

THE ROLE OF LITERARY TRANSLATION AS LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

EVA-NICOLETA BURDUȘEL*

Language is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. (SUSAN BASSNETT)
Translation is always a shift, not only between two languages, but between two cultures – or two encyclopaedias. (UMBERTO ECO, Experiences in Translation)

Abstract. The present paper aims to highlight the significance of translation studies and the role of professional translators and interpreters as cultural mediators enabled by linguistic competence. Our goal is to emphasize the power of culture to connect individuals and communities, to ensure national survival, to preserve tangible and intangible heritage as the most valuable asset of continuity. Literary translation represents one of the most powerful and effective means of linguistic and cultural mediation, though equally challenging due to the complexity of a process often touched by “untranslatability”.

Keywords: cultural mediation, literary translation, linguistic transaction

1. Introduction

The main goal of this study is twofold: on the one hand, pointing out to the expertise of literary translators in deploying their accumulated competence to achieve an accurate linguistic transaction between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) and, on the other hand, to raise awareness of the cultural turn in translation studies as an

* “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, eva.burdusel@ulbsibiu.ro

ongoing exchange of cultural patterns, concepts, symbols and significances from the source context (SC) to the target context (TC). For our analysis, the term context is the most appropriate in connecting the triad of communication – culture – language, with specific particularities given by the spatial and temporal perspectives, i.e., geography and history, in addition to anthropological, sociological, socio-economic and political factors.

The paper undertakes a thorough analysis of recent paradigm shifts in the areas of cultural, literary and translation studies in view of highlighting their interdependence as well as their power to facilitate the construction and shape the concept of world literature and its companion term, comparative literature.

2. Analysis

Translation has acquired increased relevance and may therefore and may therefore be perceived as a complex process with linguistic dimensions, cultural connotations, temporal continuity and duration as well as wide geographical circulation. In the field of translation studies, the notion of duration is connected to our conception of world literature, as, according to Helgesson (2020: 139) it “has to do with how a particular translation endures over time” accumulating authority and prestige through rereading and republication; such a form of duration involves “the accumulation of translation over time.”

The growing role and power of translation is wisely epitomized by Stefan Helgesson (2020: 131) in one of his studies “Translation. Duration and Cosmopolitan Reading” as follows: “Translation is the paradoxical condition of possibility for connecting different speech communities and literary cultures. If, on the one hand, translation might be defined as the *transfer* of a text from one language to another, it equally involves a dramatic *transformation*.” In the context of cultural turn theory, Umberto Eco’s *Experiences in Translation* (2002: 13, 17) sets forth a fundamental hypothesis stating that “translation is always a shift, not only between two languages but between two cultures – or two encyclopaedias. Translating is not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextual, psychological and narrative competence.” Furthermore and

in relation to Umberto Eco's landmark argument, mention should be made that Stefan Helgesson (2020: 135, 139) reinforced a similar idea in the aforementioned study, regarding the shift from the accuracy of a translation to the original text (SL) to the function of the translation in the new context (TC) which occurred about four decades ago, in translation studies, due to such scholars as Susan Bassnett, Lawrence Venuti, Andre Lefevere, to name just a few: "the interest shifted from the source text to the target text, and above all to the *target culture*, as summed up in Toury's paradigmatic statement: 'translations are facts of target culture.'"

As regards shifting paradigms in the field of literary translation, it is worth noting the growing interdependence in recent years among translation studies – comparative literature – world literature, according to Mads Rosenthal Thomsen (2020: 38-39) who pointed out to the significant changes in the degrees of scholarly attention to the field of translation as "there cannot be a meaningful idea of world literature without translation ... translation is now regarded as a much more creative process than it was in the past: translation is a valuable rewriting of works that adds to the understanding of the original".

One of the specific quality-related dimensions of translation is illustrated by its unparalleled ability to incorporate the cultural context, linguistic transaction and literary transfer evinced by world literature as conceptualized by David Damrosch (2009: 2, 66). He summed up in one of his landmark studies *How to Read World Literature* that "texts are culture bound" facilitating or mediating a better understanding and interpretation of textual and authorial otherness – from the point of view of context – mediated by cultural translation with the aim of reaching out to a global audience, hence "we live today in a great age of translation".

Reading literature across time, space and culture mediated by translation represents a sine-qua-non instrument for comparative literature and world literature alike: translation facilitates dissemination and accessibility of literature worldwide in addition to the promotion of national literature. Translation serves as the most efficient and effective facilitator of the circulation of "minor" literature from the "periphery" to the "centre" and its interaction with "major" literature. Therefore, world literature represents an overarching concept whose backbone and main resource is national literature, and the role of world literary studies in translation is

to enable reading across traditional borders and expand the horizon of cultural geography. Helgesson and Thomsen (2020: 78, 84, 152) sum up that “literature belongs to the world at large not confined to its cultural origin but speaks to people everywhere” where the key term is connection as “a minimal condition for world literature” more precisely connection across literature, cultures, languages, spaces.

Language is the foundation of culture, embedding and preserving the identity of a nation and ensuring its millennial survival. Literary geography calls attention to the distinction between the centre and the periphery emerging from power relations. Literature empowers people, either at the centre or the periphery, to travel the world by means of narrative imagination, to have access to and knowledge about any part of the world notwithstanding physical distance and relate to the universal matters of the human being. Storytelling represents an effective vector for creating cultural empathy among human beings worldwide, therefore literature and culture – mediated by translation – connect people and places transgressing time or any other boundaries; highlighting the interdependence between art and context – viewed as geographical territory, literary area, space vs. place. Damrosch (2009: 65-66) epitomized that “most literature circulates in the world in translation ... Read intelligently, an excellent translation can be seen as an expansive transformation of the original, a concrete manifestation of cultural exchange and a new stage in a work’s life as it moves from its first home ... Translation is at once a linguistic and a cultural project.”

In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech (2002), Orhan Pamuk acknowledged that “literature is never just a national concern; the writer ... must have the artistry to tell his own stories as if they were other people’s stories, and to tell other people’s stories as if they were his own, for this is what literature is.” The role of translation comes to prominence here since the literary translator acts as a mediator and facilitator of communicating and interpreting experiences of universal value in specific cultural contexts, disseminating works of art both ways, i.e. from the centre to the periphery – illustrated by the translation of highly popular works from English into dozens of other languages – as well as from the periphery to the core – exemplified by certain instances where translation into English paved the way for some writers, commonly not regarded as

affiliated to the centre, hence translation brought them to the centre due to travelling literature. Some other times, it was precisely a famous prize or a literary award with international fame that triggered publishers' huge interest in promoting the national literary work to a worldwide audience mediated by cultural translation.

Language is the foundation of culture, embedding and preserving the identity of a nation and ensuring its millennial survival. Furthermore, "culture provides the very grounds for human communication and interaction; it is also a source of domination ... Culture includes beliefs, traditions, values, and language; it also mediates practices by connecting individuals and groups to institutionalized hierarchies." David Swartz (1997: 4) reinforced the power of culture not only to connect individuals and communities, to enable national survival – particularly from the peripheral regions or minor literatures - throughout millennia, and the continuity of collective memory as well as to endure dominance. The other perspective is the power-related dimension of culture illustrated by dominance in terms of colonialism or imperialism. An analysis of the interaction between culture, translation and power will rely on the role of culture in the global context as an effective and enduring means of promoting communication, linguistic identity, collective memory, as well as moral, spiritual, ethical values meant to ensure the continuity and survival of any community throughout history.

According to translation theorist Andre Lefevere (2002: 88), translation involves a mediation between at least two codes and the rules to be observed during the process of decoding and reformulation mainly depend on the context and functionality of translation, for example in medical or legal text fidelity is paramount whereas in literary texts or other more creative pieces it would be counter-productive.

Another important issue in translation studies is the distinction often made between "bringing the text to the audience" and "bringing the audience to the text" According to Maria Tymoczko (2002: 42) "in translation the greater the prestige of the source culture and the source text, the easier it is to require that the audience come to the text."

3. Conclusion

Translation studies straddle both culture and language – the two most influential and enduring components of humanity’s evolution and longevity – revolving around the notion of power, both in ancient times as well as in a changing multi-polar world, either as a means of promotion or as a form of dominance.

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