

LITERATURE AND GLOBALIZATION: TRANSLATION/TRANSNATION

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In this paper I would like to explore the role of translation in relation to globalization and the teaching of literature. To pose the question of the interrelations between literature, translation and globalization will help, I think, to clear the ground for a rethinking of the teaching of literature from outside its national compartmentalisations and, in that context, facilitate a reevaluation of translation and literature in translation. My arguments are informed by my own thinking and experience not just as a translator but as a university academic concerned broadly with the humanities but especially with the teaching of literature and foreign languages and cultures. I've divided the paper into three sections: Literature and the Academy; Literary Translation / Literature in Translation; Translation and World Literature.

1. Literature and the Academy

Departments of literature (at least in Australia) are feeling the cold winds of change. The reasons for this malaise are complex. They spring partly from an unfriendly economic and cultural environment, and from a drift in the student market away from literature to areas like communications and media studies. But the malaise arguably has another, deeper root in the nationalization of literary studies, that is, in the founding ideological assumptions that governed the establishment of separate, segregated philologies, assumptions that persist in the form of institutional inertia and manifest themselves in the jealous defence of territory by Departments of English, French, German, etc. even when these departments are subsumed into Schools of Languages and Literatures. The nationalization of language, literature and culture in the age of nationalism appealed to the self-evidence of linguistic originality as well as to the inescapable plurality of "national" languages. Bill Readings, in his book *The University in Ruins*, argues that historically the integrity of the modern university has been linked to the rise and decline of the nation-state, which the university served by promoting and protecting the idea of a national culture. Now that national cultures no longer need promoting in the same way, universities are turning into transnational corporations, in which the idea of culture has given way to the bureaucratically driven discourse of "excellence", with the endless benchmarking exercises that entails. This coincidence of external pressures and internal malaise makes the question of rethinking and reforming the academic study of literature all the more urgent.

While we sense more or less acutely the exhaustion of the national paradigm as a basis for teaching and research, we have not perhaps fully grasped the blindness inherent in the

nationalization of literary studies. It's a blindness that belongs to the institution, not to the object of study. We can't blame writers and readers for the artificial segregation that came to define the study of literature, reducing it to its "national" containers. Programs in comparative literature have been seen as a necessary complement to departments of national literatures, but they have remained marginal within the university, due not least to demands concerning a reading knowledge of foreign languages. As much as we would like to require students to have a reading knowledge of two or more foreign languages, such demands, especially in Anglo-American universities, effectively deter all but a few students. In any case – and this is surely the key point – we should ask ourselves what our own literary education would look like if we confined our reading to texts in their original languages. While comparative literature may be the bad conscience of the national paradigm, translation is and remains the blind spot of the study of literature in its nationally or comparatively institutionalized forms. The blindness inherent in the nationalization of literary studies corresponds to blindness concerning the role and value of translation. Literature in translation is largely denied citizen rights in the national paradigm.

The ideology of linguistic originality, together with the notion of literature and culture as an inner, authentic essence, combined to devalue the very concept of translation and with it the transnational, occluding the hybrid nature of "national" identity. And yet, who could deny the fundamental role that translation has played in the formation of national languages; the prime example for Europe must be translations of the Bible. Moreover, we must be careful not to subsume geographical, political, and cultural identities under the heading of the national. National histories tend to emphasize unity and unification, rather than the reality of diversity. The history of Spain and Spanish literature, for example, is multilingual: Gerald Brenan, in his *Literature of the Spanish People*, includes works in Spanish, Arabic, Catalan, Galician and Portuguese. And if we speak of literature in English, it's difficult to resist Bruce Clunies Ross's argument that contemporary poetry in English belongs, as Clunies Ross says, to a "language which exists as a cluster of variants, just as it was in the Middle Ages, but its range now extends beyond linguistic variations in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England to include affiliations with the postcolonial world and the United States as well as interactions with non-European languages." In its latest evolution as a world language, English is now to be understood as an extended transnational range of variants comprising a single language, in which the vitality of poetry in English derives not from a centre but from a globally devolved network of dispersed influences. In other words, the centre-periphery model, frequently used to frame postcolonial literature, fails to register what Clunies Ross calls "the polycentric devolution of the English domain," in which literature can be transnational without translation (consider, for example, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie). The British Empire and the hegemonic role of the US go a long way to explain the global spread of English, but they can't explain the diverse developments of the English language or of poetry in English in the second half of the twentieth century.

Histories of literature have never really transcended the age of nationalism of which

they were not only the products but also culturally formative influences. They possess as their enabling and disabling birthright an imputed subject and a selective vision, in which a retrospective narrative teleology is allied to a centralizing perspective. The institutionalization of the study of literature in segregated departments is necessarily blind, because without this blindness how could a national corpus of works in English in the United Kingdom, in French in France, and so on, be determined? A national literature stands and falls with its exclusionary boundaries, just as a colonial literature presupposes an imperial centre. And just as a colonial literature only becomes post-colonial through the deconstruction of the asymmetry of centre and periphery, and a national literature only becomes post-national through a deconstruction of its foundational assumptions, so a post-national literature only becomes transnational by deconstructing the linguistic asymmetry of original and translation. Only then are we in a position to arrive at a concept of literature defined not in terms of national exclusion but of transnational inclusion, that is, to see literature as something with the same global reach as painting or music.

And what sustains literature, in its broadest sense, is translation. Susan Sontag is right to remind us that translation is, as she says, “the circulatory system of the world’s literatures”.

2. Literary Translation / Literature in Translation

Translation is one of the tools we need to make sense of the world beyond our usual field of vision. It promotes cosmopolitanism; it protects us from provincialism. And it plays a vital role in mediating our experience of literature. Edith Grossman, in her valuable little book *Why Translation Matters*, shows how the very notion of literature would be inconceivable without translation, citing Goethe’s belief that without outside influences national literatures rapidly stagnate. Authors have always borrowed from and been influenced by writers in other languages. Milan Kundera, in his personal essay on the novel, *The Curtain*, first published in French in 2007, argues precisely for a kind of literary cosmopolitanism. In his view, there are two contexts in which works of art can be understood: the “small” context of the nation and the “large” context of the world, encompassing the supranational history of art forms themselves. Provincialism is the inability to imagine one’s national culture in the large context, and Kundera thinks it has done great damage to our understanding of literary history. I quote:

[...] because a novel is bound up with its language, in nearly every university in the world it is studied almost exclusively in the small, national context. Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit, and I continue to insist that this is an irreparable intellectual loss. Because, if we consider just the history of the novel, it was to Rabelais that Lawrence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot, it was from Cervantes that Fielding drew constant inspiration, it was against Fielding that Stendhal measure himself, it was Flaubert’s tradition living on in Joyce, it was through his reflection on Joyce that Hermann Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the

possibility of departing from tradition to “write another way.” [...] [G]eographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace the *large context* of world literature, the only approach that can bring out a novel’s *aesthetic value* – that is to say: the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear; the novelty of form it has found.

Literature, Kundera is saying, has always been world literature. The entire history of literature, it might be argued, is informed by a process of transmission; a great work of literature, indeed any text, is able to enrich itself by generating new meanings as it enters new contexts. Translation could be seen in this perspective as the secret metaphor of all literary communication.

But, as we all know, the way translation is viewed, especially in the English-speaking world, remains quite negative, despite everything that has been written about translation by theorists, writers and translators themselves. The most common popular stereotype about translation is that it always entails loss, is always an inevitably imperfect substitute for the original. Esther Allen has drawn attention to a remarkable example of the ingrained nature of this view: the Wikipedia entry for George Steiner’s book about translation, *After Babel*. The entry quotes Steiner’s famous dictum: “To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate” – a statement that places translation at the heart of perception itself, and thus at the centre of all intellectual processes. However, the entry goes on to summarize the meaning of *After Babel* in the following terms: “Real translation between languages is impossible because the original meaning is always lost: the translated text is tainted by the translator’s own cultural beliefs, knowledge and attitudes.” As Esther points out, despite the multicultural reality of the contemporary world, the statement reflects a kind of nostalgia for the monolingual unity that preceded Babel, and a degree of frustration with the linguistic diversity and the debased impostures of translation that result from it. To go on to say that the translated text is tainted by the translator’s own beliefs, knowledge and attitudes is to deny or seek to refute the process of transmission, the intertextuality, that informs the entire history of literature as well as mischaracterizing the very nature of translation.

An effective way to redress negative or naïve views on translation is to foster a clearer appreciation of the fact that every translation of a text is a *performance* of that text as reflected in the selection and sequence of words on a page. If we can appreciate the dimension of *performance* in relation to music or theatre, why not also in relation to translation? The more good translations and retranslations are produced, the easier it will be to effect an appreciation of translation as performance. An encouraging sign in recent years is that retranslations of various classics have engendered a great deal of debate about the performance of the translators. It is certainly the case that, in relation to the so-called classics, there is an increasing willingness to discuss the translator’s performance. The translators of Proust, for example: Scott Moncrieff in the 1920s, Terence Kilmartin in the 1980s, D.J. Enright in the 1990s, Lydia Davies and the other members of the Penguin “team” in the last decade – all compared in their

ability to deal with the intricate twists and folds, the carefully modulated rhythms and shapes, of Proust's long sentences, his cadences, his register, his inflections. And the stakes could not be higher, in the sense that form translates thought: style *is* vision; if you don't get the style, you miss the vision. A translation is a reading of a literary work, and it is a literary work. Literary translation is an intrinsically creative activity, involving a multiplicity of exact choices about voice, tone, register, rhythm, syntax, echoes, sounds, connotations and denotations – all those factors that make up “style” and reflect the marriage between style and semantic content. In that sense, literary translation can be seen as a form of close reading of a text in its totality; translators are first of all readers, and no other readers will penetrate the original text as deeply. I can't resist quoting Tim Parks (a little piece of his in the London *Observer* I came across recently) on the task of the translator. A translator, he says,

reads with maniacal attention to nuance and cultural implication, conscious of all the books that stand behind this one; then he sets out to rewrite this impossibly complex thing in his own language, re-elaborating everything, changing everything in order that it remain the same, or as close as possible to his experience of the original. In every sentence the most loyal respect must combine with the most resourceful inventiveness. Imagine shifting the Tower of Pisa into downtown Manhattan and convincing everyone it's in the right place; that's the scale of the task.

The processes of literary translation and literary criticism are inseparable. Moreover, translation is the result not only of critical interpretation and scholarly research but also, in many cases (particularly with regard to the “classics”), of scholarly reappropriation and recontextualisation. And the more attention translation gets, the more (to put it crudely) good publicity it gets, and the more we treat translators as creative writers, or rewriters, we will have better translators, more translations, and a better literary culture generally.

Examples of excellent or brilliant translation performances are not hard to find. To take a recent Australian example: Julie Rose, the Sydney-based translator, whose new retranslation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* appeared in 2008. Rose has spoken eloquently in public discussion about what she calls “the art of hearing the voice”, by which she means the combination of all the elements that characterize a writer: “Voice [she says] encompasses a whole work, from personality to meaning. ‘Hearing’ the other person's voice, profoundly, viscerally, and dredging an answering voice up from out of the depths is the joy of the [translator's] job.”

My invocation of Julie Rose leads me to another point about translation: the desirability of giving translators themselves a voice, by which I mean recognizing their potential role, within a given literary culture, as prominent spokespersons for texts in other languages, not just by enlarging the readership of books deemed to be important, but by proposing texts for translation and by talking publicly, and writing critically and sympathetically, about texts from other languages. Julie Rose has manifestly made a significant contribution to a reevaluation of

Victor Hugo as a writer.

This point goes to the heart of the enterprise of literature itself. Literature is sustained by translation. The case for translation in these terms was made in a particularly compelling way by Susan Sontag in her 2002 St Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation (“The World as India”). The essential argument of her lecture was that a proper consideration of the art of literary translation is a claim for the value of literature itself.

My sense of what literature can be, my reverence for the practice of literature as a vocation, and my identification of the writer with the exercise of freedom – all these constituent elements of my sensibility are inconceivable without the books I read in translation from an early age. Literature was mental travel: travel into the past and to other countries. (Literature was the vehicle that could take you *anywhere*.)

The cultural importance of translation, in these terms, can’t be overstated. And the importance of translation is particularly pronounced, of course, in relation to works written in less widely spoken languages. Without translation, the novelists Orhan Pamuk, Imre Kertész, José Saramago and Naguib Mahfouz, all Nobel Prize winners, would not be known outside their native countries – Turkey, Hungary, Portugal and Egypt respectively. And so we come back to the notion of World Literature.

3. Translation and World literature

It’s appropriate that, in the early nineteenth century, Goethe sent a copy of his published collection of articles on World Literature to his English translator Thomas Carlyle. In his letter to Carlyle he compared various forms of cultural translation to the exchange of currencies. The task of the translator was to act as mediator of this general intellectual trade, increasing mutual awareness by advancing mutual exchange. The translator as mediator does indeed play the indispensable, if usually invisible role in the coming into being of world literature. His invisibility corresponds to the blindness of departments of national and of comparative literature.

The concept of national literature is arrived at by a process of exclusion, to be diagnosed as a persistent, institutionalized dissociation of the national from the world republic of letters. In turn, a definition of world literature is arrived at in a similar exclusionary fashion: world literature is not a corpus of works, the imaginary sum of all national literatures, but rather, as David Damrosch suggests, “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translations or in their original language.” As a concept, world literature therefore signifies “not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading [...] a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.” The study of world literature, according to Damrosch, does not consist of sampling a smorgasbord of works from all the world’s written (and oral) cultures, nor of mastering a given canon of classics; rather, it concentrates on following the movement of works that travel well between contexts,

eras, and languages. “The work of world literature exists on two planes at once: present in our world, it also brings us into a world very different from ours.” The implication is one of relativity; there is no single or standard world, only different worlds seen from one spot or another. “World literature [Damrosch says] is always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture.” It is thus a kind of double refraction. And the crucial point from the perspective of translation is that world literature, thus conceived, is a kind of writing that *gains* in translation – acquiring new depths of meaning and horizons of interpretation. Translations, Damrosch argues, can give us a unique purchase on the global scope of the world’s cultures, past and present. In the context of national literatures translation typically appears as loss, whereas in the context of world literature translation necessarily appears as gain in the sense that it is the means by which texts transcend their culture of origin. World literature is a function of relations; it is defined by the relationality, the translatability inscribed into the act of translation. The “translational” mode of reading generates in the minds of writers and readers the “great conversation of world literature” of which Goethe spoke in the nineteenth century, and which Kundera commends so warmly.

It’s clearly not by chance that translation forms the blind spot of a “national” conception of literature: it represents a differential, plural conception of identity incompatible with all essentializing constructs of the nation. Lacking birthright and authenticity, literature in translation has been felt to have the deficient status of hybridity. The founding condition of the national is the transnational: the national emerges from the dialectic of self and other; and precisely because the founding condition of the national is the transnational, we can say that adopting the perspective of world literature changes everything and nothing, because it does not signify the identification of another canon or corpus of texts but of another mode of reading applicable, as Damrosch says, to “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translations or in their original language.” In this sense all reading and writing is comparative, just as all cultures and civilizations live from the ongoing process of transmission and translation. And the transcendence of the local through translation plays a particularly important role for so-called minor literatures with only a few readers or for writers who are cut off from readers through censorship.

It is crucial to stress the centrality of translation, understood as a cultural activity, to the interpenetration of the global and the local throughout history, an interpenetration that has progressively accelerated over recent centuries and taken on a new dimension, thanks among other things to the revolution in communications, in our lifetime. It has brought about an ever greater consciousness of the world as one in space and time and has led to the present global problematization of cultural and civilizational identities.

What changes if we adopt a global perspective? Nothing, in the sense that a transcendence of national cultures addresses the same texts as before but now in terms of world literature. As Damrosch puts it: “One of the most exciting features of contemporary literary studies is the fact that all periods as well as all places are up for fresh examination and

open to new configurations.” In other words, world literature calls for a different way of reading and for a reframing of the study of literature in the academy. Conversely, we need to ask to what extent the nationalization of literary studies has blinded us to the fact that literature has always been world literature. The logic of this self-interrogation, and of the question of literature and globalization, is to ask: Do we need yet more interpretations of the literary canon confined within the narrow horizons of our specializations? Is it not time to develop new models of literary study for the twenty-first century? I’m certainly not suggesting that departments of “national” languages and literatures should be dissolved under a new umbrella, but that they should engage in a creative interplay with world literature – literature in the singular but conceived ecumenically, and recognized as the best means of allowing the comparative study of societies and cultures in a globalized world. To invoke Kundera once more: all literature is world literature; and clearly, world literature would not exist, could not be read, without translation.