

World Literature as a Mode of Critical Reading of Translation

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ABSTRACT

The study of world literature focuses on how literary work circulates differently worldwide. It is through translation that literary work is circulated and interpreted differently worldwide. The difference in the reception of literary work across places and time is attributed to textual and extra-textual constraints in translation, such as ideology, power, poetics of the time, and institution. To understand how literary work manifests differently abroad than it does at home, critical reading of translation is needed in the study of world literature. The critical reading of translation can be done in two ways. The first way is by juxtaposing different translations of the same literary text to explicate the different translation strategies applied by the translators. The second way is by identifying the remainders in the translation to disrupt the transparency of the translation. Both of these ways will reveal cultural differences between target and source culture, and also the influence of ideology, power, poetics and institution to the reception of literary text which varies across places and time.

Keywords: *constraints of translation, reception of foreign literature, translation, world literature*

INTRODUCTION

Studying world literature does not involve the ontological problem of what world literature is, but the phenomenological problem of how literary work manifests differently abroad than it does at home. This phenomenological aspect has been highlighted by Goethe, the founding father of world literature, by stating that world literature is a dynamic process of literary exchange, intercourse, or traffic which involves praise or censure, acceptance or rejection, imitation or distortion, understanding or misunderstanding, opening or closing to differences.¹ Given that world

literature is more about phenomenology, David Damrosch thus defines world literature, “not as an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading”.²

The worldwide circulation of literature is made possible through translation. It is through translation that literary work manifests differently abroad. Accordingly, studying world literature involves a critical reading of translation. Critical reading of translation involves awareness on textual and extra-textual constraints and the ways the translator overcomes the constraints.³

¹ Cheah, P. *What is a world? On world literature as world-making activity* (Daedalus). *Cosmopolitanism*, 137(3), 27. Retrieved on 2 September. 2015.

² Damrosch, D. (2003). *What is world literature?* Princeton: Princeton UP.

³ Damrosch, D. (2009). *How to read world literature*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

In general, critical reading of translation involves critical scrutiny of how the foreign text is refracted in the process of translation. In this paper several issues of translation and two ways with which critical reading of translation operate will be discussed.

CRITICAL READING OF TRANSLATION

There are two issues of translation that should be noticed when one conducts critical reading of translation. First, translation involves interpretation. Thus, it is ideological. The act of translation does not happen in an unmediated and objective way; rather, it is intervened by textual and extra-textual constraints, such as ideology, power, poetics of the time, and institution. These mediations and interventions are responsible for the different receptions of literature worldwide. The influence of ideology, power and institution in a target literary system makes the faithful rendering of original texts impossible. Therefore, what will happen to the original text in the target language is refraction, rather than reflection of the original. Translation will always be a rewriting of the original text. Translation should not always be seen negatively for its unfaithful rendering because it also brings offsetting gain for the original text, such as opening new dimensions of the text and concrete manifestation of cultural exchange. In other words, there is always something lost and something gained in the translation. Moreover, it also should be noticed that the refraction of the original text does not only happen across culture, but also happens across time. Different versions of translation of particular foreign text will differ greatly because of the difference in poetics of the time and the configuration of power, ideology and institution of the time. The second issue is that the refraction of original text is not always foregrounded. Some translators apply domestication strategy for fluent reading and higher intelligibility.

Thus, it creates the illusion of transparency and the illusion of the universality for recognizing home culture and values in others.

Common difficulty or challenge in identifying the refraction of translation is the ability to read the original text. However, to identify the refraction it does not necessarily require the comparison of the translation with the original text. The ability to read the original text certainly helps the readers to identify the refraction in the translation. However, as stated by Damrosch, when one cannot read the source language, comparing translations may triangulate one's way toward a better sense of the original.⁴ Moreover, comparing different translations of a same literary text may make the different strategies applied by translators apparent.⁵ By knowing the different strategies applied by translators, one can know the influence of poetics of the time and the configuration of power, ideology and institution of the time to the translation. Comparing translations reveals that the refraction is done differently not only across cultures, but also across time in a given target literary system. In this sense, comparing translations helps one to read translation critically. This idea is supported by Venuti. He states that critical reading of translation involves the ability to identify how different forms of reception construct the significance of the foreign text.⁶ Different translations in the target literary system will reveal how the significance of the original text is constructed differently.

Based on Damrosch and Venuti's opinions above, the first method for critical reading of translation is juxtaposing translations for contrast and comparison. The instance for the application of this method is presented by comparing two versions of Voltaire's *Candide* translations from the Vic-

⁴ Ibid p. 71.

⁵ Ibid p. 68.

⁶ Venuti, L. (1996). *Translation and the pedagogy of literature. College English*, 58(3), 327-344. Retrieved on 31 August. 2015.

torian era and present days. Here, the comparison is done by juxtaposing two translations from different periods. It should be noticed that translations of a same literary text which is made in the past will be different from those made in present days because of the difference in poetics, cultural and historical conditions. A translator's freedom in translating is constrained by the dominant poetics, cultural values and historical condition of the time. For critical reading of translation, the interplay of poetics, cultural and historical moments of a particular time in determining translation strategy must be noticed.

The example of the constraint of cultural values and morality on translators can be seen in the translation of Voltaire's *Candide* during the Victorian era. The Victorian era which is very prudent about the issues of religion and sexuality produces a different translation from present day wherein sexuality is frankly tackled. The difference can be seen by comparing the excerpt of translations from each era. The excerpt is taken from the scene in which an old woman who helps Candide and Cunegonde tells her story in chapter 11.

The translation in Victorian era is as follows:

My eyes have not always been bleared, and bordered with scarlet; my nose has not always touched my chin; nor have I always been a servant. I am the daughter of a king, and the Princess of Palestrina. I was brought up, till I was fourteen, in a palace I began to captivate every heart. My neck was formed – oh, what a neck! White, firm, and shaped like that of the Venus de Medici. . . . The maids who dressed and undressed me fell into an ecstasy when they viewed me, and all the men would gladly have been in their

places.⁷

Whereas contemporary translation by Roger is as follows:

'My eyes haven't always been bloodshot and red-rimmed, my nose hasn't always come down to my chin, and I haven't always been a servant. I am the daughter of Pope Urban X and the Princess of Palestrina. Until the age of fourteen I was brought up in a palace... As I grew older, so I grew in beauty, grace, and fine accomplishments. I took pleasure in life; I commanded respect; I had prospects. I was already able to inspire love, and my breasts were forming. And what breasts they were! White and firm, just like those of the Medici Venus...The women who dressed and undressed me would go into ecstasies when they saw me, back and front, and all the men would love to have changed places with them.'⁸

By juxtaposing the two translations, the difference can be seen that Victorian version has changed the speaker's father from pope into the king. This change is due to the sensitivity of religious issues during Victorian era. The alteration is significant because the intention of the author to criticize the religious authority –here, despite the vows of celibacy, the pope, in fact, has a daughter –is censored in the Victorian version. Therefore, it can be said that the reception of *Candide* in the Victorian era significantly alters the significance of the original text. Besides that, Pearson's translation reveals Victorian prudishness on translating what is actually breast into neck. Comparing these two translations from different periods shows how poetics or cultural moment of the time influences

⁷ Voltaire, F. M. A. (1927). *Anonymous Victorian-era translation*. Repr. In *The Complete Romances of Voltaire*, ed. G.W.B. New York: Walter J. Black.

⁸ Voltaire, F. M. A. (2006). *Candide and other stories* (Tr. Roger Pearson). Oxford: Oxford UP.

the strategy of translation. In order to conform to the Victorian moral code, the translator polishes the translation by avoiding frank sexuality.

The second method in conducting critical reading of translation involves the ability to identify foreign elements that are left over in the process of the translation or what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls as “remainder”. The instance for the application of this method will be presented by comparing three versions of translations of *Iliad* by Richmond Lattimore, George Chapman and Alexander Pope.

Remainder as defined by Lecercle cited in Venuti is, “textual effects that exceed transparent uses of language geared to communication and may in fact impede them, with varying degrees of violence.”⁹ As a foreign element that is left over in the process of translation (target text), a remainder gives evidence to what degree a translation has retained or lost its original form. When a remainder is retained, the foreignness of the translated text is restored, and domestication can be resisted. Identifying remainder is very important in order to be aware of the foreignness of the translated text.

According to Venuti, remainder can be identified by juxtaposing the translation with other versions of translation that will tease out the remainder in transparent translation.¹⁰ For example, as illustrated by Venuti, to identify the remainder in Richmond Lattimore's translation of *Iliad*, Lattimore's translation can be juxtaposed with George Chapman's and Alexander Pope's translation.

Lattimore's version is as follows:

So he spoke and Patroklos obeyed
his beloved companion.

He led forth from the hut Briseis of
the fair cheeks and gave her
to be taken away; and they walked
back beside the ships of the Achai-
ans,
and the woman all unwilling went
with them still. But Achilles
weeping went and sat in sorrow
apart from his companions
beside the beach of the grey sea
looking out on the infinite water.
Many times stretching forth he
called on his mother¹¹

Lattimore claimed that he rendered *Iliad* into the plain English of his time. Yet a strain of archaism can still be detected in the translation, such as lexical items (“be-loved,” “led forth”), syntactic arrangement (inversions like “weeping went”), and prosodic pattern (“a free six-beat line” that imitates the Homeric hexameter).¹² It can be seen that Lattimore attempted to restrain the foreign elements by minimizing the archaism. To identify the remainder in translated text, Lattimore's has to be compared with Chapman's and Pope's translation.

Chapman's version is as follows:

This speech usd, Patroclus did the
rite
His friend commanded and brought
forth Briseis from her tent,
Gave her the heralds and away to
th'Archive ships they went.
She, sad, and scarce for griefe could
go. Her love **all friends** forsook
And **wept for anger**. To the shore of
th'old sea he betooke
Himselfe alone and, casting forth
upon the purple sea
His wet eyes and his hands to heav-
en advancing this sad plea
Made to his mother¹³

⁹ Venuti, L. (1996). *Translation and the pedagogy of literature. College English*, 58(3), 327-344. Retrieved on 31 August. 2015. p. 335.

¹⁰ Ibid p. 341.

¹¹ Ibid p. 338.

¹² Ibid p. 340.

¹³ Ibid p. 338.

Pope's version is as follows:

Patroclus now th'unwilling Beauty
brought;
She, in soft Sorrows, and in pensive
Thought,
Past silent, as the Heralds held her
Hand,
And oft look'd back, slow-moving
o'er the Strand.
Not so his Loss the fierce Achilles
bore;
But sad retiring to the sounding
Shore,
O'er the wild Margin of the Deep he
hung,
That kindred Deep, from whence his
Mother sprung.
There, **bath'd in Tears of Anger
and Disdain,**
Thus loud lamented to the stormy
Main.¹⁴

Compared to Lattimore's plain rendering where he described Achilles' weeping, in both Chapman's and Pope's version, it can be seen that both of them were in difficulty to assimilate the early modern concepts of masculinity with the fact of Achilles' weeping. Therefore, to conform to the concept of masculinity, then Chapman reduced the weeping to "wet eyes," and to show the normalcy of this behavior in the man, Chapman also introduced "friends" who also "wept for anger" at Briseis's departure.¹⁵ Pope also redefined the "Tears" by associating them with "Anger and Disdain".¹⁶ Thus, Achilles' weeping was masculinized. To emphasize the difference between the masculine Achilles from the feminine Briseis, both Chapman and Pope exaggerated Briseis' passivity and submissiveness ("soft sorrow" and "past silent"). Another difference between Lattimore's compared to Chapman's and Pope's translation is that Lattimore did not omit the word "beloved" in treating the relationship

between Achilles and Patroklos. Chapman and Pope omitted the word to censor the homosexuality which was common to be found in classical Greek literature.¹⁷ From this comparison, it can be seen that the archaism "beloved" and "weeping went" in Lattimore's translation is the remainder that has fogged the transparency of Lattimore's translation or the foreign elements that make the target readers become estranged with the possibility of a homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroklos in Lattimore's translation.

By learning to identify remainders whenever one is reading translation, it helps one to disrupt the transparency of the translation, and thus fosters the understanding and appreciation for cultural difference in reading world literature. Remainder is also useful as new ground for choosing one translation over another. Because according to Venuti, a good translation is one which is rich with remainders or releases the remainders by opening up the standard dialect and target literary canons to what is foreign or marginal.¹⁸ To enhance one cultural understanding, it is preferable to choose foreignized translation, instead of domesticated translation. Though domesticated translation provides greater ease of consumption, intelligibility and appreciation of the foreign text, it involves, as stated by Venuti, "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home"¹⁹ Cultural homogenization practiced in the domesticated translation supports the claim of the universality of the target culture and thus, promotes cultural chauvinism. Cultural otherness or distinctiveness is elided in the homogenized translation. Ideally, the study of world literature should aim towards greater cross cultural understanding. Therefore, it requires the ability to conduct critical read-

¹⁴ Ibid pp. 338-339.

¹⁵ Ibid p. 340.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 340.

¹⁷ Ibid p. 340.

¹⁸ Venuti, L. (1998). *The scandals of translation*. London & New York: Routledge.

¹⁹ Ibi, p.20.

ing of translation, the ability to choose translation which emphasizes cultural difference and thus, sends the reader abroad, instead of bringing the author back home. This mode of critical reading of translation can be done by juxtaposing translations for comparison and identifying remainders.

CONCLUSION

Critical reading of translation in the context of world literature can be done in two ways. The first way is by juxtaposing different translations of the same literary text to explicate the different translation strategies applied by the translators. By implementing this kind of critical reading, one can identify the influence of ideology, power, poetics and institution to the reception of the literary text which varies across places and time. The second way is by identifying the remainders in the translation to disrupt the transparency of the translation. It is through remainders that one can foster appreciation towards cultural difference in world literature.

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