Summary. In recent studies on translation the concept of power has become central. In the present paper I will present the evolution of the concept in translation theory and I will present the book *Translation and Power*, focused on the power turn that has taken place in the discipline. I will finally advance some hypotheses on how the concept of power might be pertinent for the study of the translation of medieval texts.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will try to give some theoretical updates of what is happening inside the discipline of Translation Studies today, hoping that some concepts can be useful for the work that the philological research group is undertaking.

As an outsider – a non philologist, a non specialist in your field – I am embarrassed, but also honoured to contribute in this forum. I am impressed by the interesting use you are making of concepts and theoretical approaches in translation studies, and since you all demonstrate to be so well informed on what is going on in the field in which I find myself, my only choice is to present something recent that you might not yet have had access to. I will limit my contribution to a sort of presentation of some issues proposed in a new book on translation I find particularly interesting – in my opinion the most important one published in the last years. I will discuss these issues and consider how and why I think they might also be useful for the study of the translation of medieval texts.

2. Rewriting and Manipulation

In my contribution at the previous conference on medieval translation in Bergamo (2004), I dedicated the first part to the concept of rewriting and especially to how André Lefevere has developed it in Translation Theory. In my article for the proceedings of that conference I included a quotation of Lefevere’s words where he explains why the concept of rewriting is so cen-
tual for the comprehension of how texts survive and how and why they are included in the canon.

It is necessary, he insists, not to limit oneself to consider that literary studies have interpretation as the core of their analysis and rather take into consideration questions like power, ideology, institution, and manipulation.

It is my contention that the process resulting in the acceptance or rejection, canonization or non-canonization of literary works is dominated not by vague, but by very concrete factors that are relatively easy to discern as soon as one decides to look for them, that is as soon as one eschews interpretation as a core of literary studies and begins to address issues such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation.

[Lefevere (1992: 2)]

In my present paper, I therefore start from where I left off – with the same quotation – in order to introduce the main topic I am going to consider together with you. I start from the issues Lefevere invites us to address and will be paying particular attention to that of power, as announced in the title. For another reason I have decided to re-quote Lefevere’s words: Among his categories for the comprehension of how texts survive, we also find manipulation, a concept we find in the title given to the entire conference we are presenting in this book.1

In translation studies Lefevere is not only the “father” of the concept of rewriting, but he is also closely connected to both manipulation and power. As you know, in 1985 a book edited by Theo Hermans was published with the title The Manipulation of Literature and it had such deep consequences for the discipline, that the contributors to that volume – where among others we find André Lefevere – are often called members of the Manipulation School. In Herman’s introductory remarks to the book, we find the following words which define how manipulation is intended:

From the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose.

[Hermans (1985: 11)]2

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1 In the Italian title, the same word does not appear although, and it is substituted with trasformazione which in my opinion is a good concept, but probably with different connotations than those we find for manipulation.

2 Hermans’ introduction is translated into Italian and published in “Testo a Fronte” nr. 9, 1993.
When studying translated texts, the scholars of the so-called “manipulation school” underlined the importance of being aware of the fact that texts can be translated in many ways and that the reasons why one text is translated in one particular way can probably be found in how it is manipulated to achieve desired effects. Key concepts here are statements like “no translation is innocent”, “translation does not take place in a vacuum”, “there is nothing that can be called objectivity in translation”, and “translations are inevitably partial”, where the manipulating “force” was recognized to be less linguistic and more cultural or institutional.

In considering it as a cultural practice able to manipulate texts, translation was consequently promoted from its traditional position as secondary and derivative, being acknowledged as a primary tool for influencing, forming, transforming and constructing cultural representations. Therefore, translation is no longer considered simply a process of faithful reproduction but invariably it involves deliberate acts of selection, construction, and omission. So, I insist on the concept of manipulation, not only because of its connection to the title of this conference, of course, but because – as should be clear – it is strictly connected to that of power: power to manipulate for certain purposes, power to select, power to achieve desired effects.

As you know, in translation studies, the so-called Cultural Turn took place between the Eighties and Nineties – also as an evolution of the manipulation thesis posited in 1985 – and translation was finally located in the sphere of culture. This implied that translation was recognized not only to have to do with language, but with languages and texts in culture, and that difference is not situated only in the linguistic code, but in culture. Connected to the manipulation thesis we mentioned above, the cultural turn takes into consideration that the shifts in translation cannot only be explained as mistakes or subjective interpretations, but as shifts that are culturally and socially determined by the discourses of the age and, therefore, in any case informative about the relation between the source- and the target-cultures.

The next significant step in the discipline, on the way to reach the centrality of the issue of power, we have to remember another publication that has among its authors André Lefevere. In 1990 he coedits with Susan Bassnett Translation, History and Culture, probably the first book that can be considered to take the full consequences of the cultural turn. In their introduction the two editors insist on the importance of studying power relations in society in order to be able to understand and to explain the

3 We should remember here that the Polysystem Theory, mainly proposed by Even-Zohar (1978), (1981) and Gideon Toury (1980), was also important to make this turn possible.
changes in modes of translation. The question of why we have shifts in translation becomes central, and one of the explanations is suggested to be found in “the vagaries and vicissitudes of the exercise of power in a society […]. The exercise of power […] in terms of the production of culture, of which the production of translation is part” [Bassnett / Lefevere (1990: 5)] will demonstrate to be a significant constraint on the production of translations. In the same volume, Lefevere underlines the importance of recognizing that one of the constraints under which translation often operates is exactly manipulation of power relations [Bassnett / Lefevere (1990: 15-27)].

Along the line of the increasing importance of the power issue in translation studies which I am trying to trace, I consider to be particularly important the book *Rethinking Translation. Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* edited in 1992 by Lawrence Venuti. The author can be considered as a sort of “new entry” in the discipline, representing not actually the discipline itself, but rather literary criticism, dominated in this period by deconstructionalist and poststructural approaches. Venuti testifies with this book that translation studies are getting a closer and closer connection to these areas of critical literary theory, and to that of cultural studies in general, which “brings a renewed functionalism to translation theory, a concern with the social effects of translation and their ethical and political consequences” [Venuti (2000: 333)].

We are now observing a continuous presence of the question of power in translation, at least between the lines, and rather evidently in the emerging studies on translation and gender, translation and postcolonialism, translation and ideology, translation as creation and transformation of cultural representations. All these new issues are actually present in the volume edited by Venuti bringing evidence of the political engagement the studies are representing.

What followed was approximately ten years of intense activity around the phenomenon of translation and culture, resulting in a vast amount of conferences, publications, and research, more and more interdisciplinary, where we can see a gradual transformation from purely descriptive to more and more critical approaches. Lefevere’s work continued to be particularly central, like his investigations on how ideological factors are inherent in the decision-making processes of practicing translators.

At the start of the new millennium, translation studies is an international network of scholarly communities who conduct research and debate across conceptual and disciplinary divisions.

[Venuti (2000: 334)].
3. The Power Turn

In 2002 Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko coedit *Translation and Power*. They are both well known scholars in the discipline; Tymoczko primarily through her seminal work *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (1999), Gentzler through his important book *Contemporary Translation Studies* (1993). Both scholars represent a discipline that has gone through the cultural turn, and with the present book they suggest that it is time for a new turn. “The key topic that has provided the impetus for the new directions that translation studies have taken since the cultural turn is power” (2002: xvi), they state, and therefore it is time to take the consequences of the focused examination of questions pertaining to power and realise that the discipline is passing through a new turn: a *power turn*.

In developing the suggestion of power, Gentzler explains in the following why the exploration of power is becoming so important in translation studies:

> It is becoming increasingly important to explore the specific situation in which institutions of power have had an impact on translation activity and the resulting impact that translations have had on the development of culture.

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In Gentzler’s words I read that we cannot really understand why translations are as they are, if we do not explore the specific power relations in which they are produced. And, at the same time, we cannot understand the impact translation has on the development of culture, before we understand the impact of power on translation.

> “[T]he asymmetrical relations in any translation project” [Venuti (1998: 11)] should also convince us about the importance of investigating power.

In their introduction to the volume, Gentzler and Tymoczko consider that the question of power was already present in the cultural turn, but often with what they call a rather monolithic and dichotomic idea of it, considering it primarily as a form of repression. Now, when they suggest this new turn, power has to get rid of these absolutist views, and one is starting to recognize that power does not take place in completely dichotomical situations. Translation moves in the space where discourses meet and compete, negoti-
ating power relations. Power, in a foucaultian\textsuperscript{5} sense is instead connected to the concept of knowledge, where power produces knowledge, but not in the sense of a cause producing an effect. What has to be underlined is that power, after this turn, has nothing to do with the absolutist views of the past, but rather with ideas of power as “a motivating factor in cultural domains”.

As we said, power does not mean repression, and translation can in many cases be considered as an “empowering activity”, a site where one can even mobilize counter-discourses and subversion. Power might signify the assertion of power by the translators themselves, who deliberately decide to “subvert traditional allegiances of translation, interjecting their own worldviews and politics into their work” [Gentzler (2002: 197)]. With a focus on power one actually starts to recognize the power translators often are given, or take themselves to have, to adapt the texts they are translating for specific purposes:

> Translation is not simply an act of faithful reproduction but, rather, a deliberate and conscious act of selection, assemblage, structuring, and fabrication – and even, in some cases, of falsification, refusal of information, counterfeiting, and the creation of secret codes. [Tymoczko / Gentzler (2002: xxi)]

This means that translation is actively participating in the construction of knowledge: Knowledge does not necessarily precede translation activity, and the act of translation is itself very much involved in the creation of knowledge (ibidem). In fact, our knowledge about different cultures, languages and their textual production often takes place through translation, but, as we saw above, by selecting, structuring and fabricating a particular kind of knowledge. The “representations thus configured are coming to be understood as central aspects of power” (ibidem).

Creation of knowledge has for instance to do with the image created of the source-text, the source language and the source culture through translation. Translations represent the source-text, they create an image of the source text, and doing this, they create our knowledge, not only about the text they translate, but about the culture these texts originate in.

> [This kind of] poststructural translation can be viewed as a creative act, the representation of the text, participating in the creation of knowledge and, by extension, power. Translation does not simply offer a window onto some unified, exotic Other; it participates in its very construction. The process of staging translation is a process of gathering and creating new information that

\textsuperscript{5} Michel Foucault, \textit{Surveiller et punir}: Naissance de la prison (1975) and \textit{La volonté de savoir} (1976).
can be turned to powerful political ends, including resistance, self-determination, and rebellion.

[Gentzler (2002: 216)]

This kind of observation is close to the discussion we find specifically developed in Lawrence Venuti’s *Scandals of Translation* (1998), where he insists on the power of translation to construct representations of foreign cultures:

Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures. The selection of foreign texts and the development of translation strategies can establish peculiarly domestic canons for foreign literatures, canons that conform to domestic aesthetic values and therefore reveal exclusions and admissions, centres and peripheries that deviate from those current in the foreign language.

[Venuti (1998: 67)]

In this view, maybe the translated medieval texts we study today can be considered as texts which reflect the construction of the Middle Ages that has been made through the ages not only by philologists and historians, but also by institutions like the church and the school. The translations we read do “not simply offer a window onto some unified, exotic Other”, as Gentzler states over, but are results of a more or less deliberate work of selection, exclusions and admissions which lets them be new texts offering new information.

4. **Consequences of the power turn**

For different reasons I find the power turn of particular interest for the evolution of translation studies: on the one hand the turn simply represents a result of how the discipline has evolved in the last years, on the other hand it represents a kind of programme for how one wants to proceed. As I see it, the power turn represents the sum of the questions we have to ask when we explore translation. I believe this is true also for the specific case of the translation of medieval texts. But please correct me if I am wrong, I am an outsider, I speak from another position, with too little knowledge about the medieval texts you study, and of course influenced by my studies.

The power turn which was developed from the culture turn gives us the possibility to make clear that the explanations of the shifts that occur in transla-

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6 A thesis especially followed by Fulvio Ferrari in his contributions to the research-project this group is pursuing.
tion are not to be found in the nature of culture itself, but in the power relations that govern in any culture. And these power relations can often explain why a certain translation represents the source text in one way rather than in another. Every translation is partial because, as the Italian poet Valerio Magrelli puts it, faithfulness in translation has more to do with the choice of what to translate of the source text, than with how to translate it. The partiality of translation is the decision on how to represent a foreign text and the culture it represents. Investigating the power relations in culture, we should have more possibilities to understand why translations decide to be partial in one way rather than another.

In investigating why certain kinds of translations or rewritings of medieval texts have survived until our present times instead of others, or why certain texts are translated or rewritten in certain ways, we might have to consider the power relations in the translating culture at the moment of the translation activity. Analyzing translators’ choices of what to translate, we probably need to connect their choices to the dialectic of power inside the social and political situation in which they work. Is the text they translate already known? Is it already part of the canon? Do the philologists agree on the interpretation of the text? Are some forms of interpretation marginalized by a dominant cultural form of power? Are the translators working for an institution or for a “general” editor? Is the translators’ work considered prestigious or is it competing with the interpretation offered by the philologists? How is the paratextual material that surrounds translations organized? These and many more questions of this kind could be asked, and the answers one gets probably offer a deeper understanding about the translation than if one had been concentrating on the comparison between the source text and target text focusing on the linguistic differences.

5. Partiality, Fragmentation

Partiality can be considered to be one of the main characteristics of translation and brings us to think about it as both partisan and metonymic. This perspective is a further important consequence of the power turn and, I believe, significant also from a medievalist point of view since it underlines the fragmentary and incomplete nature of discourse interactions:

As with other discursive practices, texts to be translated must be seen as embodying a range of discourses, all of which impinge on the choices of the translators, thus contributing to the gaps, inconsistencies, and fragments that can be found in translations.

[Tymoczko / Gentzler (2002: xx)]
Postcolonial and poststructuralist critique insists on the fragmentary nature of discourse and of translation. Complexity is the characteristics of any textual nature, it is impossible to single out one unified meaning, also because any textual construct is a result of a plurality of languages.

It is only with the rise of poststructuralism that language becomes a site of uncontrollable polysemy, and translation is reconceived not simply as transformative of the foreign text, but interrogative, or [...] “deconstructive”.

[Venuti (2000: 218)]

Venuti considers how theorists like Derrida and de Man question the concepts of semantic unity, authorial originality, and copyright that continue to subordinate the translated to the foreign text. Both texts, they argue, are derivative and heterogeneous, consisting of diverse linguistic and cultural materials which destabilize the work of signification, making meaning plural and divided, exceeding and possibly conflicting with the intentions of the foreign writer and the translator. Translation is doomed to inadequacy because of irreducible differences, not just between languages and cultures, but also within them.

[Venuti (2000: 218)]

These theorists, and the translation scholars who have introduced their concepts to translation studies, have finally brought us to the “acknowledgement of the fragmentary nature of translations and the configuration of the power that they exert” [Tymoczko / Gentzler (2002: xx)]. When analyzing translations one therefore has to be aware of the fact that there are parts of a source text translated and parts that are absent, and that translations are made of gaps, contradictions and inconsistencies. Sometimes these gaps and partialities have the function to produce a unified and coherent target text, other times they are there in order to create a text that subverts or destabilizes the already existing image of a text, a culture or a language.

The selection, assemblage and structuring of translated texts mentioned above is another aspect of this fragmentary nature: Since texts are heterogeneous, with plural meanings, it is necessary to recognize that translation ought to be fragmentary and partial. The most important investigation, again, turns out to be that of the power relations that decide in which direction the partiality has to go.

Is it not true that medieval texts often are heterogeneous where even the existence of an original is unsure, and where the author is often more than one? Is it not true that medieval texts are often written in a language with different and contradictory devices, with a plurality of possible meanings and inter-
pretations? Is it not true, on the other hand, that translations of these text often tend to present them to be more homogeneous and unified? Examining the translations from the “point of view of power”, we will not only be able to understand the reasons why the texts are manipulated in a certain way, but we will also introduce a wider perspective to our observations in order to consider the translations’ possibility “to participate in the dialectic of power, the ongoing process of political discourse, and strategies of social change” [Tymoczko / Gentzler (2002: xviii)].

Finally, the power turn also gives us the possibility to get rid of the strong, even if implicit, connection established between culture and nation. Translation has for too long a time been too strongly connected to the romantic idea of National Languages and Literatures as expression of a Nation’s real identity and specificity, taking almost for granted that a culture expresses itself through one language and one kind of text. But since translation has more to do with the fragmentary, partial, selection of texts and their reconstruction in another heterogeneous textual and cultural reality, and less to do with strong unified identities as Nation and National Language and Culture, the partiality that results from the power turn is another positive device.

Theorists can no longer think in terms of an uncritical transfer from a monolithic language A to a similar monolithic language B; rather, translation takes place across a multilingual and multicultural environment A into an often equally multicultural environment B.

[Gentzler (2002: 217)]

6. **Conclusions**

In this short contribution I have tried to make a brief reconstruction of the presence of the concept of power in translation studies. I have presented the recent proposal of a “power turn” in the discipline, suggesting that this turn might have its pertinence for the study of the translation of medieval texts.
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