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ORIGINAL PAPER

Translation Studies *versus* Comparative Literature?

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Abstract Comparative literature is one of the main disciplines out of which translation studies emerged, so it is hardly surprising if at times the relationship between the two subjects has been marked by antagonism. Comparative literary scholars, in particular—perennially anxious about the status of comparative literature itself—have argued that their discipline has been subsumed and superseded by translation studies. Yet in recent decades, the two subject areas have also been growing further apart, to the extent that Susan Bassnett, one of the key proponents of the antagonistic view, has modified her stance and argued instead for a *rapprochement* between the two under the heading of intercultural studies.

Keywords Translation · Comparative literature · Susan Bassnett · Intercultural studies

1 Introduction: Translation Studies and the British Comparative Literature Association

From the perspective of the British Comparative Literature Association, comparative literature and translation studies have always made excellent bedfellows, and since its inception in 1975, the Association has been happy to reach out to the emerging discipline of translation studies in a variety of ways. Thus, several of the BCLA's workshop conferences have had a translation studies theme, from the 1978 event entitled simply "Translation" to the highly successful "Translation and

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Nation" conference in 1999 and, most recently, the postgraduate conference "Alternatives: Translation and the (Anti-)Canon", which was held in Glasgow in 2014.[1] Since it was founded in 1997, the BCLA's monograph series "Studies in Comparative Literature" has always accommodated titles with a translation studies slant (Legenda 2014). For a number of years now, the BCLA and BCLT (British Centre for Literary Translation, University of East Anglia) have been joint sponsors of the annual John Dryden Translation Competition, and there has been a history of what one might call overlapping personnel, of BCLA Committee members moving (apparently) unproblematically between the two worlds, from key early protagonists such as the former BCLA Treasurer Susan Bassnett and Secretary Theo Hermans to current Executive Committee members Jean Boase-Beier, Karin Littau and Karen Seago.

The BCLA has always sought an accommodation with translation studies, then, and indeed, more than that, it has proved to be one of the primary institutional means by which translation studies has become established as a discipline in the UK. Outside of the UK, one gains a similar impression of an amicable relation between the two—for example, "Comparative Literature and Translation Studies" was one of the five main sections at the last triennial congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, held in Paris in 2013 (AILC/ICLA 2013). Worldwide, many of the most prominent theorists of translation studies have had an institutional base within comparative literature—I mentioned Susan Bassnett and Theo Hermans already; one could also cite David Bellos, author of *Is that a fish in your ear? Translation and the meaning of everything* (Bellos 2011), who is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Princeton.

2 Who's Afraid of Translation Studies?

There is a counter-narrative, though, of a relationship between comparative literature and translation studies which is a good deal less cosy and more conflicted, and it is on this that I want to focus here. For as Bassnett puts it in her influential 1993 book *Comparative literature: A critical introduction*: "The relationship between comparative literature and the study of translation has been a complex and problematic one" (Bassnett 1993, p. 138). I have mischievously signalled this tension through my use of the "versus" in my title. After all, comparative literature is one of the main disciplines out of which translation studies emerged (or, depending on your viewpoint, on which it has been parasitic), so with the establishment of translation studies as a free-standing discipline in the 1970s and its rise to a position of some academic and cultural prominence since then, a reassessment of its relation to the "mother subject" was inevitable, and it is not surprising if the narrative of their relation is touched by a sense of filial presumption

[1] The full list of translation-related BCLA conferences comprises "Translation" (Brechin, 1978), "Theory and History of Literary Translation" (London, 1984), "Translating Shakespeare" (Warwick, 1985), "Word in Time: Poetry, Narrative, Translation" (Colchester, 1993), "Translation and Nation" (Essex, 1999), "Translation and Memory" (Portsmouth, 2011) and "Alternatives: Translation and the (Anti-)Canon" (Glasgow, 2014). For further details, see the BCLA website www.bcla.org.

and disloyalty. With the benefit of hindsight, one can also see that a re-evaluation of the relation between the two disciplines became urgent for more practical reasons, with the increasing use made of translations in comparative literary study as, on the one hand, multilingual competence declined among its practitioners, and on the other the subject area of what is sometimes called the "new comparative literature" broadened immeasurably to encompass the full range of non-European-language literatures. Comparative literature has been forced to shift its position from the historical attitude that translation is for the kind of comparative literature specialist who does not read his or her literature in the original language—more bluntly, that translations are for losers—and to recognise that translation loss is (or at least can be) counterbalanced by translation gain.

Here it is particularly instructive to trace the developing arguments of leading theorists Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere. If we begin in 1990 with the introduction to their edited collection *Translation, history and culture*, they argue here—uncontroversially, we might think—simply for a greater recognition of translation issues within comparative literature: "Translation has been a major shaping force in the development of world culture, and no study of comparative literature can take place without regard to translation" (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, p. 12). As Lefevere sets out in his 1995 essay on "Comparative Literature and Translation", this is only as it should be, for such a *rapprochement* between translation and comparative literature represents in his view only a restoration of the rightful order of things. Lefevere gives an overview of the history of the relation between the two, unusually, from the point of view of translation studies, arguing that comparative literature repressed the question of translation from the outset,[2] so that comparative literature's greater openness to translation issues now represents merely the return of the repressed. Lefevere's conclusion is still relatively tentative, though: "at a time when books and articles on translation are becoming more and more numerous, and singularly fail to exhibit the sense of crisis, or even of an ending, that is present in books and articles on comparative literature, the onetime ugly duckling might well come to the aid of the fading swan" (Lefevere 1995, p. 10).

The more emollient tone of Lefevere can be compared to the considerably more apocalyptic tone adopted by Bassnett, in *Comparative literature: A critical introduction*, where she argues that, effectively, the "onetime ugly duckling" might rather put the "fading swan" out of its misery. Here she proposes a reversal of the historical roles, whereby translation studies has tended to be looked down on by comparative literature scholars; instead, she now tolls the death knell for the very subject about which she has just written a definitive textbook: "Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead" (Bassnett 1993, p. 47). Bassnett's 1993 study then builds to an extraordinary (indeed notoriously) polemical *envoi*, when in the final chapter, titled "From comparative literature to translation studies", she argues that her titular subject area is in fact not just (terminally) on the wane, but ripe for supersession: "Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. […] We should look upon translation studies as the principal discipline from now on, with

[2] "To establish the right to its own academic turf, comparative literature abdicated the study of what should by rights have been an important part of its endeavor" (Lefevere 1995, p. 3).

comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area" (Bassnett 1993, p. 161).

It is true that theorists of comparative literature have always been worried about something. Comparative literature as a discipline has been perennially in crisis: ever since its origins in the nineteenth century when, squeezed between classical studies on the one hand and the national(ist) aspirations of single literary traditions on the other, it emerged into perpetual insecurities about the specificity of its methodology (cf. e.g. Wellek 1963; Étiemble 1966). From one perspective, Bassnett's 1993 position is merely another instance of the recurrent anxiety expressed in the question "Whither comparative literature?" (if, perhaps, in a terminal inflection: it's going nowhere!), framed in the context of the rise of translation studies as the latest in a succession of bogeymen (cf. Fox-Genovese 1995; Culler 2006). In this respect, we can consider Bassnett's 1993 argument in the context of similar debates from the 1960s and 1970s about the subsumption of literary study under the umbrella of semiotics, or the anxieties expressed in the 1980s and 1990s over the transformation (in the words of Antony Easthope) of *Literary into cultural studies* (Easthope 1991). One can see Bassnett's argument as symptomatic, in other words, of the periodic turf wars between the disciplines, battles over which discipline might be "queen of the sciences".

Now since 1993, the "Whither comparative literature?" debate has moved on to a range of new inflections. Bassnett's death notice for the subject is quoted by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek in his 1998 book *Comparative literature: Theory, method, application* (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1998, p. 14), but only in order for him to argue instead that comparative literature is actually alive and kicking, just that it needs a new method (what he calls the "systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture"—cf. Tötösy de Zepetnek and Sywenky 1997). A succession of theorists have remained closer to Bassnett's line, arguing for the subsumption of comparative literature not into translation studies, but rather (comparative) cultural studies, notably Michael Riffaterre, writing in 1995 "On the complementarity of comparative literature and cultural studies" (Riffaterre 1995), and Tötösy (again) in his 2002 edited collection *Comparative literature and comparative cultural studies* (Tötösy de Zepetnek 2002).[3] Bassnett's apocalyptic tone is if anything heightened by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 2000 Wellek Library Lecture series published as *Death of a discipline*, for the discipline concerned is comparative literature, which for Spivak needs to be merged into what she terms a "transformed Area Studies" if it is to have any kind of afterlife at all (Spivak 2003, p. 7).

3 Comparative Literature and Translation Studies

One could argue, then, that Bassnett's 1993 argument about the death of comparative literature is merely characteristic of a particular historical moment which has already passed, i.e. the heyday of translation studies as a brash new

[3] Cf. also Tötösy's ongoing e-journal *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (Tötösy de Zepetnek 2014).

discipline flexing its muscle in all its new-found self-confidence, on a convergence course with comparative literature because of the background of its practitioners—especially, in Bassnett's case, thanks to the "cultural turn" in translation studies since the 1980s which she herself was largely instrumental in bringing about. Yet as recently as 2006 Emily Apter makes a claim similar to Bassnett's in *The translation zone: A new comparative literature*, which argues in favour of "regrounding the prospects for a new comparative literature in the problem of translation" (Apter 2006, p. 251). In 2008, moreover, Bijay Kumar Das can still argue for what he calls a "correlation" between comparative literature and translation studies and claim that translation studies is the new comparative literature.[4]

Bassnett's 1993 argument has not gone away, then, and compels us even now, it seems to me, to reconsider the relation between comparative literature and translation studies, asking ourselves: does Bassnett (still) have a point? Do translation studies and comparative literature have the same agenda—do they simply bring separate methodologies to the feast—or are they in competition and mutually antagonistic?

Interestingly, the argument that comparative literature is being somehow "taken over" by translation studies is not one made within translation studies itself, and it seems to me that the attitude of suspicion is far from mutual. If anything, as translation studies has found its feet, it has mostly viewed comparative literature with a sense of benign indifference: theorists of translation studies actually spend very little time these days thinking about comparative literature and are certainly not planning any kind of land grab. For one thing, translation studies has had its own problems shaking off a history of excessive preoccupation with the translation of prestige literature, so that much (if not the majority of) work in translation studies nowadays is un- or even decidedly anti-literary. Nor is translation studies even invariably comparative, and there are schools of thought that address only the target text, assessing it as a product of expression in the target language, maybe even from a position of unfamiliarity with the source language. Translation studies certainly has developed its own agenda, then, which is by now often very divergent from the concerns of comparative literature. Similarly if we ask the corresponding question the other way round: are there any aspects of the comparative literary enterprise which ostensibly don't involve translation studies? Clearly the answer is "yes" here, too. Even if one leaves aside the matter of bypassing translations by reading texts in the original languages, then there is still, for example, the non-textual aspect of comparative literature involved in what former BCLA President Malcolm Bowie referred to (and so magisterially practised) as "comparison between the arts" (Bowie 1993).

If we seek to visualise the relation between comparative literature and translation studies, then it would appear that—rather than using an Euler diagram for a set entirely containing another set—we need to reach, rather, for a classic Venn diagram depicting two overlapping circles with a shared portion of common ground. If we ask ourselves in what that common ground might consist, then of course we can characterise both subjects as fields of intercultural inquiry in the broadest sense. They obviously share an interest in certain kinds of textual material, as

[4] "Translation Studies as a discipline promotes the cause of Comparative Literature in our time" (Kumar Das 2008, p. 124).

demonstrated by their shared stakeholding in influence studies and reception studies more generally[5]: they have a common interest in how literature travels, in how the study of literature affirms or subverts cultural difference. They also share challenges, though, and find themselves in the same boat when it comes to certain outside pressures. Just as the transition from "comparative literature" to "world literature" has led some commentators to view the differences between (essentially neighbouring) European literatures as incidental when compared to the much greater differences between European and extra-European literary and cultural products (consigning much of the history of comparative literature to a dismissible preoccupation with what Freud called "the narcissism of minor differences"—Freud 1964, p. 114), so both comparative literature and translation studies have been equally susceptible to attack from, say, feminist or postcolonial criticism in recent decades. Once translation studies poked its head above the parapet, in other words, it made itself equally vulnerable to attack. What's more, although the opening out of comparative literature to comparative cultural studies may have been more of a problem for a discipline with "literature" in its very title, both disciplines have been engaged in what one might call a process of "multimediation" in recent years; indeed, one could argue that translation studies is behind the curve in this, since only relatively recently in its development as an independent subject has it begun to explore the different implications of film subtitling, opera surtitling, and other forms of audiovisual translation. Both subjects are certainly still viewed as marginal disciplines within the academic establishment; in the UK academic context, for example, neither has ever had a dedicated panel in the national Research Assessment Exercise or, now, the Research Excellence Framework.

4 Conclusion: Intercultural Studies

In conclusion, then, emphasising elements of commonality between the two disciplines in this way allows us to supersede the rhetoric of oppositionality which my title enshrines. Does comparative literature still have anything to fear from translation studies (if it ever did)? There is, of course, an argument that any kind of comparative analytic work requires "translation" in the broadest sense—in the (some might argue impracticably broad) sense, for example, that George Steiner thematises in the first chapter of *After Babel*, "Understanding as translation", where he claims that "inside or between languages, human communication equals translation" (Steiner 1992, p. 49). It is in this sense that, the year after Bassnett's *Comparative literature* appeared, Steiner in his Oxford inaugural lecture "What is comparative literature?" argues for what he calls the "primacy of the matter of translation in comparative literature" (Steiner 1996, p. 165). This is not to say that, for Steiner, comparative literature somehow needs to be subsumed under translation studies, but rather it is to imagine both as subsumed under something else, a vast portmanteau conception of "translation" which accounts for all intercultural communication.

[5] On the importance of translation studies in influence study, see Bassnett (2011).

In this sense, comparative literature has always been predicated on some kind of translation or intercultural mediation, whether or not "translation proper" (Jakobson's "interlingual translation") is also involved. This is an argument conceded by Bassnett herself more recently, for she has actually changed tack considerably since 1993. Already in her 1993 study she argued: "Because it draws on different methodologies, translation studies has become a genuinely interdisciplinary field, and it may be that a better way to describe it would be to use a term like Intercultural Studies" (Bassnett 1993, p. 158; cf. Bassnett 1998). When she revisited the question in 2006 for the BCLA journal *Comparative Critical Studies*, she wrote what amounted effectively to a recantation. Citing the polemical conclusion to *Comparative literature*, she continues:

> This was a deliberately provocative statement, and was as much about trying to raise the profile of translation studies as it was about declaring comparative literature to be defunct. Today, looking back at that proposition, it appears fundamentally flawed: translation studies has not developed very far at all over three decades and comparison remains at the heart of much translation studies scholarship. What I would say were I writing the book today is that neither comparative literature nor translation studies should be seen as a discipline: rather both are methods of approaching literature, ways of reading that are mutually beneficial. (Bassnett 2006, p. 6)

Bassnett, then, has declared a truce; at least for her the turf wars are over, and the two sides have won through to a position of mutual respect. My own sense is that she is right and that subsuming both disciplines under a broader category of intercultural study has to be a more productive way of thinking the relation. Translation studies is no fitter than any other discipline to be considered "queen of the sciences", and it is no different from comparative literature in finding itself periodically destabilised and in need of self-redefinition. Within academia, there will always be considerable institutional investment in finely demarcated disciplinary structures, but in the last 20 years the academic agenda has moved on, and it looks increasingly parochial to be preoccupied with these increasingly minor-looking differences. Antagonism between the two disciplines peaked at the point when translation studies was still finding its feet yet appeared sufficiently threatening for comparative literature to fear the worst. In the current climate, though, when interdisciplinarity is the watchword, both "sides" recognise that there is clearly more to be gained from collaboration than from conflict.

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