SILVEIRA BRISOLARA, VALÉRIA
The translator as an Author
Nonada: Letras em Revista, vol. 1, núm. 16, mayo-septiembre, 2011, pp. 107-125
Laureate International Universities
Porto Alegre, Brasil

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=512451674008
The translator as an Author

O tradutor enquanto autor

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ABSTRACT
Authorship and originality are two closely connected issues. Considering this, the article aims to establish relations between theories of authorship and the status granted to the author and the translator in these theories, claiming that the translator is also an author. In order to do that, a brief history of the conceptions of originality and authorship is provided and their relationship with translation is established.

KEY WORDS
Translation; authorship; originality.

RESUMO
A autoria e a originalidade são duas questões intimamente relacionadas. Considerando essa relação, este artigo tem por objetivo estabelecer relações entre as teorias da autoria e o status conferido ao autor e ao tradutor nessas teorias, defendendo que o tradutor é também autor. A fim de atingir esse propósito, um breve histórico das concepções de originalidade e de autoria é feito e suas relações com a tradução são estabelecidas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Tradução; autoria; originalidade.

“And if what I’ve been forging does not exist?”
Wyatt Gwyon in The Recognitions

INTRODUCTION

Translations of literary works are often considered failures and heavily criticized, for they are said not to be able to “repeat”, “express”, or “match”
the original text. It is not uncommon to find reviews criticizing translations of literary works despite the fact literary works depend upon such translations to be accessible to readers. In Brazil, some authors, such as Santana (2008), have collected and analyzed recent critical reviews of translations and concluded that the reason why most translations are considered failures is the criteria used to evaluate such translations. According to her, the problem resides in the conception that the source text is a stable unity that should be identified and decodified so that it could be reproduced faithfully in another language. (2008, p. 253) This means to say that aspects such as fidelity (or faithfulness, or loyalty) to the original text and comparisons with this text are the sole criteria used to evaluate these translations.

This is related to the fact that the terms originality and original have been used as a key criterion to judge and attribute value to works in literary and art criticism for many centuries; however, they are problematic terms and the meaning and status attributed to them has changed greatly throughout history.

Edward Said (1983) identifies the importance ascribed to originality in literature and states that, “originality is something worth examining”, and ponders,

Not only does one speak of a book as original, of a writer as possessing greater or lesser originality than another, but also of original uses of such and such a form, type, character, structure; moreover, specialized versions of originality are found in all thinking about literary origins, novelty, radicalism, innovation, influence, tradition, conventions, and periods. (1983, p. 126)

Thus, this prevailing conception of originality is aligned with theories of authorship that see the author as the sole proprietor of an original text and the text as an original entity to be preserved. In this context, translations are tamperings with an original and highly valued text that that can rarely escape their fate of being failures. In their turn, theories of translation are entwined with theories of authorship, for such theories are related to an authorial system relying on the concept of originality with considers
translation as a derivative activity whose main purpose is fidelity to the original. If the emphasis is on the original and its value, the criterion that emerges as relevant is that of fidelity, faithfulness, or loyalty to the original. Translation is then a mere derivative exercise of decoding. However, the emphasis on originality and the assumption of originality can be questioned. Recent theories problematize originality as an absolute and the task of the author and, consequently, that of the translator.

The field of translation studies as an independent area of study is recent. However, translations have been made for centuries and their making has been discussed ever since. What is clear nowadays is that as much as writing is more than mere coding, translating is much more than mere decoding.

Within this context, this article aims to trace a history of the concept of originality and establish relations of this concept with theories of authorship and the status granted to the author and the translator in these theories. This is carried out for I believe the position that the translator is also an author, although already defended, has not been made clear enough and has to be reinforced. It is necessary to establish that the higher the status granted to the author in theories of authorship along history, the lower the status granted to the translator, for the more secondary or derivative the concept of translation is. In order to reach my objective, a brief history of originality and the use of the term originality to refer to literary works are provided. This is followed by a review of recent theories of authorship and the configuration of authorship in contemporary society. These are related to the task of the translator and the role of the translator in our postmodern world.

ORIGINALITY AND TRANSLATION

Most translations are said to be translations of an “original”, or source text. When we submit texts to an editor, we are asked and expected to submit “originals”. These two instances show different meanings
attributed to the term original. The word originality comes from the Latin word *origo*, which means rise, beginning, or source. However, there are two basic senses in which the term originality is used and, although they are different, they are not easily separated.

The first meaning of originality is related to a work that is not copied from another, being, thus, authentic, that is, having an aura as Walter Benjamin (1993) puts it. The main characteristic of such work can be said to be authenticity, for it is “produced directly by an artist” (LINDLEY, 1952, p. 17). That is perhaps the reason why we often read phrases such as “an original by...” or “based on an original story by...”, which are meant to raise the value of the work in question by attaching it to an individual subject. Originality is under this perspective located on the body of the artist (GROOM, 2002, p. 13) and is often represented by a single signature or a name on a cover.

German philosopher Walter Benjamin, in his 1930’s influential essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1993), attempts to analyze the influence of the then modern techniques of mechanical reproduction and diffusion on the work of art. In the first lines of his essay, Benjamin affirms that the theses contained in his text aim at putting aside numerous traditional concepts, such as creativity and genius, which had been prevailing for a long time and were closely connected to the issue of originality (1993, p. 166). For Benjamin, the difference between a perfect reproduction and an original lies in the here and now of the work, its history, its unique existence. (1993, p. 167) The aura would be, then, the content of authenticity, which would escape mechanical reproduction. (1993, p. 167)

Despite the fact that literary works nowadays rely on mechanical reproductions to be sold in the market, these reproductions increase the value of the original work for they are sold as copies of that original written by the hand of that unique author at a unique moment. Practices such as autographing are related to the need to maintain the remains of this aura and any translation of such “original” work is indebted to the maintenance of that aura.
A second meaning of originality is related to a work being innovative, displaying something new or creative, supposedly different from all the previous ones and uniqueness could be said to be its main characteristic. A book would be original for displaying unique characteristics, introducing innovations to the literary establishment. Nevertheless, it is clear nowadays that literary works are never completely new and this is a fallacy, for they are always based on preexisting works, and inserted in a certain literary genealogy.

Although the distinction between these two concepts of originality seems clear after a brief explanation, it is difficult to separate these two uses of the term originality. In both meanings, however, what makes a literary work original is the moment and the process of its creation and not merely its existence as an object. Therefore, there is an originary scene associated with this originality, that is, the existence of originality and an original presupposes the existence of an original moment.

If these two nuances of the term originality are related to translation, it becomes even more problematic. Translations are usually not considered original because this term is saved for the original, that is, the source text, which is considered as unique for being the first and not being a copy. Thus, translations are not firsts and as derivations, second-comers, are seen as secondary and, therefore, never original or originary. Also, they are not original because they are not, and are not supposed to be, innovative, new, different, for they are indebted to the source text and usually not evaluated for their original character. If literary works are praised for being innovative, translations, in their turn, are usually expected to lack originality in its both senses and being, thus, faithful to the original.

However, it has not always been like that. The rise of originality started along the Middle Ages and gained force in Romanticism when the notion of genius became widespread. Up to the beginning of Romanticism geniality remains as a gift to some chosen ones, but it is along Romanticism that geniality moves from the outside of the artist to his inside, for the muses are replaced by an internal geniality.
Martha Woodmansee (1994, p. 16) reminds us that one of the most important texts to depict this change was Edward Young’s “Conjectures on Original Composition”, which had a great influence on the Romantic movement. In this text, the word original is used several times along and Young also employs the word genius and relates genius to originality. After Young, there is Immanuel Kant’s “Critique of Judgment” that discusses originality and geniality and establishes the importance of originality in art. Kant enumerates the properties of genius and states that, “originality must be its first property”, for works of genius “ought not to spring from imitation” (1994, p. 128). Kant’s text is extremely important in raising the association between genius, talent, and originality, which will predominate from Romanticism onwards, but it fails to provide a concept of originality. Before Romanticism, the skill at executing the art forms was the most important feature, but texts such as these by Young and Kant place the ability of the writer, as a craftsman, in a secondary position and bring the ability to produce original works to the limelight.

The rise of originality continues with Wordsworth’s 1815 “Essay Supplementary to the Preface”, in which Wordsworth reinforces these arguments, for he combines the words author, great, and original. It is clear that the valorization of originality brought together a valorization of the author, the genius endowed with originality. Originality is then often praised, but rarely defined; nonetheless, there is a growing interest in how to attain originality. The conclusion is that from the eighteenth century on, originality was established as a tenet to measure the quality, or value, of a work of art. This is extremely important for the fact that the work is original will give rise to a cannonification of originals and a devaluation of translations. Moreover, and parallel to that, the devaluation of the translator as a producer of derivative and secondary works, lacking originality, will take place.

However, along the twentieth century this long primacy of originality started to be questioned. Edward Said dealt with the question of originality in the 1980’s in his well-known essay “On Originality”. In this essay, Said establishes originality as an important category to be studied and
dedicates himself to the study of the importance of originality in fiction. Said appears to be concerned with what Lindley long before had named “a fetish of originality” in the history of literature (1952, p. 170), but which few had paid attention to. Said rejects originality as an absolute and prefers to analyze it in relation to other categories, quoting Barthes when he says that “originality as a kind of absolute term becomes an impossibility” (1983, p. 134), for he sees it as “a variation within a larger, dominating pattern” (1983, p. 134). Said’s claim is that originality should be considered within a larger set of patterns. He states that “the originality of contemporary literature in its broad outlines resides in the refusal of originality, of primacy, to its forebearers (1983, p. 135). Said goes even further and affirms that “the best way to consider originality is to look not for first instances of a phenomenon, but rather to see duplication, parallelism, symmetry, parody, repetition – echoes of it” (1983, p. 135).

Said related it to authorship and states that, “the writer thinks less of writing and more of rewriting” (1983, p. 135) and “The fabric of the novel, as well as its theme, is made of rewriting, one original cantus firmus being imitated so many times as to lose its primacy” (1983, p. 136). If the writer always rewrites, it is because originality, if it exists, may be only because “Originality is individuality” (1952, p. 20), as Lindley once defended. Thus, it becomes clear that contemporary criticism rejects originality as an absolute. This is related to the abandonment of the term original in detriment of the term source text, which still implies an origin. This rejection of originality leads to a primordial questions: if originality is a fetish, a myth, or a fraud, and is therefore unattainable, why is it still a primordial criterion for literary criticism?

AUTHORSHIP AND TRANSLATION

The concept of authorship is not new either, for it has been conceived since the Greek. Homer, Plato, and Aristotle, among others, reflected
The notion that authors precede and own their works is still prevalent and is exemplified by the definition of authors in the best-selling *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as “individuals who, by their intellectual and imaginative powers, purposefully create from the materials of their experience and reading a literary work which is distinctively their own” (1999, p. 14) and a few lines later Abrams states that the work is accredited to the author because the author is its originator and concludes by saying that if “the literary work turns out to be great and original, the author who has composed that work is deservedly accorded with high cultural status and achieves enduring fame” (1999, p. 14-15). This definition illustrates that the predominant conception of authorship nowadays is still basically connected to the notions of ownership and originality, and if these two notions as absolutes are questioned, the concept of authorship itself is challenged as well as the primacy of the “original” over the translated text.

Martha Woodmansee considers the current regime of authorship as a recent phenomenon and result of a radical reconceptualization of the creative process that culminated 200 years ago “in the heroic self-representation of Romantic poets” (1994, p. 3), with a mystification of the author in detriment of authorship “with the ascent of the originary genius-proprietor” (WOODMANSEE, 1994, p. 3). The author reminds us that for the Romantics, “genuine authorship is originary in the sense that it results not in a variation, an imitation, or an adaptation, and certainly not in a mere re-production” but in a “new, unique – in a word, original’ – work that may be said to be the property of its creator”
It is important to point out that Woodmansee’s assertion encompasses both dimensions of originality, for she refers to what is new and what is unique.

This romantic conception of author as the originator and proprietor of a work began to be questioned in the 1960’s, mainly by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who were both, although in different ways, able to perceive it as construct. Their works led to a different conception of authorship, which is the basis for the arguments concerning the status of the translator as an author.

Roland Barthes published “The Death of the Author” in 1968. However, despite the title of the article, Barthes does not mean the disappearance of authorship, but rather, a reconfiguration of it. Barthes’s text is followed by Michel Foucault’s “What’s an Author?”. For Séan Burke, in The Death and Return of the Author, these two authors promoted a return of the authorial subject as they proclaimed its death, for “the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead” (1992, p. 7). There is an apparent contradiction: an author, Barthes, was necessary, to announce that the Author is dead. If the author resurrects, when pronounced dead, it is relevant to ask how and why the author returns.

Barthes defends the supremacy of writing and the text over the person who writes the text. For him, “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (1995, p. 125). Barthes proceeds to explain that when a fact is narrated, this disconnection between voice and origin takes place and “the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, and writing begins” (1995, p. 125). It is important to notice that, for Barthes, the subject that slips away is the centered, autonomous subject, and not the subject of the unconscious proposed by psychoanalysis.

Barthes questions this relation between Author and text and rejects this precedence of the Author over the text in the same way that Heidegger
(1994) rejected the precedence of the artist over the work of art. Barthes defends that the modern scription is born simultaneously with the text, for there is no being preceding or exceeding the writing (1995, p. 127). Barthes defends the conception that it is “a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” and “a tissue of quotations” (1995, p. 128). Barthes then reminds us that, “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes futile” and; therefore, the Critic, as the interpreter and evaluator of texts, loses ground. For Barthes, the concepts of Author and Critic are closely connected, for the reign of the Author has also been the reign of the Critic as the one able to explain texts produced by Authors (1995, p. 129). A reconceptualization of the Author, after its death and resurrection as author, demands a reconceptualization of the figure and role of the critic and evidently the translation critic is included here.

Barthes moves the focus from author to reader, for in Barthes’s point of view, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (1995, p. 130). The Author that dies is not the author that is constructed as a subject as the text is written, but the Author that precedes and closes the text, which is, in its turn, interpreted in the light of this Author’s life or previous works. In short, Barthes’s text suggests that not only the author, in this modern sense, which is often taken for granted, is a relatively recent invention, but also that it does not reflect our contemporary writing practices (WOODMANSEE, 1994, p. 3). Thus, the author that dies is the “Author-God”, who was the sole originator and master of a text, and who preceded, directed, and exceeded the writing that bore his name (BURKE, 1992, p. 24). But for Burke this author never existed, except as a fiction, it was also a myth, because “the author has always been absent” (BURKE, 1992, p. 16). I dare say that this fiction was also created by criticism itself, for criticism needed a God-like Author, producer of masterworks who deserved to be interpreted and have their keys revealed to the public.
Foucault states that his purpose in “What is an Author?” is to deal with the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which apparently a text points to a “figure” that seems to be outside it and antecede it (1984, p. 101). Thus, he claims from the beginning that the author may not be outside a text and may not antecede it, for an author is constructed along with the text and the birth of an author is the death of the subject writing. For Foucault, “In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor it is to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears”. (1984, p. 102) As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing”. (1984, p. 102-103). Therefore, the man has to die for the author to emerge and the Author may be dead, but not the author himself. The author that is dead is the author belonging to the humanist tradition, an autonomous subject originator of original texts. This way, the author is the product of the text, what is left after the text, and not the text the product of an author.

Foucault poses another question of the same nature of the query “What’s an author?” later in the text. He dares to inquire, “What is a work?” attempting to question the limits of a writer’s work (1984, p. 103). In short, Foucault historicizes the concept of authorship and demonstrates that the term ‘author’ does more than simply describe a writer’s role in creating a text. Barthes proclaimed the death of the author, but Foucault states that it is not enough to proclaim the disappearance of the author, one needs to move further and “locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers” (1984, p. 105).

As it can be perceived after the analyses of “Death of the Author” and “What’s an Author?”, Barthes is more concerned about the interaction between the author and society, whereas Foucault is more interested in the analysis of the relationship between the name of the author and
the text it is related to, for Foucault is interested in the function of the author’s name. Another point of convergence is that both related the modern figure and function of the author to the emerging capitalist economy of modernity, assuming it is a recent formation, and therefore, it may cease to exist as it has come into being. Also, for both Barthes and Foucault, the prevailing regime of authorship, grounded on originality, is a construct and if it is deconstructed, it is language and writing that emerge as crucial and not the empirical subject.

THE TRANSLATOR AS AN AUTHOR

In “Pierre Menard, Writer of Don Quixote” Borges makes it clear there is only one method for two people to write the same text: they have to go through the same experiences, and yet, this might not work out. Therefore, texts are always unique as the writing process and the subjectivity involved are different. In his “The Translator as Author: Two English Quijotes”, Anthony Pym brings interesting points to the discussion. He compares two translations of the The Quijote and relates this to Borges’s text, which he considers a superestimated text. In this article the author compares two translation of The Quijote and claims that only of them can claim authorship. According to him Smollet can be considered to be author of his 1755 translation of The Quijote, whereas Grossman cannot claim authorship for her 2003 translation and the reasons for that are not merely textual. Whereas Smollet’s translation is published as a part of Smollet’s Works and his name is the one on the cover, Grossman’s is different. Thus, according to Pym, the possibility of attribution of authorship to a translation has more to do with the way the translator is presented and authorized and not only with the text itself. Pym calls attention to the fact that in the initial notes Grossman presents herself as greatly indebted to Cervantes and afraid of translating Cervantes, which is completely different from the way Smollet relates to Cervantes, considering himself able to interpret and
illuminate Cervantes. In fact, what is marked is the role of the translator in the society at the time the translations are published, that is, 1755 and 2003. The translator in 1755 could claim authorship, but after the decrease in the importance given to the translator, as translation was not considered original, and, therefore, minor, the translator cannot claim authorship, for he is not seen or perceived.

This issue is tackled by Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility* as it calls the attention and criticizes the emphasis given to transparency in translations. According to many of the authors Venuti researched, a good translation should be ideally transparent, that is, without any marks of authorship, and should not look like a translation, but rather, like a new original text. Venuti defends that a translation is a rewriting of an original text (VENUTI, vii) and as such it has characteristics of the source text, but it is at the same time a new text and for this reason he sees this demand for the translation to seem a new original as problematic. The relevant question posed by Venuti regards the implications of this illusion of the transparency of the voice of the translator in the translated text for society and culture. In his opinion, this leads to a transparency of the translator not only in the credits, but also in society and the current status in which translators are undervalued. Venuti calls this phenomenon the “domain of transparency” (1995, p. 5). Further, Venuti relates this defense of the invisibility of the translator to the prevailing individualistic theories of authorship that still remain. In his words:

> According to this conception, the author freely expresses his thoughts and feelings in writing, which is thus viewed as an original and transparent self-representation, unmediated by transindividual determinants (linguistic, cultural, social) that might complicate authorial originality. (1995, p. 7)

Thus, translation is considered a minor activity and the task of the translator as inferior to that of the writer because it is not an “original work by an original author”. That means to say that the belief in originality as an absolute still remains. According to Venuti (1995), copyright regimes
are a proof of that subjugation of the translation in face of the author. For this reason, the objective of his book is to make the translator more visible and thus able to resist this notion of invisibility (1995, p. 17) and thus put an end to this “illusion of transparency” (1995, p. 21).

This endeavor is related to Santana’s conclusion (2008) that the reason why translations are considered failures and translators are often criticized is the criteria used to judge translations. She identifies that there seems to be a canonization of the supposedly original works, or source texts, as if no hand or language were capable of translating such “magical” original. However, a translation is always faded to failure if these criteria are taken into account.

Regarding this issue, Bassnett (2003, p. 72) calls attention to a very important point, which is often overlooked. The translator is both a reader and a writer and, therefore, there is no such thing as the dichotomy translator/translation (target text) and author/original (source text). Just like reading is what happens in the space between the pages and the reader, which is not an empty, but rather, a social space, translation is the result of what happens between the source text and the translator/writer/reader. The question that emerges is that if the translation relies on a reading process, the translation frees, in a way, certain meanings of the text, and hides others and makes them more or less apparent in the translated text. If that is true, as it seems to be, would not the result of such reading be a new original or source text? Or would it be a rereading? Or a version? That at the same text completes and illuminates the text, but also makes it something else?

The translated text makes the source text accessible to a larger number of readers, but at the same time it changes the source text. It is obvious that it changes the form of the source text; however, what I mean is that the source or original text will also not be the same after its translations. Returning to Benjamin, the translated text and the source text are always bonded, just like The Mona Lisa and its reproductions. The translation increases the value of the original for also making it
more accessible and widespread, but it proposes a unique reading of the text. Translation is then a displacement of an “original” text in time and space. This is related to Knight’s postulation that when artists work “it is not simply a past shaping the present; it is also a present shaping—or re-shaping—the past” (1997, p. 46). Thus, the translation is an addition. This is supported by Derrida (2006), for whom the translation is always a supplement, an addition to the source text, which shall never complete it, for any text is always open, incomplete, resembling human beings. It is derivative, but not minor. It relies on a preexisting text, such as any writing, but the difference is that the relationship of precedence is clear. At the same time, Derrida (2006) defends the notion that every translation is a new original work and, therefore, the translator deserves to receive copyright.

These issues are widely discussed by Umberto Eco when he defends that a translation is always something else and all that it can seek is to be almost the same thing, but always something else. Thus, if it is something else, it is possible to conclude that it is a new text, a new source text, or, a new original. For Eco, the perfect translation is impossible, just like the perfect language, and the perfect reading. It is defended that something is always lost, for each reader is unique. However, Eco defends that if something is lost, something is also gained. Eco defends that translation is above all negotiation and what is lost and gained is negotiated, for translation is above all a process of negotiation. This is related to what Romanelli affirmed: “the point is to get to know not only how, but also why the translator makes such choices” (2010, p. 62) when reading in one language and writing in another. It is not known yet to what extent language shapes or not what and the way we think, but if we agree with Benjamin that translation is a form (2008, 67), it is also possible to agree with Bassnett when she affirms that from the moment one accepts that can be no identity between languages, it becomes possible to discuss the losses and the gain the translation
process (2003, p. 61). Bassnett concludes by saying that language is the primary modeling system in a culture and the impossibility of translation is implicit in the translation process (2003, p. 66). This is related to Derrida’s statement that we never speak just one language, for languages are composed of other languages (2002, p. 20) and for this reason it is impossible to translate this multiplicity of voices and languages.

**FINAL REMARKS**

It is obvious that all the texts are untranslatable if this perspective is followed since they are never going to be the same after translation. The translation tampers with the original and its sacrality. It creates a new original, which lacks originality as much as they first one, but is bonded for the rest of time to the original. If the perspective is changed, if it is assumed that there is no original, then that means to say that there is no loss, only light as the translation illuminates the original and gives more value to it even though it also makes it more accessible. Thus, just like originality as an absolute does not exist, neither do original Authors. Translation in under this perspective an impossible task, which does not prevent it from being searched for, for there is no finish line, only the track, from a source language into a target language.

This conclusion that translation is an impossible activity, shared by authors such as Steiner, Bassnett, and Derrida, does not devaluate the translator. On the other hand, it suggests that translation is authorial work, but that the text is above the author and the translator/author. As much as the author is constructed along and not before the writing of a text, the translator emerges with the translated text, which is as original as any other text. Giving up the ideal of a perfect translation that decoded the original meanings of a text, like giving up absolute originality when writing, might be what enables the task of the translator as much as it is
what enables the task of the author, for texts ask to be read, written or translated, not authors. Translators do not need permission to translate any work, but rather, to publish such translations that make the text survive. However, as Derrida has pointed out, the works survive, but not the authors. Perhaps the name of the author survives along with his signature, but not the authors (2002, p. 33).

After this brief history of the conceptions of originality and authorship and the identification of the status granted to the author and the translator as these theories along literary history, it is clear that the higher the status granted to the author in theories of authorship that elect originality as their tenet to measure the quality of literary works, the lower the status granted to the translator and the more secondary or derivative the concept of translation. If originality as an absolute, in its two senses, is questioned, the concept of authorship itself is challenged as well as the primacy of the “original” over the translated text. For this reason, questioning originality and authorship conceptions seems to be the way to bring the name of the translator to the pages it has once occupied.

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