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*Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction*. Edited by Klaus Kaindl and Karlheinz Spitzl. Pp. 373. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014. Hb. £83.

Translators and interpreters can be found in all sorts of narrative. From science fiction to war stories, the encounter of different languages and cultures has meant that there often has to be a mediator. Even the famous Babel Fish from Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a solution to the difficulty of how different species and cultures can communicate with each other – it, like the Universal Translator in *Star Trek*, removes the need for an interpreter or translator to mediate. *Transfiction* is the name given by the editors of this volume to fiction – either literary or cinematic – that is 'an aestheticized imagination of translatorial action' or, in other terms, focuses on translation (and interpreting) as part of its narrative.

Klaus Kaindl's useful introduction gives an overview of the vast array of texts that might be included in this category, highlighting that there has been a recent surge in the production of fictional texts that have translators and interpreters at their centre. Kaindl traces the tradition back to twelfth-century German epic, via *Don Quixote* and the works of Jorge Luis Borges, to more recent books such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*. One might criticize Kaindl's eurocentrism here, as the texts he mentions are almost all from Europe or in European languages, but I found it helpful to have an overview and historical perspective on what can feel like a very postmodern genre. The criticism of focusing on the European tradition or European languages may also be levelled at the whole collection. The only Asian name among those covered is Yoko Tawada, who resides in Germany and writes in both German and Japanese. I would be very curious to see what Japanese or Indian narratives involving translators had to say about translation. It's a shame they are not represented here, but at the same time the book does scrutinize a great many authors and regions.

There are four sections to *Transfiction*: 'Entering theoretical territories', 'Travelling through sociocultural space', 'Experiencing agency and action', and 'Carrying function into effect'. Spitzl provides both an introduction and an afterword in addition to Kaindl's overview of previous work on the topic. I didn't find the sections to be all that illuminating as a way of dividing the texts and I noted that Spitzl didn't refer back to them in his own introduction. Some themes reappeared in more than one section, such as the relationship between translating languages and interpreting the past, especially in relation to difficult-to-discuss events such as the Holocaust. The sections are not necessarily a problem, however, as the book does not feel designed to be read linearly. It's much more likely that readers will go to the chapter that interests them.

The book's origins in a conference can be discerned in its shape: it contains a lot of individual case studies, but it can be difficult to keep a grasp of the bigger picture. Spitzl's introduction and afterword do offer some pointers to the direction the editors had in mind: fiction is one way of knowing among many, so research into fictional translators can 'challenge established concepts and paradigms' as it looks beyond the limitation of facts. While this may be the case, what emerges from the texts included in this volume is an image of translators and interpreters as failures, of translation and interpreting that do not aid communication and are not trustworthy. This does not seem like challenging established concepts and paradigms, but rather reverting to older ones. A reason for these recurrent themes may be that translation and interpreting both become more interesting to fiction when they fail. Translators doing their job well are not particularly exciting to watch or read about. Properly functioning interpreters don't give much room for intrigue. A translator who manipulates texts offers more room for plot development. An interpreter who decides to change the discussion, as in Javier Marias' *Corazón tan blanco*, gives a degree of agency and suspense to the narrative. As Ingrid Kurz notes in relation to the example from Marias, 'it is indispensable for the story, but totally unrealistic'. Fiction will therefore give a necessarily skewed reading of what translators and interpreters do. Studying how it depicts them may not challenge established paradigms but it might offer insight into prejudices and preconceptions about translators and translation.

Nitsa Ben-Ari offers a typology of fiction dealing with translators and interpreters. She begins by discussing post-colonial fiction that uses translation as a trope. Then she discusses poststructuralist texts that use translation to play with intertextuality. After this, she mentions bestsellers that feature interpreters and translators. Her final category focuses on 'parodies that can no longer take the subject seriously' where translators or interpreters tend to offer non-equivalent and unhelpful interpretations, such as the protagonist Ben in Todd

Hasak Lowy's 'The Task of this Translator', who interprets with blank spaces due to not being proficient in the source language: 'Blah years ago my brothers (passive marker?) blah by blah'. Ben-Ari's typology is helpful for the broad areas of fiction about translation, but seems to overlook that translation can be represented in texts that are not specifically about translation too – as was shown in Michael Cronin's *Translation goes to the Movies* (2009) which considered translation and interpreting in a wide variety of movies.

Some of the most striking papers go beyond trying to align the narratives with translation and interpreting theory and practice to try to extend theoretical boundaries. Rosemary Arrojo's 'The Power of Fiction as Theory' focuses on the way that Borges' fictions can be read as theory. This is well-trodden territory, especially in relation to 'Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*', which George Steiner analysed in *After Babel*. Borges as a translator, fiction writer, and essayist offers a body of work that interweaves translation theory and practice. Arrojo highlights how, as an Argentine, Borges felt both part of and outside of the European tradition, which he felt gave him licence to take on and rewrite that cultural heritage. He did this through both his translations and his fiction writing, which engages with that tradition in myriad ways. Arrojo focuses on two stories, 'Funes el memorioso', and 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote'. The first is less obviously about translation. In this story, the central character, Ireneo Funes, is able to remember with incredible accuracy. He can remember a whole day of his life, but it takes him a whole day to do so. This prodigious memory allows him to create a number system that is not sequential, so that the sign for one number does not have any logical progression from another. To be able to use such a number system, a highly developed memory is essential. Arrojo mentions this but does not develop the analogy one might find with language, where what seems arbitrary in another language – gender, case, preposition use – must be learned. Indeed, number systems can often be confusing to people learning a language (as English school

children often feel when learning that four twenties ten – quatre vingt dix – is the French way of saying ninety).

Language functions by allowing us to overlook the tiny differences between experiences and to have some sort of shared experience, but, as translators, we're often presented with these tiny differences as insurmountable, especially when having to translate terms that can only be represented with a more general term in the target language. Funes' extreme sensitivity to context resembles an extreme version of that translatorial awareness. Beyond these reflections, Arrojo finds in both stories a competitiveness between narrator and character as the (fictional) narrators are in the position of interpreting and recording the (fictional) lives of other figures. This 'will to power' is something that Arrojo sees in translators' work, where they, like Borges, take on older texts and try to surpass them.

Not all the fictional translators in this volume follow such a will to power. Kaindl's chapter on Yoko Tawada examines how she creates the translator as a figure who 'not only embodies, but also transports foreignness'. Instead of attempting to outdo her authors, Tawada's translator is dedicated to bringing out the foreignness and difference in their works. In the story, her practice is criticized by reviewers and scholars, as it might well be in the real world, where fluent and precise translations are expected. Kaindl sees Tawada's translator, like all translators, as a failure, but also argues that this is fascinating. The translator in Jacques Gélat's *Le Traducteur*, discussed in this volume by Nitsa Ben-Ari, moves from being a translator to being a writer and then gives up writing. There is both a will to power here and a failure that echoes Tawada's translator's. Another failing translator, in Luciano Biancardi's *La vita agra* (1962), is assessed in Giovanni Nadiani's contribution, which places this failure in the wider economic conditions facing translators in both late 1950s Italy and the current climate. Biancardi highlights the social and economic alienation of translators as freelance

workers. The result is somewhat depressing, and contrasts with the more lofty aims discussed by Arrojo and Kaindl.

One place where the use of translators and interpreters seems most effective is in fiction dealing with the Holocaust – as considered here by Natalia Olshanskaya, Brian James Baer, Sabine Strümper-Krobb, Renate Resch, and Waltraud Kolb. In the case of the fictional interpreter Daniel Stein, his work for the Gestapo highlights interpreters' agency and difficult positioning. In other cases, translation and interpreting serve as a metaphor for the interpreting of the past that takes place in relation to the Holocaust. In *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer – discussed by Strümper-Krobb and Kolb – the protagonist is searching in the Ukraine for the woman who rescued his grandfather from the massacre of Trachimbrod, a village which has now disappeared and which few of the local inhabitants want to speak about. The interpreter's role here is to give the protagonist mediated access to the local population. There is also another form of mediation that they perform, which is allowing access to the past. The interpreter's presence here reminds the reader that the past is not directly accessible but needs mediation.

The role of translators and interpreters in science fiction and fantasy highlights different questions, such as the gendered image of the translator as well as the limits of human communication. Alice Casarini's chapter examines how translation between species and mediation between magical/non-magical humans takes place in the Harry Potter series. While Muggles and Wizards speak the same language (although it should be noted that there are French and Bulgarian Wizards too), Casarini points out how Wizards don't always understand technological terms as they don't have any need for technology given that their magic will perform the tasks that Muggles use technology for, e.g. telephony. Casarini notes that Hermione fulfils a role as interpreter due to her extensive knowledge and learning, while Harry's abilities to interpret are often the result of chance or outside help, for example from

other characters or from his inherited ability to speak to snakes. There's a gendered approach to translation and interpreting implicit in Harry Potter, which Casarini highlights: she argues that Hermione's perseverance and empathy are traditionally feminine traits. Indeed, Hermione's role as an interpreter and translator is frequently taken for granted by her friends, echoing the often invisible position of interpreters and translators. In relation to science fiction, Monika Wozniak points out how interpreters are often removed, replaced by machines or microbes that do the work for them. Alternatively, there is no communication with the alien species, or communication is very difficult, as in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*.

There is a lot of lively material in *Transfiction* and my review has not been able to cover everything. The role of translators and interpreters in fiction is fascinating, though not necessarily for what it says about translation and interpreting, but rather as a way of addressing cultural difference, the problems of construing and piecing together history, questions of language, and the limits of human understanding (in the case of *Solaris*). The chapters that I felt most fruitful in this collection moved beyond discussing translation to probing these larger issues. The collection is not systematic enough to furnish an overview of the whole field – though Kaindl's introduction offers a cogent summary – and readers might find themselves missing certain authors and texts that they know deal with the central concerns. Despite its various flaws, *Transfiction* ultimately affords much to reflect on.

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