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Literature and Globalization: Some Thoughts on Translation and the Transnational

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Abstract

This article argues that it is time to re-embed the study of literature in the larger project of “world literature” – literature conceived ecumenically, and recognized as the best means of allowing the comparative study of societies and cultures in a globalized world. World literature, as David Damrosch has argued, is a kind of writing that *gains* in translation, enabling texts to transcend their culture of origin. Translation gives us a unique purchase on the global scope of the world’s cultures, past and present.

I. Literature and the Academy

Departments of literature are feeling the cold winds of change. All the efforts to renew the discipline in the native or foreign languages seem only to confirm and deepen the sense of crisis, as the proliferating alternatives wilt in the harsh climate of the commercialization of the university. It would be wrong, however, to attribute the present malaise solely to an unfriendly environment. It has a deeper root in the nationalization of literary studies, that is, in the founding ideological assumptions that governed the establishment of separate, segregated philologies, assumptions that persist above all in the form of institutional inertia and manifest themselves in the jealous defence of territory by Departments of English, French, German, etc. even when they are subsumed into Schools of Languages and Literatures. The nationalization of language, literature and culture in the age of nationalism appealed to the self-evidence of linguistic originality as well as the inescapable plurality of “national” languages. The study of national languages and literatures, sheltered within the national institution of the university, emerged chastened but unchallenged from the twentieth century’s apocalypse of European nationalism. The postwar challenge came from below, driven by the rapid expansion of the university in the 1960s. However, as we know, institutional inertia (rationalized as preserving what was intended for the few in the mass university) seldom yields to anything other than pressure from above, generally perceived as hostile interventions bent on destroying the accumulated wisdoms of disciplinary practice. However justified resistance to bureaucratic fiat may be, it is nevertheless the case that our crisis coincides with a profound mutation of the university. The demise of the University of Culture, based on the German model of *Bildung*, goes together with the accelerating globalization of the contemporary University of Excellence. Bill Readings argues that historically the integrity of the modern university has been linked to the rise and decline of the nation-state, which it served by promoting and protecting the idea of a national culture. Now that national culture no longer needs promoting, universities are turning into transnational corporations, in which the idea of culture has given way to the bureaucratically-driven discourse of excellence. This coincidence of external pressures and internal malaise makes the question of rethinking and reforming the study of literature in the academy all the more urgent. Hence the present proliferation of competing alternatives, of which the current favourites are cultural studies, Anglo-American or German style, communication and media studies and various permutations thereof. It would not be too unkind to characterize them as

programmes in search of content and method, to be read either as symptoms of the disintegration of the national paradigm or as signs of new, emerging paradigms. Certainly, the cultural and communicative turn of literary studies corresponds to the globalizing imperative of the university. Self-interrogation and external scrutiny thus correspond, at least negatively, in the need to go beyond the national.

These introductory comments will be familiar to colleagues in departments of literature. And yet, while we sense more or less acutely the exhaustion of the national paradigm as a basis for teaching and research, we have not perhaps fully grasped the blindness inherent in the nationalization of literary studies. It is a blindness that belongs to the institution and not to the object of study: writers and readers in English, French, Spanish or Italian. We cannot blame writers and readers for the artificial boundaries that came to define the study of literature within the limits of the national. We must therefore distinguish between our practice as readers and our practice as professionals of the segregation of literary studies into “national” containers. Although we like to think of departments of comparative literature as the necessary complement to departments of national literatures, they have remained marginal within the university, due not least to the fact that their complementary role is tied to the same founding premise of linguistic originality. As much as we would like as teachers to demand and expect a reading knowledge of two or more foreign languages, such demands, especially in Anglo-American universities, effectively deter all but a few students. Moreover, we should ask ourselves what our own literary education would look like if we confined our reading to texts in their original languages. While comparative literature may be the bad conscience of the national paradigm, translation is and remains the blind spot of the study of literature in its nationally or comparatively institutionalized forms. Susan Sontag is right to remind us that translation is “the circulatory system of the world’s literatures” (177).

The ideology of linguistic originality together with the expressive understanding of literature and culture as an inner, authentic essence – underlined and reinforced by copyright – combined to devalue the very concept of translation and with it the transnational, occluding the hybrid nature of “national” identity. And yet, who could deny the fundamental role that translation has played in the formation of national languages; the prime example for Europe (apart from the romance languages) must be translations of the Bible. Moreover, we must be careful not to subsume geographical, political, and cultural identities under the one heading of the national. Norman Davies’s *The Isles* is a salutary corrective to the unifying, teleological prejudices of all national histories, whether of Great Britain or France or Spain, in that the author’s and the reader’s interest diminishes as the fascinating story of the linguistic and political diversity of the isles contracts to the perspective of the United Kingdom over the last three centuries. Literature in Spain is no less multilingual: in his *Literature of the Spanish People* Gerald Brenan includes works in Spanish, Arabic, Catalan, Galician and Portuguese. If, on the other hand, we speak of literature in English, it is difficult to resist Bruce Clunies Ross’s argument that contemporary poetry in English belongs to a “language which exists as a cluster of variants, just as it was in the Middle Ages, but its range now extends beyond linguistic variations in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England to include affiliations with the postcolonial world and the United States as well as interactions with non-European languages.” In its latest evolution as a world language, English is now to be understood as an extended transnational range of variants comprising a single language, in which the vitality of poetry in English derives not from a centre but from a globally devolved network of dispersed influences. In other words, the centre-periphery model, frequently used to frame postcolonial literature, fails to register “the polycentric devolution of the English domain,” in which literature can be transnational without translation (V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie). Although the British empire and present American hegemony go far to explain the global spread of English, they cannot explain the diverse developments of the English language or of poetry in English in the second half of the twentieth century (Clunies Ross 293-96).

Writing of literature in India, Francesco Orsini distinguishes between the regional, the

national, and the international, with their respective readers, publishers, journals and public spheres. The regional encompasses writing in regional languages, the national refers to literature in English, and the international to literature in English that becomes part of global culture (transnational without translation). Orsini takes exception to critics such as Pascale Casanova who stress the inequalities of globalizing literary practice over the last two hundred years. Orsini is right in preferring the interactive model of the two-way traffic of appropriation to the centre-periphery model. If the local may be defined as that which resists translation, this in no way excludes a perspective that transcends the local. That is to say, regional, national, and international constitute different but not necessarily exclusive frames of reference, since each of the terms is comparative. It is just as important to approach the global in terms of its national or regional appropriation – or rejection – as the national from a global perspective. That is, complex processes of cultural appropriation or rejection both presuppose and precede intra-lingual translation.

Histories of literature have never really transcended the age of nationalism of which they were not only the products but also culturally formative influences. They possess as their enabling and disabling birthright an imputed subject and a selective vision, in which a retrospective narrative teleology is allied to a centralizing perspective. The institutionalization of the study of literature in segregated departments is thus necessarily blind, for without this blindness how could a national corpus of works in English in the United Kingdom, in French in France, and so on be determined? A national literature stands and falls with its exclusionary boundaries, just as a colonial literature presupposes an imperial centre. And just as a colonial literature only becomes post-colonial through the deconstruction of the asymmetry of centre and periphery, and a national literature only becomes post-national through a deconstruction of its foundational assumptions, so a post-national literature only becomes transnational by deconstructing the linguistic asymmetry of original and translation. Only then are we in a position to arrive at a concept of literature defined not in terms of national exclusion but of transnational inclusion, that is, a concept with the same global reach as painting or music. Departments of the visual arts or of music are as common as departments of literature are uncommon. For very obvious reasons, it will be objected. Even if we abandon the national *raison d'être* of departments of literature, we cannot simply jettison the premise of linguistic originality, which is ignored but seldom queried by cultural or communication studies. There is no such thing as “language” corresponding to “literature,” other than as empty generic signifiers. Nevertheless, literature is sustained by the agency of translation.

II. Literature in Translation

Translation is one of the tools we need to make sense of the world beyond our usual field of vision. Translation promotes cosmopolitanism; it protects us from provincialism. And it plays a vital role in literary culture. Edith Grossman, in her valuable little book *Why Translation Matters*, shows how the very notion of literature would be inconceivable without translation, citing Goethe's belief that without outside influences national literatures rapidly stagnate. Authors have always borrowed and been influenced by writers in other languages. Milan Kundera, in his personal essay on the novel, *The Curtain*, first published in French in 2007, argues precisely for a kind of literary cosmopolitanism. In his view, there are two contexts in which works of art can be understood: the “small” context of the nation and the “large” context of the world, encompassing the supranational history of art forms themselves. Provincialism is the inability to imagine one's national culture in the large context, and Kundera thinks it has done great damage to our understanding of literary history:

[...] because a novel is bound up with its language, in nearly every university in the world it is studied almost exclusively in the small, national context. Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit, and I continue to insist that this is an irreparable intellectual loss. Because, if we consider just the history of the novel, it was to Rabelais that Lawrence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot, it was from Cervantes that Fielding drew

constant inspiration, it was against Fielding that Stendhal measure himself, it was Flaubert's tradition living on in Joyce, it was through his reflection on Joyce that Hermann Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the possibility of departing from tradition to "write another way." [...] [G]eographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace the *large context* of world literature, the only approach that can bring out a novel's *aesthetic value* – that is to say: the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear; the novelty of form it has found. (35-36)

Literature, Kundera is saying, has always been world literature. The entire history of literature, it might be argued, is informed by a process of transmission; a great work of literature, indeed any text, is able to enrich itself by generating new meanings as it enters new contexts. Translation could be seen in this perspective as the secret metaphor of all literary communication.

But the way translation is viewed, especially in stereotypical terms, and especially in the English-speaking world, remains quite negative, despite everything that has been written about translation by theorists, writers and translators themselves. Translation is often seen as an unfortunate necessity at best, and at worst a terrible act of treachery. The most common stereotype is that translation always entails loss. Esther Allen has drawn attention to an excellent example of the ingrained nature of this view of translation as loss: the current Wikipedia entry for George Steiner's book about translation, *After Babel*. The entry quotes Steiner's famous dictum: "To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate" – a statement that places translation at the heart of perception itself, and thus at the centre of all intellectual processes. However, the entry goes on to summarize the meaning of *After Babel* in the following terms: "Real translation between languages is impossible because the original meaning is always lost: the translated text is tainted by the translator's own cultural beliefs, knowledge and attitudes." As Allen points out, to say of translation that "the original meaning is *always lost*" is to express a kind of medieval yearning for an absolute language that can exist without regard to context or culture. Despite the multicultural reality of the contemporary world, the statement reflects a kind of nostalgia for the monolingual unity that preceded Babel, and a degree of frustration with the linguistic diversity and the debased impostures of translation that result from it. To go on to say that the translated text is tainted by the translator's own beliefs, knowledge and attitudes is to deny or seek to refute the process of transmission, the intertextuality, that informs the entire history of literature, and the ability of a great work of literature, or any text, to enrich itself by generating new meanings as it enters new contexts.

One way of redressing the view of translation as inherently inadequate is to foster a clearer appreciation of the fact that every translation of a text is a *performance* of that text as reflected in the selection and sequence of words on a page. If we are able to appreciate the dimension of *performance* in relation to music or theatre, why not also in relation to translation? The more good translations and retranslations are produced, the easier it will be to effect an appreciation of translation as performance. An encouraging sign in recent years is that retranslations of Proust, Tolstoy, Cervantes and other classics have engendered extensive and sometimes heated debate about the prowess (or otherwise) of the translators. It is certainly the case that, in relation to the so-called classics, there is an increasing willingness to discuss the translator's performance. The translators of Proust, for example: Scott Moncrieff in the 1920s, Terence Kilmartin in the 1980s, D.J. Enright in the 1990s, Lydia Davies, James Grieve and the other members of the Penguin "team" in the last decade – all compared in their ability to deal with the intricate twists and folds, the carefully modulated rhythms and shapes, of Proust's long sentences – his cadences, his register, his inflections. And the stakes could not be higher, in the sense that form translates thought: style *is* vision; if you don't get the style, you miss the vision.

A translation is a reading of a literary work, and it is a literary work. Translation sheds

light on and gives life to the work it translates. A translation is an expression, moreover, of the translator's creativity and cultural sensitivity. To the extent that we treat translators as creative writers whose work can greatly enrich the texts they translate, we will have better translators, better translations, and a better literary culture generally. Examples of excellent or brilliant translation performances are not hard to find. One such example is Julie Rose, the distinguished Sydney-based translator, whose new retranslation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* appeared in 2008. Rose has spoken eloquently in public discussion about what she called "the art of hearing the voice", by which she means the combination of all the elements that characterize a writer: "Voice encompasses a whole work, from personality to meaning. 'Hearing' the other person's voice, profoundly, viscerally, and dredging an answering voice up from out of the depths is the joy of the [translator's] job." Our invocation of Julie Rose leads us to another point about translation: the desirability of the translator's empowerment. By this I mean the translator's potential role, within a given literary culture, as a prominent spokesperson for a text in another language, not just by enlarging the readership of a book deemed to be important, but by proposing texts for translation and by talking publicly, and writing, critically and sympathetically, about texts from other languages. Julie Rose has made a significant contribution, we believe, to a reevaluation of Victor Hugo as a writer.

This point goes to the heart of the enterprise of literature itself. Literature itself is sustained by the agency of translation. The case for translation in these terms was made in a particularly compelling way by Susan Sontag in her 2002 St Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation ("The World as India"). The essential argument of her lecture was that a proper consideration of the art of literary translation is a claim for the value of literature itself.

My sense of what literature can be, my reverence for the practice of literature as a vocation, and my identification of the writer with the exercise of freedom – all these constituent elements of my sensibility are inconceivable without the books I read in translation from an early age. Literature was mental travel: travel into the past and to other countries. (Literature was the vehicle that could take you *anywhere*.) And literature was criticism of one's own reality, in the light of a better standard. (179)

The cultural importance of translation, thus stated, can't be overstated. And the importance of translation is particularly pronounced, of course, in relation to works written in less widely spoken languages. Without translation, the novelists Orhan Pamuk, Imre Kertész, José Saramago and Naguib Mahfouz, all Nobel Prize winners, would not be known outside their native countries – Turkey, Hungary, Portugal and Egypt respectively. And it's not just a question of high culture. It's an ethical, political, human question as well. The America of George W. Bush showed in many ways the dangers of being closed off from the rest of the world. Brian Castro, in a rather melancholy article in a special *Meanjin* issue on Translation in 2005, wrote:

If the 9/11 Commission found that the FBI had failed principally through a *lack of imagination* by not detecting the plots to demolish the World Trade Center, I would suggest that this failure of imagination stemmed directly from the fact that its members did not read foreign novels with small print runs that challenged their way of thinking. They could not imagine their way into inhabiting the Other through language. (8)

Translation plays an indispensable role in creating a space of real cultural encounter. And yet English translates very little, relatively speaking. Less than 3% of works published in the English-speaking world are translations, whereas the corresponding figure for a country like Sweden is in excess of 50%. Fewer works of foreign literature are being translated into English than twenty or thirty years ago. The essential point to make here is that that dismaying statistic, less than 3%, together with the persistence in the English-speaking world of a view of translation as loss, is fraught with danger: the danger of consolidating the global domination of English, accelerating the ever-dwindling number of world languages taught, and impoverishing non-

anglophone cultures by actually encouraging them to write in English in order to be heard by the rest of the world.

III. World literature

It is striking that Goethe baptised the idea of (a coming) world literature at the very time that the modern idea of national literatures was establishing itself. The connection between national and world literature is clearly to the fore in Goethe's anticipation in 1827 of a general world literature in his discussion of the French reception of his recently translated *Torquato Tasso*: "I, for my part, would like to draw the attention of my friends to the fact that I am convinced of a general world literature, in which an honourable role is reserved for us Germans. All nations look round for us, they praise, censure, adopt or dismiss, imitate and disfigure, understand or misunderstand us, open or close their hearts: we must receive this all with equanimity, since the whole is of great value to us" (Goethe 1). It is appropriate that Goethe sent a copy of *Ueber Kunst und Altertum*, in which his thoughts on world literature appeared, to his English translator Thomas Carlyle (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* had been published in 1824). In his letter to Carlyle he compares various forms of cultural translation to the exchange of currencies. The task of the translator is to act as mediator of this general intellectual trade, increasing mutual awareness by advancing mutual exchange. The translator as mediator thus plays the indispensable, if usually invisible role in the coming into being of world literature. His invisibility corresponds to the blind spot of departments of national and of comparative literature. Literature in translation is denied citizen rights in the national paradigm and that means in the university, with one partial exception: the Great Book courses for undergraduates at some American universities, as distinct from postgraduate courses in comparative literature. (We exclude from consideration the recent emergence of translation studies in departments of literature.)

We therefore arrive at the concept of national literature by a process of exclusion, to be diagnosed as a persistent, institutionalized dissociation of the national from the world republic of letters. In turn, we arrive at a definition of world literature in a similar exclusionary fashion: world literature is not a corpus of works, the imaginary sum of all national literatures, as assumed by Comparative Literature, which would be comparable to Malraux's imaginary museum of world art. Here we follow David Damrosch's definition of world literature as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translations or in their original language" (4). As a concept, world literature therefore signifies "not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading [. . .] a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (281). The study of world literature, according to Damrosch, does not consist of sampling a smorgasbord of works from all the world's written (and oral) cultures, nor of mastering a given canon of classics; rather, it concentrates on following the movement of works that travel well between contexts, eras, and languages. "The work of world literature exists on two planes at once: present in our world, it also brings us into a world very different from ours" (164). "World literature [he says] is always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture" (283). It is thus a kind of double refraction. And the crucial point from the perspective of translation is that world literature, thus conceived, is a kind of writing that *gains* in translation – acquiring new depths of meaning and horizons of interpretation, enabling texts to transcend their culture of origin. Translations, Damrosch argues, can give us a unique purchase on the global scope of the world's cultures, past and present. In the context of national literatures translation typically appears as loss, whereas in the context of world literature translation necessarily appears as gain in the sense that it is the means by which texts transcend their culture of origin (Damrosch 289). World literature is a function of relations; it is, as it were, the relationality, the translatability inscribed into the act of translation. The "translational" mode of reading thus generates in the minds of writers and readers the "great conversation of world literature" of which Goethe spoke in the early nineteenth century. If we are to understand world literature as a function

of translation, we cannot appeal, as Damrosch rightly insists, to Schleiermacher's or Gadamer's fusion of horizons. The translational mode involves rather a mutual estrangement of horizons, the enriching tension of the distant and the near, inherent in the two-way traffic of translation.

World literature may therefore be conceived as the reciprocal of translation/translatability, and if we are to avoid a circular definition of world literature, translation becomes the concept that demands definition, or rather unfolding, because we are dealing with a term whose semantic complexity exceeds its theorization. As the translation into Latin of Greek for metaphor, the term translation thus possesses besides the direct meaning of intralingual translation a culturally important range of metaphoric meanings. The following, by no means exhaustive list conveys something of the polysemy of the word, built around the root meaning of removing to another place: "to remove to heaven; to enrapture; to render into another language; to express in another artistic medium; to interpret; to transfer from one office to another (bishop); to transform; to renovate; to make new from old" (Chambers Dictionary). Translation is the act common to paraphrase and parody on the one hand and conversion, metamorphosis, transfiguration and transubstantiation on the other. It embraces restatement, interpretation and transformation, the three dimensions of intra-lingual translation, which is as much a cultural as a linguistic phenomenon. Mary Snell-Hornby understands intra-lingual translation as an interaction between two cultures. Svend Erik Larsen defines translation as a "productive cultural invention propelled by the mutual challenge of two or more languages and media, an intervention that changes both languages and is thereby a powerful factor in cultural development" (33).

It is not by chance that translation forms the blind spot of a "national" conception of literature: it represents a differential conception of identity incompatible with all essentializing constructs of the nation. Lacking birthright and authenticity, literature in translation had the deficient status of hybridity (just as the self-understanding of comparative literature as the "international" complement of the "national" tied its fortunes to the decline and demise of the nationalization of literary studies). We stress this exclusion of translation – against all historical evidence – in order to foreground the fatal equation of a national and a nationalized literature. The founding condition of the national is the transnational: the national emerges from the dialectic of self and other, starting with the translation and transmission of the sacred sources of cultural values. Precisely because the founding condition of the national is the transnational (and not an original, native corpus of texts as in historicism's organic conception of culture), we may say that adopting the perspective of world literature changes everything and nothing, because it does not signify the identification of another canon or corpus of texts but of another mode of reading applicable to "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translations or in their original language." In this sense all reading and writing is comparative, just as all cultures and civilizations live from the ongoing process of transmission and translation. The transcendence of the local through translation plays a particularly important and recognized role for so called minor literatures with only a few readers or for writers who are cut off from readers through censorship.

Everything and nothing changes in the light of world literature, as can be neatly illustrated in terms of the coexistence of capital and metropolis. The one functions as the political and cultural centre of a wider territory and acts as the regulator of the social hierarchy and as the custodian of the common heritage of a territorially defined population. As metropolis, the capital city functions neither as the centre of power nor as the source of identity but as the site of multiple networks of exchange and heterogeneity: the place where migrants find their "natural" destination (cf. Querrien).

The migrant, the subject and object par excellence of translation, finds his place in the interface between identity and difference, capital and metropolis. As the centre of a national literature, the capital assimilates cultural interactions in terms of centre-periphery. As the locus of world literature, the metropolis replaces the former's central perspective with polycentricism,

articulated through networks of circulation. This coexistence of capital and metropolis is not new, it is in fact as old as Babel, but it has acquired a heightened significance as the mirror of the often explosive struggles for national identity under the pressure of accelerating globalization. To interpret this struggle for identity, as Samuel Huntington does, as a clash of civilisations is a dangerously essentializing mistranslation of the inherent conflicts of identity within cultures and civilisations (see Roberts, "From Modernization to Multiple Modernities")

Babel should serve, not as the parable of a lost original language, the *fata morgana* of language theory, but as the *menetekel* of all hubristic conceptions of identity as well as of their melancholy converse: the decadence theories of culture, in which the fall from plenitude manifests itself in the gulf between a lost original language of presence and its evermore imperfect and distant translations. (This belief in the power of the original, not lost but betrayed, drives the religious fundamentalisms of today.) The phantasm of unity and authenticity inhabits the normative distinction between original and translation and the hegemonic distinction between centre and periphery. Pluralism is admitted only in the asymmetrical form of derivation from a determining origin, that is, genetically as a descent that denies reciprocity as the defining term of translation. Hence the tautology, as Derrida has demonstrated, of the definition of the nation by the appeal to the origin, entailing "a recourse, a re-source, a circular return to the source," that silently excludes the indispensable supplement of translation as the means to the simultaneous assumption and creation of the national status of a language and culture. Moreover, once we accept with Derrida the inescapable indeterminacy inherent in all acts of translation, then all asymmetrical constructions of the primacy of centre or origin are called into question. In this spirit Edouard Glissant proposes a *poétique de la relation* that replaces the centre-periphery model by the geopoetics of a world-system, composed of multiple interlocking worlds of linguistic singularities.

S.N. Eisenstadt has developed a persuasive account of modernization engendering the emergence of multiple modernities as it has spread from its initial north European core to central Europe, North America, Russia, South America and beyond. In place of Casanova's hegemonic perspective, Eisenstadt takes as his dynamic of modernization the endemic and irreducible conflict between totalizing and pluralizing visions of the world as the key to European identity and to the multiple modernities of world societies. Global diversity and inflamed nationalisms do not disappear with globalization. On the contrary, pre-modern cultures, whether popular or elite, continue to exist, either through continuing popular support or through state subsidization of 'ethnic' or 'national' cultural identities or even through tourism. Not only can and does the pre-modern coexist with the modern, the multiple modern cultures of the globalized world retain their unmistakable individualities in a constantly shifting balance between the native and the foreign. We must be careful therefore not to equate cultural modernization with Westernization or Americanization. Nor conversely should we confuse protection of the indigenous with modern national, racial or religious fundamentalisms. Anti-modernism is an eminently modern attitude.

Against all fundamentalisms it is essential to stress the centrality of translation, understood as a cultural activity, to the interpenetration of the global and the local throughout history, an interpenetration that has progressively accelerated over recent centuries and taken on a new dimension, thanks inter alia to the revolution in communications in our lifetime. Roland Robertson's outline of the successive phases of globalization since the fifteenth century helps us to understand this new dimension. He distinguishes between a germinal phase (1400-1750), an incipient phase (1750-1870), a take-off phase (1870-1920s), the struggle for hegemony (1920s-1960s), giving way to the present phase of uncertainty. The third and fourth stages from 1870 to the 1960s were governed by competition and warfare between rival national imperialisms, bringing about an ever greater consciousness of the world as one in space and time and leading to the present global problematization of cultural and civilizational identities, in which the "localization of globalization" ("glocalization") renders all distinctions between the local and the global increasingly complex and problematic. Vytautas Kavolis describes the consequences of these

ongoing processes of the self-reconstructions of identity: “boundaries are blurred, contents interpenetrate, even central meanings become subject to contestations both within and outside of particular civilizational-traditions-in-transformation, alien genres suggest themselves for uncovering native experiences. Bicivilizational, multiethnic identities or identity diffractions arise, either functioning imaginatively as workshops in critical translation or dissolving into the waste products of ‘cosmopolitan’ consumerism” (Kavolis qtd. in Buell 295). Workshops in critical translation – what better description could we have of the contribution world literature can make to an understanding of globalization?

In posing the question of literature and globalization, our intention has been to clear the ground for a rethinking of our discipline from outside its national compartmentalizations, that is, from a deterritorialized standpoint that replaces works qua canonic corpus by networks of relations. What changes if we adopt a global perspective? Nothing, in the sense that a transcendence of national cultures addresses the same texts as before but now in terms of world literature. As Damrosch puts it: “One of the most exciting features of contemporary literary studies is the fact that all periods as well as all places are up for fresh examination and open to new configurations” (17). In other words, world literature calls for a different way of reading and for a reframing of the study of literature in the academy. Conversely, we need to ask to what extent the nationalization of literary studies has blinded us to the fact that literature has always been world literature. Here, the recognition of literature as the workshop of/for critical translations between the local and the global suggests that everything has changed in our global age of uncertainty, just as the University of Culture, predicated on the cultivation of the national heritage, has been replaced by the University of Excellence, in which the whole question of relationality has been “translated” into global benchmarking and the purpose of teaching and research redefined in terms of excellence, indifferent to content. We observe here a clearing of the ground that has problematized the maintenance of old disciplinary identities in the humanities and the social sciences (thus Robertson deplors the imprisonment of sociology since the 1920s within the assumption of culturally cohesive and sequestered national societies) and by the same token opened the way to an as yet unrealised interdisciplinarity in teaching and research, which would truly transcend the closure of university departments. Let us define interdisciplinarity with Svend Larsen as involving topics and themes too large for any one discipline but of interest to a number of disciplines. Interdisciplinary projects of this kind require if they are to succeed a fundamental rethinking of disciplinary perspectives: the recognition that no discipline is an island unto itself imposes the necessity of reading widely outside of one’s own discipline and the acceptance of the reciprocity of obligations on the part of all participants. In short, interdisciplinary projects, whether in teaching or research, call for an ongoing questioning and rethinking of disciplinary boundaries that makes them workshops in critical translation in their own right.

The logic of this self-interrogation, and of the question of literature and globalization, is to ask: Do we need yet more interpretations of the literary canon confined within the narrow horizons of our specializations? Is it not time to re-embed the study of literature in the larger project of world literature – literature in the singular but conceived ecumenically, and recognized as the best means of allowing the comparative study of societies and cultures in a globalized world?

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