

A CULTURE-BASED ANALYSIS OF LITERARY TRANSLATION AND THE ROLE OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES

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„Language is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy” (Susan Bassnett, Translation Studies)

“Translation is always a shift, not only between two languages, but between two cultures – or two encyclopaedias.”

(Umberto Eco, Experiences in Translation)

*“Connection is a minimal condition for World Literature”
(Stefan Helgesson, Literature and the World)*

Abstract. A preliminary idea of the present paper is to highlight the significance of translation studies and the role of professional translators and interpreters as cultural mediators enabled by linguistic competence. Furthermore, it is highly relevant to emphasize the power of culture to connect individuals and communities, to ensure national survival, to preserve tangible and intangible heritage as the most valuable asset for cultural continuity. A fundamental thesis of the present research endeavour is that literary translation represents one of the most powerful and effective means of linguistic and cultural mediation, though equally challenging due to the complexity of a process often touched by “untranslatability”. The novelty of the present study is to introduce references to the highly topical and overarching concept of digital humanities particularly illustrated by literary translation.

Keywords: world literature, comparative literature, translator visibility-invisibility, untranslatability, literary translation, cultural translation, digital humanities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study aims to highlight the prominent role of translation as cultural connector of literary texts by means of encoding and decoding linguistic diversity, accompanied by a cultural representation of space and time and a wide array of human geography imbued with linguistic identity. Translation acts as an effective mediator in cross-cultural exchanges, a powerful negotiator of cultural difference and it has never enjoyed a

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more privileged status in its capacity as facilitator for cultural diplomacy. This is the most auspicious time for translation which currently benefits from unprecedented scholarly attention and academic interest in a wealth of interdisciplinary research meant to position translation studies in direct relation to literary and cultural studies, hence regaining its dignity, value and status in relation to both the source and target texts, therefore no longer a subsidiary activity (Bassnett 2002: 13). According to Stefan Helgesson, “translation is the paradoxical condition of possibility for connecting different speech communities and literary cultures. If, on the one hand, translation might be defined as the *transfer* of a text from one language to another, it equally involves a dramatic *transformation*” (Helgesson and Thomsen 2020: 131). This brief passage sagaciously epitomizes the twofold role of translation where the former one – that of linguistic transfer – is not only accompanied but also surpassed by the latter one, in terms of acknowledgement rather than priority, represented by cultural transformation. Such perspective is enlightening for comparative literature and world literature whose sine-qua-non instrument is translation, clearly illustrated by a fundamental understanding of the “world literary space” as a cultural area comprising and creating a body of literature that can only expand to a world scale enabled by translation. The thesis that literary translation is an essential factor of and a powerful defense for cultural diversity and the increasing number of translation worldwide leads to a higher number of connections, though cultural flows are asymmetrical – contextualized by the world-system analysis since translation moves mainly from the core to the periphery – is set forth at length and thoroughly endorsed throughout the landmark anthology *World Literature in Theory*, edited by David Damrosch. The chapter authored by Susan Bassnett “From Cultural Turn to Translational Turn. A Transnational Journey” proves particularly relevant for our analysis, elaborating on the tight interconnectedness among literature, geography and translation: “Any study of translation necessarily involves a geographical dimension and the movement of literatures through translation requires an awareness of changing contexts of textual production” (Damrosch 2014: 235).

Not so long ago literature, geography, and translation would have been seen as three distinct and separate fields of research, remote from one another. That they should today, in the twenty-first century, be seen as interconnectable testifies to the radical shifts of perception that have taken place over the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium. This interconnectedness has come about in part because of great changes within the subjects themselves: the study of literature is today contextualised in ways unimaginable before the postcolonial era the study of geography has changed so completely that human and physical geographers now consider themselves as belonging to different disciplines, the former in the social sciences, the other in the physical sciences; and the study of translation has risen in status to the point where some claim that they work in a distinctive discipline called translation studies. All three fields, however, are concerned today with the movements of peoples, and with processes of import and export that are not only commercial but also aesthetic and intellectual. (ibidem)

Furthermore, André Lefevere’s manifesto for translation studies relied on a “radical rethinking of the more traditional relationship between theory and practice ... with translations viewed both as text products and text producers. Instead of applying theory to

the study of translation, translation studies would seek to investigate translation itself and then apply that knowledge to literary and linguistic theory” (Damrosch 2044: 235).

Cultural grids – a concept related to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital – largely determine how reality is both constructed and perceived, or encoded and decoded in the source text and target text, linguistically expressed and culturally represented. A translated text, however, can only be accurately received and thoroughly analyzed in a broad cultural and historical framework. Another dimension worth considering is the issue of trust in relation to a translation, since reliability, authority, legitimacy, and prestige of the translator, hence facilitating acceptance and reception of the translated text, providing one more proof, that translation is imbued with the notion of power. Here, again, the idea of the “contact zone” defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “the place where cultures, previously separated, come together and establish ongoing relations” (Basnett and Trivedi 2002: 71) highlights the interaction among the centre and the periphery as well as the circulation of cultural trends – “travelling concepts in the humanities” conceptualized and promoted by Mieke Baal.

The idea of culture as an envelope which securely binds all the members of a national community within the same coherence of meaning today belongs to the realm of myth. The great migrations of post-colonialism have produced a new socio-demographic situation: all Western nations now have increasingly mixed populations. The ease and rapidity of global communication have created an international mass culture, which competes and interacts with local forms. Every culture speaks a language traversed by two kinds of codes, the complicit idiom of the vernacular and the vehicular codes for international communication. Cultures are bonded spaces characterized by a plurality of codes and languages, it is not surprising that translation has come to figure prominently in contemporary literature. As a consequence, the place of the translator overlaps with that of the writer, and that of the Western citizen. (ibidem)

The matter of authorship-translation dominance – or the relation between the original text and the source text – is connected to the notion of cultural prevalence specific to colonialism, though it stems from a traditional biased perspective that “the original was perceived as being superior to the translation, which was relegated to the position of being merely a copy, albeit in another language of the original” (Basnett and Trivedi 2002: 2).

Susan Basnett’s contribution to the reconceptualization and recontextualization of translation studies is enriched by the variety of scholarly references adding further value and endorsing her plea for promoting the status and prestige of translation studies. Consequently, the interdisciplinary role of translation is evinced by the multifarious applications in a wide range of international transactions, from interactive communication and cultural transfer to literary production travelling the world. Given this context, probably the most significant impact of translation on literature is the fundamental role for literary historiography, testified, on the one hand, by the act of literary translation ensuring a cultural transfer of words and worlds, and, on the other hand, the promotion of national literature worldwide viewed within the larger context of world-system analysis based on the centre-periphery antinomy. Considering the essential role of culture and language for the vitality, survival and continuity of a nation, translation provides an accurate representation of cultural specificity and linguistic diversity in addition to promoting collective memory, history, tradition, as well as moral, spiritual, and ethical values. “Reading literary history through the lens of translation

has enabled us to see more clearly that the development of any literary system involves complex processes of import and export” (Damrosch 2014: 236).

It is worth pointing out that the notion of power is directly related to both language and culture, particularly in the context of world-system analysis as well as the polarity between the center and the periphery that leaves its imprint on literary studies. As regards the connection between literary translation and the dynamic concept of power in the cultural context, mention should be made here of the landmark and thorough analysis of the relation between power and culture set forth by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu accompanied by Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory of world-system analysis: “Culture provides the very grounds for human communication and interaction, it is also a source of dominance ... Culture includes beliefs, traditions, values, and language; it also mediates practices by connecting individuals and groups to institutionalized hierarchies” (Swarz 1997: 1). A translated text empowers the source culture and enriches the target culture, contributing to a win-win and mutually rewarding flow of artistic creation and literary text from one context to another, whether cultural, geographical, spatial, or temporal. According to David Crystal’s theory, the worldwide range and global recognition of a language is mainly determined by the concepts of power and dominance: technological advancement, the emergence of new information and communication technologies, economic development and global market competitiveness, mass media and the promotion of cultural values. “Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It has much more to do with who those speakers are . . . Without a strong powerbase, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication . . . A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people” (Crystal 2003: 7).

2. CORPUS

At this stage of our study and subsequent to the preliminary theoretical considerations, we would like to emphasize the novelty and originality of the present work entailed by the results of research undertaken in the framework of a highly innovative project INTELLIT aimed at “Romanian Literary Patrimony Preservation and Valorization by Using Intelligent Digital Solutions for Extracting and Systematization of Knowledge”. The relevance of the research project is manifold. On the one hand, it is directly related to the recently emerging field of digital humanities – marked by interdisciplinarity and the employment of digital technologies for the study and analysis of literature. In this particular case, digital tools are aimed at enhancing the visibility of national literature worldwide, preserving the Romanian cultural and literary heritage enabled by an integrated software platform facilitating access to information and data collected from several canonical sources, such as the General Dictionary of Romanian Literature, the Chronology of Romanian Literary Life, and the Canonical Works of Romanian Literature. In this respect, particular mention for our present analysis should be made of the General Dictionary of Romanian Literature which was one of the four pillars of the overall research project and subject to systematization, translation, and digitization. The ultimate goal of this segment of the project was to review and systematize the material for translation and further make it available as data source on the INTELLIT platform. <https://intellit.ici.ro/en/about-intellit/objectives/>

On the other hand, translation of literary texts and metaliterature acts as a powerful vector of connecting the centre and the periphery, placing national literature in the wider planetary context, as defined by Professor Christian Moraru, who identified four dimensions of the translation process: linguistic, cultural, interpretive and comparative (Moraru 2014). Such theory highlights the transactional and the culturally-embedded dimensions in addition to the qualitative aspects of the translation process rendered by the encoding-decoding performed by the literary translator and, ultimately, contributing to creation of comparative literature by means of a corpus of literary texts circulating worldwide enabled and mediated by translation. Furthermore, “a world in which worlding (“togethering”) has picked up speed, and still more so a *worlded world* ... is a structurally relational world. This world is characterized by *relationality* at two levels. One is systemic ... the other one is sub-systemic” (Moraru 2015: 23) accomplishing a connection between words and worlds.

The process of translating a wide-ranging selection of dictionary entries, from the General Dictionary of Romanian Literature, represents a challenging scholarly endeavor mainly entailed by the heterogeneity of texts as a unique combination of literature and metaliterature, illustrating Emily Apter’s apparently contradictory hypotheses that “nothing is translatable” and “everything is translatable” where the “two opposing principles consistently emerge as poles of translation theory” (Apter 2006: 8).

The General Dictionary of Romanian Literature – a research endeavor of unmatched complexity – provides ample, topical and informed analyses of literary movements, periods, themes, literary journals and a selected list of canonical writers. It stands out in a class by itself due to its encompassing power and overarching scope contributing to something more than the literary phenomenon, namely the “culture of literature” (GDRL 2016:9). Furthermore, it also creates a unique and scholarly opportunity to understand and immerse into the entirety and depth of the Romanian literary phenomenon, according to the general editor, the late academician Eugen Simion. The process of digitization significantly enhances visibility of the translated texts in addition to increased dissemination and circulation in the global context, facilitating twofold access to an invaluable literary and cultural heritage. The four-translator team performed and successfully accomplished the English translation of 151 dictionary entries which provide a coherent and harmonized approach to the Romanian source text given the unified terminology employed. 39 of the dictionary entries represented scholarly essays on literary concepts and genres, a selection of literary magazines, as well as fundamental landmarks of literary historiography and literary criticism, such as: Autobiography, the Avantgarde, Biography, Byzantinism, Classicism, Comparative Studies, Existentialism, Expressionism, the Enlightenment, Diary, Literary Romanian Language, Exile Literature, Fantastic Literature, Literature Written in Latin in the Romanian Lands, SF literature, Literary Medievality, Fundamental Myths, Modernism, Romanian Moralists, Naturalism, Postmodernism, Realism, the Novel, Romanticism, Symbolism, Cultural Slav(on)ism, Surrealism, Literary Theory, Literary Criticism. Translating metaliterary texts proved a highly challenging though equally rewarding intellectual enterprise as it demanded standardization and harmonization of terminology within the working team. Accurately and aptly noted in the editors’ note to the prestigious volume *Humanities at the Crossroads. New Theoretical, Systemic, and Quantitative Approaches*, “translation can contribute not only to the dissemination of ideas and forms across borders, but also to the creation of transnational communities. The link between national and transnational, however, is not considered as a frictionless interaction and even less so as a matter of consensus.” In line with the

aforementioned research project, the editors concluded that “digital humanities can be employed in traditional philology” (Ursa *et al.* 2022: 7–8). As previously discussed in a related paper, 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 – (QIM) 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 (Burduşel 2021: 89).

The translation of the remaining 112 biographical entries of the literary dictionary ranged across several centuries, different cultural dimensions and literary landscapes ranging from the 15th to the 21st century. The process of literary translation renders increased relevance “for a translational approach to national literatures” (Goldiş, Baghiu 2022: 16) actively contributing to a translational reading of Romanian literature. Moreover, according to the polysystem theory postulated by Itamar Even-Zohar, “translational procedures between two systems (languages/literatures) are in principle analogous, even homologous, with transfers within the borders of the system” (Even-Zohar 1990: 73) therefore it is imperative to integrate the transfer theory in the framework of translation studies.

Literary translation is accompanied by cultural translation in order to write and reach out to a global audience particularly in this great age of translation we are living in: “Writers who set their works abroad engage in a process of cultural translation, representing foreign customs for their writers home audience, the foreign can both mirror and oppose the world at home ... to write for a global audience involves a conscious effort of cultural translation, and often entails direct linguistic translation as well” (Damrosch 2009: 87, 109).

In this respect, mention should be made of Lawrence Venutti’s theory of the twofold role of translation (Venutti 1998, 2018) based on power relations can be summed up by the two concepts of domestication – the translator brings the foreign culture to the reader, and foreignization – where the translator takes the reader abroad to the target culture. The notion of prestige may be applied to the author, the translator, the literary text in the source language and the global status of the language itself, hence the mission of the translator is to break through the barriers and bridge cultural gaps, act as an interpreter of the text and a mediator of world literature. Despite Damrosch’s powerful and true statement that “most literature circulates in the world in translation” emphasizing the dissemination of popular authors particularly due to translation whose significance “is even more pronounced for works in less widely spoken languages” (Damrosch 1009: 65), Lawrence Venutti scholarly elaborates on the inequality of representation, prestige, authority and power relations between the author and the translator, where the latter one – albeit an invaluable mediator between cultures and languages, a broker of meanings, and a dragoman with diplomatic connotations oftentimes – seems to be doomed to a lower degree of visibility compared on the global literary market and the worldwide cultural context. “‘Invisibility’ is the term I will use to describe the translator’s situation and activity in contemporary British and American cultures” where the

fluency or, in other words, the illusion of transparency – hence not calling attention to the translator but the writer instead – highlights the translator’s effort to ensure readability with the subsequent result of diminishing his own endeavor “the effect of transparency conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator’s crucial intervention. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translation and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (Venutti 2018: 1).

Furthermore, translation plays an important part in cultural diversity and contributes to a wide and fair representation on the global book market and publishing industry, illustrated by a significant number of international literary awards which represent a powerful trigger for further translation into a great range of languages with subsequent accessibility and entrance to numerous other cultures, endorsed by further circulation and promotion facilitated by prestigious international book fairs.

It is highly significant to undertake an analysis of translation as a complex process and a representation of cultural triangulation – as defined by prominent scholar, researcher and literary critic Andrei Terian (Terian 2019: 16–30) – where the *scout* is the target language and culture, the *scape* is the source language and culture, whereas the role of the *scale* is performed by the translator, the third party achieving the overarching connection of the polarities. Furthermore, translation as cultural triangulation also refers to the three stages: *interrogation* – a preliminary quantitative stage of collecting information and constructing corpora and a linguistic database, *observation* – which is a more qualitative stage focused on contextual information and cultural framing, *intuition* – the final stage of interpretation, analysis and transfer. “In the field of translation studies, literary translations act as a factor of endorsing and promoting cultural diversity by means of connecting the more familiar and neighboring or rather distant areas of the planetary network, providing an informed though inevitably subjective perspective of another culture, successfully mapping the cultural geography of the world” (Burduşel 2019: 69).

Literary translation represents one of the most powerful and effective means of linguistic and cultural mediation, though equally challenging due to the complexity of a process often subject to the implacable doom of “nothing is translatable” according to Emily Apter who, in her sagacious study *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature* – most convincingly and thoroughly defined the “politics of untranslatability” to “everything is translatable” under the overarching aegis of comparative literature which has been given a new name coined as global translation (Apter 2006: 4).

Translation studies have always had to confront the problem of whether it best serves the ends of perpetuating cultural memory or advancing its effacement. A good translation, as Walter Benjamin famously argued, makes possible the afterlife of the original by jumping the line between the death of the source language and its futural transference to a target. This death/life aporia leads to split discourses in the field of translation studies: while translation is deemed essential to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritance, it is also understood to be an agent of language extinction. For translation, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and big populations, condemns minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the cultural heritage of “small” literatures, or guarantees a wider sphere of reception to selected, representative authors of minoritarian traditions. (ibidem)

3. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, comparative literature provides an all-encompassing view of the world enabling the reader to access the spirit of the times and the soul of humankind, spanning across time, space and culture with an enduring selection of universal values over a fluid mapping of the world, skillfully and scholarly mediated and transmitted by the translator. A prerequisite for an accurate translation is the ability to connect the word in source language to its most congenial correspondent subsequent to an exploration of a wide network of possibilities, thus the expertise and talent is testified by the mastery of turning even the “untranslatable” into a functional “translatable” equivalent.

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