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PROFILE: THE GÖTTINGEN APPROACH TO TRANSLATION STUDIES

Although most writers throughout the centuries have been engaged in the art and craft of translation, the field of literary translation has received very little attention in the halls of colleges and universities. Many instructors, especially those in modern language departments, cannot accept the reality that a work of literature from a foreign culture can be read and interpreted in translation. Nevertheless, history clearly confirms that major innovative ideas and modes of perception have travelled from one culture to another through the act of translation, and transfer often resulted in the revitalization of ways of seeing in the new culture.

The field of Translation Studies is still in its infancy, yet it promises to become a major force in promoting cross-cultural communication in a rapidly growing global environment. At various institutions, both in the United States and abroad, serious research projects are being pursued to lay the foundation for a systematic approach to the formulation of translation theories and methodologies.

In general, translation centers, programs, and courses in the United States approach literary translation from the point of view of the practicing translator. Students of literature and translation engage in the actual translation of literary texts from other languages, frequently texts of contemporary writers, and receive academic degrees for their translations. The concept of the translation workshop is a particularly American one and has to be seen in context with creative writing workshops that are offered in almost all English departments.

History of the Göttingen Translation Research Project

One of the most neglected fields of research in the context of literary history is a comprehensive assessment of the literature in translation. Scholarly works on the history of the short story, the novel, women's writing, gay and lesbian works, to name only a few, exist. However, it would be difficult to locate a "history" of translations. In a world that has, by necessity, to rely heavily on global interaction, translation plays an important role in

facilitating cultural exchanges and communication.

Obviously, translation is not just a matter of language. For any translation to happen, the translator must address the problems of different languages, the problems of cultural “otherness,” the philological changes, and the historical dimensions of texts.

Thus, by its very nature, translation research must rely on interdisciplinary approaches. The absence of a history of translations prompted a group of researchers to launch the unique Research Center for Literary Translation at the Georg-August- Universität in Göttingen, Germany, in 1985 (Sonderforschungsbereich: Die Literarische Übersetzung).

From the very beginning, it was obvious that such a massive undertaking had to rely heavily on the cooperation of a number of scholars and researchers from different departments. Under the directorship of Armin Paul Frank, a team of scholars and research assistants was formed. In view of the fact that the history of translations had previously not been dealt with in any comprehensive way, the directors of the center decided to limit the realm of their scholarly investigations to translations into German from the 18th to the 20th centuries.

During the initial phase (1985-1987) the group decided to focus on topics such as “intermediate translations” (mainly of English texts translated into German via French during the 18th century) and on “multiple translations” into German of American short stories, Polish plays, and British and Swedish novels. Furthermore, research was done on the translation of an entire oeuvre by one author. The second phase of the research project (1988-1990) dealt with an investigation of individual translators translating from more than one source language and literature. The research program for 1991-1993 was dedicated to the exploration of “otherness” and how the understanding of otherness can facilitate the crossing of borders into different languages, literatures, and cultures. The last phase, from 1994-1996, focused on “Die Erforschung der literarischen Übersetzung als Herausforderung an die Literaturwissenschaft: hermeneutische, historische und systematische Aspekte” the exploration of literary translation as a challenge for literary scholarship: hermeneutic, historical, and structural aspects].

Anthologies of literature in translation

In general, very little is known about how texts cross the borders from one language and culture into another. A series of questions come to mind: Who decides which writers deserve to be translated? Who is ultimately responsible for choosing specific works to be translated? And who decides whether a translator is appropriate for the translation of a particular work and in what form should the translation appear in the new language? To shed some light on these questions, the principal investigators of the Göttingen Project decided to study the history and the structures of poetry anthologies published between 1848 and 1915. One of their foremost concerns was to determine how these anthologies shaped the concepts of “national” as well as “world” literatures. The particularly exciting aspect of this perspective resided in the recognition, early on, that convincing answers could only be found if, in addition to purely literary considerations, economic, socio-cultural, political, biographical, linguistic, and aesthetic aspects were included. Furthermore, how did the contents of anthologies throughout history contribute to the shaping of literary canons and the expansion of world literature?

The research process started with the assessment of verse collections of one or several authors and anthologies featuring poems of European and non-European origin in German translation. One of the questions that guided the direction of thinking in the ongoing research was: What works by what poets included in a given anthology were translated by what translators? Attention was also paid to the arrangement of the poems, which poems were repeated in subsequent anthologies, and which writers were prominently displayed. In addition, editorial perspectives and strategies were taken into consideration. From the presentation of individual authors within the same language, the landscape of investigation was widened to include the reconstruction of the historical backgrounds and contexts for anthologies of international poetry in German translation. That procedure led automatically to a comparative study of the content of anthologies within the original language and the authors of the original language collected in the anthologies of the translated language. ‘These studies showed that major differences occurred in that transfer, since the source language perspectives differed greatly from those of the target language. The researchers never lost sight of their guiding questions: *What was translated, from which language or*

literature or culture or poet? By whom, when, how, why?

As for the selection criteria, editors of multi-language anthologies generally considered the literary quality their most important guiding principle. Common to all anthologies of literature translated from different languages into German and published during several decades after 1848 was the fact that one author was always represented with a greater selection than all the others.

Another project within the context of world literature was dedicated to a comparative study of anthologies of American, British, and Hungarian poetry. First, the research team assessed what authors and what works by these authors had been anthologized in American, British, and Hungarian anthologies published until 1915. Then, the team looked at the anthologies of their literatures that were published in German translation during the same time. The result of that investigation showed, for example, that German anthologies of American literature clearly offer a much narrower selection of American poetry.

The results of the anthology project were collected in *International Anthologies of Literature in Translation*, edited by Harald Kittel. Twenty scholars have contributed a wide range of topics to this collection, ranging from anthologies of French Medieval literature, to anthologies of German poetry in translation published in Britain between 1930 and 1990, to anthologies of translated poetry in Argentina, to anthologies of translated American short stories in Turkey, and to anthologies that have appeared in journal form. In his introduction, Kittel gives a conceptual direction to the presence and function of anthologies. “While anthologies may be the most representative and most telling indicators of current preferences and of change in the taste of individuals, cultural elites or the general public, they also reflect changing attitudes toward the writings of the past in one country, and even toward the literary achievements of other nations.” Since the investigation of anthologies included research into anthologies published in the source language and those published in translation, an intriguing insight emerged from the comparison of these two kinds of anthologies. Anthologies of translated literature may perform entirely different cultural tasks from anthologies of indigenous literature. The motives for the selection of specific poets and their poems might be quite different if seen through the eyes of editors from the source language in comparison to those anthologies prepared in the translated language. In many instances,

the selection may represent a country's translation culture at a particular historical moment.

One article of particular interest to an English-speaking audience is Holger Klein's analysis of "Anthologies of German Poetry in Translation Published in Britain 1930-1990," which also contains an elaborate bibliographical listing of anthologies of German poetry published in England from 1930 to 1990. In his article, Klein discusses the various criteria that can shape the final outcome of a particular anthology. Guiding structural principles might be chronology, genre, theme, ideologies, aesthetic quality, or the conceptual orientation of an editor. In general, translated anthologies can be classified into either monolingual (only the translation being printed) or bilingual. Once Klein had established his statistical overview, he was able to draw some conclusions with respect to the nature of these anthologies. He found out that most anthologies had been edited by translators and that the poets appeared in chronological order by birthdate. Furthermore, his study also confirmed that anthologies of translation hardly ever reach a second edition. Most of the anthologies of German poetry in translation published in Britain between 1930 and 1990 saw only one edition.

One of the underlying concepts of the Göttingen Project is the recognition that considerations that focus either on the source-language text or on the target language are ultimately not conducive to the formulation of a clearly defined translation methodology. Based on a historical-descriptive study of translation that focuses on the subtle transformations that take place in the transfer of a literary text from one culture to another, the possibility of formulating a well-founded translation theory emerges. Frank addresses this aspect of translation in the following way: "As far as the historical-descriptive study of translation is concerned, there is no doubt that a source-text based approach is inadequate. But by the evidence of our findings, the exclusively target-side based approach recently promoted for historical translation research is not the answer." Therefore, a transfer-oriented approach is the more appropriate one—"an approach that is squarely based on the literary, linguistic, and cultural differences between source and target sides that need to be mediated by an act of translational transfer" (A.P. Frank and Birgit Bödeker. "T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'" in *Interculturality and the Historical Study of Literary Translations*, p. 61).

Many objects and traditions are culture-specific, or even language-specific, and,

therefore, cannot find an exact equivalence in the new language. As assiduously as the translator might try to find exact equivalencies, any source-language text undergoes a major transformation through the act of translation. In the transfer of texts, translators try to accurately reflect the original but by doing so they also create differences. The translated text assumes an existence in the new language that is different from the overall atmosphere of the original. What becomes apparent in the act of translation is the continuous recognition that the translator points to that which is foreign in the other language, and that foreignness becomes a point of attraction for the reader in the new language. Ultimately, the foreign will enrich and revitalize ways of perceiving the world in the context of the translator's culture.

Words and expressions of objects are culture-specific but can easily take on a totally different connotation in the new language. In their article "Trans-culturality and Interculturalism in French and German Translations of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*," authors Frank and Bödeker cite a very convincing example of how quickly distortions or even misunderstandings can be introduced through the translation of a culture-specific word that takes on a totally different primary meaning in German. The example deals with a line of T.S. Eliot's poem in which he refers to a London street "along the Strand." Most of the German translators chose the same solution by maintaining the word "Strand," which means "along the beach" in German. This example shows how important it is to direct translation methodologies to the subtle transformation that occurs in the transfer of cultural phenomena, which then reaffirms that translation studies build a foundation for the comparative study of cultures.

[The impact of the Göttingen Translation Research Project](#)

The principal investigators of the Göttingen Translation Research Project and their research team have established a solid and convincing scholarly frame for the historical and cultural study of translations. The questions and methodologies they have established confirm that Translation Studies will play a major role in the study of literature and the humanities in the future. Translation responds to the complexity of our contemporary world. By its very nature, translation promotes interdisciplinary thinking. The transfer of situations from one cultural context into another through the medium of language rapidly reveals that the process

of translation demands an interdisciplinary orientation. To understand the delicate forces that make translation possible, scholars must enlarge their exploration beyond purely language considerations. Equally important are the existing literary and cultural contacts among countries; the political and social structures of one nation that become attractive to another nation; the cultural background of the translators that is responsible for certain interpretive perspectives in the translation; the specific linguistic differences between two languages and the degree of their reproducibility; the etymological and philological developments of words and their contents within a given tradition; the study of the foreign and the possibility and impossibility of recreating the foreign in the environment of a new language. The Göttingen Project has brought these questions to the forefront of discussion and has provided the scholarly community with tools and methods for approaching and possibly solving these cultural problems. Even though a major portion of the research was focused on the transfer of foreign literatures into German, the paradigms that emerged from this research can be considered as models for similar research projects in other languages. Thus, the Göttingen Project constitutes a major scholarly advance not currently within the parameters of Translation Studies, and it also reconfirms that translation methodologies promote and revitalize interdisciplinary thinking and approaches in literature and the humanities. The integrative nature that guides translation research could be seen as a driving force to offer interpretive approaches to our contemporary world, which suffers from the effects of discontinuity and fragmentation.

These are some of the basic research concepts that were pursued by the members of the Göttingen Translation Project. In addition to numerous symposia and panel discussions, the major flow of dissemination for the research that has been pursued during the last 12 years has been documented by a series of book publications, including 19 volumes dedicated to translation problems of modern plays entitled “Forum: Modernes Theater.” The second series comprises *Göttinger Beiträge zur Internationalen Übersetzungsforschung*. Furthermore, the principal investigators of the project have also published several volumes entitled “Die Literarische Übersetzung” in which they record the funding, the research

procedures, and the results of their findings from 1985 to the present.¹

Source : *Translation Review*, n° 53, 1997, p. 1-4.

¹ A detailed listing of all the publications connected with the Göttingen Translation Research Project may be obtained on diskette in WordPerfect by contacting the ALTA offices.