

Translated Literature in Literary History

The idea of a "world literature" is closely related to literature in translation. When Goethe suggested the term in one of his conversations with Eckermann around 1830 he had translated literature in mind. This literature was expanding in the 19th century with the great novels by for instance Balzac and Dickens as its basic commodity. It is a troubling thought that literary history was invented at more or less the same time. The thought is troubling because literary history is very much a national concern based on the literature of the mother tongue – in that sense opposed to the idea of translated literature as world literature. In the present article I will dwell on this trouble: the relation between translated literature and literary history. Or perhaps we should call it a lack of relation? Virginia Woolf once suggested that we should regard Constance Garnett – the translator of Russian novels – as one of the most important English writers of the early 20th century. Needless to say such an idea would imply a complete rewriting of literary history as we know it. The national perspective still rules, although translated literature has become increasingly important in the new readings of literary history and literary systems that have been presented in recent years by for example Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova. Perhaps we can expect a new type of literary history as a result of the on-going "globalization", what I would like to call the fifth phase of translated world literature.

The first phase happened in Roman times and consisted simply in the Roman adaption of Greek culture: Zeus became Jupiter (Jove), together with many other central concepts and names and phenomena, including literature. This was also the time of the first great theoretician of translation, St. Jerome (Hieronymus), who translated from Hebrew and Greek into Latin.

The second phase came during the Renaissance: the ancient culture and literature moved into the vernacular of European languages like French, Italian, English. Interestingly, neither the first phase nor the second had any importance for literary history: the idea of history was still to come. For a French Renaissance reader like for instance Montaigne the classics were all contemporary: he quoted and adapted Plato and Cicero for his own use as if they were still around, he conversed with his classics as with friends and peers. This changed during the third phase following Romanticism and during the expansion of the novel that made Goethe talk about world literature. During Romanticism we meet the second great theoretician of translation, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who translated from Greek into German.

Late in the 19th century we can discern a fourth phase, this time related to the poetry we call “symbolism”: especially the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé was translated all over the world and preparing the way for modernism. The expansion of the novel had political but also commercial reasons: translations were initiated by publishers or printers expecting a profit out of the novelistic expansion. The symbolist phase was different: it was certainly not profitable, it was often performed by fellow poets and diffused at seminars or meetings or published in literary journals. Both versions of a literary culture based on translation have been important for the canons of literary history. Both are still important, the novelistic spread initiated by publishers as well as the poetical spread by fellow poets and enthusiasts. With one important difference, that I will return to: the striking Anglo-Saxon dominance in translated world literature of today, especially when it comes to novels.

I will now try to enter a little deeper into these phases and the problematics of translated literature in relation to literary history following an essay by Susan Sontag, “The World as India”, originally a lecture from 2002. She dedicates her essay to W. G. Sebald and although she does not make an explicit use of this writer in her text, the dedication suggests an interesting problematics of translation. Sebald was born in Germany and wrote in German but he lived his grown-up life in England. He had a very complicated relation to everything German: German history as well as the German

language. This is demonstrated in his best known book, the only one to be called a novel: *Austerlitz* (2001) – not only by its research into some dark spots of German history but also by its use of language. Sebald mixes his German with English, French, Czech and Flemish. In that way he illustrates an important strand in the German tradition for the theory of translation that goes back to the Romantic era, a tradition that Sontag adopts: the problematization of the “mother tongue.”

Sontag quotes St. Jerome as being the first to state what seems to be a commonplace in all discussions of translation: that translation is an impossible task. What is the best way to deal with this inherent impossibility of translation? Sontag asks and answers on behalf of St. Jerome:

For Jerome there can be no doubt how to proceed, as he explains over and over in the prefaces he wrote to his various translations. In a letter to Pammachius, written in A.D. 396, he quotes Cicero to affirm that the only proper way to translate is ... keeping the sense but altering the form by adapting both the metaphors and the word to suit our own language. I have not deemed it necessary to render word for word but I have reproduced the general style and emphasis. (161)¹

Jerome wants, in short, to transform the foreign language into his own language, keeping the foreign sense while making it his own by “adapting” it. Something will obviously be lost in this procedure: “Translation, by definition, always entails some loss of the original substance.” (162)

Against this tradition Sontag puts the very different problematization of translation that was developed during German Romanticism by the philosopher, theologian, hermeneutic and translator Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Schleiermacher the translator stages an exemplary meeting between one’s native language and a foreign language. This meeting does not make the foreign language less foreign: Schleiermacher cannot accept Jerome’s idea

¹ Susan Sontag (2008). Will be quoted with page-reference in the text.

of adaption since the foreign language can never be completely transformed or adapted; it will always be alien to your mother tongue. Sontag quotes Schleiermacher's essay from 1813, "On the Different Methods of Translation":

... the aim of translating in a way such as the author would have originally written in the language of translation is not only out of reach, but also null and void in itself, for whoever acknowledges the shaping power of language, as it is one with the peculiar character of a nation, must concede that every most excellent human being has acquired his knowledge, as well as the possibility of expressing it, in and through language, and that no one therefore adheres to his language mechanically ... and that no one could change languages in his thinking as he pleases the way one can easily change a span of horses and replace it with another; rather everyone produces original work in his mother tongue only, so that the question cannot even be raised of how he would have written his works in another language. (170)

For Schleiermacher language is the basis of identity. Translation means a meeting with something foreign that might contribute to your own identity. The translator should of course render the original as faithfully as possible but the translation could nevertheless never be anything but a translation. When Schleiermacher translates Plato into German it is not in order to make Plato into a German but in order to enrich the German language and the German nation with a Greek heritage.

Something politically important has happened during the long time span between Jerome and Schleiermacher. Translation is now regarded as an instrument to develop individual identity as well as national identity. Translation is education. Translation also defines one's own identity in contrast to the foreign and gives a privilege to one's own language, the mother tongue, as the only language that can give an authentic identity to the individual and the nation. Jerome lived in the epoch of *pax romana* and *lingua romana* – but for Schleiermacher a transnational language could only be inauthentic and enforced, perhaps of some practical or commercial use but impossible for literary or psychological purposes.

I hardly need to emphasize that Schleiermacher's position encourages the idea of a privileged language that became the basis for national literary history – combined with a practice of translation that became the basis for world literature. According to your preferences, you could say that Schleiermacher shows the possibility of such a combination – or that he gives foundation for the separation of the national literature from world literature. Sontag follows another trace and goes on to ask if Schleiermacher has any relevance today, in a situation when we again can talk about a transnational language, like in the days of *lingua romana*. Now it is of course English that has so to speak become required or even compulsory for a growing part of humanity. The world has become “as India” as she puts it in the title of her essay: “The World as India.” She has in view the fact that India has 16 “official languages” and many unofficial but only the language of the old colonial power works as an overall language. “Just because it is alien, foreign, it can become the unifying language of a permanently diverse people: the only language that all Indians might have in common not only is, it has to be, English.” (165)

English has become the first language of India by being the *second* language for every Indian.² English functions uniting, reconciling, translating. But what about Schleiermacher's notion that only your own language, the mother tongue, can create individual and national identity? Sontag problematizes this with the following example (p. 171ff.):

So called *call centers* have become technologically possible and economically interesting, not least in India. Here you find a lot of young people answering calls from people in the US that have dialled toll-free numbers in order to be informed about for instance flight departures, hotel bookings and weather forecasts. The people

² Sontag's essay was originally published in *Time Literary Supplement* in 2003 and followed by an angry comment from the Indian professor Harish Trivedi, accusing Sontag for patronizing neo-colonialism on behalf of the English language. Trivedi's comment was then criticized by other Indians. Apratim Barna claimed that English “is an Indian language like any other” and Gurchama Das that “English remains the passport for every youngster who dreams of becoming ‘master of the universe’.” See *TLS* 2003 27/6, 1/8, 22/8 and 12/9.

working in call centers have not only learnt perfect American-English, they have taken American names – “Hi, this is Nancy. How may I help you?” – and even minibiographies locating them in relevant American settings. Their second language has provided them with a second identity. This identity we can, in the spirit of Schleiermacher, condemn as inauthentic. But it is nevertheless profitable for themselves and their employers and it may even help them leave India and settle in the States, where a double identity is not unusual – as it is becoming less unusual also in our part of the world.

I could add an example of my own: I work at a Norwegian university where we are very much encouraged to publish in English. Everything we publish must be reported – that is regarded as our “production” – and classified in different categories with different economical results. (The same system is being introduced in Sweden and Denmark). A small article in an English journal with so-called peer review gives more money directly to my university (and indirectly to me) than for instance a book-length monograph written in Swedish or Norwegian on for instance Strindberg or Ibsen. The obvious result is that a few Scandinavian academics make their way into the world but also that far too many articles are written in bad English and published in obscure journals by less successful Scandinavian academics. The result is also that the academic literary criticism becomes more academic and withdraws from the national literary and cultural debate. Instead, this debate becomes dominated by the production of quick – and quickly forgotten – opinion that is dominating the cultural sections of the newspapers as well as the media, including the internet-blogs – together with commercial campaigns for Anglo-American literature and media culture.

Sontag’s example from the Indian call-centers as well as my own seem to say that the world language English unites and reconciles – but that the reconciliation is based on narrow political and economical conditions, and that it takes place at the expense of national and individual interests and differences, as well as at the cost of quality. Something disappears when the second language takes the place of the first. Well, we all know literary examples that seem to say the opposite: that the second language could say *more* than the first. I am thinking of the English of Joseph Conrad and Vladimir

Nabokov, the German of Paul Celan, the French of Jorge Semprún. These examples, however, all belong to the modernist age, when physical and linguistic exile was or could be a productive part of the writer's condition. In our so-called globalized world a new kind of exile, exemplified by the Indian call-center as well as by myself – a Swedish scholar working in Norway and talking to you in English – is becoming the rule. It seems to me that we are entering a fifth phase of world literature, where translation is no longer secondary. Where we all translate and contribute to the world becoming “as India” and where the Romantic notion of authentic identity and nationality and originality becomes less important or even anachronistic.

Sontag is not happy with this vision of a globalized world where the second language becomes the first and translation overrules the original. She prefers to imagine the geography of world literature and world languages as a system of rivers and mountains and valleys and oceans. “To translate is to take the ferry, to bring across.” (175) The ferry connects two shores that must be separate. Translation is for her an important contribution to the traffic of ferries in the global circulation system of literature and culture. In order to support this ferry-metaphor Sontag turns to Walter Benjamin and his famous and cryptical essay “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”, originally an introduction to his Baudelaire-translations from 1923. Like Schleiermacher, Benjamin regards translation as a meeting with something foreign. But, unlike Schleiermacher, Benjamin seems to mean that translation shows us that also your own language, the mother tongue, is something foreign; translation is a way of handling what is always foreign in language. Sontag summarizes Benjamin's speculation into the following sentences combining the German philosophy of language and translation with a contemporary globalized vision:

Every language is part of language, which is larger than any single language. Every individual literary work is a part of literature, which is larger than the literature of any single language. (177)

Sontag's vision of translation as ferry-traffic comes close to another current metaphor when it comes to the philosophy of translation: the bridge. It is used for example by the German philosopher Martin

Heidegger when he pondered on the first phase of world literature, and specially the latinization of Greek philosophical terms: translation, according to Heidegger, works as a bridge uniting shores although the shores are still separate and different. And the same metaphor is used by his follower Hans-Georg Gadamer, the grand old man of modern hermeneutics, in an essay from 1989, "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen."³

Reading is, according to Gadamer's title, like translating. Especially poetry-reading is like translating from a foreign language. The poetry reader meets an unknown language that he has to transform / adapt / translate into a language that he knows: into his own. Poetry reading takes us from one shore of language to another. "The translator does not hide the distance to the original although he bridges over it." "The translating activity is for all language and understanding a bridge that can be crossed from both sides. The translation is like a bridge between two languages as well as between two shores in one single country."

Gadamer is here, as always, a harmonizing thinker trying in his metaphors to harmonize the different traditions of the philosophy of translation. You can recognize a trace of Jerome: translation is about adapting the foreign as your own, although with losses on the way. And there are distinct traces of Schleiermacher: translation is a "bridge" between the foreign and your own and the traffic on this bridge enriches your own language although the foreign stays foreign. And there is a touch of Benjamin's philosophy of language: the traffic across the bridge of translation takes place "in one single country" and the name of this country is Language (Benjamin) or Literature (Sontag). In Gadamer's world there are bridges connecting languages, literatures, histories. His version of this traffic calls for humility. No reading is final. Every literary work, every translation and every reading is a contribution to what is always bigger: Literature itself. Also when I am working in a foreign language I situate myself in the great homeland called Language.

Gadamer, as well as Sontag and Walter Benjamin, regard translation as a play where originality and authenticity are at stake. They

³ Gadamer (1993), [My translation. *A. M.*]

may well be the last of Modernists with romantic inclinations. When the world becomes “as India”, according to Sontag’s vision of the near future, no such play is necessary or even possible. No bridges or ferries are needed. When the original becomes secondary it is no longer an original. The foreign becomes your own and what was called the mother tongue becomes a phase to pass on your way to the new Babel: *lingua anglo-americana*.

This may sound nostalgic on behalf of Romanticism, pessimistic and even apocalyptic when it comes to today and the future. I want to conclude by modifying this apocalypse by relating to the main theme of this conference: literary history. I have stated that translated literature has a troublesome relation to literary history ever since literary history was invented, i.e. since the Romantic era. Translations have provided literary history with canonical texts but the cult of originality, authenticity and nationality has given translations a second-rate status. This may very well change during the ongoing globalization. When the whole world becomes more and more “as India” it may open some possibilities for a literary history that crosses the national borders and really becomes a history of world literature. St. Jerome’s method of translation – “keeping the sense and altering the form” – may well be the method also for this literary history. It will no doubt be dominated by the English language and the commercial interests that we associate with Anglo-American media culture. But even under this domination and even if we have to forget the Romantic cult of originality we may be able to find inspiration in what I earlier called the fourth phase of world literature: the translation of Symbolist and Avant-garde poetry in small settings like seminars and journals. Maybe our academic institution can become such a setting. In my next life I want to contribute to a new literary history of world literature as a member of an editorial staff devoted to the translation of Avant-garde literature, organized as an Indian call center, and receiving toll-free calls from all the literatures of the world.

References

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