

Hijacking Translation: How Comp Lit Continues to Suppress Translated Texts

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Uneven Developments

Academia is slow to change. The snag, as Pierre Bourdieu observed, is resistance to new ideas, which favors those that currently enjoy authority in a particular field.¹ Academics harbor an anti-intellectualism, ironically, bred by the splintering of intellectual labor into so many institutional compartments. To specialize, however productive the yield in quantity and depth of knowledge, is to clap on a set of blinders.

Take the field of comparative literature. It originated in late nineteenth-century Europe, and from the mid-1950s onward it was firmly established in the United States, housed in departments and programs at many academic

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1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 94–95.

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institutions. By 1975, a total of 150 schools offered degrees or concentrations at both the undergraduate and graduate levels; currently, that figure stands at 187.² Despite this remarkable growth, comparatists took more than a century to recognize that the field was grounded on fundamentally Eurocentric and nationalist assumptions.

During this period, the notion of comparing literatures amounted in most cases to a methodology that contained three critical moves. Resemblances were located among forms and themes from a canon of European works read in their original languages; differences were made intelligible in terms of the national languages, traditions, and cultures in which those works were rooted; more sweeping generalizations, whether transnational or universal, might ultimately be ventured, depending on the comparatist's assumptions about literature, society, or humanity. Erich Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis* (1946), a locus classicus for this methodology, surveys "the literary representation of reality in European culture" from antiquity to the twentieth century, explicitly excluding the "consideration" of "foreign influences" (*fremde Einwirkungen*) as "not necessary" (where "foreign" means transnational as well as non-European).³ Comparatists were expected to master a minimum of four European languages, including English, regardless of the fact that they increasingly came to rely on translations in their research and teaching. Not until the early 1990s, when the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) commissioned Charles Bernheimer to submit a committee-drafted "Report on Standards," did the field publicly confront its long exclusion of non-European cultures as well as the stigma it had attached to translation. The 1993 Bernheimer Report aimed to bring comparative literature in line with what were then perceived as "progressive tendencies in literary studies, toward a multicultural, global, and interdisciplinary curriculum."⁴

2. "The Greene Report, 1975: A Report on Standards," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 30. The current figure for US-based departments and programs was provided by Corinne Scheiner, who serves as the secretary/treasurer of the Association of Departments and Programs of Comparative Literature and is overseeing the 2014 *Report on the Undergraduate Comparative Literature Curriculum* (e-mail correspondence, February 7, 2014).

3. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 23; Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: A. Francke, 1946), 30.

4. "The Bernheimer Report, 1993: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century," in Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 47. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CLAM*.

Yet not much changed. Postcolonial theory emerged, decades after the militant anticolonial movements, amid an already expanded canon that encompassed African, Asian, and Latin American literatures. By the 1990s, this expansion had been institutionalized in myriad courses, publications, conferences, and professorships. Nonetheless, canons are by definition exclusionary because they necessarily create margins where literatures, authors, and works lie in the shadows of neglect. Even European literatures can be overlooked by all but the most narrowly focused specialists (consider Catalan, Hungarian, or modern Greek). And although the Bernheimer report recommends that “the old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated” (*CLAM*, 44), translation studies remained peripheral in the United States. Translation gained legitimacy in the British Comparative Literature Association during the 1980s, and British universities witnessed a mushrooming of degree programs that trained translators and specialized in translation research. US comparatists, in contrast, continued to concentrate on original compositions by canonical writers. With rare exceptions, a scholar’s decision to translate or to study translations was likely to jeopardize an academic career.

As the Bernheimer report made clear, comparatists still looked askance at translation because of their investment in “the necessity and unique benefits of a deep knowledge of foreign languages”—even though translation can’t be studied or practiced without such an investment (*CLAM*, 44). At the start of the new millennium, however, the continuing marginality of translation also seemed to result from an uncertainty as to what it is and does. Haun Saussy’s subsequent report for the ACLA, “The State of the Discipline, 2004,” includes an unprecedented essay on the valuable contribution that translation might make to the study of comparative literature.⁵ But Saussy’s own essay expresses a certain disdain for translation by implicating it in “thematic reading”: “What comes across in thematic reading (a tactic devised in response to conditions of our encounter with translated literature) is not necessarily what is most worth knowing about a work” (*CLAG*, 14). The misguided reader is able to concentrate on theme, Saussy believes, because in translation “nothing of the work may survive the process but the subject matter” (*CLAG*, 14).

On this point Saussy agrees with Auerbach. Although Auerbach’s

5. Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). This essay collection includes Steven Ungar, “Writing in Tongues: Thoughts on the Work of Translation,” 127–38. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CLAG*.

ideal audience commands eight languages at various stages of historical development (namely, Hebrew, ancient Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and English), for his less knowledgeable readers he provides German translations of the passages he discusses. He assumes, in effect, that the translations transmit the content necessary to make his readings intelligible. Yet this belief seems oddly credulous for comparatists with the range of languages known by Auerbach and Saussy (who was trained as both a classicist and a Sinologist). Translation can maintain a semantic correspondence, but surely this relation to the source text shouldn't be confused with giving back its theme unaltered. Any literary work is a complicated artifact that supports meanings, values, and functions specific to its original language and culture. During the translation process, however, it is dismantled, disarranged, and finally displaced, so that the translated text, even while maintaining a semantic correspondence, comes to support meanings, values, and functions that are specific to the translating language and culture—and most likely new to the source text. Hence Saussy can assert that “a translator always perturbs the settled economy of two linguistic systems” (*CLAG*, 29). But then why does he also think that “a translation always brings across most successfully aspects of a work for which its audience is already prepared” (*CLAG*, 26)? How can a translation at once frustrate and satisfy reader expectations, particularly if it merely transmits content?

The uncertainty reflected in Saussy's essay, given its appearance in a report on the state of the field, may well be representative of comparative literature in the United States. So we shouldn't be surprised to learn that over the past decade some departments and programs have created curricular space for translation. Or that they remain a small minority. A trawl through college and university websites indicates that approximately 25 percent of the schools currently offering comparative literature in some form include translation theory, history, and practice in their course inventories; a few have even instituted certificates. But the figure seems appallingly low for a field that could not exist without the extensive use of translations. And the situation seems not to have changed much since 2005, when a report on the undergraduate curriculum in comparative literature showed that 76.2 percent of the forty schools responding required courses on world literature in translation, but only 14.3 percent required courses in the theory and practice of translation.⁶ The courses in translation, moreover,

6. Association of Departments and Programs of Comparative Literature, “2005 Report on the Undergraduate Comparative Literature Curriculum,” in *Profession 2006* (New York: MLA, 2006), 181.

are staffed by faculty who had already nurtured an interest in translation or who were willing to retool in a new area. Not until 2011 did a department of comparative literature (at the University of Oregon) conduct a search for a tenure-track assistant professor with a specialty in translation studies. The search has so far proven to be an isolated instance.

These institutional developments were motivated in part by the most decisive change that the field has witnessed since the influx of European theoretical discourses in the 1960s and after. Goethe's concept of "world" literature was revived, now informed by categories drawn from Bourdieu's sociology of cultural value and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory. As a result, the purview of comparative literature became international on a planetary scale. In controversial yet groundbreaking studies like Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (1999) and Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000),⁷ global literary relations consist of a competition for the unequal distribution of cultural prestige and authority, on the one hand, and linguistic and literary resources, on the other. Metropolitan centers in the West (Paris, London, New York) assign value to national literary traditions as well as to specific authors and works through such practices as publishing, translation, and award-giving. Genres like the novel evolve in different literatures through the combination of foreign, usually European forms with local content.

This approach to world literature suffers from an Occidentalism, to be sure, ignoring the centers that exist in peripheries (Arabic publishing in Beirut, for instance, or English translations published in Calcutta). But it emphasizes the changing hierarchies in which literatures around the world are positioned, and it recognizes the crucial importance of transnational influence and reception, challenging the notion of autonomous national traditions. This sort of comparative thinking is far more compelling than the Anglocentric work on transnationalism coming out of English departments—Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), say, or Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015)—where the aggressive monolingualism of the US academy entirely excludes foreign languages and literatures.⁸ Neither

7. Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, n.s. 1 (January–February 2000): 54–68.

8. Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World*

Ramazani nor Walkowitz gives any serious consideration to *interlingual* translation, effectively emptying terms like *transnationalism* and *translation* of much of their significance while reaffirming the global hegemony of English. In Walkowitz's case, this exclusion is especially fraught with inconsistency. She argues that "translation saturates our everyday culture of reading, writing, and viewing," but discusses no translated texts, even when she quotes Kazuo Ishiguro—an author to whom she devotes substantial attention—as saying that "the rhythm of my own prose is very much like those Russian translations that I read" (*BT*, 1, 98). Walkowitz's notion of contemporary novels as "born-translated" refers primarily to original compositions in English that deploy translation as theme and trope or as code-switching and shifts between dialects. The suggestion she attributes to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*—that "the repression of translation may be tied . . . to the repression of transnational impulses within national projects" (*BT*, 28)—bears an uncanny resemblance to her own project in its maintenance of a canon of Anglophone novelists taught in US English departments.

In the meantime, the discourse on world literature among comparatists has developed unevenly, even in contradiction. David Damrosch's study, *What Is World Literature?* (2003), ranging widely over works from antiquity to the present, made an appreciable advance: the literature that deserves the label "world," Damrosch argues, is quite simply literature that crosses borders.⁹ It is not a canon of works but a mode of receiving them, and translation is preeminent among the practices that perform the worlding. All the same, Damrosch's multivolume collection, *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2004), does in fact cleave to a global canon that is immediately recognizable, packaging it chronologically for classroom use and printing every non-English work in English translation.¹⁰ Despite this absolute dependence on translations, the pressing questions raised by teaching translated literature—Why was a particular translation chosen? What interpretation does it inscribe in the source text? How does that interpretation answer to the Anglophone cultural situation where the

Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Walkowitz hereafter cited parenthetically as *BT*.

9. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

10. David Damrosch, April Alliston, Marshall Brown, Page duBois, Ursula K. Heise, Djelal Kadir, David L. Pike, Bruce Robbins, and Jane Tylus, eds., *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, 6 vols. (New York: Longman, 2004).

translation was produced?—these questions go unformulated by the army of editors who assembled the volumes. A step in this direction was taken in the second edition (2009) with the inclusion of subsections called “Translations,” short essays that comment on differences between source texts and English versions. Yet this step, even though promising, is hindered by the editors’ rhetoric of loss: far from regarding translation as interpretation, the commentary faults the versions for failing to transfer features of the source text. In “Goethe’s Mignon,” commenting on two translations of a song from *Wilhelm Meister*, the editor adopts this rhetoric throughout: “Translations are always less evocative than their originals. . . . The poetry lies in the tiniest details, the ones translators cannot but traduce.”¹¹

An anthology that deploys Damrosch’s emphasis on border-crossing could be a fascinating experiment. It might show not only that the patterns of influence and reception constitutive of world literature are historically variable, coalescing in different canons and margins over time, but also that world literature involves diverse practices, including translation, adaptation, and editing, as well as diverse readerships, elite and popular, professional and pleasure-seeking. This anthology wouldn’t be the darling of publishers: its selections can be no more than provisional, depending on how certain editors interpret literary history and which works they choose to illustrate their interpretations. Different anthologies might be edited at different moments, as global literary relations unfold through cultural exchange and as images of the past are revised in academic research. What we call world literature would thus be constantly shifting, and its contingency might illuminate the many ways that literatures develop under the impact of transnational tendencies, whether in peripheral cultures or in metropolitan centers. It would also be seen as undergoing geographical redefinition according to the language through which a text crosses cultural borders. A reception-oriented anthology could pose such questions as why, in the current Anglophone canon of world literature, writers like Orhan Pamuk, Roberto Bolaño, and Yoko Tawada have displaced Italo Calvino, Gabriel García Márquez, and Assia Djebar as focuses of interest. It might even be able to explore differences in the worldwide reception of a particular contemporary writer, say, Lydia Davis or Haruki Murakami, by juxtaposing selected translations (along with annotated English versions) and sampling critical commentary. The anthology would be less a collection that affirms an existing canon than

11. “Goethe’s Mignon,” in *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Marshall Brown and Bruce Robbins, vol. E of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2009), 198, 199.

a workbook that interrogates the changing conditions of canon-formation by studying the circulation of texts through publishing, translating, reviewing, and teaching, among other practices.

Damrosch's contribution to the 2004 Saussy report, as a matter of fact, gestures in this direction.¹² He observes that world literature upsets the "older, two-tiered model" of canonicity, divided into "major" and "minor" authors, and so he posits "three levels," which he labels "a *hypercanon*, a *countercanon*, and a *shadowcanon*" (PH, 45). He bases his thinking on data from the *MLA Bibliography*, admitting that this source "is an imprecise measure" (PH, 46). The imprecision, however, has less to do with the reliability of statistics based on a single academic bibliography than with the kinds of documents excluded by the Modern Language Association: literary works, translations, reprints, reviews of literary and scholarly works, textbooks, syllabi, lesson plans, courseware, how-to guides, letters to the editor, obituaries, and "self-published material."¹³ The exclusion of these varied yet pertinent documents shows that a bibliography of primarily academic articles and books is too limited in scope to encompass the broader, more intricate process by which literary canonization is initiated and sustained today. With contemporary authors in particular, that process is set going by print, electronic, and digital media as translations move onto book markets and feature in promotion and marketing, reviews, Internet forums, and blogs. Besides, scholars are more likely to get wind of newly translated works through mass media, especially if they are not specialists in the languages and cultures where the works originated.

Missed Translation

Although Emily Apter nowhere mentions Damrosch's Longman anthology, she evidently has it in mind when she castigates "the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources, as evinced in projects sponsored by proponents of World Literature."¹⁴ Her recent book, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of*

12. David Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," in Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 43–53. Hereafter cited parenthetically as PH.

13. Modern Language Association, "Scope of the Bibliography," www.mla.org/bib_scope (accessed May 16, 2014).

14. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically as AWL.