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Comparative and Translatorly

I. Problems

World literature's natural home is comparative literature, a discipline born from and shaped by, as Vilashini Cooppan elegantly puts it, "scholarly engagements with the categories of migration, exile, diaspora, and globalization" (15). However, world literature has frequently been framed as a problem for the discipline, in large part because of its dependence on the ever-vexing and still mistrusted specter of translation. In light of the long-standing anxiety toward both world literature and translation, I propose here that comparatists do ourselves a terrible disservice if we do not urgently take up the questions raised by this disciplinary tension. Translation – in all of its attendant struggles with ethics, aesthetics, appropriation, authority – is not the problem, but, rather, should be understood as a key critical lens for comparative and world literature.

In order to establish academia's frustration with this subject, one need look no further than the "Three Reports to the America Comparative Literature Association on 'Professional Standards'" (dating from 1965, 1975, and 1993), which return repeatedly to the problem of reading translated literature, circling around it with intense ambivalence. The moral of their story seems to be that translated texts are integral to comparative literature at the same time that they threaten its existence by undermining disciplinary exclusivity in foreign language expertise and by shining a sort of spotlight on all that literature which comparative literature may sometimes "condone" (as one of the reports puts it) but to which it does not often actively attend. Even Goethe had Western European languages and literatures firmly in mind when he coined the term, "Weltliteratur." Translations can't help but point up the limits of the "four [likely European] languages" proposed as minimal standards for graduate students by the Green and Bernheimer reports, and on the strength of which a comparative literature department would presumably distinguish itself from departments of English, media studies, and so on. The discipline, one comes to understand, must

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hold translation at arm's length, or, preferably, secreted behind its back, embarrassed that it can't just give the mess up.

For more recent evidence, I point to Stanley Corngold's 2005 "Comparative Literature: The Delay in Translation" and find, in this essay, a collision of ideas from those early ACLA reports with the inroads made by translation more recently. Crystallizing a view that I have heard frequently from comparatists, Corngold continues in the vein that perceives translation as a threat to comparative literature, renewing the old call for segregation of elite comparative literature students from those students who would read merely in translation. Corngold's anxiety seems to stem from a fear that comparatists like Andre Lefevere and Haun Saussy have gone too far in their embrace of translation, edging toward the seductive notion that "Comparative Literature is a kind of translation" (139).

Corngold roundly rejects this idea, arguing that while "translation means carrying over a piece of foreign language" into a target language, "comparison" necessitates lingering in a space between languages – or beyond them, Corngold says appealing to Benjaminian "pure language" for reinforcement (141). Corngold calls this "place of thought where the target language is absent" the "delay" (141). He asserts that comparatist metaphysically inhabits this space of "delay," the in-between languages, cultures, texts, and that engaging with translation or translated texts avoids this delay and fails to be comparative. I'll leave Corngold and entrenched disciplinary concerns there for a moment in order to turn to the other half of the problem: the landmines one must navigate in talking about world literature.

Even a cursory examination of the "world literature debates" finds them circling around three persistent concerns. The first of these I'll call appropriation, or the violence done in the de- and re-contextualization of texts, as in a traditional survey course that might feature a single, "representative" play from Africa or magical realism as the beginning and end of Latin American fiction. In spite of recent, energetic critiques by Coopan and others such as Aijaz Ahmad, these uncritical approaches remain popular, as well as reductive and/or limitingly ethnographic. They risk obscuring the multiplicity that exists within a nation, culture, and literary tradition while predisposing us to a reductive reading of texts from outside our familiar canons.

Second is the nagging question of legitimacy, of who might ever be considered qualified to teach or conduct research under the banner of so amorphous and linguistically unbounded a "field." Much as there is no translation without transformation, there is no world literature with unproblematic, untranslated access, on the part of either students or teachers. So, as progressive courses and anthologies begin to seek an increasingly inclusive concept of world literature beyond Gilgamesh and Goethe, how might such counterproductive furtiveness be avoided?

Third is text selection, which is sometimes to say canonization, other times to say censorship, and, most pointedly, to invoke global inequities of intellectual exchange, artistic distribution, and cross-cultural intelligibility. According to To be Translated or Not to Be: PEN/IRL Report on the International Situation of Literary Translation, translated literature made up "far less than 1% of all books published" in the United States in 1999. It is doubly problematic in the U.S., then, that those few text translated into English, published, lauded, and distributed widely, frequently continue to be those that uphold and reinforce the receiving culture's preconceived notions about both the source culture and literature – and may even reflect the political preferences of a receiving or source culture's reigning powers. A society that publishes so few translations and displays such ignorance about and denial of their mediation seems to be actively avoiding encounters with the foreign on equal terms, when it permits such encounters at all.

II. Solutions

Having sketched a ground on which we can see comparative literature's objections to the figures of both translated and world literature, I'll now propose turning them around to see translation studies as the lens through which comparative literature may be informed and enriched by them both, thereby killing two birds with one stone or, in the friendlier Indonesian version, "sambil menyelam minum air:" drinking water while diving into it. So how can translation studies solve the comparative literature's problem with translated texts? And, how does it provide productive strategies for improving our engagement with world literature?

I return, first, to Stanley Corngold's objection to translation's encroachment on disciplinary space. Again, he calls that space the "delay": that mystical in-between staked out for the comparatist

sounding oddly similar to the translator's liminal terrain. And, in fact, the critical-comparative space Corngold calls the "delay in translation" could just as easily be conceived of – not in terms of translated texts – but as the process of translating. That which he wants "delayed" is the "abandonment to unsuitable analogies:" the end-point or "finished" text (142). To be a comparatist, in Corngold's eyes, is to dive directly into the dark, active heart of translating: to be a translator.

This is to say that the difference lies not in the activities, not in the presence of an end-product in one and not the other, but simply in the nature of their end-products. Where the translator rewrites the source text in a new language, the comparatist/critic rewrites the source text in a new genre. This second genre may not directly involve the source language(s), but, once the critical act (or delay) occurs and the comparatist begins articulating his thoughts on some relation between Kafka and Flaubert, a product nonetheless emerges and that ur-language "place of thought" is translated into the target language.

Corngold might reply that the critical essay product remains in the space of "delay" because it is part of a discourse and is not a closed, "abandoned" end-point. However, translation studies shows us that neither is a translation, which, by its mere existence, can't help but invoke the relentless potential of its source texts and the multiplicity of versions that it alludes to but is not. I fall on the side of Saussy and Lefevere, then, leaning toward claims that the intellectual work of comparatists and that of translators is deeply connected and sometimes inseparable.

The fact that this kinship is so mistrusted, little understood, and unmined, even after all this time, seems hard to believe. André Lefevere works to explain it in Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context when he describes how literary scholars' radical discounting of the translation (as opposed to critical) end-product has historically been based on the fact that "the translator's failure to produce an objectively demonstrable 'accurate' correspondence between original and translation could be exposed much more easily than the corresponding failure attendant on the philological endeavor" (136). He places comparative literature's sustained two-facedness toward translation within the historical context of discipline-defining, saying that its "early line of defense against philological attacks had to be ambiguous," because, in its infancy, at a time more under the Romantic sway of sacred, inviolate notions of text, "by upgrading translation and translations, comparative literature would forfeit any claim to

academic, or at least institutionalized, respectability" (137). Lefevere goes on to argue that, this threat having passed and the discipline now safely established, the time has come for comparative literature to reconcile its fraught relationship with translation.

I'd go further and argue that there is still a threat to comparative literature's respectability and, ironically, it lies in precisely this reluctance to admit its limitations and turn its translational Achilles heel to a strength, reaping the great benefits this relationship can offer the discipline. The mantra tells us that translation is the closest of readings, but it could likewise be called the most comparative. The translator-reader is forced to work out the rhetorical positions, literary antecedents, and contingencies of the first author, not to mention tonal and structural currents, audiences, publishing demands, and so forth, and then to weigh (or compare) these against the possibilities available to a version in another language, culture, literary tradition, and time. Were comparative literature departments to embrace translation studies and practice, they would produce students far better equipped to read literature in a worldly, critical, comparative way. Furthermore, the demands of the subject matter mean that students necessarily must grapple with translation's (and literature's) underlying issues of selection bias and world distribution, authorship, linguistic non-equivalence, and originality; they must consider its implications for gender and otherness, post-colonialism, globalization – the ideological forces that create knowledge across disciplines and shape communication across cultures.

And, immediately, we begin to see the impact on those seemingly intractable problems of world literature. Teachers, students, and readers wrestling thus with translation studies are far less likely to fall into the traps of "appropriative" anthologies and surveys. The critical lens of translation studies helps us to rethink world literature not as a canon of books or genre of writing, but as a mode of "reading literature in a worldly way," the relationality inherent to translated literature teaching students to read relationally and comparatively between literatures as well (Coopan 11). As expressed in "Problems," it is nearly impossible for a professor (or, frequently, graduate student instructor) to have anything approaching the wide-ranging preparation in language, history, and literary context to "legitimately" teach a course that "surveys" literature from across time and global space. And to read or teach only what is available in translation (and mass-produced paperback)

risks engaging a pool already filtered by so much selection bias as to be dangerously compromised.

However, express engagement with translation studies and recourse to its methods goes a long way toward addressing or circumventing these problems. Resistance to appropriative readings can be further nurtured by framing techniques: the extra-textual aspects of the published work (such as a prominently displayed translator's name and supplementary note) that encourage an encounter with the translated text as something translated. Frequently discouraged or minimized by publishers, these techniques subtly ask for the reader's awareness and consideration of the text's mediation. Likewise, one excellent solution to legitimacy concerns can be found in the comparative study of multiple translations of the same source text. This sort of comparative study sheds light on the artistic and ideological norms of the original and translating cultures at the time each original and translation was written. The efficacy of the approach can be profound, shining light on exactly that which has been strengthened, weakened, lost, gained, reimagined, or otherwise transformed, sometimes opening up the first text more effectively and provocatively than direct linguistic access could. This strategy may perhaps sound obvious, but comparative translation study has been scandalously under-utilized due to the reluctance to admit translation into the conversation. Finally, translation-attuned students, teachers, and readers are far less likely to support the publishing prejudice that Americans will not buy foreign literature. Even a small uptick in the number of classes assigning translated texts would have a major impact on the (mostly small) publishers who value translation, and a rising tide of non-translation-averse readers could profoundly increase the demand for more and better translations, from more languages, viewpoints, and parts of the world. This expanded, less ambivalent university focus on world literature in translation could even lead to increased attention to a world literature on the high school level and in popular culture, enriching global literacy in a timely, invaluable way.

Finally, coming to terms with translation studies allows comparative literature departments to make world literature an even greater source of disciplinary strength, enrollment numbers, and recruitment of interested students. There is no other place in most universities where students routinely have the opportunity to encounter works from a variety of traditions, to put them in conversation with one another and to read in Coopan's "worldly way." In contrast to specialized

(and disappearing) national literature departments, some comparative literature departments already successfully enroll curious multi- and mono-lingual students from across the disciplines, boosting enrollment with worldly, relational courses that bring together 20th century Korean and Vietnamese war literature or read Faulkner's construction of Yoknapatawpha County against Garcia Márquez's vision of Macondo. All too seldom, though, are even these courses substantially informed by translation studies, sometimes to the point of ignoring the fact of the text as translated. While some students in such classes might read texts in the original language and even be recruited to major in comparative literature, there exists a tremendous opportunity for all students to be asked to grapple with the aforementioned array of theoretical and practical problems that translation can illuminate, bringing this new critical insight and worldly perspective back to their own projects and disciplines.

In "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from New Nightmares," Haun Saussy says that comparative literature has "won its battles," that the field's methods and theoretical frameworks have "gone out into the world and won over people who have no particular loyalty to the institutional bodies of comparative literature" (3-4). I believe that there is yet more work comparative literature can do, and that translation must be its next battleground. In order to thrive and fulfill its principles, comparative literature must open its grand, ever-morphing disciplinary arms wide enough to embrace both specialists and the cultivated generalism of translated world literature. We can go a long way toward addressing both comparative literature's translation problem and world literature's landmines by undertaking, in earnest, to include basic training in translation studies and practice into undergraduate and graduate requirements, as well as weaving it into the fabric of dedicated world (and worldly) literature classes. The metadiscipline of comparative literature is not identical to, but is functionally and theoretically inextricable from that of translation studies, and the direct, honest engagement of the two will further the dissemination of translatorly, worldly, comparative ways of thinking across the disciplines and beyond them.

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