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THE TRANSLATOR'S (IN)VISIBILITY IN ANN PATCHETT'S *BEL CANTO*

by

Amy Glauser Bankhead

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

April 2005

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Amy Glauser Bankhead

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Amy Glauser Bankhead in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements, (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE TRANSLATOR’S (IN)VISIBILITY IN ANN PATCHETT’S *BEL CANTO*

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Master of Arts

Transferring words and ideas from one language to another has always been a puzzling and difficult matter for those involved in it. For centuries, English-speakers and translators have dealt with these difficulties by enforcing, through professional codes of ethics and through publishing contracts, what Lawrence Venuti calls “the translator’s invisibility,” as chronicled in his book by the same name. By evaluating translation solely on the transparency and fluency of the target language translation (that is, by making a translation not seem like a translation), English translators and audiences assured that translators remained faithful to original authors’ intents, or so they thought.

Contemporary linguistic theory, namely poststructuralism, has changed the way we think about language and has suggested that meaning is created just as much in the mind of the audience as in the hands of the author. Translation adds a third locus—that of the translator—in the creation of meaning, and many contemporary translation scholars promote a recognition of the inevitable intervention of translators.

Ann Patchett's 2001 award-winning novel *Bel Canto* explores the way translation functions in contemporary global society. Through the microcosm of the novel, the main character, a professional translator named Gen, suggests that the acceleration of globalization that has contributed to the recent increase of translation and translation studies has also made the idea of the translator's invisibility obsolete. Instead, he finds that the linguistic awareness of his audience allows him a visibility for which his professional translation training has left him poorly equipped. To deal with his visibility, Gen must find new ways of creating responsibility in his audience and better ways to achieve ethical translation. Unlike Venuti's framework of translators who must one-sidedly demand attention and force breaks in tradition, *Bel Canto* suggests a cooperative re-evaluation of tradition that cautiously assesses translation strategies in terms of both the translator and the audience. In the spirit of global communication, *Bel Canto* presents translation as a multi-dimensional communicative situation that, with deliberate changes in the promotion of ethics, can enable international understanding and serve as an example of productive evaluation of tradition.

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## Section 1. Problems of Translation

### *Translation within Literature*

In the introduction to his book *Translation and Globalization*, Michael Cronin explains the importance of his scholarship by explaining that translation and translation studies are “so important to contemporary self-understanding” (1) because “any active sense of global citizenship must involve translation as a core element” (6). He argues that because translation cannot be reduced to binaries or one-to-one equivalencies, it is the perfect lens with which to study globalization. While he endorses translation studies, however, he expresses frustration that so much of translation scholarship is based on literary translation, when non-literary translation is by far the more common kind of translation. He laments that “As a teacher of translation and [. . .] translation studies, I have been struck time and again by the marked predominance of literary topics in dissertation and thesis work” (2). He then advocates that more attention be paid to non-literary translation, and that the ivory tower of academic translation consider the thousands of professional translators who don’t work with literature. In that spirit of expanding translation studies’ focus on translated literature to include other aspects of translation, but perhaps in a way that Cronin didn’t anticipate, my thesis focuses on non-literary translation *within* literature, specifically in *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett. Combining a study of the ethical codes and professional statutes of non-literary translators with an inquiry into the theories and practices of literature in translation, I explore how one writer treats the topic of translation within her novel and how that might expand current thought about translation.

Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*, published in 2001, has received much attention, both in academia and in popular culture. The novel tells the story of the prestigious diplomats and wealthy dignitaries who attend a lavish birthday party at the house of the Vice President of a South American country, only to be taken hostage by three older terrorists called "the Generals" and their fifteen teenage, gun-wielding followers. A four-month stalemate follows, wherein the terrorists and hostages form unexpected friendships, and people from many different language backgrounds establish meaningful bonds. Not only has Patchett's fourth novel commanded national literary attention, earning a nomination for the National Book Critics Circle Award and winning both the Orange Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award, but *Bel Canto* is also available in bulk at Costco and has been the subject of many "One Book, One Community" efforts in small towns across America. By appealing to such a wide audience and by centering her book on a translator who mediates every interaction, Patchett invites a closer reading of contemporary expectations for translation and the ways translators deal with those expectations. Through the lens of translation studies, *Bel Canto* becomes an investigation into the precarious translation situation that suggests the translator's contemporary position of power and the strategies for ethically wielding that power in a globalized world. I read *Bel Canto*, then, as a sort of fictional theoretical text that engages a discussion, through translation issues, of a variety of ongoing theoretical debates, including contemporary writing strategies and the evaluation of tradition.

### *History of Translation Studies*

What is today known as "translation studies" (which includes theories of translation, not just the act of translating) has occupied Western scholars' minds for

thousands of years and is not a recently discovered topic. Cicero, in the century before Christ, articulated a specific theory of translation, as did Quintilian in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD and Saint Jerome in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Their conceptions of translations were, of course, much different from those of current translation studies. Hugo Friedrich explains the three concepts that marked translation in Europe beginning with the Romans and continuing into the Renaissance. First, Friedrich articulates the idea that “translation meant transformation in order to mold the foreign into [. . .] one’s own culture” and that the original could be appropriated “without any real concern for [. . .] the original,” as practiced by Cicero and St. Jerome (12). Second, Friedrich advances the view that translation offers an opportunity to make the text better, a chance to surpass the original by bringing new creativity to the text. Third, Friedrich suggests that translation enriches the target language by stretching its linguistic abilities—not that the target language is foreignized by translation, but that translation gives the translator an opportunity to “reveal the latent stylistic possibilities in one’s own language that are different from the original” (13). In each of these theories of translation and their accompanying practices in antiquity, we see little concern for the preservation of meaning. Schulte and Biguenet, in their introduction to *Theories of Translation*, describe these early attitudes as “a rigorous exploitation of the original” and further assert that “whether a translation distorted the meanings inherent in the original text was of minor concern to the translator” (2). This is not to say that the early Western theories of translation were wrong to ignore meaning and the culture/language of the original author, but they provide a sharp contrast to the way current translation theory has developed. Seeing these roots of translation theory also explains why most contemporary audiences react so negatively to what they perceive as

the deliberate dismissal of meaning and its importance in present-day texts. In the English-speaking tradition, meaning is of utmost importance, and preserving the original author's meaning is the expected goal of most translators.

The problem with this insistence on preserving meaning in translation is that there is no established way for those who receive translation to evaluate the success of a translation. If English-speaking audiences don't read French and have thus never read the original, how are they to judge whose translation of *Candide* or *Tartuffe* or a pastry recipe is the most accurate to the original meaning? Audiences can't judge accuracy in regard to the original language, so they instead evaluate the accuracy in regard to the language they are familiar with; in other words, most audiences today judge translators by their fluency in the target language.

Prominent translation scholar, professional translator, and professor of English Lawrence Venuti presents a thorough examination of these traditional assumptions about translation in 1995 with his book *The Translator's Invisibility*. This book, subtitled *A History of Translation*, chronicles the historical events that led to invisibility-based translation ethics. He explains that target-language fluency supersedes other concerns largely because of ethnocentric and violent desires to conquer difference and foreignness, showing that the historical emphasis on transparent translation (a translation that doesn't appear to be one) unfortunately "conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text" (1-2). He regrets the deceit that translators who pretend to have no influence on the text must engage in, but acknowledges that publishers and audiences have come to expect and therefore demand the translator's invisibility. Venuti describes the logic behind this

standard: “The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (2). Conversely, audiences assume that a translation that stumbles or sounds stilted or draws attention to itself must have been created by a translator who was unsure or incompetent or somehow incapable of transferring the meaning of the original text into English. The demand for transparent translation is made evident in the way translated texts often hide the name of the translator and the way reviewers of translated texts rarely refer to the translator. When reviewers do actually refer to the translation itself, their reviews are, of course, based on an evaluation of target-language fluency. Venuti gives a sampling of such translation reviews, quoting descriptions of translations such as “natural, brilliant, and crisp,” “elegant,” “gracefully if not always flawlessly,” “fluent gravid momentum,” “stunning lyrical precision,” and “flows crisply” (Venuti 2-3). None of these compliments to the translator refer to the preservation of meaning, because the reviewers are incapable of evaluating such a thing. They can only look at the translated text as an English text and remark on the style of the language. This discrepancy between the privilege of meaning and the evaluative criteria has sparked the interest of many scholars and has contributed to a rise in translation studies as a discipline itself and as a provocative topic for many other disciplines.

### *Current Interest in Translation*

The contemporary rise of translation studies encompasses a wide range of communicative situations and theories that describe them. Although often one and the same, translators (those who translate) and translationists (those who study translation) range in their approaches from a concession that “pure” translation is impossible to a

directive plan for training more translators to meet the increasing demand. In the context of *Bel Canto*, I examine these disparate sources of translation theory to highlight the difficulties translators face as they try not only to reconcile theory and practice, but to reconcile disparate extremes in theory. Highly theoretical explorations like Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" and Jacques Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" focus on whether translation is even possible and what makes something translatable. Benjamin's essay suggests that translatability is a characteristic of the original work and that translations are works of art that are "no longer of importance to the original" (72). He makes an exception, however, for holy writ, claiming that scriptures "contain their potential translation between the lines" (82) and are thus best translated in an interlinear version. Derrida also appeals to the Bible for examples of translation. He locates the beginning of all translation at the Tower of Babel, but argues that proper names such as Babel and the name of God are untranslatable and that God "is left no less destitute in his force" (227) because he doesn't have a translator. Both Benjamin and Derrida question the possibility of translation and decide that the commonly accepted concept of translation as a representation of the original is impossible.

Other translationists are mostly concerned with the practicalities of translating, even if a "perfect" translation or a universal system of translation is ultimately impossible. Anthony Pym, author of 11 books on translation and director of postgraduate programs in translation at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, Spain, is one who focuses on the actions that translators perform rather than on the theoretical concept of translation. Pym explores many ways to train the increasing number of people who respond to the expanding requests for translators worldwide, eventually promoting a

localized and situational minimalism that retains the humanity lost in efficiency (“Training Language Service Providers”). His version of translation is one of practicality and how best to reconcile technology, theory, and practice. Professional translator and university lecturer Mary Phelan goes even farther in her practicality, focusing on translators’ working conditions, the prices they should charge for their services, and the acceptable number of tasks they should agree to complete in a given time frame.

As a part of the strategies she describes for professional translators, Phelan emphasizes the importance of clearly defining and distinguishing the various services that translators can provide. She and other professional translators make the distinction between oral and written translation by using *interpretation* as the word to describe spoken translation. Those who make the distinction define *interpreters* as the people usually pictured in booths at the back of conference halls, although they also work in doctors’ offices, classrooms, and corporate boardrooms, translating speech on the spot. The difference between translating and interpreting is mostly one of time and medium. Translators generally have extended time periods, limitless resources to consult, and the opportunity to revise. Interpreters, on the other hand, have a lag time of just a few seconds to decide which words to use, can usually rely only on their own knowledge, and don’t have the chance to change their minds before the next sentence needs to be translated. Translators work with pen and paper (or computer screen) while interpreters work in sound. The translator in *Bel Canto* does both, but through most of the novel he is interpreting. Because the word *interpretation*, when not associated with translation, can also connote change, adaptation, and application to new circumstances, and because the characters in *Bel Canto* only refer to the translator as “translator,” for the purposes of this



paper I have chosen to name most of Gen's activities *translation* in order to preserve the meaning of *interpretation* as a specific rendering or explanation, especially in light of the fact that the text of the novel blurs the distinction anyway, being a written account of spoken translations.

Patchett's lack of distinction may point to a general ignorance of the intricacies of translation—many people are unaware that there is a distinction at all. I find her seemingly uninformed and imprecise use of the word *translator* appropriate, however, because I am interested in how non-translators think about translation. The use of the word *translation* to describe many situations also underscores the difficulty of defining exactly what happens during the process of moving meaning from one language to another. In *Bel Canto*, Gen makes mention of both interpreting and translating, in their professional senses, but he also provides services that don't fit neatly into either category. For example, he types spoken instructions and reads written words in different languages, which further complicates the distinction between translation and interpretation. By naming Gen a "translator" rather than an "interpreter" or even a "language service provider," as Pym has proposed translators should be called, Patchett uses the popular notion of translation and focuses on the fact that Gen is involved in interlingual interactions, using one term for the multilingual services that Gen provides. This single term also highlights the intralingual difficulties of definition that can only be more difficult as words and ideas cross languages. If the experts disagree about the use of the word *translation* versus the word *interpretation* in English, how much trickier it is to make or break the distinction when working in multiple languages.

These varieties of translation expand as the definition of translation broadens to include any kind of transformation or change, including adaptations such as making fairytales into animated movies or adjusting poems to become the lyrics of a song (Bowker ix). In this sense, Ann Patchett has practiced a form of translation by writing *Bel Canto*. The novel is based loosely on the 1996 hostage situation in Peru, wherein guerrilla rebels known as the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement stormed the Japanese embassy and began a four month standoff. *Bel Canto* then translates a historical event that barely entered the consciousness of most English-speakers into a fictional account that has become a bestseller in the United States. Although the details are obviously products of Patchett's imagination, the historical event sparked her interest and provided direction in much the same way that traditional translators use the original text to spark their creativity and provide the direction of the translation. In both cases, the person doing the interpreting is well aware that the final product is not necessarily a representative rendering of the original; and yet unlike writers of historically-based fiction, translators are forced by tradition and expectation to present their interpretations as accurate and identical copies of the original. Although they function in much the same way, Patchett, as a novel-writer, certainly has more freedom of creation than does the translator character she creates—or rather she can be more blatant about that freedom. Professional translators are just as involved as historical novelists in the changes and adaptations suggested by the word *interpretation*, but they must claim to be merely a non-invasive messenger from the original author, pretending to an impossible impartiality.

*Bel Canto*'s connection with translation is more explicit than Patchett's history-to-fiction adaptation. The characters in the book, both partygoers-turned-hostages and poverty-stricken terrorists, speak at least twelve different languages among them, creating a messy communication barrier, especially in such extreme circumstances, when communication can be a life or death situation. If the hostages can't understand the commands of the gun-wielding terrorists, they could possibly be shot. If the government can't communicate some kind of concession, they again risk the lives of hostages. And if the terrorists can't understand the government's bargaining, they will likely take their frustrations out on the hostages or the mediator. Gen Watanabe is the one person who speaks all the languages; he thus becomes the main character and central player because he enables communication and allows verbal exchanges that would otherwise be impossible. His central position illustrates many contemporary translation issues, including the changing nature of contemporary translation audiences due to globalization, questionable ethics of professional ethical codes, and the problematic enforcement of the translator's invisibility.

As Timothy Brennan demonstrates in his 2004 article "From Development to Globalization," definitions of the ambiguous term *globalization* vary widely from discipline to discipline and from scholar to scholar. Despite arguments from some that a world-changing situation called globalization doesn't exist (Brennan 127) or that globalization is an infinitely complex process that defies definition (Brennan 122), for the purposes of this study, I assume a fairly specific sociolinguistic definition for this highly debated word. As I use it here, *globalization* refers to the increase in the last thirty years of personal exposure to cultures and languages besides one's own, an increase that results

from the simultaneously imagined and very real worldwide material shifts in economic and industrial relations that few scholars will deny despite their arguments over the particulars. While it's true that interlingual and intercultural interactions have occurred for thousands of years—people, after all, always find ways to interact with each other—most scholars agree that in contemporary society, more people are interacting more frequently with people who either do not speak the same language or speak it only as a second language. Of course this acceleration of multilingual interactions has undeniable connections to current economic and political situations. The plot of *Bel Canto*, in fact, proves to be a result of what popular culture would term economic globalization. On page two, the third-person narrator explains the circumstances of the novel's action:

The reason the host country (a poor country) was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense for a foreigner who had to be all but bribed into attending was that this foreigner was the founder and chairman of Nansei, the largest electronics corporation in Japan. It was the fondest wish of the host country that Mr. Hosokawa would smile on them, help them in some of the hundred different ways they needed helping. That could be achieved through training or trade. A factory (and this was the dream so dear its name could hardly be spoken) could be built here, where cheap labor could mean a profit for everyone involved. (2-3)

As this passage from the novel explains, intercultural and international business catalyzes the action of *Bel Canto*, inviting a textual connection to issues of globalization in general. Since my study, however, focuses on issues of language and translation, I will limit my

definition of this “fundamentally ambiguous” term (Brennan 122) and use it as shorthand for the idea that the total number of interlingual interactions among the general population of the world is dramatically higher than it was one hundred (or even thirty) years ago, and that consequently people are much more aware of linguistic difference.

As Cronin might have predicted (given that he considers translation studies an essential component to understanding contemporary society), just a few pages later Patchett introduces one key to understanding this acceleration of globalization when she spends four pages introducing Gen Watanabe, the professional translator among the party guests. Patchett’s juxtaposition of translation and globalization points to one reason why translation as an academic discipline and as a profession has grown exponentially in recent years: without translation, the current tide of globalization is severely impeded. It therefore makes sense to study translation in order to understand the contemporary world, of which globalization is one aspect. The increase in translation as an act and of translation theory in general have become crucially important to any study of culture or social interaction in today’s world.

Much of current translation scholarship begins with the presentation of translation studies as an up-and-coming discipline, the latest trend in cultural studies, and a rapidly increasing area of interest for literature, history, linguistics, and theory scholars. Take these opening sentences from several translation articles, for example: “Translation has been particularly visible in recent times” (Arrojo, “Revision” 25), “Translation studies as a discipline has grown enormously in the last two decades” (Bowker v), and “The growth of translation studies as a separate discipline is a success story” (Venuti vii). It’s true that the last twenty years have seen an influx of translation departments, classes, and

specialties in academia, as well as an ever-increasing market for translators in politics and commerce. This is generally attributed to several recent developments, both cultural and theoretical: postcolonialism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. Because contemporary translation is inseparable from these contemporary movements, I will use these terms to highlight the recursive nature of globalization's influence on translation, translation's influence on globalization, the rise of both, and *Bel Canto's* position within these concepts.

When the sun began to set on the English empire, the singular rulers of diverse nations were threatening to (and actually succeeded in) destroying many individual languages. As the imperialistic world crumbled, those voices and languages that had been silenced by the powerful political forces of colonialism suddenly clamored for the opportunity to speak, which resulted in attempts to revive indigenous languages that had been wiped out, such as Hebrew, Cornish, and Manx, by recovering them from the past (Finegan 3). In order for these native languages to be heard in formerly colonized nations, however, translation is necessary, both in and out of the indigenous languages and the imperialist languages. This rescue mission for languages of former colonial possessions has invigorated translation studies and increased the demand for translators.

Another linguistic result of the empire's breakdown is the drive for "the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice" promoted by scholars such as Bill Ashcroft and Gayatri Spivak (Ashcroft 7), which resulted in attempts at "re-placing [colonial language] in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place." This is not a full return to precolonial languages, but a use of language that incorporates the recursive changes that have shaped contemporary languages, both indigenous and colonial, changes

that often result from multiple translations and adaptations between languages. In their book *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin outline the textual strategies aimed at achieving this “post-colonial voice,” which often experimented with how and how much to translate from native languages. These strategies for reconstituting colonial language have put language issues at the forefront of postcolonial studies.

Despite the title of the discipline, postcolonial studies have also questioned whether colonialism is actually over. Although England no longer governs a huge percentage of the world, the English language, it could be argued, is just beginning to take over the globe as the lingua franca of business. Although nationalistic colonialism has mostly died out, the idea of spreading products, services, and the language to use them to every nation of the world is still very much alive, led less by political imperialists than by corporate expansionists like Mr. Hosokawa of *Bel Canto* and the cooperative governments that bring them into their country to promote economic benefits. To conduct this expansion of business, however, all parties employ translators, and thus the market for bi-lingual English speakers has exploded. Because English is becoming a world-language (Pym, “Training Language Service Providers”), many other languages are in a hurry to translate their own languages into English. There is also great interest the other direction; people who want to preserve native languages often attempt to do so by translating English texts into indigenous languages. In such complex, multidirectional translation exchanges, the globalization that is shrinking the world is simultaneously expanding its languages. Whether colonialism is over or not, postcolonial studies deal heavily in translation, both as a medium of exchange and as a tool of power, and the rise

in translation studies and the increased market for translators can be attributed, in part, to postcolonial linguistic movements.

Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler note in the introduction to *Translation and Power* that “the most significant of these movements [in translation studies] is the diverse group of translators and scholars who have independently yet simultaneously applied postcolonial theory and practices to translation” (xv). Given that poststructuralism has suggested that all language is interpretation of reality, postcolonial scholars like Bill Ashcroft and Gayatri Spivak have questioned the motives of those who control that interpretation by controlling language and translation, exploring the role each plays in “establishing, maintaining, and resisting imperialist power structures” (Tymoczko xv). The term *postcolonial*, whether defined temporally (as in after colonialism) or socially (as in a synonym for Third World) or nationally (as in who colonized whom), always seems to be concerned with power. Many scholars who look at translation in terms of postcolonialism assume that the translators (or their sponsors who requested particular spins on the translation) dictate the interpretations and that audiences, without the ability to compare translations, often accept those interpretations (see, for example, Arrojo, “Interpretation” and Tymoczko). This concept of manipulative translation is most notable in *The Manipulation of Literature*, an anthology edited by Theo Hermans that sets out to demonstrate the way social institutions use translation to control culture. The contributors to this anthology, all big names in translation studies, point out the way translators “consciously [. . .] calibrate their translation techniques to achieve effects they [wish] to produce in their audiences, whether those effects [are] religious faith, consumption of products, or literary success” (Tymoczko xi). They are quick to show how translation can



be used to manipulate and to promote certain values, specifically in colonial situations where institutions of power want subjects to act or think a certain way. Gentzler and Tymoczko specifically cite that “churches would commission Bible translations, governments would support translations of national epics, schools would teach translations of great books, kings would be patrons for translations about heroic conquests, and socialist regimes would underwrite translations of social realism” (xiii). Much of this manipulative power of the translator, however, is contingent upon the audience’s acceptance of the translation as an accurate, one-to-one correspondence to the original. The assumption is that because translation audiences have no access to the original and suppose equality between languages, translated texts are easily manipulated to reflect a desired interpretation. In many cases, at least as Western culture has defined translation, this assumption goes unchecked and is enforced by the deceptive invisibility of the translator.

But a postcolonial focus on power in translation studies becomes problematic in terms of poststructuralism, because if reality is mediated by language (translation doubly mediated) and meaning is created in the interactions between the author, the translator, and the audience, defining a single locus of power can be difficult. Poststructuralism’s focus on language itself as a force and as a system of arbitrary signs makes casual language use nearly impossible—using language has become a very self-conscious act. Subtlety, ambiguity, double-meaning, punnery, neologisms, intertextuality, allusions, and all other manner of linguistic tricks provide poststructuralists endless material for exploring the infinitely complicated nature of language. Translation has always been an extremely self-conscious use of language and is therefore a particularly fruitful area for

these kind of inquiries; slippery aspects of language like subtlety, ambiguity, and double-meaning are just the things that make translation so difficult. One translator who may as well have been promoting poststructuralism, explained “There is always a measure of fuzziness in the words themselves, then in our understanding of them; this fuzziness is a critical nuance. In fact, as someone once said, it is a minor miracle that communication, a fortiori translation, is at all possible!” (Cadieux). The same tricks of language that frustrate translators and are often cited as the things that make translation ultimately impossible are the things that poststructuralism has shown to be essential to language. Poststructuralism has found translation to be an illustrative example of the assertion that meaning is slippery within and across languages. In terms of poststructuralism, then, language, once thought of as an instrument that could be mastered, “ceases to be the tool we wield in order to manipulate the world and becomes something we have to grapple with, which can surprise or resist us” (Cazeaux 369). Grappling with language has long been a struggle for translators, and the fact that poststructuralism posits the same struggle for all language use (not just multi-language use) opens the door for the two fields to be naturally good bedfellows, indicated by the fact that they are puzzled by the same things.

Poststructuralism’s awareness of the inconstant, situational, and idiosyncratic language we use daily is creates an apparent discrepancy between translation and linguistics. The field of linguistics, traditionally the study of grammar and historical changes in language, changed dramatically with Saussure’s 1916 *Course in General Linguistics*, which championed a synchronic, individualized view of language as a complete system of signs. But as linguists took a more individualized the view of

language the more difficult time they had of accounting for translation. As translationist George Mounin writes:

The translator's activity poses a theoretical problem for contemporary linguistics: if we accept the recurrent thesis about the lexical, morphological and syntactical structures, we will tend to conclude that translation is impossible. However, translators do exist, they are productive, we often make use of their products. It would be almost possible to say that the existence of translation constitutes the scandal of contemporary linguistics. (qtd. in Arrojo, "Revision" 31)

Mounin's words demonstrate the problem with traditional expectations for translation: one-to-one equivalencies are not possible, and thus a translation in which the words seem fluent and the translator invisible has necessarily compromised the precise meaning by domesticizing foreign elements. Linguists who recognize the ultimate differences in "lexical, morphological and syntactical structures" also recognize the near-impossibility of translation. In the same way that linguists have begun to see language as something that cannot be boiled down to a singular essence common to all people, they have also acknowledged that any given word cannot necessarily be essentialized into one equivalent word in another language—which makes traditional theories of translation problematic.

Since 1963, the year Mounin published the previous quotation, poststructuralists have begun to reconcile linguistics and translation by theorizing that all human experience is, in essence, translated. Because we all use language, "reality" can only be

accessed through language. In other words, we translate reality into language, which exposes reality to the influences of grammar, difference, syntax, and vocabulary. Since our experience of reality is necessarily a linguistically mediated experience, translation is merely another mediation, one that has just as much claim on reality as the first.

Changing our view of language from one of transparent correspondence with reality to one of mediation through language, context, and allusion makes the idea of translation-as-mediated-text less disturbing. Ideas such as multiplicity of meaning, history as construction, and individual as social creation opened the door for linguists to study translation as an obvious iteration of these ideas—if an original text can be interpreted in many ways according to social context and historical construction, translation only makes that fact blatant because the translator must choose an interpretation before he can choose the target language words to use to create the chosen effect. The constructed nature of reality is further emphasized when we take into account the equally powerful context and interpretive abilities that audiences bring to a text, translated or not.

The recognition of the crucial powers of interpretation that an audience brings to a text has called in to question the validity of author intentionality and the possibility of accurately representing something that is impossible to determine. Social and literary critics, most explicitly Roland Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author,” have pointed out the lack of control authors have over their texts once those texts leave their immediate control, something *The Condition of Postmodernity* author David Harvey, paraphrasing Jacques Derrida, calls “minimizing the authority of the cultural producer” (51). If, as Barthes and Derrida and Harvey claim, neither authors nor speakers can choreograph exactly how their words will be received, authorial intention becomes only

part of the driving force in meaning-creation. The people who receive texts, whether spoken or written, bring their own experiences and powers of interpretation to bear on their final assessment of a text's meaning and have just as much, if not more, say in what the text "means"—hence Barthes' statement that the author is dead. This undoing of the author's authority problematized the ethical systems of translators in the English-speaking world, who, since the seventeenth century, had been mainly concerned with accurately portraying authorial meaning. In contemporary thought, however, authorial intent is neither knowable nor the definitive meaning of a text, making old translation strategies obsolete. Before the metaphorical death of the author, translators attempted to be invisible so as to allow the original author control over the text; in a similar way, translators traditionally manifest this invisibility by making their translations conform to the grammar, the style, the culture, and the values of the target language. By making their translations appear as if they were not translations but originals in the target language, they hoped that the author's meaning would be uninhibited by the difficult differences between languages. Since the theoretical death of the author, however, translation can necessarily be only interpretation, and invisibility serves to hide the lack of a definitive meaning of a text.

When texts lack a definitive meaning, other absolutes are soon called into question, a hallmark trait of postmodernism. Although scholars disagree on a strict definition of postmodernism, I find that the most prominent characteristic of the movement that comes to bear on translation is what Rosemary Arrojo calls "an anti-essentialist" attitude, something she defines as:

[. . .] a radical distrust of the possibility of any intrinsically stable meaning that could be fully present in texts or in any form of oral or written discourse and, thus, supposedly recoverable and repeated elsewhere without the interference of the subjects, as well as the cultural, historical, ideological or political circumstances involved. (Arrojo, “Revision” 25)

Postmodernism, as anti-essentialism, champions context, interests, language, subjectivity, and history over universals. Because translation is such a situational activity, these postmodern values work well for translators who discourage transparent translation in favor of situational ethics and idiosyncratic answers to translation dilemmas that scientific approaches have failed to solve (for example, the stilted and confusing translations that result from a strictly computer-based method). Arrojo further explains that if meaning is stable and universal, translators are merely “invisible carrier[s] whose job is [. . .] to make sure that the transferal of meaning is safely conducted without interfering with the content” (39), but if difference is inevitable and significant, translators become important navigators through cultural and linguistic diversity. In terms of translation studies, then, postmodernism is not a particular period or one certain theory, but a way of thinking outside of the essentializing demands of traditional language expectations, a way of dealing with the boundless variables that globalization has introduced into contemporary thought. The postmodern moment, then, is one of the anti-essentialist realization, in the face of globalization, that we live in an inconstant, situational, idiosyncratic world.

Like poststructuralism, postmodernism celebrates the fact the language is slippery and, instead of finding the impossibility of precise communication an unbearable thorn in the side, revels in the imprecise, the unpredictable, the impossible, and the absurd aspects of language and of the human cultures it mediates. Several characteristics of postmodernism lend themselves to a study of translation. By rejecting modernism's quest for a universal answer to fragmentation (the grand narrative) in favor of a random assembly of situational and idiosyncratic narratives, postmodernism has invited translation to provide alternatives to traditional universal modes like the Homeric hero cycle and the Aristotelian plot structure by making the stories of foreign cultures accessible to those who don't read the original language. Translation also provides an arena for postmodernism's play with the impenetrable surface and Jean Baudrillard's simulacra (see Baudrillard): because translation generally does not seek to create new meaning, it is traditionally concerned only with reproducing the superficial (linguistic) aspects of a text in a type of translingual copy machine. Postmodernism's focus on the superficial rather than on a mysterious depth suggests that translations should be evaluated according to the words (the superficial) rather than on the meaning (the depth) of a text, which liberates translators from the bind of accurately representing the intentions of a dead or non-present author. *Bel Canto* itself is something of a postmodern experiment. The almost-ridiculous juxtaposition of Latin American terrorists with prestigious diplomats from all over the world creates an artistic and philosophical space for playing with the impossibility of communication within a microcosm of the world, though this ridiculous plot structure is based to some degree on an actual hostage situation (suggesting, to postmodernism's delight, that reality is almost-ridiculous as

well). Inside the house of the Vice President, the fragmentation that separates highbrow politicians from guerilla extremists and the difficulties of language barriers between them all finds reconciliation in the translator.

### *Ethical Concerns in Translation*

The ethics of translation comprises two concepts that are often confused and debated: the Judeo-Christian idea of moral rightness and the idea of professional responsibility enforced by official codes of ethics. Although the difference between the two is often argued about as the difference between morals, which are generally religious in nature, and ethics, which are generally professional and secular in nature, in a universal sense they stem from the same human desire to justify behavior. Because people have to choose how to act, they want reasons for the choices they make, whether that be because God wrote on some stone tablets or because an employer has paid experts to develop a list of rules for all employees. For the purposes of this paper, I use the word *ethics* to refer to both moral and professional senses, because they both seek to standardize what is considered “correct” or “right” behavior, although I do make it plain when I am referring to a specific part of a professional translator’s code of ethics. This broadened view of ethics accounts for the dissonance the translator in *Bel Canto* feels both when he breaks the ethical codes and when he finds the professional codes to be wrong for the situation. Gen feels obligated to uphold the translator’s code of ethics and to use his discretion about how best to translate, but the tension he feels when the two don’t coincide creates multiple dilemmas for him. By categorizing both obligations as ethical situations, I highlight Gen’s struggle to reconcile opposing ethical stances. In terms of how professional translators reconcile the perceived difference between a



personal and a professional view of ethics, the unified definition evidences translators' concerns with making decisions that coincide with their individual interpretation of ethical behavior and with responsibly meeting the expectations of their clients.

As a solution to the translator's ethical bind, Venuti encourages translators to assert their own voices and to refuse to be invisible by producing foreignized texts and by raising awareness about the "secondary status of the translation" (310-11). In his final chapter, entitled "Call to Action," Venuti lays out a battle plan in which translators force revisions in translation thought by working to revise "current concepts of authorship" (311) and to claim that authorship for their translations. While Venuti's explanation of how traditional translational expectations became entrenched in the western world accounts for many of the situations that Gen faces in *Bel Canto*, what Venuti's position doesn't explain are the many instances in *Bel Canto* when characters clearly do not expect invisibility and in fact encourage Gen to visibly intervene as he translates. Neither does Venuti's call to action describe Gen's motives for his increasing breeches of professional codes throughout the book. Gen in *Bel Canto* illustrates that translation issues aren't so much about translators' need to claim visibility as about dealing with the visibility that the postmodern moment has already given them. My aim is to show that in the realm of *Bel Canto*, the translator deals with a new situation of increased visibility, and should, as Venuti encourages real life translators, look for new translations strategies—not because he needs to fight for his rights, but because he is using the old tools of invisibility for an audience who wants to see the translator clearly.

Section 2 casts professional translators as products of globalization and as a people highly concerned about ethics. The section then explores many of the issues that

currently concern translation scholars, namely the problems of marketing translation services, meeting the expectations of those who receive translations, and the potential for self-serving violence when translators misrepresent language for their own purposes. These issues are then framed in the context of globalization and of the outdated professional codes of ethics they are trained to abide by. The major portion of this section explores specific incidents in *Bel Canto* that illustrate problematic translation training, ethical concerns about breaking translation codes, the impossibility of the translator's invisibility, and his inevitable visibility as cultures and classes collide.

Section 3 deals with globalization's effect on translation, focusing on *Bel Canto* to discuss the friction that occurs between Gen's professional training (a relic of traditional expectations) and his contemporary visibility. I explore the alternative strategies and motivations for translating that Gen uses as he begins to accept his changing visibility and his inevitable intervention.

The respect and encouragement given to the translator in *Bel Canto* suggests the possibility that translation audiences do not have to take translators for granted, as so many current translationists assume. Section 4 examines this encouragement of the translator's intervention, promotes the translator's visibility, and hypothesizes on the outcome of such intervention for both translators and those who receive translations. Section 4 furthers alternative strategies for translating and examines the outcomes, using *Bel Canto* as a hypothetical case study of historical and current translation theories. In the end, the translation issues in *Bel Canto* have some valuable insights into the translation situation of contemporary society. As a fictional theoretical text, the novel suggests that transparent translation and the accompanying invisibility of the translator

will not work in contemporary society and that new strategies for translating can get us ever closer to understanding. Gen enacts many of these new strategies, providing a hypothetical testing ground for the contemporary translator's visibility. He does so not to gain power but to deal ethically with the power that the postmodern moment has already given him. Patchett's text also provides one way for contemporary novelists to account for globalization in their texts. Lastly, the thought experiment of *Bel Canto* implies that the extreme complexity of translation necessitates that translators and their clients to be self-aware about translation and about their evaluation of traditional translation strategies. In order to maintain this self-awareness, translators must give up some of their translational traditions to look for alternative strategies that will allow them to maintain their ethics and fulfill the expectations of those for whom they translate.

## Section 2. The Position of Professional Translators

### *Portrait of Professional Translators*

In light of the current fascination with the acceleration of globalization and with the associated interest in diaspora, hybridity, multiplicity, and ethics, not only in translation studies but also across academia and throughout politics and pop culture, it is no wonder that the figure of the translator has received so much attention. A quick glance at most translators' bio lines (or at more detailed profiles such as those found in every issue of *Translation Journal*) reveals that most professional translators are products of movement; they've earned their language skills by necessity as immigrants, as political refugees, or as products of interracial or international marriages. They come from bi- and tri- lingual families and have often lived in several nations, embodying the increased linguistic exposure that is globalization as I have defined it. Most professional translators

come into their careers by accident, finding that their language skills are sorely needed in an increasingly international world.

It can be tempting to think that the popular notion of globalization means a decrease in the need for translators. As populations move, and as an increasing number of people become proficient in two, three, or more languages, it would seem that an increasing number of people would be able to get along without a translator. A single, universal language, one that will eventually drown out all others and will render translation unnecessary is a common idea associated with globalization. Many scholars have gone so far as to suggest that English will become the lingua franca of the world, a position that one character in *Bel Canto* recognizes when he explains that “Everyone said it would be important to learn English” (75). Even if this world take-over should occur, however, the possibility is still distant, and in the mean time globalization necessitates more translation, not less. Indeed, the market shows that the global demand for translators is ever-increasing (Pym, “Training Language Service Providers”). In fact, as more people learn English, more people are aware of the need for translators to provide professional communication skills. Many countries, including India, Singapore, and the Philippines, that adopt English as an official language do so only in addition to their native tongues, retaining the language of the people. Corporations that conduct most business-to-business transactions in English use the local languages of their markets when they interact with consumers. Even if English is becoming a world language, in contemporary society, airports, police stations, courtrooms, doctors’ offices, government venues, classrooms, conference arenas, and executive boardrooms all need translators.

Perhaps because of the huge job market for translation services, professional translators are extremely concerned about ethics. Every translation service company has pages and pages of ethical codes that their translators must abide by. All translators' associations and organizations uphold strict ethical requirements for their members (see, for example, the websites for the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators or Language Line Services). Essentially, all these ethical codes include rules about upholding the appearance of impartiality, maintaining a professional distance and demeanor, and not omitting or adding content while translating. Most codes include mandates that translators never get personally involved in and never express opinions about the situations in which they translate. Many codes also have directives against making recommendations to audiences or using anything but the same grammatical person as the speaker. These guidelines strictly enforce invisibility on translators, but are the profession's best attempt at maintaining an ethical position in a job that is full of subjectivity and gray areas. As Rainer Schulte, director of the Center for Translation Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, tells his students, "Translation without ethics is impossible" (Schulte, Class Lecture). Translators are aware and sensitive to the potentially risky situations they work in. Delicate business deals and precarious political treaties rely on translators, making translators hypersensitive both to the power they wield over important interactions and to the responsibility they have to perform their job ethically.

#### *Professional Translators' Concerns*

In addition to and as part of their professional concern for ethical translation, translators and translationists are currently discussing related issues of power, economics,

and the potential for self-serving manipulation that can happen when a translator purposely misrepresents language. There's no question that translators have great power because they control the timing and possibly the content of the communication that happens among various parties. Translators can slow down conversations while they translate or speed up the natural timing of conversation by charging clients by the hour. While technically abiding by ethical codes, translators can also edit, simplify, or nuance the content of what they translate, often by necessity. In fact, the translator's intervention into the communicative situation is inevitable. Those who employ translators are essentially inviting an unknown variable (the translator) into their communicative power of language manipulation and meaning creation, letting the necessity of communication overshadow concerns of what the translator will do with that power. Tymoczko cites several historical examples of governments and other social institutions that have employed translators specifically for their power of manipulation; they want to shape the minds and culture of the people by the works they choose to have translated and what methods they use to translate them (xiii), in which case the desire to wield power in order to manipulate those who will receive the text overshadows the desire to communicate directly. Venuti also gives several examples of manipulative translation, most notably that of the "scientific translations" of Freud that gave psychoanalysis a technical, medical diction that the original German didn't have. According to Venuti, this scientific translation was intended to "facilitate the institutionalization of psychoanalysis in the medical profession and in academic psychology" (27) more than to recreate Freud's casual and personal German text. Arrojo has pointed out one particularly poignant instance of using translation to serve a specific cause in the case of H el ene Cixous

translating Clarice Lispector into an example of the feminine writing she promotes. Arrojo claims that in translation, Lispector's texts demonstrate Cixous's feminine aesthetic only when Cixous is the translator. A more well-known example of this phenomenon are the hundreds of translations of the Bible that have been commissioned by various governments, religious leaders, religious dissenters, and scholars who want to emphasize one doctrine or another through methods of translation (see Venuti 22-23, Cronin 25-26).

This power of translation has become especially interesting in terms of globalization because of two seemingly contradictory movements. First is the general drive to break down power structures that seek to control what people think and thus how they act, including oppressive and manipulative governments, cultures, and traditions. Second is the capitalist drive in the increasingly international economy to create profits by using marketing to exert that same power to control what people think and how they act. Translation is used in both situations; those who seek to break down power structures believe that exposing people to other cultures and ideas through translation will both enlighten minds and allow previously stifled voices to be heard by making other texts and cultures accessible to those who would otherwise be unable to cross the language barrier. On the other hand, those who use translation to manipulate people realize that precisely because those who receive translations are unfamiliar with the original, translators can represent language with any given slant, whether intentional or not.

There is also the problem of the economics of translation itself. Literary translators have been trying for decades to gain recognition for and rights to their translations; essentially they want a new marketing strategy for their work. Non-literary

translators, in an iteration of this desire for new marketing, have entire handbooks about how and how much to charge for their services. Both situations are reactions to the uninformed view that all translations are created equal and that translators should be paid minimum wages, if at all, for the task of looking up words one by one in the dictionary. The advent of computer programs that can do just that (any internet site can be instantly translated and many sites will “translate” into another language any sentence typed into a box) has only served to propagate the view of translators as either unnecessary or as educated people who can perform neat linguistic tricks.

In contrast to this view of translation as fully automated and the translator as obsolete, translation studies center around a few veins of thought that emphasize the difficult and important work that translation is. First is that translation is crucial to the existence of our global society. Second is the translator’s cry to be recognized for the intense and immense task of translating (or rather to have those who receive translations stop taking translation for granted). Third is the recognition that because translation takes place in the borders of society, translators have a great deal of power over the ways texts are received. This power can be presented in an honest way that acknowledges that the inevitable intervention of the translator and encourages audiences to recognize that intervention, or it can be used in ways that hide the translator’s intervention and that manipulate and control audiences by ignoring the translator’s inevitable biases. Of course the specifics about what is ethical and what is manipulative are debatable, even among translators, but they all seem to agree that such categories exist. Gen Watanabe, as a fictional translator in an intense, international situation, encounters each of these issues throughout *Bel Canto*. His character affirms the visibility of translation among *Bel*



*Canto*'s characters, but unlike what many current translationists posit, he doesn't need to insist on recognition. Instead, Gen exemplifies translators who must adapt their outdated strategies to maintain an ethical position amid the visibility that society has already handed them.

Currently, the way translators are trained reflects the idea that there is one and only one translation for any given expression. Ironically, the same people who adamantly insist that translation is highly interpretive and that translators can never avoid the influence of their own personalities and environments are the same people who create the codes of ethics that disallow the appearance of personality in translation and encourage an impossible objectivity. The common misgivings constantly cited by translators are actually perpetuated by the codes of conduct written by translators themselves. Of course, these ethical codes of professional conduct are also responses to the expectations of those who employ translators—a result of the supply and demand laws governing the way translation is marketed. If translators keep insisting that translation is always subjective while maintaining all appearances of objectivity, their actions betray their words. At the same time, if those who need translators will only hire translators who appear objective, translators will continue to betray their words in order to maintain their profession. This creates a seeming bind for translators; they can cater to the simplistic expectations of their audiences and their own ethical codes that are based on those expectations or they can attempt to educate their audiences and defer not to the codes of ethics but to their own definitions of what is ethical.

*Professional Translator Training in Bel Canto*

The ways translators are currently trained illustrates the translator's bind. Anthony Pym summarizes the current training programs as "a series of 'best practices.' You find out what the best people do, then you reproduce it" (Pym, "Training Language Service Providers"). This sounds reasonable enough, but there are underlying problems. First, as Pym explains, a best-practices program "sets up enlightened centres and dependent peripheries, in the image of a colonial world that we are supposed to have overcome some time ago" (Pym, "Training Language Service Providers"). Setting up ultimate authorities of translation strategies denies an individual translator's interventions in the text and suggests that translation is merely a matter of figuring out the "right" way to translate—right in terms of both accuracy and ethics. A best practices approach assumes that the best translators would agree on the one right translation and that students of translation need only to recreate the accurate translation that would be produced by translation authorities. An authoritarian approach also implies that the only way to maintain an ethical translation is again to produce that one correct translation. As the term "authoritarian" suggests, this method of translator training is steeped not only in an old colonial model, but also in the old idea of author-intentionality. Despite Barthes' theory of the death of the author and the loss of authorial control over what happens to a text once it leaves the immediate realm of the author's intentions, thoughts about translation are still very much rooted in the idea that the only right translation is the one the author would have written had he been using the target language. The task of being true to the original author's intent (an intent that is impossible to determine) immediately makes this ideal of translation impossible.

The problem of aligning practical translator training for political and business situations with the more abstract and theoretical notions of the position of the translator is no small feat. Theorists like Benjamin, Barthes, Derrida and even translationists like Venuti and Arrojo have come to the conclusion that because a text to be translated is no longer in the hands of the author, the text must stand alone and be subject to whatever meaning an audience or a translator brings to it. As Venuti puts it, “translation threatens the transcendental author because it submits his text to the infiltration of other discourses” (72). This view of texts as superceding authors makes a translator not much different than a literary critic who puts forth an interpretation of a text. In fact, Venuti acknowledges this in the conclusion of his book when he states that translation “is always an interpretation made by the translator” (308). Translators’ interpretations are very different from those of literary critics, however, because tradition dictates that translators must insist that they have expressed the author’s true meaning as reflected in the language of the text, whereas literary critics have basically been freed from having to claim authorial intent and can propose interpretations without accounting for the author’s intentions at all. Given that both literary interpretation and literary translation work in much the same way but are governed by completely different expectations, the problem remains of how to train translators.

In the field of translation, time-honored traditions are those that cater to the old idea of a translator’s non-intervention into the text. Because a method of translation training that relies on what the “best” translators are doing relies on translators and institutions that have been well-established through time, translator training lags behind theories of authority and independent texts, often because these theories are not palatable

to audiences who expect a single correct translation. Using translation methods that cater to time-honored practices of the translator's invisibility makes it difficult to instigate any kind of change in translation practices because it propagates only what has been done before, namely maintaining invisibility; this approach is hardly appropriate for a translator who not only sees himself as visible and intervening, but is conspicuously so to his audience because of increased globalization and a more linguistically-aware population. Although many translators agree with Venuti's call for the allowance and desirability of visible translation, they find it hard to implement new, visible strategies because of the expectations they assume their audiences have. Audiences who are culturally and linguistically self-contained can understandably expect invisibility from a translator because they have little concept of the irreconcilable difference between languages and cultures and may assume that a translation is a true rendering of the original author's intention. That mentality, however, is going by the wayside as audiences become hyperaware of cultural difference and more accepting of alternative interpretations because of the undeniable and widespread globalization that juxtaposes languages and cultures and exposes their differences.

Besides a best-practices approach, the most prominent aspect of translator training (and arguably the most important because it is strictly enforced throughout a translator's career) is the absolute insistence on "ethical" translations, that is, translations that adhere to the ethical codes that professional organizations have written. Most of the major points of these professional codes can be seen in specific instances from *Bel Canto*. The first requirement for translators is professional demeanor. This means that although translators are people interacting in the communicative situation, they are trained to pretend that they

have no personality and no interest in the situation, because the presence of a translator's personality would suggest that the translation was not impartial and was somehow tainted, as dictated by the codes of ethics. Of course, professionalism is important in the high-profile situations that translators work in, but there are several instances in *Bel Canto* where Gen doggedly tries to maintain his professionalism in situations where his own interests are obviously at stake. For instance, when Messner, the Red Cross negotiator asks for a translator the first time he speaks to the terrorists, Gen's professional training manifests itself in his deliberateness. Gen, who is "helpful but not heroic" (40), first asks his employer, Mr. Hosokawa, if he wouldn't mind being left alone while he translates. He then walks carefully across the floor where the hostages are lying, apologizing because he thinks it would be rude to step over someone. Probably few of the hostages, who have been ordered to the ground by terrorists' guns, would at this point consider Gen's stepping over them rude; neither would the terrorists expect perfect protocol as they brandish their weapons. Gen's careful actions are a direct result of the professional codes that are intended to best serve the expectations of the client—in this case both the terrorists and their hostages. Even though neither client expects these careful manners, the code has become more important than the purpose it was originally intended to serve, and Gen cannot escape the fact that according to most translation codes, a translator must always be dignified and respectful (See Phelan and NAJIT).

Dignity and respect are commendable traits, to be sure, and yet they often inhibit Gen's translations and interfere with the communicative situation. In this case, guerilla attackers with pointed guns are waiting for Gen to translate while he tentatively apologizes to the other hostages; the professional code could be said to be endangering

his life. And yet most translation codes specifically address the issue of dealing with highly emotional situations, stressing that a translator must maintain an unruffled demeanor and must refrain from allowing emotions or personal opinions to affect translation or professional behavior. Gen diligently upholds those standards, even as he himself is taken hostage and could arguably not be expected to maintain professionalism, showing how deeply ingrained these codes are for those who have been trained as translators.

The professional demeanor, despite its effect of hiding the translator's contribution to the communicative situation, is crucial to a translator's success. Translators choose to be invisible by always deferring to their clients and are often judged by their lack of presence. Many translators strive to never be noticed at all to assure their job security. "Lack of presence" is, in fact, what draws Mr. Hosokawa to Gen in the first place (17), after years of working with translators who cannot maintain invisibility:

The translators! They were ever-changing [ . . . ] Some could hardly speak their native Japanese and continually halted conversations to look up a word in a dictionary[ . . . ] . Others were dependent, wanting to stay with him through every meal, wanting to accompany him on his walks and recount for him every moment of their own lusterless childhoods. What he went through just for a mouthful of French, a few clear sentences of English. What he went through before Gen. (15)

After days of trying to identify what he finds so appealing about having Gen as a translator, "Mr. Hosokawa finally recognized the voice [ . . . ] . It was his own voice" (17).

Because Mr. Hosokawa feels that Gen's voice is his own, he feels almost as if he's not using a translator at all. Gen, ever the invisible employee, sticks dutifully to his training in translation, especially his ethical charge to be professionally invisible. Gen's stringent adherence to the rules gives evidence for the ways the translator's invisibility is enforced from the inside out as much as it is imposed from the outside in.

### *The Translator's Visibility*

For someone who is supposed to be invisible, however, Gen is actually the center of attention. Not only is the story told mostly from his perspective—despite Ann Patchett's claims that her novel achieves a truly omniscient third person ("A Conversation with Ann Patchett")—but we know Gen is involved in every interaction in the book, whether specifically mentioned or not, because few of the characters have common languages with which to communicate. Without seeking the position, Gen plays a central role in the Vice President's house, which is in direct conflict with Venuti's portrayal of translators as marginalized, underappreciated slaves to the cult of invisible translation who need to actively claim proper acknowledgement for their work.

In the months that the hostages are held captive, Gen becomes the most sought-after person in the house, proving that he cannot maintain his invisibility.

Gen was a busy man. He was needed by Mr. Hosokawa, who wanted another ten words and their pronunciations to add to his book. He was needed by the other hostages, who wanted to know how to say, 'Are you finished with that newspaper?' in Greek or German or French, then he was needed to read the newspaper to them if they did not read in Spanish. He

was needed by Messner every day to translate the negotiations. Mostly, he was needed by the Generals. [. . .] (131)

Gen facilitates every interaction and is necessarily present at every important moment. In fact, he becomes a crucial player in those moments because the very act of translating affects the interaction by nuancing the communication with Gen's particular ideologies and biases. As Román Álvarez and Carmen-África Vidal explain in the first chapter of their book *Translation, Power, Subversion*, the act of translating can never be neutral and translation can "become a form of control" when a translator purposely manipulates a translation in order to achieve certain ends (3). Since the characters exist in a place where no single language dominates and every person is a minority, the most powerful person is the one who can negotiate the many languages. Gen, who grew up in a multi-lingual home where "language changed on the hour" (303-04) and who hasn't been able to fit precisely in one category, can traverse the borders of language and thus make central his previous social marginality. The characters all recognize that without Gen their mundane interactions would be severely restricted and the crucial negotiations that may lead to the peaceful resolution of the ordeal would be nearly impossible. Despite what the terrorists or the hostages think, Gen is in a position to control the situation, what Venuti calls the translator's "crucial intervention" (1-2).

This visible position Gen finds himself is a positively-construed space for a person with fragmented experience. While many border-dwellers and marginalized people claim victimization and clamor for opportunities to speak, a whole profession of mostly diasporic and underprivileged people has created an opportunity for visibility and power precisely because of their often fragmented (especially linguistically) experiences.



By becoming professional translators, formerly colonized people create an important niche for themselves right in the center of things. Ironically, they maintain this powerful voice only when those who hear them don't attribute the words to the translator—translators have a voice because they are invisible. This is precisely the dilemma articulated by Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She finds it impossible for victims of colonialism to use a voice that is entirely separate from that of their oppressors. Many translators certainly fit into this category, constantly speaking but never asserting their own voices. This “voiceless speech” is just what professional codes of ethics strive to enforce in translators and what Venuti argues should be overcome with the translator's visibility.

The characters of *Bel Canto* do see Gen, helping him to achieve visibility. This new visibility, however, happens not because he has insisted, as Venuti urges translators, on being recognized for the difficult job he performs. The other characters recognize his crucial role from the moment he responds to the terrorists' request for a translator, often making comments about his intelligence and assuming that his language skills endow him with many other abilities. At one point Roxane assumes that Gen plays the piano because he “seem[s] to know how to do so many other things” (122). Simon Thibault, one of the other hostages, blatantly recognizes that Gen is an exception to the established categories of hostage and terrorist when he offers Gen up to be shot if the hostages should be out of line. Gen, of course, doesn't want to be shot and when he asks Thibault, “Why did you tell her that she could shoot me?” Thibault responds, “Because they *wouldn't* shoot you. They all like you too much [ . . . ]. It's not like I told them they could shoot poor Ruben. That girl might want to shoot Ruben” (191-192). Thibault is clearly putting

Gen in a separate category from himself and the other hostages. Instead of marking Gen's uncategorizable situations as a negative space, however, Gen's difference is a desired space, a space of safety and privilege. Because of his powers of translation, Gen is assured a space of protection from those who hold the guns.

It's clear that even the terrorists give Gen something of superstar status. He is allowed more privileges than the other hostages. He is privy to the discussions of the terrorists, who "had an enormous respect for Gen's abilities with languages. They imagined that if he could speak in Russian and English and French, he could probably do anything" (184). Their refusals to release Gen and Roxane Coss, "opera's most revered soprano," are similar in that both are taken for granted as people who would be released, and yet the terrorists insist that they are valuable hostages. When the terrorists agree to release all the women, Roxane heads toward the door with the rest of them, but just before she leaves the house, General Hector refuses to let her go. Just when she assumed she would be released, she is detained because "[y]ou keep someone always for what he or she is worth to you, for what you can trade her for" (71). Since the terrorists have failed to get the president of the country, they will take a famous opera singer, assuming she is a valuable asset. Gen, similarly, assumes he will be released because "he was worth no money, he had no leverage" (98). But of course he is infinitely valuable to the terrorists for his language skills and so, although "[h]e was as much an employee, a working-man, as the ones who had fine-sliced the onions for dinner" (98), he does not appear on the list of people to go. Neither does he appear on the list of people to keep, once again suggesting that he is outside the realm of ordinary hostages and has become the person around whom everything else revolves, especially since he transcribed the

lists. Just as Roxane is more valuable than the other women who are released, Gen is more valuable than the other workers who are released. It seems clear that both the terrorists and the hostages recognize the importance of the translator.

Of course the difference in demand for literary translators (Venuti's main focus) and non-literary translators could be argued as the reason for Gen's visibility. Most literary translations are hard to market, in part because people who speak the target language don't know about the original. Cronin's position, on the other hand, focused on technical translation, may be a bit closer to what Gen experiences. In technical translation, customers know that the information they need is available in another language, and they specifically seek out access to the information through translation. Still, like Venuti's, one of Cronin's stated purposes is to make audiences more aware of the difficulty of translation. *Bel Canto*, however, suggests that audiences do not ignore the act of translation and, in fact, are sometimes painfully aware of translation issues. When the hostages are discussing ways to escape, for example, the conversation is jerky and slow because it is taking place in so many languages. Sentences that refer specifically to Gen's visible position pepper the text: "They waited for Gen," "Gen held up his hand. 'One moment, please.' He was still translating the German into Japanese," and "'Gentlemen, your patience, please.' Gen was trying to translate it all" (113). Even though all the words of *Bel Canto* are written in English, readers get the sense of translation and the stilted nature of the interaction because Patchett keeps referring to Gen's act of translating, illustrating the discomfort of conspicuous translation. Although Gen enables communication, that communication is slow and ultimately ineffective because:

Conversations in more than two languages felt awkward and unreliable, like speaking with a mouthful of cotton and Novocain. No one could hold on to their thoughts long enough and wait their turns. These were not men who were accustomed to waiting or speaking precisely. They preferred to expound, to rant when necessary. (113-14)

Although the visibility of the translator frustrates these characters, they don't seem to blame the difficulty of multilingual interactions on the translator. Instead they seem to recognize the inherent difficulties of translation. Professional translators know that this kind of translation frustration is impossible to avoid completely, but they try to prevent it as much as they can by being invisible. Literary translators, on the other hand, don't have the benefit of having their audiences struggle through the translation process with them, so they understandably might feel that their work is under appreciated. But the fact that the entire text of *Bel Canto* is peppered with written accounts of spoken translations brings those two types of translation together in a literary account of translation, suggesting that perhaps the contemporary society that *Bel Canto* portrays has blurred the distinction between spoken and written language and has made the contemporary audience more aware of translation issues because they face multilingual interactions daily.

#### *Upholding Translation Codes*

Even though many of the characters recognize Gen's visibility, he initially attempts to uphold the invisibility he has been trained to enforce. Roxane, for one, often comments on Gen's translation, pitying him for the endless tasks he performs: "Poor Gen," she tells him, "you're always in the middle of everything. Anyone who has a secret

has to take it through you” (239). She recognizes Gen’s visibility and the fact that he possesses so many secrets. By acknowledging that Gen is the guardian of secrets in the house, she acknowledges his power. Every party is vying for the power of information that Gen has. The government would love to know what’s happening inside the house. The hostages would love to know what the terrorists talk about behind closed doors. The terrorists would love to know what the negotiator whispers to the hostages and what the hostages whisper about their captors. Gen knows all these things, wielding the trump card in this power play. Still, he refrains from using his power for any side, strictly adhering to the ethical translation codes that dictate absolute confidentiality. Hypothetically, he could give the negotiator information about how to smuggle out the hostages, himself included. He could also mistranslate the negotiations and lead the terrorists to believe that their demands were being met, again leading to the release of hostages. Gen’s professional obligation to keep all confidences and to render “a complete and accurate interpretation without altering or omitting anything” ([www.LanguageLine.com](http://www.LanguageLine.com)) prevents him from doing any of those things, even though his obligation to uphold those codes is debatable in his unusual situation.

Despite her recognition of Gen’s visibility, Roxane ends up being grateful for Gen’s initial insistence on invisibility. Because she has fallen in love with Mr. Hosokawa, a man who speaks only Japanese, Roxane, an English-only speaker, relies on Gen to mediate their unlikely relationship. Although the other people in the house are unaware of their conversations, Gen, of course, knows of their interest in each other because he’s the one who translates their conversations. When finally Roxane gets up enough courage to ask Gen for time alone with Mr. Hosokawa—time without the presence of the

translator—she dissolves her initial embarrassment with the thought that “Maybe a translator was not unlike a doctor, a lawyer, a priest even. They must have some code of ethics that prevented them from gossiping” (240).

Not only does Roxane assume that translators must have an ethical code, but she also assumes that Gen will abide by it, although his obligation to his profession in this situation is questionable at best. For one thing, he’s not being paid for his services. That fact alone could void the professional codes, especially since many codes delineate the conditions that translators will work under, conditions that clearly fall outside the realm of Gen’s situation. Gen is also in breach of codes that specify that “the Interpreter shall disclose any real or perceived conflict of interest [. . .] He/She shall immediately convey any reservations about his/her ability to successfully complete the assignment” (www.LanguageLine.com). If ever a translator had a conflict of interest, Gen does, but even if his situation is in breach of most of his ethical code, he maintains the parts of the code that he can, such as confidentiality.

As mentioned earlier, Gen tries to follow the ethical standards for professionalism whether the audience expects him to or not. Although the other characters nearly revere Gen’s translation abilities and his powerful position, Gen gives them plenty of reason to take his position for granted. At one point, as Roxane and Messner are talking, “Gen trailed behind them like a well-trained butler, both discreet and present if he was needed in any way” (236). By acting like a “well-trained butler,” Gen invites the other characters to think of him as just that, demonstrating exactly the image that Venuti and Arrojo decry as being harmful to both the translator and the receiver. They claim that invisibility stifles and hinders the translation process, resulting in inferior translation. They often blame the

receivers/clients (or at least their cultures) for insisting on invisible translators and transparent translation. In this case, however, both Roxane and Messner have previously encouraged Gen's visibility, acknowledging the difficulty of translation and Gen's position of power. It is the outdated professional codes, not his audience, that force Gen to uphold the old image of translation through his "ethical" behavior.

Father Arguedas is another character who is fully aware of the slippages of language. In fact, he has a fairly postmodern view of language, one that places telling and listening above the actual words themselves, suggesting that he recognizes that words can be inadequate for communication. In terms of poststructuralism, he has found an alternative to traditional understandings of language, a way to get around the problematic nature of the words themselves. He suggests that a supernatural power can communicate just as well as language can and that the actual acts of telling and listening supersede the act of understanding. When he first begins to hear confession in the house, Gen must sit with him to translate the sins of the confessors. But as more people want to confess and Gen becomes busier with other things,

Father Arguedas adopted a 'translator optional' policy in regard to confession. If people chose to confess in a language other than Spanish, then he would be happy to sit and listen and assume their sins were filtered through him and washed away by God exactly as they would have been if he had understood what they were saying. If people would rather be understood in a more traditional way, then they were welcome to bring Gen along if it worked out with his schedule. (242)

According to Father Arguedas's policy, for the most sacred and personal matters, language is entirely optional. Even comprehension or correct communication isn't necessary. The act of speaking is what matters to Father Arguedas, and he believes that by his listening, the confession is effective. Yet even in the presence of someone who could possibly be most understanding of visible translation, both because of his kind religious nature and because of his optional view of language, Gen employs his façade of impartiality. As Father Arguedas notices, "Gen was perfect for the job, as he seemed to have a remarkable ability not to listen to the words coming out of his own mouth" (242). Again it is the professional codes and old translation strategies that promote an invisible translator to people who don't expect a transparent translation. For both Roxane and Father Arguedas, religious culture has surpassed translation, and Gen is ill-equipped to handle the visibility these characters give him because he still works with the tools of invisibility, in which case the ethical codes, designed to help translators meet the demands of the clients, are not meeting the expectations of the customers.

Gen's trouble with invisibility is doubly challenging not only because he finds it difficult to uphold a false objectivity, but also because it may not be the most ethical strategy with which to address the concerns of those who receive his translations. Despite the strictness of traditional codes and the intensity with which Gen strives to achieve ethical translation through those codes, the other characters in *Bel Canto* no longer take the translator's invisibility for granted, creating a discrepancy between the translator and the audience. The translator's invisibility is harder and harder to sustain because globalization has made the characters more aware of the difficulties of translation and has



put translators in the center of multi-linguistic communication rather than behind the curtain.

### Section 3. Changing Expectations for Translation

#### *Transparent and Domestic Translation in Bel Canto*

The plot of *Bel Canto* highlights translation's centrality within current theoretical movements. The premise itself points out the switch from modernity's focus on nation and government to postmodernity's corporate focus. The terrorists, in a typically modern move, attempt to take hostage the president of the country in exchange for various political reforms. Instead, they get over one hundred wealthy party-goers who are not only unable to provide any political negotiating leverage, but aren't even aware of the country's situation because they are all visitors to the country. To make the circumstances even more absurd, the reason the president does not attend the party as planned because he wishes not to miss his favorite soap opera. At this party, a South American soap opera has more influence over a volatile political situation than do hundreds of prestigious diplomats and business executives. In a telling moment, one of the terrorists mistakes Mr. Hosokawa, the president of the largest electronics corporation in the world, for the intended hostage-president, as if fate would tempt the terrorists with the real source of power, corporate business. The poor freedom fighters, faced with a double language barrier because their first language is Quechua, not Spanish, don't even know it. They are in need of translation in their own country and end up relying on the translator more than their own weapons.

A similar phenomenon occurs in one particular scene in *Bel Canto*, pointing to the inability of those who don't understand the original language to judge the translation by

its style. On the first morning that Roxane sings, she chooses to practice the Czech aria from *Rusalka*. Although Mr. Hosokawa doesn't understand any Czech, he assumes that Roxane is fluent in the language. After hearing her sing, he comments, "She sings Czech like she was born to it" (163). Gen, however, who does speak Czech recognizes that she is anything but fluent:

[Gen] would never refute the beauty of her singing, the warm and liquid quality of her voice that so well matched the watery *Rusalka*, but there was no point in telling Mr. Hosokawa that this woman did not know a word of Czechoslovakian. [. . .] It was quite obvious that she had memorized the work phonetically, that she sang her love for Dvořák and her love for the translated story, but that the Czech language itself was a stranger which passed her by without a moment's recognition. (164)

Here we see that just as those who receive translations admire linguistic style and equate it with fluency in the original language, it's easy for Mr. Hosokawa to think that Roxane's Czech is perfect because he has no reason to think otherwise and no understanding of Czech with which to evaluate her performance. He instead focuses on her presentation, which is "infused with compassion and understanding" and is musically both accurate and expressive. This is much the same process that happens when Gen translates for Mr. Hosokawa: Mr. Hosokawa has no way to judge the accuracy of the translation, so he instead assumes that the apparent ease with which Gen translates signals his competency. This method of evaluating translation based on fluency has resulted in the "translator's invisibility" because any translation that calls attention to itself casts a shadow of doubt on the translator's competency in the eyes of those who

will evaluate the new text. In order to maintain authority, the translator must never claim to be an author; instead he must hide behind the words and claim they are not his own but the words of the original author, had the original author been an English-speaker. This is much like the attitude Roxane has toward her accompanist, of whom “she never thought about [. . .] enough to wonder if she should” (79). She later says of him “Christopf was very good. I don’t suppose people notice the accompanist very often” (92). She could just as easily have been talking about a translator here, one whose skill is marked by not being noticed and never drawing attention to himself. And yet the very first line of *Bel Canto*— “When the lights went off, the accompanist kissed her”—suggests that those who should remain invisible (like translators and accompanists) won’t stay behind the scenes for long, despite the cover of darkness they work under.

In order to remain invisible, English translators traditionally use the translation technique of making the translation absolutely fluid in English so as not to appear as a translation. This is one of the two extremes that Schleiermacher describes as translational possibilities: “Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader” (42). English translation has clearly favored the second, manifest by most English audiences’ inability or unwillingness to accept translations that are foreign or difficult. This leads to domesticity, the second of Venuti’s claims about expectations for translation in English tradition (the first being transparency). A domestic translation is one that replaces all differences in the foreign text with elements catered to the target language and culture. Of course the foreign language itself will have to be replaced with words from the target language, but a domestic translation will replace all

cultural, political, and economic differences with elements that are acceptable and familiar to the target language culture, a practice particularly irksome for scholars like Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen who promote an appropriation of language that encourages texts to bear the weight of cultural and linguistic difference.

*Bel Canto* refers several times to this tendency of English speakers to expect domestic translation and to blame misunderstandings on a bad translator rather than on cultural differences. One instance occurs when hostage Victor Fyodorov, the Russian Secretary of Commerce, employs Gen's translation services to declare his love to Roxane. As an American who doesn't expect strangers to suddenly make translated confessions of love, Roxane is unprepared for such a serious declaration from a married stranger. This foreign element of the Russian culture surprises Roxane so much that she initially believes it must be wrong. In response to the Russian's confession, she incredulously turns, not to Fyodorov, but to the translator. She asks Gen to clarify his translation because she assumes that it must be wrong. The fact that Roxane turns to Gen shows first, that she doesn't consider Gen invisible and second, that she expects the translator to provide a culturally modified version of what Fyodorov claims is an essential cultural difference. Instead of seeing this differing view of love as a foreign concept, her first reaction is that the translator has misinterpreted the words. This same reaction is found in English-speakers who read translations that seem especially foreign to them—there must be a problem with the translator or the translation. It's this attitude that encourages translators to produce translations that domesticate foreign elements avoid challenging the audience's culture and also avoid the criticism of an "unreadable"

translation. English speakers, in Schleiermacher's terms, expect the translator to bring the original as close to the domestic as possible.

Clearly, though, the method of making the foreign easily palatable for the target language users can interfere with meaning. At the same time that English-speakers demand "accurate" translation, meaning one that is faithful to the meaning of the original, they also demand that the original be digested and converted into a translation that is linguistically and culturally accessible. Since translators can't always do both, they accommodate these demands by scrimping on the half that English-speakers won't be able to judge; a foreignized translation that is true to meaning will certainly be criticized for being inaccessible, but a domestic translation that compromises meaning will receive praise for fluidity and grace.

Translationists like Venuti call for reform in this area and encourage translators to produce foreignized translations in order, as many Renaissance translators attempted, to enrich the target language and culture. Rudolf Pannwitz, quoted in Walter Benjamin's "Task of the Translator" and Schulte and Biguenet's introduction to *Theories of Translation*, explains the idea of foreignizing translations this way:

Our translations, even the best, proceed from a false premise. They want to Germanize Hindi, Greek, English instead of hindi-izing, grecizing, anglicizing German. [. . .] The fundamental error of the translator is that he maintains the accidental state of his own language, instead of letting it suffer the shock of the foreign language[. . .]. [H]e must widen and deepen his language through the foreign one. (Schulte and Biguenet 8)

According to Schulte and Biguenet, those who work in translation, then, are hyperaware of the differences in language and want to communicate those differences to their audiences. Unfortunately, those who drive the market for translations want domesticized and transparent translations. *Bel Canto* clearly supports translators in their desire to produce foreignized translations—translations that don't attempt to appropriate foreign elements into the domestic culture but allow cultural differences to exist—not as much for the enrichment of language as for the expansion of world view that translators who refuse to provide domestic translations can create.

One particular instance in the book shows the double discrepancy between domestic and foreign translation and between the gender expectations of different cultures. Two weeks into the hostage situation, the negotiators stop sending prepared food and instead give the hostages and their captors boxes of vegetables and raw chicken. Having never prepared a meal in his life, the Vice President requests Gen's translation services in order to ask Roxane to cook the food, assuming that since she is a woman she will know how. When Gen translates the Vice President's polite inquiry for help in the kitchen, Roxane says bluntly to Gen, "You misunderstood him" (179). She, like the Vice President, has never learned or tried to cook and is amazed that the Vice President would ask such a thing of a famous opera singer from Chicago. But instead of looking to cultural differences to understand the gender assumption behind the outlandish request, she turns to the translator to reconcile the discrepancy. Despite Gen's insistence that he hasn't mistranslated—because "Spanish was to linguists what hopscotch was to triathletes" (180)—she tells him "Try again." It takes two more exchanges for Gen to convince Roxane that his translation is accurate. She finally accepts the translation with a

cultural admission; she tells Gen that the idea that women know how to cook must be “some sort of Latin thing” (180). This brief misunderstanding reveals much about the translator’s position in the eyes of those who receive translations. Roxane, expecting Gen’s translation to conform to her own cultural position, insists that something is wrong with the translation when her expectations are not met. She wants a domestic translation, one whose meaning aligns with her world view, so she presses Gen to change his translation rather than pressing the Vice President to understand her different culture. Only when Gen refuses to change his translation does she finally expand her world view to include “some sort of Latin thing.” Gen’s persistent foreignized translation leads both Roxane and the Vice President to consider another culture as they realize that the link between women and cooking gets lost in translation between Spanish and English. *Bel Canto* suggests, then, that as translators allow cultural differences into their translations, they can create cultural awareness.

Having to choose between accessibility and cultural awareness in their translations, however, frustrates both translators and their clients. This compromised position of translation has encouraged translators to maintain their own invisibility for economic reasons. If audiences expect domestic and transparent translation, and if reviewers evaluate translations in terms of fluidity in the target language, then translators who wish to continue translating must cater to those characteristics. This is why translators are trained to be invisible and why their codes of ethics enforce invisibility. But are those who receive translation really expecting invisibility and domesticity? Despite the few instances of misunderstanding and narrow-minded characters, *Bel Canto* suggests that the cult of domestic and transparent translation has mostly been overthrown

by a respect for language and an awareness of the foreign, but that translators are still catering to these outdated demands. In light of this change in translation expectations, is the translator's invisibility ethical? Throughout *Bel Canto*, these two questions of the expectations and ethics of invisibility drive Gen to search for alternative translation strategies and to experiment with the boundaries of protocol, language, and his own intervention into the translation process.

### *Gen's Discomfort with Visibility*

In the Vice President's house, Patchett has created a unique philosophical space that allows Gen to do his translation experiments outside the usual constraints of expectations of invisibility. Because not everyone in the house is an English speaker, Gen is partially relieved from catering to the English tradition of invisible translation. His exemption has limits, though, because many of the hostages come from European traditions which have developed translation expectations similar to those of English. Also, many of the hostages do speak English, albeit as a second or third language. Finally, most of those who use English do so for business or political reasons, two areas where the protocol of invisibility is engrained, no matter the language. Still, the escape from English does afford some linguistic exemption from invisibility.

In this unlikely and experimental situation of peaceful cohabiting of hostages and terrorists, Gen begins to test the limits of his invisibility. In his first deliberate breach of his training and the translation protocol that, as we saw in the previous section, he initially tries to maintain, Gen gives a deliberately inaccurate translation for the Generals: “‘All of this information will be checked by our people on the outside,’ Alfredo said again and again, and Gen translated it into French and German, Greek and Portuguese,



each time careful to say *their* people outside. Something a translator should never do” (97). Gen specifically doesn’t want to identify himself with the terrorists, so he breaks a cardinal rule of translating, that “interpreters are to use the same grammatical person as the speaker” (NAJIT canon 5). Although the distinction between *our* vs. *their* is subtle, in any other situation, it would be enough to jeopardize Gen’s work as a translator. In the Vice President’s house, however, there is no clear client and certainly no one to check his work. It may even be that the “ethical” thing to do in this situation is to blatantly break one major tenet in the translator’s code of ethics. By separating himself from the terrorists through his translation, Gen asserts that he will not associate himself with the unethical actions of the terrorists. He is also testing his place outside the confines of invisibility and discovers that invisibility is not always desirable for a translator in a postmodern situation.

After this first attempt at breaking the bonds of enforced invisibility, Gen doesn’t suddenly dismiss every aspect of the ethical codes he has been taught. Not only do old habits die hard, but his continuing desire to act correctly in this messy situation keeps him weighing the pros and cons of invisibility. Gen is not sure of his identity in the situation: Is he obligated to translate between hostages? Is he still employed by Mr. Hosokawa? Is he on the side of the hostages or the terrorists? Gen doesn’t neatly fit into the categories of hostage or captor: although he types and delivers the demands of the terrorists, he is hardly one of the guerilla captors; and although he is forced at gunpoint to stay in the house, he is treated as a separate category entirely. Even the terrorists aren’t sure where to put him, as evidenced when they make the lists of hostages to keep and to release: he is not placed on a list at all—in their eyes he cannot be categorized, and his language

abilities create a new space for him, one that makes him exempt from violence and highly visible. This visibility is just what Simon Thibault points out when he recognizes that none of the terrorists would ever shoot Gen.

His changed position makes Gen uncomfortable; because he has been so concerned with correct translation and his ethical protocol, he has never before noticed his own intervention into translation. In fact, he has been so successful at being invisible that he has hardly noticed himself. After all his years of translating, it is during one of the translations he makes between the Red Cross negotiator and the terrorists that he realizes he “could never remember an instance when what he was translating had actually affected him” (61). His trembling hands give away his visibility.

His difficulty in accepting his visible position, so unlike the position he has been trained for, becomes first apparent right after the accompanist dies of diabetic shock. The Generals discuss shooting the accompanist’s body in order to show the government they are serious. The Vice President knows that Roxane can prevent the desecration of the body, but only if Gen will help her. In response to the Vice President’s attempt to persuade him to help, Gen is unwilling to assert himself in the very moment he can make a difference, thinking “it should not be [his] responsibility, deciding what was best for her, what to tell and what not to tell [. . . He] felt confused” (83). His confusion results from the discrepancy between his professional protocol and the strange situation in which he finds himself. Although translation guides have specific directions for many situations, the appropriate role of a hostage is not one of them. Gen recognizes that his place is visible, but hasn’t yet figured out how to effectively alter his translations to address that

visibility. Rather than act inappropriately, he hesitates, trying to deduce the best course of action.

Other times, although not confused, Gen falls back on his invisibility training because it is comfortable to him—it has become his autopilot. When he is called on to translate between Mr. Hosokawa and Roxane shortly after Carmen comes to him in the night asking for reading lessons, his mind is busy “trying to puzzle out his night” (168). Because his mind is only half on translation, “Gen exchanged their sentences like a bank teller pushing stacks of currency back and forth over a smooth marble countertop. He only half listened to what they were saying” (168). This moment in Gen’s thoughts reveals that by default he thinks of himself as invisible. He doesn’t think about what he is translating, rather he half thinks about “what they were saying,” as if he weren’t reciting both sides of the conversation in alternate languages. Perhaps this autopilot mode is also why Father Arguedas attributes Gen with “a remarkable ability not to listen to the words coming out of his own mouth” (242). Just as bank tellers (the position to which Gen is compared) have become more and more automated, so invisible translators are expected to be machines that take in one language and give out another.

Because he is reluctant to claim the position of visibility that his circumstances have given him, people sometimes take Gen for granted, expecting and occasionally demanding his services. Messner refuses to negotiate without Gen present, even though he speaks Spanish (296). Victor Fyodorov insists that Gen translate for him at the exact moment he dictates (204-05). Although they leave the other hostages alone, the Generals “were waking Gen up in the middle of the night, telling him to sit with a pencil and pad while they dictated their latest list of demands for the government” (131). Hostages and

captors alike initially feel they are entitled to Gen's services at their convenience, and since he responds with the professional demeanor that his training has instilled in him, they continue to do so. Because he adheres so strongly to established ethical codes, he becomes something of a translation slave, but is ironically more free to communicate than the other characters. Still, his professional training keeps him from taking much of a personal role or from using his freedom of communication to assert his own voice.

### *Gen Embraces Visibility*

As Gen's visibility becomes more apparent, however, he finds that the situation in the Vice President's house sets him up to claim that visibility rather than trying to avoid it. Instead of taking advantage of Gen's services and taking his invisibility for granted, the other characters start to recognize Gen's value and become grateful for his services. It's hard for Gen to maintain invisibility when everything he does obviously improves the lives of those around him. In the midst of their frustration that their takeover did not produce the president of the country and instead gave them 40 hostages they don't know what to do with, the Generals find sanity and control in Gen's translation abilities and begin to befriend their captives through his language skills. Gen, for example, sets up a game of chess between Mr. Hosokawa and General Benjamin that leads to a series of frequent, amiable matches. The hostages, who are getting sick of their never-ending dinner party, are irritable and restless until Gen enables Roxane to negotiate for some music to sing. Her singing then provides entertainment for the rest of the ordeal. His translation also allows food to be prepared, newspapers to be read, and negotiations to continue. In each instance, Gen is a mediator, not the initiator, but his sorely needed language skills give him the power to make visible changes in a situation that is

otherwise at a standstill. His ingrained drive to censor his translations to create invisibility wanes because he couldn't be invisible if he tried.

In many more instances, however, Gen acknowledges his visibility and attempts to adapt his old ways of translating to strategies that better accommodate a translator's visibility. He begins to realize that his strategies for invisibility, driven by his professional code of ethics and effective only for an audience who believes he is invisible, lead to his own exploitation when those who receive his translations can clearly see him. As Gen gains confidence in the realization that he is not obligated to translate for everyone, that he is not subject to the professional codes, he finds that his translations naturally turn away from the codes of strict invisibility. By allowing himself intervention into the conversations he translates (intervention that has always been inevitable anyway), he better accommodates his position and better serves those for whom he translates. He begins to insist that people handle their own transactions, facilitating responsibility in others. When Cesar wants Gen to tell Roxane that he is too shy to have voice lessons in front of everyone, Gen responds "Once you learn English you can tell her that yourself" (285). Had this situation happened earlier in the book, Gen would have dutifully translated, as he did for Victor Fyodorov, assuming his diplomatic role, but at this late point in the story, Gen recognizes that he can assert himself to help others discover their voices. He no longer feels confined to the strict codes that have kept him from inserting his opinion into multilingual situations. In fact he learns a deeper level of humanity by letting go of his invisibility. According to Gen's own words (not any translation), love is "the thing [he] had missed in all the translation of language" (250).

As his profession-enforced impartiality is lost to his genuine concern for those around him, Gen wants to become an active participant in the interactions of the other characters because he is the one who can help them. If he remains in his professional mode, he will not be using his translating power for the betterment of the people he has come to love. We see the height of this compassion when Gen tries to imagine what will happen when their hostage situation comes to an end. As he tries to decide who will go to jail and who will escape, “he couldn’t think of one he would be willing to give up, even the bullies and the fools [. . .]How had he come to want to save all of them? The people who followed him around with loaded guns. How had he fallen in love with so many people?” (303). Gen truly loves all—the other hostages and the terrorists. That love is what motivates and enables him to see that the expectation of invisibility is a self-imposed one. It’s not that he has abandoned the strong ethics that professional translators uphold, but he finds that he need not be confined to outdated strategies that cater to an expectation that is not there. His visibility can be claimed without sacrificing ethics. In fact, it may be that to act ethically, Gen has to do what he feels is right rather than adhering to the falsely-objective invisibility of the rules he has been taught.

#### Section 4. Ethical Visibility

##### *The Underappreciated Translator*

Invisibility is the way Venuti describes “the translator’s situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture,” and certainly Venuti proves that invisibility has been the trait expected of translators for the last several hundred years. Citing numerous translation reviews that praise fluency, and comparing the resistant reception of opaque translations with the positive reception of transparent translations, Venuti argues that

translators, publishers, and audiences throughout the last four centuries have used fluency and the translator's invisibility as the standards of judgment in evaluating translation. In the last few years, however, as linguistic scholars have come to a hyper self-consciousness about language and as translation studies has become a field of its own, the old expectations of invisibility have been placed under scrutiny. In this examination of translation, most current translation scholarship, including Venuti's, suggests that the translator's invisibility fosters an "ethnocentric violence" that subjects language to the prejudices of the target language (310). This often leads to the suggestion that translators should work to change the expectation of invisibility by using new methods of translation. In accordance with these ideas, *Bel Canto* portrays a translator who works to incorporate new translation methods, but in contrast to what most translation scholarship suggests, Gen's new methods are not an attempt to change audience expectation. Although rife with examples of the old expectations, *Bel Canto* suggests that the contemporary "situation and activity" of translators is no longer about invisibility. Instead, the character Gen exemplifies a translator in transition, one who must deal with the visible position the moment has given him, but who has been trained in accordance with the outdated concept of invisibility.

The idea of invisibility implies that those who receive translation take the translator's task for granted. The assumption that translation is a straight-forward matter yields little appreciation for translators and fosters the preference that they remain invisible. This lack of appreciation or outright disregard makes translators and translationists most perturbed—and rightly so, since their difficult and important labors have been simplified, misunderstood, denigrated, and hidden for years. This is why most

translationists include in their objectives something about “demonstrating to others, the vast majority, who are not translators, why translation is interesting and important” (Cronin 3) or “changing [translators’] cultural marginality” (Venuti 311) or fighting the “lack of awareness” about translation (Pym, “Training Language Service Providers”). Many translators and translationists crusade to prove their own importance and thus to stop the translator’s invisibility. In *Bel Canto*, however, the problem of underappreciated translators who must insist on recognition doesn’t explain the actions of and reactions to Gen. The characters rarely take Gen for granted or force him into the shadows, suggesting that the audience of the novel is more aware of the translation situation. It would be ridiculous for Gen to insist on recognition because he is already squarely in the center of things, and, in most cases, those who use his translation services are fully aware of the importance and the difficulties of his job. There are a few moments where Gen does seem to be invisible, but he brings these instances upon himself by adhering to the ethical codes that are intended to keep translators invisible. Gen struggles not for recognition but for ways to deal with the overwhelming recognition he gets.

In *Bel Canto* people from all walks of life and many different countries acknowledge the crucial position of the translator, suggesting that globalization and translation are linked by a respect for language that transcends education, socioeconomic status, or nationality. Because they so often deal in bilingual interactions, it’s almost expected that the diplomats in the book have respect for translation. The fact that the diplomats are educated also furthers the prospect that they will understand the visibility of the translator—education is what translators and translationists are calling for, after all. Simon Thibault, the French ambassador, for example, often acknowledges Gen’s



powerful position, not only when he offers him up to be shot because he knows the terrorists would never harm their most useful hostage, but also when Gen acts as a linguistic liaison between the terrorists and the hostages. Noting Gen's particular ability to get what he wants because of his language skills, Thibault exults, "We're wasting him on kitchen help and knives. [. . .] We should send this young man to Northern Ireland. We should send him to the Gaza Strip" (186). Not only does Thibault acknowledge Gen's power, but his comment also suggests that translation fosters global understanding, that somehow Gen's translation skills could effect world peace.

The Vice President, also an educated man, agrees with Thibault's assessment that Gen's skills could improve the world. To top Thibault's claim that Gen could solve the problems in Northern Ireland and in the Gaza Strip, he suggests that Gen might be able to get them out of their hostage situation, a situation that they have long ago dismissed as hopeless (186). Again, he recognizes the powerful position that Gen inhabits when he compares the different ways the terrorists have treated Gen and him. "Me they hit in the face with a gun [. . .] To you they give a staff" (186). The word *staff* here refers to the fact the Gen has just arranged for a few of the terrorists to help them prepare dinner, but it has biblical overtones of power as well, as in the staff that Moses used to perform miracles, and the staff of the Lord that David proclaims in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm will provide comfort in the valley of the shadow of death. The word *staff* can also denote something that serves as a staple or mainstay, as in the idea that bread is "the staff of life." All these senses of the word suggest importance: only wealthy and important people have a staff of others to serve them, and only those who can wield God's power would have a staff like Moses'. Messner, too, a man who speaks four languages himself and handles difficult

political negotiations, calls Gen “the brightest one here” (302), showing that rather than being invisible in the shadows, Gen is appropriately visible as he translates. Even Gen’s employer, Mr. Hosokawa, realizes that although he had once taken Gen for granted, the translator is an inextricable part of his life. As he thinks about the new languages he hears everyday, “he could see now the full extent to which he had relied on Gen in the past, how much he relied on him now” (109). Apparently, those who were once prone to underappreciating translation are awakened when faced with an extraordinarily multi-lingual situation. It seems that because global interactions within the Vice President’s house are now everyday occurrences, the characters have a better idea of the difference between languages and cultures, which allows them to see the difficulties of translation and accept translations that acknowledge those difficulties rather than translations that hide them. In a similar way, the acceleration of globalization in recent years has made multi-lingual interactions more routine than they have been in the past. While people have always known that cultural and linguistic differences exist, everyday interactions in global situations have become commonplace rather than notable, which simultaneously makes people more familiar with translation and more cognizant of the power of translators.

Even more telling than the educated hostages who assign such power to Gen are those who have little or no education—the terrorists. Their “enormous respect” (184) for Gen’s translation skills suggests that it’s not education that will end the translator’s invisibility. These poverty-stricken, indigenous people have little access to education and yet they place Gen in much the same category as those with advanced degrees who have risen to importance in international business and in government. In some ways, they have

even more reason than the educated hostages to place a premium on translation; their own native language is Quechua, not Spanish, and in this Latin American country which their people have inhabited for centuries, they face language barriers daily. This double denial of language—namely, the oppression of their native tongue and their illiteracy in Quechua and Spanish—makes language even more precious to them. Carmen demonstrates her reverence for language when, despite her painful shyness and their natural animosity, she asks Gen to teach her to read and write in both Spanish and English. She associates language with power, security, safety, and comfort. Language is a priceless gift, and once Carmen has arranged to learn it, she thinks with amazement that “she had managed to ask Gen for everything she wanted” (159). It’s clear that literacy alone wasn’t the only thing that Carmen so desired, since she turns specifically to the translator because she wants to learn a new language. Not only does she value the ability to use more than one language, but through that desire she demonstrates that she does not expect the translator to be invisible. Instead, she asks him to be explicit about his translations so that she too can learn. From Carmen’s perspective, the more visible the translation, the better, which means that lack of education doesn’t necessarily equal expectations of the translator’s invisibility.

Just as translators and translationists have blamed a lack of education for the establishment of invisibility as a reigning value in translation, they have also accused religion of promoting the translator’s invisibility. The many examples of Bible translations that catered to the whims of the commissioner depended upon the translator’s ability to produce a translation that was fluent, transparent, and therefore credible, according to the traditional criteria for acceptable translation. Venuti specifically points

out Bible translationist Eugene Nida, who promotes a translation strategy Venuti calls “centered in Christian dogma” (23). Venuti finds any translation strategy based on an agenda problematic, though impossible to escape. He especially distrusts the restrictions Christianity has placed on translation throughout the last several hundred years because the Church, being a center of power, actually helped create the cult of invisible translation. While it’s true that various Christians have commissioned purposely slanted translations, that’s hardly an act that deserves being singled out for scorn. When Venuti promotes foreignized translations, he does the same thing. Just because Venuti’s slant is different doesn’t make his particular brand of language manipulation right or wrong. What makes his argument appealing is that he champions honesty about the translation process. Essentially, language manipulation during translation is impossible to avoid, but some strategies are more truthful about that manipulation. Invisibility pretends that there is no manipulation and that the translator doesn’t interfere with the text. Visibility acknowledges that the translator intervenes and invites the audience to examine the manipulation that happens. Because religion is traditionally interested in absolute truth, the ambiguity and relativism associated with the translator’s intervention can be disconcerting when associated with religious topics; thus Venuti sees religion as an arena especially disposed to propagating invisibility.

In contrast to Venuti’s claims that religion is particularly susceptible to dishonest translation, *Bel Canto* suggests that Christianity is no longer a stronghold of invisible translation and that the idea of religious transcendence can be extended to language. Father Arguedas, a priest among the hostages, clearly does not expect invisibility from Gen. As mentioned in Section 2, the priest’s “translator optional” policy for confession

shows his recognition that language can be transcended and that words themselves aren't the only place to locate meaning. Father Arguedas first learns this lesson early when, as a young priest, he confesses his love of opera as a sin. The wise priest who hears his confession explains that enjoying music is not sinful. The older man does recognize, however, that the words of opera, often expressions of passionate love or depraved lust, can be of questionable appropriateness for one in the ministry when he qualifies his statement that art is not a sin with, "Then again, some of the libretti . . . well, try to concentrate on the music. The music is the truth of opera" (52). He explicitly counsels Father Arguedas to ignore the non-priestly subjects of the opera in order to focus on the music, which, he contends, communicates the truth. This attitude, shared by at least two Catholic priests in the book, dethrones language as the best or even the preferred vehicle for expression and communication and instead celebrates the fact that there is much more to meaning-creation than forming words. These two priests certainly don't fit into Venuti's perception of religious figures as major propagators of linguistic absolutism. The priests' view of language as something that is able to be transcended extends easily to translation: if music can transcend language, then nuances, implications, and extra-textual elements also can convey more than what the words themselves express. And if meaning can be found outside language, in things such as hand gestures, intonation, and facial expressions, then it's impossible for a translation to capture perfectly a "true meaning" with only words. Father Arguedas, as the representative of religion in this microcosm of global society, acknowledges the limitations of language and therefore does not expect invisibility from Gen, although he recognizes when Gen attempts to remain invisible.

Like Father Arguedas, Roxane Coss uses religion as a way to see that words are not the only method of communication. When her accompanist is dying and Father Arguedas administers last rites, Roxane, herself a Catholic, knows exactly what is happening despite the language barrier. “She didn’t know the language, but the rituals of Catholicism were recognizable anywhere” (78). In this instance, neither Father Arguedas nor Roxane needs a translator because they both understand the “language” of Catholic ritual. Both characters are explicitly aware that although they don’t have a common language of words, they do have a common understanding of an extralinguistic sign system, a system for which a linguistic translation is inadequate. This movement outside of words is especially poignant because even though Roxane has been schooled in Catholicism, “she could remember not a single word of prayer” (78). For this reason, a translator would not have been useful in this situation anyway. Roxane has forgotten the words she needs in this situation, so there would be nothing for a translator to translate. She has not, however, forgotten the extralinguistic sign system of last rites, suggesting that perhaps some sign systems can be more powerful, or at least more memorable, than language itself.

Just because the characters in *Bel Canto* respect the translator and acknowledge his importance doesn’t mean they won’t question the translation process. In fact, an appreciation for translation seems to be positively correlated with a more pronounced awareness of the ways that translation can go wrong. Both hostages and terrorists are aware that translation is difficult, and at the same time they applaud Gen for his skills, they don’t hesitate to recognize that he is fallible and that their words may not be perfectly transferred into another language. By acknowledging that translation is not

always reliable, they also recognize that the translator is a part of the translation and that any misunderstanding or twist of interpretation goes through him. These characters are not the typical audience that Venuti claims would expect and insist on the translator's invisibility; their understanding of language and their expectations for translation don't seem to fit with Venuti's model of the last 400 years. These characters show an awareness of translation beyond the fluency that has been translation's only criterion, an awareness that includes content, not just style. Despite her initial expectations of a transparent translator (discussed in the previous section), Roxane shows this awareness in one poignant moment when she stops mid-yell to make sure the translation gets through: "[. . .] if you kill me, and make no mistake, you will have to—are you getting all this?" She said to the translator. 'The very wrath of God will come down on you and your people'" (84). During this intensely emotional and powerful speech, Roxane shows concern that her message get through the translation process. The translator is certainly not invisible at this moment when she puts her heated rebuke on hold to check that Gen is translating.

The people listening to Roxane's speech, however, acknowledge a shortcoming of translation when they recognize that the translation was unnecessary and redundant to the message. "Even though Gen translated [. . .] every person in the room understood what she was saying without him, in the same way they would have understood her singing Puccini in Italian" (84). Like Roxane's understanding of the sign system of Catholic ritual, the other hostages' understanding of her impassioned speech shows that the characters are generally aware that other sign systems can enhance and/or replace language. By recognizing that translation of language is not the only way to glean

meaning, they acknowledge that a translation is not necessarily transparent—that extralinguistic elements evade translation but can still carry meaning. Gen’s “reluctant” translation of Roxane’s words certainly didn’t carry the same weight as the world-famous soprano’s prophecy of God’s wrath, proving that a translator can change—in this case weaken—the message. One of the youngest terrorists also questions the validity of translation when he asks if there is a way to ensure that a translation equals the original. Upon hearing a retelling of an earlier conversation, Cesar incredulously responds,

“You don’t know that.”

“I do, too. The translator was there” [. . .]

“How do you know all of this?”

“I told you, the translator.”

“And how do you know he tells you the truth?” (271-272)

Cesar obviously doesn’t trust the translation process, making him unlikely to brush the translator off as invisible. He would, in fact, be more likely to want the translator to be as conspicuous as possible so as to be consulted about truth. Gen himself acknowledges that he can dilute or augment meaning through his translations. When a medical professional gives a detailed argument for why the terrorists shouldn’t shoot the body of a man who has already died, “Gen related the information, trying to choose words that would make the whole thing sound more gruesome rather than less, as he, too, did not want to see the poor accompanist shot” (83). Here Gen purposely adds nuance and connotation to the translation in hopes of persuading the terrorists against desecration of a corpse. In all three cases, the characters are aware of the translator’s presence and his intervention in the original, clearing marking him visible. The characters’ clear acknowledgement of the



difficulties of translation and of the translator's intervention into his translations suggests that contemporary audiences are not as naïve about language and translation as Venuti claims they are. In *Bel Canto*, the educated and uneducated, the hostages and the terrorists, the rich and the poor all understand that a fluent translation doesn't necessarily equal translational exactness and that the translator's contribution to multilingual communication is just as prominent as the original speaker's or the listener's.

### *Invitations to Visibility*

Translators' visibility and intervention are complexly related to the expectations held for them because the codes that enforce continued invisibility are explicitly intended to cater to an audience's expectations of invisibility. Translators who assume their audiences expect invisibility will do their best to remain invisible in order to please their clients and to maintain their professional demeanor. But if an audience doesn't expect invisibility, is a translator still obligated to deny his inevitable intervention? Gen struggles with this discrepancy between the codes he has been trained to abide by and the other characters who encourage Gen to disregard the codes. This lack of expectation of invisibility comes in many varieties. Characters like Cesar, who distrust translation, question an invisible translator and expect the translator to be visible in order to monitor perceptions of truth. Characters like Father Arguedas, who know the difficulties and power of language because of their own experiences with extralinguistic meaning, expect visibility because their expansive worldview acknowledges the problematic nature of translation and the value of the foreign. Characters like Roxane, however, seem to move from expectations of invisibility to a new desire for visibility as they discover the value of a translator's intervention. In several of the passages previously discussed, Roxane

shows surprise when her expectations of an invisible translator are not met, asking for clarification every time she encounters something foreign to her. At other moments, as she begins to understand that those foreign elements stem from differences between the original language and the target language rather than from a mistranslation, she invites Gen's interventions into his translations and encourages his visibility. What causes her changed perspective? Gen's insistence on visibility when he translates for her seems to resonate with her "bad habit of thinking like Americans" (222); that is, Roxane's strong individualism makes her the perfect person to encourage Gen to show his individuality as he translates, once she realizes the value of the translator's inevitable interventions. Translation, it seems, has just as much to do with the audience as it does the translator.

Roxane alludes to her newfound expectation that translators include their own personalities into their work when she talks about love. "Most of the time we're loved for what we can do rather than for who we are," she says. But she further explains that the latter is better "if someone loves you for what you can do then it's flattering, but why do you love them? If someone loves you for who you are then they have to know you, which means you have to know them" (224). This conversation on love stems from an exchange about Gen's position as translator and can easily be transferred to Roxane's understanding of translation. She implies that the people in Vice President's house admire Gen because of what he can do (translate), but she suggests that she admires him more for who he is (his intervention in the translation). If she truly has come to expect Gen to assert his personality into his translation, one could expect that she would invite him to do so, and in fact she does on many occasions. She definitely does not desire what Norman Shapiro describes in his explanation of translation: "Certainly my ego and

personality are involved in translating, and yet I have to try to stay faithful to the basic text in such a way that my own personality doesn't show" (qtd. in Venuti 8). She instead asks for Gen's opinions and encourages him to offer advice while he translates. During the exchange in which the Vice President asks Roxane, through Gen, if she will help cook dinner, Roxane stops to ask a question obviously directed at Gen rather than the person with whom she is conversing. She does the same thing during her exchange with Fyodorov when she specifically asks Gen "Do you have any idea where this story is going?" (215). In the middle of this serious conversation, Roxane invites Gen to share his opinion and give his predictions about the content of his translation, blatantly asking him to step outside his invisibility. Gen's intervention allows her to better understand Gen's position in the conversation. Having more information about Gen's translational intervention helps her to make more informed decisions because she doesn't presume that the original request and the translation she receives are one and the same. In addition to leading to more informed perceptions of meaning, Roxane's invitations to visibility seem to be her way of respecting and acknowledging the importance of the translator by revealing that she thinks of him as a person in his own right.

Gen responds to Roxane's insistence on visibility by acknowledging her invitations and allowing his personality to pepper the translation instead of pretending he isn't there. To Roxane's comment that perhaps she shouldn't be offended by what she perceives as the Vice President's sexist assumption, Gen replies, "I think that would be wise," clearly violating the idea of impartiality found in most codes of ethics for translators. Most ethical codes require that "the Interpreter [. . .] shall not allow personal opinions to interfere with his/her duties nor [. . .] make recommendations"

(www.LanguageLine.com) or, in other words, translators “shall not counsel, refer, give advice, or express personal opinions” (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services). Gen is again in breach of these codes when he jokes with Roxane during her conversation with the Vice President: “Should I tell him you don’t sew?” (181). With this comment, not only does he violate the rules for impartiality, but he also ignores the guidelines for completeness—“Interpreters shall not add to what is said nor provide unsolicited explanation” (www.LanguageLine.com)—and for accuracy—“Interpreters/translators shall [. . .] conserv[e] the tone and spirit of the source language message” (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services). By making a joke about this cultural misunderstanding, Gen steps far outside the bounds of invisibility, drawing attention to himself and making a personal connection with Roxane. He also leaves the Vice President out of the joke, which could be interpreted as both unprofessional and culturally insensitive, two more traits specifically forbidden in most ethical codes. With just a few sentences, Gen has violated most of the codes he has been trained to adhere to, and yet he does so at the invitation of his audience. Given that the ethical codes that enforce invisibility were originally intended to meet the expectations of translators’ audiences, Roxane’s desire for a visible translator suggests a discrepancy in the codes. If contemporary audiences no longer expect invisibility, one could argue that translators no longer need those codes to keep their jobs safe. The audiences in *Bel Canto* do not use fluency or transparency as their chief points of evaluation but instead look for the translator’s contribution to meaning-creation. It’s as if they recognize a professional translator’s promise not to intervene in meaning for the lie that it is. Rather than desiring a false sense of a translator’s non-intervention, the characters in *Bel Canto* invite the

translator to honestly acknowledge his intervention in order to foster a better understanding of that intervention. To better understand the translator's contribution, Roxane and many of the other characters invite Gen to make his presence and his opinion known while he translates.

Ironically, breaking the codes that were meant to promote cultural sensitivity and avoid misunderstanding is perhaps the best way to achieve those ends because visible translation allows the translator to mediate without having to hide behind imposed and artificial restrictions. Gen's intervention into the conversation about women cooking lets Roxane know that she need not take offense at this difference in gender expectations. By telling her it's wise to "bear cultural differences in mind" (180), he uses his position as translator to be a mediator not only between languages but also between cultures. Gen acts as a linguistic and cultural bridge in this situation, but he does so only by violating the specifics of the ethical codes according to context and situation. He, in effect, translates culture for Roxane, and yet he is honest about the fact that he intervenes. Gen takes it upon himself to judge what is and isn't necessary to translate, often omitting certain phrases or clauses, something forbidden by translation codes. During a particularly heated discussion between the terrorists and the negotiator, Gen exercises this judgment, deciding that "the second part of the sentence [. . .] was irrelevant and so he left it off" (61). In another instance of negotiations, Gen only "translated the first half of the statement" (42); his "unethical" omissions prove that he no longer pretends to be impartial, nor observes those codes that would make him appear so. In abandoning his impartiality and in refusing to adhere to traditional codes of conduct for translators, Gen is able to act like the linguistic mediator that he is, rather than pretend to be a translingual

copy machine. Not only is his deliberate intervention more honest than a pretension of non-intervention, at least for an audience who knows he intervenes, but because his audience knows of his intervention, they demonstrate more awareness of the communicative situation and can take Gen's perspective into account.

In other cases, Gen's liberation from invisibility takes the form of commentary in his translations, sometimes even without a deliberate invitation like Roxane's. When Gen comments on the Vice President's compliment to Roxane with a "Very impressive," the Vice President gives him "a look that made it clear he [the Vice President] had no interest in editorials" (179). And yet during the same exchange, the Vice President finds Gen's editorializing very helpful. Without consulting Roxane, Gen clarifies to the Vice President that Roxane really doesn't know how to cook, and without consulting the vice President or Thibault he suggests Thibault as someone who would have skills in the kitchen. Both instances of code-breaking intervention lead the Vice President to the solution to his problem and eventually to his praising Gen as a translator and as a mediator. Even for someone like the Vice President who originally seems to resent the translator's visibility, Gen's intervention into his translation proves productive and helpful, a result of Gen's concern for his audience and his newly acknowledged responsibility to foster total understanding and not just to translate linguistic meaning.

The Vice President isn't the only one who associates Gen with the usefulness of rule-breaking. The young terrorist Ishmael recognizes the muddy distinction between acceptable breeches of protocol and those violations that would be punished:

Some things were against the rules, rules that were memorized and repeated in drills. Some rules (speaking respectfully to a superior officer)

stood firm. Other rules (never speaking to a hostage unless it was to correct him) weakened and fell away. (230)

As he deliberates about how to discern whether it would be an acceptable break in code to play a game of chess with a hostage, he immediately thinks of Gen's ability of "making things [even breeches in protocol] seem especially important" (230). Amidst major changes in rules that had once seemed set in stone, Ishmael admires Gen, the person who has broken the most rules. The fact that Ishmael recognizes the rule-revisions that Gen makes shows that he does not have an essentialist view of translation, as Venuti claims most translation audiences have. Rather than being appalled at Gen's blatant visibility and his willingness to revise traditional expectations, Ishmael sees changes in the rules as something important and admirable. Ishmael exemplifies a contemporary audience that recognizes and welcomes openly interpretative translations.

#### *Traditional Ethical Codes vs. New Visibility*

Despite the other characters' educated and uneducated encouragement of Gen's visibility and despite their awareness of the translator's intervention, Gen has a hard time translating in accordance with those expectations. Because his audiences' expectations promote and effect breeches of the ethical codes to which Gen has so strictly adhered, he faces plenty of cognitive dissonance as he works out his visible position. Many awkward translation moments are peppered with what we can assume are Gen's thoughts given to us through the third-person narrator. In several cases, Gen mentally recites the codes of ethics to himself, as if in moments of temptation to break the codes, he rehearses to himself the rules he has been trained to observe. When Gen thinks his employer should talk to Roxane, he mentions his opinion, but then "Gen did not press his point. He waited.

It was not his role to advise Mr. Hosokawa” (90). When Gen blatantly breaks the code that insists that the translator maintain the same grammatical position as the speaker, he acknowledges his breach of code with the thought that the change is “something a translator should never do” (97). Clearly Gen is not entirely comfortable with breaking protocol, and initially is hyper-aware of the times when he does.

As Gen begins to break the code more frequently, his decisions about whether to follow code become based upon his own assessment of the situation; he begins to distinguish between the rules of the code and the ethics behind them. One passage illustrates his movement from rule-based decisions to ethics-based decisions: “It should not be Gen’s responsibility, deciding what was best for her, what to tell and what not to tell. He did not know her. He did not know how she would take such a thing” (83). The first sentence in this passage acknowledges the rule that translators are not to interfere with the situations they work in, but the second two sentences explain that the reason Gen doesn’t want to interfere is not that he wants to obey the rules but that he doesn’t feel equipped to intervene properly. He refrains from breaking protocol because he doesn’t know Roxane, not because he believes in the rules. By the end of the book, Gen deliberately discards his rule-based ethics in favor of ethics-based ethics, meaning that he no longer relies on rules to dictate his behavior. Instead he relies on his own sense of propriety in the given situation, suggesting that the professional codes of ethics may not be applicable or appropriate for all translators in all cases. The narrator tells us that “Gen was born to learn. But these last months had turned him around and now Gen saw there could be as much virtue in letting go of what you knew as there had ever been in gathering new information. He worked as hard at forgetting as he had ever worked to



learn” (304). Much of what he works hard to forget, though not explicit in the text, are the old rules and his previous training in translation. Although living in a multi-lingual house for four months hones his translation skills to the sharpest they have ever been—“It was an opportunity if one chose to see it that way, so many native speakers in one room” (172)—Gen purposefully forgets his devotion to the codes that he learned along with the languages. This deliberate forgetting demonstrates that Gen is not haphazardly rebelling against traditional translation rules, nor is he motivated by an isolated desire to radically alter professional translation. Gen’s calculated visibility results from a cautious realization that the traditional codes of ethics don’t adequately respond to his audience’s expectations. The fact that Gen must work to forget the old protocol shows that not only was his previous ethical training deeply engrained, but also that Gen feels the changes are important enough to work hard for.

Although Gen’s cautious hesitancy about visible translations becomes less frequent as he becomes more comfortable with his visibility and his rule-breaking, the third-person narrative style of *Bel Canto* reflects his initial ambivalence. Sometimes in the text, Gen approaches invisibility in the narrative itself, meaning that the structural choices of Patchett’s narrator forces the issue of invisibility both on Gen and on the reader. Although we know Gen is translating, the text makes no references to him, and any ruptures of flow or meaning are hidden by the third-person narrator. A conversation between Roxane (who speaks no Japanese) and Mr. Hosokawa (who speaks only Japanese), for example, is reported this way:

He told her he had declined many invitations from the host country but then agreed to come once they told him she would be there. He told her he

had never had any plans of helping this country. He told her he was a great admirer of her work and named the cities he had seen her in. He told her he must be in some part responsible for the death of her accompanist. (93-94)

All this telling (“he told . . . he told . . . he told”), along with Roxane’s responses, referred to later in the text, must have been translated for readers, making the conversation twice as long and possibly tedious. For the purposes of the story, however, the translation is transparent and the text does not emphasize Gen’s work. As far as readers know, Gen’s translation was crystal clear, and he achieved the translator’s desired invisibility. Of course this technique is a wise stylistic choice: had the translator been conspicuous here, readers may have reacted as the hostages did when trying to plan their escape, getting frustrated and giving up before communicating at all. But this stylistic element also points to Gen’s absence and takes for granted the accuracy of his translation. This particular account of invisibility also gives a noticeably one-sided description of the communicative situation. Not only is Gen invisible, but so is Roxane. Mr. Hosokawa is the only agent in this paragraph and is thus the only one credited with creating meaning. Between the lines, both Gen and Roxane had a great deal to do with the meaning of this situation, but this account isolates Mr. Hosokawa. In the same way that this paragraph leaves Roxane’s contribution out, so does an expectation of the translator’s invisibility leave the translator out. Roxane’s invisibility in this paragraph serves as a parallel for the translator’s invisibility and further emphasizes the times when Gen’s translations are deliberately visible.

Other places in the text include small phrases that let the reader know about the translator's presence: "Father Arguedas explained to Gen, who explained to Mr. Hosokawa, that what they were looking at [ . . . ] was called *garúa*" (106). This could easily have been described in the same way that Mr. Hosokawa's story was described, skipping the translator by saying "Father Arguedas explained to Mr. Hosokawa," but instead this sentence points out the mediator and acknowledges the translation. Other phrases that are small in the text but signal the presence or absence of the translator without making the translation process explicit include "while Gen translated" (234), "He did not ask for Gen to translate" (154), "so Gen related the message" (153), and "let Gen translate" (152). Sometimes conversations that have nothing to do with Gen and could just as well be described without him are interspersed with pauses in the conversations while Gen stops "to remember the word for *concienzudo* in English" (101) or when he "looked at [Messner] and then he translated the message" (298). More often than not, the narrator accounts for Gen's presence in multilingual interactions, but the inconsistency of the references to Gen's omnipresence mirrors the inconsistency Gen feels as he transitions from invisibility to visibility.

As Gen gains confidence in the realization that translating "is no longer his profession" (280) and he thus needn't follow the codes, he finds that his ability to help people increases. He shows people how to handle their own transactions, facilitating independence from rather than dependence on a translator. When Fyodorov asks for Gen's opinion about Roxane's response to his story (another invitation to insert his opinion into translation), Gen tells him, "You can tell as well as I can" (214). Rather than answering Fyodorov directly, Gen encourages him to be independent, to use his own

knowledge and sensitivities, despite his dependence on the translator. He disables the possibility that Fyodorov can blame mistranslation for Roxane's less-than-hoped-for reaction to his declaration of love. He encourages Fyodorov to interpret the extralinguistic signals on his own. Gen shows a similar encouragement of independence when he tells Cesar "Once you learn English you can tell her that yourself" (285). Gen no longer feels restricted by the ethical codes that have forced him to keep his opinion to himself, and he acknowledges that Cesar will have to learn English in order to achieve his potential as a world-class singer. It's not that Gen has abandoned the strong ethics that professional translators uphold, but he finds that the underlying ideal of enabling communication is better served when he realizes that he need not be confined to his profession in his unique situation. He comes to much the same conclusion that Venuti makes in the final chapter of *The Translator's Invisibility*: "I am encouraging [. . .] a utopian faith in the power of translation to make a difference [. . . in] new cultural relations" (313). Venuti sees that translation and changes in cultural relations go together. He wants translators to catalyze and effect those cultural changes. Although Gen finds a similar connection between cultural relations and translations, he comes to this conclusion the other way around. As a translator, Gen responds to new cultural relations by disillusioning himself about his previously learned translation strategies, instead of, as Venuti encourages translators to do, attempting to create new cultural relations by changing his translation strategies in order to disillusion people about translation. Gen certainly faces a new culture, one that expects him to be visible. And contrary to the implications of professional codes of ethics, his visible position can be claimed without sacrificing ethics. In fact, it may be that to act ethically, Gen has to disobey many of the

specifications of translators' ethical codes and become visible. By refusing to hide his own intervention behind a false-objectivity, and thereby complying with the expectations of his audience, Gen embraces the contribution he makes to multilingual exchanges and becomes ethically visible.

Despite many years of invisibility and despite translators' complaints of underappreciation, *Bel Canto* suggests that the contemporary moment has lent translators a great amount of respect from people from various nations, religions, and socioeconomic situations. Globalization has opened the curtain to reveal the translator's visible position, making contemporary audiences aware of the difficulties of translation and willing to appreciate, question, and invite the translator's intervention. The invisibility that audiences expected from translators for centuries is now replaced by invitations to present an honest acknowledgement of the impossibility of invisibility and thereby to promote cultural sensitivity. Gen exemplifies a translator who recognizes that traditional translation codes no longer work for a contemporary audience and who breaks away from the codes by acknowledging his intervention into his translations. He discovers that ethical translations are best created by discarding traditional ethical codes in favor of a visible translator.

#### Section 5. Implications

As I have explored the connections between the history of translation, current translation theory and practice, and the fictional translator in *Bel Canto*, I find that the resulting implications about translation can be applied in three successively expansive areas. Certainly *Bel Canto* demonstrates that translation *within* literature can be just as valuable an arena for translationists to explore as the traditional study of the translation of

literature. Through *Bel Canto*, Patchett provides a literary thought experiment about the social position of the contemporary translator and much-needed ways to revise the current professional codes. The salient issues of translation in this novel, however, are not limited to translators or those who read translations; the translation issues in *Bel Canto* also apply to writers of contemporary fiction. Through the translator figure, Patchett provides a way for literature to account for the difficult issues of globalization and multilingual interactions in a reader-friendly way. Finally, the translation issues in *Bel Canto* exhibit a model for effective, on-going evaluation of professional codes in any discipline.

#### *Organic Changes for Translators*

As a thought experiment on the contemporary status of translation, *Bel Canto* suggests that although translators now hold a visible position within globalization, their current ethical codes enforce an old concept of the translator's visibility. Because translators necessarily cast a translation according to their own biases, translation can either facilitate the breaking down of stereotypes and help people overcome their linguistic barriers, or it can reinforce stereotypes and harden linguistic barriers. According to the old codes of invisibility, translators were to ignore their inevitable intervention, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish the slants of the translations they received, whether those biases were welcome or not. Gen's struggle to find balance between the old codes and his contemporary visibility reveals that the current ethical codes for translators don't take into account the audience's increased linguistic awareness or their desire to discern the translator's intervention. The codes intended to help Gen maintain invisibility in order to meet the expectations of those who receive his

translations don't cater to the needs of an audience who expects to see the translator's presence in multi-lingual interactions. The novel suggests, as do most contemporary translationists, that these outdated codes should be changed to better reflect the translator's position and to better meet the expectations of contemporary society.

*Bel Canto* diverges, however, from current translation theory in terms of how changes in the professional codes should be enacted. Although *Bel Canto*'s casting of translation codes as outdated and in need of revision dovetails with the premises set forth by Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility*, the reasons for those changes, as displayed by Gen in *Bel Canto*, differ significantly. Venuti's call to action asks that translators educate their audiences by resisting traditional translation methods by foregrounding linguistic and cultural differences—a “foreignizing” translation strategy. Venuti's suggestions for translators are full of phrases that characterize a struggle for rights and an insistence on acknowledgement, such as “translators must [. . .] force a revision of the codes,” “Translators will do well to insist on their authorial relation,” and “[translators] should demand [their translations are] an ‘original work of authorship’” (311). Given the long-standing tradition of and expectation for transparent translations by an invisible translator, Venuti's ideas appeal to those who recognize that language in general and translation specifically are much more complicated than one-to-one correlations—and also to those who believe that the general population doesn't have that view of translation. *Bel Canto*, on the other hand, puts translators in a much more reactive, and I believe more ethical, role. Rather than demanding changes in the ethical codes and insisting that his audiences recognize his intervention in translation, actions that echo the previous insistence on invisibility, Gen finds that his audiences require changes in the

code in order to accommodate their already-developed recognition of the translator's visibility. While the immediate results of Venuti's model and Gen's fictional experience are the same (revised codes and visible translators), Gen presents a possible situation that avoids both another authoritarian reinscription of translation values and a "translators vs. audience" mentality. Venuti demands that translators educate their audiences, but Gen finds that globalization has already educated his audience and that they can work together to establish visible translation strategies.

The changes in translation that Gen discovers in *Bel Canto* also suggest that creating the desired revolution in translation may not be as difficult as many translationists claim. Since translators are generally a people highly concerned with following protocol, they, like Gen, may find that their previous training in invisibility will be an advantage as they become visible. Gen's dogged efforts to uphold the old codes, even while total observance is impossible and while those around him encourage his breeches of protocol, show how intensely translators' codes of ethics are engrained, but also suggest the tenacity with which professional translators try to act responsibly and morally as they translate. As Gen adjusts his translation strategies, he shows that the same intense concern he previously applied to professional codes can be applied to making his own judgments of how best to approach a translation situation.

Translators are also generally people highly concerned with ethics. They may, like Gen, find that a translator's visibility is actually a more honest and therefore more ethical position than traditional invisibility. As Gen begins to accept the visibility that his audience has given him, he realizes that the translator's intervention can promote cultural understanding and compassion, two traits that he deems more "ethical" than maintaining



his professional ethical codes. This change in motivation suggests that a translator concerned with ethics would not promote a false invisibility; instead, truly ethical translators will acknowledge that all translation is interpretation and that those who receive translation are entitled to and can benefit from foreignized and visible translation.

That's not to say that translators need push their visibility agendas to benefit their audiences. Rather, globalization has made contemporary society aware of linguistic difference and of the inevitability of the translator's intervention; *Bel Canto* suggests that contemporary audiences expect visibility of their translators and will not accept outdated ethical codes that enforce a false objectivity. For translators and translationists, this characterization of the translator's position implies that revisions in the codes may be more organic than the fight for translation rights they describe, because global audiences appreciate the centrality of translation and consequently realize the translator's visibility. Not only does the audience's recognition of the translator's visibility make changes in the codes necessary and natural, but the same intensity that translators currently apply to meeting the perceived expectations of an audience can be appropriated to meeting these new expectations that necessitate a new method of ethical translation.

The visibility of the translator in *Bel Canto* also implies a partnership between translators and audiences that is not hindered by traditional categories. Even though Ann Patchett set her story in South America, the book could easily have been anywhere else in the developing world, given the diversity of languages spoken by the characters. The text destroys any particular setting (although simultaneously presenting a potentially essentialized view of Third World countries) when it refers to the blatantly unnamed country simply as "the host country" (2). The glaring absence of a specified nation dilutes

the concept of nationality and suggests that any poor country could be host to the novel's plot in the same way that *Bel Canto*'s model of translation dilutes the uneven distinction between translator and audience and allows both categories to contribute to the translation situation. Patchett also disables time by giving the characters monotonous schedules outside normal routines and by limiting the action of the novel almost entirely to one house, and further, to a few rooms in that house. A similar generalizing effect happens between languages because they are all filtered through Gen. Not that Gen ignores linguistic and cultural difference, however; as Gen becomes more comfortable with his visibility and begins to take responsibility for his intervention into meaning, he openly acknowledges that he does intervene and that true equivalence between languages is not possible. The fact that all the languages go through the translation process reflects that no language (and no speaker) is necessarily privileged over any other in the Vice President's house. Linguistic boundaries, national borders, the distinction between translator and audience, and even the distinction between hostage and terrorist are dissolved in *Bel Canto*, creating a compassionate brand of globalization that both acknowledges and blurs traditional categories. This blurring liberates translators from traditional invisibility, allowing them to openly acknowledge their inevitable and desirable intervention. It also liberates translators from the burden of demanding a translation revolution because in this leveled version of globalization, the audience is just as invested in changing the old codes as the translator is, making the shift from invisibility to visibility that much easier.

The way *Bel Canto* equalizes the translator and the audience also enables a conscientiousness responsibility for both parties. The more honest and more visible

version of translation that Gen discovers in *Bel Canto*, and that Venuti promotes, fosters in the audience the responsibility to acknowledge the translator's presence and to be aware of intervention. The audience's accountability is especially poignant in *Bel Canto*'s version of the translator's visibility because the audiences themselves ask for and expect it rather than having it forced on them by the translator. This positive cooperation is important because it suggests to translators that they can work together with their audiences rather than imposing visibility and demanding recognition. This isn't to say that *Bel Canto* presents a more "accurate" version of current translation issues, or that Venuti's theories are necessarily outdated; rather, *Bel Canto* demonstrates a possibility that may be more compassionate, more democratic, and more appealing to translators.

#### *Translation as a Tool for Contemporary Writers*

Translators aren't the only people for whom the issues of translation in *Bel Canto* apply: the novel offers ramifications that go beyond translation itself to include contemporary writers. The translator's visibility in *Bel Canto* exemplifies how translation can be useful in contemporary American literature in general. Because the United States has no official language, and because America's presence in global markets increases every year, American literature will naturally have to deal with the presence of multiple languages, even if English remains its primary language. Almost 18 percent of residents of the United States speak a language other than English at home, and there are around 176 languages spoken in the country today (Finegan 5), which makes translation a pressing issue in many fields, including literary studies. As an American journalist/novelist who deals daily with globalization, Patchett wouldn't ignore the linguistic diversity of her characters, nor could she make her novel a multi-lingual text.

Instead, she has created a translator who serves both as a mediator for the characters in the novel and for readers. Gen's presence signals when multi-lingual interactions take place and indicates that the process of translation occurs, without actually translating anything. Patchett has also shown that translation issues apply not just to translators and comparative literature scholars, but also to American novel-writers.

In contrast to American authors like Sandra Cisneros or Cormac McCarthy who write bilingual texts that have whole sections in languages other than English, Patchett uses a different method of accounting for the many languages that show up in her text. Of course, it would be rather unwieldy for *Bel Canto* to be written in the 12 or more languages of the characters—a book of that sort would have a very small audience, although it might be a fascinating experiment on making the readers feel like a character in the plot. She could have written the book in several simultaneous languages and then used Gen to translate for her readers, which would again put readers inside the story as people who need a constant translator but would make the book twice as long and would create a research nightmare for Patchett, who probably doesn't know those 12 languages. Instead, *Bel Canto* has Gen as a central character for both the plot of the novel and for reader-accessibility. As a structural technique, the visible translator provides a device for monolingual literature to account for multilingual situations in a way that acknowledges the linguistic interpretation that occurs between languages without running into the specifics of those interpretations. Not only do the characters within the novel encourage the translator's visibility, but that visibility makes the novel as a whole both readable and linguistically consistent with current theories in translation that celebrate the translator's intervention. Because *Bel Canto* is written entirely in English (save a few isolated words

that are quickly defined), it isolates the difficulties of translation without the distraction of translation itself.

*Translation as an Example of Effective Self-Evaluation*

Finally, although the novel itself never can completely escape essentialism, in a broader sense of anti-essentialism and boundary-shifting, the translation issues in *Bel Canto* show that the results of breaking down previously strict categories can lead to an increased ethical awareness and compassion in various arenas that have nothing to do with translation. Gen's struggle to reconcile his training in the old codes with the shifting expectations of his audiences demonstrates that translation isn't only a tool for creating new understanding but is also a field, like many others, that can benefit from some paradigm changes. The translation strategies that translators have traditionally considered ethical don't work for Gen. His desire to act ethically at first results in his determined attempts to maintain the old codes, but as he discovers that his audience doesn't expect invisibility, he revises his definition of ethical translation and, consequently, his translation strategies. Basically the boundary-dissolving and shifting that take place between languages, cultures, and countries in *Bel Canto* also takes place within Gen's professional understanding. Whereas Gen previously upheld a strict division between his translations and his personality, opinions, and intervention, by the end of the book, he has moved his position as a translator from the category of "invisible" to "visible," and he acknowledges that the distinctions between translation and his opinions are not so clear cut, nor need they be. The advantage of these shifts in Gen's understanding of his field is that Gen can more freely make his own choices rather than tenaciously abiding by rules that stifle his opinions. This shift in strategy also benefits Gen's audience by enabling

them to see his personality and giving them a more honest perspective on the communicative situation. A willingness, like Gen's, to adapt to audience expectation and to place the intricacies of an individual situation over traditional and absolute rules could allow many disciplines the same liberation from outdated practices. Promoting a partnership between experts and lay people can result in improvements for everyone.

The recursive nature of these translational paradigm shifts—that is, that translation can change and be changed by the audience—demonstrates that inquiries into traditional systems must be self-reflective and cooperative. Gen can't help those around him take responsibility for their communication if he doesn't change his own translation strategies; neither can he change his approaches to translation without the encouragement of those who expect his visibility. Translation is both affected by and affects the communicative situation, much as Barthes has suggested that texts affect and are affected by audiences. Translation adds a third party to the author and the listener that is just as active in the creation of meaning, although the traditional western model of translation has dictated that the author and the listener ignore the contributions of the translator. To introduce a more accurate model of translation, Venuti suggests that translators force their way into listeners' perceptions by being more conspicuous in their translations. *Bel Canto*, on the other hand, suggests that listeners have opened up a place in their perceptions for translators, and that translators' main task is to adapt their translation strategies to that space. Again, *Bel Canto's* treatment of translation suggests one way for various arenas to deal with globalization. The increased knowledge of the general population is best met with increased responsibility for all parties because any change in protocol will affect and be affected by those to whom the change applies.

As both translators and those who receive translation become aware of the translation process, they make room for compassion and for understanding others. Gen specifically acknowledges that he has come to love all the other characters, terrorists and hostages alike. The caring, family-like atmosphere that Patchett creates in the Vice-President's house toward the end of the book coincides with Gen's increasing visibility and his change in translation strategy. The new self-awareness and new expectations result in increased bi-directional responsibility—that is, Gen's responsibility for his translational intervention and his audience's responsibility to acknowledge that intervention. Gen's self-awareness also results in increased compassion, evident in the cross-cultural and cross-lingual relationships that develop, both romantic and brotherly. As an example for humanity in general, *Bel Canto* shows that deliberately exploring tradition can enable responsibility and compassion. For Gen and the other characters in *Bel Canto*, a self-conscious inquiry into traditional assumptions leads to a shift in professional protocol which leads to increased understanding of cultural diversity and linguistic difference. This equation works the other direction as well: the characters' general increase in understanding of linguistic difference leads to changes in codes of ethics that foster self-awareness and continued evaluation of those codes. Finally, the positive net result of the interplay between increased understanding and questioning tradition suggests a world view that champions a responsible, ongoing evaluation of traditional assumptions. Tradition dictated that Gen's desire to act ethically could best be served by being invisible and creating fluent translations so as not to appear to interfere with the author's original meaning. With new understanding of the nature of language and the ways people create meaning, Gen discovers that the best way for him to act

ethically may well be to reject the professional codes of ethics and to instead take a visible and responsible role in his own translations. Through Gen's eventual willingness to step away from tradition, he becomes more honest and improves communication between languages and culture. As readers of the novel follow Gen's self-evaluation and his increased compassion, they too are presented with an increased responsibility for their own professional conduct in terms of outside expectations and are given a type to follow.

The idea of constant evaluation and willingness to take responsibility for revisions in tradition can apply beyond the realm of translation. Many fields might increase compassion and responsibility, as Gen does, by measuring professional codes against his own assessment of situational propriety and responsibility. That's not to promote a wholesale rejection of tradition, as postmodernism has been accused of doing, but rather to encourage self-awareness (as opposed to blind acceptance of tradition) as the preferred way to evaluate effectiveness. Gen does not randomly or rebelliously cast out his carefully learned and carefully designed ethical training, but deliberately and cautiously changes his strategies in order to better achieve the outcome that the traditional codes were intended to create. Not only is Gen a model for possible revisions in translation theory and professional codes, but he also presents a cautiously malleable mindset that enables compassion and understanding.

As a microcosm of the globalized world and postmodern (anti-essentialist) mentality, the translation issues in *Bel Canto* introduce an ethical stance for dealing with globalization in a way that equally distributes responsibility for meaning among listeners, speakers, and translators. The translation that happens in the novel also demonstrates a flexible and productive way of evaluating traditional assumptions in order to improve



communication. Unlike Venuti's framework of translators who must one-sidedly demand attention and force breaks in tradition, *Bel Canto* suggests a cooperative evaluation of tradition that cautiously assesses translation strategies in terms of both the translator and the audience. In the spirit of global communication, *Bel Canto* presents translation as a multi-dimensional communicative exchange that, with deliberate changes in the promotion of ethics, can enable international understanding and serve as an example of productive evaluation of tradition.

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