

# Their Truths Live On

## Remembering Eugene Nida (1914-2011) and Peter Newmark (1916-2011)

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The world of translation suffered two major losses in 2011 – losses that filtered through only very gradually as academia enjoyed its summer recess. The sad news that our two universally recognized fathers of modern translation were no longer with us after half a century's front-line leadership left a gaping hole in our collective ranks, not to mention general feelings of sorrow as we mourned their passing. Nida's and Newmark's longevity was not merely a question of years, but of intense academic, intellectual and cultural activity, right up to the very end. They made few, if any, concessions to the ageing process and, when the time came, their departure from this world was as discreet and gentlemanly as all of us would have expected from the two elders of our profession.

The true impact of our loss came in the months of September and October with our return to classes, with the obituaries that had been late in appearing, almost as if in a sign of disbelief. Then there were the memorials too, bringing hundreds of us together not only in a moment of shared bereavement, but also and most importantly as a celebration of their lives and work. You cannot think of any more illustrious names in today's profession deserving of such celebration.

These two names, Nida and Newmark (which fittingly even alliterate), are virtually inseparable in academic circles, so frequent is the collocation in the classroom and in publications too. One student, I recall, thought they always worked together as a team, the parallels in their lives being constant and at times quite striking. They were born within eighteen months of each other, Nida in Oklahoma City at the end of 1914, Newmark shortly afterwards in Brno,

now in the Czech Republic, where his father had served as a British diplomat. At university, they both studied languages, Nida Classical Greek and Latin at UCLA, while Newmark read Modern Languages at Cambridge. Both started writing on translation and translation theory in the 1960s and both were nonagenarians when they died, but here really the similarities end.

In actual fact, they were like chalk and cheese – as different as an American Baptist minister and a radical English eccentric ever could be. Gene, as Nida liked to be called, was more specifically involved in linguistic and semantic research, being greatly influenced by Noam Chomsky and his theories on deep and surface structures. It is sometimes forgotten that Gene's work in semantics is every bit as important as his contribution to the science of translation, as he liked to call it – especially his opus magnum, the superlative *Componential Analysis of Meaning* (1975a).

Peter, on the other hand, was more of a pragmatist, a born educator, strongly influenced by the work of the two French linguists, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet. Nida, an ordained Baptist minister, was writing on aspects of linguistics as early as the 1950s. A good deal of this was based on his practical experience as a Bible translator, whereas Peter's articles, later collected together and published as *Approaches to Translation* (1980), were based much more on his classroom experience which, he claimed, kept his feet firmly planted on the ground. Anyone who ever studied with the great man knows how much of himself he would give to his students and how much he, in turn, was adored by them.

Throughout his life, Peter felt particular repugnance towards the abstractions, ostentations and vagaries of the Ivory Tower, as he expounds in no uncertain terms in his article *The curse of dogma in Translation Studies* (1991a). He always maintained that it was thanks to his students that he was prevented from being abstract and from losing touch with reality. As a teacher, I too have always tried to be as practical as possible, emulating in particular one of Peter's pet obsessions – his insistence on being able to support theoretical claims with practical examples. We would frequently hear him say "Examples please. Always give an example and don't say anything unless you can!"

Outside of their scholarship, the two men, with seemingly boundless energy, were highly active in their chosen professions. For forty years, Gene worked for the prestigious American Bible Society and, as Head of their translation programme, he would "traverse the globe by plane, train and canoe" (Fox 2011), coordinating the publication of the Good Word in hundreds of different indigenous languages. It was this experience of a source text set in the Middle East having to be translated for a target readership of say Inuit communities who only had experience of ice and snow, or for Peruvian natives in their rain forests, that lay the foundations for his much acclaimed theory of dynamic (functional) equivalence.

This method that Gene refers to early on in his biography as "faithful adaptation" (Stine 2004: 76) becomes ever more apparent with his Bible translation work into English and his editorial assistance in the publication of *The Contem-*

porary English Version, The New International Version, and The New Jerusalem Bible, but nowhere more so than the controversial and much criticized *Good News Bible*. In this “plain English” version of the Holy Scriptures, there is not a ‘thou’, a ‘sayeth’ or a ‘begat’ to be found and even something as straightforward as “behold the fowls of the air” quite simply becomes “look at the birds flying around”. It is of little wonder that this approach to a message should appeal so much to modern readers and particularly to younger people, not to mention our interpreting community more or less as a whole.

Peter Newmark was not without his own faith – of course not strictly religious, but nonetheless totally serious and moral. He had been greatly influenced by Sean O’Casey while at Cambridge and his meeting with the great Irish dramatist was later to shape much of Peter’s own activism regarding politics, peace, ecology, equality and human rights. Indeed, in his obituary in “The Guardian” newspaper, Tony Bell (2011), Chair of the Council of the Institute of Linguists, writes a most telling caption under Peter’s photograph about how, when working as an interpreter for the negotiation of a peaceful surrender at the end of the war, this eccentric and improbable British soldier would spend much of his free-time reading poetry in the company of German officers.

At the end of the war, Peter went straight into teaching, first in schools, then Guildford Technical College and finally, in 1958, as Head of Modern Languages at Holborn College, later to become the Polytechnic of Central London, now Westminster University. The School of Languages of the Polytechnic created a chair for Peter in 1974, thus introducing the first ever university course in the UK in literary and non-literary translation and translation theory. Over the years and especially under his deanship, the School deservedly gained a reputation as being one of the most prestigious schools for translation and conference interpreting in the world.

Upon his official retirement in 1981, Peter actually increased his work load, both in terms of his scholarly output and as a lecturer, becoming a Visiting Professor, first at the University of Bradford and then the University of Surrey. In 1995, the “Trieste connection” was also officially recognised by Giacomo Borruso (2009: 141), the then Vice Chancellor, with a *laurea honoris causa* at the School for Interpreters and Translators in Trieste, the city Peter jokingly claimed to have liberated single-handedly. Newmark actually collaborated with us actively in those early days and it is no exaggeration to say that he was instrumental in helping the School develop into the fully-fledged university faculty that it is today – the first of its kind in Italy.

As far as translation studies are concerned, Eugene Nida’s heyday was certainly in the 1960s and 70s with the publication of his three major works: *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1974) with Charles Taber and *Language Structure and Translation* (1975b). After this period, the American linguist was to devote most of his time to working for the American Bible Society, although, at the turn of the millennium, Gene produced two further works on translation for John Benjamins, the first a general text-

book on the subject called *Contexts in Translating* (2001), the second, *Fascinated by Languages* (2003), specifically on the very diverse problems of Bible translation.

Newmark's heyday, on the other hand, seems almost to fill the gap left in the eighties and nineties when Gene was concentrating on his religious mission. It makes one begin to realise perhaps that rather than talking about the similarities and differences of the two scholars, it would be more appropriate to talk of their complementarity. After the publication in 1980 of his previous papers and articles in *Approaches to Translation*, translated into Italian by one of our former students (Newmark 1988a), Peter followed it with the immensely popular *Textbook of Translation* (1988b) that for decades was considered a must-read for would-be translators. In 1991, he followed *Textbook* with a general discussion of the wider issues involved in translation called *About Translation*.

Peter, over the years, had also been an indispensable contributor to the success of "The Journal of Specialized Translation" and "The Linguist", serving on their respective boards and councils, as well as being a regular contributor to the journals. From 1989 on, every two months, he published his thoughts on translation problems in his *Paragraphs on Translation* for "The Linguist". These were then gathered together and published by Multilingual Matters in book form (1993, 1998) and are a treasure trove of good advice for translators and students, as well as an insight into the personality of the man through his very personal, almost stream-of-consciousness writing, not in the least bit devoid of Newmarkisms, contradictions, changes of heart and even apologies.

The complementarity of these two men's work is certainly casual, both temporally as well as in terms of their proposed methodologies, one more orientated towards freedom and adaptation, the other more towards literalism and respect for the original author and his/her form of expression. Clearly, they were not a team – their approaches and indeed their *materia prima* being unmistakably dissimilar. But they were not rivals either, as if they could somehow intuit that together they created a whole or completed a circle.

Their respect for each other too was wholehearted. Nida had no hesitation whatever in honouring Newmark by writing his personal commendation in his "Foreword" to Peter's first book, *Approaches to Translation* (1980: vii), with an abundance of laudatory adjectives like *important, highly useful, well-illustrated, detailed, relevant, valuable, insightful* and of course *practical*. Peter, for his part, returned the compliment whenever he could, for he sincerely believed that Nida had laid the foundation for virtually every aspect of the translation process and had dealt with *almost every translation problem* (1980: 9) imaginable.

Having known both of them, I am occasionally asked to read between the lines of their respective curricula and describe what the two men were actually like. Having been his student for several years, I obviously knew Peter more than I knew Gene, but I think it is unanimously agreed that Nida was a gentleman in every sense, especially that of being a "gentle man". On the numerous occasions we met, I never saw him upset, or raise his voice or make the slightest aspersion against anyone. The only time I ever saw him put out about some-

thing was when he last visited Trieste and, while with us, he suffered a recurring bout of malaria that he had picked up years earlier in Africa. His understandable distress, though, was not in any way over his ill-health which, he said, he had learnt to cope with years earlier, but the fact he could not keep his word and join us for dinner. Gene was one of the most agreeable colleagues I have ever had the pleasure to work with and what I remember particularly is how easy he made it for everyone to like him.

Peter, on the other hand was not easy – by any stretch of the imagination. Not that he was not a gentleman – he was. And an extremely caring sensitive gentleman at that. But he could be over-sensitive and insecure at times, which often made him seem grumpy or even aggressive to those who did not know him well. Even here, their personalities seem complementary. I like to think of the two as the diplomat and the soldier, both necessary, both with a common goal. Peter, the soldier, would go on the offensive at the drop of a hat. Little wonder is it that he so often refers to translation as a weapon! I remember the soldier on one of his visits to Trieste charging off to the Town Hall to admonish the mayor for not having the names and titles of exhibits translated into English in the city's museums and art galleries. You can imagine the face of the mayor when assailed by such an irresistible force! The Mayor fortunately was not an immovable object, as in the song, with the result that we have had translations in our museums ever since.

Many people, of course, will remind you of the in-fighting that occurred between Peter and other academics and translators. Being a somewhat insecure man, if attacked he would often lash out – and often apologize afterwards. He never lacked the courage to admit to being wrong. Even with his friends. I invited him to lunch once – on the spur of the moment, I admit – but I was snapped at for not giving him enough notice. “Couldn't you have asked me earlier”, he growled. Then, his superego would kick in. “Oh. Sorry. I mean ... thank you. I mean ... who's going to eat Pauline's sandwiches?” The whole fuss was actually about not wanting to waste the pack lunch that his wife had so lovingly prepared for him that morning.

Peter's sparring partner *par excellence* was always Sergio Viaggio, Chief Interpreter at the United Nations, Vienna, and regular visitor to the Trieste School and contributor to translation and interpreting journals all over the world. Hostilities commenced with an article Sergio published in the “Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione”, in which he contests what he calls Peter's obsession with literal (semantic) translation. Contestation, Peter said, is perfectly acceptable but Sergio's claim that his theory was *wrong and didactically dangerous* (1992: 27) was a red rag to the bull.

The battle was to rage for years until they actually met here in Trieste. I remember accompanying a very agitated and disinclined Peter to the Savoia Hotel where Sergio was staying. The meeting was understandably cool, to put it mildly, until they both stopped to listen to some classical music playing in the background. Chance would have it that Janacek was a favourite composer of

both of them and hostilities, though not exactly ceasing, were toned down considerably as a new friendship was formed. So much so in fact that Sergio has sent in a moving valedictory note that can be found at the end of this obituary. Like Nida, even “cranky old” Peter Newmark could make himself loved, even by his most ferocious adversary. With Gene, it was instantaneous; with Peter it just took a bit longer to get to know him, to scrape through the many layers of armour that the old soldier wore.

To return, by way of conclusion, to their respective contributions to translation studies, I would like to stress again the idea of the two men almost being as one. If Nida lay the foundations and built the walls, Newmark provided the furniture and fittings, all of those details that, according to Nida, “most books on translation largely overlook” (Newmark 1980: vii). Their complementarity is like a torch and its battery, the one showing the way, the other providing the energy.

It is logical that the two great men should have gone out together, but it is equally obvious that the path they have shown and the passion and enthusiasm for the journey they embarked upon together will never be forgotten and will always remain the rock on which all of us today operate.

And tomorrow too. For as I said at Peter’s memorial, and it is just as true for Gene too, not a week goes by that their names are not mentioned in academic circles. They live on in their translation classrooms all over the world and it is just as they would have wanted.

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