

Literary Translation

Chantal Wright



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Chantal Wright

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Literary Translation

Literary Translation introduces students to the components of the discipline and models the practice. Three concise chapters help to familiarize students with:

- what motivates the act of translation
- how to read and critique literary translations
- how to read for translation.

A range of sustained case studies, both from existing sources and the author's own research, are provided along with a selection of relevant tasks and activities and a detailed glossary. The book is also complemented by a feature entitled 'How to get started in literary translation' on the Routledge Translation Studies Portal (<http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/translationstudies/>).

Literary Translation is an essential guidebook for all students of literary translation within advanced undergraduate and postgraduate/graduate programmes in translation studies, comparative literature and modern languages.

Chantal Wright Associate Professor of Translation as a Literary Practice at the University of Warwick, UK, is a translation theorist as well as a translator from German and French. She is the author of *Yoko Tawada's 'Portrait of a Tongue': An Experimental Translation* (2013).

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Routledge Translation Guides cover the key translation text types and genres and equip translators and students of translation with the skills needed to translate them. Concise, accessible and written by leading authorities, they include examples from existing translations, activities, further reading suggestions and a glossary of key terms.

Literary Translation

Chantal Wright

Scientific and Technical Translation

Maeve Olohan

For Dan

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Introduction

In order to bring in their babies' bread most translators must have an academic connection and must toil in those insidious groves where translation, along with the rest of literature, has fallen into the hands of the big kids, who like to take things apart to see how they work. I remember the big kids as the spoilers, always ruining what the more imaginative little kids were up to.

Gregory Rabassa, *If This Be Treason* (2005:42)

Before his retirement, Gregory Rabassa, distinguished US translator of Nobel-prizewinning authors Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, among many other Latin American luminaries, was himself a toiler in the insidious groves of academia. He held a PhD and taught Hispanic Languages and Literatures at Queens College, an institution within the City University of New York system. Rabassa's grumble that a position in or affiliation with academia was an unavoidable evil for translators, prompted by financial necessity, no longer holds true, if indeed it was ever really the case. Nonetheless, literary translation remains an inadequately compensated practice and its practitioners almost inevitably rely on additional forms of employment, of which academia remains one, to earn their living. What I am interested in here, however, is Rabassa's true complaint, namely that academics have no business dissecting works of art, which are 'unutterable even when the creation is made up of words' (Rabassa 2005:42). Clearly, a book about literary translation that is conceived as an introduction to literary translation both as a practice and as the academic discipline that it has now become will be a dissection of sorts. I make no apologies for that, being a firm believer that a theorization of artistic practice is necessary because theory 'provid[es] a new view of the world, changing its reader's perceptions, broadening the mind' (Boase-Beier 2006a:56). Jean Boase-Beier, a translator and an academic, has written extensively and in very accessible language about the usefulness of theory for literary translators (Boase-Beier 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2011) and I will offer only a brief summary of her arguments here. Since a theory of any activity arises from observation of practice or 'a segment of perceived

reality' (Boase-Beier 2010:26), theory is, by nature, descriptive rather than prescriptive. In other words, it offers an account of how something appears to operate, but it does not tell us how something should be done, although it can certainly influence how things *are* done. Since theories are based on observation and experience of phenomena, they are partial and subject to refinement as further observation and experience of new phenomena highlight their strengths and weaknesses. In other words, theory is a 'creatively constructed (and shifting) view of practice' (Boase-Beier 2006a:48). Practice can become less intuitive and more considered, less in thrall to convention and more open to innovation, if it is informed by a theoretical understanding of what is taking place. It is for these reasons that Boase-Beier argues for theory as 'an aid to creativity' (ibid:47) that can 'act as a counterbalance to the constraints of the ST [source text]' (ibid:56).

Translation theory and the notion of formal education in literary translation are often still regarded with scepticism by practitioners who work outside ivory towers and red-brick halls and even by some within academia who view translation as a made-up subject. Some practitioners who have undertaken formal study of literary translation find translation theory off-putting and fail to see its relevance for practice. It is obviously perfectly possible to be an accomplished translator without a postgraduate education in literary translation; before the advent of Translation Studies in the 1970s, this was the norm rather than the exception. Thus one can maintain, quite justifiably, that 'I got along perfectly well without theory'. But theory can be a powerful tool when correctly understood and channelled, as Boase-Beier has argued. And, as Antoine Berman reminds us, reflection on translation is not a new invention ushered in by Translation Studies but has existed 'at least since Cicero, Horace, and Saint Jerome' (1992:1). Gaddis Rose goes even further, arguing that 'it is difficult and probably futile to separate the history of translation from the history of translation studies' since 'conceptual issues arise almost automatically. Translations are needed; translations are criticized; translators are advised; finally, translations change lives' (1997:15).

The twentieth-century emergence of translation as an 'autonomous practice' – a field of academic enquiry independent of literary studies, linguistics, theology and philosophy – means that it is now 'capable of defining and situating itself, and consequently to be communicated, shared, and taught' (Berman 1992:1). As a profession, translation of the literary and non-literary varieties continues to be undervalued (Gouadec 2010 [2007]; PETRA 2012), with attendant problems of low pay, lack of recognition and – in the literary field – under-dissemination of translation products. However, there have been significant and ongoing improvements within the realm of Anglophone literary translation in recent years, as noted by Daniel Hahn, former national

programme director of the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), in a 2013 editorial piece for *In Other Words*, the journal of the BCLT (Hahn 2013:1). Literary translation's establishment within academia and the increasing number of theoretically schooled practitioners who have emerged from it have contributed in no small way to these changes. The fruits of formal reflection on translation – theorization of the translator as a subjective presence in the target text; a better understanding of translation's role as a mediator of foreign cultures; the conceptualization of translation as a mode of reading and writing – have all had 'impact', to use a phrase currently much in vogue in UK academia, in the 'real world'. As Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky have recently argued, 'There is a generational move toward an image of the translator as an intellectual figure empowered with agency and sensibility who produces knowledge by curating cultural encounters' (2013:xix).

Translators have certainly become more visible. In the UK, for example, they are involved in readings, panel discussions and other events as literary experts (the London Review Bookshop's Live Translation and World Literature events are a prominent example of this); they engage the school-age public through the Translators in Schools project, working with the cultural riches of a diverse population; they are generally given credit for their work in newspapers and journals and are articulate in their protest when they are not. The academic autonomy of the practice has played an important part in this; a resurgence in engaged, small and medium-sized publishing houses such as And Other Stories and Pushkin Press, staffed by well-travelled, multilingual editors, has also helped, as has the commitment of dedicated international online journals such as *Words Without Borders* and *Asymptote*. Literary translation is also undergoing a florescence beyond the Anglophone world. In a sign that literary translation in Germany has been consolidating its position since the landmark 1997 establishment of the Deutsche Übersetzerfonds, the German President, Joachim Gauck, hosted an evening event in honour of literary translators at his official residence in Berlin in May 2015. In Taiwan, the Taiwan Literary Translation Center, a division of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, was established in 2012 to promote the visibility of Taiwanese literature abroad, and in August 2014, Taiwan's Word Wave Festival (Huawen Langdu Jie) featured its first Translation Across Frontiers forum, sponsored by the Taiwan Cultural and Creative Platform Foundation, with several panels taking place across four days. There has also been a recent significant increase in the number of works of German literature being translated into Chinese in Taiwan (Deutsche Welle 2015).

If students of literary translation struggle with theory, this may be because abstraction is challenging, particularly for those who are drawn to translation precisely because of its concrete qualities as a practice;

but it may also have something to do with the way theory is taught, and indeed with how a formal education in literary translation is structured, and perhaps with a confusion as to what a theory of translation is trying to account for. Masters students tend to encounter theory and practice as separate pedagogical entities. MA programmes will typically offer a core module on translation theory and a ‘hands-on’ translation workshop in which participants critique the translations of their fellow students, or some variation of this pedagogical constellation. This separation means that the nature of the relationship between theory and practice is often unclear and might in part be responsible for the commonly held but erroneous view that theory is something to be ‘applied’, the way one applies a can opener to a tin of baked beans or implements a new skincare regime. There are ways to counteract this tendency: by making sure that theory classes include a substantial element of activity based around the production and analysis of translations and by encouraging students in workshops to reflect on their motivations for translating a particular text and how these motivations influence what happens on the page. There is also a need for students of literary translation to read outside the boundaries of the discipline, to think of themselves as literary scholars and as ‘translating writers’ (Scott 2012a:180), and for literary translation to discover ‘its true and fruitful affinities with life-writing and creative writing’ (Scott 2012b:10). Some of this can be achieved by strengthening the ties between programmes in literary studies, creative writing and literary translation – as is the case both at the University of Warwick and the University of East Anglia, for example – which might also result in literary translation being incorporated into the methodologies of other disciplines. Translation’s ‘theory problem’ can also be counteracted by, as Boase-Beier suggests, ‘tak[ing] on peripheral theories: of the text, the context, the reader, the effects of history, the nature of literature’ (2010:36).

The ‘theory problem’ is one of the reasons why none of the chapter titles in this book contain the word ‘theory’, although there is much discussion of theory within its pages. It is more helpful, I believe, to frame the approach to literary translation in other terms. Antoine Berman argued that a modern theory of translation, which involves ‘know[ing] what translation must mean in our cultural setting today’ (1992:3), requires the construction of a history of translation, an ethics of translation and an analytic of translation (ibid:9). This is because we cannot hope to comprehend our own translational efforts without contextualizing them historically; because we should understand what we are translating for; and because we also require an analytic of translation to make translational practice – good and bad – more conscious, to realize the forces that work on the translator and the textual effects thereof. This book will not offer a history of translation, as this lies

beyond its scope, but it will work towards an ethics and an analytic of translation by asking and offering answers to the following three questions, which will also function as chapter headings:

- Why do we translate?
- How do we read translations?
- How do translators read?

Readers may wonder why the obvious and seemingly the most useful question, namely ‘How do translators translate?’, does not feature on this list. Translators translate on the basis of how they read, and how they read has much to do with why they translate, with their motivations for pursuing the practice of translation and with how they experience literature. If we are able to account for why translators translate and how they read, the ‘how’ of translation will emerge organically.

Before proceeding to outline the content of each of these three chapters, it is worth re-iterating that this book is about *literary* translation. My definition of a literary text is wide-ranging and encompasses fiction, poetry, children’s literature, life writing, philosophical writing and Freud’s psychoanalytic writings. (There is no discussion of dramatic texts for reasons which have to do with my own current areas of expertise as a translator and the nature of these texts as works intended for performance, an area that is beyond the scope of this book.) This understanding of the literary is clearly not confined to the fictional, and there is nothing unusual about this position (Boase-Beier 2011:35–46). The quality of literariness is not dependent upon a lack of propositional or truth-bearing content. If this were the case then a text such as James Rebanks’ *The Shepherd’s Life* (2015), which is a blend of life and nature writing, would not be considered literary, and nor would most travel writing. Literariness has much to do with the style of a text, with its marked and distinct use of features such as voice, metaphor, ambiguity, repetition and defamiliarization, to give but a few examples. With the cognitive turn in literary studies, literary texts are also increasingly being seen as ‘embody[ing] a state of mind’ (Boase-Beier 2011:46). This is not to say that non-literary texts are entirely without an individual style, nor that they do not embody a state of mind, but that these features are more prominent in literary texts. This is the understanding of the literary that guides my approach in this book.

In the first chapter, I will consider the issue of the ethics of translation by asking why we translate. It is possible to answer this question synchronically and diachronically, for our own time and place and for earlier epochs and traditions. I am primarily concerned with answering it for a contemporary setting, and my focus will be on the English-speaking world, broadly defined (mainly the UK, the US and Canada), in full

awareness of the fact that this transnational entity has separate national and subnational faces and concerns. I have adopted this transnational focus because English-language publishing is a transnational industry – literary translators produce work across national borders – and because academia in the English-speaking world is very much in cross-border dialogue, a fact reflected in the business of academic publishing. In broadly addressing and drawing on the experiences of the literary translation community in the UK and North America, it is not my intention to slight the Republic of Ireland, India, Australia, New Zealand or Anglophone countries in Africa and the Caribbean, all of which have their distinct (and postcolonial) Englishes, but rather to focus on those countries where I have spent extended periods of time living and working, and hence with which I am more familiar. The differing national contexts and global positions of the UK, the US and Canada have a significant effect on the why and the how of translation in each one. The UK is a member, albeit frequently a reluctant one, of the political and cultural unit known as the EU, which currently has 28 members and at least as many languages. The UK is a former colonial power and has been involved in several wars in the Middle East in the last few decades. The US is a global political and economic power, whose supremacy has been challenged of late by financial crisis and a changing world order; it has a history of involvement in the affairs of its Latin American neighbours and, like the UK, has been involved in conflict in the Middle East. The US is an immigrant country and is de facto bilingual (Spanish–English) in many of its states. Canada too is an immigrant country; it has two official languages, English and French, with English numerically the more dominant of the two, and this status means that there is a long-standing Canadian Translation Studies tradition (Mezei *et al.* 2014). Canada has a significant Aboriginal population and continues to deal with the legacy of colonialism within its own borders. It pursues a policy of cultural protectionism against its neighbour to the south and attempts to overcome what has been called *les deux solitudes* via a generous system of state support for translation between English and French, among other measures. Canada has also seen its military deployed to the Middle East and elsewhere. When I address the transnational entity that is the English-speaking world, I do so with an awareness of these immense differences and in the hope that this book may also be of interest to English-speaking practitioners of translation elsewhere in the world, and perhaps even more widely than that.

Why, then, do we translate? We translate as individuals and as cultures. We translate for other people and for ourselves. We translate for humanistic reasons: to create a world literature, an ideal that dates back to the early nineteenth century and Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* (Eckermann 1982 [1836/1848]:198), to expose ourselves to difference