriate term – it certainly seems more appropriate than draping the job in exaggerated, saccharine humility or phony denials of one's ability to do it in the first place. At this stage of the business, the author's anxiety about achieving a translation at all is such that she attaches great importance to the role of someone who is going to do nothing less than *re-create* that text for her in arguably the premium international language of modern literary consumption. So she defers to his importance. She even "agrees" to what might in different circumstances be regarded as "tampering" with her creation. Note the paradox, here, that the author's deferral to the translator-producer is based on an entirely legitimate ambition to become an internationally reputed author.

What strikes me as immediately interesting in this negotiation is that the self

– in this case, two selves – are impelled by an *Eros*-like drive to find their very life-affirmation in the making of, and association with, a particular creative object. However, and this is the exquisite paradox in the matter, in order to allow the event to happen at all, both writers have to *give up* their exclusive claim to the text. The constraints upon the translator are well known. In addition, the writer of the source-text must allow that the writer of the new, different-although-parallel text will “take liberties”. Indeed, the author must accept that the translator-producer will work inside the tempestuous straits which were once famously characterised by Walter Benjamin, sans the nautical metaphor,³ as flowing between the headlands of “fidelity” on the one hand, and “freedom” or “licence” on the other. Such work, which occurs in what I think of as the *straits of translation*, is done in search of another Benjaminian ideal, “pure language” (Benjamin [1955] 1992: 78-79). This metalanguage, if I may call it that, is partly defined for me by the fact that it is loosened from the anchorage of writerly ego, and released into general cultural possession. What Benjamin describes as “[regaining] pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux” (p. 80) strikes me as too dynamic a concept to be “owned” by one author. I think the term cultural *possession* is far more apt in this respect.

Now, for me this is one of the major virtues of literary translation. It allows one to enter into the sphere of imaginative writing without the immense burdens of egotistical obsession, in its many debilitating forms. Or, it allows one to do this for a while. In this regard, American poet and creative-writing teacher Rosanna Warren explains how translation can serve as a path of entry for creative-writing students because it allows imaginative inhabitation and the exercise of writerly craft without the “noise” of possessive personal attachment:

I think the study of translation is an excellent training for people trying to fashion themselves as writers, because it focuses them almost entirely on style and form, and relieves them of the burden of mustering “ideas” or any kind of “originality”. It inculcates the kind of attentiveness and ego-less-ness I think fine writing demands (a paradox that, since strong selfhood always manifests itself in strong writing). But I think the imaginative selfhood the writer wrests from his art is totally different from the functioning social ego, and the discipline of translation sets aside, to a large extent, the interferences of that social ego. So, it’s the discipline of becoming a writer. You might be amazed at the innocence of even quite sophisticated students – graduate students – when they confront the specific challenges of style and form, and realize how the weight of a small cosmos shifts with the choice of one or another word or syllable count or subject/verb relation.⁴

Warren’s description of how “the weight of a small cosmos” can shift “with the choice of one or another word or syllable count or subject/verb relation” strikes me as apt. The question, “whose small cosmos?”, becomes meaningless.

It doesn't matter whose cosmos, what matters is the integrity of that "small cosmos". This is precisely the virtue of literary translation. However, if in the *writing* of a translation the question of ownership of the mode of signification⁵ becomes subordinate to the demands of felicitous, dynamic or effective recreation, this is not so much the case once you step outside of the actual scene of the translation, the primal scene of writing. Then Warren's "functioning social ego" and "strong selfhood" are not easily kept apart, and the more legalistic notions of sole ownership begin to assert themselves (cf Venuti 1995: 9). Except, that is, in the kind of "pact" I have described above, in which the author allows, in theory at least, the text to be opened out to the strong winds of what one might call frame-transfer, forces which are the essence of literary translation. In this act of loosening, there is a surrendering of the work to the flux and play of transformation and improvisation within a more generally held and plural sense of language and culture. Ultimately, when the author dies, this claim upon the work by more widely shared modes of signification, in the name of "culture" in general, will become complete. In Benjamin's language, the text, if it is translatable in the ideal sense, will approximate the condition of pure language, will slip from its confinement to a single code and thereby enter more general intelligibility (this, of course, distinguishes great writing from less great writing). In the beginning stages of literary translation, then, it seems that the limits of "sole ownership" over the mode of signification of a text can be significantly breached, in a way that is also imaginatively daring. This can be an exhilarating experience for both author and translator.

However, as suggested above, in the practice of literary translation there are distinct limits to Warren's notions of egolessness and community of property. There is a rude shock in store for the translator of a living author who believes she or he can share the work "equally" with that author. Before encountering this shock, however, I experienced the most sublime interregnum of egolessness, especially in the early stages of translating *Triomf*. I was on sabbatical leave, so the claims of the real world felt far away, I was working in a summer house on the coast of New England, and my only responsibility to the world, for five hours a day, five days a week, was to re-write, or produce anew, a text of which I was already very fond. In this early period of translation, I experienced an enthralling feeling of *possessing* the text; not owning it, not making any personal claims to it, but possessing it and being possessed by it. I think I possessed it in the best sense of the word, namely in giving one's labours to an act of culture in which one's possession is framed in terms of the demands of the work. To use an analogy, this kind of possession is like being a good listener, and possessing to the fullest extent the words between two people, as opposed to someone who can hardly listen to others for all the noise in his or her own head. During this period, I also experienced something akin to the feeling of "pure language" of which Benjamin speaks. As I translated,

it seemed as if neither the Afrikaans of the original text nor the English of my translation were at all important to me except as a kind of peripheral vision. If this seems an impossible statement, let me explain that the “experience” or the “action” of the novel seemed to lift off into an intermediate realm of “pure language” almost *because* I was grappling with the two languages in order to render the experience signified in the text. Between the two languages there seems to exist a metalingual, or conceptual, understanding of the content, a kind of Platonic ideal form similar to Benjamin’s sense of “pure language”. “It is the task of the translator”, Benjamin writes ([1955]1992: 80), “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 re-creation of that work”.

What Benjamin says here amounts to a startling claim – the translator is a kind of freedom fighter. She/he must, in Benjamin’s words, “*liberate* the language *imprisoned* in a work” into a “re-creation”, which is the translation. What would any number of authors think of that! One may interpret this as follows: self-enamoured authors *borrow* from that pure language which we all potentially possess. Such authors perhaps don’t even realise the short-term nature of the loan; instead, they forcibly detain the borrowed language, which they then seek to appropriate for their own account in a kind of writerly solitary confinement. At this point, enter the hero-translator, who must break the jail and liberate the temporarily reconfigured version of pure language back into multilingual general possession. Granted, my analogy is playful; Benjamin would be the first to remember the debt to authorial creativity. Nonetheless, the practice of translation, and the theoretical speculation which surrounds it, seem to open up highly unconventional perspectives on literary “ownership” – in my terms in this paper, ownership of the mode of signification. We are here surely talking about a process of creative cross-appropriation, where individual “ownership” of a text makes way for a far less rigidly defined sense of cultural possession which exists in the transformation (sometimes repeated) of a text into ever-changing semantic and cultural chains of signification. Even though one should feel obliged to add that the transformation in each case occurs against a benchmark of originality – the “original work” – one must also acknowledge that the linguistic and cultural metamorphoses involved in the transformation are such that the “work itself” is often perilously close to becoming something almost unlike itself. The further away one gets from the watchful and possessive living author, the more such transformations become possible. The question is: who is to say how, in Benjamin’s words ([1955] 1992: 81), a translation should “[pursue] its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux”. Does the author, in the final instance, have a greater say in this matter than the translator? We know that many of the claims of poststructuralist literary criticism, not to mention theories of intertextuality, seek to empty the categories of writerly ownership

and to see the processes of signification as rhizome-like or capillaristic. Still, in the real world of publishers, agents and contracts, the more conventional notion of sole-owner authorship remains stubbornly strong. This "real world" has entirely seen off the poststructuralist challenge, if ever it even noticed the beast in the first place. The sole-owner model is, besides, entrenched in the charters of the law of things, where one's proprietary right over an object, tangible or intangible, must be specified and can never be as hopelessly vague a concept as a rhizome, employed metaphorically by a cultural theorist, to boot.

My near-transcendental interregnum of pure language, then, soon came up against a few obstacles. I believe there is an in-between period of translation in which the fluidity inside our Straits of Translation – swimming in the tides of freedom and fidelity – allows one maximal play and experimentation. In this phase, one feels the current of freedom very strongly, perhaps more strongly than the pull of fidelity. One feels as though fidelity will find its expression in the greatest possible freedom of creative transfer. However, as the moment approaches where finality about the new text must be reached, and the text has to be cast in stone once more, a strange shift in the limits of possession begins to occur. Merely the apprehension of this coming moment is enough to create spasms of anxiety. Is the text accurate and correct? Will it satisfy the implicitly or explicitly held norms of the reading public and those of the more specialist readers?

The anxiety brought about by approaching publication deadlines can easily lead one back to a kind of literalism of the last resort. In my case, now back in South Africa with a finished draft at my side, I suddenly found myself quite feverishly checking the translation for literal accuracy against the original. I felt that any exercises of transnational brilliance would have to be based on nothing but the most exacting standards of accuracy. I came to view many of my liberties with something like horror. In some cases, I couldn't believe that I had been quite so arrogant, and quite so careless. I found that my "pure language" experience, in which the text had seemed to lift away from both of the two languages involved, had also coincided with the making of errors – literal, basic errors – in my translation. In short, I began to feel decidedly humble before the original novel, which lay menacingly beside my computer.

This feeling was reinforced by encounters with agents and contracts. Contracts hardly recognise the role of translators, and when they do, they tend to see translators as little more than delivery agents. The standard publishing contract talks quite definitely about the "proprietor" of the work in the singular. The fact that a translation has occurred makes little if any difference to legal concepts of ownership.⁶ When I was interviewed by the London agent of *Triomf*, I told her that the author and I had already agreed informally to a particular royalty-sharing arrangement, in preference to the more customary

one-off payment that remains the norm in translation practice. I asked her if she would include my royalty-sharing agreement with the author in the publishing contract. The agent declined. She made it clear I would have to strike up a separate agreement with the proprietor of the work herself. Yet this same agent was speaking to me because she wanted me to deliver the manuscript, pronto pronto! What's more, I did deliver the manuscript, and it was on the basis of this manuscript that the novel was accepted by a major international publishing house, Little, Brown and Company.

I rapidly grew accustomed to this intermediate role. You write the text, but have no final say over its ultimate presentation. You deliver the goods, but the goods were never actually yours to start with. You write every last word in the text, but somehow you actually didn't write that text at all. From the moment the translator delivers the manuscript, the process seems to collude to force the translator back into the shadows. As Venuti (1995: 8) comments, "the translator's invisibility is ... a weird self-annihilation". Authors are marketable, translators generally not. Unless the author is dead and the translator herself is famous. Then the author's role seems to be more fairly and prominently acknowledged. Hofstadter (1997: 353) plays delightfully with assumptions about authors, invoking the example of how a concert pianist is held in esteem, regardless of what she actually plays. Whether the concert pianist plays Bach, Beethoven or Debussy doesn't matter, it's her name which appears in the advertising, and she to whom people come to listen. Hofstadter invites us to imagine the following conversation:

- She:* Did you hear – Gregory Rabassa has just finished translating another book!
- He:* Oh, that's terrific news. Is it available yet?
- She:* I think so, or it will be in a month or two, anyway.
- He:* Oh, by the way – who's the author?
- She:* Don't have the foggiest. It didn't say, in the advertisement I read. But it'll be great. Rabassa always is.
- He:* Ah, Rabassa – what a translator! I could read his flowing sentences forever!

Hofstadter (1997: 353) comments: "If you think this ... conversation could plausibly occur, then dream on, friend!" As Hofstadter suggests, in similar vein to Venuti, it is a strange feature of the culture of translation that its greatest aim is often stated as invisibility. The more *invisible* the translator and his or her rendering of the work, the better the translation, or so the argument frequently goes. And it's more often than not translators themselves who seek to encourage the posture of invisibility. Hofstadter asks his readers to imagine a review of a concert pianist in which the artist is praised for the *invisibility* of

her rendition. How absurd!

One must, of course, distinguish between legal ownership and what I have called ownership of the mode of signification. There is to be no tampering with copyright law. Authors retain copyright in the original work, as well as in the translation (shared), since the translation is itself a manifestation of the original work. Translators often hold copyright in the translation as such – that is, only to that particular version of the text, and only to their version of the translation of the work, as opposed to the work in its original sense. The legal process cannot be expected to accommodate ambiguous and shifting senses of "ownership". But in the world of literary reception there are many more parties who claim a form of ownership to objects of culture in general. What I ultimately came to realise was that there are, in fact, more than two parties to the negotiation. Beyond the author and the translator, there is another group of people who claim proprietorship over one's text. These people are the readers, specialists, critics, teachers, reviewers and editors. It is they who do public battle over literary-cultural norms in general, and it is to them, I realised, that both the author and the translator defer in the end.

In my case, this realisation was brought about when an editor went over my finished translation prior to its South African publication. This editor performed an action which was the equivalent of pulling a single thread in the text loose – she queried a certain decision of translational style – and the balance of the entire translation suddenly began to shift. As it happens, she questioned the retention of certain Afrikaans words in the translation. At the same time, a contract with Little, Brown and Company was signed, and the author and I immediately realised that we needed a thoroughly Anglicised text to deliver to the international publishers. Immediately, we were both catapulted out of our respective senses of possessing or owning the text, and thrust into an alarming sense of third-party expectation, third-party evaluation, and, worst of all, the possibility of third-party censure.⁷ In this regard, the example of Vladimir Nabokov's merciless calumny of various translators of Pushkin's famous verse novel, *Eugene Onegin*, comes to mind. Nabokov variously described the translators of *Eugene Onegin* and their translations as "very weak", "dreadful", "meaningless", "ludicrous", "miserably reproduced", "idiotic", "impossibly vulgar", "preposterous", "horrible", "wild", "very clumsy", and, my favourite, a "monstrous undertaking by a pitiless and irresponsible paraphrast" (Hofstadter 1997: 265, 269).

In the run-up to actual publication, then, the nature of the pact between myself and the author seemed to change quite dramatically. We were now no longer giving up any sense of exclusive possession of the text to a fluid and transformative process as such, and to a general cultural ownership conceived as open to the freedom of exhilarating play. Instead, we were now deferring to a sense of jealous, impatient cultural watchfulness, although we made strong

efforts to “foreignise” the English version, in keeping with Schleiermacher’s classic distinction between domesticating or foreignising a literary translation (cf Venuti 1995: 19-20). A certain terror entered our minds as we scoured the text for Afrikanerisms, and, in the process, came upon what we began to conceive as “mistranslations”. Mistakes there certainly were, and when these were of a basic, literal nature, they were rooted out. But there is a tendency, when in the grip of this feeling of terror, to begin to regard what one might earlier have seen as “ingenious” plays with nuance in the translation as “mistakes” – a tendency which begins to confirm the Italian motto, *traduttore, traditore* (“translator, traitor”, or, “to translate is to traduce”). What I found was that, in the grip of this terror occasioned by the approaching reckoning with normative literary judgement, the author’s assumed “ownership” of the mode of signification of the text once again began to assert itself. Creative free-play gave way to hawkish anxiety. Was the text good enough? Would it suffice? When there was doubt, the author prevailed. Supply now exceeded demand. I had already produced about ten drafts of the translated work. The initial anxiety about *producing* an English text as such had entirely disappeared. Shifting ownership of the mode of signification had been temporary. Understandably, the living author now wanted it back.

As interesting as my particular case-history may be, it is not the autobiographical content of this story which is of primary value. The case-history is interesting only insofar as it points us towards more general conclusions. It seems to me that in literary translation, we shall never quite escape the cross-currents of what I have called Benjamin’s Straits of Translation. Hemmed in by the seemingly conflicting tides of “fidelity” and “freedom”, the translator must steer the course that the prevailing weather allows, sometimes listing more to the side of freedom and greater ownership of the mode of signification, sometimes conceding that the tides of strict fidelity are too strong to fight against. Allow me, in conclusion, to give examples of both extremes. To demonstrate demands of fidelity that cannot be trifled with under any circumstances, one cannot but cite the example of sacred writing, as Benjamin does. Here there is to be no thought of sharing or co-owning the mode of signification, since it is believed to be above the reaches of human invention. Translators of such writing must of necessity be invisible and utterly humble before their sacred task. In stark contrast to the case of sacred writing, however, consider the alternative offered by Douglas Hofstadter in *Le ton beau de Marot*. In this book, the object of translation, a little poem originally written by a long-dead sixteenth-century French poet, often serves as little more than a *pretext* for games of translation. Hofstadter provides a large number of vastly different translations of the same poem, written by himself and other writers, and these translations range from the literal to the fantastic, the witty to the wise, sexy to sweet, offensive to endearing. Hofstadter’s exercise demonstrates

abundantly just how much the mode of signification of a translated work can, and should, be shared as well as improvised. It is only when signification is shared and exchanged, compared and enjoyed because of its *difference from itself*, in the Derridean sense, that it comes fully into its own multiple possibilities of being. Signification, even when it supposedly points to the "same thing", is by its nature multifaceted and ever-shifting. "The task of the translator" writes Benjamin ([1955]1992: 72), "consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original". This *echo* is anything but the truth of literal rendering, and its "correctness" resides not in simple comparison or the dominion of even the author's opinion, but in a kind of poetic equivalence which resides, for Benjamin, in pure language, in what he calls the "interlinear" meaning between the lines of every text. The delight of Hofstadter's book is precisely the way it shifts semantic frames around, and then plays with particular patterns within those frames. And yet Hofstadter always demands close attention to the form of the original. He allows transculturation and even what he calls transtemporation of the content, but beyond that he remains watchful over fidelity to the *ethos* of the original. His notion of fidelity, however, is heavily loaded in favour of freedom. I find his particular sense of freedom irresistible. It is generous and open, and it invites the reader to share in an abundant sense of human creativity. In Hofstadter's example, it is notable that the original author is long dead, and that his work is open to the kind of sharing that the legal understanding of copyright would not allow in the case of a living author. It is also notable that, unlike *Eugene Onegin*, there is little general cultural investment in the Marot poem. Hofstadter works in microcontexts where there is a minimum of overdetermined ownership of modes of signification, whether by a watchful critical community, or a watchful living writer with copyright. By doing this he demonstrates, however, just how strong the currents of free-play can potentially be, currents which the big, manmade harbours of proprietorship – not to mention cultural homogenisation – may seek to restrain.

However, there is no simple or easily resolved conclusion to this story. Translation, I have come to believe, radically unsettles the seemingly fixed categories of legal proprietorship, authorly ownership, translational appropriation, author-translator hand-holding, and third-party monitoring, rendering them all contingent upon, and relative to, the *work done by the text itself*, or the work of the *verwerking*. The case of *Triomf* was unusual in that, following its dual publication in Johannesburg and London (the American edition is now also due), the South African version was met with quite extraordinary acclaim for the translator. Unusually, the translator became the subject of interviews and extensive exposure, both in the press, on television and in magazines (cf Rautenbach 1999; De Waal 1999; Isaacson 1999). More than one prominent

newspaper review tended to devote *more* attention to the translation than to the work itself – more, also, than the customary parenthetical nod given to translators in reviews which otherwise entirely ignore them, as well as the fact of the translation itself (cf Cilliers 1999; Nel 1999). The English translation of *Triomf* was awarded the Inaugural South African Translators Award for Outstanding Translation in 2000 (carrying a substantial cash prize for the translator), and one of the translated poems in the text of *Triomf* was co-awarded the 1999 FNB Vita / English Academy prize for poetry in translation. Paradoxically, almost *too much* recognition was given to the translator above the author for her role in the translation process, which was substantial.

What I have come to believe, in the final analysis, is that the *strong selfhood* invested in truly creative writing, both by authors and translators, is comprehensively received by a strong reader only when she/he *owns* it: that is, fully hears it, sees it and feels it in all its immanent complexity. If the work survives the test of time, not to mention the author's death, such overlapping public "ownership" becomes an established fact – in fact, it becomes *the* condition for the work's survival in the community of readers down the generations. In this sense, co-ownership of a literary work – perhaps one should say multiple joyful possession – is nothing less than a cause for celebration.

Notes

1. *Triomf*, for those who may not have read the text, deals with a violently dysfunctional and incestuous Afrikaans family, the Benades, who live in the Johannesburg suburb of Triomf. Triomf was built on the ruins of Sophiatown after this fabled multiracial ghetto was bulldozed to the ground by apartheid's social engineers. The Benades consist of siblings Pop, Mol and Treppie, plus the incestuous child Lambert, who was fathered by either Treppie or Pop. Symbolically, the Benades represent the end-result of Afrikaner nationalism's obsession with staying within one's own cultural group in order to maintain cultural "autonomy" and "sovereignty". In Van Niekerk's hands, this becomes nothing less than historical inbreeding, a cultural ghetto which is busy imploding during the course of the novel. In *Triomf*, not only has apartheid failed the country at large, it has also failed those, such as the Benades, who are now left to the tender mercies of the new dispensation while the Nationalist politicians busy negotiating the transition to black majority rule loot the state coffers and desert their pathetically deluded followers, the "ordinary" people who faithfully voted for them for more than forty years but remained spiritually and otherwise impoverished.
2. Literally, "verwerking" means "act of working" or a "working through". It also has connotations of "adaptation" and "creation of a version".

3. The nautical metaphor is my own.
4. Personal communication by e-mail, November 1997
5. By "mode of signification" I mean the particular style of address, the choice of narrative voice and the delimitation or extension of cultural reference in the translated text. These are choices which are by no means easy-to-hand or "naturally" self-evident. And yet most translations implicitly pretend that such choices are precisely that. In similar vein, Venuti (1995: 18) writes as follows:
Meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging unified essence, and therefore a translation cannot be judged according to mathematics-based concepts of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence ... canons of accuracy in translation, notions of "fidelity" and "freedom", are historically determined categories The viability of a translation is established by its relationship to the cultural and social conditions under which it is produced and read.
(Venuti 1995: 18)
6. See Venuti's extensive treatment of this topic (1995: 9-17).
7. Eventually, I proposed, and the author agreed, that I create a "South African" version of the translation (published by Jonathan Ball) which would retain certain "Afrikanerisms" and "transgressions" of the fundamental rule of translation, namely that everything in the source language be translated into the target language. Because we felt the South African audience would be reliably multilingual, we agreed that it would enrich the new text to have "untranslatable" words in the South African English text such as, for example, *the moer in*. In the UK version (published by Little Brown), this became *the hell in*. The extremely common but almost unspeakable word *meidepoes* became, in both versions of the translation, and after much animated discussion with the author, *coloured pussy*. Another variation was *toffee skirt*. Similarly, in the all-important conversation between Lambert and Sonnyboy in Chapter 13, I allowed the characters to "switch" from "English" (in reality, Afrikaans, in the original text), to semi-untranslated slang Afrikaans, since we could rely on the South African audience knowing both English and Afrikaans, as well as the "interlanguage" of English-Afrikaans slang. Hence the following exchange:
"You said it," says Lambert, "and beggars can't be choosers."
"Moenie kom kak soek nie!" says Sonnyboy.
"Ek soek niks," he says, "ek het iets. Six free meals, fifty bucks each."
"Watse kak, man!" says Sonnyboy.
(Van Niekerk 1999a: 229)

One crucial piece of dialogue, in which Sonnyboy declares his identity, is spoken in a hybrid "interlanguage" which, for the South African version, was rendered unchanged:

“Kyk, daai’s nou my luck in Jo’burg gewies, nè! Ek’s ’n Xhosa, ek kom van die Transkei af. En ek’s maar so.” He touches his face. “Toe dag die Boesmans ek’s ok ’n Boesman, toe kry ek ’n room in Bosmont tussen hulle. En hulle praat met my regte Coloured Afrikaans. En toe leer ek maar so on the sly en ek sê fokol, want hoe minder ’n Boesman van jou af weet, hoe beter. Dis ’n bad scene, die Boesmanscene. Hulle lê dronk en suip en steel en steek jou met messe en goed ...”

(Van Niekerk 1999a: 227-228)

This statement linguistically *enacts* Sonnyboy’s achieved hybridity. Just as his identity cannot be contained in any single or ordinary ethnic or cultural category, neither can his mode of address be contained in any single language. He breaks through the cultural containment apartheid tried to impose from above, and thereby represents an “underground” cultural insurgency in Van Niekerk’s novel.

In the UK “English” version, Sonnyboy’s statement is necessarily less forceful:

“Look, that’s how the dice fell for me here in Jo’burg. I’m a Xhosa, I come from the Transkei, and some of us are yellow.” He touches his face. “That’s why the bladdy Bushmen thought I was one of them, so I got a room in Bosmont right in among them. And they began talking real Coloured Afrikaans to me. So I got the hang of it on the sly, and I didn’t say nothing, ’cause the less a Bushman knows about you, the better. It’s a bad scene, the Bushman scene. They drink themselves stupid and then they rob and stab you and leave you for dead ...”

(Van Niekerk 1999b: 275)

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