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THE PLACE OF LITERARY TRANSLATION IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY MICHAEL SCOTT DOYLE

The relationship of literary translation to other aspects or agendas (constituents and constituencies) of literary studies within the American academy remains problematic at this time.¹ In the face of the academy's status quo—literary studies = research/scholarship = criticism and/or theory regarding works/workings of literature—translation is still too often cavalierly dismissed as somehow (yet self-evidently) more secondary and derivative, less critical and original (i.e. creative), and therefore less germane and consequential, than other types of inquiry and activity ensconced before the more primary construct called Literature. The direct result of this prejudiced and systematic disparagement is that literary translation is all too often only grudgingly accorded a patronized, tense, and small space within academia, if any at all. It is the victim of a closet syndrome. This attitude and practice, this ongoing academic platitude, must again be scrutinized and called to account in order to unveil a systematic misprision concerning the role and unique value of translation in literary studies.

Since literary studies is commonly housed within the larger academic units known as Arts and Letters or Humanities, where translation in general suffers a similar fate, it is appropriate to begin with a few observations regarding translation in this broader context before moving on to the specific unveiling at hand. One of the fundamental ironies of our times is that, although translation is often professionally derided in this broader context, too, it is no less than one of the pillars upon which the Humanities—as they are thought and taught today—have been, and continue to be, built. In short, and to varying degrees in a paradigmatic manner, American higher education in its present form would not exist were it not for translation. Without the contributions made by translation, the intellectual enterprise of Arts and Letters would find itself radically different, undermined and impoverished, in such fields as Philosophy, Religious Studies, Psychology, History, Economics, Sociology, and Literature, to name a few that would be most affected. What would Philosophy be without access to such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Alfarabi, Averroes, Descartes, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Kant, Hegel, Leibnitz, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard, Unamuno, Ortega, Sartre, Derrida, etc.? Religious Studies without translations of the sacred texts of the major religions of the world? Psychology without the contributions of Freud and Jung, Helmholtz, Fechner, Pavlov, and a host of

other pioneers? History without Herodotus, Thucydides, Cato, Livy, Tacitus, De Tocqueville, Ranke, Bloch, Braudel, and the autobiographies of those who have shaped history since its earliest times? Economics without Marx? Sociology without Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx? And, finally, Literature without works from Homer to Dante to Cervantes to Kawabata, Kundera, Grass, and García Márquez? The same telling rhetorical question may be asked of other disciplines within our colleges of Arts and Letters—ranging from Anthropology (Levy-Strauss, etc.) to Women's Studies (Simone de Beauvoir, etc.)—and the least bit of unveiling begins to reveal that throughout the Humanities translation has made its indelibly positive mark by making available to the American reader seminal works by authors thinking in a language other than English.²

What distinctly emerges from even a cursory survey is that translation, too, not unlike economics with its premise of scarcity and laws of supply and demand, has been one of the great motors of history and human development. Setting aside any physical consideration (translation's role in technology transfer to improve the human condition), translation over the ages has responded consistently and admirably to our intellectual, spiritual, and cultural needs, satisfying such demands and desires when scarcity called for a sharing and transportation of ideas and aesthetic forms from across the globe. The recipients of this noble venture, especially those within the academic context at issue here, have found themselves, in the words of Ortega, "in a secure prospect full of possibilities, everything placed at their disposal, without any previous effort on their part, in the way that we find the sun on high without our having carried it up on our backs" (48). Higher education in America has been to no small extent basking in a sunlight that has been created by legions of translators. Yet the academy has demonstrated itself singularly mean-spirited and forgetful when the moment of acknowledgement has arrived. With its condescending attitude and the real-world consequences thereof (a denial of recognition and reward when retention and promotion decisions are made),³ it bites a hand that feeds it and adds insult to injury. It is within this general context that the place of literary translation in American higher education must be considered because it suffers a similar, perhaps even worse, fate.

In a broad sense, literature has long been pursued because its study is considered instrumental in the devel-

opment of that ideal called the cultured individual: one who is familiar with the best that has been thought and said over the ages; one who has learned how to think and write well by analyzing, understanding, and emulating the achievements of masters of the art and craft; one who has acquired insight into the cultural (historical and socio-political) development of entire nations or regions of the world. As H. Stephen Straight has observed, there are but two routes to this end: either the reader approaches the work on its own terms by learning the language it was written in, or the work is brought to the reader through translation. For centuries the cultured individual in the West needed only to know Greek and/or Latin, and a newly budding national language such as English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish. Two or three languages sufficed for the formation of the cultured individual. As Greek and Latin were gradually abandoned in favor of the new national languages that were coming into their own (a process unabated since the 16th century), and as the world began to develop along the lines of the interdependent global village that it is today, the cultured individual was forced either to master more languages or to read more translations. As it now stands, very few people in America are sufficiently fluent in enough foreign languages so as to be able to read the many and diverse works that increasingly give shape to today's cultured individual. More than ever, it is the translator who has picked up the slack and brought the works to the American reader. As Straight remarks: "Education may be more 'effective' than translation, but it is by no means as efficient" (44). The result is that to be cultured, to be well-read and enlightened, has been facilitated by the sun carried up on high by legions of translators. Without them, without the thought and literatures of the world that they have made available in English, very few Americans could attain to that ideal of being well-read and liberally educated as prescribed by such native thinkers as Mortimer J. Adler in lists of suggested readings that run from Homer and the Old Testament to Molière and Voltaire to Goethe, Ibsen, Chekhov, Beckett, and Solzhenitzyn (318-350).⁴

As we move into the American academic setting, that museum, laboratory, and increasingly political arena of literature, and into the English departments (and their ancillary, Comparative Literature), we discover that not only are English and American literatures taught but the literatures of the world as well, *in English*.⁵ Typically listed in English (and Comparative Literature) departments are courses such as The Psychological Novel, The Bible as Literature, Children's Literature, Adolescence in Literature (the *Bildungsroman*), Modern European Literature, The Literary Use of Legend (Ulysses, Don Juan, Faust), Women's Literature, Third World Literatures (Asian, African, Latin American), and The History of Literary Criticism ("from Greek times to the twentieth

century"). We also find courses on Major Individual Authors such as Sophocles, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, or Proust.⁶ In other words, the enterprise of shaping cultured individuals is being achieved by means of translation, through translations into the English language, that very same mode of instruction and transmission which originally shaped many of the students' instructors. This reliance on literary translation is undeniable, it is historical, and it is taken for granted since seldom is it emphasized (much less acknowledged) in these courses that the works being read are indeed translations; seldom are they studied in this light, with a serious consideration of what strategies and implementations were utilized by the translator in making a given work available to domestic readers. In America the underpinning of studies in world literature is ignored and forgotten, overlooked, revealing an un-self-critical (irresponsible?) ingredient in the entire enterprise.

There are numerous explanations, both historical and sociological within the academy, for this casual and damaging attitude. One, perhaps, is that American literature instructors themselves are too often unable to read in the original languages the works they teach. They tend to be predominantly monolingual, having themselves relied on translations for their own previous formation, and the path of least resistance is to perpetuate this syndrome rather than to make the lengthy investment of mastering the true capacity of reading a second, third, or fourth foreign language. Nor do many American instructors seem to know much about translation itself—its history, strategies, and implementations, its theory and practice. Thus many are doubly ill-equipped to address certain facets (semantic losses or gains accrued, stylistic and syntactic variance, instances of untranslatability, etc.) of the works they are teaching. But perhaps the most fundamental reason for slighting translation is the formula given earlier—literary studies = research/scholarship = criticism and/or theory regarding works/workings of literature—in the face of which translation has been regarded systematically as more secondary and derivative, less critical and original, and therefore less germane and consequential, than other types of literary inquiry and activity. In short, translation is still considered by far too many to be a mechanical form of applied critical reading which requires only a good GBD (general bilingual dictionary) instead of the acute critical insights attributed to the good critical reading traditionally ascribed to literary critics and professors of literature. This pervasive attitude bears further scrutiny.

Both translators and literary critics (the latter being those who traditionally and currently occupy the high ground within academia) are first and foremost readers, good readers, practitioners of extremely close reading. They have been trained, either by themselves or by

others, to delve deeply into a given work of literature. They are hermeneutic experts, specialists in interpretation, in decoding and recoding—in exegesis, that critical and creative reiteration of the primary source (for there can be but one for either enterprise). Both types of applied critical reader (so called because the reading leads to later writing grounded in what has been read) engage in a secondary and derivative activity. Neither is more culpable than the other in this regard; it is simply a fact for both enterprises. Yet, despite the fundamental similarities, the motives and results of their applied critical readings are not the same. The literary critic has traditionally used the original text as a pretext for privileging certain aspects of it: a detail, a pattern, a character portrayal or development, a voice, a style, a theme, a relationship to other texts, etc. In recent years this approach or model has been shifted increasingly from a reading that focuses on elements within the original text to one that privileges the imposition on the text of the reader's idiosyncrasies and ideologies.⁷ In either instance, the literary critic engages in an intensely reductive yet paradoxically expansive (often explosive) reading of an original poem, story, play, or novel—his or her eye serving simultaneously as a microscope, magnifying glass, telescope, and overhead projector—privileging a particular or constellation of particulars, intrinsic and/or extrinsic to the text. Thus the critical eye of close reading leads to an essay or article. The translator, on the other hand, must focus on the whole of the original text. His or her close reading cannot privilege any part of the whole at the expense of the whole, nor is it free to impose on the text an interpretation that might be fundamentally alien (extrinsic) to the text. A narrow spotlight cannot be focused in the manner characteristic of criticism; rather a floodlight must be used to critically comprehend the entire original text, according to what the text *itself* attempts to say through its semantic and syntactic arrangement, so that it can be re-created in as much of its entirety as possible. In a very real and practical sense, the translator as reader must subsume the functions of the critic as reader, for the particulars of a given work must be fully apprehended if the translation is to succeed, if it is to mirror the depth and nuances as well as the surface of the original. If it is the translator's task to heuristically conjoin theological and romantic hermeneutics in an attempt to re-write in another language what the original author might well have written had that language been his or her original language; if it is the translator's task to become an alter-author of the original author, penetrating to the core the signs, symbols, voices, patterns, and nuances as they were configured in the mind of the original author; if it is the translator's task to thoroughly interpret and then strive to recreate an entire piece of writing—then how can such applied reading be considered less critical and

worthy of professional esteem than the reading performed by the literary critic? Perhaps the only valid answer can be: by convention (and convenience) of the political interests and self-serving platitudes that have been developed over the years within academia.

Translation, differently but no less than criticism, involves deep critical reading and subtle interpretation. No less than criticism, it is a profound scholarly and intellectual act of decoding and recoding. At the very least, translation relies on the very same hermeneutic abilities applauded in literary criticism. Further, in dealing with literature, the form of translation's critical reiteration must strive to match the level of artistic, creative writing present in the original text. A good GBD in no way suffices to achieve the ends of good translation, for such ends cannot be achieved by mechanical means. If such were the case, Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, and Octavio Paz would have been made available by computers long ago.⁸

As we disclose further the plight of literary translation in American higher education, not only do we discover the extent to which academia has been built upon the primary texts that translation has made available and the degree to which translation can be no less than the critical and insightful reading that has been attributed to literary critics,⁹ but we also witness the extent to which literary studies has depended upon translation for access to the theoretical and secondary texts that have increasingly given shape to how literary studies itself is conducted. Literary theory, which springs from observations and models based upon literature (i.e. the prior existence of literary works), has dominated the landscape of literary studies for several decades. American university presses have flooded the shelves of literature professors and students with important theoretical works from Russia, Germany, Italy, and France, for example. The result has been that today one of the underpinnings of the very act of literary criticism is the fact that critics often ground their work in imports from abroad. Whether it be Russian formalism and structuralism, German hermeneutics and reception aesthetics, Italian reader-response, or French semiology and deconstruction, the American academy has been busy naturalizing what began as foreign thought expressed in a foreign language. Literary critics are quick to invoke such authorities as Lotman, Uspenskij and Bakhtin, Gadamer, Iser and Jauss, Eco, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, etc., and to enlist them as part of the infrastructure of their critico-theoretical enterprise. But where would such forms of literary criticism be today without the primary theoretical works made available to so many critics by such translators as Laurence Scott, Gail Lenhoff, Ronald Vroom, Carol Emerson, Michael Holquist, Timothy Bahti, David Linge, Richard Howard, Annette Lavers, Colin Smith, David Allison, Barbara Johnson, Alan Bass, and Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak? Without the substantive contributions made by these and many other translators of the critico-theoretical genre, literary criticism would be just as impoverished and imperiled as would be the Humanities in general without translation. The landscape of literary criticism would be devoid of many fine critical works built upon direct access to *thought originally expressed in a language other than English*. Many professional critics would find themselves reading what other critics have had to say about Bakhtin, Jauss, Eco, or Derrida, rather than actually reading *what* these theorists have said.

The brief unveiling attempted in this essay begins to reveal the crucial role played by translation in the Humanities as they are taught today in the United States. Within this context, further disclosure lays bare the equally significant role that literary translation (and its ancillary: the scholarly translation of literary theory) has had in literary studies and literary criticism. What becomes clear is that the space allotted to translation within academia has been woefully out of proportion, small, in light of the vital role played by translation. It is time to redress a wrong. It is time to redefine the space and the place of translation in general, and literary translation in particular, in American higher education. It is time to stop biting the hand that feeds. In order to achieve this long overdue reassessment and redefinition, steps such as the following are proposed:

*That instructors of world literature be increasingly sensitized to what translation is and entails. This can be achieved through more workshops, seminars, and institutes on the subject, sponsored by organizations such as the NEH, NEA, ATA, ALTA, MLA, AATSP, etc., and by individual institutions of higher learning.

*That more courses and programs be developed nationwide in translation studies so that students can study and practice the art and science of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural renewal, thereby enhancing at an earlier stage a lifelong appreciation of the craft and contributions of translation to the world in which they live.

*That such courses and programs be increasingly developed not only at the undergraduate level but at the graduate levels as well (the M.A. and Ph.D.), so that students who have chosen literature as a career have the tools to better understand on a theoretical, if not practical, level the scholarly nature and intricate processes of translation and its impact on their chosen career.

*That more literary journals and professional organizations devote greater attention to the serious consideration of translation—its theory, processes, products, and effects. This, of course, will require that more working

translators and critics and theorists of translation submit more articles, essays, and notes on the subject.

In sum, translation and translators must raise their voices and credentials in order to create a new space—and claim a rightful place—within academia at the highest levels of inquiry and practice.¹⁰ They must finally be allowed to share in the sunlight that they have legitimately labored to make available. In terms of literary studies, this may mean no less than a new educational epistemology on the horizon: an inversion whereby what was once considered least important (and was, thereby, taken for granted) may indeed prove to be one of the most fundamentally important and fruitful areas of the enterprise itself.¹¹

NOTES

¹ Although the situation regarding translation studies has been improving in recent years (per the ATA data base there are now more courses and programs devoted to the topic than there were a decade ago, the NEH funded a three-year Literary Translation Institute at the University of California in Santa Cruz [1987-1989], the MLA now has a sub-category in translation studies under “COMPARATIVE STUDIES [European Literary Relations (including Translation)], and *Hispania* [AATSP] now devotes a small section to translation), there remains much work to be done in redeeming translation as an important and fundamental area of inquiry in American higher education.

² This situation, of course, is also paradigmatic elsewhere as throughout the world translation has made, and continues to make, available seminal works by authors thinking and creating in a language other than any given national language. Thus, the French, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, etc. are able to read Shakespeare, Melville, Poe, Bellow, etc.

³ In the evaluations of academic personnel at American colleges and universities, a typical hierarchy of what counts in terms of research and publications would be one similar to the following: critical books and monographs, articles or essays in refereed journals, articles or essays in refereed proceedings, articles or essays in non-refereed journals or proceedings, notes, reviews, and last and not least, translations. One of the arguments implicit in this essay is that good, well-reviewed literary and scholarly translations deserve to be ranked as high as critical books and monographs because such translations are also works of critical hermeneutics, erudition, and sensibility. John Felstiner has laid bare this fact in his seminal and paradigmatic illustration (*Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*, Stanford U.P., 1980) of what ideally (and for him, in praxis) goes into a translation. In this book about his own translation of Neruda’s poem “The Heights of Macchu Picchu,” he makes explicit what is implicit to varying degrees in all acts of good literary translation.

⁴ These more conservative, traditional reading lists may of course be extended to include many of the authors in new

proposals nationwide to expand (update) the literary canon.

⁵ A synonym for English and Comparative Literature Departments is the Literature Department found at many institutions.

⁶ This survey of courses and topics is drawn largely from the *San Diego State University 1990-91 General Catalog*, and may be considered representative in that similar courses and topics are offered at many other institutions of higher learning throughout the United States.

⁷ This shift, which appears to be increasingly tied to ideological "schools" of reading being developed, implemented, and enforced nationwide, is interestingly documented in Charles J. Sykes' recent book, *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education*.

⁸ The relationship of translation and translation studies is fundamental to literary studies in other epistemological and hermeneutic manners as well. Fruitful areas of inquiry would include the following: **If reading is semiotic decoding and recoding, and if translation is *par excellence* also semiotic decoding and recoding, then what, more precisely, is the relationship between reading and translation? If understanding is based also on decoding and recoding, then what is the relationship between reading, translation, and human understanding? Or between criticism and translation, if both are forms of applied critical reading? Might it be that translation is so epistemologically fundamental that as an area of inquiry it would help to account for other systematic metaphors so often used to refer to interpretation and its formalizations, ranging from reading to understanding to literary criticism itself? If, according to recent Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, creative writing is also fundamentally an act of translation, then what, more precisely, is the relationship between literary creativity and translation? In what way are all of these enterprises none other than acts of translation? Is translation perhaps a core metaphor from which other more conventional metaphors of interpretation have spun off without bothering to look back? In what manner might it be more appropriate to characterize the human being as *homo translator* rather than according to the Barthian *homo significans*? How, more precisely, does the culture and commerce of translation bear on literary history and the sociology of literature from nation to nation? What does the sociology of literature-in-translation itself reveal? To what extent has translation been an underpinning of both literary studies and the Humanities in general? In sum, to what degree and in what manner has translation been one of the great motors of Western as well as world history?** These and other questions would represent an additional context for the ongoing research being conducted in the process and products of translation.

⁹ Again, Felstiner's book, *Translating Neruda*, makes explicit the critical principles and practices—the homework—implicit in all good literary translation.

¹⁰ In spite of the fact that translation has always played a role

in Western higher education, from the earliest days in Europe where translation into Latin represented a *lingua franca* for scholars and was also used as a tool for teaching students the art and craft of classical rhetoric (a device later exported to America), the call here is for a new space to be created within academia. A new place must be claimed, rather than risk dangerous flirtation with the notion of reclaiming old ground. The new role of translation has nothing in common with the traditional abuse (and therefore bad reputation) of translation as a mechanically pedagogical device whereby students created cribs and trotted out grammatical ponies for their rhetoric (composition) and language instructors. Such so-called translation was not really translation at all; it was a surface exercise which served a lexical and grammatical purpose for schoolchildren. The new space of translation is to be created in light of its fundamental relationship to literature, literary studies, criticism, and creative writing; it is to be pursued because of its fundamental relationship to reading and exegesis, and to theories of decoding and recoding.

¹¹ **Another compelling reason for creating a space for translation within higher education relates to the role and model of the translator *qua* reader, to the type of reading performed by translators in an era when literary theory and criticism seem bent on pushing the act of reading over the brink of the pursuit of any concrete (pinned-down) determination of meaning into the abyss of sheer and cleverly orchestrated indeterminacies. Translation still requires the reader to confront and deal with works of literature in an intrinsically traditional (straightforward and commonsense) manner, i.e. according to what the work of literature offers, more strictly speaking, *in and of itself*. Although the author may be considered "dead" for the translator *qua* reader, just as he or she is for the literary theorist and/or critic *qua* reader, the literary work itself cannot be considered "dead" (a silenced corpse for ideological plundering) because for the translator the text-at-hand remains the object of central focus, an object which must be allowed to reveal and renew itself on the face of its own intrinsic literary terms—such traditional elements as character, setting, voice, style, themes, tone, etc. The translator cannot, *should not*, adopt a "posture of defiance" (Sykes 70) toward the text being translated and willfully make the text say what it perhaps (in the final communicative instance) does not say, for to do so would be to abandon all sense of honesty and ethics in translation. The translator's task, as Gregory Rabassa has insisted, is to bring a text, "warts and all," into a new language and culture. Thus, translation may be considered a form of literary hermeneutics that remains primordially concerned with decoding and recoding the *surface* as well as the deep structures of language. It is concerned with the words in works of literature and what they actually say, both fundamentally and on the face of it. It cannot freely abandon the obvious, surface meaning of words for the sake of seeking out and overdetermining what the words *might be saying* or *what one might want the words to be saying*, for to do so would be to grossly overtranslate (to delve too deeply in order to uncover, discover, or re-cover too much between the lines or within the words—in short, to ask too much of the text by willfully basking in metaphysical indetermina-**

cies), which would result in that most unpardonable of instances of critically applied misreading called mistranslation. The act of translation is an act of reading that still recognizes a focus, a center, and it cannot be a willful attempt to divert (or even silence) the primary-meaning voice of the text (created by a [once] living author) as in the manner often systematically pursued by much of today's literary criticism. The translator cannot risk abusing the work of literature by imposing on it from without a too overt idiosyncratic and ideologically guided reading and still refer in good conscience to what has transpired as translation. As such, the translator *qua* reader is a sobering reminder that *texts do have something to say in and of themselves*. At this moment, it might not be too far-fetched to view translation as a last (and lasting) stand for the traditional act of commonsense reading—a reading whose concerns are still basic content and form as well as primary meaning.

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