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**THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION
IN LITERATURE**

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THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN LITERATURE

A. The Study of Translation Within Literature

In 1962 Edmond Cary declared that “La traduction a en règle générale, précédé la création littéraire autonome, elle a été la grande accoucheuse des littératures.” (Cary 1962: 126) Since then, focusing on the role of translation¹ in the history of literature has increasingly occupied the minds of philologists and translators alike. But this has not always been the case. In fact, the study of the influence of translation on literature has been overshadowed by numerous other issues. Within the field of translation study itself, “theoretical reflection on translation was for centuries focused primarily on the problem of translating literary texts.” (Holmes 1978: v) More specifically, issues of translatability, fidelity and technique have prevented a clear development of the roles of translation in literature.

Literary scholars, for their part, have also been too preoccupied with their own concerns to contemplate translation’s functions on their primary object of study. In fact, “histories of literature mention translations only when there is no way to avoid them.” (Even-Zohar 1978: 117) Furthermore, the prevailing practice has been to treat translated literature separately from the major body of literary works and this marginalization has resulted in the unawareness of “the possible existence of translated literature as a particular literary system.” (Even-Zohar 1978: 117) Because translations have been regarded as dispersed works unconnected to the literary system, their relationship to the evolution of literature went unrecognized. Recently, however, many academics have realized the importance of studying translation as a part of literary history. “I cannot see how any scholarly effort to describe and explain the behaviour of the literary polysystem in synchrony and diachrony can advance in an adequate way if [we do not consider translated literature.]” (Even-Zohar 1978: 118-119) Moreover, studying translation in relation to literature reveals the “real history of contacts and transfer” (Frank 1998: 18) that is literary history and as André Lefevere stresses:

c’est en démontrant le rôle énorme qu’ont joué les traductions dans l’évolution des littératures qu’on pourra révéler la “polyglossie littéraire” comme donnée de base de toute littérature européenne depuis le Moyen Age, et de toute littérature extra-européenne depuis

le dix-neuvième siècle. (Lefevere 1993: 32)

The role that translation played, and continues to play, in literature, can be explained more precisely upon examining the historical reasons why literature was translated.

B. Historical Reasons for Translating Literature

Promoting a National Literature

One of the reasons that literature was translated was to promote a national literature. The example of Renaissance Europe serves as an illustration of this phenomenon as “the sense of participation in a cultural contest [was] a dominant sentiment.” (Shire 1978: 179) The concept of “nation” was born out of the Renaissance and monarchs and writers were eager to develop a national literature as a testimony to the power and prestige of their countries. Translation was a tool by which the Antiquity’s greatest works were imported and subsequently interpreted and imitated by writers in many European countries. For example, it became apparent with Spain’s rapid rise to power at the end of the fifteenth century, that there was not an independent national literature to justify the country’s newfound prestigious position. “In a number of ways such a new political role needed [...] to be accompanied by the propagation of new literary and linguistic standards.” (Barrass 1978: 182) There was a feeling in Spain at the time that the Castilian literary inventory was inadequate and so translators turned to “external sources for ways of filling gaps in their own culture.” (Barrass 1978: 182)

In England during the Renaissance, many of the same events were being played out as in Spain. Translation was viewed as a “service to the Queen” (Shire 1978: 179) and by the end of the sixteenth century “la plupart des grandes oeuvres antiques et étrangères existaient en traduction.” (van Hoof 1991: 127) Many of England’s most famous authors were inspired by the translations they read. “English literature [...] enriched itself by liberal translations and adaptations from foreign languages.” (Macy 1925: 261) Not surprisingly, it has been shown that both the style and content of many of Shakespeare’s plays, were influenced by translations such as John Florio’s *Montaigne* and Thomas North’s *Plutarch* (which was itself a translation of the French by Jacques Amyot).

In France during the sixteenth century, translators like Claude de Seyssel, Jean Lascaris, Jacques Amyot and Clément Marot were enlisted by the monarchy to create a “litterature en françois” (Horguelin 1996: 3) by translating prestigious Greek and Latin authors such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch and Virgil. In the second half of the century a group of translators-poets called La Pléiade took the idea of national literature one step further. Inspired by Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, they too wanted to bestow on France a rich national literature and advocated free imitation of the Classics to put French literature in a position to rival the great Greek and Latin works. In order to propagate their ideas on translation, one of the members of La Pléiade, Joachim du Bellay wrote a manifesto entitled *Deffence et Illustration de*

la langue françoise, from which an important literary concept was born. This was the realization that through the simple act of being translated, a literary work became more prestigious within the literary system. “There is [...] a sense in which a literary work that has not been translated even once is incomplete, that it has not become ‘world literature’ in any sense of the word.” (Frank 1998: 22) Du Bellay insisted therefore that an attempt be made to create original works in French by “‘l’imitation originale’” (Du Bellay quoted by Horguelin 1996: 12) of foreign texts. His insistence was based on the notion that, until a nation’s literary works are worthy of being translated by other nations, the country does not have a legitimate national literature. The above three examples show that translation was a patriotic act, encouraged by monarchs during the Renaissance and that it was undertaken to ultimately produce a national literature capable of embodying the values and ideas of a political power.

Enriching the National Language

Another reason for translating literature was to enrich the national, vernacular language. Because a culture’s language is one of the most intimate traditions that it possesses, the desire to develop it is an act of patriotism. In this way then, enhancing one’s language was a practice closely linked to the creation of a national literature as both were gestures of loyalty. Translation played a major role in the establishment and expansion of national languages, particularly in the Renaissance when the vernaculars were still very young. As each work was translated, translators were inevitably forced to create new words to express the novel ideas that they were introducing into their culture. “C’est la Renaissance, qui, éprouvant le besoin d’inventer des termes pour désigner des réalités nouvelles, façonne une notion entièrement neuve de la traduction.” (van Hoof 1991: 31) John Florio’s translation of Montaigne represents a good example of this phenomenon in England. Florio has been credited with introducing numerous words into the English language, some of which were: “entraîne, conscientious, endeare, tarnish, facilitate, amusing, regret, effort and emotion.” (Yates 1968: 227) He was also the first writer to make use of the genitive neuter pronoun ‘its’. It is interesting to note that Montaigne’s original work (which influenced Florio’s word inventions) may not have even been possible had it not been for Jacques Amyot’s profound contributions to the French language, for it was Amyot who inspired Montaigne’s simple, logical style. Moreover, Amyot, who was one of France’s most revered translators, had a passion for writing as idiomatically and as clearly as possible.

Et de fait, les archaïsmes, les latinismes et les italianismes sont rares dans la prose d’Amyot, ce qui contraste avec les traductions pédantes, truffées de néologismes barbares, des écrivains-traducteurs de la Pléiade. Outre l’ordre et la liaison des mots, les rapports logiques entre les propositions, phrases et paragraphes sont un souci manifeste du traducteur. [...] Quant au style, il est simple et naturel... (Horguelin 1996: 17-18)

The list of Amyot's admirers does not end with Montaigne, but continues with such other literary greats as "Fénelon, Racine, Molière, Montesquieu [and] Rousseau." (Horguelin 1996: 18) Thus, the influence of his translations as well as the changes he made to the language had far-reaching effects on literature. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Amyot never wrote an original work unlike so many translators who went on to become famous authors (Chaucer, Erasmus, du Bellay, Ronsard, Voltaire, Goethe).

Importing New Ideas

The trend whereby translators took up writing originals in their mother tongue is not all that surprising, considering that translators, who were engineers of their language, were also the first to be exposed to and interpret the ideas of the great thinkers they were in charge of translating. "In some cases translation represents a phase in the development of the literary skills of authors." (Tymoczko 1993: 82) The exchange of ideas that was made possible by translation provided the subject material for many literary works. Much of the Renaissance literature drew its sources from Classical literature, often because it:

clearly appealed to a fairly wide audience, both as a valuable body of literature and as a repository of useful information and wisdom. It provided, perhaps more particularly for writers from the sixteenth century onwards, a number of models to be emulated, but to a considerable extent it was valued for its content. (Barrass 1978: 190)

Of course, biblical translations offer the most significant examples of the exchange of new ideas that impacted not only literature, but also man's entire concept of spirituality. The translation of the Bible into the various vernacular languages in Europe during the sixteenth century (an English version had however been translated in 1382 by John Wycliffe) allowed for a much larger group of people to read and contemplate the Bible. Moreover, the Protestant versions that appeared gave not only authors, but also subsequent Bible translators new interpretations to reflect upon in their writing and translations. "Les traductions successives des textes sacrés portent l'empreinte des changements politiques, philosophiques et idéologiques des époques où elles furent produites." (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995: 164) Translations of the Bible therefore set off a series of chain reactions that were echoed in national literatures. An interesting example of this is in sixteenth-century Spain where translations of the Bible were prohibited from 1551, when the Index of the Spanish Inquisition was first printed, until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Because of the prohibition, Spanish biblical translators were forced to go into exile and publish their Castilian versions outside of Spain in centres like Antwerp, Geneva, Bâle, Frankfurt and Amsterdam. Even though translations of the Bible remained outside of Spain's borders, its ideas were imported and incorporated into Spanish literature, where the Bible was quoted and interpreted freely. Ironically enough, "Menéndez Pelayo wrote that one could almost compile a complete translation of the Bible from the quotations scattered through

the mystical treatises and sermons of that time.” (Barrass 1978: 186) Translation also assisted in changing the form in which many authors chose to write about the new ideas that had been imported into their culture.

Introducing New Literary Genres

Experimentation with new literary genres was another result of translation, which brought cultures in contact with different forms of writing.

Through the foreign work features are introduced into the home literature which did not exist there before. These include not only a possible new model of reality to replace conventions no longer effective, but a whole range of other features as well, such as new poetic language, new matrices, techniques... (Even-Zohar 1978: 120-121)

The example of the twelfth-century shift in genre from epic to romance in France illustrates the revolutionary force that translation can have on an existing literature. This shift was an important one because it marked a transition from a “traditional oral hero tale to written, author-innovated adventure literature.” (Tymoczko 1993: 75) In fact, it has been suggested that this shift was “the single most important literary development in Western vernacular culture [in which] translation played a central and in fact decisive role.” (Tymoczko 1993: 75-76) The epic or *chanson de geste*, exemplified by the *Chanson de Roland*, is characterized by “heroic values”, “warrior ethics”, “medieval feudalism” and “the opposition of Christianity and paganism.” (Tymoczko 1993: 77) However, as Tymoczko explains, no sooner do these oral epics begin to be written down do challenging genres also appear in French literature, mainly originating with translations from medieval Latin works. The translations from that era demonstrate many typical characteristics of the romance genre, including formal elements such as “female characters of all sorts”, “a biographical focus” and “the individual authorial voice”, and most notably ideological elements like: “*courtoisie*”, “a taste for luxury and wealth” and “*amour courtois*.” (Tymoczko 1993: 83-84) Thus, translation’s primary function in this instance was to facilitate a transition to romance literature by introducing the various elements of it to France, where men like Chrétien de Troyes embraced and perfected it in Old French. Even once the romance genre was established as an acceptable literary form, translation continued to play a part in conserving it. Curiously, “we find that many of the early romances are in fact pseudo-translations: they present themselves to their audiences as translations[!]” (Tymoczko 1993: 86) Apparently, if a work of an innovative genre was presented as having been translated from a prestigious source (Latin or Greek) then it was more likely to gain acceptance from its receptors. In conclusion therefore, “it has generally been acknowledged that ‘precursors’ of romance are found in twelfth century translations into Old French....” (Tymoczko 1993: 87)

C. The Position of Translation in Relation to the Literary System²

To continue with the discussion of the role translation played in shaping literature, it is important to take a closer look at the potential positions that translation systems could (and can) hold in relation to the literary polysystem. Three identifiable situations can create the ideal conditions for the importation of foreign works through translation and allow translation to play a primary role in the development of literature. The first, as explained by Even-Zohar, is a situation where the literature of a nation is still establishing itself. In this case, translations act as a means by which the nation can “put into use its newly founded (or renewed) tongue for as many literary types as possible in order to make it functionable as a literary language.” (Even-Zohar 1978: 121) The second, is a context where an existing literature is weak or peripheral and therefore “do[es] not produce all systems ‘required’ by the polysystemic structure, but instead fill[s] some of them in with translated literature.” (Even-Zohar 1978: 121) And the third situation arises when turning points or literary vacuums occur in a literature. A turning point or a vacuum, as Even-Zohar explains, happen when “established models are no longer tenable for a younger generation [and when] no item in the indigenous stock is taken to be acceptable....” (Even-Zohar 1978: 122)

The circumstances of nineteenth-century Spain offer an example of the last two situations. Severe censorship for nearly three hundred years had prevented Spain’s national literature from flourishing and as a result “there were more translated novels and plays in Spain than original Spanish works.” (Gruber 1985: 166) Therefore, Spain’s national literature was incomplete (weak existing literature) and there were no available solutions in the domestic inventory (literary vacuum). When the censorship was relaxed there was a large demand for the translation of both old and new works. “Diderot, for example, was translated for the first time in 1831 [...] Rousseau, too, was late in coming, [and Romanticism] reached the Iberian peninsula at a time when [it] was already old-fashioned in the rest of Europe.” (Gruber 1985: 165-166) Translation, therefore, very clearly played a primary part in modernizing Spanish literature.

But as Even-Zohar also explains, translation can function in a secondary, peripheral position within the literary system.

In such a situation it has no influence on major processes and is modelled according to norms already conventionally established by an already dominant type. Translated literature in this case becomes a major factor of conservatism. (Even-Zohar 1978: 122)

One has only to look at the number of times that Greek and Latin works (often termed ‘Classics’) have been translated and retranslated throughout the ages to find examples of translation as conservative tool.

Translation can therefore hold a primary or secondary position within literature and can thus be used to establish a literature, complete a literary system, renovate an literary system or preserve traditional literary genres. However, it is important to realize, as Even-Zohar points out, that translation never occupies an entirely primary or secondary position at any given time, but that “as a system, translated literature is itself stratified.” (Even-Zohar 1978: 123)

D. The Translator's Role

In attempts to dissect the role of translation as a precursor to literature, it may appear that not much attention has been paid to the translators themselves. Let it be said, then, that the development of literature did not miraculously happen by translation alone but by the conscious efforts of the actual translators. “[I]ls ont [...] été conscients de la mission littéraires attachée à leurs efforts de transposition.” (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995: 85) It is possible that translations would have been completely ineffective had their translators not been aware of the contributions they were making to their country. The degree to which translators understood the importance of their task is evident from the numerous prefaces and dedications accompanying their works. The following are examples that show that translators were aware that their work helped to promote a national literature, enrich their language and import new ideas and literary genres into their countries.

“To translate a foreign writer is to add to your own national poetry”

(Victor Hugo, translated in Lefevere 1992: 18)

“I have always thought of translation as a way to enrich a language.

[...] If you translate, you import the riches contained in foreign languages into your own, by means of felicitous commerce.”

(Jacques Delille, translated in Lefevere 1992: 37)

“The most eminent service one can render to literature is to transport the masterpieces of the human spirit from one language into another.”

(Anne Louise Germaine de Staël, translated in Lefevere 1992: 17)

In conclusion, the translation of literary works throughout time played a highly significant role in the development of literature: it gave authors a reason to write (to promote their national literature), the tools with which to compose (an enriched vernacular language), subjects to reflect and write on (new ideas discovered through translation) and finally innovative genres with which to express themselves. Moreover, within the literary polysystem, translation can hold a primary (creative) position or a secondary (conservative) position. But regardless of its function, its impact on literature cannot be ignored because:

Every work, every writer's *oeuvre*, is a choir, so to speak, of all the voices, fragmentary or continuous, dissimulated and undisguised, adopted, adapted, and avoided, from past or contemporaneous writings—literary, philosophical, scientific, journalistic, etc.—in the writer's own language and in other languages, untranslated and translated, as they echo and re-echo in his lines and paragraphs

and chapters and books. (Frank 1998: 23)

Notes

1. In order to narrow the scope of this paper, it will focus on literary translations to illustrate the impact of translation on literature. Note though, that this is not to suggest that other types of translation (medical, legal, administrative, etc.) had no influence on literature.
 2. The basis for this discussion is an article by Itamar Even-Zohar entitled “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem.”
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