

USING TRANSLATION AS AN INSTRUMENT IN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION

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Abstract

In recent years, an increase in cross-cultural relations has led to a huge interest in the process and products of translation. In this light, translation has become one of the most effective instruments that facilitate intercultural interactions. In turn, this has triggered a heightened awareness of the fact that translation is also an act of cultural transfer, besides being a tool for linguistic transference. Translation is the platform through which minor literatures become accessible to a significantly larger base of readers. Ideas, cultural values, principles and habits are spread in this way and contribute to the creation of a more comprehensive picture of a given culture. In this context, the figure of the translator as an agent of mediation between the two cultures acquires more relevance than ever before. This paper sets to take a look at the English translation of Filip Florian's acclaimed novel Degete mici. The purpose of the ST-TT analysis is to attempt an identification of the translator's agenda and the direction in which he guided the text. In doing so, we will make use of the notions of domestication and foreignisation put forward by Canadian researcher Lawrence Venuti.

Keywords: translation, translator strategies, domestication, foreignisation

JEL Classification: Z10

1. Introduction

It is a reality, if not a condition for the survival of humanity, that cultures need to interact and that the forms of interaction should be as diverse and enriching as possible. There are few fields of interpersonal and intercultural communication which are more challenging and complex (on multiple layers) than translation. It is the link that connects the numerous and multi-layered manifestations of human activities, from artistic endeavours to commercial exchanges, social experiences or economic relationships. Information travels faster than ever, and in order to be put to good use, it needs the mediation of translation. "Globally, it is the age of mass-communication, of multi-media experiences and a world where audiences demand to share the latest text, be it film, song or book simultaneously across cultures" (Bassnett, 1996: 11).

It is a well-acknowledged fact that nowadays translation is culture bound and that, through the act of translation, a text is not only transferred from one linguistic system into another, it crosses cultural borders at the same time. "Otherness" is more present in

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translation than perhaps in any other form of intercultural manifestation. It is an extricable element of the translation process and the translator has a tremendous role in rendering the complexity surrounding the concept of otherness in the target culture. In the process of mediation, the act of translation touches upon some of the most stringent cultural issues: “the consequences of colonization in the interpretation of other cultures; the problems springing from the rebirth of xenophobia and racism; the understanding of the exotic, not in terms of false imaginary constructions, but as an historic reality in itself which must be respected disregarding hierarchical cultural boundaries. It could be said that translation is a provisional way to encounter the strangeness of languages, to paraphrase Benjamin, although it can also become a form of control, particularly if there are already a series of preconceived stereotypes about a given culture” (Alvarez and Vidal, 1996: 3).

Drawing upon the idea of translation as rewriting and of the source text, this paper aims to tackle the English translation of the novel *Degete mici* authored by Filip Florian. The analysis sets to identify to which extent the rewriting – i.e. the translation – of the Romanian text assists in signalling its otherness to target readers. As such, the analysis focuses on identifying the orientation of the translation towards domestication or foreignization and the strategies adopted by the translator in order to complete his task.

2. Context and analysis of the translation

Degete mici was published in 2005 at Polirom and represented the literary debut of Filip Florian, a former reporter in political journalism. It was received by the Romanian literary critics with great enthusiasm, and Florian was acclaimed as one of the most powerful voices of the Romanian new wave of novelists. The book received several prestigious awards in Romania and became highly visible on the international literary scene as well due to its translation into several languages such as Spanish, English, German, Slovenian or Polish. The novel enjoyed the same critical acclaim abroad as it did in Romania.

The novel reunites all the large themes that will recur in Florian’s later novels such as *Toate bufnițele* and *Zilele regelui*: revisitation of the past from the perspective of the present, memory and individual life as opposed to collective existence. In *Degete mici*, the plot revolves around the discovery of a mass grave in a small mountain town, where everybody knows everybody. This macabre discovery divides the town in two: some inhabitants support the expert opinion of archaeologists who state that the bones are the remains of a plague that affected the population several centuries before, while others are of the same opinion as the authorities, who claim that the grave is proof of a mass execution dating from the communist regime. The main story is interwoven with numerous side stories, which feature characters as diverse as a writer (the main hero) and his girlfriend, Jojo, a retired colonel (with a morbid fetish for little fingers, which he secretly collects), the monk Onufrie who seems to have a special communication with the Divinity, not to mention the plethora of minor characters who make shorter appearances in the novel.

The time frame of the book is just as intricate as the labyrinth of stories and their protagonists; readers are carried through the interwar period, during the communist

regime, all these time scenes being placed against the background of the chaos dominating Romanian society after the 1989 Revolution. Actually, as critics mentioned several times, one of the merits of the book and part of its charm reside precisely in the complexity of the narrative fabric: “Adunându-se în jurul unui spațiu inedit, al unei intrigi ce izbucnește încă din titlu, crescând progresiv și multiplicându-se în jocuri de suprafață, firul narativ se va lăsa, nu de puține ori, desfăcut, deșirat, reorientat către povești laterale, urmând să se reîntrească, într-un moment atent căutat, când povestirile aparent disparate nu vor mai reuși să se sustragă mult-regizatei întâlniri” (Mărculescu, 2010).

The novel benefited from the English translation as a result of the translation programme TPS (Translation and Publication Support Programme), launched in 2005 by the Romanian Cultural Institute. The main aim of the programme was to make Romanian literature accessible and known to foreign readers, as the ICR covered the translation and the publication costs in some cases. The titles were proposed by the foreign publishing houses. The translation of Florian’s novel into English was performed by Alistair Ian Blyth and was published at the prestigious American publishing house Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2009. It sold in 2,000 copies in the first six months after publication.

Blyth has an extensive experience as a translator from Romanian and signed the English version of numerous contemporary Romanian authors such as Bogdan Suceavă, Dan Lungu, Lucian Dan Teorodovici or Ioana Pârvulescu. It is worth mentioning that he is also living in Romania, which means that he experiences the Romanian realities on a daily basis and has already acquired a significant amount of local cultural expertise. This is not a fact to ignore, as most postmodern Romanian prose writing is deeply embedded in the social realities of today.

Degete mici is not an easy task for the translator at multiple levels. The narrative unfolds in a sort of stream of consciousness manner, with juxtapositions of time periods and personal stories intermingled sometimes in the same sentence, which shakes the readers off their comfortable reading habit. This is completed by the language itself, whose masterly use has been considered one of Florian’s most significant creative accomplishments, a personal feature that sets him apart from other authors of the same generation. Here is what Dan Lungu, another powerful voice of postmodern Romanian writers, says about Florian’s writing: “Filip Florian e un bijutier, un miniaturist meticulos, un încăpățânat frumos. Într-o generație insurgentă și rebelă care a descoperit libertățile postcomuniste, Filip Florian e un călugăr franciscan. Dar unul care fumează. Îl putem plasa în descendența lui Ștefan Bănuțescu, Radu Petrescu sau, mai aproape, a lui Ștefan Agopian, adică în linia scriitorilor artiști, pe care o continuă la cel mai bun nivel” (Lungu quoted in Ilie, 2013). His craft as a language jeweller forces the translator to test his own skills at rendering the same level of linguistic craftsmanship in the target language.

Apart from these challenges that pertain to the literary and linguistic level, there are the cultural references, which cover various categories and which require distinct translation strategies. „Alegerea unei, să zicem, sintagme de către autor este rezultatul unei experiențe desfășurate într-o cultură circumscrisă istoric și geografic, comunicate unui cititor care se presupune că împărtășește aria de proveniență a acestei experiențe. Traducătorul va trebui în mod ideal să reproducă acest circuit la un nivel care să-l poată include pe cititorul din spațiul său cultural – operațiune deloc ușoară [...]” (Bican, 2013).

Indeed, the translator is faced here with the task of re-creating in the target text an atmosphere – with all the elements that help design it – that would replicate, at least to a certain degree, the same aesthetic response it elicits in the source readers.

In his translation, Blyth aligns with the principles of cultural translation, through which he strives to bridge the gap between the Romanian context and the background of English speaking readers. As we will see later, he takes the role of mediator between the two cultures interacting through translation, striving to reach a middle ground between his loyalty to the source text (with everything this entails – to the intention of the author, message transmitted, frameworks of reference) and his concern for the text readability and acceptancy in the target language. Cultural translation, as the term is used by Carbonell, occurs “whenever an alien experience is internalized and rewritten in the culture where that experience is received. [...] There exists a gap between the significative context of the cultural components involved, there is always an element of untranslatability that allows the modification of the originary meaning according to the structures of representation of the target language/culture” (1996: 81). It is precisely in this gap, or interstices as he calls them, that the translator expresses his/her own subjectivity and where his agenda of domesticating or foreignising the text becomes visible.

Despite the translator’s attempt to strike a balance between the foreignness of the source text and the norms, conventions and expectations of target text readers, sometimes there is a visible preference for one of the two poles of translation, which Canadian researcher Lawrence Venuti calls foreignisation and domestication (the same polarity is approached by Gideon Toury in terms of adequacy and acceptability). According to Venuti, foreignisation “signifies the foreignness of the foreign text by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its efforts to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home” (1995: 18-20). At the other extreme, the translator, in his/her attempt to make the text as easily recognisable with the target readers’ own familiar frame of reference, adopts a domesticating orientation, which is “a labor of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader, providing him or her with the narcissistic experience of recognising his or her cultural other” (1992: 5). In other words, the translator either brings the reader to the text or the other way around, the consequence being inevitable loss on either of the two sides involved in this form of exchange.

Blyth’s translating agenda reveals a profound knowledge and awareness of Romanian culture, with its subtleties and peculiarities. Moreover, in his interviews he demonstrates that he truly wishes to contribute to making Romanian literature known to an English speaking readership. However, as we shall see, his translation has a clearly marked domesticating direction. But, given his commitment to the cause of Romanian literature and his self-assumed role as an agent of its visibility abroad, one could claim that his domesticating strategies could only be explained by the fact that he wishes to take the text as close to its target readers as possible, in the attempt to befriend them with the author and his creation.

ST: Vântul e recișor și parcă are gust, unul de mure, barca trece pe lângă un plop alb, peste apă stau risipite șuvițe de abur, pui de ceață, barca lasă în urmă un șir de sălcii pitice, ce noapte negricios-albăstrie, ca tușul! Barca înaintează pe fondul întunecat al

ierburilor și al tufelor fără culoare, ah! cât de destoinică e bărcuța lui de doisprezece crivace! Nici curentul nu i se împotrivește, e atât de liniște, dar se aud destule de pe maluri, sunete pe care nu toate urechile le aud, un şuierat slab, foșnete, un flfăit, mai multe, trosnet de vreascuri (...)

TT: The wind is chilly, and it has a taste, a taste of mulberries. The boat passes by a white poplar. Over the water stand scattered streaks of haze, whelps of mist. The boat leaves behind a row of dwarf willows. A bluish-black night, like ink! He advances against a darkened backdrop of colorless grasses and bushes. Ah, how agile is his little wooden boat! Not even the current opposes it. The night is tranquil, but much can be heard on the banks, sounds that not every ear can detect: a faint whistle, rustling, a flutter, more fluttering, cracking bushwood.

ST: În zațul uscat se citea neîndoielnic că vor sosi niște bani, o sumă frumoșică, nu un mizilic, însă întrebările se strecurau cu duiumul: să fie amărâta de pensie? (ah, nu, nu cred, niciodată nu mi-a ieșit în cafea că vine poștașul), un cadou? (ha, ha, ha, nu s-a născut încă o persoană așa gentilă), să fie o moștenire? (pfui, ce prostie), un câștig la vreun concurs? (pușor, tu mă cunoști, m-ai văzut tu vreodată că joc la loto sau la bingo? M-ai văzut tu că decupez buline de pe cutiile de dero sau că strâng capace de bere?), o fi chiria (păi e chiar culmea, tu stai aici lângă mine, la doi metri, nu-mi zici tu nimic despre plată și-mi iese la ghicit...).

TT: In the dry coffee grounds it could unmistakably be read that some money was going to arrive: a tidy sum, not a trifle. But questions kept cropping up: could it be that measly pension ("Ah, no, I don't think so, the fact that the postman is on his way has never come up in my coffee grounds") A present? ("Ha, ha, ha, a person that courteous has yet to be born.") Could it be a legacy? ("Phooey, what nonsense.") A prize in some competition? ("Darling, you know me: have you ever seen me playing the lottery or bingo? Have you ever seen me cutting out tokens from boxes of laundry soap or collecting beer-bottle tops?) Might it be the rent? ("Well now, that's the limit, I mean, here you are sitting two feet away from me and not a word about paying and you leave it up to come up in my fortunetelling...")

As can be noticed from the comparison between the source and target text fragments, the translator interfered with the source text mainly at syntactic level. The former example is a description of the silent route of a wooden boat on the lake, at night. It is a telling illustration of Florian's masterly use of language, of how he manipulates words in order to create impressions and sensations. Reading the passage feels like being right there, in the boat, caressed by the cool wind, listening to the mysterious sounds, plunging deep into the ink-like night. The translation manages to capture the atmosphere of the source fragment, except that the flowing rhythm of the long sentences in Romanian is somewhat broken in English, where the translator opted for shorter more telegraphic sentences. They imprint a different reading pace and imbue the text with distinct dynamics, more alert than in the original.

The latter example, although consisting of a single very long phrase, is actually a dialogue in disguise. It is a conversation between auntie Paulina, the landlady, and Petrus, her tenant. However, the interventions of the two conversing characters are not marked as distinct, and it is the reader who has to detect who is saying what; actually, the one launching the questions is Petrus, while the brackets contain Paulina's answers. In the target text, the Romanian phrase is turned into nine distinct other sentences. The comments in between brackets, which belong to Paulina, are marked as such. Consequently, one might conclude that the translator proves his visibility through his interventions at the syntactic and typographic levels. He thus facilitates the reader's task of decoding the dynamics between the two characters and of making sense of this interplay of assumptions and answers.

The fragment also displays a number of discourse markers of orality – “ha, ha, ha”, “pfui, ce prostie”, “păi e chiar culmea” and the atmosphere is faithfully captured in the target text with target language versions such as “ha, ha, ha”, “phooey, what nonsense” and “well now, that's the limit”. Apart from the narrator, most of the secondary characters are also defined by the register they use. Hatim and Mason claim that “social differentiation is also reflected in language” (1990: 42). Through their choice of grammar and lexis, characters such as auntie Paulina indicate the social category to which they belong through their middle-class talk abounding in the orality markers indicated above and in the use of certain lexical markers such as “pușor”, “mizilic” or “amărâta de pensie”. The translator has to grasp the idea of identity which is displayed thus by the linguistic code of the specific speech community whose members the characters are.

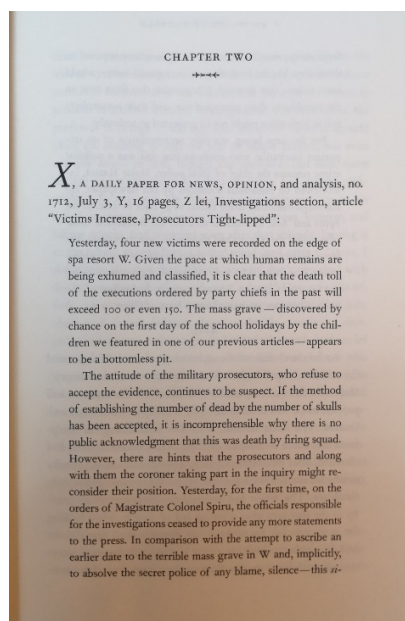
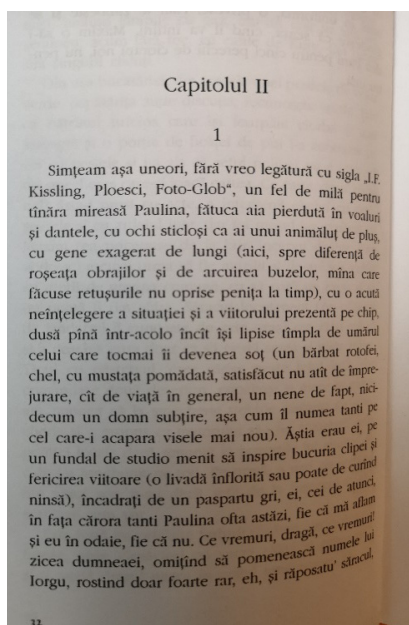
In any act of translation, the translator is bound by a double allegiance – to the source text/author on the one hand, and to the target language/readers, on the other. It is not an easy responsibility, as s/he has to find the right formula to render the author's intention (in terms of writing style, message, narrative etc.) in the target language so as to be appealing to target readers. This requirement of twofold loyalty relates to four main fields: linguistic diversity, interpretive diversity, pragmatic diversity and cultural diversity (Franco Aixela, 1996). In our particular case, the examples above illustrate how the translator managed to render the linguistic diversity of the two languages involved in translation, in this particular case Romanian and English. In an effort to achieve equivalence in the target language, he resorted to the syntactic manipulation of the source text which brings the text closer to its target readers.

Another layer of diversity refers to the cultural elements present in the source text. Franco Aixela calls them culture-specific items (CSI); they reflect the dimension of cultural variability, which can often be a touchstone for translators, as they encode a reality specific to a given culture in terms of values, habits, units of measurement etc. When the gap between the two cultures involved in the translation exchange is narrower, such elements of cultural reference may overlap, which makes the translator's task easier and the text more readily accepted by target readers. But when the cultural distance is wider, the translator has to choose whether he opts for domestication or foreignisation. In other words, whether he wishes to signal the foreignness of the text and bring readers closer to the cultural reality of the source text or whether he is more concerned about acceptability in the target language and manipulates the text so as to read as “an” original.

According to Franco Aixela, culture specific items are “usually expressed in a text by means of objects and of systems of classification and measurement whose use is restricted to the source culture, or by means of the transcription of opinions and the description of habits equally alien to the receiving culture. In either of these cases, they are usually manifestations of a surface nature, outside the structure of the text” (1996: 56). Depending on the orientation of the translation, the translator may opt for strategies ranging from conservation (when the translation has a marked foreignising orientation) to naturalisation (when the translator’s agenda favours domestication).

The culture specific items present in Florian’s novel cover a wide range of references, from gastronomy and eating habits to clothing, historical events, institutions and terms of address. In the gastronomy field, there are terms such as “brega” (TT: “millet beer” – although *brega* does not contain alcohol, which one might associate with beer), “pilaf” (TT: “rice”, although *pilaf* is not simply boiled rice, but rice with oil and vegetables), “cozonac” or varză călită“. In terms of clothing, the part describing monk Onufrie abounds in terms pertaining to the Orthodox rite and religious habits such as “parastas” (TT: “wake”), “camilafcă” (TT: “kamilavkion”) and the more worldly “clop” translated as “hat” (a telling example of a term with no referent in the target language, as the *clop* is a specific type of hat, worn solely in the Northern part of Romania).

Although most of the translation strategies adopted by Blyth can be accounted for based on his translating agenda, there is an aspect related to the extraliterary framework of the analysis that is utterly incomprehensible. The source text is organised into chapters (Capitolul I, Capitolul II etc.), with subchapters (1, 2, 3 etc.).



Nevertheless, the subchapters are fully deleted in the English version. Moreover, the order of the chapters is reversed, and the same is valid about the order of subchapters

within the same chapter. This major intervention of the translator in the organisation of the text reveals the visibility he undertakes in his role as an agent of reconciliation between the Romanian and the English texts. This decision to reorganise the very structure of the source text in the target version may be accounted for by the translator's concern with the principles of readability. By reframing the main story, the side stories may seem to follow a more logical pattern. It is, in a way, an expression of re-authoring the text, in contrast with the intention of the actual author.

3. The translation of proper nouns

The treatment of proper names in this translation deserves a special analysis. In general, proper nouns represent one of the most difficult categories to translate. Most of them refer to names of persons, celebrations and festivals, institutions, personalities, historical events or geographic spaces. Apart from the fact that they have a high cultural load, awareness of a given culture and of its naming habits may provide hints as to the gender of the person, their ethnicity or religious identity. Their cultural nature is precisely what makes them so difficult to translate: "they are the most problematic to translate in part because their [...] significance is often culturally specific and dependent on cultural paradigms" (Tymoczko, 1999: 224). Besides the unloaded proper nouns, i.e. those that have strict denotative meanings, there are also PNs with a marked connotative bearing, with a great significance for the message and plot of a text. The strategies used to deal with such proper names in translation are dictated by the general orientation of the translation towards domestication of foreignisation. They also reflect the translator's linguistic and cultural competence: "The transformation of names in translation [...] is rooted deeply in the cultural background of the translator, which includes phonetic and phonological competence, morphological competence, complete understanding of the context, correct attitude to the message, respect for tradition, compliance with the current state of cross-cultural interference of languages, respect for the cultural values and the responsibilities of the translator" (Apostolova quoted in Jaleniauskiene & Cicelyte, 2009: 32).

Actually, Theo Hermans put together four strategies for the foreign rendition of proper names. His taxonomy of translation strategies is still one of the most widely used in translation studies: "Theoretically speaking, there appears to be at least four ways of transferring proper names from one language into another. They can be **copied**, i.e. reproduced in the target text exactly as they were in the source text. They can be **transcribed**, i.e. transliterated or adapted on the level of spelling, phonology etc. A formally unrelated name can be **substituted** in the TT for any given name in the ST [...] and insofar as a proper name is enmeshed in the lexicon of that language and acquires 'meaning', it can be **translated**" (quoted in Franco Aixela, 2000: 76).

In *Little fingers* there are many proper names which refer to persons, topographic references and historical events. Although it is possible to apply distinct translation strategies to the proper nouns present in the same text, in our case the analysis of the TT and the ST revealed an inconsistent use of such strategies. Here are a few proper names designating persons:

Proper nouns for persons

ST	TT
Lucica	Lucica
Paraschiva	Paraschiva
Nițica	Nitzica
Răzvan	Răzvan
Pușa	Pusha
Vuța	Vutza
Ghiță	Ghitza
Jeni	Jenny
Iancu	Jancu
Ioanichie	Ioanichie
Onufrie	Onufrie

As can be noticed, the prevalent translation strategies here are reproduction, namely the names were copied in the TT with the same form they had in the ST. One name was completely substituted – Jenny. Others were dealt with through transliteration, mostly phonetic adaptation used in order to give an indication to target readers as to how those names should be read: *tz* for *ț* or *sh* for *ș*, for example. However, although the strategy is just as valid as any other and in keeping with the domesticating orientation of Blyth's text, following this logic of the phonetic adaptation, the names Lucica and Paraschiva should have also be transcribed (perhaps as Lusica or Paraskiva).

The same inconsistent treatment can be noticed in the translation of topographic names:

Proper nouns for places

ST	TT
Focșani	Focshani
Căldărușani	Căldărușani
Buzău	Buzau
Cernica	Cernica
Slănic	Slanic

Again, there is a marked preference for transliteration especially in the case of proper nouns which contain specific Romanian characters such as *ș* or *ă*. However, it is not clear why the translator chose to keep the *ș* in Căldărușani and adapt it in Focshani, and why *ă* is maintained in Căldărușani (which, kept as such is really difficult to read by English speaking readers), but omitted in Buzau.

4. Conclusion

Degete mici represents a challenging experience for foreign readers for two main reasons. On the one hand, there is the personal manner in which Florian constructs his phrases and builds his edifices of words and intricate linguistic structures. On the other

hand, it is the fact that the novel depicts a reality which is deeply rooted in Romanian realities, lifestyle and mores. Consequently, the translator was faced with the complex assignment of having to transplant the source content into English considering both the linguistic code and conventions of English, and the potential target readers with a multicultural background (although the text is translated into English, it obviously is not targeted solely at Anglo-American readers, but at whoever wishes to access the text in this language).

The ST-TT analysis above, which focuses on just a few aspects such as syntax and cultural references, can be expanded to include many other considerations. However, the aim was to detect the general orientation of the translation, either towards domestication or towards foreignisation. The examples analysed reveal that the translator's interventions were visible at the macro-level of the text, with the reorganisation of the source text, but also at the micro-textual level, with the syntactic alterations. Moreover, the dominant translation strategy used for the treatment of proper nouns and cultural references (i.e. transliteration) reveals a general preoccupation for the principles of acceptability, whose aim is to take the text as close to the readers as possible.

It is our personal opinion, in which we concur with Venuti, that "a translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other, a translation strategy based on an aesthetic of discontinuity, can best preserve that difference, the otherness, by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process and unbridgeable gap between cultures" (1995: 306). This does not mean that a translation with a domesticating intention is not a valid interpretation of the source text, because what else is a translation but the translator's own reading filter which he applies to the source text.

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