

Literary translation

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The vagueness of the phrase “literary translation” enables it to cover the “non-literary” translation of “literary” texts (e.g. literal renderings of a poem for pedagogical or for philological purposes) as well as the “literary” translation of “non-literary” texts (e.g. religious ones). But in most cases the phrase refers to “literary” translations made of “literary” originals, whereby the translators are expected to preserve or to recreate somehow the aesthetic intentions or effects that may be perceived in the source text. It should be remembered, however, that the status which texts have as “literary” texts or indeed as “translations” is ultimately a matter of conventions, norms and communicative functions as much as being a reflection of the text’s intrinsic characteristics (see Literary Studies and Translation Studies).

1.The flow of literary texts

Translation can be looked on as an aspect of the reception of a literary text. It is one of the many ways in which a text can “live on” beyond the linguistic and cultural milieu of its origin and find ever new readerships, thereby releasing or prompting new meanings in the process. As such, literary

translations function alongside with source-text editions, quotations, commentaries, adaptations, allusions, parodies, and so on within the wider web of intertextuality. Descriptive Translation Studies was the first paradigm in the field to emphasize how much is to be gained by looking at these translational afterlives from the viewpoint of the receptor cultures.

1.1 Patterns of import

Translation (import) can make up a sizeable proportion of the total literary field in cultures when we compare it with newly produced works in the literature (production) or with works from the past that are still being pressed into literary service in the present (tradition). These exact proportions may vary strongly between cultures and they are likely to fluctuate across time within a culture. The interactions between production, translation and tradition may be taken to reflect the dynamics of cultural change (Lambert 2006: 15–21). It is well-known that “minority” cultures will usually generate a proportionately higher number of translations than “major” literary markets. Venuti (2008 [1995]) strongly criticises the ethnocentrism that tends to result from the more self-reliant situation of majority languages.

The conditions under which translation is likely to be more visible and to exert an innovative influence on the receptor system have famously been hypothesised by Itamar Even-Zohar (e.g. 1978). Translations are more likely to perform a so-called primary function when a “young” literary system is in the process of being established; when a system is “weak” in its dealings with another, more powerful system; and when a system is in a period of “crisis”. For a more detailed discussion of these hypotheses, see Polysystem theory and translation.

Many studies have demonstrated the validity of Even-Zohar’s basic intuitions, whether they use the terminology of Polysystem Theory or not. As it happens, many descriptively oriented scholars taking an interest in the occurrence, distribution and impact of translated literature now seem to have increasing recourse to sociological models such as those of Pierre Bourdieu (see Sociology of translation). Increasing attention is thereby given to the role of individual agency opposing normative and institutional forces in literary translation as well as to repressive mechanisms such as censorship (see Censorship; Agents of translation).

1.2 The sociolinguistics of literary translation

Translations have often been used to enhance the status of the target language by lifting it from the inferior position of a dialect or patois to the rank of a real language of culture and by expanding its expressive range. Newly emancipated or recognized languages (e.g. Afrikaans in the 1920s, various Creoles today, various Sign Languages) or newly constructed ones (e.g. Esperanto in the late nineteenth century) quite systematically engage in the translation of canonical texts in order to enrich their textual repertoires, flex their stylistic muscles and showcase their ability to accommodate even the most demanding texts. The Bible and Shakespeare are typically found at the top of their “to translate” list. There are surely no speakers of Esperanto who do not also have a natural mother tongue that can offer them trustworthy versions of the Scriptures and of Shakespeare. The “normal” reasons for translation (semantic access, spiritual regeneration through sacred texts, aesthetic enjoyment through a foreign classic...) would not seem to be the prime motives driving the translation project here, but rather what translation can do for the status of the target language and, ultimately, for the cohesion, visibility and recognition of the social group or culture identifying with it.

This may be observed with particular clarity when we attend to translation and related activities (e.g. the making of bilingual dictionaries) occurring between mutually intelligible languages, and

especially when this happens in politically sensitive contexts. Examples such as Serbian/Croatian or Bulgarian/Macedonian may spring to mind here. While literary translations and bilingual dictionaries are traditionally supposed to serve as mediators overcoming a linguistic and cultural divide (“translation is a bridge”), in such cases their function is no less to formalise and consolidate the divide in the first place (“the gap of otherness is so deep and wide that a bridge is needed”).

1.3 Empire and after

How do the volumes and directionalities of translation correlate with the permanently shifting and increasingly globalised economy of linguistic, literary and cultural values? These issues of language, translation, power and cultural identity may be observed anywhere in literary and cultural history, but they have particular urgency in postcolonial situations in which by definition linguistic and other cultural transactions do not take place on an equal basis (see Post-colonial literatures and translation). This particular issue has invited some fascinating research in Translation Studies: see e.g. the work done on “cannibalistic” theories and practices of postcolonial translation in Brazil; the research of Annie Brisset (1996), Sherry Simon (2006) and others on translation in Quebec; Roshni Mooneeram’s book (2009) on literary translation into Mauritian Creole; and so on. Such efforts towards a more inclusive, truly international and culturally balanced approach to translation are gaining momentum (e.g. Maria Tymoczko 2007) and are sometimes reframed within what has been dubbed the “international turn” in the discipline.

2. Charting the history literary translation: panoramic views

Historically oriented questions about literary translation are now being addressed in several places of the world in what begins to look like a concerted research effort. Perhaps the most impressive example of such systematic literary translation research to this date has been the Göttingen-based SFB 309 on Die literarische Übersetzung (a SFB or Sonderforschungsbereich is a temporary collaborative research centre). This project ran formally from 1985 to 1996 and has continued in more informal ways since; it has produced an impressive number of articles and books on the history of literary translation in German-speaking countries (e.g. Frank and Turk 2004).

The new millennium saw the publication of two very useful reference works that can serve as a compendium of existing knowledge and a platform for further investigations into literary translation in the English-speaking world: the *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* (Classe 2000) and *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (France 2000). These books were a prelude to the more ambitious initiative of the *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English* (France and Gillespie, in progress). Similar projects are under construction elsewhere. In France, for instance, Yves Chevrel and Jean-Yves Masson are coordinating a *Histoire des traductions en langue française*, which will cover the history of literary (but not only literary) translation into French. The three-volume reference work *Übersetzung, Translation, Traduction. Ein internationales Handbuch zur Übersetzungsforschung* (Kittel et al. 2004–2010) also contains many entries of literary interest.

3. More specific issues and interests

The many forms and manifestations of literary translation also raise a host of more specific issues. Some of these are discussed in the entries on the translation of drama and poetry. The following themes found in recent research literature reflect the many dimensions of literary translation as a study object as well as the changing priorities of literary studies:

the role of translation in the international career of an individual writer: e.g. Shakespeare and the Language of Translation (Hoenselaars 2004);

the role of translation in the dissemination and international perceptions of a national literature: e.g. *One Into Many. Translation and the Dissemination of Classical Chinese Literature* (Chan 2003);

the role of translation in the creative development of an individual author/translator: e.g. *Translation as Stylistic Evolution: Italo Calvino Creative Translator of Raymond Queneau* (Federici 2009);

specific translations of specific texts: e.g. *The Vision of Dante. Cary's Translation of the "Divine Comedy"* (Crisafulli 2003);

the translation of specific intertextual devices, literary techniques, narrative strategies, and so on: e.g. *How Does It Feel? Point of View in Translation. The Case of Virginia Woolf into French* (Bosseaux 2007);

the role of translation in the development and/or spread of a specific genre, as well as the specificities of translating it: e.g. *The Problem of Translating "Jabberwocky": the Nonsense Literature of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and their Spanish Translations* (Orero 2007); see also *Children's literature in translation*; *Comics in translation*;

the specific stylistic challenges that face the translator of literature: e.g. *Stylistic Approaches to Translation* (Boase-Beier 2006); see also *Stylistics and translation*;

the role of retranslation in translation history: e.g. *The Breach and the Observance. Theatre retranslation as a strategy of artistic differentiation, with special reference to retranslations of Shakespeare's Hamlet (1777–2001)* (Mathijssen 2007);

the effect of literary translations on their readers: e.g. *Untersuchungen zur Übersetzungsäquivalenz dargestellt an der Rezeption von Multatulis "Max Havelaar" und seinen deutschen Übersetzungen* (Stegeman 1991);

the role of translations in the teaching of literature: e.g. *Enseigner les œuvres littéraires en traduction* (Chevrel 2007);

the continuities and discontinuities between literature, translation and various processes of adaptation, whereby the borders between media may or may not be crossed (see *Audiovisual translation*).

Needless to say, this highly selective and randomly organized list doesn't even begin to do justice to the abundance of research avenues already taken or waiting to be further explored. Among other things, we need to specifically acknowledge the growing number of publications that take an openly critical, political or activist line in their approach of (literary) translation (see also *Committed approaches and activism*). We have already alluded to the work carried out within the context of a postcolonial sensibility which specifically critiques the lingering Eurocentric or western bias in the study of translation. To this growing body of work, we need to add the authors who look at literary translation from the gender viewpoint (see *Gender in translation*).

4. (Literary) discourses on (literary) translation

The epistemological skepticism of postmodernism and poststructuralism has in the past decades created an open discursive space in which the conventional distinction between "creative work" and "academic writing" is deconstructed. This is a reminder that discourse about literary translation is definitely not the exclusive privilege of academically-based researchers with a scholarly mindset. The translators themselves and authors have also written intriguing texts on the nature or functions of

literary translation. In the days before Translation Studies got formally established as a discipline, practising translators were among the main writers about literary translation (prefaces, correspondence, treatises, and so on; see Paratexts).

Much of this material is now being made available to us in anthologies. Some of these are very wide-ranging such as *Western Translation Theory from Herodotos to Nietzsche* (Robinson 1997) and *Translation: Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader* (Weissbort and Eysteinsson 2006), but anthologies of “prescientific” metatexts on literary translation can also adopt a narrower scope in terms of author, period and/or language. See, for instance, *Traduire Shakespeare. Les Reflexions dels Traductors Catalans* (Pujol 2007) or *Cent ans de théorie française de la traduction. De Batteux à Littré (1748–1847)* (D’hulst 1990).

4.1 Text and metatext

The question remains what status should be given to these “older” and “prescientific” discourses on translation produced by translators and authors. Should they be regarded as “object texts” to be correlated with the translations and then to be contextualized and discussed by scholars who are themselves operating on the methodologically higher ground of the descriptive “meta-level”? Or should they be allowed to frankly take their place among the “scholarly” pronouncements on translation, claiming quite the same levels of metadiscursive interest and validity? If so, would this second course of action mean that the whole idea of distinguishing between object-level and meta-level has to be jettisoned?

The answer to this question depends very much on one’s own epistemological position; it is bound to remain a matter of controversy. Be that as it may, one has the impression that the above-mentioned anthology by Weissbort and Eysteinsson (2006) is very much in tune with our postmodern times when we see that it includes fictional texts (e.g. the biblical story of the Tower of Babel and Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quichote”) side by side with sternly academic selections (e.g. Jakobson, Even-Zohar, Snell-Hornby). From a methodological viewpoint these are very strange bedfellows indeed, but the editors of the anthology insist on emphasizing the continuity between the various voices speaking about translation: those of the “theoreticians” and those of the “practitioners”, those of the “scholars” and those of the “artists”.

4.2 Translation as literary criticism

It is not a coincidence that one of the two editors of the afore-mentioned anthology, Daniel Weissbort, had been actively involved in the strong American tradition of “literary translation workshops” at Iowa University and in other places from the 1960s onwards. These workshops brought poetry and translation together in sessions of close reading and creative writing that aimed to experience and recreate the singularity of each poem (somewhat in the spirit of the New Criticism). Such a project is a far cry from what would have been the more “scholarly” ambition of trying to formalize or explain the various translational choices in terms of general models, categories or theories.

The belief that literary meanings can be captured and communicated in their sameness in another language has since the 1960s progressively made way for a keen sense that the meanings of the source text are always elusive and that their representation in the translation is bound to remain provisional and problematic (a change that mirrors the paradigm shift in Literary Theory from the New Criticism to its de facto successor Deconstruction). But what has remained constant in this tradition of authors/translators reflecting on their art is the close, creative and personal involvement with literary texts and consequently the reluctance to sacrifice the unique intensity of these

experiences on the scholarly altars of generalization, rationalization, logic or maximum neutrality. In her *Translation and Literary Criticism: Translation as Analysis* (1997) Marilyn Gaddis Rose introduces a hermeneutic and pedagogical practice she names “stereoscopic reading” which uses “both the original language text and one (or more) translations while reading and teaching. Stereoscopic reading makes it possible to intuit and reason out the interliminal” (p. 90) and it is this “interliminality” which is “the gift translation gives to readers of literature” (p. 7). Translations and their study can thus be made to enhance the literary experience in a manner which defeats strict rationality and whose effect is therefore best suggested by metaphor or neologism (“interliminality”).

Translators who draw on their own experience and who have written personally, eloquently and influentially on the art of literary translation are too many to name. Any recent list within the English-speaking world is likely to include Ezra Pound, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Bly, Gregory Rabassa, Suzanne Jill Levine and Douglas Hofstadter. Outside English (but also, overwhelmingly, in English after it was first translated in 1968), Walter Benjamin’s “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” has to be singled out as a massively influential essay. It was initially published as a preface to his own translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* from 1923. Benjamin’s diffuse style and the abstract nature of his philosophical speculations (e.g. his concept of the “reine Sprache” or pure language which translation supposedly allows to shine through) have not stopped it from becoming “arguably the single most important piece of modern Translation Studies” (Weissbort & Eysteinnsson 2006: 297). Benjamin became a major source of inspiration to the adherents of hermeneutics and deconstruction especially. While never achieving a similar cult-like status, other twentieth-century literary translators outside the English sphere to have written influential prefaces and essays on their art include Valéry Larbaud, Haroldo de Campos, Henri Meschonnic and Yves Bonnefoy.

Needless to say, their work should be distinguished from the practical handbooks that some practitioners and teachers of literary translation have written for the benefit of neophytes and in which in they explain the ins and outs of how to write a literary translation and how to get it published; an example of this hands-on approach would be *Literary Translation: a Practical Guide* by Clifford E. Landers (2001).

4.3 Multilingualism and translation as literary devices

We should note the growing interest in bilingual writing and in fictions that play out issues of multilingualism and translation either through their emplotment within the fictional world or through some or other metafictional device. Indeed, translation is not merely something that happens “after” literature and as an extension of it. In many cases it is already present “within” the literary text as a component of the story content and perhaps even as a central theme. Considering writers such as Borges, Márquez and Vargas Llosa, and referring to translation critics such as Else Vieira, Rosemary Arrojo and Adriana Pagano, Edwin Gentzler (2008: 108) has argued that “translation is perhaps the most important topic in Latin American fiction, more important even than the widely circulated magic realism theme”. But the theme is prevalent in original writing and critical work in other places too, as may be illustrated by the papers collected in *Fictionalising Translation and Multilingualism* (Delabastita and Grutman 2005). As Michael Cronin (*Translation Goes to the Movies*, 2009) and others have recently demonstrated, it is no less present in cinematic fictions. Growing attention to these various crossovers between translation and fiction has led some to speak of a “fictional turn” in the discipline (see *Turns of Translation Studies*).

A closely related area is that of literary multilingualism or heteroglossia (Grutman 1997). Many writers are bilinguals or even polyglots; they may have a cosmopolitan background, live in a bilingual

country, or belong to a borderline situation. This may be expressed by the multilingual nature of their writings, whereby special attention needs to be given to the social presuppositions and values attached to each language and language variety represented in the text. It goes without saying that the translation of such multilingual texts creates quite unique translation difficulties. Just try to envisage the mind-boggling obstacles facing the translator of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which combines among others, English, French, "broken" English spoken by French characters and "broken" French spoken by English characters, not to mention a range of regional accents (Delabastita 2002). We find that in many cases the interlingual tensions present in the source text are somehow diminished in translation. Whether their texts are multilingual or not, bilingual writers can engage in self-translation, which raises fascinating questions about the status and primacy of these different versions (e.g. Tagore, Julien Green, Nabokov, Beckett, I.B. Singer, to name but a few). For recent and wide-ranging surveys of such issues, one may refer to *The Bilingual Text. History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation* (Hokenson & Munson 2007) or *Heterolingualism in/and Translation* (Meylaerts 2006).

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