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Translation and the Problem of Sway
by Douglas Robinson
Translation and the Problem of Sway

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Preface

There are many ways to contribute to the intellectual development of a field. One can invent a whole new approach, an original theoretical or analytical model that revolutionizes the field – the kind of contribution that typically wins the scholar in question the highest possible accolades. One can adapt someone else’s theory or analytical model to the needs of the field – a contribution that is perhaps less highly respected than the invention of a radically new approach, but that is nevertheless extraordinarily valuable, as it too can revolutionize a field.

This second type of contribution, I suggest, is the focus of my book, or rather, two instances of it are: Lawrence Venuti’s adaptation of Charles Sanders Peirce’s concept of the interpretant (as well as, again, his adaptation of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s concept of foreignization) for the study of translations, and Mona Baker’s adaptation of narrative theory to the study of translating and interpreting.

My book itself offers a third type of contribution, parasitical on the second: it seeks to test, challenge, critique, expand upon, rethink someone else’s proposed paradigm shift. According to Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970), if the first two contributions constitute “revolutionary science,” this third would be a form of “normal science”: it accepts the descriptive power of the other scholar’s paradigm-busting contribution, and seeks only to help that new paradigm account more fully and more complexly for the empirical data. Obviously this is a humbler task than either of the first two, on which it relies. (A fourth would be to anthologize samples of the first three contributions.)

I also, however, bring to the study of translation in terms of interpretants and narrativity my own “new” and potentially revolutionary paradigm, new at least in Robinson (1991), when I first proposed it: the somatics of translation, or, roughly speaking, the ways in which the decisions made by translation commissioners, translators, and the critics and ordinary readers of translations are guided by shared evaluative affect. The reticulation of such affect through a group, or what I call the somatic exchange, is my model of all social regulation – the channel by which such things as the meaning of a word or phrase, the correctness or not-quite-correctness of a linguistic structure or ideological formulation, and the appropriateness of a response are governed by the group. It is my claim in this book that Venuti’s model of the interpretant and Baker’s model of narrativity both tacitly depend, for their ability to guide translator (and other) behavior, on something
like my somatic paradigm – indeed, as I hope to show in Chapter 6, that Baker's model of narrativity depends on the operation of a prenarrative interpretant that guides us in imposing narrative form on experience, and that at the core of that interpretant is the somatics of all human interaction.

As my title suggests, too, I here for the first time introduce into the discussion the concept of sway, which I borrow from the book of that title by Ori and Rom Brafman (2008). The Brafmans tend to understand sway as a purely irrational force, typically emerging out of emotional response, tiredness or other sources of rational deficits, or group pressures; in Chapter 1 I track the problems with defining sway so narrowly and so negatively, suggesting that the norms and values we hold most dear, even the very notion of rational thought and rational behavior, are themselves the product of sway. My suggestion there is that the translation norms pioneeringly theorized by Gideon Toury (1980) are merely the “positive” version of translational sway, of which the translator errors that have long been a staple of translation criticism, as well as the translator “bias” that is arguably the focus on Venuti's work on interpretants and Baker’s work on narrativity, are thus the flip or “dark” side. In subsuming translation norms, errors, and biases under the rubric of “sway,” I am tacitly urging a moving past the up/down, light/dark, good/bad binaries that have traditionally been imposed on translation sway. I am interested here in the forces, pressures, channels of guidance that influence the production and reception of translations.

Chapter 2, then, introduces Venuti's concept of the interpretant as specifically a channel of sway – but with a series of “friendly amendments” proposed in response to Charles Martindale's complaint that ideological analysis tends to reduce human creativity and aesthetic beauty to mechanistic causality. One of my goals in the book, in fact, is to expand Venuti's model of the interpretant so as to be able to explain aesthetic phenomena like “beauty.” At the end of Chapter 2 I also briefly introduce my somatic model of human interaction.

Chapter 3 is a long case study of a single translator, Alex. Matson (1888–1972), a bilingual and bicultural Finn who translated primarily literary texts from English to Finnish and from Finnish to English. (In his publications he always abbreviated his first name with a period, and I have followed his lead here.) I look closely at his translations into Finnish of James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and William Faulkner's Wild Palms and As I Lay Dying, and his translations into English of Aleksis Kivi's 1870 novel Seven Brothers and several works by Aino Kallas and F. E. Sillanpää. My project in this chapter is to test Venuti's concept of the “formal” interpretant against a complex translation history, and in the process expand the model to incorporate rhetorical situation. The model I offer at the end of the chapter suggests that there are rhetorical interpretants guiding our interactions with other people; that rhetorical interpretants, following Aristotle, might be
divided into *logical* interpretants (governing structure), *pathetic* interpretants (governing affective interaction), and *ethical* interpretants (governing the perception of character); and that Venuti’s two types of interpretant, the formal and the thematic, should be seen as subcategories of the logical interpretant.

In Chapter 4 I pull back from the close analysis of specific translations to rethink the interactive (rhetorical) spatiotemporal dynamic governing foreignism, which Venuti is now presenting as one of two important formal interpretants. Venuti tends to suspend his conceptualizations of foreignism in an odd limbo between a formalist or objectivist mode in which it is built into and stably recognizable in the text, and a rhetorical mode in which it can and should have an impact on each individual target reader – but is never quite to be defined *in terms of* its rhetorical impact on real readers. I suggest here that the lingering traces of objectivism in Venuti’s theorization are unworkable and must be banished. What remains is far more complex than Venuti’s conceptualizations, but at least the resulting complexity is something that lends itself to detailed analysis.

Chapter 5 is another case study of a specific translation history, this time one to which Venuti (2008: 45–48) devotes the last few pages of the recent article that is my focus throughout, namely the rival English translations of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* by Constance Garnett in 1912 and by Richard Pevear and Larisa Volokhonsky in 1990. What I find, by studying a longish passage stereoscopically, is that the two translations do not differ significantly – and the notion that they do, that Garnett naturalizes and Pevear and Volokhonsky foreignize, which Venuti takes from Emerson (1991) and May (1994), moves me into a broader reformulation of the interpretants governing not only how we translate but how we theorize translation.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I turn briefly to Mona Baker’s (2006) extraordinarily fecund tracing of a narrative paradigm for the study of translation, in *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*. My argument there, as I began to suggest above, is that the true radical core of the narrative is itself a prenarrative impulse to impose narrative structure on experience – and that another word for that core might indeed by the interpretant, as organized by ideosomatic regimes.

The obvious imbalance between my four chapters (2–5) on a single article by Venuti and a single chapter (6) on a whole book by Baker may deserve a word or two of explanation. I originally planned to divide the book into two parts of equal length, one devoted to Venuti and the interpretant, the other to Baker and narrativity; what I found as I proceeded, however, was that the two sections dovetailed in significant ways, so that many of the issues that I wanted to raise with Baker turned up in my discussion of Venuti, and did not need to be rehashed. In addition, the theoretical component in Baker’s discussion of narrativity that specifically addresses *translational sway* turned out to be far less elaborate than the sway-related
aspects of Venuti’s theory of translational interpretants. Baker’s book is actually far more intensively and extensively oriented to the theorization of narrativity than it is to the theorization of translational sway; as I note in the beginning of Chapter 6, her book might more accurately be titled not *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* but *Narrative and Conflict, With Some Examples from Journalism, Translation, and Interpreting*. As my book stands now, therefore, it is a theoretical study of translational sway with a dual focus on the interpretant and narrativity, but with the interpretant as its primary focus and narrativity as theoretical counterpoint, to show how the interpretant works in narrativization as well as translation. Since Baker’s translation- and interpreting-based examples also ground a discussion of sway much more obviously in the somatics of translation than do Venuti’s, Chapter 6 also allows me to explore the sway of regulatory affect in the narrativization of translated and interpreted texts.
Acknowledgments

This book was initially born out of conference papers, and I am indebted to the conveners of and participants in the various conferences at which I presented snippets of my argument here:

Chapter 4, the oldest piece, was commissioned for the Literary Division’s Marilyn Gaddis Rose Keynote Lecture at the American Translators Association in New Orleans, November 1–4, 2006, and subsequently presented as the Rosenblatt Distinguished Lecture in Translation Studies at Florida Atlantic University, April 19, 2007, as a distinguished lecture and colloquium at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Humanities, March 3–4, 2008, and at Beijing University, Beijing Foreign Languages University, and Nankai University, the last week of October, 2008. Thanks especially to Marilyn Gaddis Rose at Binghamton, Jan Hokenson at Florida Atlantic, Jill Morawski at Wesleyan, and Zhu Lin at Nankai University. Thanks also to Brian Baer for publishing the article version in TIS: Translation and Interpreting Studies, and for permission to reprint.

A version of Chapter 2 (through 2.3) was presented at the Translation History conference organized at Okan University in Istanbul, Turkey, September 25–27, 2009; another version (mostly consisting of 2.4) was presented in the retranslation panel at the Modern Language Association meeting in Philadelphia, December 27–30, 2009. Thanks especially to Michaela Wolf at the University of Graz, Cemal Demircioğlu at Okan University, Carol O’Sullivan at the University of Portsmouth, and Julie Chandler Hayes at U Mass Amherst. Chapter 5 was originally intended as a brief discussion to be incorporated into the paper for the Istanbul conference; as I wrote it, it kept expanding until it burst its confines and became one of the longest chapters in the book. Ivan Delazari of St. Petersburg State University and Galina Solomatina of Voronezh State Pedagogical University helped me think through the Dostoevsky passage in Russian, and Ivan read the chapter and made detailed comments on both my understanding of the Russian and my argument in general.

A version of Chapter 6 was presented at the Fifth CIATI Conference in São Paulo, Brazil, May 17–20, 2010, and again at the Forum on Translation and Globalization at the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Chengdu, Sichuan, China, July 8–10, 2010, with Mona Baker as respondent. Thanks to Mona for her comments, and to Prof. Guo Yangsheng for inviting me.
Chapter 3 was not written for a conference, but was first inspired by conversations with Finnish historians of literary translation at the Translation Studies Conference at the University of Eastern Finland in Joensuu, December 11–12, 2009, especially Ritva Leppihalme, who sent me her paper comparing the English translations of Väinö Linna by Alex. Matson and Richard Impola. Ritva also read that chapter and wrote long and detailed and extraordinarily helpful comments on it, and put me in touch with her Ph.D. student Hilkka Pekkanen, who was just completing a quantitative study of the style of Alex. Matson’s translations. Based on an excellent paper Outi Paloposki gave at the conference, I sent her first Chapter 3, and then, eventually, as she kept wanting more, the entire manuscript, and her comments were very helpful. Thanks also to my old friend Riitta Oittinen, who was not at the Joensuu conference but with whom I discussed similar topics over dinner in Tampere the night before, and who read and commented usefully on Chapter 3 as well. A drastically abbreviated version of the chapter was presented in a talk given to the English department at the University of Jyväskylä on December 13, 2010; thanks to Arja Piirainen-Marsh for arranging that event and to the various audience members who asked useful questions.

Thanks also, as always, to the indefatigable people in the Interlibrary Loan office at the University of Mississippi, who took great pride in tracking down the more obscure Finnish works I ordered from them for Chapter 3; and, when they were unable to locate Alex. Matson’s 1947 translation of Joyce’s *Portrait*, my oldest daughter Laura Robinson spent an afternoon in the University of Helsinki library scanning pages for me. Yrjö Varpio also kindly scanned the relevant pages from his 1971 book on Alex. Matson and emailed them to me, and answered numerous questions I had about the material.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Translation and sway

Why do translators make mistakes?

Put that way, the question does not seem particularly interesting: translators make mistakes because all human beings make mistakes; because to err is human. Translators don’t always know enough: they confuse the meaning of a sentence in the source text; they miss allusions; they fail to hear certain connotations or nuances of the target-language word or phrase they use. And they don’t always exert enough rational control over the translation process: their eye skips over a word or phrase or even whole sentence, or sees “affect” as “effect”; they think they know a word that they really ought to look up; they do not analyze the syntax of a problematic sentence; they are inattentive to the pragmatics (indirect speech acts, implicatures) of the source text.

The question becomes more interesting, though, when we ask why translators translate in ways that they believe are correct, and might even defend as the best possible translation, but that later readers identify as erroneous. This broader focus would incorporate the problem of translator bias, which a number of translation theorists have been exploring recently under the rubric of “narrativity”: as Giuliana Shiavi (1996) notes, “there is always a teller in a tale,” and the translator of a text is its “teller” or narrator. This is not just a matter of propagandistic translation; the bias that is constitutive of narrative point of view demonstrably shapes the interpretive work done even by translators who strive for absolute neutrality.

If unconscious bias can sway this scrupulously neutral translator into phrasings that are later condemned as erroneous, what shall we say about translation norms? Are translation norms not also a form of translator sway? Ever since his first theorization of translation norms in 1976, developed in a paper at the Catholic University of Leuven and published in his first book In Search of a Theory of Translation, Gideon Toury (1980: 51) has insisted on understanding translation as at least partially guided, shaped, organized by norms: “There is a point,” he writes there, “in assuming the existence of norms only in situations which in principle allow for several variations of behavior. Such variations are either meaningless, being cases of free variation, or patterned, that is, directed and regulated by norms” (emphasis added).
Would it be stretching Toury’s formulation excessively to suggest that translation norms are another form of bias?¹ They would, of course, be biases approved and supported by the community that has constructed them as norms, and thus would not likely be widely identified as bias, a word that tends to carry a negative connotation signaling a motivated deviation from fact or truth (which is to say, from group norms). But if the only significant difference between norms and biases is that norms have group approval and biases do not, surely it makes sense to subsume both into a common category?

In fact my suggestion is not the tendentious one that norms and biases be subsumed into the latter, but rather that both be considered forms of sway. Schematically: the sway of a norm maintained by Group A may be identified as the sway of bias by members of Group B, who, if they do make such a charge, will also be inclined to brand translations “directed and regulated” by those norms as errors.

Let us begin untangling this skein at the conservative end: with error analysis.

1.1 The question of error

There is a famous case of translation error in the Septuagint rendering of Isaiah 7:14’s almah “young girl/woman”; the 1970 New English Bible correctly but controversially renders the key phrase as “a young woman is with child.” But the third-century-BCE translators of the Septuagint rendered almah as parthenos “virgin,” and so unwittingly laid a significant part of the mythological groundwork for Christianity. Why? Was it perhaps not an error at all? Some Bible scholars have argued that almah and bethulah in the diasporic Hebrew of the day were more or less equivalent synonyms for virgin, making this a case of what Toury calls “free variation,” and thus “meaningless” in terms of sway. Another explanatory model would insist that it was an error, but a mere slip, a sheer accident of ignorance or incompetence, and so equally meaningless in terms of sway. Yet a third model would be the early legend according to which the Septuagint translators were inspired to translate thus by God. As Augustine writes in On Christian Doctrine (Robinson 1997a: 34):

> And in emending Latin translations [of the Bible], Greek translations are to be consulted, of which the Septuagint carries most authority in so far as the Old Testament is concerned. In all the more learned churches it is now said that this translation was so inspired by the Holy Spirit that many men spoke as if with the mouth of one. It is said and attested by many of not unworthy faith that, although the translators were separated in various cells while they worked, nothing was to be found in any version that was not found in the same words and with the same order of words in all of the others. Who would compare any other authority with this, or, much less, prefer another?
Translating *almah* as *parthenos*, in other words, was not an error, but divine inspiration: the Holy Spirit put the foreknowledge of Jesus’ virgin birth into the translators’ minds nearly three centuries before it would happen, and *guided* them to the prophetically correct translation. This would be yet another channel of sway: neither norms nor bias but direct supernatural intervention.

Possibly listening to his friend Jerome – who unlike Augustine could compare the Greek translation to the Hebrew original, and wondered in *Preface to the Pentateuch* “who was the first lying author to construct the seventy cells at Alexandria, in which they were separated and yet all wrote the same words” (Robinson 1997a: 30), even though the best authorities had reported that they all conferred together – Augustine (ibid: 34) also considers another possibility:

> But even if they conferred and arrived at a single opinion on the basis of common judgment and consent, it is not right or proper for any man, no matter how learned, to seek to emend the consensus of so many older and more learned men. Therefore, even though something is found in Hebrew versions different from what they have set down, I think we should cede to the divine dispensation by which they worked to the end that the books which the Jewish nation refused to transmit to other peoples, either out of envy or for religious reasons, might be revealed so early, by the authority and power of King Ptolemy, to the nations which in the future were to believe in Our Lord. It may be that the Holy Spirit judged that they should translate in a manner befitting the people whom they addressed and that they should speak as if with one voice. Yet, as I have said before, a comparison with those translators who adhered most closely to the words of the original is not without use in explaining their meaning. Latin translations of the Old Testament, as I set out to say, are to be emended on the authority of the Greeks, and especially on the authority of those who, although there were seventy, are said to have spoken as if with one voice.

In other words, even if the Seventy were not divinely inspired to translate *almah* as *parthenos*, but settled upon that translation in a purely secular fashion, by conferring and agreeing, the sheer cultural *authority* of that translation makes it right, or at least makes it wrong to question it: “it is not right or proper for any man, no matter how learned, to seek to emend the consensus of so many older and more learned men.” And of course Augustine doesn’t really believe that the translation process was entirely secular: the conclusion he draws from this insistence on cultural authority is again that “therefore, even though something is found in Hebrew versions different from what they have set down, I think we should cede to the divine dispensation by which they worked.”

This does not explain the Septuagint translators’ error, of course; but clearly some powerful form of sway is at work in Augustine’s response to that error. He is quite
nakedly saying that no matter how the translators settled upon *parthenos* for *almah*, it is *not* an error. We are not even to consider the possibility that it might be wrong.

Augustine’s approach is still very much with us today, of course. The idea that *parthenos* for *almah* was a slip, a mistake, a translators’ booboo, is understandably anathema to conservative Christians; and conservative Christian intellectuals, who cannot resort to the stratagem used by the laity – just ignore the problem – find themselves very much in Augustine’s camp. Here for example is Jay P. Green, Sr. (1996: vii):

> The marketplace is being glutted with new books which are being represented as *versions* of the Bible. Each one claims to be the very word of God, yet there are literally thousands of differences between them – and such differences as to cause one to discern that there is much disagreement as to which Greek words are to be translated, or paraphrased. In one way the new *versions* agree: they all leave out dozens of references to the deity of Jesus Christ, and they add words which tend to question His virgin birth, His substitutionary, fully satisfying atonement. This is due to their decision to depend upon an Alexandrian text-base, instead of that body of God’s words which has been universally received and believed in for nineteen centuries, known to us as the Received Text. These new versions are not only marked by additions, but also by subtractions, since some four whole pages of words, phrases, sentences, and verses have been omitted by these new *versions*. And these are words attested to as God’s words by overwhelming evidence contained in all the Greek manuscripts, in the ancient versions, in the writings of the early fathers – and these from every inhabited land on the earth where Christianity has been.

The confusing welter of competing texts is here reduced to a simple binary: “an Alexandrian textbase,” which is corrupt (because compiled with a purely secular attention to textual consistency), and “that body of God’s words which has been universally received and believed in for nineteen centuries, known to us as the Received Text.” As Augustine phrases the exact same attitude, “it is not right or proper for any man, no matter how learned, to seek to emend the consensus of so many older and more learned men.”

For conservative Christians, this is normative thinking, and thus a source of correct and trustworthy Bible translation. For everyone else, it is bias, and thus – at least potentially, and in the case of Isaiah 7:14 patently – a source of translation error.

Or take a less famous example: in Ruth 3:4, the young widow Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi tells her to wait until Boaz is asleep, and then, according to King James’ translators, “thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do.” “Uncover his feet” is a literal translation of the Hebrew *galah margelah*; and most other modern English translations render the passage with the exact same literal phrasing.² In fact this is the strategy adopted by almost every modern European translation:
Chapter 1. Introduction

- In 1534 that great scorners of literal Bible translation Martin Luther has “decke zu seinen Füßen auf” (and later German translations, such as the 1871 Elberfelder Bibel, follow Luther)
- Casiodoro de Reina in the Sagradas Escrituras of 1569 (revised by Cipriano de Valera in 1602, producing the translation known as the Reina-Valera Antigua) has “descubrirás los pies” (and later Spanish translations, such as the 1986 Biblia de las Américas, follow the Reina-Valera)
- Giovanni Diodati in 1649 has “scoprilo da’ piedi”
- Jean-Frédéric Ostervald in 1724 has “découvre ses pieds” (and later French translations, such as Louis Segond’s in 1871, give us exactly the same phrase)

In the Latin Vulgate Jerome gives us a slightly wordier variation, in “discoperies pallium quo operitur a parte pedum” (remove the coverlet with which he is concealed from the region of the feet); and the 1927 Riveduta translation into Italian follows suit with “alzagli la coperta dalla parte de’ piedi,” as does The New English Bible – that radical provocation excoriated by conservative bishops and people like Jay P. Green, Sr., for correcting the Septuagint’s mistranslation of almah – with “turn back the covering at his feet.” Strikingly, the Douay-Rheims translators in 1609, absolutely committed to translating literally from Jerome’s Latin, introduce a significant revision with “lift up the clothes wherewith he is covered towards his feet” (my emphasis), apparently misreading Jerome’s a + ablative “from” as ad + accusative “toward.” Jerome’s image, obviously, is of a blanket being folded up off the feet; the Douay-Rheims translators, supposedly faithful to Jerome, start at the other end of Boaz’s body, at his chest, and suggest that Ruth turn the coverlet down toward his feet.

The question these more or less literal translations fail to ask, of course, is why Ruth should uncover Boaz’s feet at all – what the semiotics of this gesture could possibly have been. Is this some sort of ancient Hebrew tradition?

Marvin H. Pope (1992: 721) offers an explanation: Hebrew regel “foot, leg” and its plural derivatives were sometimes used in biblical Hebrew as euphemisms for male and female genitalia. “Covering the feet” in Judges 3:24 means urinating; “the water of the feet” in 2 Kings 18:27 is urine; “the hair of the feet” in Isaiah 7:20 is pubic hair. To uncover Boaz’s “feet” in Ruth 3:4 is to therefore lift his skirt or tunic and expose his genitals.

“Uncover his feet,” then, is a fairly obvious translation error: the actual physical (genital) meaning of the Hebrew phrase is lost or obscured through overly restrictive attention to the literal meaning of the word margelah. Again, why have so many Bible translators and translation committees over the past four centuries – the vast majority – made this error? Was it through insufficient knowledge? Did the various translators simply not know what the ancient Hebrews meant by
margelah? That’s entirely possible, of course; indeed the fact that almost every translation I’ve looked at has the straightforward literal “uncover his feet” rather than some inventively awkward evasion might well be taken as support for that conclusion. Did translators, not understanding Naomi’s advice to uncover Boaz’s feet, wrap themselves in the warm secure cloak of literalism, and move on?

As I say, inventively awkward evasions are rare, but two variants of more or less the same evasion can be found in Today’s English Version and The Message: “lift the covers and lie down at his feet” (TEV) and “lie at his feet to let him know that you are available to him for marriage” (Message). In both translations the feet remain; all the two translation committees have done is to further obscure the original advice to uncover Boaz’s genitals by making the feet markers for a general area in which Ruth is to lie down (the Message translators further adding a faux-anthropological justification for the oddness of Naomi’s advice).

Eugene Nida was of course the intellectual powerhouse behind the United Bible Societies’ TEV, and, as he himself once told me, for decades was perceived as a dangerous radical in Bible translation circles for following Luther in insisting on translations that conveyed the actual meaning of the original text in language that the ordinary modern reader would understand. In his famous theoretical terms, obviously, “uncover his feet” would be formal equivalence; one can imagine Nida railing against the absurdity that formal equivalence produces here. 3 But “lift the covers and lie down at his feet” is not dynamic equivalence; it is what we might call camouflage equivalence, rearranging the semantic elements of the original (“uncovering” and “feet”) in a plausible way that disguises their dynamic meaning. Surely Nida would have agreed, at least privately, that the dynamic equivalent of the euphemism in galah margelah, and thus a translation conforming to his own theoretical orientation, would be something like “uncover his middle leg”? Should we imagine Nida attempting to convince the UBS translation committee to render galah margelah with some such modern euphemism? Perhaps that is going too far; but whether it was the committee’s decision to overrule Nida, or Nida agreed that having Ruth lie down at Boaz’s feet was the best possible English translation, or Nida was not even a party to the decision-making process, in Nida’s theoretical terms the TEV translation of galah margelah is an error.

Some or all of these translators may well have mistranslated the original Hebrew out of ignorance, but there is of course a far likelier explanation: they were embarrassed, or they were afraid that churchgoers hearing the passage read aloud in church would be embarrassed, or they wanted to protect children from such sexual images. In other words, we can speculate that the various mistranslations of galah margelah are the product of censorship – they were made not for doctrinal reasons, like defenses of the Septuagint mistranslation of almah, without which there is no Old Testament anticipation of the virgin birth, but out of pressure from
social taboos on talk of sexuality. But again social taboos are norms for the groups that are subject to those taboos, and distortive biases for those who are not.

1.2 The Brafmans on sway

While it is, as I say, entirely possible that the Septuagint translators rendered almah as parthenos out of ignorance or inattention, and that one or more modern European translators rendered margelah as feet out of ignorance or kneejerk literalism, the sheer resistance of these mistranslations to correction as they are replicated and defended over the centuries suggests that they are shaped and organized by that generalized force that I’m following Ori and Rom Brafman (2008) in calling sway – or, in the terms they use in their subtitle, The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior. They identify several different channels of sway:

- **Loss-aversion**: having invested time, money, energy, emotions, etc. in a belief or behavior, we tend to cling to it even as it increasingly proves erroneous or destructive, so as not to waste our investment in it
- **Commitment**: having committed our loyalties to a group, a set of values or beliefs or norms, or a course of action, we stick to it, lest others perceive us as flighty and inconsistent
- **Value-attribution**: we tend to assume that people or things valued highly by society will be more worthwhile, more likely to be true and honest and decent and trustworthy, than people or things valued less highly by society
- **Altruism/Selfishness**: we seem to have a need to balance between the two, so that too naked an appeal to our selfishness may incline us to be more altruistic, and too naked an appeal to our altruism may incline us to be more selfish
- **The chameleon effect**: we tend to be shaped, not just in our self-conceptions but in our behavior and even our cognitive and affective functioning, by how others see us
- **Fairness**: our sense of what’s fair will often override rational considerations

As a tentative beginning, we might venture the guess that Augustine and later defenders of the Isaiah 7:14 mistranslation were swayed by commitment, specifically to the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth; and that the mistranslators of galah margelah were swayed by value-attribution, the assumption that a sacred text like the Bible couldn’t possibly be (portrayed as) describing lewd sexual seductions.

We could also use this list heuristically to direct our attention to other possible forms of translation sway. We might detect the sway of loss-aversion, for example, when we’re halfway through translating a novel and gradually begin to suspect that the style we’ve developed for it is subtly but significantly wrong, but feel reluctant
to go back and revise the first half of the book to fit our new sense of the right way to proceed. And if the chameleon effect might be used to study the process by which translators mimic the styles of (or temporarily “become”) the authors they translate, that effect combined with the tension between altruism and selfishness might offer an explanatory avenue into the epiphenomenon called fidelity or equivalence.

But that is not how I plan to proceed. Instead, I want to look at some actual translations and analyses of translations and let a rough typology of translation sway emerge from that material. For example, I suggested above that the mistranslations of *galah margelah* might have been produced out of ignorance or kneejerk literalism: obviously in that tentative formulation “kneejerk literalism” is itself a kind of sway, but not one of those the Brafmans identify; and exploring the sway a sequence of source-text words separated by spaces can wield over the translator would require considerable close attention to the cognitive and perhaps even affective processes of translation.

Along the way I also want to rethink some basic assumptions that the Brafmans bring to the study of sway – for example their inclination to see sway as the “irresistible pull of irrational behavior.” Their theoretical default setting is rationalist and individualist: praiseworthy behavior is always rationally governed by the individual, and “sway” is always an irrational and often group-influenced deviation from that rationalist ideal.

In that previous paragraph, for example, I suggested that the translational epiphenomena traditionally singled out for highest praise, the faithful translator imitating the style of the original, might be thought of as achieved through sway. If sway is fundamentally irrational, does that mean that translation is an inherently irrational activity in which the translator surrenders rational control of the writing self and lets the source author or source text channel the translation through him or her? Possibly; as its subtitle suggests, my book *Who Translates?* (Robinson 2001) is an exploration of “translator subjectivities beyond reason.” But the complex conclusions I came to in that book were very far from the simple binary that the Brafman model might posit, according to which writers are rationalist creatures who produce original texts in complete control of their expressive intentions and translators are the passive irrational channels of other people’s expressive intentions. At the very least the notion that the chameleon effect might generate praiseworthy effects should help us avoid the Brafmans’ rather simplistic notion that rational action is good and surrendering to sway is bad.

And group dynamics for the Brafmans are clearly the exception that proves the individualistic rule. To their minds the moment when they turn from individuals to groups is the last chapter of their book: “Something strange happens,”
they write in that chapter’s opening lines, “when you put people in groups. They take on new roles, form ‘in group’ alliances, get swept up by extreme stances, and succumb to peer pressure. In a group setting, the reasonableness of our thinking can be distorted and compromised. So it’s not surprising that the hidden sways we have discussed so far reveal themselves just as prominently within a group setting” (Brafman and Brafman 2008: 150). The implication in this suggestion is obviously that they are just now turning to a consideration of these “hidden sways” in a “group setting,” that their discussion of sways in their first seven chapters was all individualistic, all focused on the swaying or skewing – irrationalizing – of the decision-making processes going on inside the heads of isolated individuals. This is patently not the case. In fact every single case they discuss in the book involves group dynamics. The story with which they begin Chapter 1, and to which they recur throughout the book, is the 1977 crash of KLM Flight 4805 over the runway at Teneriffe; what they think they are showing throughout the book is how that crash was caused by irrational behavior (“sway”) in Captain Jacob Van Zanten, a pilot of legendary skill and an unblemished record who was then head of KLM’s safety program. But strikingly, their own report of the safety board’s diagnosis of the problems that led to the crash does not primarily deal with individual failures. It is all about the hierarchical structure of the group dynamics in the cockpit, leading subordinates to let a tired or distracted captain crash the plane rather than risking being perceived as insubordinate.

What I find initially interesting about the deep-seated assumptions coursing through the Brafmans’ claims is that for most of the book the authors themselves are on their own terms just as guilty of “irrational behavior” as Captain Van Zanten and his crew. They too repeatedly turn a blind eye to the “objective information” – both research findings and stories from the newspapers like the crash of KLM Flight 4805 – that they themselves have painstakingly accumulated, analyzed, and presented. The information that they adduce in the book shows with overwhelming clarity both (a) that sway is almost always a group dynamic, not typically something that happens inside individual nervous systems, and (b) that the remedies society has developed to counteract that group dynamic are not the operation of King Reason in each person’s head but new resistive group dynamics, like training first officers in the cockpit to challenge or even countermand the pilot’s dangerous decisions – training them to overcome (in the terminology they borrow from Kantor 1976, to “block”4) their conditioning to obey a superior officer. They do finally state this, in their final chapter – the importance of the blocker for the achievement of group rationality – but as I say their presentation of the phenomenon of sway throughout remains individualistic and rationalistic, as if the norm were the strong rational individual sifting through and considering the evidence and then making a calm rational decision.
And of course it is. This is their norm. What’s interesting, though, is that it’s a norm to which they are in their own terms “irrationally” committed, committed as a form or channel of “sway,” in flagrant but unnoticed disregard for nearly all the evidence they review in the book. What is even more interesting about this commitment, of course, is that they patently aren’t the only ones who think this way. Their rationalist individualism is, in fact, a group norm, or what we call an ideology. It is an assumption or structure of assumptions that in Kantor’s terms arises out of the Brafmans’ unquestioned support for rationalist liberalism: they are neither liberal initiators like John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, nor antiliberal blockers like Karl Marx, nor even observers like John Stuart Mill – they don’t notice that this group dynamic is operative in their book – but supporters. They go along with fundamental group initiatives, which are themselves by the twenty-first century so unconscious as themselves to be largely a form of nonobservant support. So hegemonic is this group norm in their (our) culture that conscious analytical awareness is really only required for resistance and, to a lesser extent, the kind of observation I’m doing here.

Look back at those opening lines to their Chapter 8: “Something strange happens when you put people in groups. They take on new roles, form ‘in group’ alliances, get swept up by extreme stances, and succumb to peer pressure. In a group setting, the reasonableness of our thinking can be distorted and compromised.” What their unconscious support for rationalist individualism blinds them to here is that there is also something all-too-familiar that happens when people stay in their old groups for a long time – for centuries, in fact. They (we) continue to play old roles, and continue to support in-group alliances, without noticing themselves (ourselves) doing so. Having long since succumbed to peer pressure, they (we) get swept along by well-worn moderate stances called norms.

And in our group setting, in our unconscious support for any current group dynamic of which we’re a part, all this conduces to the normative definition of our thinking as reasonable. What is unconsciously normative is de facto reasonable. To the cockpit crews of exhausted or otherwise temporarily incapacitated airline captains in decades past it has been normative, hence reasonable, hence rational, to refrain from shrieking “abort, you idiot!” and so let him crash the plane; the new safety measures the Brafmans report entail retraining cockpit crews not just to behave differently but to feel the normative pressures of groups differently, and thus also to redefine behavioral group rationality (challenge twice, with escalating urgency, and if the second challenge fails, take control of the plane). The difference between obeying the chain of command and letting the pilot crash the plane and breaking the chain of command in order to save hundreds of lives is not a difference between “irrationality” and “rationality”; it’s one between competing rationalities. The former rationality in most cases saves lives; in those rare cases where
the captain is mentally incapacitated in some way, it endangers lives. What the Brafmans are theorizing in the new safety measures is not a move from irrationality to rationality; it is a move from a dangerously inflexible rationality to a more flexible and therefore safer rationality. And the rationalities in both cases are specifically group dynamics.

To take that one step further, the only difference between the old group rationality that mandates strict obedience to the chain of command in airplane cockpits and the group rationality of the Brafmans’ normative assumptions about reason and the individual is that the Brafmans’ assumptions don’t endanger the lives of hundreds of passengers. Both are unnoticed and unquestioned forms of normative (ideological) sway. So utterly reasonable and “natural” and “right” is normative thinking, in fact, that it is extremely difficult for us “supporters” to come to understand it as a distortion or a compromise, as a group formation, as the product of a historical having-been-placed-in-a-group.

In other words, sway is not just a disruption of rationality, as the Brafmans portray it; it is also a source of rationality. It is not just a disorganization of thought, a failure of thought, but a primary collective channel for the successful and effective organization of thought as well. As we begin to crawl up out of the anxious turbulence of the unconscious supporter’s role into the false calm of the observer’s role, we begin to feel the collective forces that sway us to think rationally, to plan ahead, to assess the success of past plans, to impose a careful checklist regime on our corporeal-becoming-affective-becoming-conative-becoming-cognitive behavior. What felt like a purely internal or individual reasoning power while we were mere supporters of the rationalist regime can now be observed being reticulated through the group, a channel of sway that is also a metaperspective on sway.

1.3 Gideon Toury on translation norms

As Toury (1980: 51) first formulates the realm he charts for translation norms, it is a collection of “constraints,” which, he says, “can be described along a scale anchored between two extremes; objective, relatively absolute rules (in certain behavioral domains, even stable, formulated laws) on the one hand, and fully subjective idiosyncrasies on the other. In between these two poles lies a middle-ground occupied by intersubjective factors, commonly designated ‘norms.’ The norms themselves do not occupy merely one point of the scale, but a graduated section of the entire continuum.” Norms, then, occupy the entire middle ground between explicit rules or laws and “fully subjective idiosyncrasies,” and are defined as “the translation of general values or ideas shared by a certain community – as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate – into specific performance-instructions
appropriate for and applicable to specific situations, providing they are not [yet] formulated as laws” (Toury 1980: 51; square brackets Toury’s). That phrase “performance-instructions” makes norms sound like conscious and analytical rules that individuals apply in specific situations; indeed while Toury (1980: 54) writes of “the translator’s commitment to the operational norms for his translation” (emphasis added), using a term that the Brafmans adopt as a description of one major channel of sway, he also tends to describe operational norms “as a model in accordance with which translations subject to them are actually formulated” (1980: 55), suggesting that the translator’s commitment to a given set of operational norms might well be conscious and analytical, like following a check-list.

But of course the fact that Toury has excluded explicit rules from this middle ground of norms entails that norms are by definition not explicit but explicitable – inchoate and unstated but capable of being further “translated” (explicitated) as rules or instructions. In Freudian terms, norms are preconscious: most commonly operating without the individual’s conscious awareness, but available to conscious reflection and analysis if needed. Toury (1980: 51) goes on to say that “these instructions, the norms, are acquired – even internalized – by individual members of the community during the socialization process, and may be said to serve as criteria, in comparison with which actual instances of behavior are evaluated or judged by the group as a whole and by its members individually.” As internalized and thus individualized operationalizations of group values, norms channel collective regulatory impulses into individual behavior. What the individual is swayed by, then, when s/he is swayed by norms, is the practical wisdom of the community.

If norms are a channel of sway, then, and are definitively distinguished in the sociological literature from both explicit rules and laws and “fully subjective idiosyncrasies,” does that mean that neither explicit rules and laws nor “fully subjective idiosyncrasies” are channels of sway? Not necessarily. Idiosyncrasies, freak whims, passing fancies, sudden impulses, random urges, vagaries and caprices are all in the realm once thought to be random but colonized for the study of unconscious sway by Freud and his followers, especially beginning in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life and continuing at least through the Brafmans’ Sway. And once norms are explicitated as rules or laws, adherence to them is thought to be conscious and rational and therefore not a channel of sway; but of course we usually obey rules and laws even when a representative of the enforcing power is not aiming a gun at us and threatening us with death if we fail to comply, and in fact in most of our lives we are not highly conscious of obeying rules and laws, which suggests that rules and laws too are mostly internalized, and activate our compliance inwardly and individually.5

I am, then, interested in a wide variety of forces or impulses that sway the translator:
a. those of which we (whatever group(s) we happen to construct ourselves as representing at any given time) approve – norms, rules, laws, leading to translations that we believe to be correct, successful, appropriate – but may at some point be reinterpreted as cases of (b);

b. those of which we disapprove – biases, prejudices, leading to translations that we believe to be incorrect, failed, inappropriate, misleading, awkward, or perverse – but may originally have been conceived as (a);

c. those of which the translator or the target reader or the translation scholar is unconscious, preconscious, or fully conscious.

I am, however, assuming that sway is always a group phenomenon, part of some larger group dynamic, and that as such it is always driven by a group-organized rationality.

1.4 Venuti and Baker

The key ideological sway-concepts that I will be highlighting in the book are taken from the recent work of two well-known translation scholars, Lawrence Venuti (Chapters 2–5) and Mona Baker (Chapter 6) – and I will be suggesting that the two concepts in question, Venuti’s “interpretant” and Baker’s “narrative,” are roughly synonymous, or rather that the sway-based core of the narrativization that Baker is primarily interested in is essentially synonymous with the interpretant. The interpretant, which Venuti borrows from Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958) via Umberto Eco (1979), is a semiotic concept and therefore imagistically more abstract than narrativity, which Baker borrows from social theory, and which imagistically points us toward story-telling and literary studies; but both are specifically channels of sway, ideological guides to interpretation.

Both are also specifically theoretical constructs rather than empirically registered, measured, or tested objects in the world: while stories are narrated in the world, and Baker (2006) quotes quite a few of them, she is also at pains to distinguish the concept of narrativity that concerns her from the actual telling of stories. Of the four types of narratives that she distinguishes (Baker 2006: ch. 3), borrowing the conceptual framework of Somers (1992, 1997) and Somers and Gibson (1994), “ontological narratives” or “narratives of the self” may be told to someone else but may also be unconscious orientations that can only be constructed interpretively by an observer; “public narratives” are “stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual” (Baker 2006: 33), but they may circulate through what Fredric Jameson (1981) calls the political unconscious as well; “conceptual” or “disciplinary narratives” are
specifically the organizing “myths” or “orientations” in any discipline or disciplinary camp; and “meta-narratives” or (Lyotard’s term) “master narratives” are the large-scale ideological frames “in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history ... Progress, Decadence, Industrialization, Enlightenment, etc.” (Somers/Gibson 1994: 61, quoted in Baker 2006: 44).

One distinction we may want to draw between interpretants and narratives as channels of ideological sway, then, might be that interpretants are “smaller” and more localized than narratives, which by contrast seem big and splashy; as Venuti (2008: 30–40) elaborates Peirce’s interpretant, it tends to be a normative or quasinormative orientation first guiding the work of an individual translator, at what he calls the “metalinguistic level,” then guiding the evaluative response to the resulting translation by individual readers, at what he calls the “axiological level.” Interpretations of specific texts, whether source texts (at the metalinguistic level) or target texts (at the axiological level), are thus only apparently or superficially individualized events: the interpretant allows Venuti to analyze them in terms of larger ideological trends in a culture. Narrativity gives Baker a much larger canvas: the conflictuality of the modern world. But again, I suggest that this difference is largely imagistic: Venuti and Baker are both primarily interested in the sway wielded by large-scale ideological orientations over individual decision-making.

The primary distinction I will be drawing between interpretants and narratives, therefore, will lie elsewhere, arising in a sense out of Venuti’s classification of interpretants into the “formal” and “thematic”: Venuti himself is clearly most interested in the formal interpretant, which guides the (interpretive/metalinguistic) choice of a formal translation strategy and the target reader’s (evaluative/axiological) response to the formal strategy used, most centrally for Venuti “fluency” vs. “foreignism”; Baker’s narratives are all, I suggest, “thematic interpretants” writ large, imposing “thematized” or propositionalized views or beliefs on events. I will, therefore, be dealing with formal interpretants (naturalization and foreignization) in Chapters 2–5 and thematic interpretants or narratives in Chapter 6.

The other significant difference between Venuti and Baker is that Venuti is utopian in his thinking, placing great activist or “positive” hope and trust in the formal interpretant of foreignization as a vehicle of societal transformation, while Baker is more obviously resigned to the inevitability of political conflict and directs her activist hope only to the “negative” goal of critique. Anthony Pym (1996: 166) notoriously caricatures Venuti’s utopianism by comparing it to “the machines E. P. Thompson (1978) used in order to illustrate Althusser’s social models many years ago, with neat instructions like ‘For Revolution X, pull lever B’”: it does indeed sometimes seem as if Venuti oversimplifies and exaggerates the role translators might play in social transformation. For Baker (2006: 6), by contrast, we may not be able to change anything, we too may be locked into our own
narratives, but at least through hard intellectual work we may be capable of raising our own and others’ awareness of the sway narratives have over us:

Finally, much of what I have to say in this book will be interpreted as a strong condemnation of US, UK and Israeli policies toward the so-called third world in general and the Arab World in particular. I make no apologies for this stance. However, the fact that I have chosen to focus on the narratives of the political elites in particular regions must not be taken to imply that I see these elites and their narratives as representative of the relevant societies as a whole. Indeed, much of the critique of US, UK and Israeli policies I draw on here comes from American, British and Israeli sources. I am also aware that Arab and Islamic societies generate their own highly questionable narratives, often fuelling the very conflicts that continue to tear these regions apart. I have chosen to prioritize the narratives of the Anglo-American and Israeli political elites because, in my own narrative of current conflicts, they deserve special attention given the enormous war and media machines they have at their disposal.

I personally find this stance admirable and honest, and a reflection of the dual hope that critique holds for Baker: that it may help us become more aware of the deleterious effects not only of our political opponents’ narratives, but of our own as well. In contrast with Venuti’s utopianism, too, I find Baker’s realism/pessimism about the prospect of significant political change – a cessation of hostilities, say – refreshing. But I still find myself drawn to the vague gray middle between these two extremes: to an exploration of what small and local hope there may be for significant change.