

ALEKSI KIVI AND/AS WORLD LITERATURE

DOUGLAS ROBINSON

APPROACHES TO TRANSLATION STUDIES 44



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Aleksis Kivi and/as World Literature

By

Douglas Robinson



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Cover illustration: Starry night Ursa Major, Big Dipper constellation with diffraction spikes.
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The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at <http://catalog.loc.gov>
LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2017000986>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0169-0523

ISBN 978-90-04-34021-3 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-34026-8 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

Printed by Printforce, the Netherlands

Aleksis Kivi and/as World Literature

Approaches to Translation Studies

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Edited by

Henri Bloemen

Cees Koster

Ton Naaijken

VOLUME 44

The titles published in this series are listed at *brill.com/atts*

For Sveta and minoritarian sexuality



2007

Preface

Like my earlier single-author study, *Ring Lardner and the Other* (1992), this is actually two books rolled into one. The first is a study of the great Finnish writer Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872); the second is a theoretical reflection on world literature. In the first, the premier research question concerns whether Kivi is world literature, and, if not, why not. In the second, the research question concerns the complexity of the crowd-sourcing of world literature, especially the role played by translation in that crowd-sourcing. As in my Lardner book from two and a half decades ago, Deleuze and Guattari on majoritarian and minoritarian literature play a critical role in the theoretical argument, but this time supplemented with icotic theory (four majoritarian icoses of Kivi, one minoritarian icosis) and translation theory (transmajoritization as the use of translation to validate majoritarian icoses, transminoritization as the use of translation to send majoritarian icoses racing). Jacques Lacan also has a cameo in this book (section 5.1); whereas his bridge metaphor from Schema L organized my whole long first chapter in the Lardner book, here his notion of the jouissance of the Other from Seminar XX helps me make a case for the embodiment of minoritarian reading strategies, in opposition to the more disembodied regimes of majoritarian reading.

(The first [single-author] “book” included here): In the Kivi argument that runs throughout the book I explore the history of the reception and translation of Kivi:

In Chapter 2 I essay a Franco Moretti-esque “comparative morphology” of Kivi’s international reception, studying however the forms and structures not of his *writing*, as Moretti would, but rather of *how he has been read*. This is the first Digital Humanities section of the book: I use data-mining of Wikipedia, the MLA International Bibliography, and other online resources to explore purely quantitative measures of the international reception of Kivi and various comparables. Unlike Moretti, who bases his entire approach to world literature on this kind of counting, I use data-mining and “distant reading” as a trial balloon, en route to more traditional methods of “close reading.” Specifically, drawing on Itamar Even-Zohar’s notion of the “culture repertoire,” I seek evidence for the “through-put” of Kivi’s reception: whether, once he has been translated, he is integrated into individual target culture repertoires as tools or channels for further cultural work.

In Chapter 3 I study Kivi’s Finnish reception, moving from August Ahlqvist’s vicious attacks on Kivi 1 around the time of the publication of his 1870 novel, *Seitsemän veljestä* (“The Brothers Seven,” “Seven Brothers,” abbreviated

throughout as *sv*), through the various reactive Kivis, articulated and icotized as majoritarian defenses against the Ahlqvist attacks:

- Kivi 2 as a good upright Christian who wrote the novel to help readers live a more moral life (not the perverted Kivi 1)
- Kivi 3 as a folk realist who portrayed the Finnish peasantry and artisan class with ethnographic accuracy (not Kivi 1, the gross distorter of folk reality)
- Kivi 4 as a sweet, otherworldly, Romantic sentimentist who longed tragically for ethereal happiness (not Kivi 1, the trampler of religious sensibilities)
- Kivi 5 as a warm and sunny folk humorist who sought the inclusive transformation of the Finnish community as a harbinger of a future Finnish republic (not the iconoclastic Kivi 1).

As I note there, I pay particular attention to the accusations Ahlqvist lodges against Kivi, with an eye to the minoritarian recuperation of those accusations in a positive light in Chapter 5.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I shift to the history of Kivi translations into 34 languages, focusing on transmajoritization in Chapter 4 and transminoritization in Chapter 5. In the former I look first at the early translations of *sv* into Swedish and German, especially as those were engineered by Kivi's first great majoritizer (as the neo-Romantic Kivi 4), Otto Manninen, and then move on to take a close look at the two English translations, by Alex. Matson in 1929 and Richard Impola in 1991. Rather than universalizing my own likes and dislikes as an analytical framework for discriminating between "good" and "bad" translations, I borrow the analytical framework developed in defense of the majoritarian Kivi 5 icosis in Viljo Tarkiainen's magisterial 1915 book, testing Matson and Impola not against my own (mystified) preferences but against Tarkiainen's definitive account of Kivi 5.

At the very end of Chapter 4 I also introduce the "Aleksis Kivi *Brothers Seven* Translation Assessment Project" (<http://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/translate/>), which I worked with Rebekah Wong in the HKBU Library to set up as the second Digital Humanities component of the research. For that I secured all 58 existing translations of *sv*, into 34 languages, and, selecting the same five passages in each for comparison, put those passages up on the site, along with six questions designed to elicit evaluative feedback on them from scholars, translators, and other lovers of literature from around the world. My original plan was to include a lengthy analysis of the results of that feedback in Chapter 4; but the feedback was so slow in coming, and while I was setting up the site the book ms kept growing so large, that in the end I decided to save reporting on the results for a later publication, and here simply refer readers to the site.

In Chapter 5, then, I shift to transminoritization, looking first at the history of minoritarian readings of Kivi in Finland by great Finnish modernist writers (rhetorically suppressed as beyond the pale by majoritarian critics), then at my own minoritarian translation of *sv*.

In Appendix 3, finally, I offer an illustration of transminoritizing strategies in a complete translation of Kivi's 1866 play *Kihlaus*, which I translate as "The Troth-Plight." The idea there is that Franz Kafka has become something of a poster child for minoritarian literature, based on Deleuze and Guattari's book on him, and recent English translations have sought to highlight the minoritizing impulse thought to be at work in his writing, especially his use of dialect. As I show, while in Kafka's case such minoritizing readings and translations have been contested, rather vociferously, they fit Kivi's greatest works perfectly. Kivi did write all his best work in stylized dialect, and has been read as an carnivalistic iconoclast. "The Troth-Plight" is a translation designed to illustrate this, and to illustrate it specifically in a full text, as opposed to the snippets selected for consideration in Chapter 5.

I have also included two further appendices, in lieu of multipage footnotes: Appendix 1 gathers all the quantitative evidence for the claims I make about *sv* translations in section 4.3, and Appendix 2 provides somewhat lengthier background accounts of Finnish history, culture, and literature than would have fit at the feet of the pages in the text.

(The second [world-lit] "book" included here): The WL-theoretical argument that runs through the book is first developed in Chapter 1, which offers a series of four answers to the question in the title: "What Is World Literature?" The answers include [1] Walter Benjamin's mystical account of WL from "The Task of the Translator" and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*; [2] David Damrosch's definition of WL as a collection of transcultural reading strategies in which literature gains in translation (supplemented with Deleuze and Guattari on majoritization and minoritization); [3] Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's synthesis of (1) and (2), drawing on Benjamin's constellation model with a constructivist rather than a mystical/essentialist methodology; and [4] my own icotic model, drawing on (peri)performative theory from Austin through Butler to Sedgwick.

(A note on notation: I use [square brackets] for the first mention of a numbered or lettered list item, (round parentheses) for all further mentions of that number or letter.)

In Chapter 2 I suggest that Itamar Even-Zohar's trenchant theory of culture repertoires might be read as a fifth answer to my defining question in Chapter 1, in the sense that classification as "world literature" implies not just *availability for use* by world cultures but *actual use* by world cultures. In the extension of Even-Zohar's model that I develop there, that involves four steps: [1] the

vetting of a “national literature” (NL-)source text for translation, [2] translation as the creation of a new target text for potential integration into a different NL-target culture, [3] the successful integration of the target text into the NL-target culture repertoire (this much is Even-Zohar), and [4] the integration of several NL-target culture repertoires made via translation from the same NL-source text (or mediatory NL-target text¹) into an intercultural/international composite “world literature” (WL)-target culture repertoire. The key metric for (4) in Chapter 2 is the number of works (critical studies by scholars, adaptations by artists) launched by people who cannot read the source text in the source language.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I develop a composite model based on Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of majoritarian and minoritarian writing and reading strategies, with, as I say, elements of icotic theory and translation theory woven in. My claim that majoritarian and minoritarian strategies are “icoses” entails the notion that they are broad-based social, cultural, and ideological regimes that organize the “plausibility” of their basic tenets somatically, so that they *feel* not like ideological regimes but like “reality,” or “simple” “human” “nature.” To put that simply, an icosis is an affectively naturalized ideological regime. Thinking of Kivi 2–5 as majoritarian icoses, for example, means understanding them not simply as *ways of reading* Kivi, or as Kivi’s *influence* on the writers and readers of a given period, but as regimes of *felt reality*, to deviate from which is by definition perverse. Thinking of Kivi -1 as a minoritarian icosis means not simply individual writers and readers resisting that majoritarian regime, but groups of writers and readers occupying the “deviant” or “perverse” peripheries contemptuously dismissed by the dominant majoritarian icosis, and developing them, like Milton’s Satan, into a pandemonium counterregime.

Chapter 4 is focused theoretically around transmajoritization, by which I mean not just the translation of major texts, nor even just the majoritarian translation of major texts, but the respectful celebration of NL majority from a position of foreign and/or translatorial inferiority. My hypothesis is that transmajoritization of minoritarian writers like Kivi hinders the through-put effect of assimilation to and through foreign culture repertoires: if, as I claim, Kivi is a brashly iconoclastic writer who has been NL-majoritized *for Finnish nationalists*, in the sense that his creative complexity has been icotically reduced to a

1 It is interesting, of course, that the mediatory translation of sv from which Even-Zohar created his 1987 Hebrew translation was not exactly an NL-target text (translated into a single *national* language) but what might arguably be identified as itself a would-be WL-target text (translated by two members of the source culture into a single *international* language, Esperanto).

simplified scheme that is socially and politically useful for majoritarian Finns, a “respectful” inferiorizing translation of that reduced version of Kivi will render him useless for foreign target cultures. What gets transmajoritized in this model is a kind of touristic exoticism, of interest mainly to readers interested in “what Finland is like” or “what Finnish literature is like”—and as such of minimal use-value to the target culture repertoire. It is, of course, possible for adaptive artistic work to be done with such “exotic” literary tourisms, but the threshold to such repurposing is extraordinarily high.

Chapter 5, finally, is focused theoretically around transminoritization, by which I mean translating iconoclastically, perversely, insidiously, so as to undermine NL majority through a shifting/sliding trajectory of oblique edginess. As I note there, the transminoritizer seeks to intensify icotic tensions and turbulences around disturbing obstructions and resistances.

Acknowledgments

Thanks first of all to Ivan Delazari and Heidi Huang, with whom I had several early brainstorming sessions on world literature that were extraordinarily fruitful; Ivan also read the entire ms and made useful comments, and Heidi also transcribed the Chinese passages for the online sv translation assessment project, and provided full bibliographical details on the Chinese translation, including the fact that it was made from the 1952 edition of Matson's English translation. Other transcription help was provided by Yamamoto Yoko (Japanese), Elena Dinu (Romanian), Atara Sivan (Hebrew), Angela Tarantini (Italian), Piotr Blumczynski (Polish), Oktay Eser (Turkish), and Audrey Heijns (Dutch). Thanks to all of them.

This is a project that relied heavily on professional support services from the university library. Thanks first to Li Haipeng, until 2015 HKBU's University Librarian, who approached me as Dean of the Arts Faculty to coorganize mini-conferences on the Digital Humanities, at the first of which I met Rebekah Wong, head of the library's Multimedia and Digital Services Section; it was shortly after Haipeng departed for UC Merced that I approached Rebekah with my idea for a translation assessment website, the creation of which (<http://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/translate/>) she expertly coordinated. Sally Chung in the library's ILL department found not only upwards of 50 translations of sv for me, but numerous scholarly books and articles in Finnish and German as well—and was always flexible and resourceful when the foreign libraries sent the wrong book.

I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer to whom Masja Horn at Brill sent the manuscript for vetting, for excellent suggestions and corrections. In some cases I have stubbornly declined to make the reviewer's suggested additions or corrections, however, so that any lacunae that you find in the text should be laid entirely at my feet.

List of Abbreviations

Kivi's Works

<i>Kih</i>	<i>Kihlaus</i> ("The Betrothal," "The Troth-Plight")
<i>Kul</i>	<i>Kullervo</i>
<i>NS</i>	<i>Nummisuutarit</i> ("Heath Cobblers")
<i>OS</i>	<i>Obviretki Schleusingenissa</i> ("Beer Expedition in Schleusingen")
<i>SV</i>	<i>Seitsemän veljestä</i> ("Seven Brothers," "The Brothers Seven")

Kivi Icoses

Kivi 1	The Kivi attacked by August Ahlqvist as a perverted hack
Kivi 2	Moralist Kivi
Kivi 3	Romantic sentimentalist Kivi
Kivi 4	Folk realist Kivi
Kivi 5	Folk humorist Kivi
Kivi -1	Minoritarian Kivi

Other Abbreviations

GIT	Gain in translation
L	Literature
NL	National literature
TQ	Translation quality
WL	World literature

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What is World Literature? Four Answers

The mere expansion of coverage, the conglomeration of different literatures, however, does not make a meaningful concept of world literature. The sheer quantity of works available makes it impossible for anyone to read even a small portion of the world's literatures, so world literature as a concept has to be a theoretical construct, rather than a mere juxtaposition of literatures as textual materials.

ZHANG LONGXI, *From Comparison to World Literature*, 174

Aleksis Kivi (1834–1972) is widely recognized in Finland as the founder and greatest exemplar of Finnish National Literature. Is he World Literature, or not?

The “and/as” in my title suggests that the answer to that question might very well be *no*. “And”: there is Aleksis Kivi over here, *and* World Literature over there. They are two different things. “As”: Aleksis Kivi may or may not be *taken as* World Literature. I pose this, however, not as a proposition but as a question—*is* Kivi World Literature?—and as a series of theoretical metaquestions: what would it mean for the study of World Literature for Kivi to be taken as World Literature? What can the question about Kivi's inclusion in or exclusion from World Literature tell us about the institutionalization of WL, its institutional viability as an academic discipline into which scholar/teachers are hired, as the name of an academic department, as the title of a university course, as a section of a bookstore?

If, as Zhang Longxi suggests in my epigraph, WL is a *theoretical construct*, the primary theoretical question revolves around whether a given work or a given author is World Literature in some *essential* sense, objectively, stably, regardless of how that work or that author is perceived by readers—or whether that work or that author has to be *perceived* as World Literature by readers. Let us begin, then, with two opposed answers to the “what is” question in my chapter title: WL is a collection of great works (Answer 1 as thesis) and WL is a shifting secondary byproduct of culturally situated reading strategies (Answer 2 as antithesis).

1.1 Answer 1: WL is a Collection of Works that are Intrinsically Literary and Intrinsically of a High Enough Quality to Warrant WL Status

The extreme version of this answer would be Walter Benjamin's, in "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"/"The Translator's Task": just as any great literary work is intrinsically translatable in or by the mind of God, even if no human could ever translate it, so too is any great work intrinsically WL, even if it is never translated well enough to impress readers from outside its National Literature (NL as source culture). This is fundamentally a mystical view that when secularized becomes difficult to defend philosophically, but in its unsecularized form sounds so intensely religious, so worshipful of supernatural forces, that it can make its most fervent defenders uneasy, and can incline them to mystify the mysticism to a greater or lesser degree.

Benjamin might be read as defining WL through his concepts of "Überleben"/"over-living" and "Fortleben"/"on-living":

So wie die Äußerungen des Lebens innigst mit dem Lebendigen zusammenhängen, ohne ihm etwas zu bedeuten, geht die Übersetzung aus dem Original hervor. Zwar nicht aus seinem Leben so sehr denn aus seinem ›Überleben‹. Ist doch die Übersetzung später als das Original und bezeichnet sie doch bei den bedeutenden Werken, die da ihre erwählten Übersetzer niemals im Zeitalter ihrer Entstehung finden, das Stadium ihres Fortlebens. (Benjamin 10–11)

Just as expressions of life are connected in the most intimate manner with the living being without having any significance for the latter, a translation proceeds from the original. Not indeed so much from its life as from its "afterlife" or "survival" [Überleben]. Nonetheless the translation is later than the original, and in the case of the most significant works, which never find their chosen translators in the era in which they are produced, indicates that they have reached the stage of their continuing life [Fortleben]. (Rendall 153)

The Answer 1 reformulation of that might be that *only the most significant works survive, and their survival, accompanied/signaled by the act of translation, is the mark of WL*. If a work doesn't survive past the era in which it is produced, it isn't fit to be WL. If it does survive past that era, and then gets translated, its "Stadium [seines] Fortlebens"/"stage of [its] continuing life" is WL.

What exactly the *Überleben* and *Fortleben* of a work are, however, is not quite clear. Both manifestly have to do with *not dying*—but what does that mean?