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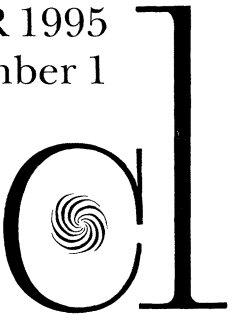

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Introduction: Comparative Literature and Translation

THE RELATIONSHIP between the discipline of comparative literature and the phenomenon of translation was not blessed with the most auspicious of starts, which may help to explain why both partners continued on a footing of uneasy ambiguity down the decades. This introduction shows how things developed, telling the story, perhaps for the first time, from the point of view of translation. It also shows that a different relationship is possible.

The reserve, not to say reluctance, with which the first comparatists treated translation becomes understandable when we realize that the first thinking about comparative literature was trapped in the historical moment of the shift between the first and second generations of Romantic writers and thinkers in Europe. The first generation was cosmopolitan in outlook, and one of its most representative figures was Madame de Staël, whose book *De l'Allemagne* introduced Germany to the rest of Europe. It is highly symptomatic for the theme to be treated here that August Wilhelm Schlegel, who was for a while a tutor to Madame de Staël's children, became one of the leading literary critics in Europe only after his *Vienna Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* had been published in French, Italian, and English translations. This fact is hardly ever mentioned in histories of literature, even comparative ones, whose authors no doubt assume that Schlegel's impact on Europe was a matter of critical osmosis.

The representatives of the second generation of Romantic writers and thinkers retreated behind the boundaries of national literatures, abandoning the cosmopolitanism their predecessors had inherited from the Enlightenment. Cosmopolitanism was super-

seded by nationalism, a sense of belonging to a certain people. The point here is that you did just that, belong, and that you had no say in deciding which people you wanted to belong to. Since everybody naturally wanted to belong to the "best" people possible, the step to positing a certain people as the best was easy, especially if the people in question posited itself as the best. As a result, a "national" literature was no longer supposed to also function as a repository for all of world literature, in translation, as German literature had been called upon to function by Schleiermacher. Rather, a national literature was supposed to showcase national talent and to incorporate a few authors from other countries as "secondary classics."

This new, nationalistic attitude proved to be pernicious for theoretical thinking about translation, though somewhat less so for its actual practice, when the universities of Europe began to develop courses in the national literatures of the continent. The study of national literatures could be organized at universities without much opposition, but it had to establish its own academic respectability with regard to its main competitor: the study of the classical literatures, which was much older and eschewed translations, or at least professed to do so.

The new programs in national literatures not only took over the traditions of the study of classical literature, its professional and pedagogical methodology, but reinforced them to make sure none of the practitioners of Classical Philology could claim that what the new-fangled practitioners of the National Philologies were doing did not belong in a university. To be sure, among those traditions there was room for a certain kind of translation, namely the kind used to check student comprehension of the original and little if anything more. Students of the classics have, after all, been making use of glosses, cribs, and bilingual editions for as long as the classics have been the object of study, and they continue to do so today, without necessarily acknowledging their practice. To make the new National Philologies look even more like Classical Philology, the study of the older periods in the national literatures was greatly encouraged and of course undertaken in the "original languages": Old and Middle High German, Old and Middle English, Old and Middle French, and corresponding variants in other literatures.

The young discipline of comparative literature, which arrived later on the scene, and which could logically be expected to be willing to reflect on the phenomenon of translation, had to face a

double competition and blithely sacrificed translation on the altar of academic respectability, as defined at the time of its inception. 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. By doing so it also abandoned the possibility of acquiring any kind of institutional niche for the study of translation. Finally, since they abjured translations (at least in theory), comparatists could not very well be expected to show an interest in the phenomenon of translation.

At that time, and as long as comparative literature limited itself to the literatures of Europe, it was quite possible to find scholars with a command of three, four, or five ancient and modern languages. As soon as comparative literature tried to go beyond Europe, however, translations became necessary. Or, to put it differently: as soon as comparative literature tried to compare different kinds of poetics, and not just different variants of European poetics in its historical evolution, it could no longer avoid confronting translation. It could, and did, try to play down that confrontation for as long as possible.

It is significant in this context that to the present day, comparatists who dismiss the relevance of translation are precisely those who are in practice devoted to the idea of a comparative literature limited to (Western) Europe and its historical dependencies, no matter what their theoretical pronouncements may be. Conservatives, it would seem, do not like translation, precisely because they see translation as a potential threat to what they are trying to conserve, rather than as a potential enrichment of it. This conservatism has deep roots in the West, and I can only touch on them here in passing. The common denominator is an almost fanatical devotion to the word, both in translating (word for word) and in thinking about translation. That devotion to the word was enshrined early on in the development of the Western tradition, when translators in Akkad and Sumer drew up bilingual word lists, making the word into both the unit of translation and the limit of translation thinking for thirty centuries. The devotion to the word was further reinforced by Platonic thought with its emphasis on the *logos*, the truth static and unchangeable (because how else can it be made unchallengeable?). Finally, the devotion to the word was made enforceable and enforced during the long reign of Christianity in its several variants. Since the Bible was the word of God it should not be changed, and should therefore be translated word-for-word. Even if produced by the most skillful translator,

word for word translations will, by their very nature, retain a certain measure of agrammaticality, which is exactly what is needed if one wants to prevent the translation from actually replacing the text, and point to the fact that the translation should be read next to, not instead of, the original. The less command the audience of a translation has of the language of the original, the more emphasis needs to be given to word-for-word translation if one does not want the translation to eclipse that original in the target culture. This explains, *ex negativo*, why the so-called "Belles Infidèles," arguably the only translations produced beyond the level of the word in the West, could be produced only at a time when the audience for them was still relatively bi- or multilingual, at least in Latin, Greek, and French, and at a time when French had replaced Latin as the prestige language of that West. It also explains why producers of "resistive translations," from Hölderlin to Benjamin and beyond, insist on an element of agrammaticality in their translations.

Translations became necessary to and in comparative literature as soon as the discipline tried to move beyond the comparison of European literatures only. Yet, though now necessary, translations were nonetheless treated as an evil for a long time to come: they were made and criticized, mainly from the point of view of accuracy, which corresponded to the use made of translation in teaching both the classical and the national literatures, but again this did not lead to any reflection on the phenomenon of translation as such. If anything, it restricted any reflection, once again, to the level of the word, totally ignoring any factors beyond the word, such as the text as a whole, not to mention the culture in which that text was embedded, as even potentially relevant to the study of translation. Reflection could be kept centered on the word because the Romantics had extended the status the Bible had so long enjoyed as a sacred text to canonized works of literature, which should, therefore, also not be subject to any change whatsoever. This sacralization of the canonized text goes a long way in explaining the different fortunes of translation and criticism in the study of literature. Though both essentially rewrite the text, and both do so in the service of some ideology and/or poetics, translation is seen to do so, whereas criticism is not. The critic can be seen, even revered on occasion, as the priestly figure interpreting the sacred text. On the other hand, the translator who interprets the sacred text with a vengeance is treated with distrust and disrespect because he or she can actually be seen to disfigure that text.

This explains why the production of translations failed to confer any academic respectability on their producers. Until very recently students were dissuaded from trying to "do anything with" translation for their Ph.D.s, whether they would actually produce translations or study the impact thereof in the receiving culture(s). As a rule, academics still are not often offered employment, and even less often promoted, on the basis of translations they have produced, even if those translations happen to introduce into the receiving literature works of literature that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to readers of that literature. Incomprehensible as it may seem to the commonsensical mind, comparatists long preferred to write books in language A about the use of metaphors, say, in books written in languages B and C, without being in the least concerned whether those books were available in language A; they would certainly not have thought of making them available. As is often the case, conservatism seems to have led to a certain kind of elitism: it is not important that scholars make texts generally available to the culture of which they are a part; it is, paradoxically, important for them to keep analyzing texts with ever more expertise for an ever diminishing circle of readers. At most this elitism will allow a certain number of foreign texts to exist on the fringe of national literatures as "secondary classics" or, perhaps, unavoidable "Masterpieces of World Literature." Even more paradoxical is the fact that whereas these texts are translated over and over again, new texts are rarely admitted to this secondary canon, even if they have been translated.

Early comparative literature developed in the shadow of the Romantic concept of genius, which did not exactly encourage the study of translation, although that study had been routinely seen as part of the study of literature until the Enlightenment: even Gottsched's *Critische Dichtkunst*, arguably the last of the great "Poetics," contains a few chapters on translation, that is, on how to produce translations, as did most of its predecessors since the Renaissance. And yet the Romantics, especially of the first generation, translated many works of literature. They managed to defuse this apparent contradiction by insisting that only a writer of genius could or should translate a writer of genius. In doing so they managed not only to weave a certain mystique around translation, but also to lower the status of the many translators who, though presumably honest craftsmen, could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered writers of genius. And by weaving a mystique around the production of translation by writers of genius, the Ro-

mantics made the actual study of the translation process or its impact superfluous by firmly locating it beyond the ken of mere mortals.

When influences of one literature on another were studied, authors were described as having read each other in the original. When the influence of Goethe's *Faust* on Byron's *Manfred* was discussed, it was, therefore, assumed that Byron had read Goethe in German. In reality, Byron had read *Faust* in the French translation Madame de Staël published in *De l'Allemagne*. That translation amounted to an extract, combining the main scenes of the play with a summary of the plot, and omitting whatever Madame de Staël considered not suited to the taste of her intended, mostly French, readership. It is also significant to note, in this context, that the genre of the extract, which played an enormous part in the literary culture of Europe from the second part of the eighteenth to the third decade of the nineteenth century (because it was the most economical way to quickly disseminate new works of literature in other languages), has received virtually no attention from historians of literature or culture. This is another example of the consequences of a restrictive (because ultimately word-bound) understanding of translation: anything that is not seen to be immediately conducive to the production of "good," because word-bound, translations is not deemed worthy of study.

To have read Goethe in German was therefore rather different from having read Madame de Staël's *Faust*. It was probably known that Byron did not read German, but that important fact was rarely pointed out, as it still is not pointed out in most histories of literature. To shore up the concept of genius, translation had to remain invisible, and so it did, except of course in those cases in which one genius deigned to translate another.

But not for too much longer. In the first and second decades of the twentieth century both Walter Benjamin and Ezra Pound independently, and coming from two quite different traditions, stated that translations conferred a new lease on life, or an "afterlife," on their originals. Benjamin did so in a much more radical way than Pound, which is why it is perhaps all the more remarkable that his actual translations are much less radical than those of his American counterpart. Benjamin's stance is more elitist than Pound's: agrammaticality as the road to the redemption of the "pure language" (a concept that is also found in August Wilhelm Schlegel, though understandably without the kabbalistic overtones it acquires in Benjamin) is not the easiest concept to understand.

Pound, on the other hand, sees translation as the "organon" of literature, as a factor that can and should influence the development of literatures. Through his own example Pound makes the convincing case that translations that take their place as works of literature in the receiving literature can play a major role in that literature and convince other writers to write in a similar manner, even if, or precisely because, these translations manage to make T'ang dynasty poets sound like Pound himself and his early Imagist friends. Translations pronounced "good" in the groves of academe, on the other hand, tend not to have much of an impact on the evolution of the literature written in the language of those translations. Rather, these types of translation tend to lead a shadowy existence in academic limbo, where they were long thought by academics to belong. This is all the more remarkable because the same academics of a more conservative persuasion have no difficulty at all in admitting the influence of translations on the development of a language, or languages; the line seems to be drawn at literature.

The important point Pound and Benjamin make is that of the translator as giver of life. This endows the translator with a certain power: texts that are not translated do not live on. Translators could again be seen to be mediators, as they always had been, but they were now again allowed to have an agenda that differed from the requirements of mere accuracy. Against academic tradition and (much more slowly) against academic institutions, the counterposition to what has been described above slowly developed: translators could not only bestow life on the originals they translated, they could also decide what kind of life they would bestow on those originals and how they would try to inject them into the receiving literature. In other words, they did, and do create an image of the original for their time and their readership. So do the translations that languish in academic limbo, of course, even if they claim they do not, in the interest of accuracy or objectivity; but they are much less influential in the receiving culture precisely because they do not desire, and therefore do not try, to replace their originals: they still consider diminished readability a virtue.

Pound opened a Pandora's box, and the academics, who ferociously attacked his *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, for instance, tried to limit the damage. They did so in two ways. One was to banish the potential evil mainly to "translation workshops," usually led by a writer, which kept them at least in the margin of the academy. The mirror image is arresting: on the one hand the academic

translator on the margin of the literary life of his or her culture, on the other hand the poet on the margin of the academy. Academics could then also contrast translations that did still conform to the requirements of accuracy, and were therefore "good," with translations that originated in translation workshops, and were therefore "interesting," to be read only by those who liked that sort of thing. Not coincidentally the forties, fifties, and sixties of our century, which witnessed both a long retreat from accuracy and, mirroring it, a slow progress beyond the level of the word as the horizon of both production of and thinking about translation, represented a scholastic phase in the new attempts at reflection on translation. Many of the questions asked bore on whether a text is a translation, an imitation, a version, a paraphrase, or what have you, unfortunately crowding out other questions of a more fundamental nature, at least for a while. As so often happens, the search for definitions tended to lead to uneasiness, rather than to certainty, mainly because the terms in the definitions had to be defined in turn, and the result was an increase in confusion rather than clarification.

It became less and less easy to avoid reflection on the phenomenon of translation in the 1970s and 1980s, though, for two reasons: the advent of a kind of thinking about literature that emphasized the reception of texts, as opposed to their production, and the advent of deconstruction. Reception theory made it clear that the influence a work of literature has on its own culture is, to a large extent, predicated on the reception of that work, that is, on the image critics create of it. The link with translation is obvious: the impact of a translated work of literature depends not just on the image of it created by critics, but primarily on the image of it created by translators. In doing so, reception theory posited that translators are responsible for the fame, influence, etc. of a work, a genre, or even a whole literature at least to the same extent as the writer (presumably of genius) who first created the work. Without Constance Garnett there would be no nineteenth-century Russian literature in English, nor Chinese poetry without Pound and Waley. It is significant that translation comes into its own concomitant with the rise of reception theory. Theories of literature that were unhistorical in nature, like New Criticism and, especially, structuralism, could not conceive of a more central position for the study of translation within the study of literature.

For deconstruction, translation is a reality only insofar as it refers to Walter Benjamin's statements on the subject; beyond this

arguably limited domain, deconstruction uses translation as a metaphor for all kinds of transformations, from the gathering of data in psychoanalysis to Heidegger's thinking. But the important point here is that deconstruction severely questioned the hierarchical relationship—originally based on the sacred character of the original—between original and translation, thereby undermining the last vestiges of the concept of accuracy. The text becomes an original only when it has been translated; without translation it remains a text and nothing more. Add to this that there are translations whose importance within a culture is immeasurably greater than that of their originals. Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* is perhaps the most obvious case in point.

We have now reached the point at which a new start for the relationship between translation and comparative literature is possible. For that new start to be productive it is necessary to avoid further ambiguity. To that end, three fundamental distinctions will have to be made.

One is the distinction between translating and translation. As it applies to comparative literature, the study of translation is only indirectly, if at all, concerned with the training of translators, which is not to say that this training is not, in itself, a very interesting, highly necessary, and immensely productive activity. Rather, the study of translation deals with the finished product of the activity of translating, the latter being more suitably referred to as the process of translation.

The second distinction is that between normative and descriptive, as tirelessly advocated by Gideon Toury and others over the last two decades. The analysis of translation(s) is not undertaken to declare one kind of translation "good" and another kind of translation "bad." Rather, it starts not even from the assumption, but from the fact that certain translations have been extremely influential in the development of certain cultures/literatures, and it asks why. That general "why" can then be broken down into more specific questions: Who commissioned the translation, and why? What strategy was adopted for the translation, by whom, and why? Why was the translation so influential? How long did it remain so? This list is by no means exhaustive. The end of normative translation studies also implies an enormous widening of the field of translation studies as such. Rather than being limited to "rules" for the production of "good" translations, translation studies can now devote itself to the whole field of what recent German thinking on translation has been calling "translational practice," and what I

have been referring to by means of the term "rewriting." Since rewriters are at least as influential as writers in ensuring the survival of works of literature—the extract referred to above is only one case in point—it is important that various forms of rewriting be studied if literary historians are ever to be able to establish causality between the phenomena they list in their works. It is just as important to remember that rewriters always have some kind of agenda, hidden or not, and that this agenda will influence the production of their rewritings.

The third distinction is that between analysis and production. Although translation study does not actually teach how to translate, that does not mean that it should not encourage the production of translations or confer a high degree of respectability both on those translations and on those who produce them, particularly if they make works in lesser known literatures accessible to readers who are used to reading better known literatures. Such translations can be and are produced by those who have studied a given text for years—academics—and by those who have not, but want to translate it because they think it is important in the present stage of the development of their literature/culture—writers. The goals of these two types of translating activity differ, but that does most emphatically not mean that one is somehow superior to the other, so long as academics are no longer willing, in the name of accuracy, to relegate their translations to academic limbo. It goes without saying that these translations should be taken into account when decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion are made. Service to a whole culture should be rewarded, even if it does not meet the criteria of institutions evolved in the Romantic period.

With these distinctions in place, comparative literature may engage in a positive and productive reflection on the intercultural phenomenon of the first magnitude known as translation. The essays contained in this issue show some of the ways in which that reflection can take place. In fact, 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 one-time ugly duckling might well come to the aid of the fading swan.

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