

(World) Literature

SUSAN BASSNETT

From: **“When is a Translation Not a Translation?”** in Susan Bassnett & André Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures. Essays on Literary translation* (1998) Clevedon – Philadelphia – Toronto – Sydney – Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters.

“Once we start to consider the way in which both the terminology of translation and the idea of authentic ‘original’ that exists somewhere beyond the text in front of us are used by writers, then the question of when a translation is or is not taking place becomes increasingly difficult to answer. It is probably more helpful to think of translation not so much as a category in its own right, but rather as a set of textual practices with which the writer and reader collude. This suggests that literary studies, and discourse analysis in particular, need to look again at translation, for the investigation of translation as a set of textual practices has not received much attention. This is doubtless because we have been far too obsessed with binary oppositions within the translation model and have been too concerned with defining and redefining the relationship between translation and original. Even where the model of dominant original and subservient translation has been challenged, the idea of some kind of hegemonic original still remains—either in the source language or target language. It is time to free ourselves from the constraints that the term ‘translation’ has placed upon us and recognise that we have immense problems in pinning down a term that continues to elude us. For whether we acknowledge it or not, we have been colluding with alternative notions of translation all our lives. (p. 39)

DAVID DAMROSCH

From: **“Death in Translation”** in Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (eds.) *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation* (2005) Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press.

To understand the workings of world literature we need more of a phenomenology than an ontology of the work of art: a work *manifests* differently abroad than it does at home. (p. 394)
[...]

It shouldn't be necessary to treat a foreign work with an uncomprehending sympathy in order to appreciate its excellence. It does no service to works of world literature to set them loose in some deracinated space, whether the "great conversation" of a 1950s-style academic humanism or the "closed self-referential loop" of recent poststructuralist metafiction. Aesthetically as well as ethically, a pure universalism of either variety is finally reductive, missing the real complexity of a work, just as much as would an opposite insistence that a work can only be read effectively in the original language, inextricably linked at all points to its local context. An informed reading of a work of world literature should keep both aspects in play together, recognizing that it brings us elements of a time and place different from our own, and at the same time recognizing that these elements change in force as the book gets farther from home.

[...]

[W]hen we read a work of world literature we have a great deal of freedom in deciding what use we will make of such contextual understanding. This freedom can most readily be seen when we are reading a work from a distant time as well as place. To take the case of Dante, for instance, it seems to me trivializing to treat *the Divine Comedy* as an essential secular work, though various modern commentators have chosen to focus on Dante as "poet of the secular world," in Erich Auerbach's phrase. Auerbach went so far as to claim that Dante's realism overwhelmed his theology "and destroyed it in the very process or realizing it" (*Mimesis*, 202). We can dispute such a claim on both historical and aesthetic grounds, taking seriously the idea that *the Divine Comedy* may actually have been a successful Christian poem. Even so, appreciating Dante's profound religious vision does not require us to convert to Catholicism, or to take a stand on issues of Florentine politics, though both of these responses are ones that Dante might well have desired. A work of world literature has its fullest life, and its greatest power, when we can read it with a kind of a *detached engagement*, informed but not confined by a knowledge of what the work would likely mean in its original time and place, even as we adapt it to our present context and purposes. (pp. 394-395)

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American Comparative Literature Association, David Damrosch has written widely on comparative and world literature. His books include *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (1987), *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (1995), *What Is World Literature?* (2003), *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (2007), and *How to Read World Literature* (2009). He is the founding general editor of the six-volume *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2004), and of the six-volume *Longman Anthology of British Literature* (4th ed. 2010), editor of *Teaching World Literature* (2009), co-editor of *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature* (2009), and co-editor of a recent collection, *Xin Fang Xiang: Bi Jiao Wen Xue Yu Shi Jie Wen Xue Du Ben* [*New Directions: A Reader of Comparative and World Literature*] (Beijing U. P., 2010). He is presently writing a book called *Comparing the Literatures: What Every Comparatist Needs to Know*.

DAVID DAMROSCH

From: “How American is World Literature?” (2009) *The Comparatist*, 33.

It would be well worth while to undertake a comparative study of world literature as it is construed in differing locations around the globe. Such a study could help scholars everywhere to think directly about the relations (whether symbiotic or hegemonic; whether unusually close or unusually disjointed) between their national tradition and their presentation of the wider plenum of world literature. A fuller sense of the range of possibility might keep scholars from falling unwittingly into nationalistic patterns in the construal of global literary relations, such as the Gallicentrism so prominent in Pascale Casanova’s otherwise wide-ranging *République mondiale des lettres*. Perhaps in time only a third of the essays in the *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, instead of the two-thirds or more, would center on India’s authors and linguistic traditions.

American comparatists, on the other hand, seem clearly to be at the opposite end of the range of continuity/discontinuity. For too long, we have accepted a high degree of uprootedness and the internal exile in relation to our home culture. This orientation may have had a certain logic for the émigrés who taught us or our teachers, but it makes less and less sense for our field today—even for foreign-born scholars, as can be seen in the cross-cultural work of such comparatist Americanists as Wai Chee Dimock and Djelal Kadir. There are encouraging signs of a budding rapprochement between American and comparative literary studies, seen for instance in a valuable recent collection edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007). It is symptomatic, though, that both editors are based in departments of English and American studies rather than comparative literature. They and their contributors clearly see the benefits that can accrue to American studies by taking a comparative and global perspective; more departments of comparative literature need to accept the converse realization, that a vital comparatism can best thrive in creative symbiosis with its home traditions as well as those of the wider world.

A comparative study of different national approaches to world literature should also help us to do a better job construing the world’s literary traditions, whether to move beyond an overemphasis on a few literary great powers, as Werner Friederich urged, or to avoid projecting liberal American multiculturalism outward, as Spivak fears that our courses (and possibly some anthologies!) may do. Already in the early 1960s René Wellek commented, in a trenchant article on “American Literary Scholarship,” that “The selection of European writers which have attracted the attention of modern critics in the United States is oddly narrow and subject to the distortion of a very local and temporary perspective.” Such distortions can become endemic in any scholarly community that pays little attention to foreign traditions, and this danger applies to patterns of construing world literature as much as individual national traditions. The study of world literature in America has much to gain if it can become both more American and more wordly as well. (pp. 18-19)

SUZANNE JILL LEVINE

From: *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* (first edition: 1991; 2009) Champaign – London – Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press.

In 1932, in *Las versiones homéricas*, an essay that could be translated as “Some version of Homer,” Jorge Luis Borges questioned the privileged status of the original books we call the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Which interpretation of the original is the “original”? he asked; only a Greek from the tenth century B.C. (according to Borges) might be able to tell us. Borges prefigured here Michel Foucault’s challenge to the concept of authorship: What is an author? How can we determine intentionality? The only real difference between original and translation—Borges playfully specified—is that the translator’s referent is a *visible* text against which the translation can be judged; the original escapes this sceptical scrutiny because its referent is unspoken, perhaps forgotten, and probably embarrassingly banal.

This meditation of translation contains the subversive seed of Borges’s poetics of “reading as writing,” which he articulated further in 1939 in his perverse parable “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” the piece that George Steiner, in *After Babel*, considers the summa of all translation theory. Here Cervantes’s masterpiece becomes a tentative web of propositions that change with each new historical act of reading; each successive reading, rewriting, translating of a text enriches and ensures the original’s survival anew. Every work enters into a dialogue with other texts, and with a context; texts are *relationships* that of necessity evolve in other contexts.

Borges has shown us how literary works already give us the theoretical models through which we may interpret them: “Some Version of Homer” and “Pierre Menard” both prefigure reader-response and reception theories. These texts reveal not only the thin line between originals and their interpretations but the parallel and complementary nature of these interpretations. “Pierre Menard” in particular illuminates the related functions of translation, parody, and literary criticism.

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she directs a translation studies doctoral program. Her scholarly and critical works include her award-winning literary biography *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman* (FSG and Faber & Faber, 2000) and her groundbreaking book on the poetics of translation *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* (published in 1991 and reissued this year by Dalkey Archive Press, along with her classic translations of novels by Manuel Puig). Aside from numerous volumes of translations of Latin American fiction and poetic works, she has regularly contributed articles, reviews, essays, and translations of prose and poetry to major anthologies and journals including the *New Yorker*. Her many honors include National Endowment for the Arts and NEH fellowship and research grants, the first PEN USA West Prize for Literary Translation (1989), the PEN American Center Career Achievement award (1996), and a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. She has just completed a five volume project as general editor of the works of Borges for Penguin Classics.

“Pierre Menard” is a stylized parody of the laborious bibliographic homage an obscure French provincial writer pays to his mentor Pierre Menard, an obscure French symbolist whose most fantastic project is his attempt to rewrite word-for-word, in the language of Cervantes, *Don Quixote*. Our vertigo upon reading this *ficcion* is infinite. To begin with, *Don Quixote*—often labeled the first modern novel—was born both as a parody (of the chivalresque novel) and a “translation”. The narrator suggests in an aside that the “original” is a found manuscript written by an Arab named Cide Hamete Benengeli (to wit, Sir Eggplant). That a French writer of the late nineteenth century would attempt to re-create (without plagiarizing) a seventeenth-century Spanish classic, and that an Argentine writer—Borges—would attempt to write Menard’s disciple’s homage, produces a *mise en abîme*. Menard’s faithful rendition of a sentence from the *Quixote* turns out as different as a parody, that is, an imitation with a critical difference, because the same Spanish phrase becomes an affectation and takes on different, even opposite meanings, reinscribed in another linguistic and historical context. Borges’s Spanish “rendition” of a supposed French original (the invented disciple’s homage to the invented mentor) is both a “translation” and a parody (about the parody/translation of a parody/translation) that makes us question the status of what appears to be an ever-elusive original. Indeed, where does the French end and the Spanish begin in this text? Here Borges conflates the modes of parody or satirical imitation and translation or imitation in another language, and also shows how they function as literary criticism with one important difference: Both translations and parodies attempt to repeat the discourse of the original; the critical essay uses another rhetoric.

Borges has proposed, essentially, a tentative status for the original as one of many possible versions. James Joyce, collaborative translator of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of *Finnegans Wake* into Italian, was thinking along similar lines when he chose to call his original “work in progress”—which he continued to complete in the next stage—translation. Joyce “transelaborated” aspects of the original, which became more *explicit* in Italian. He took advantage of his relationship to what he experienced as the earthy musicality of the target language to invent a more slangy version, and different double, even triple puns. The poet laureate Robert Penn Warren once observed, Dante’s *Inferno* on his lap in the original Italian, that those outside of the language, like himself, could appreciate its musicality more than a native speaker—precisely because the outside reader would tend to focus more on (exotic) sound than sense.

In a sacred vein Walter Benjamin privileges the original, radiating an infinity of versions, over translation, one limited version among many, but he coincides with the profane Joyce in seeing the original “embodiment” as, in George Steiner’s words in *Antigones*, “an annunciation, however well wrought, of forms of being yet to come.” Steiner shows how Benjamin’s theory of “absolute translation and of the confluence of all secular tongues towards a mythical *Ursprache*, a primal source of perfect unison and facsimile” was inspired, in part, by Hölderlin’s journey to the source, seeking through his translations of Sophocles to bring forth “the ‘Oriental’ substratum and well-spring stifled in fifth century Greek art.”

The bringing forth of a “substratum” is implied in the concept of subversion, in which translation betrays in the traditional *traduttore*, *traditore* sense but also because it makes evi-

dent a version underneath that becomes explicit, a latent version implied in the original. In a sense this latent version is a *subtext*, a term borrowed from psychoanalytical theory, which Terry Eagleton has defined as

A text running within a work, visible at certain “symptomatic” points of ambiguity, evasion or overemphasis and which we as readers are able to “write” even if the novel itself does not. All literary texts contain one or more such sub-texts... which can be called the “unconscious” of the work. The work’s insights... deeply related to its blindness—that is does not say, and how it does not say it—may be as important as what it articulates; what seems absent, marginal or ambivalent about it may provide the central clue.

Persuasive translations uncover subtexts, or underlying meanings, for, after all is said and done, translation’s first and final function is to relate meaning.

(Sub)versions

Authorized geniuses such as Borges, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, and Vladimir Nabokov command an *authority*, unlike most translators, to re-create, to “subvert” the original—particularly their own. They offer an ideal model, nonetheless, for what literary translations should be: creation. Having collaborated with such polyglots as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Manuel Puig, I have been able to observe a symbiotic if not parasitic relationship between translation and original composition.

Far from the traditional view of translators as servile, nameless scribes, the literary translator can be considered a subversive scribe. Something is destroyed—the form of the original—but meaning is reproduced through another form. A translation in this light becomes a continuation of the original, which already always alters the reality it intends to re-create.

But let’s take this argument beyond the cliché about what gets lost in translation—from reality to original, as well as from original to translation. The disruptive effect of books such as *Tres tristes tigres* and *La traición de Rita Hayworth* occurs through the violation of usage, through a resistance to language as useful or usual. Proper names become puns in Cabrera Infante’s books; the communicative function of spoken language is subverted when Puig and Cabrera Infante transform it, with all its grammatical violations, into writing. The translation of their “abuses”—a term Philip Lewis applies to creative translation—must also violate, and in doing so sustain, their comment about language, in ways that are not arbitrary but which make the reader aware of decisive linguistic or textual knots of signification. The translation of Cabrera Infante’s title *La habana para un infante difunto* into *Infante’s Inferno* offers a prime example of this both abusive and sustaining process. Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, Severo Sarduy—principal exemplars in this meditation on my work as a translator—see their originals already as translations of texts and traditions as well as of realities; each in his own way is a parodist, a creator-commentator. Dethroning language’s dominion over meaning, they have also in a sense dethroned the “author”. As collaborators or self-translators they are self-subverters. (pp. 4-8)

