Introduction

Translation Studies Meets World Literature

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For a long time translation was a Cinderella subject, marginalised, patronised or simply ignored by literary theorists. The advent of a new field called Translation Studies did little to change the perception of translation as a second-class, derivative activity, inferior to so-called original writing and hence less worthy of attention. But as Translation Studies developed and diversified through the 1980s and 1990s, it began to become apparent that some of the core concerns of this new field were highly relevant to another new and expanding field, postcolonial studies, and to the revitalised fields of Comparative and World Literature. Today there is a confluence of all these fields, concerned as they are with the ways in which texts move across cultures and with the transformations those texts undergo in the process of movement. Since the field’s inception in the late 1970s, researchers in Translation Studies have, like their colleagues in World Literature, studied patterns of textual transmission, exploring the diverse fortunes of texts at different moments in time as they cross into other languages and other cultural contexts. At the same time, the growth of global perspectives among comparatists has fostered new attention to questions going well beyond the handful of languages that a person can learn, and at the same time comparatists have begun to look with new interest into the ways in which the wider world enters a given literary space through translation. A natural result of these developments has been to unite scholars starting from a World Literature perspective and those starting from within Translation Studies. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Georg Brandes was sceptical both about translations and about world literature. Not only did he view translation as linguistically imperfect, inherently failing to do justice to the original, but he also had a negative view of the role played by translation in
international canon-formation, noting that the privileging of a few hegemonic languages meant that “the writers of the world’s various lands are not equally apportioned with respect to world renown” (25). This prescient remark prefigures some of the contemporary debates about the forces behind the movement of texts, forces that are not only aesthetic but also social, political, and economic. World Literature scholarship has concerned itself with exploring different aspects of these forces, but has tended to neglect one of the most powerful forces of all: translation.

Translation Studies scholarship, on the other hand, has endeavoured to raise the profile and visibility of translation and translators, but has tended to focus too narrowly on written texts, at the expense of investigating the broader network of agencies involved in the production and dissemination of translations, which include publishers, patrons, copy-editors, censors, and many others.

This development has led translation theorists such as Siri Nergaard and Edwin Gentzler to use the term “post-translation studies" to distinguish a new focus today on the circulation of texts within and across cultures. Post-translation studies, a deliberately provocative term recalling the coinage of “post-feminism” a few years ago, proposes that older definitions of translation as interlingual transfer no longer hold, and that sharp distinctions between originals, translations, versions, and rewritings need to be jettisoned. This is particularly pertinent in our age of mass media, which is witnessing the advent of a variety of new forms—blogs, fan fiction, social media sites—at an unprecedented speed, forms that coexist with more traditional modes of expression.

André Lefevere was also concerned with problems of definition, and sought to relabel translation as “rewriting.” He argued that translations, literary histories, anthologies, reference books, criticism, reviews, and editions all involve textual manipulation and adaptation in accordance with dominant ideological and poetological currents of the age. Today, one strand of research in Translation Studies is taking that argument further and investigating the multiple agencies involved in intercultural textual transmission. In addition to research into translated texts and their translators, there is a growing body of work that is looking at paratexts, at editions, at publishing strategies both diachronically and synchronically, at explicit and implicit censorship, and at the mechanics of textual distribution, all under the aegis of Translation Studies. Similar lines of research are taking place under the aegis of Comparative or World Literature, and here the extent of the confluence can be seen.

What seems to be happening today is that World Literature scholarship has started to acknowledge the fundamental importance of translation as a shaping force in literary history, and at the same time Translation Studies scholarship