

Canon Deterritorialization through Translation

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Abstract: The article scrutinises the manner in which recent studies in translation have started to examine the entrenched disproportion of the process and amount of translation and to question the mechanisms of selection that have avoided constantly diversity and cultivated instead strategies that are designed to preserve inequities both in the target culture and in the source culture.

Keywords: *canon, deterritorialization, translation, inequality.*

“Do you think,’ she murmured, ‘it is absolutely necessary to translate it?’”
(Samuel Beckett, *Dante and the Lobster*)

In one of the early critical assessments of canon making, “Genre and the Literary Canon” (1979), Alaistar Fowler writes that “the Official Canon is institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism” (98), failing to mention the role played by translations in the making and strengthening of the canon. Sean Cotter, a brilliant translator of Nichita Stănescu, “haunted” by Roland Barthes’ dictum that “literature is what is taught” (which is, in fact, another definition of the canon), remarks that “translation distinguishes ‘classic’ from ‘canonical’” (2023: 179-80). And he goes on with the explanation:

If ‘literature’ requires ancillary labor from educators, if a text becomes literature only through the collaboration of various parties, then we must consider how much effort (and from how many translators) is needed to create the classic. It takes not a village but a planet to make a classic. (Cotter 2023: 179-80)

Yet, if the whole “village” focuses on making the canon and/or the classics, what happens to the rest of literary texts that do not benefit from the concentrated attention and work of critics, academics, and translators? Furthermore, who makes these choices and on what grounds? Recent studies in translation have started to examine the “ingrained inequality in translated literature” (Vassallo 2023: 4) and to question the mechanisms of selection that have avoided constantly diversity and cultivated instead strategies that are designed “to perpetuate imbalances in the source culture when choosing titles

to publish in translation” (Vassallo 2023: 30). Yet, the decisions regarding which texts to pick for translation and which to reject are equally relevant for the target culture because while importing a certain text through translation the principle of selection is also transplanted into the receiving culture. On the subject of the concomitant ingress of standards, feminist critics consider that “this is particularly relevant if editors want to identify or commission ‘canonical’ literature from a given culture because this is likely to perpetuate and calcify notions of ‘great’ writers being men” (Ibid.) and definitely white.

In reverse, as Helen Vassallo remarks, deterritorialisation of the canon by means of translation is also achievable: “De-centring translated literature: working against the celebrification of ‘prize culture’” (Vassallo 2023: 126). The silent and quasi-invisible work of translators who are “situated *on* or perhaps *in* the borders between cultures” (Pym 2023: 191) is to be taken into account in any serious debate on the canon. What a culture decides and selects to be translated is definitely part of canon making. My focus is on how such choices can and do strike at the foundations both of patriarchy and of the canon.

The recent “Cultural Turn” of Translation Studies, inaugurated several decades ago by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere’s theoretical studies and fixated “on the interaction between translation and culture, on the way in which culture impacts and constrains translation” (Munday et al. 2022: 168), as well as the latest feminist and post-colonial critical approaches that focus on the absent and silent voices of the subaltern in translations have changed dramatically the perception of the mechanisms of translation as well as of the translator’s role in intercultural communication, in general, and in the policy of canon making, in particular. From a poststructuralist standpoint, translation is a process of textual production that does not deliver a finalised text, one that is no longer amendable. Quite the opposite, translation is a method of linguistic exploration in which a plethora of solutions and significances is being prospected. As Mark Polizzotti writes, “is a translation ever finished? As with any writing, endlessly finding further improvements comes with the territory, even after publication; something always slips by.” (Polizzotti 2018: 1)

Hence, alike the Gothic that Fred Botting has memorably described as “a writing of excess” (Botting 1996: 1), each and every translation is “an excess of language” (Schwieler 2022: 169). Accordingly, the translated text is haunted unrelentingly by the ghosts of other actual or potential versions of the given text. As a result, every translation is charged with a residual energy that is going to fuel the next version. A less Gothic perception of translation is the one proposed by contemporary theoreticians who employ a metaphorical description of translation as a prismatic streaming of the text, “inspired by the image of white light being dispersed into the many colored rays of the rainbow” (Dunne 2023: 123). Beside the multiplicity of solutions, prismatic translation acknowledges their hermeneutical function, the fact that each version is in fact a rewriting and a decoding of the translated text, one that elucidates and sheds light on previously unmapped significances.

Other metaphorical renderings of translation describe it as a window that opens upon a new culture or, of late, as a door. This last simile points toward a two-way flow of meaning that discards the preceding impassive

contemplation of another culture (through the “window”) and it conforms to Madhu Kaza’s account of the routine of translation as a process of getting acquainted with the other, similar to “the practice of hospitality” in which both guests and hosts take great efforts at finding things about one another, at preserving the authenticity of communication with no intention to minimise the interlocutor’s distinctiveness.

By the same token, translation is no longer opposed to its “original” as the relationship between the two texts is seen more in terms of Heidegger’s coupling of poverty and wealth. Viewed as such, translation’s poverty infers the text’s poverty and the other way round. Both texts “work as the wealth of the other, as well as the poverty of the other – wealth since it extends the other’s meaning and poverty in that the meaning is also restricted by its otherness. This brings to them both a simultaneous balance and imbalance, which is equal in its inequality. One could, perhaps, say that they emancipate one another” (Schwieler 2022: 171). Hence, such matters as “originality” and “primacy” are less important in this period of global cultural hybridity in which translators occupy intermediary positions and translations are weighed in terms of their cultural effect. From this new angle, translation is viewed as also apt to “perform acts of subtle resistance by introducing texts (...) that speak from marginalised voices and values, or through modes of translation that do not seek to erase the otherness of the text” (Kaza 2017: 14–5).

We must however admit the fact that what is still predominantly translated into other languages is the contents of the canon. Thus, the agents involved in the process of translation – editors, academics, critics, and, last (and perhaps least) translators – determine not only what is part of the canon in the source literature but also what the canon should look like in the target culture. As Lefevere points out in *Translation, Rewriting and Manipulation of Literary Fame*, translation (i.e., the condition of being translated into other languages) is one of the prerequisites for a text to be included in the canon, next to some more extraliterary “issues such as power, ideology, institution and manipulation” (2017: 2).

Feminist Translation Studies propose a change of attitude towards the imbalanced representation of diversity and a reconsideration and readjustment of criteria because, as Helen Vassallo remarks, “translated literature offers an excellent opportunity to re-think our perceptions of what is ‘normal’: since translated literature can only ever represent a small proportion of what is published in a given language, country, or culture, then there is no reason to perpetuate imbalances in the source culture when choosing titles to publish in translation” (2023: 30). The practice of hospitality that both Virgil Nemoianu and Madhu Kaza refer to should encompass many more women writers but is also expected to apply to the so-called “minor literatures” and “minor writers”, to all sorts of marginalised or silenced voices. Some authors prefer the term “minorisation” to that of “minority” when they refer to certain European languages and literatures, such as Romanian, for instance, that are “placed in a less powerful or secondary position in power hierarchies” (Castro et al. 2017: 7) and lack “status, prestige, diffusion, standardisation and a normalised

functional use” as well as “recognition by speakers of the sociolinguistically dominant language” (Castro et al. 2017: 7).

Now that we know something about the magnitude of the cultural junctions and cross-fertilisation performed by translation one can not refrain from asking a variety of disquieting questions: what has been lost in target cultures due to the fact that minor writers have never been translated into other languages? What has been lost in major cultures as a result of the fact that minor literatures have not been translated into other languages? What would world literature have looked like if, for instance, Tristan Tzara’s Emil Cioran’s or Eugène Ionesco’s literary works had been written in Romanian only and had never been (self)translated into or written in French, the *lingua franca* or the hegemonic language of their time?

The fact is that, according to English PEN, for example, the 3% figure divulges its translation programme:

The Little Prince, Don Quixote, Metamorphosis, War and Peace, Anna Karenina, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Holy Bible – all are translations into English with which most readers are familiar. How much would be lost to us if such writing was not so readily accessible to us? Yet less than 3% of the UK’s literary publishing output every year consists of translated literary work.

The same percentage is to be taken into account when we refer to the amount of translations in USA, according to the “Three Percent” site of the University of Rochester’s translation program:

Unfortunately, only about 3% of all books published in the United States are works in translation. That is why we have chosen the name *Three Percent* for this site. And that 3% figure includes all books in translation—in terms of literary fiction and poetry, the number is actually closer to 0.7%. While that figure obviously represents more books than any one person could read in a year, it’s hardly an impressive number. An even greater shame is that only a fraction of the titles that do make their way into English are covered by the mainstream media. So despite the quality of these books, most translations go virtually unnoticed and never find their audience.

The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos coined the term “epistemicide” to describe the epistemological inhibition and downgrading of “the indigenous knowledges of the global South, which are so eclipsed and marginalized that they are barely accorded the status of ‘knowledge’ at all” (Bennet 2023: 454). This knowledge occlusion is compared to a genocide of the information coming from the margin and has been created by the hegemony of the Western epistemology that has actually blocked the participation of other parts of the world in the scientific and cultural dialogue. Accordingly, de Sousa Santos pleads for a policy of checking the Western epistemicide “through a strategy of ‘intercultural translation,’ which works toward the ‘ecologies of knowledge’ necessary to achieve ‘cognitive justice’” (Bennet 2023: 454). The transfer of knowledge should work not only between West and East, North and South, but also between minor and major because, according to Walter Benjamin’s definition that he gave in “The Task of the Translator” (1923), an

effective translation resides in acknowledging the difference (which is definitely not only linguistic) and aspiring to cope with it.

The epistemicide works both ways. It is not only that minorised literatures are not translated into major languages but minor works by minor writers from major literatures, expelled from the canon and marginalized at home, are rarely translated into minorised languages. When the translator is free to choose what to translate, which, we must admit, is quite rare, their choice is suggestive because, as Theo Hermans writes in his *Metatranslation* (2023), it “provides a privileged index of cultural self-reference or, if you prefer, self-definition” (20) since

translators never ‘just translate’. They translate in the context of certain conceptions of and expectations about translation. Within this context, they make choices and take up positions because they have goals to reach, interests to pursue, material and symbolic stakes to defend. Both the context and the actions of individuals and groups are socially determined. Translators, too, are social agents. (Hermans 2023: 25)

Additionally, translators are cultural agents in the sense in which Bourdieu uses the word. They may choose to remove barriers and reveal entire regions on literary maps that were once concealed under the cautionary inscription “*terra incognita*” or the even more terrifying engraving “*hic sunt dracones!*”

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