CHAPTER 8

The Poetics and Politics of Un/translatability in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s New Anatomies

Carol L. Yang

Abstract

This paper explores the ethics of translation and the poetics and politics of un/translatability in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s New Anatomies via the theories of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas. The play—characterised by a series of surrogates and simulacra, textual cloning and reproduction—aims to debunk the Western pretension to know, to totalise the Other. In the vein of translation/transcreation, New Anatomies is a contemporary articulation of cultural displacement, which illuminates the cultural and epistemological otherness at stake in translation. New Anatomies offers a simultaneous representation of the indeterminacy of the Other and the untenability of truth and history.

Introduction

Since moving to England in the 1970s, Timberlake Wertenbaker has established herself as a powerful voice in the British theatre, not only as a much awarded playwright but also as a highly adept translator and adaptor. Wertenbaker has worked on many linguistic, genre, and media translations and adaptations: from French, ancient Greek, Czech, and Italian to English; from non-fiction, history, and literature to theatre, radio, television, and cinema. However, it was not until the production of Our Country’s Good (1988)—an adaptation of Thomas Keneally’s novel The Playmaker—that Wertenbaker’s contribution to the art of adaptation and translation won her wide recognition. There are now myriad studies on the issues of im/migration, border-crossing, dis/location, language, nation, culture, and identity in Wertenbaker’s praxis of playwriting, translation, and adaptation (Carlson 1993, 2000; Bassnett 2000; Roth 2000, 2008; Wilson 1991, 2003). From 31 March until 1 April 2006, an international symposium on themes of translation and transformation in Wertenbaker’s work was hosted by Georgetown University during Wertenbaker’s 2005-06 residency there, leading to the publication in 2008 of a collection entitled
International Dramaturgy: Translation and Transformation in the Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker. Although translation studies is claimed by such critics as Maya E. Roth to be a promising methodology in relation to Wertenbaker’s work (11), most of the critical literature on Wertenbaker—including the International Dramaturgy collection—focuses on Wertenbaker’s translation practice and theatre productions. What I propose is a study based on both practice and theory. Wertenbaker’s work lends itself to an ethics of translation that shifts the focus from questions of textual fidelity to the ethical responsibility to respect and to preserve otherness. Arguably, for Wertenbaker, translation is not so much a transfer between source and target languages as a negotiation between what Lawrence Venuti calls cultural domestication and foreignisation;1 for Wertenbaker, translation has moved beyond the word and the text to entail a cultural turn. The epistemological otherness at stake in translation forges a pathway to cultural exchange, negotiation, and transformation.2

Wertenbaker’s praxis in translation is characterised by her creative reworking of literary or historical material in multifarious social, cultural, and political contexts. It is a process of transcreation, which brings a complicated if not conflicting epistemological and cultural alterity to the fore. In using the term “alterity,” I emphasise Derridian and Levinasian connotations of change and otherness. That is, I suggest that the praxis of translation renders possible not only an endless process of transportation and change, of difference and defer-

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1 Domesticating theories recommend a fluent and transparent translation at the expense of the difference of a foreign text. Therefore, domesticating translation may be accused of epistemic violence. Some argue that a foreignising translation signifies the difference of the foreign text which in turn becomes the site where the existence of a cultural other is made visible. However, Friedrich Schleiermacher mainly used his foreignising theory to serve a nationalist cultural programme, which highlights the problems with this view of foreignisation. Both approaches lead to the concerns with the ethics of translation, and forms of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, narcissism and imperialism. For more on the concept and impact of foreignising and domesticating translation, see Lawrence Venuti, The Translator’s Invisibility, especially Chapters One and Three.

2 In 1990, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere were the first to suggest that translation studies should take a “cultural turn.” In their 1998 book Constructing Cultures they propose the coming of age of the integration of translation studies and cultural studies, by arguing that the study of translation is the study of cultural interaction. In 1999, Bassnett and Harish Trivedi edited Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice, which developed the cultural project using postcolonial frameworks. Gayatri Spivak’s earlier work on the politics of translation (1992) is one the first attempts to combine a deconstructionist ethics with a postcolonial activist agenda, characteristic of a “relentless pursuit of inaccessible cultural otherness” (Staten 111). See Sandra Bermann’s “Introduction” for further discussion of the legacy of cultural studies and literary theories on translation studies.