KAFKA TRANSLATED BY MICHELLE WOODS

Kafka Translated: How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka, Michelle Woods. New York, London, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014. £66.00. ISBN: 9781441149916.

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The title of this book is very tricky. Those who have counted on a purely linguistic analysis of Kafka's translations and a discussion of 'good' and 'bad' solutions will definitely go away empty-handed. First of all, Michelle Woods treats the eponymous 'translators' very broadly. The translators who have shaped our reading of Kafka are not only literary translators *per se*; these are in particular discussed in the first chapter of the book [Chapter 1: Translating Kafka]. Woods's translators instead span all the various artistic figures who engage with language, interpretation and hermeneutical quest for meaning. They encompass, for instance: characters and narrators from Kafka's prose, and Kafka himself (he "lived between languages and learned several" (129) as well as 'translated' some existing literary themes into his own works) [Chapter 2: Kafka Translating]; and 'intersemiotic translators', i.e. film directors who adapted his novels or biography [Chapter 3: Adapting Kafka]; or even literary critics who have influenced our reception of his oeuvre [Chapter 4: Interpreting Kafka[. Then, Michelle Woods does not really point the finger at any translatorial 'mistakes' nor dwells on what 'fidelity' in translation is or should be. Her book is a story about how Kafka has been notoriously rewritten and appropriated by his interpreters; and how the final product of these diverse readings and understandings is intertwined with a range of interesting narratives, twists, anecdotes and nuances.

The purport of Woods's multi-threaded tale is twofold. Firstly, it garners all the completely different voices and images shaping our readings of Kafka. In 1992, in his *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, André Lefevere, a Belgian translation theorist noticed: "When non-professional readers of literature say they have 'read' a book, what they mean is that they have a certain image, a certain construct of that book in their heads". That image is usually loosely based on things like fragments selected for anthologies, plot summaries, reviews in newspapers, magazines, and journals, critical articles, performances on stage or screen, and, of course, literary translations. All these different media partake in Kafka's cultural and inter-cultural circulation, showing his figure from different angles and always through the prism of the mediators. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the book reminds us about the fact which often escapes our notice, namely that: "a translator is a literary being" (88). And a human being. Woods helps us glimpse through the translators' lenses by providing a very detailed historical and personal context for their work. She studies their biographies, diaries, letters, own literary works, she even interviews one of them and publishes the conversation in the book. By doing all this, not only does she give each of them an individual voice and bring their presence to the foreground. Her analyses also point to and explicate some crucial problems in translation history, in general.

For example, Woods delves into The Milena Myth and strips it of all its mythical layers. Kafka's first translator, Milena Jesenská, is mainly known to a broader public as his lover and the addressee of *Letters to Milena*. As her own letters back to Kafka were burnt, we know about her and have access to her fictionalised persona mainly thanks to Kafka: an irony that would be also reflected in many other aspects of her life. Not only is Jesenská's own writing and journalism forgotten, her translations into Czech are also "too faithful to the German original" (27), as if she had been too much in thrall to Kafka's dominance. Woods explains this hierarchy with the Chamberlain-inspired metaphor of translation as a

faithful woman: Milena's rendering represents a "feminised, passive text"; whereas Kafka, playing in his letters with the notion of "sexual dominance" (18), stands for the authoritative and unquestionable original. Interestingly, a similar feminist strand is used to explain the relations in the Muirs duo, the first translators to introduce Kafka into the English-speaking world. Woods mentions the undeserved criticism of the couple's translations and then moves on to particularly shed some light to Willa Muir's contribution which was traditionally overshadowed by the figure of her husband. Despite being a philologist and modernist writer, Willa Muir was usually underestimated or completely omitted by literary critics who assumed that Edwin, a "man of letters", had the major impact on the final, literary shape of their translations (45-56). This also shows how translation is perceived as a marginalised, derivative and feminised art contrary to creative writing, which was immediately attributed to Edwin. The Muirs's case heralded another problem, which can be equally exemplified by two translators discussed afterwards, Mark Harman and Michael Hoffmann: Venuti's notion of 'translator's invisibility' in the English-speaking world. The 'naturalness' and 'transparency' of their English has been critiqued partly with regard to their nationality and language background: the Muirs are Scottish, Harman originally comes from Ireland, Hoffman is described as half-English, half-German, or even "not quite English, and not quite German" (108). Woods, in contrary, takes the translators' backgrounds at face value, she points to their interest in languages, artistic inspirations, self-awareness, and their own translatory style. Kafka's short story *Eine kaiserliche Botschaft* (*A Message from the Emperor*) discussed at end of this part seems to confirm the positive scenario. The envoy from the story, the only potential communicator of the dead emperor's message, becomes a translator figure. The translator's special, privileged role is in a sense similar to the messenger's: they serve as mediators between otherwise inaccessible literatures and cultures.

Woods' rich discussion of Kafka's film adaptations teaches us another important lesson about translations. In this chapter, she successfully analyses the place of these films in the directors' cinematography, and how their own artistic visions left an imprint on Kafka's representation on screen. The selected material includes a variety of distinct films: Orson Welles' *The Trial* (1962), Michael Haneke's *The Castle* (1997), Federico Fellini's *Intervista* (1987), Vladimír Michálek's *America* (1997), Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka* (1991), and Peter Capaldi's *Kafka's It's a Wonderful Life* (1993). Regardless of the genre and quality (one is an almost "B-movie-type film" (233)), Woods always acts in defence of each "translation of the script to the screen" (232). She also provides a number of historical contexts and inspirations which were essential for each of the directors' artistic perspectives (e.g. Holocaust, Czech enchantment with America, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*). This non-normative approach is very natural of film criticism: adapting for cinema is not expected to truly and faithfully represent the original written text, and every 'deviation' from the plot is interpreted as the filmmaker's artistic voice. Haneke even distinguishes between novel adaptations for television from those adapted for cinema (201), with the first one being 'faithful' to the script and the latter showing his authorial style and constituting a real form of art. Adaptations for television present a book in a nutshell and are most certainly created for those who have not read it; adaptations for cinema, on the other hand, are artistic takes on original scripts and are not expected to perfectly render them. This distinction is perfectly acceptable for 'intersemiotic' translations, but one might now ask a number of questions which are not explicitly posed in the book: Why does this distinction not hold for textual, literary translations? Is it because translations are *always* expected to represent the original texts? Or is it because we still believe in linguistic equivalence which can be achieved in literary translation, but cannot really take place in 'intersemiotic' translation by any means? Are the differences between semiotic systems bigger than those between different languages?

Or maybe we should rather accept the fact that there can be translations 'for television' and 'for cinema', that is literary translations which purport to either substitute or to retransform the original. And there is nothing wrong in the latter and in thinking about translations as being 'unfaithful' to the original. By approaching both types of translations (literary and intersemiotic) in the same way and placing their analyses next to each other in her book, Michelle Woods gives an optimistic answer to this question. She shows that every 'rewriting' of Kafka bears a trace of the rewriter's presence: their voice, their understanding, and their interpretative perspective.

Michelle Woods's book is a thought-provoking and illuminating reading, full of flowing and enjoyable prose. Some parts may appear quite digressive (especially the chapter on Kafka Translating with its close-up treatment of various hermeneutical themes), but even if so, any fragments going off the track remain extremely fascinating and give the readers food for thought. After all, it is a very considerate narration about umpteen Kafka's translators who have often devoted their lives to bringing Kafka to their audience, and who have tirelessly and irreversibly shaped our reading of him. According to one of them, Michael Hoffman (112): "Translators ask for terribly little, just to be read, to be included, to be understood – and don't get it… nobody much cares for or about translators – not authors, not publishers, not reviewers, not readers. I don't know what can be done to remedy this." Michelle Woods definitely knows – and shows what exactly.