

Woodsworth, Judith. (2017) *Telling the Story of Translation: Writers who Translate*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 230pp. ISBN 978-1-4742-7708-2 (Hardcover), UK £95.00.

In her *Telling the Story of Translation*, Judith Woodsworth presents a triad of modernists, namely George Bernard Shaw, Gertrude Stein, and Paul Auster, who also practiced translation at some point of their writing career. By exhaustive biographical investigations on the three writers and in-depth analytical survey on their translations and their comments on the art of translation, the book showcases how each of them appropriated translation as a pretext for *something else* that, for Shaw, Stein and Auster, ultimately serves the purposes of reflecting upon or fashioning their authorial egos. In order to do so, Woodsworth laboriously draws on a vast spectrum of primary and secondary materials including not only creative writing, translation and biography, but also interviews, personal life, travel and so on. Better yet, each of the three writers is given particular focus: Shaw's relationship to Siegfried Trebitsch, whom he translated and also by whom he was translated; Stein's undertaking of her self-exile to Paris where she experimented with writing as well as translation; Auster's translations of French poetry and his characterization of the translator in his fiction. In addition, Woodsworth shows us the reception and influence of their translations, perhaps more so of Shaw's and Stein's than Auster's. The resourceful research enables Woodsworth to convincingly elucidate the three translator-writers' respective ambivalent views on the art of translation—on the one hand, they uphold the value of practicing; on the other, they eschew translation for whatever reasons each of them found. In the meantime, from the "Introduction" to the "Epilogue," the book carries an ambivalent undertone which cannot be better exemplified by what Woodsworth concludes in the latter that there is no clear-cut answer to the question as to whether these writers' appropriation of translation "perpetuates the stereotype of translation as a secondary art" or "help[s] to elevate its status" (169).

The subtitle of the book, "Writers who Translate," not only reveals case study is the methodology of writing this book, but also expressly states that the cases selected for this

book are the writers who *also* translate, instead of the translators who *also* write. In other words, the attributive clause adopted for the subtitle emphasizes this book brings forth a writer-centered focus, instead of taking a translator-centered approach. In her “Introduction,” Woodsworth brings up a great parade of the writers who *also* translate, including literary greats such as Chaucer and Dryden, Baudelaire and Valéry, Pound and Eliot. She argues that among them Shaw, Stein, and Auster “are ones who have achieved relatively little recognition within the sphere of translation. [...] their practice and theorization have not received the attention they deserve from the translation studies community” (4–5). This comment may equally be made to a more poetry-focused triad of English-language (post-)modernists such as Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Bly, and Seamus Heaney. This is not to pick on Woodsworth’s selection of the writers for study, but merely to expose translation studies community’s urgent need for such case studies on translator-writers, from English-language cultures, as well as from other cultures, such as Boris Pasternak, Jorge Luis Borges, Xi Chuan, Fernando Pessoa, Czesław Miłosz, Paul Celan and so on so forth. These case studies that focus on a lesser known sector of the literary greats’ *ouuvres* would refresh the understanding of their writings and provide with a new point of entry to their literary worlds. *Telling the Story of Translation: Writers Who Translate* is exemplary in this respect. Any scholar interested in Shaw, Stein or Auster would find this book immensely useful. According to the author, another reason for forming the Shaw-Stein-Auster triad is that “[e]ach of them either originated in or moved in multilingual spaces. [...] All three have been involved in translating the other and in ‘translating’ themselves not only literally but in the metaphorical (geographical) sense” (5). Their movements from one culture to another, some more permanent than others, invoke theoretical interests in cultural translation. Bhabhaesque third space theory could have helped generate enlightening discussions on their expatriate experiences, which in turn could have yielded new insights on the part of theory because of their discrepancies. Despite icing on the cake, this theoretical potential of cultural translation is not fully realized but is only briefly mentioned in the chapter about Auster as a metaphor appropriated by scholars “beyond the borders of translation studies” (150–151).

The writers who *also* translate are very visible in many cultures, because, as Woodsworth also notes: “Writers have always regarded translation as an exercise, as a prelude to or preparation for original work [...]” (5). This observation is certainly true for many emerging writers who are devoted to producing translations as starting points of their literary careers. Apart from those more or less ostentatious and pronounced treatments of translation “as a way of paying tribute to an admired foreign writer, as an infusion of elements of a foreign culture into their own culture, or as a mechanism for strengthening personal or collective identity [...]” (6), all those, there is always the selfish, taciturn, even at times stealthy aspiration that the fledging translator’s writing would one day surpass the poem, story or literary nonfiction piece that she or he is translating. This thankless work does pay and pay off by sharpening the translator’s skills to write creatively, especially if she has the heart to pursue a writing career. Even more so when she seriously mulls over why the translational writing is *hers*, not anyone else’s, through which she distinguishes her voice from the myriad voices therein. Not to mention T. S. Eliot’s (in)famous revelation: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.” As a poet myself writing both in English and Chinese, I spent tremendous time and energy on translating poems in both trans-linguistic directions when I started my own creative career. (And I still do so today!) Translating veteran poets’ works indeed helped my poetic techniques mature. I learned to build overall structures for poems, make every use of on-and-off rhyme and rhythm count, and concentrate complex poetic feelings into succinct images, economical words, and laconic syntaxes. Thanks to the moments of translating the works that I found myself identifying yet disagreeing with the poets, with their overall ideas of poem, with their versifications and dictions, on which bases I could speak to them by using my own words to produce responsive poems. By and by, from such resilient experiences sprang my poetic voice and the conviction that it could participate in the timeless and simultaneous cosmological dialogue among all poets. All said, there are also many incidents when literary aspiration plays the least role. Some literary translations were commissioned works, I did them at the time only because the employers offered a good rate and I needed the remunerations to buy bread and pay

rent. This phenomenon is not uncommon among practicing writers living in a capitalist society, before they can live solely on royalty.

As exhaustively as *Telling the Story of Translation: Writers Who Translate* has excavated the printed and verbal materials of Shaw, Stein, and Auster on translation, this lack of first-hand empirical and psychological wrestle between paralleling practices of creative writing and translation can be understandably felt between the lines. And this lack leads to some dubious over-interpretations. For instance, the author cites Auster's revelation on his preference in translation strategy: "Whenever I was faced with a choice between literalness and poetry, I did not hesitate to choose poetry. It seemed more important to me to give those readers who have no French a true sense of each poem *as a poem* than to strive for word-for-word exactness." Immediately follows her embarkation on the "age-old tradition of distinguishing literal and free translation" where Auster's "literalness" is understood to be associated with "word-for-word translation" and his "poetry" with "sense-for-sense translation" (129–130). While this analysis may appear valid, the cited lines exhibits poet Auster's sensibility towards poetry on a deeper level. The passage, where Auster tries so hard to pivot around, but never quite illuminate, the quintessential quality of poem, is written in *poetolect*, a communal habitual speech peculiar to practicing poets when conversing on their idiosyncratic perceptions and understandings of poetry. For the poets who uphold the belief that "poems should be translated by poets" (Auster's words), there is only but one strategy of translating poetry—translate "each poem *as a poem*," which transcends and encompasses all secondary translation techniques, whether word-for-word or sense-for-sense. If word-for-word is what it takes to translate the poem *as a poem*, Auster or any translator-poets like him would not hesitate to choose it. Therefore, equating word-for-word with Auster's "literalness" or sense-for-sense with his "poetry," or placing his "poetry" to either side of a binary opposition, hardly does justice to what Auster means by translating "each poem *as a poem*."

Shaw, Stein, and Auster are unarguably canonical literary giants, and also literary translators in their own right. Their image as a writer is perceived to be so much stronger than that as a translator, that the latter can but be considered secondary. This hierarchical

perception of image is predemtermiend by the selection of study subjects. In the book, no matter how hard the author tries to enhance the profile of the art of translation by citing the three writers' acknowledgements to this craft, its value and function always remain subservient to literature. As an academic study, this is totally legetimate and the author's archival research is indeed admirable. Reading this book, I cannot help thinking beyond and fiddling with the question as to what might be the way to reverse such hierarchy. Perhaps, what the translation studies community knows even less about is the translators who *also* write, because their creative writing pursuits are simply even less visible than their names on the cover and spine of the book they translate, which makes it special, worthwhile, even heroic, to take translator-centered approach and study the translators who *also* write. Thus, the art of translation may be studied as "a way of being, away of knowing," not merely "a practice, a subject, and a trope in literature" (2).

Chris Song  
Centre for Humanities Research  
Lingnan University, Hong Kong