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# Norms and Geeks and Pigs: Targeting the Source

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*Forget all this talk about translation “norms.” When was the last time you held a norm in your hand, or heard one call to you from across the room? Norms are fictions, hypotheses, methodological constructs whose existence cannot be proven, only imagined.*

Doug Robinson, “Double Binds of Translation: Norms vs. Freedom”, [home.olemiss.edu/~djr/pages/.../db-norms.html](http://home.olemiss.edu/~djr/pages/.../db-norms.html)

Katherine Dunn’s pyrotechnically inventive novel *Geek Love*<sup>1</sup> centres on the Binewski family’s freak show in a travelling circus, the Carnival Fabulon. Binewski juniors include Oly, a bald Albino hunchback dwarf, the novel’s narrator; Electra and Iphigenia, svelte and beautiful Siamese twins, and Arturo the Aqua boy, with flippers for limbs. All of them were lovingly procreated as freaks by the use of drugs, insecticides, and radioisotopes, “spar[ing] no expense” (p. 8), since their deformity/difference was considered a sound, stock-market-proof investment, according to their parents: “What greater gift could you offer your children than an ability to earn a living just by being themselves?” (p. 7) as their mother Lil puts it. Occasionally the experiments went wrong, and the child was practically normal: “It was a disappointment when I emerged with such commonplace deformities”, Oly confides; in her brother, Fortunato’s, case it was a near-disaster: “I did everything, Al ... [...] What happened?” Lil wails (p. 64); “Despite the expensive radium treatments incorporated in his design, Fortunato had a close call in being born to apparent normalcy. That drab state so depressed my enterprising parents that they immediately prepared to abandon him on the doorstep of a closed service station as we passed through [...] Wyoming late one night” (pp. 8–9). Fortunately (hence his name), as they were packing his abandonment trousseau the baby sucked his mother towards him and clamped onto her, using the telekinetic force over objects and people which became his trademark and made of him “my parents’ masterwork”.

The idea had come to their father when he was “troubled by business boondoggles”: a moment of financial crisis. Wandering around the experimental beds of a municipal garden, admiring their “designed [...] striped and layered” roses, it occurred to him that “the oddity of them was beautiful, and [...] contrived to give them value”. Children too, he realized, “could be designed [...], a rose garden worthy of a man’s interest!” (p. 9). A close and for many years happy family was soon created (““family values’ will never be the same”, as the book blurb remarks) and the first chapter closes with them all “cozy in

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (New York: Vintage, 2002 [1983]). All page references are to this edition and will be incorporated in brackets in the text.

the warm booth of the van, eating popcorn and drinking cocoa and feeling like Papa's roses" (p. 10).

Their father and mother had no such gifts (Lil was originally "a water-cool aristocrat from the fastidious side of Boston's Beacon Hill" [p. 7] before she ran off and joined the circus), and consequently had to work hard for their living. Lil found herself having to improvise the "profession" of geek, and the novel opens with her children's favourite bedtime story:

When your mama was the geek, my dreamlets, she made the nipping off of noggins such a crystal mystery that the hens themselves yearned towards her, waltzing around her, hypnotized with longing. "Spread your lips, sweet Lil", they'd cluck, "And show us your choppers." [...] She'd shake her star-white hair and the bitten-off chicken head would skew off into the corner while she dug her rosy little fingernails in and lifted the flopping, jittering carcass like a golden goblet and sipped! (pp. 3, 6)

The family, then, flaunt their difference, spearheaded by Arturo, self-denominated Art, or Arty, who quickly takes over the (meta-)narration. Like all his family, but more, Art loathes what he dubs "norms": everybody with the *normal* complement of limbs in the *normal* places: people who, as it were, go quietly about their communicative business without foregrounding themselves as signifiers within the social text. He berates his little sister for being scared by a ghost story: "Hey, nit squat! Those are written by norms to scare norms!" and personally, systematically "practise[s] hate-forms on the norms" (pp. 46, 78). There is an incident later in the novel when a norm tries to gun down Art's whole family, but his norm-aversion is spontaneous and self-inciting, and was already entrenched when, as a three-year-old, he would relish making eyes at the audience through his glass tank, then "paddle off, revealing the turd trailing from his muscular little buttocks" (p. 8).

Publicly, Art makes a show of relishing the signifiers of his deformed, deviant body, decking it out in a sequined swimsuit and swimming to the top of a giant tank through pink spot-lights and champagne bubbles; he then props his fins on the rim and cosies down with the audience for a chat. "It was a central charm of [Arty's] act", his brother says, "that, though he looked and acted alien [...] he would prop his chin on the lip of the tank to talk 'just like folks'" (p. 49). But Art, we know, hates "folks", hates "norms", and indeed his brother cautions us "Only it wasn't quite like folks". Observing (and resenting) his brother's literal power to move people, Art perfects his own verbal form. His chats become incantatory and bardic, nurturing a "quasi-religious cult of Arturism" (p. 227) to which the norms convert in their droves; craving full communion with him through a shared sign-system, they beg to surgically shed their normality, their limbs, joint by joint, until they are slithering torsos. Like mother like son: off with their chickens' heads, off with their norms' limbs.

So what is it with Art and norms? Has he got it in for Gideon Toury, Theo Hermans, and systems theorists generally? Has he, perhaps, heard Toury say he "[doesn't] think literature is all that different from other kinds of texts",<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Christina Schäffner (ed.), *Translation and Norms* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 1999), p. 48.

or overheard talk of “manipulation”,<sup>3</sup> of “performance instructions”,<sup>4</sup> of “an attempt [...] to eliminate choice”,<sup>5</sup> in the “modifi[ca]tion” of “text relations in the original” in favour of “[more] habitual options offered by the target repertoire”?<sup>6</sup> Does he fear that, as a non-integrated “foreign body”, he can never meet an adequacy, let alone an acceptability, norm, or any social “assumptions and expectations about correctness or appropriateness”?<sup>7</sup> Is he right in offering a pre-emptive first strike at the norms he is subverting, realising that only affirmative action can create a space, inside and outside the Big Top, for his family’s own minoritised body language; that unless the *non*-dominant is also recognised in any “descriptive” system – unless, that is, the description is also applied to the Source – then only the Target dominant will be endorsed in translation practice? A translatorly approach to this kind of literary language, Art must suspect, will make short shrift of his de-familiarised family signifiers and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque multi(de)formity of the Fabulon road show, and knock the sequins and spotlights off any text which refuses to normalise and “talk like (Target Culture) folks”.

Dunne’s novel, from the near-oxymoron of its title, is a celebration and enactment of the anti-norm in theme and language. Gothic in its lavish descriptions of the unfeasible, the incredible, and the unacceptable, and science-fiction in its systematic inversion of norm-expectation, with its own parallel world and values system, it pushes a series of conventions to their limits while always, ultimately, returning to the defamiliarised but recognisable parameters of the realist novel tradition. Her platform is humanist and ethical. Humour is never at the service of the purely ludic, and the reader is never allowed post-modern absolutism, but is forced to commit emotionally and painfully to recognizing *mon semblable, mon frère/ma sœur*. At the same time the metafictional invitation is clear in elements like “Carnival”, “Fabulon”, and the function of Art, and for present purposes I have chosen, only slightly speciously, to privilege this reading of the novel as an extended metaphor of fabulation and literary language, the deviant word made flesh, which, like the Binewski family, “earns a living *just by being itself*”: representational, a-synonymous and unmodifiable.

The Binewskis, then, embody the theory of literary language as skewed, differently-able, and in Shklovsky’s famous term “defamiliarised”, as propounded from the Romantics through to the Structuralists and beyond. With different emphases, Mukarovsky, Havránek, and linguists such as Richard Ohman have argued that literary language is non-automatised, not used in the service of communication, and without the normal illocutionary forces of language, but should be seen as marked, foregrounded, iconic, and self-referential, all subsumable under Wittgenstein’s famous warning in Zettel<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Hermans in Román Álvarez & M. Carmen-África Vidal (eds.), *Translation, Power, Subversion*, (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Toury in Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and System-oriented Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999), p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Davis quoted by Toury in Schäffner, p. 14

<sup>6</sup> Toury in Hermans, *Translation in Systems*, p. 93

<sup>7</sup> Schäffner in Schäffner, p. 1

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), quoted in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 162.

that “a poem” (and the poetic function of language in general), “although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information”. As Arty’s brother has it, it doesn’t talk “*like folks*”. In his father’s more sumptuously Gothic terminology, it “d[igs] its rosy little fingernails into the flopping, jittering [referential] carcass, and turns it into a golden goblet”.

The above definitions can stand as a respectably mainstream if not uncontested view of literary language (Carter and Nash, for example, and most pragmatists, prefer to talk about “deflection” and a cline of literariness, from referential to representational language).<sup>9</sup> But whether deflection or deviation, how are these features accounted for in literary translation? It might now be a courtesy towards the Binewskis, knowing the metalinguistic trouble they took to source their offspring’s abnormality and the viciousness with which it was targeted, to look at some of the translation theories dealing with literary language and its transfer, check the extent to which they foreground the difference/*différance*/defamiliarisation of the ST, and see what provisions are made in the TT, at least within the prevailing, domesticating norms of the Western canon, for the linguistic equivalent of wheelchair access. It might be useful to question the applicability of norms-based translation theory to a description of literary translation, and the legitimacy of dethroning the ST and terming as no more than “adequate” a translation which acknowledges its otherness, reserving “acceptable” for a text more in harmony with our own system. There will always be a time-gap between the appearance of a new literary form and possible terms in which to assess its translation into a new readership and critical system: how to test the water or let the TL reflect some of the splash made by, say, the *nouveau roman* or magical realism – both of which, in very different ways, push the SL to new acceptancy levels – if the translator’s eye is on containment and conservation of target norms? This is more likely to reverse Lil’s trick with her chicken and turn the “goblet” into a “carcass”, corralling the ST (and slightly mixing metaphors) back into the canonical and the known.

As a circus performer, Art would be the last person to ignore audience satisfaction; he knows he has to acknowledge their world (using the “language of information”, “like folks”): he “ha[s] contact with norms”, he tells us, “but only in dashes and flashes. I never thought of carrying on a conversation with one of the brutes” (p. 175). He plays the language-game by a different set of rules, and requires his audience to shed target expectations and accept a relational norm-reversal whereby they submit totally to the source, even if it means deforming itself/themselves in the process. Art seems not to want to be “Turned”, linguistically or culturally: he demands to be accepted but not interpreted; to be matched limb for limb, deformity for deformity, an eye for an eye, signifier for signifier.

Is a theory which charts the application of prevailing norms best equipped to carry on a conversation with ideas of this kind? Or rather, since the answer to that is simply “it doesn’t converse but *describes*”, the question

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<sup>9</sup> Ronald Carter and Walter Nash, *Seeing Through Language: A Guide to Styles of English Writing* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 5.

could be rephrased to consider how far description can ever remain such before passing into endorsement and refraction, rewriting towards a more comfortable linguistic, stylistic or, worse, ideological fit: from description to prescription,<sup>10</sup> norm to strategy, “‘is’ to ‘ought’”.<sup>11</sup> Norms are predicated on the referential, contextual world, and draw on sociology, anthropology, and the behavioural sciences, and although competing “anti” norms are countenanced, it is the dominant behavioural trend which is emphasised, and the language of the “folks” *outside* the tank which is listened to. To accept, though, that the TC force-field is desirable or even inevitable introduces the risk that in the textual world, SL deviance and difference (which of course is intralingual difference, from its own referential canons, as well as interlingual) will come to be seen as a deformity to be shot down in a domestic-readership-cossetting, underdetermined, undertranslation. In that case “the brutes” are us, *hypocrite traducteur*; and at that point the dominant norm has become precisely the “negative analytic” Berman tells us we are hard-wired to produce and must resist if we are to “accept the foreign as foreign”.<sup>12</sup>

Ethics and ideology apart, an immediate teacherly objection is that, given an inch of norms theory, a translation class will take a yard of normalising, automatising, and dumbing-down. When dealing with texts of any nature they struggle to resist “talk[ing] like folks” (“this is what my native Italian/Dutch/Farsi would say”,/ “You can’t say that in my native ...” etc.), and explicate Toury’s law of growing standardisation whereby an ST feature will be modified into the repertoire of the TL. The following sentence, taken from Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, is my personal trial-by-fire ST-deviance-resistancy test for classes:

And to prove to himself the non-existence of God he now stood in the dining-room of the city’s most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face.<sup>13</sup>

I have never been able to elicit a linear, one-to-one substitution, though it would work perfectly in any language I know or have asked about. What the pigs are rooting for, surely, is a fat, juicy signifier which nobody has messed with except the author. What they often get is a change of noun category, from “pigs” to “pork”, or one of the items in the food repertoire, and the metonymising of “face” into “mouth” (= “with pork coming out of his mouth”). However many collocation searches the students make, however much information I have given them about Rushdie, magical realism and his allegorical form of political satire, and whatever jokey assurances I give about British eating habits, even specialist students remain convinced there must be some residue of a rhetorical

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<sup>10</sup> “In a debate on prescription versus description, he [Kurt Vonnegut] said the former, ‘as nearly as I could tell, was like an honest cop, while description was like a boozed-up war buddy from Mobile, Ala.’” Introduction to the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, quoted in a review of The Random House Dictionary, *New York Times* (30 October 1966).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Chesterman quoted in Anthony Pym, *Method in Translation History* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1998), p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> A. Berman, ‘La Traduction comme épreuve de l’étranger’, *Texte: Revue de critique et de théorie*, 4 (1985), 67–81; trans. L. Venuti, ‘Translation and the Trials of the Foreign’, in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 284–298.

<sup>13</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), pp. 29–30.

figure behind the English, or some different frequency tolerance, which helps to normalise it in the *source*, but which is not an option open to their target language.

There are two issues here, cultural and linguistic, and to avoid applying a norms-oriented reading naively we – I – should perhaps take into account Toury's distinction between the translation act (the individual translator's interaction with the ST) and the translation event, all the circumstances surrounding the production aspect. The act belongs to the ST, in all its denotative, connotative, and formal peculiarity, and no short-cuts or target-slanting can be countenanced at this stage, whatever the ultimate skopos options: this should be, as it were, the ST's last semantic supper, where it gets to preach its own Word to a respectful audience, however heavy the communicative cross to be borne in the social *event* of the translation and its reception. The event belongs to the fallen world of compromise and crowd-pleasing social expediency, which, in the case of the Rushdie example, may endorse translating "pig" into a culturally less-sensitive animal (cf. Nida's various zoological translations of the lamb of God), or adapting the pigs/face juxtaposition to the target reality of particularly fastidious notions of linguistic or wider cultural correctness. The aesthetics of magical realism quite quickly forced a violent paradigm shift, and Rushdie himself, in addition, near-miraculously managed to refamiliarise if not exactly normalise allegory, in many ways the least "cool" of tropes, after some three centuries of disuse. It demanded a steady head from its translators – a steadier head than it received from some commentators and national governments – , and it might be worth considering in what way a dominant-norm training would have influenced Rushdie's first translators both in the translation of these tropes, and in dealing with more culture-specific issues in the text: what sort of constraints it might have imposed, to the detriment of the subversive agenda of the originals. Some implications of a constrained translation reading are clear from the continuation of the passage:

On the day [Gibreel] was discharged from hospital [...] he got out of the limousine at the Taj hotel and [...] went directly into the great dining-room [...] and loaded his plate with all of it, the pork sausages from Wiltshire [...] and the rashers of bacon from godknowswhere; with the gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig's trotters of secularism. [...] [he] began to eat as fast as possible, stuffing the dead pigs into his face so rapidly that bacon rashers hung out of the sides of his mouth [...] On that day of metamorphosis [...] his recovery began. And to prove to himself the non-existence of God, he now stood in the dining-room of the city's most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face.

The pigs, we understand, are in the mouth of an apostate, enacting his apostasy, and all the ideological and metaphysical horror Gibreel feels is translated into the final, grotesque, Boschian image. There is a careful progression from referential, metonymic details – "pork sausages", etc. – to metaphorical – the "gammon steaks of his unbelief" – ; this acts as internal normalising which partly prepares us for the "stuffing ... dead pigs", further naturalised by both the "stuffing" pun (as in pork stuffing) and the "stuff your face" colloquialism. Then a quick Monty Python swap of dead pig for live, or pig of unspecified ontological status, and *les jeux sont faits*: "And so he stood there ... with pigs falling out of his face." The apostasy is double: from a Catholic perspective

what he has also put into his face is a skewed version of the eucharist, the wafer which transubstantiates into the body of Christ, as the rasher re-transubstantiates into the body of pig.

This is a delicate, dangerous image to carry into a new system, and it presents issues which go far beyond the textual – all issues which would have to be discussed in translator-training. But it puts the clearest possible argument for resistancy and linguistic fundamentalism – telling it as it is: and with all the questions “as it is” immediately begs, there has to be a moment when we ask our inner Derrida: “what is it about ‘original’ that you don’t understand?”. What theory of transnationalism or Jamesonian new post-modern international culture requires us to hesitate here? It can’t be part of our brief<sup>14</sup> to remove the ideology from a man’s mouth because we happen to be squeamish about his signifiers: a mouth is a face is a limb is a fin.

Hermans’ position on the question of “original” in translation is a beguiling one, and sends us into an elegant *mise-en-abîme* of hermeneutics, narrative voice, and the subject-position of the translator, which could be summarised as “fear translators bearing gifts of neutrality and equivalence”; the lady protests too much who says she is nowhere to be found in her translation. “We construe translation as a form of delegated speech, a kind of speaking by proxy [presuming that] only the translator who operates with self-effacing discretion can be trusted not to violate the original. [... But] the norms concept is there to remind us [...] that [this] is an illusion, a supreme fiction. We all know that a translation cannot coincide with its source”;<sup>15</sup> or, as he put it in the abstract of his paper “How to read translations?” given at the 2009 IATIS conference, “while reported [delegated] speech is primarily mimetic, its mimesis is never pure. It leaves a diegetic margin which permits translators to speak in their own names, however indirectly.”<sup>16</sup>

A fair objection might be that it is one thing to acknowledge that language transfer contains this margin, and another to set out to create it, in deference to different target norms; but it is too necessary a statement to quibble with, not least for those of us who bear the white translator’s burden of a language which has imposed its “own name” in too many countries, and is “compromised by its own history and status”.<sup>17</sup> Here are eggshells to be trodden on aplenty (and out of cowardice or courtesy alone it is worth remembering that the more scrupulously the target tries to calque the source, the more the source can be held responsible for its own statement, and the lighter the burden; the more refracted the translation on the other hand, the more *mea* the *culpa*). For a variety of reasons, we all have semantic/hermeneutic/ideological blood on our hands, as it were: at best, we’re “telling it as we think it is”, placing as many anti-leakage controls as we possibly can by replacing like with like wherever possible. There remains, in any case, a Source with which we can’t coincide but surely shouldn’t collide: yet norms theory’s vocabulary of manipulation,

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<sup>14</sup> Unless of course we endorse the idea of Lefevere’s “refraction”, translating or rewriting according to a specific ideological agenda (André Lefevere in Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems*, p.126).

<sup>15</sup> Hermans in Schäffner, *Translation and Norms*, p. 62

<sup>16</sup> Conference Abstracts of 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS), Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, 7–10 July 2009.



forcing, refracting, containing, and meshing in conditions of power seems not to bode well for intertextual pacifism.

If this is simply a description of dominant translation practice, rather than a plan of action, then it is ideologically necessary to provide the counterweight of norm-departure “norms” and alternative practices;<sup>18</sup> the idea of “polemical translations”;<sup>19</sup> Holmes’s “mimetic form”,<sup>20</sup> where the TT calques the forms of the ST as closely as possible (and which finds one of its extremes in the Zukovskys’ phonetic translations); Venuti’s (Berman-influenced) “foreignised” translations, and their ancestor, Schleiermacher’s, “alienated” ones: otherwise our accounts of “descriptive” systems will be as biased and collusive as reporting by “embedded” journalists covering only selected lines of engagement, to be written up and delivered as the dominant and victorious strategy. Fear norms theorists bearing gifts of pure description, we could add then, since:

As long as there is such a thing as appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviour (according to an underlying set of agreements), there will be a need for performance instructions as well. In a way [...] norms may be seen as part of Swidler’s “tool kit”: while they may not be “strategies of action” in themselves, they certainly give rise – and lend justification – to such strategies.<sup>21</sup>

Used diachronically, norms-awareness extrapolates patterns, tendencies and “turns” and, in showing the roads not taken, offers feasibility studies for future alternatives; applied deterministically they can become target-textual engineering, tantamount to strait-jacketing a text into the acceptability norm dominant in a particular culture’s polysystem, and averting any possible clash of civilisation for the Target readership by translating alterity into the form we ourselves endorse. One wo/man’s street-wise internationalism is another’s political intolerance, promoting precisely the cultural hegemony it ostensibly deplores and applying a protectionist nationalism to translate the foreign into the dominant values of the target community. “Translation should be made to respond to the demands of a culture”, Mary Snell-Hornby writes,<sup>22</sup> though it could be Bush or Rumsfeld, and norms-theory vocabulary of “response prediction”, “containment”, and “the foreclosure of options” has scary connotations of preparatory linguistic air-strikes and regime-change of a source culture which had originally had its own “demands”. And “containment”: isn’t that the word Niranjani constantly uses when she criticises translation as exploiting the discourse of colonisation through strategies of containment?<sup>23</sup> Isn’t that shooting down Art and his “uncontained” language to make him talk “just like folks”? To allow myself a little post 9/11 hyperbole, to forcibly remove a text from its own territory and transport it to a culturally unknown

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<sup>17</sup> Hermans, Introduction to *Translating Others* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2006), p.1.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hatim and Mason’s stress on norm-departure, mentioned in Schäffner, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> In Schäffner, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> In Anthony Pym, *Exploring Translation Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> Toury in Schäffner, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> In Lefevere (ed.), *Translation/History/Culture A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> For example, in Lefevere, p. 21.

destination for the purposes of extracting data which suits our *own* agenda could be seen as not translation but extraordinary rendition. And that, we hope, we have now put behind us.

*Libera Università Luspio, Rome*