



Loredana Polezzi. *Translating Travel. Contemporary Italian Writing in English Translation*, Aldershot, Ashgate “European Cultural transmission”, 2001.

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Volume 15, Number 1, 1er semestre 2002

La traduction au Canada : Tendances et traditions
Translation in Canada : Trends and Traditions

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006812ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/006812ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (print)
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Buzelin, H. (2002). Review of [Loredana Polezzi. *Translating Travel. Contemporary Italian Writing in English Translation*, Aldershot, Ashgate “European Cultural transmission”, 2001.] *TTR*, 15(1), 251–256.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/006812ar>

n'existe pas en dehors de nos esprits. La réalité et la fiction sont intimement liées. Nos idées sont des fictions créatives. » (cité p. 142)
Un partisan de la contradiction aussi : « La contradiction est souvent une conviction intime. Je n'ai jamais cru ceux qui ont un point de vue univoque, ou ceux dont les affirmations sont toujours cohérentes. » (cité p. 142)
Borges poussait très loin l'ironie : « J'affectionne vivre dans la perplexité, et je m'étonne que les gens me prennent au sérieux, j'ignore si je me prends moi-même au sérieux. » (cité p. 145)

Un personnage fascinant pour un ouvrage qui fascine. L'expert saura aussi apprécier le lourd appareil de notes (43 pages) et les très nombreuses citations de et sur Borges. Les autres découvriront un traducteur, pour paraphraser ce que dit Borges d'un de ses personnages, qui « n'a pas travaillé pour la postérité ni même pour Dieu, dont il ne connaissait rien des préférences littéraires. Minutieux, immobile, secret, il a tramé dans le temps son labyrinthe invisible. » (cité p. 133) Fausse modestie?

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Loredana Polezzi. *Translating Travel. Contemporary Italian Writing in English Translation*, Aldershot, Ashgate "European Cultural transmission", 2001.

Italy has always been an ongoing realm of fantasy, dreams and representations by foreign travelers. Both Italian literary critics and theorists have thus traditionally focused their attention on "foreign representations" of their "domestic culture". Yet Mrs. Loredana Polezzi, in a both thorough and original analysis, decided to look at the other side of the coin. The author hence studies travel writing in the Italian context from a radically new point of view, focusing on "domestic" - Italian - contemporary narratives about "foreign" cultures and on their English translations.

The following two questions raised respectively in the introduction and the conclusion, sum up the problematics of the book: 1) "Why does a genre, which in its international (and predominantly Anglo-Saxon) tradition is as popular in Italy as it is elsewhere in the world, fail to get recognition when it originates from 'home' writers?" (p.1); 2) On the other hand, "why should an Italian book on Tibet, or

Vietnam, be published in English – a language into which notoriously little is translated – when there are already plenty of volumes on the same subject written by English speaking authors?”(p. 212). The search to these questions engages both writer and reader in revisiting the function of travel writing, its relation to translation as well as the role played by both forms of writing in the dynamics of cultural exchanges.

The investigation is undertaken within a strong polysystemic framework. The author postulates the existence of an asymmetry between the Italian and the English polysystem as well as the relative marginality (and hybridity) of travel writing as a genre. In this study, translation is mainly used as “a heuristic tool to enhance our understanding of both texts and their conditions of production, distribution and reception” (p. 2). In line with Todorov’s *Genres in Discourse*, Polezzi defines travel writing from the perspective of its historicity (its function and ideology) rather than as a set of formal characteristics. The book consists of seven chapters: the first three chapters present a theoretical discussion, the remaining four are case studies. Following the author’s order, I will present the theoretical discussion first followed by the case studies.

The first three chapters deal with the first issue raised in the preceding paragraph. By focusing on the source-system, the author’s aim is to explain why - despite the international success of Italo Calvino or Oriana Fallaci - “travel writing” is still currently unrecognized as a genre in Italy. As the three chapters unfold, this question is answered by various and complementary standpoints. The author begins by examining the Italian literary system in relation to its English counterpart and the importance given to travel writing in both systems in order to show how Italian critics have traditionally relied and still rely on a dichotomic system of value opposing literary (“longlasting” and fictional) works to non-literary (factual, “plain” in style and ephemeral) ones. According to the author, such a framework can neither accommodate nor give any recognition to a hybrid genre such as travel writing or English faction. This conclusion leads up to the following hypotheses relating to the condition/effect that the translation of contemporary Italian writing might have on both target (English) and source (Italian) polysystems:

We might expect contemporary Italian travel writing (a genre in disguise in its original context) to become at once more visible and more regulated by generic norms when translated into English” (p. 69).

[Yet, travel writing being a “hybrid” hence “minor” genre with respect to Deleuze and Gattari’s theory], translation may become an instrument of containment rather than recognition and ‘liberation’. The selection, for translation purposes, of texts which appear easy to reconcile with the generic expectations operating in the target culture, and the subsequent choice of fluent, domesticating translation strategies which assimilate the foreign text to domestic models and make it immediately recognizable to the target audience, might after all amount to the imposition of a further (and even stronger) set of constraints upon the source text [...] Yet [...] we might hypothesise the existence of foreignizing translations which apparently preserve the otherness of the source text, but do so only to distance it from the target culture and its audiences, prevent identification on the part of the reader, and thus contain the text within the boundaries of stereotypical represents of foreign cultures. (p. 70)

Polezzi highlights in the third chapter of her book the differences and similarities between travel writers (portraying a particular culture and setting by narrating their personal experience), journalists (reporting foreign affairs and events) and ethnographers (who head toward a scientific account of a particular culture through participant observation). These different personae, which both interpret and translate “foreign” cultural values for a “home” readership, share an ambivalent position. They indeed all use narrative as well as stylistic strategies in order to create a voice that must sound both authentic and imbued with scientific and artistic authority in its depiction of the “Other”. However, as shown in this study:

[given] the ambiguous relationship between speech and writing which is at the core of Western thinking about creation and representation, original and copy, the ethnographer’s (or the traveller’s) text gains autonomy from and authority over, that same reality: unlike the translator, the travel writer and ethnographer have no fear of being brought to task by the presence of an original which could be invoked to test their authority and the truthfulness of their account. (p. 92)

This compelling analysis could pave the way for further discussions. Indeed, one could wonder to what extent the increasing recognition of translation studies as an academic discipline may blur this asymmetry and change the status of translators and of their texts? One could also question on what grounds (scientific/artistic) programmatic translation theories arguing for the greater recognition of translation claim the authority of the translated text? Finally, if translation, ethnography and travel writing truly have the power to

create images “talk[ing] back, informing and justifying practices and attitudes which directly and indirectly affect the source culture,” shouldn’t we rethink (or expand) the definition of literalism so as to take into account not only forms and texts but also source-text readers and informants?

The second part of the book consists of four chapters each relating a case study, in which Polezzi confirms most of the assumptions stated in the theoretical part. Their purpose is to show:

what happens when Italian ‘travel writing [...] gets translated into a culture which has a much more established space for that genre? What gets translated? Under what historical and cultural circumstances? What strategies are adopted? How is the translation received? And what can all this tell us not only about the target system, but also about its relationship with the source systems and about the criss-crossing of interference between the two. (p. 4).

The first case “traces the discursive formations which characterize travel books written by Italian explorers of Tibet between the 1930s and the 1950s and their English translation” (p. 114). It focuses on three authors who are all relatively unknown in Italy, yet whose work has been translated into English and is frequently referenced in contemporary English books on Tibet. Relying on both historical and biographical data as well as on her in depth analysis of the texts, Polezzi shows how “the scientist Tucci, the great Italian explorer Dainelli and the innocent traveler Maraini were all translated (and, where necessary, adapted) according to the conventions of English travel writing and put in service of its interests, whether they were those of imperial archive in the first half of the century, or those of the tourist industry in the second” (p. 131). The second chapter is dedicated to Oriana Fallaci, whose books are analyzed as Italian versions of English “faction”. Much more popular with English critics than Italian ones, Fallaci is described as a radically transgressive figure playing both on genre and gender boundaries as well as a typical case of an author whose work is somehow “given a new lease of life in translation” (p.157). The third case shows how Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibili*, a travel narrative based on the rejection of “realism as a mode of apprehension and knowledge of the world”(p.165) could be read as a literary expression of “the theoretical preoccupations with identity, textuality and representation which are at the heart of the current interest in the genre [...]and] the ultimate example of the hybridizing potential of the travel book” (p.179). The last case is dedicated to

Claudio Magris's *Danubio*, a book which "resistance to rigid genre categorization was in fact one of the most important factors in its wide European success" (p. 184) and which, like Oriana Fallaci, yet for different reasons, was in a way "freed" through translation. From highbrow and sophisticated narratives to realistic and overtly polemic ones, from "marginal" publications to bestsellers, academic to biographical or "literary" styles, Polezzi thus covers many scenarios, giving this research an extremely wide scope.

The only shortcomings to Polezzi's analysis are those that are somewhat inherent to polysystemic research. Thus the "Bermanian", literary or even ethnographically-minded reader may be slightly dissatisfied by the asymmetry between secondary (contextual) data and primary ones. Unsurprisingly given the functionalist approach adopted, yet ironically given the problematics tackled, the authors – travel writers and translators – who produced the works discussed in the study are hardly given "much of a voice". They hardly ever speak of/for themselves and the textual "spaces" reserved for quotations or stylistic analyses of their narratives seem rather bare in comparison to the importance given to the data relating to their contexts of emergence, distribution, reception, etc. Except that, *Translating Travel* is an extremely interesting book: the subject matter is original, the theoretical concerns and questions raised are highly topical, the data is extremely rich and the overall interdisciplinary approach allows for both subtle and complex answers. As such, this volume offers a strong contribution not only to translation studies but also to many other fields such as cultural studies, literary criticism and anthropology. Polezzi concluded her analysis on the following note:

the consumption of travel writing in translation may represent a displacement of a related set of fears and questions concerning the way in which we see others—and the way in which others see us. In exploiting the freedom granted by its marginal status, travel writing has been conservative at least as often as it has been adventurous, conformist as much as revolutionary. Similarly, a foreign text may be allowed greater impunity in its representations of the world, or be considered reassuringly easy to dismiss. The translation may domesticate its foreignness and invite us to feel safe in the conviction that others share our views of the world, or face us with irreconcilable difference and force us to reconsider our own assumptions—though even then, there is an easy escape route: we can refuse to identify with the point of view of the text, blame its foreign author for whatever hurts us, and maintain our safety distance. (pp. 212-213)

As I was reading these lines in June 2002, the French translation of Oriana Fallaci's highly controversial 'travel book' on Islam, *La rage et l'orgueil*, was ostentatiously on display, as the spring's number one bestseller in most Montreal and Paris bookstores and "le cas Fallaci" was on the headlines of many French magazines ... Why? and For Whom? This anecdote seems to prove, maybe more effectively than this lengthy review, the critical importance of Mrs Polezzi's research and, hopefully, the resonance it ought to have beyond the academic spheres.

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