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Promoting literary translation by conferring an academic status to translated literature

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Introduction

Reading foreign books is an excellent means of discovering life in other countries, because literature generally provides an inside view of things, free of stereotypes and much more focused on real life and individual human beings than the political, historical or economic considerations relayed by the media. Exposure to literary works stemming from a specific culture often gives a much more reliable access to that culture than that available to most tourists. In literary translation, however, more is at stake than just its particular subject matter: it helps to move a literary work beyond its own linguistic borders. When one limits oneself to the literary production written in the language one masters, one is deprived of the joys and enrichment one experiences on discovering the great works of art that have originated in other cultures.

We tend to consider authors, translators and readers as belonging to well defined groups, but these categories are all permeable. Most authors read and some translate as well. Translators often like writing, generally enjoy reading and some publish texts as authors. Readers are potential writers and most of them are at least intra-lingual translators in some circumstances. When translated texts are integrated in a culture this therefore has an impact on that culture's literary output. Translated texts cohabit with texts published in the country and, provided that they are read, they probably contribute as much as native texts to the country's cultural identity and heritage.

In this paper, I will first go back to Even-Zohar's theory of polysystems and discuss the factors that have an impact on the propagation of foreign culture. I will then argue that institutions have an important role to play in promoting the cultural status of the translated text. Finally, I will refer to Lawrence Venuti's conception that translated texts are part of the output of national literature and will suggest that they be included in the literary curricula of the arts and humanities faculties of the target language countries.

1. Culture propagation through translation

In the seventies, it occurred to a few scholars that it was possible to consider literary production (among other semiotic phenomena) in a global perspective, so as to detect its consistency. In the nineties, Even-Zohar refined the theory of polysystems he had developed two decades earlier.

The idea that semiotic phenomena, i.e., sign-governed human patterns of communication (such as culture, language, literature, society), could more adequately be understood and studied if regarded as systems rather than

conglomerates of disparate elements has become one of the leading ideas of our time in most sciences of man.¹

According to him, each genre and type of literature should be understood and studied in the perspective of the other ones, without losing sight of the big picture.

[L]iterature for children would not be considered a phenomenon sui generis, but related to literature for adults; translated literature would not be disconnected from original literature [...].²

Even-Zohar postulates that translated works form a system within the system of a national literature. According to him they correlate in two ways:

(a) in the way their source texts are selected by the target literature, the principles of selection never being uncorrelatable with the home co-systems of the target literature [...]; and (b) in the way they adopt specific norms, behaviors, and policies [...] which results from their relations with the other home co-systems.³

He explains that the constraints imposed by the polysystem has a controlling effect on “the procedures of selection, manipulation, amplification, deletion, etc., which are taking place”.⁴

This new perspective showed that, on a national level, the selection of works to translate reflects cultural tendencies and that the type of translation produced by translators mirror the habits and customs of their target culture. Moreover, the theory of polysystems clarified the role of the different stakeholders in the translation life cycle: the producer (or author), the consumer (or reader), the institution (“the aggregate of factors involved with the maintenance of literature as a socio-cultural activity”⁵), the repertoire (“the aggregate of laws and elements – either single, bound, or total models – that govern the production of texts”⁶) and the market.

According to Even-Zohar, the institution is an important factor, because it establishes which works can be written or translated and the way they should be written or translated. The institution sanctions some texts and rejects others. To define it more precisely, it

includes at least part of the producers, “critics” (in whatever form), publishing houses, periodicals, clubs, groups of writers, government bodies (like ministerial offices and academies), educational institutions (schools of whatever level, including universities), the mass media in all its facets, and more.⁷

This perspective on literary translation falls more within the province of sociology than translation or literary studies. As Theo Hermans explains, “The point about the systems idea is that it invites us to think in terms of functions, connections and interrelations. Contextualization of individual phenomena is the key.”⁸ To do justice

¹ Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Studies”, in *Poetics Today*, 1990, p. 9

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸ Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems – Descriptive and system-oriented approaches explained*, Manchester, St Jerome, 1999, p. 99..

to a translation, it is however necessary to study it for its own sake and not only as part of a general tendency, even if it is to situate it within the literary production of a nation.

Even-Zohar's theories gave rise to diverse developments. Gideon Toury stressed that translation must play a social role, that is, fulfil the function it was assigned by its community "in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference."⁹ According to him, translators have far fewer choices than is generally believed, because they obey "*governing principles*" from the target culture that reflect "an underlying *network of relationships*"¹⁰ corresponding to the notion of literature and of translation prevailing there. André Lefevere focused on the notions of power and ideology. He considered translation as a rewriting of an original and, according to him and Susan Bassnett:

All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society.¹¹

Lefevere introduced the concept of patronage, exerted by groups or individuals (political parties, religious bodies, social classes, publishers, media, etc.) holding power and able to influence anyone reading, writing or rewriting literature.¹² According to him, patronage is at work through its ideological control on the translators, through the economic situation it provides to them, and through the social status it grants them.¹³

Lefevere saw two main factors determining the way a translated work projects the original in the target culture:

the translator's ideology (whether he/she willingly embraces it, or whether it is imposed on him/her as a constraint by some form of patronage) and the poetics dominant in the receiving literature at the time the translation is made. The ideology dictates the basic strategy the translator is going to use and therefore also dictates solutions to problems concerned with both the "universe of discourse" expressed in the original (objects, concepts, and customs belonging to the world that was familiar to the writer of the original) and the language the original itself is expressed in.¹⁴

According to Lefevere, translators therefore remain under the control of the prevailing ideology whenever they make a choice.

Johan Heilbron has suggested studying the international translation system as a hierarchical structure containing core, semi-peripheral and peripheral languages. According to him, irrespective of the number of speakers of a language or language group,

⁹ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹¹ Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, *Translation, History and Culture*, London, Pinter, 1990, Introduction, p. vii.

¹² André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London and New York, Routledge 1992, p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The general principle is: the more central the international position of a language/language group is, the lower the translation rate within that language.¹⁵

He adds that “the more central a language is in the international translation system, the more types of books are translated from this language”.¹⁶

Gisèle Sapiro, working along the same lines, has analyzed the structure of the international book market. Her idea was to observe the quantity of texts translated in and from the various languages and to relate these numbers to the power relations at work between countries and their languages:

Three types of power relations can be identified: political, economic and cultural. The asymmetry in the flows of translation reflects how these three kinds of relations are connected. [...] The structure of the market explains the fact that translations (like exportations) circulate principally from the center toward the periphery. However, the asymmetry in the flows of translation does not simply reflect the size of the markets. Political and cultural factors take part in structuring the circulation space for written texts as seen in the competition among nations for cultural hegemony (...).¹⁷

Sapiro shows that globalization has not increased diversity on the translated book market but “reinforced the domination of English”. The share of English has grown bigger, mainly at the cost of Russian, while that of peripheral languages has decreased. Whereas China, Korea and Japan (which has improved its position mainly due to the manga industry) fare rather well, few African books are translated in other languages. In her conception, translation is mediated by agents, who can be both individual and institutional, “such as translators, publishers, critics, book-sellers, literary agents, and state agency representatives.”¹⁸ However, agents, translators and even publishers can be motivated by intellectual or aesthetic reasons. The economy of translation also relies partly on support from public or private bodies. Her findings confirm that the great majority of books are translated from English, and that there are very few translations into English. In the United States,

Traditional prestigious publishing houses [...] continue to play a significant role in importing foreign literature. However, most translations (around 80% in 2008) are published either by non-profit presses who mention it as part of their mission [...] or by small independent trade publishers.¹⁹

According to Sapiro, “collective action in favour of translation” provides a protection against the “cultural and economic imperialism of Anglo-American publishing corporation”.²⁰

Obviously this effort is not sufficient.

¹⁵ Johan Heilbron, “Structure and Dynamics of the World System of Translation”, UNESCO, *International Symposium Translation and Cultural Mediation*, 2010, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 6.

¹⁷ Gisèle Sapiro, “Translation as a Weapon in the Struggle Against Cultural Hegemony in the Era of Globalization”, in *Bibliodiversity – Translation and Globalization*, February 2014, p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

2. Opening up to other cultures

On the cultural level, everybody would gain if the translation flows were not mainly dictated by political and economic hegemony.

Gideon Toury stresses the fact that

cultures resort to translating precisely as a major way of filling in gaps, whenever and wherever such gaps manifest themselves – either as such, or (very often) from a comparative perspective.²¹

He adds that in a “colonial situation”, “an alleged gap may be factually pointed out for it by a patron of sorts”.²² Indeed, if it is not governed by ideological manipulation, foreign culture can be a source of inspiration and a way of enriching the home culture. Authors can discover new possibilities and integrate or adapt new effects or techniques into their own works. Exchanges are very often a key to evolution. Besides, the discovery of novelty can be fruitful for the public. Ning Yizhong alludes to the idea of giving “the target culture audience a shocking pleasure of the presence of a new, exotic cultural element”.²³

As long as it is presented as such, translation is no threat to the target culture. It offers privileged access to the other culture, without presenting it as a would-be norm. According to José Lambert, translation can even contribute to the core of a nation’s culture.

On the basis of what has been demonstrated about the development of writing (scripture, alphabet) and of religious or legal traditions in Korea through the ages, it is obvious that even very traditional and ‘closed’ societies borrow some of their most central and canonized texts from other languages, building their own tradition with the help of translations, and at the same time setting different translational models against each other.²⁴

The question is what can be done to change that situation and who can help promote literary translation and grant it the position it deserves on its sole merit. Let us ask ourselves what the different stakeholders of the translation market could do to improve the situation.

Readers are decisive agents. They play an important part on markets driven by supply and demand, but they cannot *demand* what they know nothing about. They are prone to read books from the reading lists in the school curricula or books that they find in the libraries and in the book-shops. They may be influenced by what they hear or read about in the media or are recommended by acquaintances. In almost all cases, they never read a text *as a* translation. Readers can be reached and their horizons broadened by using both the media and social networks.

Translators themselves can suggest texts to publishers and apply for grants, but the latter are often reserved for projects that have already been approved by a publisher. A translator with a solid reputation in specialised literary circles or with a publisher

²¹ Toury, *op. cit.* p. 27.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ning Yizhong, *Translation as Cultural Transplanting: In the case of the translation of Peony Pavilion*, Beijing Language and Culture University, p. 13.

²⁴ José Lambert, *Functional Approaches to Culture and Translation: Selected Papers*, Benjamins, 2006, p. 122.

may have a certain ascendancy over the latter, even though this will probably not impact very much on the literary output at national level, because publishers must weigh up risks.

The media are inundated with new books. Journalists and reviewers tend to turn to authors they know, who are granted prizes, whose themes correspond to events with wide media coverage or who are praised by publishers. Generally speaking, they do present works as translations, but rarely say anything of substance on the matter.

Publishers cannot do much either.²⁵ According to them, the media concentrate on best-sellers and few are the critics or specialised journalists covering good-quality translated texts, whether in literary journals or articles dealing with literature or the particular country.

When asked what criteria they apply when considering whether to publish a translated text, publishers mention the following:

- the media coverage on the country or on the theme of the work;
- the reputation of the author;
- the international literary success of works published in the particular language;
- the reliability of the translator.

Publishers complain that it is harder to receive public subsidies for translations, rather than for national authors. Among the practical obstacles, they mention the need of having a reviser or a copy-editor who knows the original language. And they give three criteria that help the publication of foreign texts: public subsidies, the presence of the author in the country and wide press coverage.

Some of them consider that it is their duty to introduce foreign literary works to the public and are ready to take risks, but they generally consider that the market for foreign books is not sufficiently robust.

As to the contribution of institutions, there are to my knowledge few subsidies and prizes for foreign works – and, moreover, school curricula tend to exclude translation (even though many teenagers read translations of the works they are supposed to read in the original languages). A solution would be that institutions that work in the source language sphere offer more prizes, and grant more subsidies for translation.²⁶

Overall there is little cause for rejoicing. Apart from a small number of critics, reviewers and publishers, and translators themselves, very few people consider translations *as* translations and the interest aroused by translated works often has little to do with their literary value.

3. Translated Texts in Literature Departments

The fact that translations are perceived as a secondary form of literature and that the translator's creative talents are focused on reproducing a pre-existent form and

²⁵ In order to get a better idea of the factors which induce a publisher to have a text translated, I asked a few questions to four Swiss publishers working in the French-speaking area (Zoé, Bernard Campiche, Patino and LaDogana). All my comments concerning the publishers and some of my observations concerning the media are based on their replies.

²⁶ Of course, these prizes and grants should be publicised in countries of the target languages.

content does not imply that they are less interesting from a literary point of view. What does seem certain is that nobody can judge the original on the sole basis of the translation.

University literature departments give texts a high degree of recognition, which has an impact on their status at all levels of society. Even if many texts studied in the academic world are considered somewhat exclusive, they provide an orientation to the general public's references: they are monitored by journalists and influence the younger generation via the language teachers who are generally required to have a degree in literature.

In my opinion, quality translations of great literary works deserve to be studied as such in the academic world, in the literary department of the target language, because they are primary creative works of art and because they are part of the target language literature²⁷. Translated texts should however be studied as translations, because despite the fact that their artistic form belongs to the target culture, they originate in another cultural context. They should not be studied on a par with originals, but in a different context integrating their special intercultural status.

As translators²⁸ have a deep understanding of and a good feel for both the source and the target cultures, they find ways of expressing the whole constellation of the source culture within the proportions and possibilities offered by the target culture. If they anticipate well the flexibility and receptivity of their readers, they create a new set of landmarks preserving as many as possible of the contextual elements they perceive in the source text. This new configuration is not completely present in the text they produce. It is external, but nonetheless embodies all the relevant elements in such a way as to warrant their consistency: it is an extension of the text they produce, which the reader must unconsciously reconstruct in order to grasp the full signification of the text. As such, it represents a cultural enrichment for the readers, which transposes them as close to the source culture as translators presume they can go. It is not the cultural context of the original, nor is it that of the target reader: it is a virtual multicultural paradigm between two cultures in which translated literature can operate.

As Lawrence Venuti puts it,

To read a translation as a translation, as a text in its own right, we need a more practical sense of what a translator does. I would describe it as an attempt to compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain. [...]²⁹

Describing what the gain is, Venuti explains that the translator, through the choice of words from the target language, “adds an entirely new set of resonances and allusions designed to imitate the source text, while making it comprehensible”³⁰ to the readers of the target language and immerse it in the target culture. According to him,

²⁷ This is no new idea as Lawrence Venuti, in a speech which was available online, explained that he asks his students at Temple University to study translated texts. He actually asks them to translate texts themselves, which I consider more controversial in the context of literary studies.

²⁸ I am referring here to the notion of “competent translators”, who possess the adequate skills and who work in optimal conditions. (Cf. Lance Hewson, “Ethics and choice”, in Christine Pagnouille (ed.) *Sur le fil – traducteurs et éthique, éthiques du traducteur*, Liège, Université de Liège, 2010, 21-30).

²⁹ Lawrence Venuti, “How to read a translation”, in *Translation changes everything*, Routledge, 2013, p. 110.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Th[e] ratio of loss and gain allows a translation to be constructed as an object of study that is relatively autonomous from the source text but always tied indissolubly to the receiving situation.³¹

Again, from the perspective of English speaking readers, Venuti adds that

the fact remains that the translator has chosen every single word in the translation, whether or not a source-language word lies behind it. And the translator's words, in our case, function only in English, releasing literary effects that may well exceed the language chosen by the author of the source text.³²

Venuti implies here that the quality of the source and target texts may differ. Indeed, translations can be disappointing or they can be better than the original. As such, we could consider a translated text as the fruit of a collaboration between the author and the translator, the latter helping the former to find the adequate form for the target audience and both having some responsibility for the end product. In most cases, obviously, this collaboration is a virtual one because the author is not aware of the process. According to the situation, the translator may have the feeling of working with a peer, of serving someone he or she venerates or of helping someone in need, but he or she always feels and relies on the presence of "the other", "the author". Translators write their texts, but never feel alone while doing so: someone else (whom one could call "the author" or "the original") is there to tell them what to say and, to a certain extent, how to say it. As a translator, whenever in doubt, I go back to the text and "ask" it what to do. And it is almost always there that I find the answer. Just like a partner, a text can be more or less talkative or mute, vague or articulate, clear or confused. Reading the text without taking account of the fact that it is a translation would be to misread it and to miss the contribution of one member of the special virtual team constituted by the author and the translator.

Introducing a translation section into the various literary departments would imply making a selection of works and entrusting the course to a competent person. It would be very useful to establish links with translators, professors teaching literary translation, critics of translation, or professors teaching literature in either the source or the target language, provided they have a very good command of the other language. Moreover, all such people would be capable of selecting texts.

Professors of comparative literature could fruitfully integrate various translations of a same text into their curricula in order to compare the various forms, choices and structures a text receives in different languages.

All translations – just like all originals – are not necessarily good. Works would need to go through a selection process. In order to offer fertile ground for study, a translated text must have an interesting form and demonstrate sufficient creativity. In this matter, one needs to question the way that the original and the translation are presumed to differ in terms of creativity. Holman and Boase-Beier, who argue that there is indeed creativity in translation, stress that the original too can be considered secondary writing, because "all texts assimilate, borrow, imitate and rewrite other material".³³ According to them, "art is, by its very nature, derivative".³⁴

³¹ Lawrence Venuti, "Translation studies and world literature", in *op.cit.*, p. 193.

³² Lawrence Venuti, "How to read a translation", in *op.cit.*, p. 111.

³³ Michael Holman and Jean Boase-Beier, *The Practice of Literary Translation*, St Jerome, Manchester 1998, introduction p. 2.

Original writing and translation, so it seems, have in common that they dismantle material and re-shape it into other material, whereby that transformation may involve change of medium (reality into art, play into opera, novel into film, painting into poem) or change of language, as in translation.³⁵

To counter the argument that translators are constrained by the original text and that this is an obstacle to creativity, Holman and Boase-Beier explain that constraint is a key to creativity, and they claim that original writing is also constrained by literary tradition, prevailing political views, censorship and the linguistic characteristics of its medium.³⁶

All in all, then, original writers do not simply write what they want: they are bound by all manner of constraints: political, social, poetic and linguistic, as well as the constraints of the text itself, which creates a context potentially confining and determining the form and meaning of every utterance.³⁷

As such, original writing can be compared with translation.

Poetic language can thus be seen as a language marked by specific characteristics which include the stretching of standard language by creative deviation from its norms.³⁸

Again, they state that

as the language of an original literary text will creatively deviate from standard language, so the translation can regard the original as a standard to deviate from, and the extent to which deviation is perceived will vary according to the cultural context in which the [target text] is to be embedded.³⁹

Granting translated texts a literary status in the academic world would help changing their image in society as a whole. Reading them both *as* translation and as an integral part of the target culture would help translators to be recognised on their merits. This could encourage the media to grant them more space and institutions to offer them more subsidies. Finally, this would probably give more visibility to the works translated by authors who are already famous.

Conclusion

The translation of literary works is dependent on flows which are mainly determined by external factors, such as power relations between nations and economic considerations. The different stakeholders have little power to guide the public or give the greatest works the recognition they deserve. To counter the influence of politics

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13

and economics, it seems that both society in general and the intellectual elite should contribute to promoting literary translation through social networks and academic study.

Even though translated literature is based on a virtual culture which is a compatible extension of both the source culture and the target culture, it belongs to the literary output of the latter. The greatest translated works deserve to be studied on a par with great original works. The translation output in a linguistic area interacts with the original output to form a culture's literary heritage. Literary translations, when they are of a high standard, display just as much creativity in their form as original texts and they inject innovation into the culture.

Translations should however always be studied as translations, that is, as a collective work of an author and a translator, whose merits are shared by both. Every literature department would gain by having a section devoted to translations, with courses given by renowned translators, professors teaching literary translation, critics of translation, or bilingual professors of literature. Literary translation could be analysed and the interaction between native literature and translated literature could be fruitfully explored.

One important effect of this would be that translators could be more present in the media, their works would be part of school curricula, and grants and subsidies might be less scarce than they are today. And readers, when choosing a book to read, might then look not just for author's name, but also for the name of the translator as proof of quality and pleasure.

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