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# The Function of Translation in Global Literary Studies

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## Abstract

Literary scholarship is in a state of crisis. The national paradigms have outlived their usefulness as the organizing structures for literary scholarship, and the institutional framework for literary study is becoming comparative and global. In response to these changes we are witnessing a new convergence between academic practitioners of literary studies and their “lifeworld” of readers and writers under the rubric of “re-connection”. Issues of language and translation rather than of nation and identity have become indicative of broader developments in literary studies. The seminal reflections of Johann Wolfgang Goethe on “Weltliteratur” provide models for change in the teaching and study of literature in contemporary global literary studies.

## The crisis in literary studies

“Departments of literature are feeling the cold winds of change”, write Roberts and Nelson (53), and literary scholarship is indeed in a state of crisis, especially in the foreign language departments of English-speaking universities worldwide. On many campuses, literature continues to exist as an academic discipline in English departments only, leaving foreign language departments increasingly reduced to second language acquisition. Literary scholars in such departments find themselves isolated as students rely on generalist disciplines to provide the basis for postgraduate literary studies. This situation has come about as a result of institutional changes in academic departments in which literary studies are taught, as well as of disciplinary changes in literary studies themselves.

The root of the problem lies, for Roberts and Nelson, in the national paradigm that was put into place in nascent departments of literary studies in European and American universities. The problem is not romantic nationalism itself, but its institutionalization in university literature and philology departments. Institutional structures develop in ways that are different from ideational models. Roberts and Nelson thus take Pascale Casanova (*The World Republic of Letters*) to task for attaching the responsibility for the nationalization of literary studies to Herder and romantic nationalism, bringing an end to the Enlightenment “republic of letters”. The problem of the nationalization, and hence limitation, of literature to “national boundaries” thus lies squarely with the universities and with what they term the “founding premise of linguistic originality” at a time when the nation was coming to exercise ever-greater influence on patterns of thinking in the humanities. The problem is linked primarily to the importation of national models into university language departments in such a way as to bind the study of literature to national languages. Literary studies entered a fatal institutional embrace with the problematic epistemological assumptions inherent in the national traditions of philology, literary history, interpretation and criticism.

In language departments, literary analysis had to be carried out in the authentic language of the text, namely the language of origin. Hence literatures remained separated, linked only by translation as a secondary form of literary communication at best. Translation was seen as inauthentic, as a crib or an excuse for not mastering the language sufficiently to read texts in their original form. As a result, language departments have maintained their special right to teach their particular literatures, but at the same time are unable to do so due to low student numbers and levels of linguistic ability. The consequence of the failure of literary

studies in the foreign language departments has been the development of broad-based cultural studies courses underpinned by nebulous Whorfian assumptions of uniqueness in the relationship of language and meaning, which leave much to be desired in terms of disciplinary and methodological scope and depth.

In this article I will discuss the crisis of literary studies in the wake of national and post-structuralist paradigms and in the context of new developments in comparative literature. My aim is to show that we are witnessing a new convergence between academic practitioners of literary studies and their “lifeworld” of readers and writers under the rubric of “re-connection”, in which language and translation move to the forefront as a metaphor for literary studies *per se* in the era of globalization. The seminal reflections of Johann Wolfgang Goethe on “Weltliteratur” suggest ways of thinking about the relationship between literature and cosmopolitanism and provide models for change in the teaching and study of literature (Goethe, vol. 14, 898-917).

### **The rediscovery of the referent**

The future of English and literary studies has been a hot topic since the nineties (cf. Bergonzi; Bender, Chodorow and Yu; Bérubé; Bloom; Denby; Ellis; Graff; Harpham Ch. 2; Hunter et al; Kernan, *What's Happened to the Humanities, The Death of Literature*; Kronman Ch. 2; Scholes; Woodring). For some commentators, literary studies had declined to the point where they were obsolete, or had transformed themselves into creative writing or cultural studies. Bernard Bergonzi identifies five phases in the historical emergence of English as a field of academic study: the nationalist, the religious, the ethical, the aesthetic and the rhetorical. For Bergonzi only the final – rhetorical – phase is still viable, mainly in the form of professional writing courses. Louis Menand goes even further in denying the ongoing validity of a literary mode of knowing and communicating. For Menand literature is a moribund discipline, the function of which had been to establish national philologies. The histories of national philologies have by and large been written, and literature departments are left chasing after ephemeral notions of literary essence. Even as early as 1999, Edward Said commented on the “disappearance of literature itself from the curriculum” and on the “fragmented, jargonized subjects” that replaced it (3).

Literature, more than any other field, has been left without a disciplinary home as global perspectives determine the frames of reference for intellectual endeavour in the contemporary university environment. Without the disciplinary framework of the national philologies, literature itself seems threatened as a mode of human knowing, an epistemology in its own right. Few literary scholars, however, will accept Menand’s proposal that literature is as transient as the national ideologies or as ephemeral as the theoretical jargons which have carried it into and through the institutions. Similarly, few will be persuaded by Richard Rorty’s suggestion that literary analysis is no longer compatible with institutional rigour. In the context of the new sobriety in the humanities, the “free play” of the interpretative imagination has come to an end and a new impetus can be felt toward connection and to the function of the referent as well as the signifier (cited in Menand 210-11).

Under the rubric of “return to life”, a range of writers in a recent issue of *PMLA* address the needs of literary criticism in the twenty-first century as dominated above all by the need to reinstate the referent. *PMLA* is arguably the most important indicator of trends in global literary studies. These essays are written in the spirit of “forward to the past”. From the vantage point of 2010, the first decade of the twenty-first century appears to be a time of climbing out of the post-structuralist abyss, rediscovering reference and the responsibilities of literature, not only to itself but to the human community in the widest sense. In her “Afterword”, Cathy Caruth notes, “the force and fragility of literature and of literary criticism are bound up with the possible disappearance of the literary archive, which we implicitly confront in reading literature and in pursuing its forms and thoughts as literary critics” (1087). Literary criticism in the new century must meditate “on the loss and survival of literature” (Caruth 1087). In this context, Caruth makes a strong programmatic statement for reconnection:

If literary criticism is bound up with questions of life, of *leben* and *erleben* (living and experiencing), [...] – a mode of reflection, testing, and imaginative experience of “knowledge for living” – it is only insofar as literature links life inextricably with *überleben*, survival, and thus with death, with the precariousness that attends upon life and language, and with the peculiar sense in which literature emerges as a living on.  
(Caruth 1087)

This new awareness of the world has begun to make itself felt in literary theory under the sign of social and ecological crisis, history and the passing of memory. Literary studies is moving inexorably back to the lifeworld of writers and readers and away from the Möbius Strip of textuality. Developments in the USA over the past decade indicate that comparative or world literature will provide the most meaningful model for literary studies in the foreseeable future, that is, in a world in which global issues will continue to predominate. The dominant themes of literary analysis are international and global: migration, change as opposed to stasis in issues of socio-political identity and context, even within the English-language context. In this new model language can be viewed as either an impediment or an aid to understanding. Tied to obsolete concepts of nationality, language remains an impediment; freed into the neo-cosmopolitanism of the twenty-first century global environment, however, language becomes the defining metaphor.

### Questions of language

On its journey toward the global, literary study is torn between the Scylla of national and linguistic identity and the Charybdis of translation and loss of linguistic authenticity. Can we base literary study in a non-national context while still paying attention to legitimate questions of language, in order to provide the epistemological foundations for a discipline of literature rather than one of national literatures? This would be a discipline of literature *per se*, in which all literatures are equal, rather than of the older models of comparative literature in which translation plays a secondary role. Or are we left, after the end of the twentieth century, with a radical denial not merely of the national in literature but of the ontological essence of literature itself?

David Damrosch uses the terms “source” and “target culture” to re-articulate this asymmetry in defining comparative literature as the study of the interrelationships between original texts and translations, based on a process of mutual loss and gain in which that which is “lost” in translation comes to the forefront of the literary encounter, and in which the translated text takes on an authority of its own in different linguistic and cultural contexts (Damrosch 329). Even in the case of English, pluricentricity involves semantic and other linguistic differences which require understanding, and hence translation, in cultural if not strictly linguistic terms. In this approach, we are brought to recognize what is gained in translation, namely the recognition of the otherness of the translated text through the recognition of the nature of the process of translation itself. That which is lost in translation is the true subject of world literature. Through this process the text is rewritten into a broader, supra-national context. The issue of translation remains, but it is no longer a question of the status of texts. Rather it is one of broadening the hermeneutic circle and using literature as a means of identifying and engaging with the other. “Only by deconstructing the linguistic asymmetry of original and translation” can a post-national literature become transnational, write Roberts and Nelson (55).

In these new frameworks, language is a beginning not an end. Language does not exist in a vacuum: language is always also cultural (Radhakrishnan 791). It requires translation and contextualization to be understood. The act of translating thus becomes representative of the act of encountering and attempting to understand, of the act of literary interpretation itself. Hence literary studies cannot be separated from the idea of translation, since all understanding is at some level a process of translation from, in Damrosch’s terminology, a “source” to a “host” environment. Translation involves not only the assignment of signifiers but also the interpretation of environment and context. All literary interpretation is an act of understanding,

of entering the hermeneutic circle and participating in the act of comprehending and re-articulating. In this context linguistic translation is merely an extreme example of the hermeneutic processes. It dramatically broadens the hermeneutic circle, but in a global environment this is what is required. Translation is the necessary means of extending literature beyond the language and culture of its origins. Translation renders dialogue possible.

### **The “world” of literature**

Goethe was the first to wish for this supra-national aspect to literature. In the unruly early years of the “Concert of Europe” he wrote of his hope for and belief in the emergence of a “world literature” which would ameliorate the relations among nations. He coined the term *Weltliteratur* in a series of short articles, letters, diary entries, notes and commentaries between 1827 and 1831. At that time he was following French affairs closely, interested in the fortunes of the *juste milieu* and observing the revival of French political order. Implicit in his idea of world literature is a view of Europe in which the open economies of western Europe rather than the states of the Holy Alliance would prevail in European and world affairs, and in which popular nationalism rather than feudal absolutism would be the dominant force. Writing as the European nations were beginning to take on the definitive forms for the next century, Goethe viewed with suspicion the emergence of the national, an epistemological category. “World literature” was his tip to his contemporaries not to allow the national to eclipse the cosmopolitanism of the past while keeping literature connected with the events of the present.

In Goethe’s reflections translation plays a particular role. The Enlightenment was not a censorious era in respect of translations. That came later, as a consequence perhaps of romantic nationalism’s concern to preserve the uniqueness of the national lexicon (cf. Valenza 143-45). What is noticeable is Goethe’s lack of hesitation or reluctance in dealing with questions of translation. Indeed he uses translation as a metaphor for *all* communication from the level of the individual to the nation. Translation was not a story of loss for Goethe. Any loss is offset by gain, to the mutual benefit of all, in his concept of world literature. Translation is essential to this process as the means by which literary works can circulate beyond their source cultures and languages. Translation represents a form of added value in Goethe’s market-place of world literature, or, in Valery Larbaud’s terminology as quoted by Casanova, “enrichment” (Casanova 23).

So far Goethe’s idea has been received and validated primarily in the sense of providing a theoretical matrix for the world’s literatures as an infinite set of connections and interrelations. It is not literature stripped of its national characteristics or even its language, but rather literature which circulates beyond the nation and gains in its contact with other cultures and other readerships. However, there is a *second sense* in which we can understand the “world” in Goethe’s idea, one which is implicit in his contextualization of societies and politics, readers and respondents, and in his acceptance of the principle of translation as *essential* to the literary endeavour. That is the sense of the world as the *matter* of literature. Regardless of the particular historical paradigm, whether political, religious, national or aesthetic, world literature is about connectedness with *its world*. The literary must remain in connection with the concerns of the people who live, read and write it, and in a *world* made up of language-communities, this involves translation as well as original language and culture.

### **Translation, literary studies and reconnection with the world**

So where does this leave us in terms of the discipline and our institutions? The institutional framework for literary study must clearly be comparative and global. For literature *per se* to continue to exist as a discipline of study we need both to reconnect to the world and to change the way the university community views literature, not as a statement of national identity but rather as an epistemological field across nations and cultural boundaries.

Most importantly in the current context, this will involve the teaching of languages and literatures in an intellectual environment in translation, which is understood to be a hermeneutic of expansion rather than contraction. We must understand the nature of language in order to

accept the value of translation. Such an intellectual environment would necessitate broad general levels of language teaching and acquisition in schools and universities. The acquisition of languages teaches us to recognize the nature of and need for translations. The value of translation should emphatically not reside in the sense of the perpetuation of a tiny group of highly competent translators providing finalized texts to a mass of monolingual readers. We must recognize as a global society that translation is not a detour around the problematic language of the source text, but rather is a penetration of the language of the text, an inquiry into meaning and its possibilities and a testing of linguistic assumptions and relations (this is the particular task of *literary* translators). Translation is not something done once and then dealt with for the foreseeable future. Moreover all readers at one level or another are translators. Speakers of pluricentric languages such as English and Spanish, for example, regularly translate unfamiliar words and expressions into their own vocabulary. In this sense literary translation is the pinnacle of literary interpretation, and literary translators occupy a privileged – but not a technocratic – position in the community of meanings that makes up the global consciousness.

This is a time for the rediscovery of reference and of the responsibilities of literature to the human community in the widest – global – sense. We must link our existing academic strengths in literature to a broader undertaking, in which the focus is again on literature as an epistemological mode, capable of supporting the links to the world of readers, writers, teachers and publishers. Perhaps we should look back to Goethe's paradigm of world literature as "building a bridge" to the world in two senses: in the sense of opening our eyes to the literature of the world and in the sense of re-connecting to the world of literature.

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