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I’m a translator and I’m proud: how literary translators view authors and authorship

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the relationship of literary translators with ‘their’ authors and with the source text. The issue has been dealt with from different theoretical perspectives. I will focus instead on the practitioners’ own views, setting these against the scholarly voices and looking for possible similarities and discrepancies. In 1998, Simeoni stated that ‘the more vocal calls for translational emancipation’ had originated not among the translators themselves, but among ‘peripheral observers’, such as translator scholars. Does this claim still hold true, or are translators nowadays more concerned about emancipation, more prone to claim ownership and/or authorship than previous generations? A first glance at the results of a survey among literary translators in Scandinavia seems to indicate that they are not: most respondents apparently do not perceive the translated text as ‘their text’. The free text comments, however, reveal a more differentiated picture. My claim is that to understand literary translators’ ethical stance vis-à-vis the text they are working on, and to give them the rightful credit for their work, we need to revise some of the traditional dichotomies within translation studies, such as creativity versus fidelity, and take a more nuanced stance towards the notions of ownership and authorship.

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1. Introduction
In a survey on ‘multiple translatorship’, conducted among literary translators in Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 2015 and entitled Collaboration in Literary Translation, a section was dedicated to the translators’ relationship with ‘their’ authors and to the question of ownership of the translated text. Do literary translators perceive the text that they are working on as the author’s text, or does it become ‘their’ text through translating? And how does their perception of the text’s ownership relate to the ways in which power and decision-making are distributed between the two parties? One of the respondents adds the following free text comment to the question on ownership:

It IS the author’s text, but I’m the one who has written the Swedish translation and I must take responsibility for it. […] I don’t act as if it were a text authored by me. Well, when it...
comes to the publishing house and others, I’m very keen about my copyright on the translation. And the publisher is not allowed to change freely in my text!

As can be seen, the respondent states within the same few lines that the text is both ‘the author’s text’ and ‘my text’. This seeming contradiction is a focal point in the present article, which explores how literary translators relate to the author and how they view authorship and ownership.

The debate on authorship and ownership within literary translation, though not new, is still pertinent, not least when considering whether the last decades of increasing scholarly focus on literary translators’ role and status have influenced the ways in which the practitioners themselves perceive the issue. From the nineties onwards, a number of influential papers have discussed the author-translator relationship and questioned both the status and the attitude of translators, and prominent translation scholars have pleaded translational emancipation from different theoretical perspectives.

Strongly criticizing the ‘fluency ideal’ governing literary translation in the Anglophone context, Venuti launched a ‘call to action’ urging translators to make themselves visible both in the translated text itself and as a profession (Venuti, 1995, p. 307). Taking as point of departure the Barthean death of the author and the deconstructivist move, Arrojo (1997) for her part emphasized the need for ‘validation of the translator’s voice as a legitimate interference in the translated text’ and for the translator to work on ‘the signature of his or her authorial name’ (p. 31). Bassnett, from a writerly point of view, has in her own work as a translator deliberately blurred the line between literary translation and creative writing (see Bassnett, 2006; Stratford, 2011), and in her scholarly works she has repeatedly underlined the role of the translator as writer, author, and creative artist in his or her own right (e.g., Bassnett, 2011). A more extreme, activist position was called for by feminist translators (most of them stemming from academia, that is, not ‘mere’ practitioners) who deliberately transgressed the ‘conventional translation practice of being see-through and silent’ (Von Flotow, 1991, p. 79), by ‘woman-handling the text and actively participating in the creating of meaning’ (p. 76).

The scholarly views that have been presented briefly here all advocate for translational emancipation, but how about the practitioners’ attitude? Two decades ago Simeoni stated that ‘the more vocal calls for translational emancipation have not originated in the ranks of the translators as such, but among peripheral observers’ (Simeoni, 1998, p. 12). Referring to a survey conducted by Jänis (1996) among translators of playwrights, he also noted that the metaphor of the ‘translator-as-servant’ was recognized by nearly all the informants as a valid interpretation of their work, suggesting that it was ‘a powerful argument in favour of taking this belief in subservience seriously’ (Simeoni, 1998, p. 8). The question is whether practitioners still see themselves as ‘servants’ or if they have, since then, followed the scholarly recommendations and evolved from ‘submissive objects to emancipated subjects’ (Chesterman, 2016, pp. 161–162). If so, does this ‘emancipation’ entail a claim to ownership and authorship? Do translators want to be intervening agents turning the text into ‘their’ text, or is their ideal of the good translation still based on ‘the traditional notions of meaning recovery, fidelity or equivalence’ (Arrojo, 1997, p. 30), that, according to Arrojo, already two decades ago were no longer adequate to describe the relationship between originals and translations?
From time to time the views of practising translators have been drawn into the scholarly debate, but in general only prestigious translators working with prestigious and canonical texts (e.g., Bassnett & Bush, 2006; Buffagni, Garzelli, & Zanotti, 2011; Vanderschelden, 1998). To get a more balanced picture that also includes the views of ‘ordinary’ literary translators, those responsible for the bulk of translated fiction reaching the broader readership, I will look at the responses from the above-mentioned survey on Collaboration in Literary Translation, more specifically, the part on translators’ interaction with their authors (more details on the survey will follow in the next section). I will structure the discussion in three rounds that roughly follow the order of the survey questions:

(1) Do literary translators want to interact with their authors, and if so, why, and about what?
(2) How do the translators perceive their relationship with their authors in terms of ‘trust’, ‘truth’, ‘faithfulness’, ‘respect’, and ‘loyalty’?
(3) What is the translators’ stance towards the issue of ownership and authorship vis-à-vis the text they are working on?

Throughout the discussion, the practitioners’ own voices, emerging from the survey data, will be set against the scholarly voices in order to identify both similarities and discrepancies in how they view translators’ relationship with their authors and the texts they are working on. My claim is that if we want to understand literary translators’ ethical stance, that is their ‘ideas regarding good, correct, or appropriate translational behaviour’ (cf. Greenall, 2018, p. 2), and if we want them to have the credit that they rightfully deserve for their work, we need a more nuanced view on the notions of ownership and authorship.

2. Presentation and discussion of the survey data

The overall aim of the survey on Collaboration in Literary Translation was to shed light on ‘multiple translatorship’, that is the fact that more agents than just the translator are involved in the translation process and that, in some way or another, their voices will impact the final translation product (on the notion ‘multiple translatorship’, see Jansen & Wegener, 2013). The survey was distributed through the professional associations in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden in 2015, and 190 members responded, which corresponds to around 20–25 per cent of the members. Although some answered rather sporadically and only 151 completed the whole questionnaire, the survey generated a considerable amount of interesting data. It is difficult to determine if the respondents’ distribution according to age, gender, experience etc. reflects the general distribution among literary translators in Scandinavia, not least because not all literary translators are members of a professional association and not all have therefore received the questionnaire. However, with due reservations regarding representativity, I think it is legitimate to point out some general tendencies.

The survey concerned collaboration with authors, editorial staff, and fellow translators and consisted of 73 questions. In this paper I will focus on the 27 questions concerning the literary translators’ interaction with ‘their’ authors – the degree, mode, content, and perception of this interaction – including a series of free text comment boxes, from
which I will quote extensively in order to let the practitioners’ voice be heard directly.\(^3\)

The survey was anonymous, and the respondents were informed that their answers would be treated with confidentiality to make them feel unrestrained when touching on potentially delicate questions (related e.g., to an asymmetrical power balance between the involved parties).

### 2.1. Why interact (or not) with the authors?

According to Vanderschelden (1998), authority in literary translation ‘implies not only the claim of authorship made by the author over the text, but also the power relationship that authors can instigate when it comes to the “life” of their writings, including their translation’ (p. 22). She claims that the involvement of the author in the translation process (even when asked for by the translators themselves) may in fact ‘shift the decision process from translator to author’ (p. 26) and thereby undermine the translator’s agency. Vanderschelden is primarily concerned with the authors’ attitudes towards the ownership of the translation and whether and how they exert their authorial position to interfere in the translator’s work. The focus in this paper is how translators feel about it: do they want their authors to have a say in the translation process, do they refrain from contact to avoid such interference, or do they in fact feel that their agency is not at risk in any case?

Presented with the statement that ‘Literary translators should ideally have contact with the author’, approximately 50 per cent of the respondents agree, 35 per cent say it depends, around 14 per cent disagree, and only 1 per cent definitely disagree. As a matter of fact, around 60 per cent indicate that they usually or sometimes do interact with their authors. In the free text comments too, most respondents advocate contact, but – besides emphasizing that it depends very much on both the genre and the text in question – the majority advocates contact with the author either mainly or only when necessary to ‘solve specific and practical problems and fix misunderstandings’.

This view, or reservation, is confirmed when the questionnaire touches upon the content of the interaction. In fact, when asked what the communication is usually about, 77 per cent of the respondents answer ‘information’, 35 per cent ‘interpretation’, 17 per cent ‘translation strategies’, and 12 per cent ‘bonding’, that is ‘establishing a good atmosphere, attuning spirits’.\(^4\) As can be seen, the communication focuses predominantly on clarifying the content of the source text (specific problems regarding lexicon, references, and culture-specific terms), less on how this content should be read, and even less on how the content should be rendered in the target text or on bonding (although several respondents do cherish the friendships that arose from the collaboration, but like a bonus).

As the following free text answers illustrate, the respondents seem to perceive the translation process as a twofold process wherein the translator must first thoroughly grasp the source text (here the author’s help may be useful) and then work on the target text (which is the translator’s responsibility, in some cases, as the comments show, with the aid of the editor):

- They only answer my questions on specific words or sentences and then trust me to use that information well. […] Guidelines for the translation are discussed with my editor.
- I never ask them how I should translate, but only to elaborate the meaning of something to enable me to translate. They enlighten me, they don’t really instruct, that’s the editor who might do that.

Some comments furthermore specify that, actually, the ‘contact with the text [and not the author] is what matters’:

- It is very useful to learn the opinions of the author. However, […] what I translate is the text as it appears, and while the author has an intimate knowledge of that text, his/her interpretation is not absolute.
- If it is a finished work, it should ideally be unnecessary to have contact with the writer, as the work speaks for itself, and the translator needs to trust his/her interpretation of it.

In a recent study that also addresses the relationships between translators and authors, Hersant (2016) proposes a typology, deduced from a sample of renowned translators’ accounts and correspondences with their authors. The typology testifies to the variety of ways of interacting, as it ranges from the author who gives the translator either carte blanche (‘do what you want’), to the author who offers general recommendations (sometimes collective ‘letters’ addressed to all the translators of the text), the author who engages in more or less extended exchanges of questions and answers, the author participating actively in the creation of the new text, and finally the author who, exerting his or her authority as the original creator, controls and maybe even revises the translator’s text.

As an extreme example of this kind of authorial interference, that is, of the author becoming the translator’s corrector, Hersant (2016, p. 93) refers to Milan Kundera and his rewriting of translations of his works. Anticipating the question of ownership and authorship, which will be taken up below, we can point to a similar case of a ‘controlling author’ within the Scandinavian context, i.e., the interesting case of ‘inventing F. David’ discussed in Wirtén (2015). It concerns the Danish author, Peter Høeg, who after having been presented with the acknowledged translator Tiina Nunnally’s American translation of his bestseller, *Smilla’s sense of snow*, forced his British publisher to revise it for the British readers. Peter Høeg took active part in the revision process, with the British translation (entitled *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*) eventually being attributed to an altogether fictitious ‘F. David’, and the American translator choosing to withdraw her name from it altogether (cf. Wirtén, 2015, p. 49).

This kind of ‘collaborative’ control obviously requires that the author ‘sufficiently masters the target language’ (Hersant, 2016, p. 93), which is very seldom the case when translating into peripheral languages such as the Scandinavian ones. In fact, 43 per cent of the respondents say that the authors never know the target language, while 32 per cent indicate that they seldom do (the authors who do understand the target language are almost exclusively from Scandinavia too).

Despite the pronounced language barrier, some (but not many) respondents apparently foresee this kind of authorial interference, stating for example that they ‘prefer to keep the authors at a safe distance from the translation process’, as ‘contact may merely lead to unwelcome interruptions and complications’. The majority, however, welcome the exchange of questions and answers with the author, finding the assistance useful (65 per cent very useful, 33 per cent useful to a certain degree), but not strictly necessary, as
also noted in the free text comments above. This is further confirmed by the fact that 70 per cent of those who claim to have no or very little contact (around 40 per cent) say that they neither feel the need for nor miss such contact. The respondents indeed do not appear very ‘submissive’, and apparently do not perceive interacting with the authors as restricting their agency as translators. 82 per cent of the respondents definitely or mainly agree that ‘the authors’ instructions / suggestions make them feel more confident about their translation choices’, but at the same time 90 per cent definitely or mainly do not agree that these instructions or suggestions should make them ‘less free’ in their work (one respondent replies instead that ‘editors make me feel less free’).

2.2. What about trust, truth, faithfulness, respect, and loyalty?

Arrojo (1997) makes the following statement: ‘if the original is seen as the true recipient of its creator’s intentions and expression, any translation […] necessarily represents a form of falsification’ (p. 21). This premise of ‘inherent distrust’ in the translation of a literary text is, according to Alvstad (2014), one of the incentives behind establishing what she labels ‘the translation pact’. The pact invites readers to ‘trust’ the translation, promising that the translator has not tampered with the original and that the translation indeed ‘provides a true account of the foreign text’, wherefore ‘you can safely read it as if it were the author’s text’ (Alvstad, 2014, p. 275). This line of thought echoes to some extent Jiri Levy’s (1963/2011) illusionist translation method: ‘Readers of a translation know they are not reading the original, but they require the translation to preserve the qualities of the original, then they are prepared to believe they are reading Faust, Buddenbrooks, or Dead Souls’ (p. 20).

Commenting on their relationship with the author and the source text, the respondents can be seen referring very frequently to the notions of ‘trust’ and ‘truth’ (or ‘faithfulness’), which brings to mind two different kinds of ethics formulated by Chesterman in his ‘Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath’ (2001). One is an ethics of representation that ‘highlights the values of fidelity and truth: the translator must represent the source text, or source author’s intention, or even the source culture, faithfully and truly’ (p. 140). The other is an ethics of service that involves both ‘loyalty’ and ‘trust’, as ‘trust is precisely the value which motivates loyal behaviour’ (p. 153). The respondents seem to commit themselves primarily to the ethics of representation, but they also embrace the ethics of service. They recurrently emphasize their loyalty towards and respect for the original author and for his or her text, and also the importance of clearly showing this respect in order to gain the author’s trust.

Among the suggested best practices for collaborating with an author, ‘showing respect’ ranks high, but rather than signalling the translators’ ‘internalized subservience’ (as Simeoni might have interpreted it), it seems to me rather to testify to a pragmatic move to humour potentially finicky or suspicious authors. Talking about ‘authorial appropriation’, Hersant (2016) states that ‘the fear of betrayal is a powerful motivator, encouraging the author to monitor closely his translator’ (p. 103). Showing respect – including flattering the author and ‘humbling’ oneself, cf. the following comments – seems to be a conscious means to appease the authors, to make them ‘feel safe’:

- Be thankful, show respect: ask but don’t comment and judge their work. I sometimes tell the author that it might very well be a question of me not fully grasping the language
when there’s something I don’t understand, just to ensure that she/he knows you’re not criticizing anything, just looking for an elaboration to make YOU understand.

- I tell them I love their books but could they please help me solve one tiny problem.
- Show that you take the author’s text VERY seriously.

We turn now to the ethics of representation and the imperative of faithfulness, which is foregrounded in the codes of ethics of different translator associations. In their Translator’s Charter, the International Federation of Translators (1963/1994) lists among the translator’s general obligations ‘[e]very translation shall be faithful and render exactly the idea and form of the original – this fidelity constituting both a moral and legal obligation for the translator’ (n.p.). Likewise, the American Translators Association (2010) states that the translators’ ethical and professional duty is ‘to convey meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially’ (n.p.).

Bassnett (2011) refers to two extreme views on how much freedom a translator may be ‘permitted’, one suggesting that the ‘translator has no freedom whatsoever and is necessarily the slave of the original’, the other that ‘the original text is merely the starting point for the creation of a completely new work that is only tentatively connected to the source’ (p. 94). But similar to Otokar Fischer, an acknowledged Czech translator of e.g., Goethe and Shakespeare, who claimed that ‘a translation must be free to such an extent that it can be faithful’ (quoted in Levý, 1963/2011, p. 59), two of the survey respondents (as well as others) clearly do not see faithfulness and freedom as mutually exclusive:

- ‘My’ authors usually give me all the freedom I want, because they trust me, and I’m faithful.
- [The author ‘fully supporting’ the translator’s approach of re-imagining nonsensical words in the target language] gave me the confidence to take the liberties I felt I needed in order to create a stylistically and emotionally equivalent work.

What is interesting here, too, is that the respondents link the interdependence between faithfulness and freedom to the trust bestowed on them by the authors. The comments almost imply that the ‘freedom of expression is a function of the permissive presence of the author’ (Munday, 2007, p. 225), which for all the self-confidence and self-sufficiency displayed by the responses above could be said, a little maliciously, to reveal some degree of ‘subservience’.

In any case, many respondents thus view faithfulness and freedom not as opposites but as going hand in hand, which brings me back to Levý (1963/2011) and his definition of translation as on the one hand ‘reproduction’ and on the other ‘artistic creation’ (pp. 57–58). Translation, he claims, is determined by two norms: a reproductive norm that requires ‘fidelity as based on a proper understanding of the text’, and an artistic norm that requires an ‘original, creative re-stylisation’ of the text (Levý, 1963/2011, p. 58). Although the term ‘reproduction’ might seem rather derogatory (probably more nowadays than in 1963, when Levý wrote his text), this binary definition captures quite well, I think, the way in which the literary translators, at least those participating in this survey, perceive their work.

In contrast to Bassnett (1998), who feels a ‘growing sense of discomfort with […] the moralizing discourse of faithfulness and unfaithfulness’ (p. 39), and despite all the
problems inherent in the ethics of representation, ‘vulnerable to arguments about the impossibility of totally true representation, about the relative status of originals and translation, about the illusion of perfect equivalence’ (Chesterman, 2001, p. 142), the survey respondents do not seem to have given up on the imperative of being ‘faithful’. What Levý claimed in 1963 – that ‘anti-illusionist translations are rare […] since a translation has primarily a representative goal; it is supposed to “capture” the source’ (1963/2011, p. 20) – is foregrounded in the various professional associations’ ethical codes and seems to remain the stance of most of the respondents of the 2015 survey and of literary translators referred to in other articles (e.g., Bassnett, 2011, p. 93; Zanotti, 2011, p. 87).

2.3. To whom does the translated text belong?

Wirtén (2015) points to a contradiction in the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (1886), the first multilateral treaty on copyright. In fact, while Article 2(3) in the convention states that translations, even if listed under ‘derivative works’, ‘shall be protected as original works’, Article 8 emphasizes that the author has ‘the exclusive right of making and authorizing the translation of their works’ (Wirtén, 2015, p. 40; see also Venuti, 1995, p. 9). Although translations are thus defined as works in their own right, the original author still retains the ultimate authority over them. Alvstad (2014) mentions another contradiction or incongruity linked to the fact that, prototypically, authors feature prominently on the cover of the translation while translators are mentioned only inside the book: ‘Two agents are thus accredited as the creators of the text, but the first one, the author, is given considerably more attention than the second one, the translator, even though the translator is the one who chose the exact wording of the text at hand’ (p. 276). This brings us back to the ambiguity that emerged in the above-quoted free text comment on the translation being perceived as ‘the author’s text’ but at the same time as ‘my text’.

The comment was a follow-up to a question on how the respondents felt about the text they were working on, where the following answer options were given (with the instruction to mark if they felt in this way usually, sometimes, seldom, or never, and ‘your’/‘you’ obviously referring to the author):

- It is my text now and I do what I find appropriate
- It is my text now but I will accept your help
- It is our text and we are in it together
- It is not my text, but I will try to recreate its equivalent
- It is not my text so it’s ok if you tell me what to do

Although several respondents marked usually for more than one answer option, bringing thus the total percentage to more than 100 (apparently confusing, but explainable by the fact that ‘it is very difficult to generalize as each translation experience has its own specific features’, as emphasized frequently in the free text comments), the result was nevertheless quite clear. In fact, around 60 per cent of the respondents answered that they usually did not feel ownership of the text (‘It is not my text’). However, only 10 per cent said that they usually left the floor entirely to the author (‘It is not my text, so it’s ok if you tell me what to do’), while 50 per cent stated that they usually took on responsibility for ‘recreating the
equivalent’ of the source text. Conversely, 35 per cent did claim ownership (‘It is my text now’), but only 11 per cent stated that they actually took over the text completely and did what they ‘found appropriate’, while the rest, 24 per cent, were willing to ‘accept the author’s help’. Finally, 30 per cent of the respondents indicated ‘shared’ ownership and responsibility (‘It’s our text now and we are in it together’). The majority thus seems to refrain from taking over ownership, either leaving it to the author or settling for shared ownership. The free text comments, however, illustrate a range of different attitudes related to the issue, also pointing to seemingly different degrees of ‘subservience’ versus ‘emancipation’ in the relationship towards the author and the source text.

On the one pole, we have a respondent – very much the exception to the rule – who strongly advocates that the translator should take over the authorial role:

- A literary translation is an INDEPENDENT creative undertaking, not a directly derivative service to the author. The translator IS the author.

On the other pole, we find more representative comments that could, at least at first sight, be read instead as signs of ‘voluntary servitude’, ‘self-effacement’, or ‘chosen instrumentality’, as Chesterman says, commenting on Douglas Robinson’s definition (1991) of the six stages whereby the translator gradually moves from ‘servility to self-confidence’ (Chesterman, 2016, p. 161).

- Remember that the author is the author and you are there to interpret their work, not fulfil your own wishes.
- As a translator you have to turn into the author for a while, take over another person’s language and narrative, put yourself to one side and try to see things from another person’s perspective.
- I want to be the Danish version of my authors.
- I feel like ‘the prolonged arm of the author’.

These comments (and many others) once again make clear how being faithful and empathetic interpreters of the original author and his or her work is felt as both a duty and a desire. This, however, does not seem to imply any sense of inferiority or servility; on the contrary, it is most often referred to self-confidently as something to be proud of, as a skill or an art that should be recognized and acknowledged in its own right.

An interesting comment emphasizes the impact of genre on how ownership is perceived and loyalty distributed:

- It very much depends on the genre. Mostly, I’m very respectful and strive to create a work that the author would be happy with if she/he could read my language. But I also translate romances like Harlequin, where I’m just paid to perform a craft and not a work of art. In those cases I consider the text mine, and my only concern is the reader.

While apparently having no qualms about taking over the authorial role when it comes to less ‘serious’ texts (in which case the loyalty switches from the author to the reader), the
respondents, when it comes to recreating a ‘real’ literary text, clearly feel both prouder of their work and less ready to claim ownership.

Certainly, this variety of views can, in part, be explained by the heterogeneity of the group of respondents (as to age, experience, literary genre, second profession, etc.), but it might also, and maybe primarily, reflect a general ambiguity as to what the respondents refer to when they talk about the translation being or not being ‘their text’. There might, in fact, be two kinds of belonging at play, namely ownership and authorship. The translators do claim ownership, meaning thereby that it is ‘their’ text, because

(a) they have written or created the translated text, for which they take responsibility – as seen above, the assistance of the author is generally considered useful but not strictly necessary;
(b) they hold the copyright to the translated text and they want the final say in the editing process – in other words, it’s their text, not the publishers’ (or as one respondents says, ‘the translator is not the editor’s servant’); and
(c) the authors as a rule do not know the target language and are thus unable to value or control the translation.

However, as the previous discussion on trust, faithfulness, and respect have also shown, the large majority does not seem to claim ownership in the sense of authorship, that is of taking over the authorial role, replacing the original author, and rewriting the source text according to their own agenda. In short, they do not (with a very few exceptions) seem to claim the title of ‘author’.

3. The translator is not an author, but need we be sorry?

In his article ‘The translator is not an author, and I’m sorry about it’, Pym (2011) states that the translator is not the author in the pronominal sense (c.f. the ‘alien I’) and therefore not ethically responsible for the text. I do not disagree, but what I want to question is whether we actually need ‘to be sorry’ about the translator not being an author.

The distinction between translators and authors is not clear-cut, but even if it may occasionally be blurred and should perhaps be seen rather as a continuum, it nevertheless persists. Sometimes authors can turn into real co-translators, as in the case of the ‘close-laboration’ between the Cuban writer Cabrera Infante and his translator Suzanne Jill Levine (Hersant, 2016, p. 97); and, the vice versa, translators can be co-authors, with for example the Italian writer Claudio Magris often addressing his translators as such, but nevertheless providing them with an impressive amount of suggestions, or instructions, on how to understand and also translate his text (Jansen, 2013, 2017b). These are exceptional cases, however. In the overwhelming majority of cases there is a clear division of labour, obviously also due to the natural chronology of the process, with the author working with and being responsible for the source text, and the translator working with and being responsible for the target text, as explicated in the following survey comments:

- Most authors seem to acknowledge that the text to a large extent is ‘out of their hands’.
- Some [authors] don’t want to comment on the translation because it’s my work – their work is already done, and they feel no need to get involved in the translation.
The perception of a clear division of labour and responsibility also emerges when a rather resentful respondent criticizes J.R.R. Tolkien for writing an extensive guide on how to translate the names in *The Lord of the Rings*, as Tolkien then ‘makes a lot of choices that are really the translator’s job to do’.

Luckily, however, at least in the eyes of the translators, this is not the way the authors behave normally: they ‘are usually very respectful’, ‘don’t want to meddle’, and ‘seldom tell me how to do my job’.

Returning to the much-debated question of fidelity versus creativity, what is then ‘the literary translator’s job’? As shown above, the traditional ethics of fidelity to the source text, despite having largely fallen out of favour in translation studies, still seems to be predominant among the respondents of this survey. But does the aspiration of being faithful to the original – what Levý (1963/2011) defines as the ‘reproductive norm’ (p. 58), and Chesterman (2001) as the ‘ethical imperative to represent the source text, or the source author’s intention, accurately’ (p. 140) – automatically imply ‘servitude’? And does it constrain the translators’ creativity to such a degree that it renders it ‘second rate’ compared to the creativity of original authors?

This seems to be the line of thought in what was probably a deliberately provocative claim put forward by Simeoni (1998): ‘The only space left for creativity and innovation is in the ways chosen for achieving the goals of subservience (nothing to sneer at for sure, but clearly a substitute for higher ambitions)’ (p. 12). It is not quite clear who perceives the translators’ work as a ‘substitute for higher ambitions’. Do the translators, as a part of their emancipation, feel an urge to be ‘real’ authors, or is it, as Pym (2011) says, ‘our contemporary theorists, who would make translators into authors in the name of recognizing creativity’ (p. 36)?

The juxtaposition of fidelity and servitude seems to imply a denigration of the element of ‘reproduction’ or ‘representation’, instead of acknowledging the very special creativity required to re-produce, re-present, indeed re-create, the original work in a new language and a new culture. In fact, although she is sceptical of the notion of faithfulness, Bassnett (2006) rightly points out that ‘given the constraint of having to work within the parameters of that source text, it could be argued that translation requires an extraordinary set of literary skills, no whit inferior to the skills required to produce that text in the first instance’ (p. 174).

Which, again, brings me back to Levý (1963/2011) and his definition of what literary translation entails, advocating on the one side that ‘the translator’s goal is to preserve, capture and convey the original work, and not to create a new work having no precedent in the source’ (p. 57), and at the same time strongly emphasizing the creative, artistic dimension, where ‘translation as a work of art is artistic reproduction, translation as a process is original creation and translation as art form is a borderline case at the interface between reproductive art and original creative art’ (p. 58). A definition that, without feeling the need to turn the translators into authors, is highly appreciative of their work and, not least, very much in line with the practitioners’ own view as it comes across in the survey responses.

The translation scholars who claim ‘authorship’ on behalf of the translators seem to act on the premise that ‘servitude’ (i.e., fidelity) to the source text and to the original author, whether forced or voluntary, is indeed unethical as it restrains the translators’ agency and discredits their work and status. In my opinion, it could, on the contrary, be argued that not insisting on seeing translators as authors in order to recognize their creativity would be
a way of heightening the status of translators and translatorship. Why, in fact, should translational emancipation – gaining agency, self-confidence, and visibility, and being duly acknowledged and rewarded – imply that translators become authors? Shouldn’t they rather be credited for their creativity, their originality, their art, as well as for their ownership of the text, in their very capacity as translators, not authors?

Most of the respondents seem to be particularly proud of the re-creative part of their job, which is the part that most clearly distinguishes their work from that of the authors of the ‘first’ text. Kahn (2011), an acknowledged German translator of Italian authors, proudly describes his indeed very inventive and creative ways of translating (or, as he puts it, ‘treating’) dialects. Yet he refuses to be seen as a co-author, contending instead that if literary translators ‘succeed in making it possible to perceive the greatness and the uniqueness of the author’s work, that will be their greatest award as translator-artists’ (Kahn, 2011, p. 113).

4. Conclusion

What the survey results appear to show us about literary translators’ stance on the question of ownership and authorship is that they want credit for their work and their creativity; they want to be visible, but as professionals rather than in the text itself; they want ownership in regard to copyright and remuneration; and they want control over their text and the final say when it comes to translation choices. But they want all this as translators, not at the expense of the author, and not aspiring to be (or to be considered) authors, as many translation scholars (well-meaningly) seem to do on their behalf.

Translators can be just as creative and innovative as authors, or just as little creative and innovative as authors – but the two activities represent different kinds of creative effort, commitment, and achievement, the one not more valuable than the other. There is no need to be sorry about the translator not being an author. On the contrary, we should say it out loud: we are translators and we are proud.

Notes

1. The questionnaire was formulated in English, but the respondents were free to use their mother tongue, that is Danish, Norwegian or Swedish, in the free text comments. When needed, I have translated them into English.

2. For more details on the survey, see Jansen (2017a), in which the data on the collaboration among fellow translators are employed to discuss whether the traditional image of the solitary literary translators still holds true, or if the translators, not least due to modern communication modes, rather feel like members of a community.

3. For the survey “Collaboration in Literary Translation” and the quantitative data, see https://engerom.ku.dk/english/staff/?pure=en/persons/86805 (under Current Research, b). Questions 6, 14–37, and 69–71 are related to the translator-author relationship.

4. A similar classification in ‘clarifying comments’, ‘recommendations on translation strategies’, and ‘bonding’ was used in Jansen (2013) to characterize what three Italian literary authors (Umberto Eco, Claudio Magris, and the co-authors Monaldi & Sorti) chose to share with the translators in their ‘collective letters’ sent to all the translators along with the text to be translated.
5. See Jansen (2013), mentioned above, in which this practice of authorial assistance/interference is illustrated.
6. Greenall (2018, p. 7) also mentions Tolkien’s guide (the ‘Nomenclature of The Lord of the Rings’), referring to it as an example of an author subscribing heavily to an ‘ethics of fidelity’.

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