André Lefevere

LITERATURE, COMPARATIVE AND TRANSLATED

I am not going to tell you how to translate, nor am I going to tell you how to tell other people to translate. But I am going to try to tell you why nobody can tell you how to translate, and why this is a great bonus for the integration of translation studies into comparative literature and even into literary theory.

I am not going to talk about any of the old standby's: the impossibility of translation, the untranslatable, (whether connected with the *Geist* of a given language or not) equivalence (whether static or dynamic), the *tertium comparationis* between original and translation, the ontological status of a translation compared to that of the original, fidelity and freedom, version and adaptation, and any other evergreens I might have forgotten.

What, you might then say, is there left to talk about in that case? For all of the topics I have just listed have dominated much of recent writing on the translation of literature–recent academic writing that is, which has not proved to be of overmuch use to practising translators, and which has also not succeeded in bringing translation closer to the center of comparative literature or literary theory. On the contrary: they have left it squarely (and unfairly) in the periphery, where so many in academic tend to think it belongs, anyway.

And yet translation, translations are a fact of life in literature, they possess a reality that cannot be denied, and they play a very obvious and important part in the evolution and interpenetration of literatures. They should be given the attention they deserve, and which has been withheld from them until recently.

It has been withheld from them by a critical practice and a theoretical thinking about literature that set great store by interpretation. First the "right" interpretation of a text, and later on, as it was getting farther and farther away from the Biblical hermeneutics that spawned it, transferring the "sacred" nature of the Bible to secular texts as it did so, "novel", "stimulating", "thought-provoking", "interesting" interpretations, now more generally called "readings" of a text.

The number of such interpretations is as unlimited as human ingenuity itself. They can be produced more or less at will, or even whim, and they can be applauded by those who share the writer's (or should I say reader's) assumptions, and decried by those who do not. Just as the number of translations of a text is, theoretically, as unlimited as human ingenuity

itself, and just as translations are applauded by those who share the translator's assumptions (think of critics and readers well disposed towards the modernist trend in poetry in connection with POUND's *Propertius*) and decried by those who do not (think of classical philologists in connection with the same translation).

All the more wonder, then, that the type of thinking about literature I refer to has fairly consistently denigrated translation, and just as consistently elevated criticism, presumably because translation is "not original", whereas criticism is, and also because translation is quite openly seen to tamper with the "sacred" text, whereas criticism is not. Yet both activities can, quite literally, be pursued and commented on *ad infinitum*. As such, they play at least a socially somewhat constructive part: they are instrumental in the awarding of Ph.D's, and in the promotion of academics, as well as occasionally making literature accessible to the general reader.

The potentially unlimited nature of these activities makes them somewhat incapable of description. Or, in other words, they tend not to bring us much closer to an answer to the question of how literature works and how it develops. Instead we tend to get the latest fad spawning the latest articles, in which literature is used as a quarry containing materials that can be used to shore up the fad in question, rather than that the fad sheds much light on the question I just asked and which, supposedly occupies the minds of those studying and teaching literature.

One thinks, in this respect, of the latest philosopher or the latest psychologist "turning" to literature–by which is usually meant little more than a few carefully selected texts, just as carefully divorced from their social, economic and historical context. Nobody will deny the right to do this, but the results do not belong to literary studies, they belong elsewhere.

It is my contention that the activities referred to will not bring us any closer to an answer if we keep looking at them in relative isolation, as is still the case in a paradigm for literary studies dominated by the concept of interpretation, rather than as part of a system. Literature has been conceived in terms of a system before, probably first explicitly so in the work of the Russian Formalists, especially TYNJANOV. This notion has since been explicated by VODIÈKA between the two world wars, and by scholars like TANAKA, SLAWINSKI,

SCHMIDT in more recent years. The notion of system is also implicitly inherent in much Marxist and sociological criticism and the criticism linked of late with *Rezeptionsästhetik*. It has received its most seminal formulation in the work of the Tel Aviv "school" around ITAMAR EVEN-ZOHAR, in whose footsteps I follow.

Literature–or a given "national" literature–is a system embedded in the environment of a society. I make use of a few concepts borrowed from General Systems Theory to make the matter a little clearer. Literature is a contrived system, i.e. it consists of both texts, and the people who produce, read, disseminate texts. When I say "literature is a system" I mean of course that I use certain of these concepts as a heuristic model to make sense of the bewildering variety of phenomena subsumed under the term "literature", not that this model actually *exists*. The system is used as a map to make sense of a territory. It should not be confused with the territory. Its rather abstractly phrased general characteristics should be applied with great flexibility to actual cases. In other words–and this is the important differential–"literature", a literature is not just a collection of (more or less sacred) texts, it also comprises the people who do things to these texts, who write them and, to coin a phrase, *refract* them. By restricting "literature" to a series of texts, sometimes linked with the biographies of their authors, it is relatively easy for those working within the dominant paradigm of literary studies to separate certain texts as "great", "prophetic", "significant" and to deal with these texts only, to the exclusion of all others.

A refraction is any text, produced on the basis of another, with the intention of adapting that other text to a certain ideology (SCHILLER, e.g., "*als Kampfgenosse Hitlers*", or the Hamlet who suffers from an Oedipus complex) or to a certain poetics (VOLTAIRE'S *Othello* in alexandrines, and minus Desdemona's offensive handkerchief, or CHRISTOPHER LOGUE'S *Patrocleia*) and, usually, to both. Refractions are made to influence the way in which readers receive a text.

Refractions can take many forms. Think of the way in which each of us comes into contact with a classic in his or her own literature. First there is the comic strip, then the version of children, then the extract in school and college anthologies, the film version, the TV serial etc. Classics from other literatures are "appropriated" in the same way, but here we must add translation as a form of refraction among many. In both cases we also have

histories of literature at our disposal (of the summary-cum-interpretation type, mostly) and critical articles, in almost unlimited supply.

Refractions are made under certain constraints, both ideological (in the widest sense of that word) and poetological. Why? Because the literary system has both a control mechanism and a dominant "code", which lays down what is acceptable and what is not. Some people in the literary system act as patrons. They can be individuals (MAECENAS comes to mind, LOUIS XIV, the Chinese and Japanese emperors) or institutions (the Roman Catholic or Protestant Churches, the fascist or the communist party). Patronage consists of at least three components: an ideological one, an economic one (assuring the livelihood of the writer) and a status component (providing that writer with a certain position in society). Sometimes, as in Tudor England, status is more important than money: writers prefer to circulate their manuscripts at court, rather than have them printed to be "sold in the streets".

Most literary systems we know have operated under a relatively undifferentiated patronage during by far the longest period of their existence. It is indeed somewhat sobering to reflect that most of the texts acclaimed as "classic" have been produced under these circumstances. In other words: the patron represents the dominant ideology, and also has the power to bestow money and status. A relatively differentiated patronage begins to operate with the rise of the Enlightenment State in Western Europe, and is more and more accentuated as that state develops into a liberal capitalist society. Different ideologies are tolerated side by side–provided they do not directly threaten the foundations of the society and compete within limits set by the state, which may be able to declare certain themes (such as sex) taboo for a relatively long time. Economic considerations (the profit motif) play an increasingly bigger part, and status is no longer bestowed by one individual or one institution. The three components that build up patronage together no longer rest in the same hands, and all kinds of permutations become possible.

Both producers of original work *and* producers of refractions operate under the same constraints of patronage, just as they operate under the same poetological constraints. Historically (and it should be stressed that both patronage configurations and a poetics are historical, changeable entities, by no means fixed and immutable), a poetics is the codification, whether explicit or, as in the Chinese and Japanese systems, through the use of

exemplary models collected in anthologies, of the dominant practice in the formative phase of a system. Hence mimesis as the dominant concept in the Western system based primarily on the drama, and the relative absence of that concept in all other systems, based primarily on the lyric.

Patrons rarely enforce an ideology or a poetics themselves. That is the task of refractors: teachers, critics, academics, from the *Querelle des Anciencs et des Modernes* to the book review and the blurb, the reading and the appearance on the talk show. Refractions contribute to the dominant position of a certain poetics, and to the subsequent canonization of certain authors and texts as exemplary within that poetics. Once dominant, a poetics necessarily exerts a conservative influence on the system, often remaining in place long after the patronage configuration (the Greek city state, the courts of the emperors of China or Japan, or of the Sultan) that fostered it has disappeared. Maybe the most obvious example of this tenacity is the survival, often unadulterated, as in the case of the Japanese *tanka,* or through mixing and adaptation, as in the case of the sonnet, of genres and forms that originated in times long gone by, often also outliving the very poetics that brought them into being, and being taken up again by its successors. A poetics therefore may be said to have both an inventory (genre, characters, types) and a functional component, which is more closely related to ideology, and therefore relatively more change-prone, whereas the inventory component remains, on the whole, less subject to change. After changes in patronage, or in the service of competing patronage groups in a relatively differentiated system, refractions contribute to the subversion of the dominant poetics in favor of another, and to the canonization of different authors and texts. The two forms of refraction most influential in this struggle are criticism and translation, since they play the most important part in the teaching of literature.

Refractions, then, are not "neutral, objective, generally accepted" descriptions (in the case of criticism) or renditions (in the case of translation) their proponents would have us believe (and their opponents disbelieve). In other words, when we are first introduced to our literature in school, we are taught to read it and "experience it" through the refraction of a particular ideology and a particular poetics. German schoolchildren between 1933 and 1945 were told that HEINE's *Loreley* was an, "anonymous ballad" and university students of

English literature remained relatively ignorant of the existence of JOYCE's *Ulysses*. Indeed, the subversion of canonized authors had been radical: their books were burnt, just as the books of those producing under the new patronage would be taken out of public libraries after 1945.

Needless to say, every patronage configuration, every poetics, will tend to establish itself as "eternal" or "unescapable", even though they are, in practice, limited in time. We are, at this moment, witnessing the decline and fall of an essentially Romanticism-based poetics, which has been dominant over the last one hundred and eighty years.

Refractions are part of the struggle between a dominant patronage and poetics on the one hand, and its challengers on the other. It is important to remember, at this stage, that the constraints I mentioned above do not operate in a mechanistic way, that both producers of original texts and refractors are "aware" of these constraints, and that they can in theory devise their own strategies to deal with them, ranging from enthusiastic or grudging acceptance to outright rejection, which is the beginning of attempts at subversion. It should also be remembered that refractors are human beings, and as such liable to certain forms of idiosyncratic behavior that transcend all categories, systemic or not.

Refractions, and let us come back to that form of refractions we started out with, translations, cannot be adequately described if the man or woman who tries to describe them is, or remains part of the literary system and that system only. If he or she is in favor of a given poetics and/or a given ideology, he or she will, most likely, damn or praise in accordance with that poetics, that ideology, thus effectively contributing to the endless spiral described at the outset of this paper, which does not really admit of any progression in any direction.

In order to describe literature, the way it works, the role of translations (as one type of refraction among many) play in it, the observer should choose his standpoint outside the literary system, describing it, not trying to influence it, and inside the system of science, not ideology–only to find that the scientific system, too, has its patronage, and that the articulation of science has a certain historically changeable "poetics" which varies according to different disciplines. It is then up to him or her to devise his or her strategy *vis-à-vis* those constraints, as far as that is possible.

Translations, then should no longer be seen as a matter of dictionary *cum* grammar *cum* drudge or genius. They should also not be analysed in isolation, either the other main type of refraction, criticism (what is printed and published as a "translation" is often a combination of the two, with criticism playing the part of the "introduction") or from the poetics, dominant or alternative, of the period in which the translation is produced. The ideological and poetological constraints under which they were produced should be explicitated, and the strategy devised by the translator to deal with these constraints should be described: does he or she use his or her translation to adpat the foreign work to the native system as such, or to rival poetics and/or ideologies? What, in other words, are the intentions with which he or she introduces foreign elements into the native system? Equivalence, fidelity, freedom, etc. will then be seen as functions of a strategy adopted under certain constraints, not as absolute requirements that should or should not be imposed or respected. It will then be seen that "great" ages of translation occur whenever a given literature recognizes another as more prestigious (German/French in the seventeenth century) and tries to emulate it. Literatures will be seen to have less need of translation when they are convinced of their own superiority. It will also be seen that translations are often used (think of the Imagists) to challenge de dominant poetics of a certain period in a certain system, especially when the alternative poetics cannot use its own work to do so, because that work is not yet written. In extreme cases, where the dominant poetics is very strong, original work will pass itself off as a translation (think of MCPHERSON's *Ossian*, e.g.) in order to acquire a certain manoeuvering space.

And it will be seen that genius does not always triumph in the end (presumably through some mysterious concept of osmosis) but that a foreign writer of genius is painstakingly introduced into the native system, *via* all kinds of compromises, and that it can take a long time for him or her to become established, let alone canonized, in that native system. He or she is introduced *via* a number of misunderstandings and misrepresentations, as seen from the vantage point of his or her own literature; hence a predictable hue and cry, which totally loses from sight the fact that these misunderstandings and misrepresentations are, for the largest part, a function of the relationship of need, superiority, relative equality etc. between two literatures at a given moment in time. This state of affairs can easily be

negatively illustrated by the neglect of writers of genius belonging to the Islamic system in the Western one. Translations, have, in this case, been nowhere near as many as translations from, say, Chinese or Japanese.

It will be obvious that this kind of observation will not lead me to call for "better" translations of writers belonging to that system, for "better" is an empty word by now, as are "good" and "bad" when used of translation. Translators make mistakes only on the linguistic level. The rest is strategy. Translators can be taught languages and a certain awareness of how literature functions. The rest is up to them: they can place their translations squarely inside the literary system and, in doing so, try to influence it, or they can produce translations that never escape altogether from the poetics of their time, but use them in a more dispassionate way, to make foreign work accessible for its own sake, and as a heuristic tool for the study of literature in all its forms.

That strategy plays a very important part in the evolution part in the evolution of literature: not only by introducing new texts, authors and devices (think of JOHANN HEINRICH VOSS and his hexameter in German literature) but by introducing them as part of a wider design to influence the way a literature is going (think simply of translations from the Western into non-Western systems from 1850 onwards). Forgive me if I shall therefore not, as is customary and pointless, end with a call for better translations, but with a call for a better study (and I am aware of the constraints involved while I say this) of translations as one of the elements that will bring us closer to an answer to the question of how literature works.

I am also aware that that very question may sound suspect to many, for that way formalism lies, and doesn't literature have a message to impart, knowledge to give, experience to share? Of course it does, and, if I may end (really end this time) with a counter-question: shall we not know and appreciate better what it does if we also know how it does it?

Source : *Babel*, vol. 29, n° 2, 1983, p. 70-75.