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Introduction: The Role of the Translated Text in Britain Today

Poetics and politics: in theory

This issue presents selected papers of the Shelving Translation conference held at Oxford University in April 2004, the culmination of a two-year seminar series, Contemporary Literature in English Translation, which ran from 2002-2004 at Oxford. The seminars were initially set up in order to bring together scholars from across the range of languages represented within the Modern Languages Faculty. Consequently, the role of the translated text seemed at first quite easy to define: it was to act as a point of entry into each other's different literary and linguistic spheres. Reading foreign-language texts in English was to be a way of accessing both good literature from other languages and each other's expertise. So, while we recognised that the exact way in which the individual words had been translated was certainly important, the immediate appeal of the texts they constituted was much more that of a window onto something new, a distraction from our daily routine.

Although Translation Studies, with its focus on the role of the translator and the act of translation, was initially more of a sideline than a central issue for our seminar, it soon became clear to us that our founding principles were not so very far from those of

the translator. Translation is undertaken in order to carry a text from one language into another. The act of translation allows this movement from source to target language, while reading the product as a translation entails moving back from target to source. Just as we hoped would be the case for our seminar contributors, source and target languages are made to talk to and, ideally, enrich one another. It was clear from the start, therefore, that it would be naïve to believe we could enter into one another's linguistically and culturally foreign worlds without taking account of the translation process that had facilitated this move. Given the very physical format around which our dialogue was based, however—we were, after all, reading real books that seminar members had to go and track down in the shops—it was not so much the theoretical side of translation as the practical issues of how and why particular foreign-language books were making it onto British shelves that began to intrigue us.

Translation Studies has expanded in recent years to include a wealth of different approaches that point to much more than merely the human agent of the translator. However, we found that the majority of the most readily accessible translation criticism is still concerned with highlighting the translator's role and theorising the actual translation process. This, as Peter France points out, is fundamentally linked to a process of evaluation, as indeed can be seen from many of the most popular terms which have until very recently underpinned the entire discipline.¹ As is clear even from the table of contents in Umberto Eco's *Mouse or Rat?*, these terms are based on binary oppositions.² Such an oppositional vocabulary—losses and gains, source and target, domestic and foreign—has even been taken up on a meta-level by Translation Studies itself. In the chapter entitled “Central Issues” in Susan Bassnett's introduction to the subject, for example, the sub-sections progress through “language and culture,” “decoding and recoding,” “loss and gain” to the final, existential question: “science or ‘secondary activity?’”³ Although Bassnett's preface to the third edition of her book in fact shows how Translation Studies has begun to move on from such rigid categorisation, drawing

meaning instead from the concepts of “negotiation” and “in-betweenness,” even these terms are reliant on the continued existence of two oppositional poles which they then seek to unite. The result is a tendency to work with value-laden categories which have not only become integral to Translation Studies discourse, but have encouraged scholars and theorists to pursue links with other ethically conscious areas, such as postcolonialism and gender theory.⁴ While these links in themselves have helped enormously in developing the concept of translation, there seems a danger that, when followed to the extreme, they turn the translated text into an ethically overburdened entity whose existence in translation theory is increasingly at odds with the practicalities of its actual life on the shelf.⁵

Initially less concerned with the actual process of translation and the moral responsibilities of the translator, our approach to literature in English translation has therefore taken a different path. The translator is only one of a series of influences on the final translated text. In focusing on the product of translation rather than the process, we were less concerned with any sense of an individual’s power and/or responsibility than the very practical considerations of the market. We wanted not to judge the market, but simply to understand it—an approach which has clear sympathies with that of Gideon Toury.⁶ In focusing on Britain, however, we had particular questions relating to the practical existence of translated literature which kept us at arm’s length from the abstracting tendency of theory. Theo Herman’s short description of the role of translation norms in conditioning the wider existence of translated literature struck a chord:

Translations are made in response to or in anticipation of real or perceived demands and needs of the recipient culture. If this is the case, then the selection of texts to be translated, the mode that is chosen to (re)present the source text, the manner in which translation generally is circumscribed and regulated at a particular historical moment, and the way in which individual translations are received, all this tells us a great deal about the cultural community that engages in translation.⁷

This had been our own experience so far. We had wanted to read translated literature first and foremost as good literature that would have the added benefit of helping us expand our horizons. Gradually, however, we were coming to realise that this was in itself a tacit expectation that was entering into play with a number of other, equally tacit expectations exercised upon the text from within the British publishing industry in its widest sense. Book covers revealed a wealth of important underlying assumptions about what would and would not sell; the number and tenor of newspaper reviews clearly had a huge impact on readers' expectations; the policy of major publishing houses often quite blatantly attributed a different role to foreign and English-language literature, but this was generally not reflected in bookshop shelving policy, which quite cheerily places W. G. Sebald next to Danielle Steele. All of this could be understood as political on a very practical level. Our question, however, was whether this sort of practical politics was visibly marking out translated literature as inherently and specifically political, or whether the political considerations might not in fact be as incidental to these texts as they are to English-language literature in general.

It was at this point that we decided to host a one-day conference, *Shelving Translation*, in which, in the spirit of translation, academics, translators, publishers, booksellers and reviewers all found a forum for the exchange of opinions and experiences in the hope of collectively advancing discussion. In a call for papers that specifically asked to move on from the 1990s battleground of the translator's visibility, we invited contributors to question current expectations concerning the role of the translated text. Where academic discussion so far has, in as much as it attempts to account for the vagaries of the market place, considered the process (and by extension the product) of translation to be invested with a particular socio-political significance, we set out how this might be challenged by the actual position of translated literature on local bookshop shelves.⁸ Here, translations are allowed a relatively unburdened existence under the

auspices of Literary Fiction or Recent Fiction, terms entirely untroubled by source and target, domestic and foreign, losses and gains. It is with this in mind that selected papers from the conference are presented in this volume under the wilfully ambiguous title, “Shelving Translation.” We ask the reader temporarily to put to one side those current debates within Translation Studies that work with a strong sense of ethical judgement and focus instead on the product on the shelf. What kind of roles does the book market in its widest sense encourage translated literature to play in our lives?

The chapters in this issue

Anthea Bell’s opening chapter provides us with an initial stance from within the industry. Referring back to the arguments associated with the ethics of maintaining a visible foreign presence within the translated text, she first puts her own argument for the idea of the process of translation as one of “spinning the illusion” that “the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing,” and then points out that in practice “there is not much difference between the results produced by self-confessed invisible translators … and the proponents of the school of visible translation.” However one might theorise the process of translation, in practical terms in today’s publishing industry the finished products are both “completely literate” and “good entertainment.” The predominant “culture of reception” (Peter Bush’s term, chapter two) in the English-speaking world, on the other hand, seems less able to relinquish its own visions of the foreign. In view of this, Bell’s chapter posits that the one clear role of the translated text is to bring to English-language culture an “extra dimension of experience.” This point is developed with reference to children’s literature, whose young readers are considered particularly receptive. For Bell, then, while the role of the translated text is to broaden our cultural vision, as a linguistic product on the shelves it should not be seen.

While her understanding of her role leads her to conclude “if reviewers don’t comment on a translation, it has worked,” Peter Bush is of quite a different opinion. For

him, it is the major anomaly of a particularly British “culture of reception” that literary reviews in fact so often overlook translations—both specifically as translations and indeed generally as books. By contrasting this British situation with that of France and Spain, he argues that the way in which the media treat translations is symptomatic of a far greater “‘invisible’ cultural presence.” “Handling the foreign” is linked to “complex national issues.” Thus Spain, with its recent change in political fortunes, propounds a positive image of the foreign. The liberal Spanish press gives extensive space to translated literature and a resoundingly positive tone is in evidence throughout. France, on the other hand, feels its own culture to be under pressure from Anglophone dominance. The result is that French attention to translated literature has started to go the other way, with both media gossip columns and government policy concerned to raise awareness and activity of translations from French into English. What both France and Spain display, however, is an inherent belief that the translated text should and does act as a visible player in international relations. This contrasts with a distinctly British form of “cultural Imperialism.” Not only do English-language writers dominate the literary pages, any need for the foreign is considered best and most pleasurable fulfilled by the British genre of the Englishman’s travel diary, what Bush terms “the Orwell syndrome.” Reviewers’ apparent lack of interest in foreign-language literature stems from a feeling that it does not contribute anything over and above the insight offered by home-grown products: “much better the vivid readability of an Etonian on the Ebro or on Wigan pier or under the bridges of Paris, than translations of books by literary locals.” While Anthea Bell and Peter Bush therefore ostensibly agree that one of the major roles of translated literature is to extend the mind beyond narrow nationalist confines, they are poles apart in their understanding of how Britain’s culture of reception facilitates or impedes this process.

In chapters three and four, Penny Johnson and Carol O’Sullivan present two case-studies of how Anglophone assumptions have conditioned exactly what is chosen for

translation and how this is presented. Johnson's chapter takes a postcolonial approach to the same kind of ideological issues affecting text selection as Bush observed in reviewing practices. Focusing on the fate of Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* in English translation, she traces how its reception has been conditioned by a marked tendency within the culturally dominant Anglophone world to project not only its own understanding of the Other but also its self-understanding onto Latin America. The supposedly more primitive culture is understood within this pattern as "proto-European," making the so-called underdeveloped South into an earlier version of the developed North. This sort of identification almost inevitably results in ambivalence on the part of the target culture: the earlier stage of one's own development is a cause of both embarrassment and romanticised idealism. This is compounded, however, by an inherent ambivalence underlying the structure of the source-language text. In the *Canto general* two types of poetics co-exist: descriptive/lyrical passages conform to the romantic Anglophone image of Latin America, while overtly political tracts force the target culture to engage with its own imperialist past. The result is that both the general invisible cultural assumptions that condition translation between former colonies and colonial powers and the specific textual structure of *Canto general* offer considerable ground for what Johnson refers to as "cannibalisation."

Carol O'Sullivan's chapter builds on the idea of a selection process conditioned by target-language assumptions. Her approach is to examine the role of the "paratext" when considering the way in which contemporary British publishers present both English-language and translated crime fiction set in Italy. Cover design and the name of the author so prominently displayed combine to create the paratext, which goes on to play a crucial role in creating "a particular contract of trust between reader, writer and publisher." This idea of trust is particularly important because the contract can in fact be manipulated when the author's name simply looks foreign and/or the cover design suggests a certain genre or location which is decidedly non-Anglophone in origin. Any

one of these facets results in the “red-herring” of what Carol terms the “pseudotranslation:” a home-grown product which is both marketed and read as an authentic representation of the foreign. In the case of crime fiction set in contemporary Italy, this phenomenon has become particularly striking, as pseudotranslations and translations alike are currently competing for readers in the British market. By tracing the startling degree of convergence between the most varied of British imprints and publishers with regard to the cover design, Carol reveals the kind of invisible assumptions that underlie the British publishing industry’s understanding of the foreign. The plot and characters of the original source-language texts are suppressed on the English-language covers in favour of an apparently archetypically Italian setting and genre. This perception, however, stems less from Italian than British culture, with the Oxford artist John Ruskin acting as an important mediator. The British book covers all draw on “monumental, architectural Italy, whose visualisation can be traced back to the daguerrotypes of Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*. ” The result is that the source culture is marketed as foreign, but in line with a decidedly domestic understanding. “Italy is seen as synonymous with crime,” and consequently the translations are made to fit into the same publishing mould as their English-language pseudotranslation predecessors.

In the following two chapters, Carmen Bugan and Eleni Papargyriou provide more in-depth analysis of the ways in which cultural assumptions and the act of translation intertwine with a particular understanding of literature’s function. Bugan documents how Seamus Heaney turned first to Irish-language and then to Eastern European poets in his attempt to “credit poetry.” In a similar manner to the Anglophone appropriation of Neruda described by Penny Johnson, he hoped to root his own poetics within his understanding of the foreign. Unlike the Anglophone publishing world, however, Heaney has explicitly reflected on this process, leading him to speak of the act of translation as one of “Settlement.” Bugan argues that the “pattern of attitudes” Heaney believes to have uncovered through his reading of the poetry in translation of Osip

Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert has resulted in Heaney developing a specific “poetics of exile” within his poetry. Tracing the Eastern European understanding of poetry has allowed him to gain distance from his own historical situation, and this sense of distance has been crucial in allowing him to find a way of tempering a lyrical poetry of celebration with its socio-political context. The result is a poetics that understands itself as opening the way into “alternative worlds:” the role he ascribes his poetry has grown out of the role translated literature has played for him.

Eleni Papargyriou similarly looks at overlap between the significance of translation and the significance of literature. Her subject is intertextuality and the cultural significance of intertextual allusions. She argues that, whereas intertexts with classical, or what one might think of as world literature are recognisable regardless of language, culturally specific intertexts are rather more difficult to relay in translation. Focusing on the intertextual games that condition Yoryis Yatromanakis’ Greek novel, *Eroticon*, she shows that what is at stake in the translation of a postmodern text is far less the specific cultural reference than the meta-narrative game. Intriguingly, this can be equated with the effect of translation, for both intertextuality and translation represent the process whereby one text is made to speak (or in Bugan’s terms “settled”) in another. The challenge in translating *Eroticon* therefore becomes the challenge of translating the effect of simultaneous familiarisation and alienation as the reader partly recognises the roots of the text and partly realises that these roots belong elsewhere. In order to achieve this, specific cultural reference can be dropped, the linguistic register adapted and the genre changed, as indeed is the case in David Connolly’s translation of the novel. This leads Papargyriou to meditate on the role of the reader in determining the exact role the translated text should play. The act of translating intertextuality, “the translation of a translation,” is, in her argument, doubly geared towards the reader: the source-language text already reliant on the reader to fulfil its “potentiality.” The target-language version has to try to replicate

this principle of potential appropriation, so that “the reader can appropriate it according to his or her reading experiences.” In this understanding of translation, the role of the translated text is no longer one of reproducing an original effect, but rather of specifically enacting a postmodern poetics.

In the final chapter of this issue, we return discussion of literature in translation to those actively involved in its production. Christopher MacLehose’s overview of the British publishing industry traces the practicalities of translated literature from the first readers’ reports through to the final stage of literary reviews. Just as the original “Shelving Translation” conference ended with a round table of professional practitioners and theorists of translation, here his insight helps draw together various strands traced throughout this volume: the role of professional readers, editors, authors, translators, publishers and reviewers in determining the position of translated literature in contemporary Britain.

Poetics and politics: in practice

So what is the role of the translated text in Britain today? No matter how theoretical the academic approach, running through all contributions in this volume are distinctly practical effects. A first, clear-cut, and we would argue most traditional role for translated literature is educational. When Heaney forges a poetics based on his reading of Eastern-European poetry in translation, it is in order to find a means of linking an ethics of political response with an aesthetics of lyrical celebration. Engaging with translated literature had a pedagogical effect on his own self-understanding. In the case of Anglophone representations of Neruda, we saw how those involved in the translation process have similarly used translated literature in order to support their own political and/or artistic ideologies. Both cases show the (clearly recognised) scope of the translated text to function as a decidedly pedagogical tool, however one may rate the effects of this pedagogy.

A second role that emerges for the translated text is linked to the idea of travel literature. Evoking the exotic is clearly a marketing ploy used to sell translations that cannot immediately rely on the reader buying them out of a desire actively to engage with and learn from the foreign. This is certainly the implication of the strategies employed to sell crime fiction set in Italy, a genre not generally associated with broadening the mind, but certainly entertaining. Translated literature can quite simply function as a good read, and this is clearly something which publishers are increasingly beginning to recognise. As translations are shelved alongside both pseudotranslations and clear non-translations, the English-language reader's chances of hitting, as much by chance as by design, on well-written and entertaining literature are significantly increased. If during this process the playful nature of such deviously entertaining texts as *Eroticon* results in confused shelving policy—the said example of learned literary fiction was last sighted in “Erotic Literature”—then this sort of inadvertent education-by-stealth is perhaps no bad thing.

A final, third role for translated literature goes one step further again from the initial pedagogical stance. The interests of translated and English-language literature overlap arguably to the greatest extent in the current post-modern understanding of both as art for art's sake. The postmodern text demands the reader fulfil its offer of linguistic play. The appeal of engaging with translated literature as a whimsical (rather than pedagogical) intellectual pursuit is something which both flatters and entertains the small minority of readers seeking this kind of postmodern self-fulfilment in the act of reading.

As for the seminar series and conference from which the following chapters are derived, it is certainly the case that engaging with literature in English translation worked on all three levels: initially seeking some sort of educationally justifiable diversion, we found that consciously constructing our own maps of world literature allowed us to stretch our intellectual horizons in quite an unexpected manner. Engaging with the Other made us question ourselves. The result was as much fun as it was intellectually

stimulating. We hope that our readers will be able to say something similar of what follows.

Notes

¹ Peter France, “Translation Studies and Translation Criticism,” in Peter France, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-10.

² Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

³ Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ A stimulating collection of essays that follow this line: Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds., *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵ Lawrence Venuti in particular stands for a markedly political line. His *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998) focuses on the political ramifications of certain translation issues.

⁶ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995).

⁷ Theo Hermans, “Norms of Translation,” in Peter France, ed., 14.

⁸ This markedly political approach to theorising the industry behind translation is the unifying aspect to two of the volumes we have encountered which state a desire to engage with the wider context of translation: Lawrence Venuti, ed., *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds.