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Article abstract

This paper examines the collective self-images of Israeli literary translators, assuming that their desired idealized personae are no less effective than their actual performances in regulating the “rules of the game” in their field. In view of translators' popular image of ‘invisibility’ and ‘submissiveness,’ my argument is that translators are compelled to make intensive use of self-promotional discourse in their endeavor to establish their profession as a distinctive source of cultural capital. The present analysis is based on around 250 profile articles and interviews, reviews, surveys of translators and other reports in the printed media from the early 1980s through 2004. Three main self-images emerge from this self-presentational discourse: (1) The translator as a custodian of language culture; (2) The translator as an ambassador of foreign cultures and an innovator, and (3) The translator as an artist in his/her own right.

The Translators' Personae: Marketing Translatorial Images as Pursuit of Capital¹

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les autoreprésentations que partagent les traducteurs littéraires israéliens, en supposant que leurs personnages idéalisés désirés ne soient pas moins efficaces que leurs performances réelles dans l'établissement des « règles du jeu » dans leur champ. Vu l'image populaire de traducteurs comme « invisibles » et « dociles », mon argument est que les traducteurs sont contraints à tirer le parti intensif de discours promotionnel de soi dans leurs efforts pour établir leur profession comme une source distinctive de capital culturel. La présente analyse se fonde sur environ 250 articles de profils et d'interviews, de critiques, d'enquêtes de traducteurs et d'autres rapports dans les médias imprimés à partir du début des années 1980 jusqu'en 2004. Trois auto-représentations principales émergent du discours : 1) le traducteur comme gardien de la culture et de la langue ; 2) le traducteur comme ambassadeur de cultures étrangères et innovateur ; et 3) le traducteur comme artiste dans son propre droit.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the collective self-images of Israeli literary translators, assuming that their desired idealized personae are no less effective than their actual performances in regulating the “rules of the game” in their field. In view of translators' popular image of ‘invisibility’ and ‘submissiveness,’ my argument is that translators are compelled to make intensive use of self-promotional discourse in their endeavor to establish their profession as a distinctive source of cultural capital. The present analysis is based on around 250 profile articles and interviews, reviews, surveys of translators and other reports in the printed media from the early 1980s through 2004. Three main self-images emerge from this self-presentational discourse: (1) The translator as a custodian of language culture; (2) The translator as an ambassador of foreign cultures and an innovator, and (3) The translator as an artist in his/her own right.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

symbolic capital, translators' self-images, self-presentation, literary translators, self-promotional discourse

Recently, some attention has been drawn to the dispositions of translators as a factor constraining their performance (see especially Daniel Simeoni's attempt at discussing the habitus of translators, in his 1998 article in *Target*). However, it seems that this theoretical attempt still fails to go beyond the popular image of translators as “servants of other masters” (see Jänis 1996), with low occupational prestige (e.g., Choi and Lim 2002). Taking at face value the idea of “the tyranny of norms” imposed by the clientele or by the readership, this popular view overemphasizes “submissiveness” as a supposedly universal disposition of translators. Such a sweeping generalization can hardly apply to all layers and sub-groups of those who practice translation in

each and every cultural setting. My argument, by contrast, is that translators, like other occupational groups, may often be rather ambitious regarding their social status, and invest considerable efforts in establishing a distinctive professional prestige for themselves. Moreover, caught in a dynamics of competition which characterizes all fields of cultural production, they tend to employ different – and differentiated – strategies of status attainment, in an endeavor to create group and individual cultural distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). These different strategies entail the cultivation of different ethoses and aspirations and the adoption of different persona-types which provide the translators, in different contexts, with a distinguishing symbolic capital.

My case in point is the field of literary translation in contemporary Israel. True, the Israeli case is an example of an ambitious peripheral culture, where translation – and cultural importation in general – eventually play a more significant role than in more established and central cultures. However, we may assume that in principle, similar dynamics governs all fields of cultural production, whatever the intensity of this dynamics may be.

While certain concrete measurable factors such as income or skills play an important role in the prestige hierarchy (Treiman 1997), occupational prestige eventually hinges on the image(s) constructed for a certain occupation (e.g., Gordon 1994). And the image of an occupation is actually the image of the people practicing it (Glick et.al. 1995). In what follows I would like to propose a few observations regarding the self-images marketed by Israeli literary translators today, assuming that their desired occupational images are modeled by an obligatory repertoire which is no less decisive than their actual performances in determining their status and chances of success. I restrict my present study to literary translators for the simple reason that the literary field provides us with a more clearly marked context and that as agents in this field these translators are normally far more exposed to the public than translators of non-literary texts. Moreover, whereas in the realm of non-literary translation a trend of professionalization is also attempted, intended to promote institutional, impersonal rules and parameters to determine translators' professional reputation, the status of *literary* translators in Israel seems to depend entirely on their personal glorification through the propagation of highly valued images of translators as cultural agents (Sela-Sheffy 2006). My question is therefore, what kind of personae Israeli literary translators must learn to assume in order to become recognized and successful in their trade.

My analysis is based on a study of the self-presentations of Israeli translators in the written media. These sources suggest that literary translators strive to shape idealized personae for themselves in the face of a rather humble, unattractive image of their occupation. This observation is based, among other sources such as Internet translators' forums or personal communications and interviews with translators, on responses to a questionnaire about the popular image of translation and translators I have conducted between 1999 through 2004. The respondents to the questionnaire were 117 students in workshops of the Translation Diploma Program and in graduate seminars at the Unit of Culture Research, both at Tel Aviv University. My aim with this was to get an impression of the common knowledge and evaluation of translators held by relatively educated people such as graduate students.

On the whole, these responses confirm the assumption that the translator's profession suffers from a relatively inferior status. 43.4 per cent of the respondents

declare that it lacks prestige, using clichés such as “kept in the shadow,” “behind the scenes,” “servants,” “technicians” or “craftsmen,” calling translators anonymous, “silent group.” They indicate that translators are unduly undervalued, labeling their job “an intellectual occupation lacking glamour,” “important but dull,” hard or “dirty” work, unrewarding, and frustrating. When asked to mention names of individual translators, 30.4 per cent of the respondents, including those from translation classes, were unable to remember any names at all, or declared indifference to the subject. Other respondents mentioned several names, but were usually unable to provide specific information about them. Nevertheless, a few names seem to have been recognized much more than all the others, with such names as Nili Mirsky (18.4 per cent) and Rina Litvin (9.7 per cent) at the top.

On the other hand, these responses reveal high expectations regarding the translator's personality and qualifications. 34.78 per cent of the respondents think that translators should be highly learned people, with perfect linguistic proficiency and broad education, including close acquaintance with the culture of the source text. However, they also expect translators to be “creative,” referring to them with vocabulary such as “imagination,” “high sensitivity,” “literary sensibility,” etc. They expect them to love their work and treat the source text with awe and faithfulness in transmitting its special “spirit” or “mood.” These are all attributes normally associated with the nature of men of art rather than with that of mere “technicians of words.” Moreover, when asked to make comparisons between the personality of translators and that of authors, 21.7 per cent of the respondents in fact thought it was – or should have been – similar, while only 19.5 per cent of them found this comparison irrelevant.

Without aiming at this point to establish how this common view of translators is formed and spread, suffice to say that some aspects of this popular view are propagated, or else countered, by the translators themselves, in their exposures to the media. The material I have examined covers about 250 interviews, profile articles, critical reviews, surveys of translators and other reports dedicated to translation in newspapers supplements, magazines and periodicals, from the early 1980s to 2004. All these reveal a dynamic public discourse, where translators also get the floor. The ways they represent themselves in this discourse are diverse and differentiated, but not unregulated. Taken as a whole, the varied self-images constructed by this discourse thus offer a clue to what Israeli literary translators see as their relative assets in competing over recognition and fame, and a glimpse of the dynamics of this competition.

I have focused on 20–25 of the more acclaimed translators whose voice is particularly heard in this discourse, and who can eventually be seen as leading figures in the endeavor to create a specific, autonomous capital for the profession of translation. While some of them have taken translation as their major career on which they depended for livelihood, others' reputation stemmed also from other careers, mainly as poets, critics, literary editors, or academics. Nevertheless, they all tend to glorify translation as a “vocation” rather than just as a means of earning a living. In doing so they rely alternatively on the two main sources of prestige which are available to them, namely, (1) the specific kind of prestige which emanates from their acting as *cultural custodians* responsible for the shaping of the local culture, and (2) the prestige they derive from their acting as *men of art*, endowed with artistic creativity.

Oscillating between these two main options, these translators are divided by their strategies of self-presentation with accordance to their specific positions. Three main self-images emerge from the material I examined. Let me elaborate on them in some length.

(1) *The translator as a guardian of the domestic language and culture*

This is a rather long-established image of Hebrew translators, which emanates from the national-culture building ethos of the pre-state period beginning with the nineteenth century (Tourey 2002). Throughout that period, promoting the status of Hebrew as a language of living culture was a major declared motivation for the flourishing of translation as an occupation and the expansion of the market of translated literature (Shavit & Shavit 1977). This image endows the translator with the position of someone who performs a cultural mission on a national-scale. A perfect example of this stance can be found in a talk given by Aharon Amir, a veteran prolific translator and the winner of the 2004 Israel Prize. In his talk (delivered at Haifa University, January 2004) he speaks about “translation as an act of occupation,” in the context of

[T]he struggle for the inculcation of the Hebrew language in the Hebrew *Yishuv* [in British-ruled Palestine]. [...] a struggle for the enhancement of the primary status of Hebrew as a language of this community’s speech, culture and education, especially for its future generations (Amir 2004; all translations are mine).

Adopting this attitude is a very safe strategy, employed to greater or lesser extent by many Hebrew literary translators, whether they see themselves as guardians of the Hebrew canon or as innovators. It seems, however, to be more eagerly adopted by senior translators, who usually translate “classics” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and who are better educated in the higher layers and ancient lore of Hebrew, tending to exhibit this knowledge as their prime, exclusive skill.

These translators often speak in defense of the Hebrew canon and express their concern for its status as a “language of high culture,” endowed with historical depth, lamenting its dissipation in today’s literature and language, and committing themselves to educating a “cultured readership” to live up to its standards. Such is, for instance, the expressed motivation of Amazia Porath, a senior translator and a member of the Academy of The Hebrew Language, who refers to himself as “the pedant guardian [of Hebrew] that is inside me” (*Moznayim* 1983: 24).² In 1983 he said: “I am a hundred times more comfortable with acting with the molds of canonical Hebrew, making no concessions to the ears [...] and I wish to direct [the readers’] hearing and to customize them to listen to the chant and the original melody of Hebrew” (*Moznayim* 1983: 24). Hence his awareness and great respect for “the historical strata of Hebrew writing culture,” as he puts it, without which, so he claims, contemporary Hebrew is absolutely not possible, “if it is to be a language of culture” (*Moznayim* 1983: 24). And the same stance is voiced by him twenty years later: “Until today,” he says in 2002,

[W]hen they try to tell us that the time of these values has passed, I am not ashamed to admit that in each and every [Hebrew] letter I write while doing my translating and editing work [...] I see myself dealing with education, too, filled with a sense of duty (Porath 2002).

This is certainly an orthodox voice, typical of veteran translators whose interests lie in securing the value of their high linguistic expertise as their specific capital, the acquisition of which is a prerequisite for the admission of novice translators into the sanctuary of their trade. However, this stance is not exclusive to veteran translators, but is sometimes also embraced by the newly arrived. In fact, in the last decade (i.e., after 1990) it has become an almost revolutionary attitude adopted zealously by rising translators of younger generations, such as Aminadav Dykmann or Dori Manor, who specialize in translating poetry and the classics. Apparently, in light of the trendy “democratic” predilection for a “thin” language, even the spoken vernacular, an extensive knowledge of Hebrew – together with other classical languages – has become ever so rare and difficult to attain, which is why such knowledge is perceived as an eccentric, distinguishing property. Using a stylized, highbrow language in a newspaper article, Dykmann sounds very elitist in attacking what he calls linguistic popularization: “[...] reading many poetry translations of recent years, I get the impression that the translator’s task is merely to entertain the reader, or [...] to transmit to him in an easy-to-get way information which is unavailable to him” (Dykmann 1996: 2). “In our places,” he complains,

[...] there is indeed such a terror among editors, critics, and perhaps (and this is the most distressing) readers. This means, in practical terms, that whole sections of Hebrew are blocked for the translator of poetry, because they are identified by the public as ‘highbrow’, ‘archaic’ etc. [...] Does it mean that an old translation has no right to exist? This absurd idea means that there does not and should not exist any classics whatsoever. (Dykmann 1996: 2)

Hence his ambitious view of his own role as a Hebrew translator: “In such conditions of cultural amnesia, strange taste-dislikings [sic!], lazy reading habits, I find the work of translating poetry more important and interesting than anywhere else in the world” (Dykmann 1996: 2).

(2) *The translator as an importer and an innovator*

In the name of the same cultural commitment, however, other translators speak about the need to open up to world cultures through translation, so as to carry on the task of building the Hebrew culture and rescue it from provincialism and petrification.³ While many Israeli translators, like thousands of translators before them in all cultures, speak on behalf of domesticating imported texts, others define their job as that of an “enrichment authority” (Zvi Arad in *Moznayim* 1983: 26), whose task is to open new horizons for the local culture. “I translate things that are cultural assets, that have utmost cultural importance,” says Rina Litvin, a prominent Hebrew translator. In her view, translators are those who actually set the tone in the local culture, in that they “transfer the models according to which master-pieces in Hebrew will be later created [...] Translators pave the way for what will come next” (Snir 1988: 19).

Presenting themselves as ambassadors of foreign cultures, these translators capitalize not only on their knowledge of foreign languages, but also on their personal acquaintance with and feeling at home in these respectable cultural legacies, declaring that their incentive to translate is to bestow their own advantage on the local readership. “I wish the culture I belong to would be rich and interesting, [...] that I could share with people everything that can be brought from the cultures I am attached to and which I grew up in” says Litvin (Karpel 1994: 29). Similarly, the late

Yoram Bronowski, an acclaimed translator during the 1980s and the 1990s, says: “Europe is still the world we belong to and our longing should be ‘to the cultures of the world’” (Levtov 1994: 22). His passion for translation, he says, came from the need to share with people experiences that were inaccessible to them: “[T]he reading material I got in my hands has always been written in foreign languages [...] and I remember myself telling friends the content of books they could not read [...] This is how the translator in me was born” (Bronowski 2002: 13).

Few translators even go so far as to take an outright revolutionary stand and claim the role of innovators and trend-setters *par excellence*: “When I came back from America [to Israel],” says Moshe Ron, who is also an academic and a literary editor specializing in contemporary American literature,

I started to translate from American literature things that no one had ever done anything with before. Things that were more pioneering. I was much more fanatic for avant-gardism and innovativeness. [...] and today I am particularly identified with Carver. [...] many people who write in this style think of me and send me manuscripts (Beker 2001: 88).

He then goes on to dispute the prevalence of canonized domestic literary styles, calling them outdated and fake, speaking in the name of the younger readers who demand a fresh, “authentic language.” Admittedly, such a radical stance is less common among Israeli translators, as it often runs the risk of sounding eccentric and controversial and calls for hostile criticism against an intolerable foreignization and offence of Hebrew, as it were.⁴ That is why this stance is usually taken under the shelter of a secured reputation in another career, especially in the academic field. In 1983, Gideon Toury, then an uprising translator and university scholar, asserts: “I personally prefer to leave in the translated texts parts of what is foreign and new, even at the cost of a certain violation of accepted norms of Hebrew language and literature (*Moznayim* 1983: 23). However, saying that, he emphasizes that practising translation came only second to his academic research, as a skilled hobby rather than a profession.

(3) *The translator as an artist in her/his own right*

Whether taking an orthodox or a provocative position, it appears that at least since the mid-1980s, Hebrew translators have also been striving to establish translation as an autonomously gratifying art-trade in its own right, with its own distinctive aura. This is inferred from the fact that more and more performers of literary translation today make claim to fame and maintain a public persona as “creative translators,” sometimes to the point of gaining stardom as translators. Nili Mirsky, one of today’s most celebrated Israeli translators, is certainly the ultimate manifestation of this process, enjoying impressive public recognition and admiration based entirely on her translatorship.

Her breakthrough during the 1980s is described as meteoric. Already in 1989, she was presented in the media as a name that sells books: “Nili Mirsky’s name [...] is not hidden in the pages of the book. The publishing house knows what critics and readers also know: if it is written ‘translated by Nili Mirsky’ on the cover, quality is guaranteed and sale is not bad either” (Melamed 1989: 32), to quote but one of many examples. Ever since the early 1980s, Mirsky gets the greatest public exposure as a translator, with large flattering interviews ever so often. The professional credo she

pronounces on all of these occasions, her highbrow taste in literature and music, and her Russian-like dramatic personality have granted her the uncontested position of “the guru of translation” and “Mrs. Culture” in general. In fact, it was her glorious career as a translator that has paved her way to later becoming a literary editor, and not the other way around. Until today, translation is her trade mark.

Mirsky is a dominant figure, but she is not the only one. Some veteran prominent translators are walking in her footsteps, and so do several other celebrated translators among the younger generation. It appears that the media is on a hunt for stars in translation. Here are, for instance, the words used to praise Haim Buzaglo, a rising drama translator: “Not every day a new translator is born, [...] No doubt, Buzaglo is a discovery” (cited in Nagid 1998: 26).

This emerging star system in the field of translation is a symptom of the efforts to advance the status of this occupation and establish it as an autonomous source of symbolic capital. As such, this system relies on – and helps establish – the image of individual translators as men of art. In conditions of an unprotected market, as these translators see it, with “so many people thinking they can translate [from English] just because they know that ‘table’ in English is ‘shulhan’ in Hebrew” (Mirsky cited in Harel 2003), the propagation of this desired image helps to secure their privileged standing and distinguish them from their anonymous peers. Evidently, this trend in the realm of translation bears heavily on models borrowed from the fields of literature and the arts. As in similar cases of this kind, this process entails two major elements: (a) a *mystification* of the profession’s rules and requirements, and (b) the construction of a shared mythological profile of its practitioners (Sela-Sheffy 1999).

(a) First, the tendency to mystify – rather than explicate – the rules and requirements of their profession is manifested by translators’ efforts to portray their competence as consisting of a unique, unexplained gift that one either does or does not have: “[...] Translation is after all [...] a story consisting of alchemy, wonder, almost magic” says Nili Mirsky (Melamed 1989: 33). She has no rational explanation for how (good) translations are produced. “[...] I do not believe in a theory of translation whatsoever. [...] I have certain guidelines, but the trouble is that many of them contradict each other, and since I try hard to be faithful to all these principles at once, it turns out that I look at the work of translation as a mission impossible by definition” (*Moznayim* 1983: 25). Dramatizing this inherent conflict, as it were, she speaks of a Sisyphean existential condition of the translator, whose emotional burden is immense, knowing that her/his search for perfection is beyond human reach.

Pertinent to this mystified self-image is the ambivalence translators express in debating the status of their profession between “craftsmanship” and “individual creation” (e.g., Wollman 1987; Mirsky in Melamed 1989, in Karpel 2002; Ben-Ari in Paz 1989). “Lack of ego” “lack of personal style” or “lack of self expression” are catchwords which some translators repeat time and again, and the more acclaimed the translator, the stronger seems her/his inclination to use them. To quote Nitsa Ben-Ari, for instance,

[The translator] should make sure that his voice will not be heard [...] He is a mediator, a medium.[...] [He should be] boneless, a parasite, to infiltrate and enter into the author’s arteries, [...] to transfer the experience as it crosses the author’s head. If a translator is endowed with creativity and has something to say, he should write himself [...] (Katzenelson 2000: 27).

However, this tricky sense of humbleness is actually meant as a virtue rather than a weakness. The influence of the New Criticism elitist literary creed, with its cult of the Text (with a capital T), is arresting in the philosophy of self-elimination expressed by these translators. “In my mind,” says Nili Mirsky,

[T]he translator must never create a personal style of his own, [...] To the contrary, with each and every piece he works on, the translator must create a new style for himself, unique and special for this piece alone; whereas he himself must disappear entirely, with his personality and style and linguistic approaches – to disappear without leaving traces, just to dissolve into the text [...] This too, of course, is an almost impossible mission. [...] (*Moznayim* 1983: 25).

Rina Litvin has even developed a theory of “The translator as a medium,” or as “a (good) parasite,” which she elaborates on most earnestly in newspaper interviews as well as in learned articles (Litvin 1995). She, too, sees this aptitude as something that distinguishes “a genuine translator” from “someone who [merely] transfers words from one language to another” (Karpel 1994: 29). Moreover, while others remain vague, she is very clear about her artistic-creative aspirations: “In translation I repeat the process of creation” (Snir 1988: 18), she says, “I do not see myself as an educator. A creator, yes. [...] This is my job” (Karpel 1994: 29).

The claim of translators for artistic glory is also manifested in their habit to compare their own trade with that of art performers, notably musicians. The Music metaphor is most appealing to translators in more than one way. It confers upon their profession the elevated status of a “sublime art.” It also implies their own highbrow taste and education, and at the same time their ambivalent view of themselves as located between “performers” and “creators”: “[a translator is] Like a player who performs music. He is an artist. He is not the composer, but he is a musician. He is the performer” says Yael Renan, another acclaimed translator (Wollman 1987: 20). Nili Mirsky never misses a chance of using this analogy:

[...] It is a little bit like playing the piano, and after all I love playing the piano. [...] it is a little bit like playing to the notes. Notes are given, this is the source text. You sit by the piano, and perform it. I experience translation as a non-rational process, in which things are channeled through the ear, through sensation. [...] I can change a word just for the rhythm. There is something very addicting in this thing of searching for words and once more playing them again and again in order that the tune will come out purer and clearer (Landsman 2000: 92).

Similarly, Rina Litvin and Rami Saari use stage-acting as their metaphor. Litvin says: “I feel enormous closeness to the theatre. [...] I play when I translate. [...] I have great love for actors, I have a special bond with them. I see them, too, as mediums” (Karpel 1994: 30).

Along the same line, most translators indicate their freedom in selecting the material they translate. Rami Saari says: “[...] I have never translated a book that I was not a hundred percent happy about. This way or another, the repertoire of experiences in all the books I have translated was composed of things that in certain respects are directly linked to my life” (Katzenelson 2000: 27). Insisting on her artistic license, Mirsky even goes as far as to deny any readership constraints on her work, while Shimon Sandbank, an academic literary critic and translator of English and German poetry, declares he never reads translation of his predecessors, in order to avoid being

influenced by them, "Not because I fear the risk of plagiarism, avoiding this sin is easy for me. I am trying to be faithful to my own voice" (Levtov 1993: 20).

By repeating the mantras of those who play by the rules of the small-scale field of literary production (Bourdieu 1985), these translators actually aspire at having equal position as authors. In an attempt to construct a glorious history of their profession, many translators evoke with nostalgia the great names of the highly canonized pre- and early-Modernist Hebrew poets who also practised translation, notably Shaul Chernikhovsky, Nathan Alterman and Lea Goldberg (e.g., Haim Isak in *Moznayim* 1983: 27). Similarly, Nili Mirsky asserts that she feels "[...] really attached to the Russian translating-culture, which is known for its very free and 'creative' approach to the work of translation. The reason is mainly that in Russia the great writers and poets used to dedicate their efforts to the work of translation [...] from Vasily Žukovsky in the Romantic period to Boris Pasternak in our own time" (*Moznayim* 1983: 25). Rina Litvin is straightforward: "I am a writer. I dedicated years and a lot of energy to translation, and this was the way to [...] examine myself, to find my identity. [...] I have arrived at literary-personal writing" (Karpel 1994: 30). She talks about her experience as a poet ever since childhood, and indicates her being associated with canonized literary figures such as the mythological Israeli poetess Yona Wollach. Praising her is for Litvin an indirect way of crediting herself: "Today, when they compare [my poems] to the poetry of Yona Wollach, who had published several years after me, it looks funny. I admire her boldness, she is the real revolutionary" (Karpel 1994: 30).

In fact, translators often even claim superiority over authors. Nitsa Ben-Ari, for instance, grants them the power of omniscience: "The translation exposes the author's magnitude, as well as his shame. In front of the translator, the author is naked, like at the doctor's. It is impossible to hide the rough stitches from the eyes of the translator" (Katzenelson 2000: 27). She approves of identifying with the authors. "When you feel that the author is your brother, thinks like you, feels like you, it is easier to connect and to do the job with enthusiasm" (Paz 1989: 24). However, she ranks translators as better qualified: "An author is locked inside his own consciousness. I love translation for the fun of penetrating another's head, of being inside a different consciousness" (Paz 1989: 24).

(b) Secondly, in the absence of formal professional criteria and qualifications, personality becomes a most important admission card. Translators portray an idealized disposition of the "good translator," her/his background and lifestyle. A central component of this disposition is first and foremost the sense of *being an outsider*. By analogy to artists and poets, translators often present themselves as non-conventional individuals, living non-conventional lives, with unsociable, even neurotic personality. Mirsky talks about her bohemian lifestyle: She is divorced, has no children, and lives alone in an old downtown apartment, filled with European atmosphere and packed with books and a piano. We get to know about men in her life, her careless appearance, and the fact that she smokes and likes to drink. Her professional and personal lives are intertwined, she says, and this is reflected in her daily rituals. Performing translation is described by her as performing art, in irregular hours and irregular locations and positions. Before the advent of the computer, for instance, she used to translate in bed.⁵ "I like to work at night," she says, "so I begin in the afternoon, and the brain slowly opens towards midnight. It comes with a little drink" (Kadosh 1994: 43).

Dori Manor, a celebrated poet and translator of French poetry and philosophy, a declared anti-Zionist and homosexual, assumes the position of the ultimate outsider Intellectual and an *enfant-terrible*. An Israeli born, who was raised by an ordinary Israeli family, so he reports, he chooses to live in Parisian exile. Identifying with this detached position is so internalized by him that he claims it has been physically inscribed in the French accent he acquired: "I think my diction and intonation is non-Israeli, a kind of refusal" (Karpel 1997: 48). Recounting his childhood in Tel Aviv, Manor embraces the metaphor of the outcast Jew:

I was a lonely, alien child, a Jew in an environment of anti-Semitic children, Jew as a metaphor. An Exile Jew. The children bugged me because I was awkward. Not for any physical thing, but rather [for] a sense of alienation that I believe I conveyed. [...] Yes, I was terrible. I could never endure what seemed to me to be a stupidity and I had to react and scream, and this is what I did, although I knew the price. (Karpel 1997: 47)

Rina Litvin admits that "there is a bourgeois side" to her life, which includes solid marriage, a well-off livelihood and a grand residence in a high-status neighborhood in Tel-Aviv, but she says this side of her life "is not very deep" (Karpel 1994: 76). Emphasizing her multicultural background, she thinks of herself as an outsider by mentality:

For many years I have had the complex of a newcomer. But it took time to understand that I am a stranger because of my personality, which is slightly different. I would feel a little bit as a stranger everywhere. [...] I belong here, but at the same time I come from different worlds. It is a situation in which I constantly look from the outside. [...] The word tourist is wrong for me. The word 'observer' is more adequate. It is a mental situation which is known to many creators. [...] there is a small part that observes, and that is the eye of the creator. (Karpel 1994: 30)

Another dominant component of this idealized disposition is a *rich inner world*, filled with imagination and emotions. Literary translators like to talk about their emotional bonds with the fictional worlds of the texts. "During work," says Litvin, "a tremendous identification with the characters is created, [...]. I start living this world as very real and with intensity that is perhaps not lesser than that of the creator himself" (Litvin in Snir 1988: 18). Similarly, Mirsky, telling about her work on the new translation of Anna Karenina, recounts how the characters in the novel bewitched her:

[They] actually walked around at my place at nights, all of them. I actually heard their voices. [...] It is something special, very hard to describe. As if you had another homeland, or another world, or another soul that takes place in Russian. That is why it was not an easy thing. [...] (Landsman 2000: 92).

The word "love" is often repeated. A person performing translation is compared to someone tormented with passion: "When you translate, you walk around the whole day with a word, a sentence, [you] wake up at night, 'Yes, I found it!' – and forget in the morning. Exactly like a person in love," says Nitsa Ben-Ari. And the reporter continues: "Her infatuation with translation has long become an established relationship" (Katzenelson 2000: 28).

And finally, this idealized portrait also entails an *unpredictable life-trajectory*. Most of the celebrated literary translators whose personalities are sought by interviewees are well educated, usually college and university graduates, and often with exposure to foreign languages from an early age. However, their becoming translators

is usually presented by them not as a rational decision, fitting their education and social status, but rather as a destiny that has somehow been realized by chance. They talk about an inborn sensitivity and a compelling drive that have grown inside them from childhood, to be later incarnated in their work of translation. Nili Mirsky describes her moment of revelation: she wanted to be a piano player,

[...] but when I was a little girl, I came across the problem of transferring from one language to another. There were two translations of Oscar Wild's fairytales in the house, [...] the one enchanted me, and the other lacked anything that could deeply penetrate, that moved me. [...] and I remember that I told myself I wanted to discover where this magic lies, how the musicality of language is created (Melamed 1989: 32).

Once she started, she says, "I simply became addicted to it. [...] It is such an addictive work, that I absolutely can't detach myself from it. [...] And like all addictions, I guess, it starts completely by chance" (Melamed 1989: 32). Similarly, Ran HaCohen, a rising translator from German and Dutch, says he abandoned a career in computer science in favor of translation. To the interviewer's suggestion "When everybody else dreamt of becoming journalists or film producers, you dreamt of becoming a translator?" HaCohen replies: "I believe so. Language has always had a magic spell on me, but I never wrote poems or stories [...]" (Altaras 2002).

Consequently, translation is presented as something that can never be systematically trained for. Romanticizing her own experience, Mirsky evokes the medieval model: "[...] there is a master – an experienced veteran expert – and beside him there works an apprentice. One learns little by little. [...] Although I taught [translation] workshops at the university, when they asked me to do so, I have less and less faith in it, in the possibility of a systematic teaching of translation" (Melamed 1989: 32). Hence the ambivalence, not to say resentment, literary translators sometimes express towards academic learning. Haim Buzaglo, a rising translator of Classical literature, who was trained as a marine officer before he realized in recent years that "poetry is the most important thing in my life" (Nagid 1998: 26), takes the stand of a "natural intellectual." For him, the university is only a marginal agency in his autodidactic training: He went to the university several times but never completed his study. "My study" he says, "is not systematic. I take what I feel I still need [...]: a little bit in language, a little reading of Homer" (Nagid 1998: 26). Mirsky's despise for the academy is bolder:

"[in Germany] I studied German and Russian literature and intended to return to Israel, on my way to a secure academic career. But when I came back after five years I realized that in no way have I been able to stand the dullness of the academic world. Starting to translate was not planned: it was just a work, an interesting experience" (Melamed 1989: 32).

Conclusion

The portrait I tried to sketch here certainly does not apply to all active Hebrew literary translators. There are major, prolific translators who expressly reject any higher aspirations, treating their work as merely a means of livelihood.⁶ There are also those who have devoted themselves to translation but would not be interviewed, preferring to remain in the shadow.⁷ The view these translators have of their occupation is evidently not sought by the media, nor are they motivated to construct a public image

of themselves. However, this group of literary translators who bother to express their high aspirations in the media and build their public personae – and the fact that the media shows interest in them – suggest that they view the images they adopt as important assets and expect to capitalize on them.

Like many other occupational groups, they build their specific capital by mobilizing two central images, namely, their image as cultural custodians who perform a national-scale cultural mission, and their image as men of art. As cultural custodians they waver between playing the guardians of the domestic canon, on the one hand, and importers of innovations from foreign-cultures, on the other. Their discourse suggests that, like in other areas of Israeli life, the acquaintance with world languages and cultures is valued as a chief parameter of translators' prestige. Nevertheless, it appears that expertise in the Hebrew language and cultural lore is also ranked very highly by Israeli literary translators. Whether presented as an orthodox or an eccentric attitude, speaking on behalf of the domestic canon is still a powerful component of Israeli translators' self-image. However, whatever their cultural commitment, their discourse suggests that the most desirable image they promote for themselves is that of producers of a "creative" art form. The marketing of and complex interplay between all these images help this circle of literary translators to guarantee their privileged position in their field of action.

In fact, these individual translators seem to have already accumulated enough symbolic capital, which often also translates into further prestigious career-opportunities, such as literary critics and editors, and establish their status as public figures that have a say in literary taste in general, and as policy makers in the market of translated literature in particular. This capital evidently also advances their power to bargain for the terms and price of their work. All this is more than implied in their discourse. Already in a 1987 translators symposium (Wollman 1987), some of them asserted that "[...] this profession is becoming more and more attractive. [...] there are people who do earn their living in translation, who can [...] see translation as an occupation like all other occupations. [...] In recent years there has been a change in the translation industry in respect to the willingness of publishers to pay for translations" (Inbar cited in Wollman 1987: 25). In reply, Nili Mirsky says: "That is because we have raised our voice!" (Wollman 1987), to which claim Inbar agrees, and Amazia Porath adds: "[...] because suddenly there came several good translators and raised the level of translation, made it a profession worthy of public attention" (Wollman 1987).

NOTES

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the International workshop: "Institutions, Habitudes and Individuals: Social, Historical and Political Aspects of Cultural Exchange." Tel Aviv University, May 2-5, 2004.
2. *Moznayim* is a veteran establishment periodical, published by the Writers Association of Israel since the 1930s. The 1983 Translators Survey seems to have been an attempt by the editors to rejuvenate the journal. Nine contemporary prominent translators were invited there to express their views about their profession.
3. Nili Mirsky, concerned with what she calls the poverty of contemporary Hebrew, voices this double sense of "cultural responsibility" most clearly: "I guess translation plays an important role in the process of crystallization of Israeli culture. Since for different objective reasons this culture is severely threatened by the risk of becoming provincial and shut-out, the role assigned to translation is to render from time to time certain gateways to the outside, enrich the scope of sensi-

bilities of the Hebrew reader and let him sense – if only ‘through a veil’ – the tastes and aromas of other cultures. [...] A further central role is also assigned to translation in the process (still uncompleted) of the revival of the Hebrew language. The everyday linguistic actuality surrounding us is [...] remarkably poor and shallow. Translation, on the other hand – and primarily when translation of the great masterpieces of the past are concerned – is capable of introducing into the blood-cycle of the living language word compounds, expressions, syntax complexities and linguistic nuances originated in cultural systems far away from us in place and time, and thus it contributes to the enrichment and refinement of our expressive options” (*Moznayim* 1983: 25).

4. See, for example, the bitter attack by Moshe Singer, the late literary critic, poet and poetry translator, against what he called “experimental translation” published by “the professor” Benjamin Harshav of *Tubiya the Milkman* by Shalom Alekhem, one of the classics of the revived Hebrew literature of early twentieth century (Singer 1980).
5. In the interview she tells how she used “[...] to arrange the books and dictionaries, the drink and cigarettes, around her in bed, leaning on her right elbow, and used to translate, while laying down, into a thick hardcover notebook. Towards the end of the book the elbow would become swelled from the pressure [...]. Another ceremony was throwing the notebooks to the dustbin the day the book appeared” (Kadosh 1994: 43).
6. One of them, Avital Inbar, asserts, for instance: “I see translation as an occupation, not a vocation, not an art, and I do not see myself as an artist but rather as a craftsman” (Wollman 1987: 20).
7. Here are, for instance, the words of Aviva Barak, a 1990 prize-winner in translation: “I do not give interviews too often. I do not think that the translator as a personality is of interest in the context of the book. What does it matter whether or not I have a cat?” (Seidman 1990).

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