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## Comparative World Literature: Making a Case for Re/Translation

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**Abstract:** Translation has been a major bone of contention in comparative literature studies. For the longest time it was looked down upon by *bona fide* comparatists, who insisted on studying literary works in the original. World literature scholars, on the contrary, have from the beginning acknowledged that, given the multiplicity of the world's languages and their literatures, it was inevitable that one resort to translation to access all but a handful of literatures. The final decades of the 20th century saw the rise of translation studies. Adopting insights and methods from descriptive translation studies might help bridge any putative gap between comparative and world literature studies, also when it comes to transcultural studies.

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It is customary to date the beginning of the discussion about world literature to Goethe's use of the term in his conversations with his private secretary Johann Eckermann in the late 1820s. There has been debate about whether Goethe himself conceived of *Weltliteratur* as essentially Eurocentric or not.<sup>1</sup> Consensus has it that, in any case, after Goethe the practice of world literature studies has indeed been Eurocentric, at least until the end of the 20th century. However, for Ottmar Ette, Goethe's idea of world literature has been erroneously interpreted as marking a permanent view of the state of the world's literatures, with European literature at the center. For Ette, Goethe's remarks on world literature not only marked the beginning of an epoch but also the end of one, viz., that of the hegemony of European literature. This statement is to be taken in two senses ("Interview").

To begin with, the very moment at which Goethe with his *Weltliteratur* at least potentially embraced all the world's literatures is also the moment when the idea of literature not necessarily being linked to a specific language or country was replaced by a more restricted idea of national

literatures tied to national languages. Herder and Romanticism had a lot to do with this, but so did what Benedict Anderson pinpointed as the spread of print culture driving the formation of nation states. Earlier writers were unbiasedly European in their attitudes to literature. Chaucer was more at home in French and Italian literature than in English (Turner); Shakespeare famously may have had little Latin and less Greek, but whatever little he had of them he *did* have; and Donne and Milton were fluent in several European languages and wrote a significant part of their oeuvre in Latin. From around the turn of the 19th century, a popular national press catering to growing national publics and empowered by mounting literacy replaced the former *République des Lettres* as the arena where literature was discussed, not in Latin or French—as had been the case with what in essence had been a “*république des lettrés*”—but in the vernacular. Goethe himself stands at the end of this open “worldly” attitude towards literature. In this sense, Ette is right in situating Goethe’s statements on world literature as simultaneously marking the start of the discussion on the subject and the end of a non-national approach to literature. In fact, Goethe’s remarks on world literature implicitly indicate his realization of this epochal change. When he says on 31 January 1827 to Eckermann that in his opinion national literatures do not mean very much anymore and that the age of world literature is at hand (Strich 349), he is explicitly admitting that he has witnessed the dawn of an age in which national literatures have grown into the dominant paradigm. The rise of these national literatures, and particularly of German literature—to which many of the younger writers he associated with in Jena in the 1790s (Wulf) had contributed—had marked the end of a “European” literature transcending national and linguistic boundaries, and therefore of an era in which such a European literature effectively equaled world literature. In a sense, Goethe with his world literature was therefore projecting into the future an ideal borrowed from the past, a re-invented *République des Lettres* as it had functioned in Europe for several centuries—only bigger, given its potential (Strich 16) to span the entire world. In other words, he gestured toward a World Republic of Letters, to borrow Pascale Casanova’s term, albeit with a very different meaning from hers. Similar arguments with respect to the rise of national literatures signaling the end of a truly “European” literature were developed by the Hungarian Mihály Babits and the German philologist Ernst Robert Curtius during the first half of the 20th century (Tihanov 471; D’haen, *A History* 40). Curtius explicitly singled out Goethe as both the culmination and the end of such a European literature. At variance with Goethe, though, they adopted a staunchly Eurocentric position.

This brings me to the second sense in which Goethe’s pronouncements on world literature can be seen as marking the end of one era and the beginning of another. After all, Goethe mentioned world literature for the first time to Eckermann in a discussion they had with respect to the German author’s reading of a Chinese novel in translation. In the *TransArea* approach he has developed since the early 2000s, Ette has consistently emphasized that centers shift over time and that multicentricity, with respect to literature as to all other matters, is a much more accurate reflection of the world’s reality—in political science parlance this would translate as multipolarity.<sup>2</sup> Ette’s reading of Goethe, then, forcefully configures world literature not as a stable entity naturally

given but as relational. Goethe's starting to talk of world literature at the end of the 1820s would then have signaled his understanding of relations shifting between nations and literatures, in the first instance in Europe but beyond this perhaps also in the wider world. In fact, his reference to Chinese literature cast the world literature web as wide as possible, as Chinese civilization and culture until Goethe had routinely been seen as existing at the furthest possible remove, not only geographically but also politically, intellectually, and culturally, from Europe (D'haen, "Routes").

One way to gauge the shifting relations between the literatures of the world is to look at the translation flows between them. Goethe himself was a prolific translator from literatures in several languages (some he could handle directly, for others he used intermediary means). But he also saw translation as an influential agent in determining the relative standing literatures enjoyed in his concept of world literature. While he unhesitatingly rated French literature highest, he reserved an important role for German literature as mediator for the world's literatures because of what he saw as the German language's unique gift for translation. This allowed German literature an alternative claim to major status in the literary field at a time when what we now call "Germany" was still divided into a multitude of small and some larger political entities. Its literature therefore, unlike its French or English counterparts, could not figure as the expression of a major player in the European, and by implication the world's, concert of nations. At best, German literature could function as the embodiment of a *Kulturnation*, not as a truly national literature expressive of a nation state.

As many historians of comparative literature have noted, the origins of that discipline date from around the same time as Goethe's world literature. Instead of focusing on the idea of what binds literatures, though—with Goethe himself insisting to Eckermann that, judging from their novels at least, the Chinese were much more like Europeans than the latter at the time were wont to think—comparative literature built on the differences between the European national literatures then asserting themselves. Following Herder and the German Romantics elaborating his views, a nation's literature was perceived as the embodiment of its soul. And, as a nation's soul was seen as rooted in its language, comparative literature hallowed the principle of studying literature in its original tongue. Translation was seen as diluting the original, a *pis aller* at best. The result was that comparative literature for most of its history has concentrated on a few so-called major European literatures, as the languages in which they are cast were the only ones sufficiently well-known to provide a common ground for comparison. At best, comparative literature scholars originating from smaller language areas added their own literature to the comparative scale.

Contrary to orthodox comparative literature scholars, world literature scholars from the very beginning have recognized the importance of translation for their own discipline. In fact, many have insisted on the inevitability of resorting to translations when seeking to gain awareness of more literatures than would otherwise be accessible to orthodox comparative literature scholars. It is precisely for this reason that Albert Guérard called translation the indispensable instrument for the study of world literature. Since the re-emergence of the discipline at the turn of the 21st century, there has been a lot of talk on translation in world literature studies. Most of

the discussion has centered on the possibility or impossibility, the enabling or disabling effect, of translation. Damrosch (*What Is*) and Zhang Longxi have taken up the cause for translation. Gayatri Spivak and Emily Apter (*Against*) have assumed the opposite stance. Much attention has also gone to what has been or is being translated. Here the names of Gisèle Sapiro and Heilbron come to mind.<sup>3</sup> There is also a great deal of discussion about world literature that concentrates on the pros and cons of translation, or on *what* from *which* literature can be classified as world literature. But might it not be better at this stage to focus on how translations actually function in a world literature perspective? Doing so might provide an original, or at least an alternative or complementary, entry—an Auerbachian “Ansatzpunkt” (Auerbach)—into what I, borrowing the term from Damrosch, who uses it with a slightly different slant, will call “comparative world literature” (“Comparative”).

Over the past half century or so a lot of work has been done on translation studies proper. In fact, it has gradually developed into a largely separate discipline. This is as true for the linguistic as for the literary dimension. As to the latter, so-called descriptive translation studies has been particularly successful. The term “translation studies” was coined by James S. Holmes in 1972 in an article that constituted one of the first systematic attempts to map the rapidly growing proliferation of approaches, research, and theories concerning “translation” in the widest sense of the word. Susan Bassnett in 1980 consolidated much of this in her still widely used and several times updated primer *Translation Studies*. Specifically with regard to literature, what Bassnett, and with her the so-called Tel Aviv-Leuven-Amsterdam school of translation studies picked up on, was literary polysystem theory as elaborated by Itamar Even-Zohar in a number of articles in the early and mid-1970s, largely while he was on a research stay in the Low Countries, and in close conversation with Holmes and scholars at the universities of Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Leuven. At the same time Even-Zohar also closely collaborated with his colleagues Benjamin Hrushovski and Gideon Toury at the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics of Tel Aviv University in a tradition inspired by various schools of structuralism. Starting from structuralist premises, Even-Zohar as of the 1970s came to see society, and culture, as multi-layered, with sub-systems operating within a larger system. This led to his polysystem theory in which systems dynamically interrelate with one another, thus leading to continuous transformation. As far as their interest in translation was concerned, Even-Zohar and Toury worked in what Holmes termed descriptive translation studies. Even-Zohar was particularly concerned with the function of translated literature within his more comprehensive view of all literature as an interlocking polysystem composed of central and peripheral sub-systems (such as genres, but also translated literature versus literature in the original) battling it out for supremacy. Toury concentrated rather on establishing the norms that ruled actual translations. For a description of these norms he drew upon, and refined, the terminology of shifts between original and translation, or source and target text, that the linguist J. C. Catford had developed in his influential 1965 book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. In earlier approaches such shifts, on both the micro (words, sentences, nuances) and macro (structure of the text, including its arrangement in chapters or other forms of ordering, prefaces, notes, and

other so-called paratextual features) levels, would have been evaluated in terms of equivalence—or not—between original and translation, or between source and target text. Some such shifts might be deemed inevitable because of insurmountable differences between the source and target language or culture; others were simply deemed failures on the part of the translator, whose highest norm was always supposed to be the greatest possible fidelity to the original. In all fairness it should be said that much of the earlier terminology, and the emphasis on equivalence, derived from research and theorization primarily pertinent to non-literary translation, and in the context of the translator-training institutes that had started to appear all over Europe as of the 1950s. Now, however, scholars working on literary translations adopted this very same terminology, coupled with the insights of Even-Zohar and Toury, not to find fault with the work of literary translators, but to study what shifts they made as part of the process, or the strategy, of fitting the translated work to the receiving culture. The title of a collection of essays edited by Theo Hermans in 1985 is a fair indication of this shift of emphasis: *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*. Probably the best-known early exponent of this approach was André Lefevere, who eventually came to see translation as only one form of what he called the refraction of literature, next to for instance criticism and historiography. In one of his best-known articles, “Mother Courage’s Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature,” Lefevere showed how what at first sight appear blatant distortions in the American translations of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s play *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*) are in fact changes effected a) because of constraints upon what was acceptable to an American public, b) what was possible because of political conditions, and c) what was presentable according to an American horizon of expectations, at the moment of staging these translations. According to Lefevere, a translation always represents “a compromise between two systems,” the originating and the receiving one (237). “The degree of compromise in a refraction,” Lefevere adds, “will depend on the reputation of the writer being translated within the system from which the translation is made,” while “the degree to which the foreign writer is accepted into a native system will, on the other hand, be determined by the need that native system has of him in a certain phase of its evolution” (237). Lefevere is here expressing on the level of an individual author what Even-Zohar had put in more general terms when he said that “through the foreign works, features (both principles and elements) are introduced into the home literature which did not exist there before,” and that “the very principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the (home) polysystem: the texts are chosen according to their compatibility with the new approaches and the supposedly innovatory role they may play within the target literature” (193). According to Even-Zohar there are three situations in which a literature may be particularly receptive to such “import” via translation: “when a literature is ‘young,’ in the process of being established,” “when a literature is either ‘peripheral’ (within a large group of correlated literatures) or ‘weak,’ or both,” and “when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature” (194).<sup>4</sup>

The success of descriptive translation studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s was such that

it led Susan Bassnett to confidently predict that henceforth the relationship between comparative literature and translation studies would be reversed. Instead of the latter being a sub-branch of the former, she argued (*Comparative* 161), translation studies should be regarded as “the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area.” In 2006, when the initial enthusiasm had waned a little, Bassnett adopted a more conciliatory tone, admitting that her 1993 statement had been “deliberately provocative” and “was as much about trying to raise the profile of translation studies as it was about declaring comparative literature to be defunct” (“Reflections” 6). Both comparative literature and translation studies, she now argued, “are methods of approaching literature, ways of reading that are mutually beneficial” (6). One of the ways in which “translation studies research has served comparative literature well,” Bassnett proposes, is that “whereas once translation was regarded as a marginal area within comparative literature, now it is acknowledged that translation has played a vital role in literary history and that great periods of literary innovation tend to be preceded by periods of intense translation activity” (8). This is true of the Renaissance in Europe, she maintains, but also for our contemporary era of globalization, with China assuming an ever more important role geopolitically and geoculturally.

Of course, the growing role of China and its culture—both in the contemporary world and in retrospect also historically—has been amply acknowledged in the more recent versions of world literature studies that have emerged since the turn of the 21st century. This is particularly visible in the more recent world literature anthologies, such as the Longman and the Norton versions. In these anthologies Chinese works of literature, like those of all other literatures, appear in English translation. As such, they constitute one of the “manifestations” of world literature “enabled by translation” that Damrosch (*What Is* 15) distinguishes: namely that they can function as “windows” on a world beyond that known to the reader from his native (in this case English-language) literature. Already in her 1993 book, though, Bassnett (159) quotes Lefevere (*Translation* 2) to the point that “translation is not just ‘a window opened on another world,’ or some such pious platitude [...] rather, translation is a channel opened, often not without a certain reluctance, through which foreign influences can penetrate the native culture, challenge it and even contribute to subverting it.” As Bassnett puts it:

Writing does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in a context and the process of translating texts from one cultural system into another is not a neutral, innocent, transparent activity [...] translation is instead a highly charged, transgressive activity, and the politics of translation and translating deserve much greater attention than has been paid in the past. (*Comparative* 160–161)

Specifically, Bassnett adduces, “Through translation come new ideas, new genres and new forms, so it is extraordinary that for so long comparative literature as a field of study did not acknowledge the importance of research into the history of translation” (“Reflections” 9). She concretizes her point with reference to Ezra Pound’s collection *Cathay*.

While the poems in *Cathay* may have started out as what Pound intended them to be, viz. translations from classical Chinese, the First World War context in which they appeared meant that they were not read “primarily as exotic translations,” but perceived as “powerfully imagistic words resonant with the pain and loss of the Great War” (“Reflections” 8). “The impact of these poems was such,” Bassnett points out, “that on the one hand they could serve as models for a new generation of poets struggling to make the horrors of war a proper subject for poetry, while on the other hand they established a benchmark for future translators because they set the parameters in the minds of English-language readers of what Chinese poetry could do” (8). The *Cathay* poems, then, highlight “the way in which translation can serve as a force for literary renewal and innovation” (8). I have argued the same with respect to what I have called a “Chinese Turn” in European literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries via the translations/adaptation of Judith Gautier, Klabund, Hans Bethge, Pound, Gaston Burssens, T. S. Eliot, and J. Slauerhoff.<sup>5</sup>

Several parallels here suggest themselves. To begin with, the process of innovation through translation Bassnett describes closely resembles Homi Bhabha’s idea of “how newness enters the world” (212–235), developed at approximately the same time as the elaboration of descriptive translation studies. As the subtitle to his chapter indicates, Bhabha situates his approach squarely in the context of postcolonial studies, where cultural translation becomes the site for Bhabha’s in-betweenness, hybridity, and third space. But things can also be simpler—think for instance, of Baudelaire translating Poe, making the American poet the initiator of symbolism through the strength of Baudelaire’s versions and the French poet with his own poetry picking up on Poe’s theory and practice. There are also obvious resemblances with Shunqing Cao’s variation theory of literature. Cao’s concept of variation covers more than just translation and more closely resembles Lefevere’s concept of the refraction of a literary work in a foreign culture. Such refraction is achieved through both translation and adaptation, but also reception via scholarly criticism, literary history, and all other forms of what in the English translation of Walter Benjamin’s celebrated 1923 essay “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (“The Task of the Translator”) is rendered as a work’s “afterlife.”<sup>6</sup> As Cao and Zhoukun Han say: “In the process of the reception of Chinese literature in Europe (e.g., in English, French, German, etc.), Chinese discourse will initiate a dialogue with European literature, and eventually these imports will be transformed and adjusted to reach European readers, or even spur a development of national and other local literatures” (514). And they develop the same argument with respect to theory when they propose that “foreign theory, if properly blended with local theory, could also offer new perspectives.” In fact, they argue, “cultural innovations are more often than not informed and inspired by what stands out as foreign” and “beneficial elements carried by foreign literature and theory will definitely open new venues for any culture” (514). For Cao and Han such blending comes about by what they call “domestic appropriation” of the foreign by the native literature. It should immediately be said that they use the term in a very different way than in which it is usually interpreted in Western theoretical discourse about translation. Taking their cue from Goethe’s own remarks on translation in his “note on translation” to his *West-östlicher Diwan* (1819) and Benjamin’s 1923 essay, Western

theoreticians on translation usually disparage what they call domesticated or naturalized literary texts as glossing over the signs of their foreignness for the sake of a smooth adaptation to the target culture, thus foreclosing the “shock of the new” leading to true innovation in the receiving culture. For Cao, what he calls “domestic appropriation” more broadly simply means the acceptance of the source text in translation in the target culture. One reason for this difference in view is that Cao starts from the assumption that Chinese and Western literature, and the cultures whence they originate, are so different from one another that without domestication in the sense meant by Cao no meaningful relation would be possible. This brings Cao close to Apter’s concept, based on Barbara Cassin,<sup>7</sup> of “the untranslatable” which would preclude the construction of any tenable conception of world literature rooted in translation. Yet it is precisely “untranslatability,” Shaobo Xie argues, that “offers the productive space in which a new text emerges by way of translation” (158) and he concludes that “as such, untranslatability is not, as Apter and other contemporary scholars insist, a foe to world literature, but a friend; not that which makes world literature an untenable concept, but that which urges us to reconceptualize it” (162). “[U]ntranslatability,” he argues “is not an obstacle to world literature, and is in no way incompatible with it” (162). This sounds very much like Cao’s ideas on the role played by domestic appropriation by translation in his variation theory. Zhang in various instances, and most recently in his 2024 volume *World Literature as Discovery*, has energetically disparaged the whole idea of untranslatability, as has who at present is probably the most widely known traductologist, Lawrence Venuti.

One interesting aspect of Cao’s variation theory is when Cao and Han suggest that “from the perspective of domestic appropriation, translated literary works could be a part of local literary classics” (521). This is a point likewise argued by Svend Erik Larsen. Starting from the premise that, certainly in today’s world, even all so-called national societies are in fact linguistically and culturally to a greater or lesser extent heterogeneous because of historical border shifts, migration, and trade as well as cultural and media flows, Larsen argues for a view of literature that focuses on the local situation in a translocal context. As an example of such an approach he holds up a work of Danish literary history for use in high schools he himself co-edited (Andreasen et al.). Such a history, Larsen maintains, “should be not a Danish literary history, but a history of literature in Denmark, thus including translations from non-Danish and non-European literatures, the changing multilingualism in Denmark used by Danes and immigrants, and interart and intermedia perspectives, while also opening up colonial and post-colonial perspectives.” From this perspective, he argues, “Shakespeare, to take one important case, is probably the most important playwright in Denmark, yet without being a Danish playwright” (11–12). In effect, such a literary history becomes a history of world literature as operative in the Danish cultural orbit. Many of the works featuring in such a history, and taught in its wake, might be in the original, as is most probably the case with Shakespeare given Danish high school students’ advanced level of English, but many more will be in translation. Undoubtedly, the situation is very similar in many other literatures. In many smaller European countries Shakespeare, but also Molière, Ibsen, and Brecht, will be prominently part of the literary and cultural environment. In fact, in some of these cultures,



like my own (Dutch and Flemish), especially English-language authors, both contemporary and historical, feature at least as large, and I would say even larger, than native authors, especially historical ones. As such, they are legitimately part of literature *in* the Netherlands and Flanders, if not of Dutch-language literature. For the comparatist this opens up interesting avenues of research into the comparative study of such literary histories across several countries, but also across what Đurišin (Čo) and Đurišin and Gnisci (*Il Mediterraneo*) defined as interliterary communities or zones, for instance East/Central Europe or Scandinavia, to stay within the European context, or any comparable entity. Of course, such research might fruitfully also be extended to cross-cultural studies, including East-West studies.

Another interesting possibility transpires from Caroline Disler's discussion of Benjamin's use of the German originals for what in English became "afterlife" in his 1923 essay on the task of the translator. Disler seizes upon Benjamin's use of *Fortleben*, which starting from an etymological analysis, she defines as "constant, dynamic change of the original," contrary to *Weiterleben* and *Nachleben* which, she says, are static continuations of what was" (194). "Through the concept of the *Fortleben* of the original," Disler argues, "Benjamin has dissociated translation from the original. He has taken the primacy of resemblance, of similarity out of translating. Combined with Benjamin's vision of history, the chronological precedence of the original no longer presupposes superior status over its translation. Translation has been emancipated from the chains of the original" (194). Such a view opens the possibility of a comparative analysis of translations across languages and literatures, as well as cross-culturally, independent of the original text. Descriptive translation studies here again presents itself as a suitable methodology. Equally interestingly, what now offers itself as a field for comparative study is that of retranslations. In fact, this is a field that over the last decade or so has been expanding rapidly (Tian). What matters here in the first instance is what retranslations add to already existing translations. Some of the explanation may simply lie in the fact that the language used in older translations no longer appeals to later readers. This is what Regina Galasso illustrates via an anecdote from her own teaching practice. When a student tells her that the version of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* she is reading does not do anything for her, Galasso finds out that the student is reading a late 19th-century English translation of the French writer's classic. When Galasso gives the student a more recent translation by Lydia Davis, the student finds her relation to the text much improved. Of course, much may also have to do with Davis's skills as both a translator and creative writer. Yet, as Galasso underlines, an alternative subtitle to her book might have been "Translators on the Making of World Literature" (6). Indeed, it is translators, and especially re-translations, that make a work into a "classic." Galasso cites the example of Haruki Murakami who, when asked why he wanted to bring yet another translation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a book that had been translated several times already into Japanese, answered that "new translations are meant to 'refresh' literary classics, 'wash them anew'" (10).

Finally, I want to propose that the study of translations and re-translations along the lines suggested in my previous paragraphs also offers scholars of comparative literature the opportunity

to turn the translational tables against the source culture. If descriptive translation studies can tell us a lot about the target culture, its openness or closedness, its restraints or its liberties, by how it receives foreign works, it may also serve as a reverse mirror for the source culture by showing it which of its own often unspoken assumptions with respect to cultural norms light up in translation. Here lies truly a novel field for comparative world literature!

## Notes

1. D'haen, *Routledge; A History*, especially chap. 2.
2. See Ette, *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben; Writing-Between-Worlds; TransArea*; “Toward”; *WeltFraktale; Literatures*.
3. See Sapiro, *Translatio*; “Translation”; Sapiro and Ungureanu; Heilbron; Heilbron and Sapiro.
4. Much of this paragraph I have copied (almost) *verbatim* from my summary in *A History of World Literature* (151–153).
5. See Pos et al.; D'haen, *Dutch*; “Well-Tempered.”
6. For the problematic use of this term, and for its alleged German original *Nachleben* in Benjamin's essay, but which he in fact never used, preferring instead *Überleben* and *Fortleben*, see Disler.
7. Apter, “Untranslatables”; *Against*; Cassin; Cassin et al.

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