

Reviews

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Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London and New York: Verso, 2013. (Pb, £20/Hb, £70) Pp 382. ISBN: 9781844679706.

Emily Apter's monograph *Against World Literature* is a response to the much-appraised book *What Is World Literature?* by David Damrosch. The Harvard professor realized that translations should be part of world literature if we want to approach, in a new way, World Literature, this notion coined by Goethe. In the age of globalization when the flows of ideas, people, and merchandise are faster than in any other previous historical period, World Literature can no longer be a kind of museum where exhibits exalt some kind of universal notion of beauty that pretends to transgress times and geographies. The introduction of translators, translations, and their biographies creates a new image of World Literature which is regarded primarily as a dynamic system, a network, a netting, a nexus whose interconnections, crisscrosses, and arteries make up a living body that has its own preferences, and that includes the likes and dislikes of different ages and times.¹

Apter wants to perform the "rephilosophization of World" (9), which means, in fact, "the rephilosophization of literary history through the history of translation" (9). Paying attention to translation also means taking into account "untranslatability," which is a notion Damrosch did not consider at all. Both translatable and untranslatable works "are constitutive of world forms of literature" (16). The analysis of translatability leads Apter to "hypertranslation" which is a kind of adaptation of the source text. The example Apter gives is Alain Badiou's version of Plato's *Republic* (20-21). Apter's very authoritative and well-circumstantiated study offers "a planetary approach to literary history that responds to the dynamics of geopolitics without shying away from

fractious border wars” (43). She recommends transnationalism which she defines as a sort of “comparatism that bypasses the metropole [sic] while privileging translation between ‘minor,’ or micro-minority languages and literatures” (71). The few dominant literary powers must not control the market of literary interpretation.ⁱⁱ

Apter very competently presents the state of the art in literary theory. A whole chapter is dedicated to Franco Moretti’s contribution to the study of world literature. Moretti’s method is characterized by Apter as “a loose name for a practice of World literature shaped by quantitative analysis and computational skills” (45). In other words, “the worlds of literature are thinkable as data systems based on quantitative indices of plot and style” (Apter 2013, 187). Apter is not only a very well-read scholar but she is also an artist of the word. The beauty of her critical judgments enhances an easier understanding of her ideas. Analyzing for instance, Moretti’s study about the grafting of free indirect speech onto Russian, she notices that “texts must experience the condition of exile. Transplanted from their native soil, and forced to encounter extreme cultural and linguistic difference, literary forms jump the line into morphological innovation” (50). Moretti draws attention to the “Great Unread – the vast unexplored archive that lies underneath the narrow canon of literary history.”ⁱⁱⁱ Masterpieces cannot exist in the absence of the huge corpus of texts that did not have the chance to correspond to some fundamental ideas of the age or to be imposed on the literary market of value by some influential critic.

Another contemporary literary theorist mentioned by Apter is Dipesh Chakrabarty, the very interesting challenger of centristic perspectives. In Apter’s words, Chakrabarty avoids “the simplistic substitution of Asiaticity or Afrocentricity for Eurocentricity, which rests on a caricatural logic of divided world-systems and cultural Othering” (59-60). He prefers translational approaches to the classical periodicity based on the master narrative of European culture. Apter sums up this process using a very interesting pun. Contemporary culture passes from the “politicization of history to a historicization of politics” (64). The change from the definite article “the” to the indefinite article “a” points to the transition from a unique view on history and history of culture

imposed by certain political forces to one of the possible ways in which history and political history can influence culture. The alternation of the nouns composing the noun structure (“politicization of history” vs. “historicization of politics”) reinforces the idea of change: from a history imposed by Western politics to a historical explanation of this politicization partial and aggressive.

The introduction of translation into comparative literature cannot be complete without the analysis of the untranslatables. Translation is a partial process, there is no such thing as a perfect translation and sometimes translation is even impossible. The untranslatables, words rife with meanings, that Apter chose to analyze are: cyclopedia, peace, fado and saudade, sex and gender, world in “world literatures.”

From a Romanian perspective, I think that particularly interesting are the “fado” and “saudade.” The former is the traditional Portuguese musical form that expresses longing (“saudade”), a combination of sadness and melancholic hope. “They lend symbolic capital to an oceanic regionalism drawing on myths of Atlantism and the Mediterranean, and nourish the construct of a greater transcontinental Lusophonia that binds the populations of Lusophone Africa, and South America – subjects of colonialism, diaspora, and immigration – to a common Portugueseness” (139). “Fado” and “saudade” correspond to the Romanian “doina” and “dor”. The four of them “emerge as semantic national monuments” (140). Both “dor” and “saudade” show the untranslatability of longing into language. Like “saudade,” “dor” becomes “a philosophical Untranslatable” (155). On the other hand, “doina” which is the melancholic song and poem that the shepherds created while leading their sheep on their long roads of transhumance is not a marker of expansion. Transhumance was a kind of seasonal migration that did not lead to the subjection of other peoples but ensured the survival of the Romanian shepherds for centuries by putting them out of harm’s way (the harm that was coming from the temporary imperial powers).

Another untranslatable from Apter’s study is “world” in “oneworldedness,” a term Apter prefers to globalization. It refers to the “planetary paranoia marked by cyber-surveillance, cartographies of cartels, and webs of international relationality within and outside the

nation and on the edges of legality” (70-71). Fast travelling and the internet make us experience “oneworldedness” more acutely than any other previous generation. In “world literature,” world characterizes “a cosmopolitan project better suited to privileged emigrés than to immigrant, second-generation minority cultures” (177). Consequently, the term “world literature” becomes less suitable for today’s world of globalizing waves of information, merchandise, tourists, or labor force.

Other untranslatables from Apter’s book are sex and gender which are analyzed in several translations of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* into English as well as in several reviews of this classical text in gender studies. It is one of the subtlest chapters in Apter’s study. Negligence in translation led to confusions. For instance, according to Beauvoir, is the female body the instrumentality of women’s freedom or is it defining and limiting essence? The translation of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is another interesting case which demonstrates that translation can lead to misinterpretations of the original. Starting from the word “trouble” in Butler’s title translators have systematically influenced the understanding of this text as well as its relation to Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*.

Emily Apter is not only a scholar very much up-to-date with the latest information in her field but she also demonstrates that translation has been an area of great interest for several theorists long before David Damrosch reinvented world literature introducing translation and its highways into the scholarship about world literature. Starting from Benjamin, Wellek, Auerbach, Said, and even Derrida, a lot of literary scholars wrote about the translations of the world. For instance, in 1979-1980 Derrida offered a seminar on *Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation*. He also gave several talks on the *Theologies of Translation* in Toronto, in 1983-1984.

The beauty of Apter’s language goes hand in hand with her scholarly competence. The result is a text that impresses, teaches and delights at the same time. Here is one such sample where scholarly power meets delicate wording: “He [Derrida] is also especially interested in tracking the vagaries of the Babelian comparatist who wanders across state borders infringing trespass law, seeks access to the literary

commons, experiences like the emigrant the portage^{iv} of language from place to place ..." (240).

The problems referring to the translation of the holy books cannot miss in a study dedicated to translation in world literature. Apter analyses Abdelfattah Kilito's seminal work *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, dedicated to the translation of the Qur'an. As the Qur'an is God's word, humans can never exhaust its meanings. As for trying to pass its meanings from classical Arabic into another language, this is even more difficult to conceive and equally impossible to perform. Apter reminds us of similar controversies in the Christian world before Luther's revolutionary translation of the Bible into German. She mentions John Wycliffe and William Tyndale as the "historical cases of death-by-translation" (257). Wycliffe was persecuted for having translated parts of the Bible and for his daring attacks against the Papacy, but he died of natural death (a stroke) in 1384. It was only later in 1415 that the Council of Constance declared him a heretic. Tyndale was, indeed, strangled and then burnt at the stake in 1536 for daring to have translated parts of the Bible. The conclusion of this chapter is that translation is "a kind of leveraging of language" (246) and it "causes the university, and the entire the world, to pivot, eventually if incrementally, on its own axis" (246). The problems of translation, theologies and philosophies of language are fundamental in all the cultures of the world.

A very successful chapter is dedicated to the careful analysis of several translations. An interesting sample in this respect is the history of the English translations of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The most enduring of these English equivalents was the work of Eleanor Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx. It was published in 1886 and it was accompanied by a preface where Marx defined three types of possible translators. The first type is the genius translator, for instance Baudelaire for Poe. Then there is the hack translator. His work is often a perversion, not a rendering. Finally, there is the conscientious worker who is honest and earnest. This kind of translation is faithful to the original. Eleanor Marx considers that she belongs to this last type. Apter comments that "[t]he modesty of the translation's textual ideal seems here to conform to the personal modesty of a woman" (289). On the other hand, the translation of Eleanor Marx is

deprived of any originality, namely it tries to stick to the original as slavishly as possible. “Deauthored, neutered, deowned – ‘suicided,’ if you will – the translation like the Flaubertian cliché, is cast as an unusual form of literary expression that, counter to Romantic values and myths of avant-garde originality, flaunts its derivativeness and proudly wears the lead weight of predication on literary antecedent” (281). This translation is close to the Barthesian zero degree of *écriture* and it is the perfect medium for a bourgeois novel. Barthes himself considered the blank *écriture* which he called zero degree of *écriture* the stylistic marker of the rising bourgeois novel. In connection to this problem, it is worth mentioning that in 1886 Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling co-authored the essay “The Woman Question” which argues against woman’s exploitation in capitalism. Both stylistically and ideologically the novel, the translation, and the translator meet on the battleground against capitalism and bourgeois order. On the other hand, the feminist ideals of Eleanor Marx support the idea of collaborative authorship which is the best characterization of the translator’s work. And if we add that both Emma Bovary and Eleanor Marx commit suicide “in the wake of failed relationships” (267), the history of this translation contributes to the history of politics, philosophy, culture, and economics.

The next popular translation of *Madame Bovary* was published by Paul de Man in 1965 and heavily relied on the version created by Eleanor Marx. On the other hand, most of this second translation of *Madame Bovary* was by Patricia de Man. It was the wife, who did most of the work although Paul de Man appears as the translator. After revising the work of his wife, Paul de Man theorized about translation in an article based on Walter Benjamin.^v It must have been the pains of this editing activity that made de Man infer that translation shows “the pain and suffering on language itself” (205). Apter’s conclusion to these thorough analyses of translation is that the translated text has “no autonomous textual identity” (281) but it can offer an excellent ground for the discussion of ownership and copyright problems: “Translation offers a particularly rich focus for discussions of creative property and the limits of ownership because it is a peculiar genre” (303). At the other extreme, Derrida considers the problem of translation at a super-general level. In Apter’s words, Derrida

thinks that “language maintains copyright on all originals” (306). Or as Terry Eagleton said in an article published in *The Guardian*, on 6 June 2002: “all our language is filched and forged, reach-me-down rather than bespoke” (310). The chapter becomes picturesque thanks to some notorious cases of writers who translated a text and pretended it was theirs.

The conclusion of this ample and provocative book is that World Literature is not “a politically abstracted meeting ground” (320). This is an idea that Apter shares with Damrosch. On the other hand, in many respects, Apter challenges and completes Damrosch. The study of the untranslatables, the case study of the holy books or the careful analyses of several translations *per se* bring several important new aspects to a discussion that existed long before it was revigorated by David Damrosch.

Notes:

ⁱ In a minor literature, such as Romanian literature, the interest in reception can be understood in two ways: as the reception of foreign texts in Romanian by means of? translation and as the reception of Romanian texts in other literatures also by translation. In Romanian literature, for instance, reception and translation have always been considered to be very important. Romanian reference books included information about the circulation of translations in Romania and the reception of Romanian works abroad by translation long before David Damrosch had the idea to introduce translations into comparative literary studies. See in this respect: the dictionaries compiled by Eugen Simion, Mircea Zăciu et al., Aurel Sasu, the dictionaries compiled under the auspices of the Romanian Academy in 1979, 2004, 2005, 2004-2009, 2011. When I say that Romanian literature is a minor one, I refer to the Romanian literature’s power of influencing other literatures; the minor status of Romanian literature is particularly owed to the small circulation of texts authored in Romanian. Such minor literatures have a history of endurance. They do not have the proud and haughty status of dominant literatures coming from a history of submitting others.

ⁱⁱ All this is very promising but presupposes that these minor literatures should have their works translated into the languages spoken by most peoples of the world. If we think of Romanian literature, it seems that we are about to miss this new trend in comparative literary studies. No political or cultural authority from Romania has yet made Romanian literature the object of a coherent programme of translations into the most spoken languages of the world.

ⁱⁱⁱ Franco Moretti, “Network Theory” apud Apter, 54.

^{iv} A system that allows a worker to work freelance from one place to another.

^v Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' in *The Resistance to Theory*.

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