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# Literary Translation: Looking Toward the Future

Literature and our attitude toward language have changed greatly in the last fifty years in their relation to Western culture. Literary translation, a complex activity, is ultimately going wherever literature goes. I would like to highlight some of these changes and tease out some of their implications for the future of literary translation as a craft and as an art.

Thinking about translation's future requires extrapolating from the way language and literature have related to culture in the past. My observations are those of a translator, not a theorist of translation, and I am limiting myself to some trends that have become evident in Western European and American prose fiction, although I think that many of my points might well have wider application.

At the end of the twentieth century, language has lost or is losing its status as a marker for "nation," and the "semiotic mystique," if I may call it such, that has characterized language from psychoanalysis through post-structuralism.

The identification of language with nation in Europe was codified in the eighteenth century by Herder, who asserted that language was the voice of a people, and that what defined a people was a common language. Thus the German language was the expression of the German soul, and the English language the expression of the English soul. This language posited as the matrix of a national culture was not the refined speech or written language of educated people, but the spoken language of the largely illiterate *Volk*, the common people, in whom a primal national *Ur*-soul was thought to be most purely expressed.

Up to the late eighteenth century, roughly speaking, the concept of "nation" had been thought of in dynastic, territorial terms rather than as an intangible, spiritual essence, and up to that time the concept of "Volk" as a defining collective class had been nonexistent. The horizon of the aristocracy and the educated classes was international or non-national, even after Latin had faded out as the lingua franca of the educated. Milton could be an Englishman and an internationally-oriented English poet without identifying literature, let alone common speech, as the central element that defined and

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united the English nation.

But once "nation" was defined as a spiritual essence embodied in a particular vernacular language, the way was opened for the philosophical development of nationalism as an ideology, and the language one spoke and wrote became a primary expression of this ideology.

The equation of language with nation and the nation-state reached its peak in the nineteenth century. This equation began to break down seriously with the rise of linguistics, semiotics, and language-oriented philosophy and psychology around 1900, when language became the subject of international scientific research as an independent area of intellectual investigation; language was no longer, or only secondarily, tied to a particular country.[1] In the later twentieth century the concept of the nation-state is in decline, at least in Western Europe, and language and nation have been increasingly decoupled from each other. Language, including literary language, has become simply instrumental, an agency of communication; it is no longer considered the marker of nationalist ideology. This change in the cultural valency of language is paralleled in the political sphere in Western Europe. The slow political amalgamation described by Nelly Furman is also having an impact on the writing of literature, as I shall demonstrate. Furman writes that

> As the new Europe becomes a reality, it will in time erase the memory of the once-autonomous countries... that historically were fierce enemies before becoming allies. In the forthcoming European federation, the countries of old Europe, with their societies unified by specific languages, defined by precise geographical borders and structured by distinctive histories, will little by little, like the Normans of yesteryear or the formerly independent realm of Burgundy, simply become events of the past relevant to scholars of history. (Furman, 68)[2]

This development is still in its beginning stages, but the direction is clear, and gives translators and teachers of translation much to think about.

Up until recently I would confidently tell my translation students that when they translated a foreign literature into English they were translating not just the words but the other culture, and that, by way of preparing themselves to translate a writer, they could never know enough about the

1 There is an interesting discussion on the relation of language to the development of national consciousness in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 40-46, 133-34, and passim.

2 In a call for submissions for a forthcoming issue devoted to "Mobile Citizens, Media States," *PMLA* (114:3, 1999, 310) states that "as national borders become increasingly problematic in an era of global media culture, categories of citizenship and local forms of identity are becoming more mobile, nomadic, and hybrid."

national culture in which the writer was embedded and of which he was a product. Words, I told them, were the least of their problems. But looking at the trend of contemporary writing coming out of Europe now, I'm not so sure. Now I must ask myself: *What* other culture? Or what *other* culture? As in Western society generally, a creeping homogenization seems to be developing in prose fiction, a kind of generic international literary style and content that travels effortlessly across fading national borders and that is immediately familiar to citizens of different countries. A broad horizontal culture seems to be replacing vertical national cultures. Richard Eder writes in a review of a recent novel by Geoff Dyer, for instance, that "his novel is an early specimen of what you might call European Community fiction. Luke, the vaguely intending writer, and Alex are British and need no papers to get laboring jobs in a book warehouse [in Paris]. Nicole, a Yugoslav immigrant, and Sahra, an American, are employed more formally, the first as a secretary, the second as an interpreter."

Another straw in the wind is that within Western culture literature has become marginalized. The word is no longer thought to be the sacred bearer of morality and culture, as it still was for writers of the Modernist period like Virginia Woolf, Joyce, Proust, Musil, Kafka, Rilke, or Thomas Mann. For Matthew Arnold, literature was the prime defender of culture against anarchy, and Nietzsche had proclaimed in *The Birth of Tragedy* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*) that the world could only be comprehended and justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. The aesthetic word was a morally charged arrow: In an early polemic, "Bilse und Ich" ("I and Bilse," 1903), Thomas Mann speaks of "the tremblingly taut bow that fires off the *word*, the sharply pointed, feathered word, which whirrs and strikes and sits quivering in the target's black center" (Mann, X, 21, translation mine).

Yet in the early twentieth century the literary word was becoming disembodied and robbed of its central moral function. It increasingly became the object of psychology and linguistic philosophy on one hand and of advertising on the other. The literary word became a deceptive surface that concealed but allowed glimpses of depths and subversive agendas. More than a generation after *Bilse und Ich* we find the mathematician Ulrich, the hero of Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities* (*Der Mannohne Eigenshaften*, 1930-1942) — a novel about the inadequacy of language — musing that no word can mean the same thing twice. In *Doctor Faustus* (1947), a much older Thomas Mann brilliantly summarized the situation of a modernist art that had become so complex that it could be created and understood only as parody. His hero, the composer Adrian Leverkühn, cried out for an art of a new expressive simplicity, an art that would be "auf Du und Du mit der Menschheit," on easy terms with all humanity.

Well, we got it. In the last quarter-century fiction has generally been



marked by a return to much simpler literary devices, in which language plays a far more modest role than it does in Proust, Musil, or Joyce—or in Heidegger, Benjamin, or Derrida. The Russian formalists' distinction between aesthetic or poetic language and everyday language seems to have dissipated. One might argue that literature has benefited from this lightening of its charge: freed from moral responsibility and from fixed formal conventions, literary language has gained freedom, directness, and a new suppleness in giving voice to an increasingly pluralistic and polyvalent culture.[3] Writers are turning to different means to achieve their effects.

With the equation between language and nation fading, national languages have lost much of their importance as a vehicle for communicating ideas. For instance, many American academics and students who study French or German philosophers or theory see no need to consult their foreign sources in the original language, or to take into account what local circumstances and cultural traditions might have gone into producing them. Even the *PMLA* publishes learned theoretical articles dealing with European philosophers and theorists in which every single reference is to an English translation. Ideas thus disembodied from national languages and cultures seem perfectly adequate to these writers and to *PMLA*, and perhaps they are; they might be regarded as part of a new transcendentalism in which ideas are to be apprehended in their Platonic rather than their manifest form. My purpose, however, is not to criticize this practice, but to put it in the context of the major re-orientation of both language and literature that is now taking place.

For the practicing translator of prose fiction, this changing role of literature and literary language has implications that have been largely overlooked, but before mentioning some of them let me give a few examples of the increasing horizontal diffusion of literary culture:

W. G. Sebald has written a splendid novel called *The Emigrants*. It was written in German, but its author has been living in England since 1966, and since 1970 he has been Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia. In its settings, *The Emigrant* ranges as far afield as Deauville, France, and Ithaca, New York. The different cultures in Sebald's novel do not clash at all, but blend seamlessly and indifferently into each other. The characters seem the same and act the same wherever they are, while only the scenery changes. This book won three distinguished literary prizes in Germany, but is it a *German* novel?

3 An example (from Tarnopolsky): "... Hebrew is becoming an ordinary language, and its literature a normal literature, no longer the exclusive province of high-minded ideals and nationalistic fervor .... [C]haracters in contemporary Israeli fiction have turned away from ideals and ideology, away from the burdens of history, toward their own individual lives, however outlandish."

The Swiss writer Max Frisch wrote a novel set in Montauk, Long Island, and appropriately titled *Montauk*, about an unspecified man's affair with an American woman. What's Swiss about it?

*Austria Kultur*, the cultural magazine published by the Austrian government, offers in one recent issue (17:1, 1997) three striking examples of the current international homogenization of literature and the arts. In an interview, the writer Jakob Lind describes himself as a "Viennese-born Dutchman turned Israeli with an Austrian passport, Eastern European parents." Lind lives in England, writes in German. If I translate him, what culture am I translating?

The second item in *Austria Kultur* announces that "in the interest of advancing the arts, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science, Transport, and the Arts has created a new 'Artists-in-Residence' program for Austrian artists. Over the past few years the Ministry has rented or purchased studio apartments in various countries.... Professional apartments are available in Paris, London, Berlin, Rome, Cracow, Cesky Krumlov (Czech Republic), Fujino (Japan), as well as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles." If I translate a contemporary Austrian writer officially residing in one of these places, am I to think that I am translating the Austrian nation or the Austrian soul?

With all these developments, certain canonical texts about translation now seem out of date. Walter Benjamin's tragic view of history included a tragic view of translation. His 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator" (*Die Aufgabedes Übersetzers*) rests on the notion of the sacredness of the word, as in holy scripture, and insists on a literalness in translating that will recreate the spirit - the sacred spirit captured in the inimitable word - of the original in another language. This is consonant with the modernist attempt to preserve, or restore, the moral centrality of the literary word. But what if the word is no longer regarded as sacred by writers or readers but merely as a transparent or semi-transparent medium of expression and communication? What if contemporary writers and readers no longer think that the surface of a literary text conceals layered depths which the translator labors in vain to transpose? What if the translator is no longer regarded as the hapless betrayer of the sacred spirit of the original language, but merely a facilitator?

A recent book on translation notes that there has been a steep decline since the '60s in poets and novelists doing translations in addition to their own writing. The author notes that younger writers are less likely to know foreign languages, less likely to be interested in the forms of language (including English), and who, because they regard language as instrumental rather than essential, are less in love with language as part of their literary work (Wechsler 191-92).

If writers are increasingly deprived of nation and national language as exemplary vehicles, they still must search for a way to express their individual



identities as literary style becomes more straightforward and more international. A sense of place, of location, seems to be taking the place of national culture, as is the case with Sebald. The late German novelist Uwe Johnson, who ended up living in isolation in Ireland, wrote an ambitious three-volume novel titled *Anniversaries* (*Jahrestage*) about a German woman who lives in Manhattan. There is some back-and-forth between the adult character's present life in New York and her childhood hometown in Germany, but the emphasis in both is on impressions of local *places* rather than local *cultures*. The emerging cultural pattern seems to be one of scattered places tied together by air travel and rapid forms of communication. The idea of "nation" is fundamentally irrelevant to this pattern of prose fiction.

Translators are facing new tasks. For instance, this new kind of construal of place has led some writers to put a new and sometimes perverse emphasis on regionalism and regionalist expressions, which adds considerably to the translator's burden. Siegfried Lenz's *Deutschstunde* (*The German Lesson*) contains a goodly number of technical nautical terms. Germany is a country with a small coastline, and except for its far north has never been, culturally speaking, a seafaring nation, so these technical nautical words will send most German readers to their dictionaries. Since English has an extensive nautical vocabulary and literature dealing with the sea, the equivalent words in English do not stick out nearly as much. In her novel *Magdalene die Sünderin* (*Magdalene the Sinner*), the Austrian writer Lillian Faschinger makes the incomprehensibly prolific nomenclature of regional Austrian pastries a thematic marker - think of Proust's madeleine multiplied by a hundred different kinds of pastries. In the absence of thematically-weighted equivalents in the second language, translating such regional markers can be impossible. What should the translator faced with such a situation do? Look for a non-existent equivalent in English? Provide an explanatory note that will not convey any weight to English-speaking readers? Simply ignore the problem by dropping the thematic marker, and if so, what about the loss to the original? Might the translator in such a case *re-write* the original text in order to retain the marker in a different guise, thereby displacing the author, to the extent that a translator does not automatically do so? These are questions that can only be answered on a case-by-case basis, not theoretically. The reason that theories of translation cannot be of help is that no two works of literature are sufficiently alike to form a theoretical basis for the practice of translation.

Thanks to the twentieth century's obsession with putting everything on a scientific basis, an almost scientific scrupulousness has become the hallmark of literary translation. (This was not notably the case for earlier translators.) For the scientifically scrupulous translators of the present this has positive as well as negative aspects. The twentieth-century's manic obsession with language since Freud, Wittgenstein, Saussure, and their

followers and modernist writers seems finally to be ebbing, but it has had a salutary effect on those of us who translate the literature of the past. We have become far more sensitive to the nuances and overtones of words and sentences than were earlier translators, such as Constance Garnett and Helen Lowe-Porter. We later translators, beneficiaries of a hundred years of study of the philosophy of language and the psychology of language, have been trained to be much more accurate, and more sensitive on a technical level to the subtle and idiosyncratic ways in which a writer uses language. This has proved especially useful in translating the complex literature of modernism, whose writers were so intoxicated - scientifically intoxicated, most of them - with both the power and the sounds of words, James Joyce's "a day of dappled seaborne clouds," Proust's "aubépines" and "boutons d'or."

But it remains the case that a scrupulous translator who has no literary sensibility, who plods from one word to the next without listening to the writer's creative flow, will produce a turkey of a translation. The most important quality a translator can have is an acute literary sensibility; in his or her own language, so as to be able to render the foreign text adequately, and in the foreign language, so as to understand the writer's subtleties and style. A translator who is linguistically expert in a mechanical sense but has no sense of literary style, and a translator with an agenda, who wants to prove a point about translation on the corpse or corpus of the accidental author, are two things that can kill a literary translation.

After a long, hard struggle for recognition, literary translation has recently been gaining respectability in the academic world. This prestige derives from two sources: on one hand the achievements of translating or re-translating major writers of the past, particularly those of the modernist period, and on the other hand from the elevation of translation as a subject of theoretical discourse. But will either of these bases continue? Looking at the direction in which contemporary literature appears to be heading, the translator's hardwon and still unconsolidated prestige would seem to be in some jeopardy. It is a question whether this prestige will still be tenable when it comes to translating writers of the less demanding, or differently demanding, kind of literature being written now and which seems likely to go on being written and read. It seems not to matter greatly any longer in what original language a work of literature was written. Literature is no longer regarded as the vehicle for spiritual or moral values, and readers are less trained and less willing to invest the hard work that goes into reading that kind of literature. The uncomfortable question remains: Why should any special status accrue to the translator of the museum pieces of, for example, modernism? The literature of the past will still need to be periodically re-translated - our monuments are, after all, our monuments - but it will continue to fall away from us. The literature of the unrolling present is developing new conventions



that will call for new kinds of translation that threaten increasing invisibility for the translator.

The translator's continuing prestige is also uncertain on the theoretical side. Translation theory in sociolinguistics and in philosophy has serious shortcomings, since neither addresses the specific problems of the literary use of language. Sociolinguistics deals with the morphological units of language, not with the paragraphs that are the basic units of prose fiction, whereas for philosophy translation is a highly abstracted dialog with "otherness."[4] Translation theory is not related to translation practice, and the theory only makes sense in a theoretical context divorced from practice. Theoretical claims that translation is a hegemonic tool used by one culture to assert its power over another (Venuti 5) derives from a warped perspective in which domination and victimization are projected as tropes for what was formerly regarded as borrowing and assimilation. Translators must smile at seeing themselves invested with such power to purvey domination.

While so much has changed in our knowledge of and attitudes about language, prose fiction, and translating, there have been since Dryden three general approaches to translating which have remained constant:[5] 1. The translation should be transparent. It should follow the original as closely as possible, but read as if the author had written it in the second language; it should not read like a translation. 2. The translation should be semi-opaque or opaque, preserving verbal and/or syntactic features of the original, thereby preserving its status as an identifiably foreign text. (This is likely to be hard on readers; if done conscientiously it will sound like a bad translation, and will not convey the quality of the original in its own language.) 3. The translation should be a free adaptation, only loosely connected to the original. The choice among these general approaches will depend on the qualities of each individual work to be translated.

4 Walter Benjamin: "... all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness [*Fremdheit*] of languages." (Benjamin, 50, translated by Harry Zohn in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. Professor Zohn is an excellent translator, but Benjamin was notorious for packing terms with harmonic overtones: thus "foreignness,"the straightforward rendering of "Fremdheit," misses the also-present "alienness," "strangeness." Translators must make choices; the problem lies rather with readers who, out of ignorance or unconcern, mistake the translation for the original.) Most interesting in this connection is an anthology of essays, *Translating Freud*, ed. Darius Gray Ormiston Jr., M.D. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), which discusses the problems that arise in translating Freud into various languages.

5 As can be seen in perusing the essays in Schulte's and Biguenet's anthology *Theories of Translation*.

Literary translation as an activity calls for knowledge and skill, the more the better, and will continue to do so, but in different ways. Every project presents its own challenges and difficulties, and must be approached on its own terms. Given the radical changes in writing, readers, and reading that are now evident, along a trajectory whose end we cannot foresee with any clarity, translation as a field will need to be deeply rethought.

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SIMONA SAWHNEY

# Gods, Heroes and Epic Translations

In the famous opening paragraph of *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukacs describes the age of the epic as an age when the life of mortals corresponds perfectly to the world around them. "Everything in such ages," he writes, "is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars" (29). The correspondence between aspiration and deed, life and essence, belongs, according to Lukacs, to a consciousness fundamentally different from our own – a consciousness of the organic and concrete totality of life where the hero's destiny "connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate is crystallized in his own" (67). The epic is thus ineluctably linked to the Greek world – that is to say, to a profound and endlessly powerful fantasy of origin. Lukacs says that an unbridgeable gulf separates that world from the world of later literature, and specifically, from the world of the novel. While his account of the epic is particularly memorable for its skill and eloquence, it is also in many ways representative of the path by which western modernity has articulated its relation to, or its distance from, the Homeric epics. From this perspective, the epic is not simply one literary genre among others: it is the name for a lost world of perfection.

Even a cursory glance at contemporary scholarship from South Asia reveals, however, that the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, occupy a somewhat different position in modern India – or, indeed, in South and Southeast Asia. While the "original" Sanskrit texts may be read by relatively few people, most Indians are familiar with some version of these poems, and references to epic situations and characters are a commonplace in popular culture. In an essay called "Three Hundred Ramayanas," A. K. Ramanujan notes that no one in India or Southeast Asia ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time (46), and that in Sanskrit alone, one may find over 25 versions or "tellings" of the story in various genres (24). Instead of relinquishing their authority to entirely new literary creations, the Indian epics seem to reappear in every age in new guises, perhaps dramatizing in their tenacity the tale of one of their minor characters, Yayati. Insatiably attached to life and lust, Yayati convinces his youngest son Puru to trade his youth for his father's age, so that the father might continue to

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