

What are You Trying to Say?: World Literature and the Frustration of Translation

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To Damrosch, world literature is a literature of hope. He offers the following definition of world literature: “Perhaps there is no better definition for world literature than the expanding universe of works that compel us to become that ideal reader, dreaming of that ideal insomnia” (5). The impetus is put upon the reader when encountering world literature; it is their obligation to engage with the cultural and literary assumptions that underpin certain texts. It is here that the notion of translatability enters into world literature, as all texts are built upon cultural and literary assumptions. However, the audience only has significant access to very few cultural assumptions, and thus there must be a process of translation occurring. Texts themselves complete some of this translating as “a work of world literature has an exceptional ability to transcend the boundaries of the culture that produces it” (Damrosch 2). However, the audience too must be active participants in this translating, “We need to become aware of different literary assumptions made in different cultures” (Damrosch 4). These assumptions are both found in the manner in which texts are produced as well as in their reproduction, or in their reception; “Texts become successfully worlded only through interpretive acts of mediation profoundly bound up in aspects of culture” (Henitiuk 31).

These interpretive acts need to occur during any institutional translation; translation of language for example, as well as cultural translation on the behalf of the audience. By engaging in translation, institutions and translators are translating the narrative itself and the composer’s use of codes and motifs into a language and narrative they, the audience, can access. This dualism found in translation has become particularly pertinent in a contemporary globalised world where “new works by prominent writers are simultaneously translated and published in up to a dozen languages, and the marketplace of print is dominated by multinational publishing houses” (Chaudhuri 593). However, this has not itself liberated the literary landscape by inviting silent voices to contribute in a more meaningful and accessible manner; “But as we know to our cost, free markets do not result in free exchange; they perpetuate existing inequalities of reception and control and produce a *skewed* cosmopolitanism” (ibid). This is representative of Casanova’s view that “meaning flows from the centre, or, conversely, texts reach the centre to acquire meaning there” (594). This Eurocentrism suggests that a text is valued for its treatment by institutions, who by treating texts maintain positions of privilege. One of the ways in which institutions maintain the position of privilege is through the process of prize giving. Prizes come from centralist institutions and “do more than reward the significant achievement of a writer: they stake a claim in the right to judge – to legitimize – that writer’s work” (Huggan 413). Ergo, literary institutions play a key role in the construction of world literature due to the role they play in the reproduction of literature, but more so in the legitimising of certain types of literature. By turning the gaze outwards, that which the literary institutional gaze lands on is preferenced and brought to the centre: not only legitimising it, but incorporating the linguistic and cultural alterity of the text into the institution and broadening the base from which centralist readers can engage with texts. While this form of homogenising texts at once prizes otherness, it also broadens the cultural base of the reader, meaning a stronger engagement with texts from

other cultures becomes possible in the future. This cross-cultural reading then becomes a key part of the manner in which texts will gain in translation; the text itself may gain, but more so, future texts gain by having a more broadly read audience who engage more deeply with the text and its literary traditions.

Antithetically, Emily Apter's argument for untranslatability, or those elements of literature and specifically world literature, that ought not be translated, denies world literature depth and in many ways is condescending to the field of translation as well as to the audience. Apter does not dismiss all aspects of world literature in its entirety: "I endorse World Literature's deprovincialization of the canon and the way in which, at its best, it draws on translation to deliver surprising cognitive landscapes" (2). Here Apter notes the power of translation to create access to writings of alterity, particularly when this alterity plays a role in the 'deprovincialization' of the canon. This tension between cosmopolitanism and provincialism has been at the heart of canonical discourse with the rise of localised, de-Eurocentric, literary canons. However, Apter continues: "I do harbor serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded 'differences' that have been niche marketed as commercialised 'identities'" (ibid). Ostensibly, the tension Apter is drawing attention to is substitution as a function of translation. Substitution as the process of inserting a simple cultural, linguistic, social or otherwise 'like' for a seemingly equivalent 'like'. This process inadvertently centralises a piece that is drawn from the margins, and by being centralised loses that which marked it as marginal.

However, the very terms, 'translation' and 'translatability' fall on a spectrum of possible definitions: "In other words, 'translation' is used in a metaphorical as much as a literal sense. As such, it can apply also to how generic conventions are 'translated' from one culture to another" (D'Haen 108). This form of cultural translation is fecund ground for consideration of translatability in world literature. However, "The very looseness of the 'translational' relation implied between 'original' and 'translation' or 'copy', then, means that it might equally well be defined alternatively as a form of 'intertextuality'" (ibid). This further view of translation as a form of intertextuality is a more comfortable view in the context of world literature. The act of translation can be spoken about using the same terms as Bassnett used when discussing writing: it does not occur within a vacuum (Bassneett 160). Each writing and translation reflect a cultural *zeitgeist*. However, those who engage in the act of translation must be cognizant of two cultures, that of the text and that of the audience. Here is perhaps where Apter sees her frustrations, that in an attempt to serve two cultures, the translator serves neither.

This line of argument, however, ignores the antithetical consideration of translation as a 'binding' tool: a tool that brings audiences and texts together. Particularly texts from the fringe, texts that express ideals of cultural alterity, or are written from places, lacking in cultural or institutional capital. "Bound' intertextuality, then, or 'translation as rewriting', emerges as a powerful tool for not only innovation but also emancipation in postcolonial writing" (D'Haean 119). Ergo, translation perhaps finds its reason for being in its function. It serves to centralise or emancipate texts that may well have otherwise never had such access to institutions.

World literature is in a particularly unique position in that it draws attention to multiple operating forces. Damrosch notes, "virtually all literary works are born within what we would now call a national literature" (283). However, the humble roots of a national literature ought not be an inhibition to a text's

engagement, particularly through translation, with broader ideals or discourses. While talking about Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*, Walkowitz elaborates that "the novel takes seriously the idea that international, collective events can be transformed by local individual actions" (217). The text, in the ethereal sense, is an attempt to transform via individual actions, or products. Walkowitz continues; "By encouraging readers to notice both proximate and distant networks Ishiguro measures different scales of literary culture and mediates between interpretive strategies that abjure political and geographic distinctions and those that try to preserve them" (217). Though speaking particularly of Ishiguro, this argument extends to texts that are being read across time and space and hence draw particular attention to networks and institutions in operation in the production of the text, the translation of the text and finally in the contemporary reception of the text.

Elucidating this notion is Lola Ridge both as a figure of iconography as well as her poetry. Despite being an English language text, the text itself extends across cultures and time. Ridge herself was a writer who embodies the world literature psyche. Not to dwell on the narrative of her life, and to ignore her movements, which truly embody the provincial and cosmopolitan dichotomy, would be a folly. Her movements include the geographical movement from Ireland, to New Zealand, to Australia, eventually settling in New York. Her social movement extends from being born into social obscurity to rising to the middle upper class, with her marriage to a gold mine manager, before attempting to locate herself outside of a capitalist class structure as a New York Avant-Garde artist. Her poem *In Harness* exemplifies this attempt to grapple with economic class structures. The "wild stallion" of the final stanza is the metaphorical embodiment of the working class, or proletariat: "And I think of a wild stallion... newly caught... / flanks taut and nostrils spread" (Ridge 71). The poem itself is not a homage to hopelessness, rather it is a paean to capacity and strength. Furthermore, Ridge's work speaks to what is at stake in the production of literary works: "What is at stake, in other words, is not just the *material* conditions of production of works of literature but the ongoing struggle that takes place over these work's *symbolic* power" (Huggan 427). Here is what Ridge is achieving: she is battling the "little French merchant men / with pointed beards / and fat American merchant men / without any beards" (Ridge 71) for the symbolic power of her poetry, but more broadly for the symbolic power of literature to transcend economic, cultural and social capital: "Literature emerges, not as a locus of immanent value but as a site of contestation between different discursive regimes" (Huggan 412). Ridge's work translates over time as it still emerges as a part of the discourse surrounding social and cultural capital and furthermore is a part of the discourse surrounding the circulation of literatures in English. It is in this that Ridge's work gains in translation.

The tradition Ridge, or arguably any composer, writes from offers some insight into her purpose; however, it is the transitioning across times and cultures that offers the deepest insight into a composer's work. "Different traditions locate writers differently along the sliding scale between independence from society and integration within it, and a given tradition's writers will be found at various places on their culture's bandwidth" (Damrosch 22). By reading texts across space and time, and equivalently across cultures, audiences appropriate texts onto their own cultural bandwidth, reinvigorating the text and author into sometimes similar, though often different contexts. In this is a critical ideal of world literature, that time is not as absolute an ideal in the literary world as it may be outside of it: "Life moves always forward, but literary time is reversible, and as readers of world literature we should become adept at time travel in both directions" (Damrosch 25).

Apter's concerns surrounding translation, as mentioned above, appear to be based in the fear that the text loses something in translation. However, by reading texts from positions outside of the cultural norm of the audience "Indeed, the changes wrought upon the world of literature, and perhaps even on the world itself, by such acts of 'translation' affect not only Europe's, or by extension the West's, 'Others', but likewise Europe itself, unhinging vested hierarchies, reversing points of view, giving voice to the hitherto unvoiced or voiceless" (D'Haean 119). This giving voice to the voiceless is a key part of the world literary *zeitgeist*. Within world literature are key concerns of production and how this production may be the product of translation or the marketing of translation at the cost of the original text. "It is rather to see that work as being bound up in a late-capitalist mode of production where such value-laden terms as 'marginality', 'authenticity' and 'resistance' circulate as commodities available for commercial exploitation" (Huggan 413). Within the context of commodification, Apter's fear may find grounds. When notions of alterity and otherness are the grounds of marketing, when commercial institutions exploit alterity for fiscal gain, the text that gains from translation may well only gain in a commercial sense, through greater sales. However, when commercial interests find fiscal justification to back literature, the circulation of literature can only increase. Ergo, texts that gain in circulation from translation still gain from translation. The tension between provincialism and cosmopolitanism here enters into direct circulation as notions of 'marginality' become an impetus for texts to enter the centre of the literary world.

Walkowitz defines some of the concerns of translation in reaction to world literature: "Translation leads to *cultural homogenization* ... It leads to *political homogenization* ... The concern is this: translation is bad for what it does to books (presents them apart from their original language and context); but it is worse for what it does to authors (encourages them to ignore that language and content)" (Walkowitz 216). The common denominator, and hence arguably, the point of fear, is homogenization in all forms and manifestations. The argument continues that world literature is playing a role in the construction of a dominant identity and ideologies and squeezing smaller or, capital wise, weaker identities and ideologies to the margins from whence they may never return. However, "the meaning of these effects will depend on how we evaluate sameness and difference: do we assume, for example, that homogenization is always a negative outcome?" (ibid) It would be a difficult ideological, and arguably moral, position to argue that the cultural and political homogenizing of identities and ideologies is not a negative outcome. However, to reiterate the above, "writing does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in a context" (Bassnett 160). Given a contemporary context may include a shifting gaze towards the centre. Hence, any writing from the margins that reflects an engagement with that centre is a true reflection of that context. As Walkowitz concludes: "There are many variables in the new world literature, and they press us to consider not only the global production and circulation of texts [as discussed above] but also our ways of thinking about cultural and political uniqueness" (Walkowitz 216).

An inverse to this includes notions of authenticity, or where authenticity comes from: "Western scholarship about the Orient significantly contributed towards the legitimating process" (D'Haean 110). Key to this is the process of legitimating texts and areas of scholarship and writing. However, marginality is defined by those within the centre and here the notion of translation, or specifically what texts face translation, plays a key role in circulation or even more so, what texts are considered 'literary.' Hence, by institutional selectivity and deciding which texts are faced with the opportunity of translation offers the

cosmopolitan literary centre the opportunity to cast texts, and by extension entire cultures as “devoid of, or as lagging behind in, the features of modernity, and therefore as inferior to the West” (ibid). Here then an argument for non-translation does appear. The argument suggests that to protect the whole, none ought to be offered the opportunity to participate in a broader literary discourse. This argument though is obviously fraught with protectionist ideals that lead to insularity and a lack of academic rigor and development.

Notions of translation are impossible to escape when considering the circulation of literature and world literature. When approaching world literature as an academic subject, it is absurd to expect the individual to learn multiple languages and cultures, modes of access, to gain access to texts. Morretti’s ‘distant reading’ paradigm (*Conjectures on World Literature*, 2000) is a clear attempt to grapple with this absurdity. Whilst translation and world literature are not synonyms, translation is most certainly a tool of world literature; “Translation, we might say, is *the* craft of world literature” (Harrison 411). Viewing translation as a tool at the disposal of the world literature, student gives articulation to the manner in which world literature and translation operate in symbiosis. It is important though to note when discussing translation as a tool of world literature that working in world literature does not mean working as a translator. “Rather, it means studying literature through published translation, or at least, accepting that your students do so” (ibid). This notion does operate with the recognition that translation is not the absolute in constructing and conveying meaning: “Translators, he explains, have the power to ‘nudge’ readers (his words) towards one allusion or another and phrases will have more resonance in some cultures than others” (Walkowitz 220). It is a paradox to recognise that some, specifically cultural, nuances may be lost in translation. However, the balance between the loss of nuance and the gaining of access to new cultures and worlds constructed by text must be struck and in this is the art of the translator.

To return to the starting point of Damrosch and the notion that world literature is that which gains in translation, the notion of what the term ‘gain’ means warrants a brief moment of consideration. To ‘gain’ is to suggest a value judgement, more than likely, non-empirical and significantly subjective. Though popularity is a poor substitute for rigorous study and deconstruction, the notion of textual popularity does offer some insight into how a text may ‘gain’ as a result of translation. The popularity of a text can be measured in a multitude of ways. Firstly, through measuring the sales of a text. However, this route opens itself up to dilution through institutional interference; the manner and extent to which a book is promoted, the publisher of the text, the edition the text is published into, even, as the Robert Galbraith experiment has shown, the author of the text itself can all be significant variables in a text’s sales. Furthermore, the publishing industry “arguably participates in what we might call an ‘alterity industry’: one which involves the trafficking not only of culturally ‘othered’ artefacts but of the institutional values that are brought to bear in their support” (Huggan 413). Ergo, the sales of a text are open to institutional influence.

Another manner in which to measure gains may be the extent to which a text is adopted onto curricula and syllabi and furthermore, the location where a text is adopted onto curricula and syllabi. By this measure, a text such as Dickens’ *Great Expectations* has gained significantly from translation across time and space as it has been a prescribed text of study on the senior high school English curriculum of every Australian state at one point or another. That the text has translated so consistently and so

effectively across time, and to some extents across languages, and been academically recognised by being incorporated in so many curricula, stands testimony to the manner in which it has gained from translation.

The third way in which a text may measurably gain from translation, as noted above, is in the process of prize giving. There are obvious institutional influences that may well dilute this measure though. Prizes need backers: people, institutions, or governments who finance the prize itself. Thus: “The prize literalizes the principle of evaluative investment by drawing attention to the consecrating role played by the financial sponsor” (Huggan 413). Though it is clear that a text may gain from receiving a prize it is of note that the prize giver gains too. “Literary prizes, in other words, do more than reward the significant achievement of a writer; they stake a claim in the right to judge – to legitimize – that writer’s work” (ibid) and it is in this that the literary prize itself gains. The institution of prize giving infers prestige on those who receive the prize and in equal parts on those who give it. However, this is not to say that prizes ought not to be used as measures of the manner in which texts gain through translation. Prizes such as the Nobel are not based purely in one language. As such, the Nobel Prize might agree with Apter’s argument of untranslatability. However, an inevitable result of winning a Nobel Prize is a much wider interest in the work. Hence, the broad translation of the work across cultures and languages. This is to say nothing of other literary prizes that are invested entirely in one language, such as the Man Booker (Huggan 107).

The term translation itself bears a significant burden due to its ambiguity. All texts, in one sense or another, are translations and require a process of decoding by the audience to become accessible. The very act of writing is to appropriate certain codes and attempt to use these to convey a concept through language that hopefully survives deconstruction by the audience still with the intended meaning of the composer. By engaging in reading the audience is engaging in translating across cultural and language contexts, and as such it would not be difficult to consider that all texts gain from such forms of translation.

Ultimately the wide circulation of texts and translation go hand in hand. World literature does need to be conscious of the manner in which texts may lose as well as gain in translation. However, it is appropriate to here arrive at “an account of world literature, in which translation and global circulation create many books out of single texts, transforming old traditions and inaugurating new ones” (Walkowitz 235). Through the act of translation, new texts are created. These new texts are clearly appropriations of existing texts, but these are texts that stand alone, participating in genres and cultural milieu that may well have never been accessible to the original text. This is one of the central ways in which texts gain in translation. The broader, metaphorical notion of ‘text’ gains as new texts are produced from existing texts, reflecting cultural ideals and concepts in manners, never before considered. In doing so it is world literature, and the audiences of world literature, who are the beneficiaries, as existing traditions are appropriated and pushed forward into new dawns of opportunity.

Here is the key concept of translation: opportunity. Through translation texts which would otherwise have existed on the margins, would never be faced with the opportunity to enter the centre. Discourses would remain dominated by major cultural centres and never be challenged. Inversely, national canons would never face the challenge of defining themselves against a global canon of literature and have the very nature of canonicity called into question. The wide circulation of literatures is an integral part of the spreading and interacting of cultures. Not only do dominant cultures spread through literature, but cultures which may otherwise be denied institutional voice also spread through literatures.

The lingua franca of world literature is English and though this does in some sense prize translation it also opens world literature up and creates a point of access for all participants. World literature is that which gains in translation, as translation is the act of making accessible the world's literatures.

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