The Invisible Hands That Control Translation

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This paper is part of an unfinished book-length project; I have provided hypertext links to some snippets from that project to give you some sense of the bigger picture. Basically, however, the project is an attempt to explore the nature of the «agencies» that control translation (the individual translator? the source author? the target culture, in the form of the marketplace? technology?) by looking closely at an analogy that has not been explored before: that between translation and spirit-channeling —communicating with and/or mediating for others the spirits of dead or «discarnate» people. When translators say that their job is to «step aside and let the original author speak through them», I'm suggesting, that is close enough to what is traditionally thought of as spirit-channeling or psychic communication with the dead to make the analogy potentially worth exploring. The translator is a «medium» or mediator who channels the «spirit» or voice or meaning or intention of the source author across linguistic and cultural and temporal barriers to a new audience that could not have understood that source author without such mediation. The translator does not speak in his or her own voice; s/he speaks in the voice of the original author. The translator does not convey to the target audience his or her own ideas, meanings, arguments, images; s/he is a neutral and noncommittal conduit to the target audience of the ideas and meanings of the original author. (For a short history of spirit-channeling [link].)

The analogy suggests both

(a) that the source author has the power to initiate communication with the target audience through the translator (the author is active, the translator is passive, or at the very most active only in the act of surrendering his/her activity to that of the author), and

(b) that the translator possesses some means of gaining access to the author's voice and meaning, of reliably «opening up» to the intentional speaking of a person who is almost invariably other (sometimes translators translate source texts they wrote themselves, but usually the source author is another person), most often distant in time and place, and not infrequently dead.

(For more detailed philosophical ruminations on these two claims in terms of the unknowability of the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* [link]. For a discussion of the problem in terms of universalism and relativism [link].)

And indeed historically many translations have been presented as explicitly channelled from the spirit world. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that when they speak in tongues (what we might call spirit-channelled foreign-language skills) they

should also pray for the ability to interpret what the glossolalists speak; this latter would be spirit-channelled conference interpreting. The belief that certain Bible translations are «divinely inspired» is fundamentally a belief that they were spirit-channeled. (For further discussion of spirit-channeled translations and interpretations in Christianity [link].) Joseph Smith also claimed to translate *The Book of Mormon* [link] from the ancient Egyptian through spirit-channeling.

What interests me here, however, is the range of ways in which this idea has been secularized in Western thought as an expression of our continuing sense —despite two-plus millennia of emerging rationalism and the now-dominant belief that we are the captains of our own souls— that there are forces both outside us and inside us that wield us as their tools. In the rationalist model that prevails in most translation theory (indeed in most theory period), the translator is a rational agent in control of his or her actions, including speech and thought; when the translator must make a decision, at whatever level —whether to translate a text, how to translate a text, what word or phrase to use, etc.— s/he acts as a single unified being under the command of a single unified ruler, reason. Reason gathers intelligence, charts a course of action, gives a series of commands, and carries them out. There are no competing forces inside the translator's head. Nor is reason an external force, wielded by God or spirits or other people: it is the translator, the translator's mind, the truest core of the translator's professional being. Other people can exert coercive influence on the translator, but the translator only surrenders to such coercion if reason decides that this is the wisest course.

Clearly, the spirit-channeling model flies right in the face of this rationalist tradition. It posits an entire army of what Adam Smith famously called «invisible hands», which shape, direct, regulate, control translation. Indeed, one of those «invisible hands» would be reason itself, which ideology theorists beginning with Friedrich Nietzsche would identify as an internalized form of ideological mastery, the voice of external social control that commands the individual from inside his or her own head. Just as the spirit seizes or possesses the channel and speaks or otherwise operates through the channel's willing body, so too does ideology and its agents —including reason— seize or possess the ideological subject and wield [link] that subject's body as (virtually) its own.

In fact Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* offers an early, powerful, and extremely influential statement of the shaping of the individual by collective forces. Nietzsche's work was complicated in influential ways by the French neomarxist theorist Louis Althusser [link], in what he calls «interpellation» or hailing: just as the spirit hails the channel through whom he or she wishes to speak —appearing before for the clairvoyant, welling up inside her head a verbal like pressure begging to be released for the clairaudient— so too does ideology hail the translator as translator, the critic as critic, any other subject as subject. How did we learn what to do when we first began to translate? Readers, editors, users, teachers gave us feedback; channeling that feedback, we were channeling ideology. Our «helpers» channeled it to us; we channel it to others. They hailed us as translators; we hail others. Translators know certain things: how to regulate the degree of «fidelity» with the source text, how to tell what degree and type of fidelity is appropriate in specific use contexts, how to receive and deliver translations, how to charge for them, how to find help with terminology, how to talk and generally act like a professional, and so on. Translators are those people who know these things, and who let their knowledge govern their behavior. And that knowledge is ideological. It is con-

trolled by ideological norms. To know what those norms prescribe and act upon them is to submit to control by them. To become a translator is to be hailed or interpellated as a translator by what Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses, or what Adam Smith would call the «invisible hand» of the market. (For Jacques Derrida on Marx and capitalist spectrality [link].) If you want to become a translator, you must submit to the translator's submissive role, submit to being «possessed» by what ideological norms inform you is the spirit of the source author, and to channeling that spirit unchanged into the target language. What you are then channeling, in this ideological perspective, is no such thing, of course; Althusser at least would certainly want to insist that there are no spirits in the occult sense of discarnate persons, disembodied beings who once lived on this earth; this is all a myth propagated by societal authorities who want to fill that myth's empty husk with their own author-functions (to invoke a Foucauldian term), their own generalized «intentions» for transmission from language to language.

Let's now take a closer look at Adam Smith's references to an «invisible hand» [link]—that mysterious force that leads merchants in a free market to promote collective interests while intending only to satisfy self-interest. As Emma Rothschild notes, Smith used the phrase twice in economic contexts. The first mention comes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), where it is used sardonically to describe rapacious entrepreneurs for whom the common good is the last thing on their mind, but who nevertheless in the pursuit of their own «vain and insatiable desires» (quoted in Rothschild 319) do provide work to thousands: «They are led by an invisible hand to… without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society» (quoted in Rothschild 319). The second and more famous mention comes in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): «he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which is no part of his intention» (quoted in Rothschild 319).

But as long as economic historians and theorists have only read those two passages, the invisible hand has remained a puzzle. Did Smith, a religious sceptic, mean God, or some other deistic spirit? If not, what did he mean? What «invisible» force wielded economic agents to ends other than their own?

Rothschild works to answer these questions by tracing what amounts to a logology [link] of the invisible hand, beginning with a naturalistic context in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where one hero stabs his opponent in the back: «twisted and plied his invisible hand, inflicting wound within wound». Here the hand is invisible not because the body to which it is attached is spiritual, ghostly, supernatural, but because it is behind the victim's back and so cannot be seen. The next context, rather more spiritualistic, is in Shakespeare's Macbeth:

> Come, seeling night
> Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
> And with thy bloody and invisible hand
> Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
> Which keeps me pale! (3.2.46-50)

Here «seeling night» is personified as a violent spirit invoked by Macbeth to calm his conscience: his thoughts of the men he has murdered, which «should indeed have died / With them they think on» (3.2.10-11), live on to torment him.

The third context, then, is Smith's first: in *The History of Astronomy,* probably written in the early to mid-1750s, a handful of years before *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* (and only published posthumously in 1795). «He is talking», Rothschild writes, «about the credulity of people in polytheistic societies, who ascribe 'the irregular events of nature',

such as thunder and storms, to 'intelligent though invisible beings —to gods, demons, witches, genii, fairies'. They do not ascribe divine support to 'the ordinary course of things': 'nor was the invisible hand of Jupiter ever apprehended to be employed in those matters' […]» (319). Here the invisible hand is clearly spiritualistic and divine, almost monotheistic: Jupiter as the greatest of the gods has often been made a figure (or logological precursor) for the «supreme being» of monotheistic Christianity. Later, also, between *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, in a lecture series delivered in 1762-1763 —the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*— Smith referred to «fairies, Nymphs, Fawns, Satyrs, Dryads, and such divinities» as «invisible powers» (quoted in Rothschild 320). The logological movement is clearly from naturalistic human hands that are invisible because hidden from the eyes, through the unseen controlling influence of animistic or deistic spirits, to some sort of unspecified economic force.

Working out just what that economic force was, what Smith could have meant by the market's invisible hand, has in the twentieth century become an entire cottage industry in political economics —as Rothschild notes, Smith's commentators paid little attention to the invisible hand before the twentieth century (319), possibly because before Marx, Darwin, and Freud there was no secular model of disaggregate agency that would account for a locus of regulation outside that secular avatar of God, the rationalist self. Indeed as Rothschild shows, «the invisible hand is un-Smithian» [link] (320). Smith too sought to purify the rationalist model of the self of any supernatural or otherwise unexplainable or unmasterable influences. Rationalism must be just as monotheistic as the Platonic Christianity out of which it largely emerged: thou shalt have no other selves before me. Economic agents should be the sovereign masters of their own fates. The only forces acting on them should be other economic agents who are similarly masters of their own fates. Certainly there should be no incursion of «invisible hands» from supernatural or psychological realms whose very existence, if it could be proven, would shake the foundations of rationalism. As Carl Menger wrote in 1883, in *Untersuchungen über die Methode der Soczialwissenschaften und der politischen Oekonomie insbesondere* («Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences and Political Economics In Particular»), Smith and his later followers viewed «the institutions of economy […] [as] the intended product of the *common will* of society or of positive legislation […] The broad realm of unintentionally created social structures remains closed to their theoretical comprehension» (quoted in Williamson 323).

It was Menger's view, in fact, foreshadowing a whole host of twentieth-century theories of the almost infinite diffusion of control in both society and the psyche, that «law, language, the state, money, markets, […] [the] prices of goods, interest rates, ground rents, wages, and a thousand other phenomena [are] to no small extent the unintended result of social development» (quoted in Williamson 323). As Menger posed the key question for the social sciences: «How can it be that institutions which serve the common welfare and are extremely significant for its development come into being without a common will directed toward establishing them?» (quoted in Williamson 323). Or, as Robert Nozick has most influentially reframed that question for late-twentieth-century political economics, «what decentralized competing processes within an individual» —and, by sociological extension, within groups of individuals or an entire society or economy— «would give rise to a (relatively) coherent decision-maker?» («Explanations» 314).

Drawing on the work of the philosopher Daniel Dennett *(Consciousness Explained,* 1991), Nozick calls his model a «disaggregated theory of the self» [link]: whether we imagine the relevant economic agent as an individual translator (say, a freelancer or an in-house person) or as a group of people who make a variety of contributions to the final translation product (say, an agency, including freelance translators, the translator's expert helpers [link], freelance editors, in-house editors and project managers, even in many cases the end-users [link] themselves), the assumption is that there is no single unified rational control of the translation process. The various agents and part-agents in this process all «channel» other significant forces —not spirits, necessarily, but for the most part those other forces are just as «invisible» as spirits, because we are typically connected to them through various virtual/prosthetic communication channels, including telephones, faxes, and e-mail, which do not bring us into the physical or even visual presence of the other.

Indeed the main unwritten part of this project will deal extensively with the figure of the cyborg in translation —the cybernetic organism or human-machine interface that relies heavily on the ghostly presences of virtuality and prosthetic sociality. This would be the field normally described as «machine translation» (MT), except that MT researchers despair of ever programming a machine to produce a translation of professionally usable quality without human assistance. All MT systems are, in fact, already cyborg translation systems: they all require a human-machine interface. The imagination of the cyborg translator comes, of course, from science fiction [link], where the linguistic complexity of space travel is often bypassed with various translator prosthetics that operate like technologically channeled spirits: just as Paul's glossolalists open their mouths and interpretations of their colleagues' foreign words come out, channeled from the Holy Spirit, so too do various sf space travelers open their mouths and utter words in languages they do not know, or open their ears and understand words in similarly unfamiliar languages. The prosthetic devices turn them into cyborg translators who become able to «channel» foreign speech into the target language of the (usually monolingual) sf writer and reader. In fact, the Urim and Thummim was a prosthetic device that made it possible for Joseph Smith to translate *The Book of Mormon* [link] from the ancient Egyptian; during the 45 days during which he dictated the translation, without even looking at the ancient Egyptian golden tablets, Smith was himself a cyborg translator.

But then, in a broader sense, so are we all.

Works cited [link]