The Role of Cultural Translation for Literary Historiography

Eva-Nicoleta BURDUȘEL

Centre for Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Studies
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Letters and Arts
Personal e-mail: eva.burdusel@ulbsibiu.ro

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION FOR LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY

Abstract: The main objective of the present paper is to highlight the relevance of translation in the scholarly endeavour of placing and firmly setting national literature in a wider context, i.e. planetary literature. Moreover, due to its complexity, long tradition, noble endeavour, worldwide mission and overarching goal, translation – as a fourfold process encompassing the linguistic, cultural, interpretive, comparative dimensions, according to Christian Moraru – serves as a most effective connector between words and worlds, in addition to overcoming successive waves regarding the state of "translatability" as Emily Apter scholarly theorized it, from her first thesis "nothing is translatable" to the twentieth thesis "everything is translatable", where all the intermediary stages, hypotheses, and other theoretical assumptions further investigated.
Keywords: world-system analysis, centre-periphery in literary studies, cultural translation, planetary literature

Citation suggestion: Burdușel, Eva-Nicoleta. "The Role of Cultural Translation for Literary Historiography". *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2021): 88-90.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2021.10.14.

"Words may, through the devotion, the skill, the passion and the luck of writers, prove the most powerful thing in the world. They may move men to speak to each other because some of those words express not just what the writer is thinking but what a huge segment of the world is thinking." (W. Golding – Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech)

"Good literature erects bridges between different peoples, and by having us enjoy, suffer, or feel surprise, unites us beneath the languages, beliefs, habits, customs, and prejudices that separate us ... Literature creates a fraternity within human diversity and eclipses the frontiers erected among men and women by ignorance, ideologies, religions, languages, and stupidity." (Mario Vargas Llosa – Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech)

"Culture, on a global scale, concerns us all... Culture belongs to all humankind." (J.M.G. Le Clézio – Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech)

The main objective of the present paper is to highlight the relevance of translation in the scholarly endeavour of placing and firmly setting national literature in a wider context, i.e. planetary literature. Moreover, due to its complexity, long tradition, noble endeavour, worldwide mission and overarching goal, translation – as a fourfold process encompassing the linguistic, cultural, interpretive, comparative dimensions, according to Professor Christian Moraru[1] – serves as a most effective connector between words and worlds, in addition to overcoming successive waves regarding the state of "translatability" as Emily Apter[2] scholarly theorized it, from her first thesis "nothing is translatable" to the twentieth thesis "everything is translatable", where all the intermediary stages, hypotheses, and other theoretical assumptions further investigated. The twenty postulates provide a multidimensional approach to translation studies and its connection to comparative literature – "global translation is another name for comparative literature", the concept of power – "the translation zone is a war zone", notion of dominance and imperialism – "mixed tongues context the imperium of global English / translation is an oedipal assault on the mother tongue / translation is the traumatic loss of native language", including the more recent and ineluctable impact of technology on the area of translation studies.[3] Furthermore,

Emily Apter`s analysis points out to the qualitative and quantitative dimensions, methods and instruments defining and pertaining to translation studies. In recent decades, translation studies reached the prestigious status of an academic discipline that came to be regarded as an sine-qua-non instrument for cultural studies, comparative literature, world literature, global diplomacy, literary criticism, as well as linguistic and cultural mediation or the preservation of the memory of individuals and nations.

Numberless writers and most scholars equally acknowledged the power of art, culture, literature to connect diversity and differences, to make the distant both near and familiar. The word, as highlighted by the Nobel Laureates mentioned in the opening of the present paper, is an invaluable resource as they emphasized the significance of the book as the most treasured cultural product. Literature translates real life experience into writing, whereas the act of literary translation is a cultural transfer of meaningful *words* and enlightening *worlds*.

A second, though not secondary, aim of the paper is to call attention to both dimensions of the translation process: qualitative and quantitative. The former one is mainly illustrated by the cultural context, linguistic transaction and literary transfer of meaning, whereas the latter one is testified and enabled by the most recent tools provided by digital humanities to store, access and retrieve terminology in a resourceful corpus of terminology as a valuable repository literary and cultural concepts. World literature can be more accurately understood by means of a chronological, quantitative approach specific to literary historiography intertwined with an equally subjective and qualitative approach specific to comparative literature. David Damrosch noted that "texts are culture bound"[4] hence an understanding otherness – both author and text – is mediated by cultural translation with the consequence of reaching out to a global audience, summing up that "we live today in a great age of translation"[5].

Special mention should be made of the unique scope and unparalleled amplitude and complexity of the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature*, an unparalleled scholarly project encompassing minute accurate definitions and thorough presentations of literary movements, literary concepts, literary publications, literary institutions, writers, translators, etc. The *Dictionary* stands out in a class by itself on the one hand due to its encompassing power and overarching scope contributing to something more than the literary phenomenon, i.e. the "culture of literature". Literature should be read on two levels simultaneously and equally important, i.e. an *international dimension* or reading and writing for the planet (Christian Moraru) as literature possess the unique ability to make us all contemporary with the world at large, putting all people into contact mediated by language and culture; and an (inter)*cultural dimension* which is closely connected with the former one as culture facilitates the integration of the national within the large canvass of the world and, at the same time, preserves the identity of the nation in any kind of worldly interaction.

The process of translating the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature* (GDRL) resorted equally to quantitative and qualitative methods: the former one – quantitative instruments for translation research – (QnM) was employed particularly in the endeavour of searching databases and archives for a thorough comparison of existing translations of titles, concepts, or retrieval of former literary translations of the passages included by the contributors, whereas the latter one – qualitative approach to translation research – (QlM) implies the translation proper of literary texts, a process which is simultaneously scientific, artistic and interpretive. This is a rather novel undertaking since the complexity of the task had been basically unparalleled in the Romanian cultural and literary context, given the wide scope of the project where the translations ranged from literary texts, literary criticism, reviews, biographical notes, overview of the writer`s life and work.

The process of translating the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature* further illustrates the two-dimensional connection between culture and power: on the one hand, nations – particularly those regarded to be situated at the centre – have always resorted to power as a persuasive weapon of domination; on the other hand, the aim of culture is to overcome oppositions, bridge polarities, to finally achieve connections and harmony.

The present paper was prompted by an outstanding research project whose overarching goal is the daring endeavour and relevant contribution to the preservation, capitalization and promotion of national literature worldwide in the larger context of a world-system analysis where the centre-periphery antinomy highlights the hypothesis that there is no centre without the periphery, instead it is precisely the assumed marginal literature, looked upon as supposedly less significant as allegedly powerless, that empowers major literatures. The travel and circulation of literature from the margin to the core and the other way round is facilitated and mediated – linguistically and culturally – by literary translation.

"Connection is a minimal condition for World Literature ... regarded as a rhizomatic and ever-changing complex of relations" and translation is the method, medium and instrument enabling and facilitating connection across literary landscapes, cultures, languages, geographical areas, "connecting different speech communities and literary cultures"[6]. The concept of borders in literature or, rather literary landscapes, determined by geographical, historical and political reasons, became quite fluid as literature speaks to the world at large, where experience is similar and the artistic expression – in matters of literary genre, technique and form – differs from one culture to another and from one literary tradition to another.

Apart from the significance of culture for the survival and continuity of a nation, national literature is the representative and reflection of cultural specificity, linguistic diversity, echoing historical conditions, economic upheaval, geo-political turmoil. Based on the theory that nations are narratives and that reading literature is a valuable and effective means of accessing the (hi)story of a nation and immersing into its culture and tradition, we may firmly conclude that the literary and historical narrative performs a twofold role: one

of dominance - i.e. colonialism and imperialism - and another one of survival and preservation of memory - i.e. commonly associated to "minor" or "peripheral". Any discussion and analysis about the interdependence between culture and power, in its various manifestations, will inescapably rely on the role of culture in the global context as an effective and enduring means of promoting communication, linguistic identity, collective memory, as well as moral, spiritual, ethical values meant to ensure the continuity and survival of any community throughout history. In its ideal form, power may provide balance, whereas in its lowest form power is mere dominance; culture is the only one able to uplift the manifestation of power and culture is endowed with the power to create harmony.

Literature may be regarded as a relevant archive, repository of a nation`s invaluable and indelible memory, encoded and decoded in a particular cultural context. Hence literary history is equally an endeavour of accomplishing cultural history, where cultural identity and specificity play a similar essential role as the concept of localization is for translation. Experience is universal though its expression and world literature cannot be accomplished without a well-defined and firmly rooted national literature. The role of world literary studies is to enable and guide reading across traditional borders. "Literature belongs to the world at large not confined to its cultural origin but speaks to people everywhere" and studies in world literature embark on a process of reading across traditional borders.[7]

"Translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of cultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative, i.e. *subjective* activity, that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries."[8] Special mention should be made here that successful translation of literary texts should be neither excessively subjective nor heavily reliant on computer-aided translation or similar tools, specific to computational linguistics. Human intervention is the most powerful mediator in literary translation. Machine translation may observe linguistics rules though it may not be able to distinguish the most appropriate equivalent for the original text in the target language. It is particularly relevant, here, to mention the recent shift in translation studies from "the source text to the target culture" hence changing the paradigm of dominance from the original – regarded as prevailing – to the reception, audience which thus gains in importance, significance[9]. Such a perspective is congenial to studies in communication theory which highlight the focus on the audience in the transactional linguistic and cultural process. Moreover, translations contribute to the duration of a literature and the continuation of its cultural context; hence a literary work moves beyond its original context: geographical, cultural, temporal, gaining in significance with each different and successive translation.

The idea of the "contact zone" as "the place where cultures, previously separated, come together and establish ongoing relations"[10] highlights the interaction among the centre and the periphery as well as the circulation of cultural trends – "travelling concepts in the humanities" set forth and theorized by Mieke Baal. To conclude, literary translation is much more than merely a transfer, of a text from one language and culture to another, it is also a transaction entailing a transformation both in the production of the translated text as well as in its reception by the targeted audience. Translation serves as a powerful mediator to accessing and understanding the World Republic of Letters.

Notes:

1. Christian Moraru, "World, Globe, Planet: Comparative Literature, Planetary Studies and Cultural Debt after the Global Turn," *State of the Discipline Report*, ACLA. December 03, 2014.
2. Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).
3. Ibid., 12-13.
4. David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Chichester & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.
5. Ibid., 66.
6. Stefan Helgesson and Mads Rosendhal Thomsen, *Literature and the World* (London: Routledge, 2020), 76, 84, 131.
7. Ibid., 78, 152.
8. See the chapter authored by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002).
9. Helgesson and Thomsen, *Literature and the World*, 135.
10. Sherry Simon in *Postcolonial Translation*.

Bibliography:

Apter, Emily. *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016

Bassnett, Susan, and Harish Trivedi, eds. *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and* Practice. London: Routledge, 2002.

Damrosch, David. *How to Read World Literature*. Chichester & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Helgesson, Stefan, and Mads Rosendhal Thomsen. *Literature and the World*. London: Routledge, 2020.

Moraru, Christian. "World, Globe, Planet: Comparative Literature, Planetary Studies and Cultural Debt after the Global Turn," *State of the Discipline Report*, ACLA. December 03, 2014.