

THE MERCHANT OF LETTERS: THE STATUS OF A LITERARY TRANSLATOR IN (POST)MODERN CULTURE

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The title of this article is a witness to its author's hesitant mood. Do literary translators change along with the literature of their time? Does the seemingly routine act of translation differentiate between post- or even post-post-modern in ways other than the recognition of the nature of the source text? Or in other words, is the translator's task affected by the sequential (cyclic?) emendations of literary trends? Without prejudice to the rules which hold true for writers, translators operate in a cultural dimension extending beyond literary practices. They do not write literature, and yet they partake in deciding of what becomes of it. In more sense than one, our perception of global literature hinges on what is translated, and why. And published. And marketed. This perception extends also to whatever shall eventually emerge beyond postmodernism. If so, how shall translation impact our view of the new paradigm?

Let us begin with a licensed infringement of privacy, and recall a passage from the correspondence of utmost intimacy: the author addressing his translator. I refer here to a letter written in the summer of 1827 by Johann Wolfgang Goethe to Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish

essayist and historian.¹ In this letter, the Weimar Master claims with emphasis:

*Und so ist jeder Übersetzer anzusehen, dass er sich als Vermittler dieses allgemein geistigen Handels bemüht, und den Wechseltausch zu befördern sich zum Geschäft macht.*²

Given Carlyle's aversion to, as he began to call it, "the dismal science of economy", Goethe's choice of metaphors may appear particularly inadequate. Thus, a translator partakes in the intellectual commerce (*geistiger Handel*) and makes his business (*Geschäft machen*) by supplying foreign commodities. In consequence, the profit-oriented foresight and fortitude of vendors became vehicles of

¹ Thomas Carlyle translated Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, a romance of biographical interest, and wrote numerous essays popularizing German Romantic literature.

² I cite this passage after Mary Snell-Hornby (171, quoted after Tgahrt 9) who refers to it twice, first in the conclusion of her *Integrated Approach* (1988), and then again in the concluding chapter of *The Turns of Translation Studies* (2006). Characteristically enough, however, for her Goethe prophesizes mainly the growth of an all-encompassing translation activity and anticipates globalization processes. My concern lies with the publishing market.

the metaphor describing the role of translators in relation to the texts they convert to foreign audiences. Naturally, the history of translation abounds in far more suggestive metaphors ranging from military, like in St. Jerome's image of a translator-conqueror marching on the original text like a captive into his native language (Robinson 26); somewhat horticultural, like in Friedrich Herder's imaginative description of a traveler walking through the foreign gardens and picking up the flowers and fruits ripened under a foreign sun³, to loving, or even mystical as in Franz Rosenzweig's evocative image of *hieros gamos*, a sacred wedding or the miracle of the marriage of the two spirits of language.⁴ However, my concern here, for what it is worth, lies with the expressively economic phrasing of Goethe's insight. Is the comparison to ordinary business derogatory for literary practices? Should we allow the thought of books as commodities, and translators as merchants? And, if commerce indeed does not fit the humanist agenda, can a modern theory of literary translation account for the ever-increasing role of economic factors which shape publishing policies? And, if we allow economics into the theory, what would be the status of literature, and thereby, literary translators in this great printing and publishing business?

Interestingly enough, even though references to trade are quite common in

³ Compare the whole passage: "I travel among foreign peoples; it is not to lose the citizen ship of my fatherland that I become more than I would gain. But I walk through foreign gardens to pick flowers for my language, as the betrothed of my manner of thinking: I observe foreign manners in order to sacrifice mine to the genius of my fatherland, like fruits ripened under a foreign sun" (quoted after Berman 38).

⁴ The comparison figures in Franz Rosenzweig's essay "Die Schrift und Luther" and refers to Schlegel's translation of Shakespeare, and Voss' of Homer, and Luther's of the Bible, the essay is cited in Berman 28.

contemporary critical discourse of Translation Studies, they serve, as with Goethe, to reflect upon the nature of cultural processes which trigger interest in foreign valuables, and they do not signal the inclusion of economic aspects and market laws into translation theory. In other words, the translation theory acknowledges the parallels between import and translation, and yet while answering the question of what is translated, and why, falls back on the (often *a posteriori*) critical judgement of the academy rather than on the mercantile interest of printers and publishers. It is also very significant that the growth of the publishing market with its specialized functions of short-listing, editing, and marketing has deprived the literary translator of some of the prerogatives and splendors so readily assigned to them in the previous ages. Thus a translator used to be not only an expert linguist, but a cultural missionary, a brave explorer of the lands of dragons, an arbiter of taste, and a world-shattering innovator. Such an attitude is easily discernible in Herder's picaresque, if pastoral, metaphors of romping in foreign orchards. Nowadays, however, the translator, more often than not, is commissioned the task of translating literature selected and professionally advertised and distributed by someone else. Hence, it is not the literary translator who controls and moderates the influx of foreign literature, and which is rather sad, it is not solely the quality of translation which determines the intensity and success of the reception process. Consequently, the traditional set of activities ascribed to a literary translator have become unevenly divided among various centers of influence which shape the profile of literary life in a given culture, whereas the status of a literary translator has somewhat shrunk and shriveled, and become reduced to an intense relationship with the text. Valiant negotiators

have become vulnerable messengers, exposed to the ruthless demands of their commissioners. A symptomatic reflection of the reduction of the status of literary translators and, as it were, neglect for their role as individuals, can be found in the well-acknowledged *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* edited by Mona Baker which fails to provide a definition of a translator, whereas literary translation is defined as “the work of literary translators”, and followed by a curious commentary “that is a truism which has to serve as a starting point for a description of literary translation” (127). Similarly, Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie in the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* defines neither a translator, nor literary translation.

***If it not the translator’s,
whose deal is it?***

If it is not a daring individual effecting “an intellectual exchange”, then who rules in “the international traffic of ideas”? Apparently the answer given by the Translation Studies of the 1980s was – the system. The very birth of Translation Studies to a large extent hinged on the intensely scrutinized assumption that the fact of translating along with the adopted translation strategies are not derivative exclusively from the status and properties of the original text, but that they reflect the needs and expectations of the target, or hosting, culture. This, in turn, sanctioned the reorientation of the research from the meticulous study of the source texts vs. their translations, to the study of translated literature against the background of the target literary system. The new methodological guidelines found their best summary in the *locus classicus* of Translation Studies included in Theo Hermans’s *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary*

Translation (1985), wherein the new approach to the study of literary translation was described as non-normative, target-oriented, functional and systemic (10-11).⁵ It is the last mentioned postulate which reflected the merger of the developing discipline with the so-called Polysystem Theory proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar, an Israeli semiotician of culture clearly building on the inquiries of Russian Formalism. The original Polysystem Theory stressed the necessity of examining the interaction of cultural phenomena of varying types and status, including literature, as well as the mechanisms of literary evolution where the translation of foreign literature often triggers change. The division of the literary polysystem into the privileged centre and the underscored periphery, and literature into primary (innovative) and secondary (conservative) proved instrumental for the newly established discipline which thereby placed systemic thinking at the heart of its methodology. Following the publication of Hermans’s book and the formation of the Manipulation School in 1985, the Polysystem Theory became a necessary trademark of Translation Studies and a natural framework for a multitude of case studies.

Significantly enough, most of the scholars associated with the new discipline saw the greatest contribution of the Polysystem Theory in the abolishing of the static concept of literature, and thereby advancing the view of

⁵ Compare the whole passage: “a view of literature as a complex and dynamic system; a conviction that there should be a continual interplay between theoretical models and practical case studies; an approach to literary translation which is descriptive, target-oriented, functional and systemic; and an interest in the norms and constraints that govern the production and reception of translations, in the relation between translation and other types of text processing, and in the place and role of translations both within a given literature and in the interaction between literatures” (Hermans 10–11).

the intensely negotiable, and at all times tentative canon(s). The recognition of the internal tensions and alliances (as well as vacuums) within the literary polysystem offered a great explanatory power as regards the acquisition of foreign works. However, by stressing the decisive role of the target system, it somewhat obliterated the pioneering nature of the translator's mission. This is how radically Gideon Toury, by far the most eloquent exponent of the Polysystem Theory, interpreted the translator's loyalty in 1985 in the article included in Hermans's volume:

Translating as a teleological activity *par excellence* is to a large extent conditioned by the goals it is designed to serve, and these goals are set in, and by, the prospective receptor system(s). Consequently, translators operate first and foremost in the interest of the culture *into* which they are translating, and not in the interest of the source text, let alone the source culture (19).

A similarly radical view was restated by Toury in *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (1995), by arguing: "Translatorship is not merely taken, then; it is granted. And since it should be *earned* first, it stands to reason that the process involves the acquisition of those norms which are favoured by the group that would grant the recognition" (emphasis by Toury, 241).

Indeed the methodologies and approaches thriving in the wake of the so-called "cultural turn" in Translation Studies reflected mainly the interest in the shaping mechanisms operating in the hosting system. The extensive analyses of various forms of patronage, of the sway held by target poetics, and of the pressure of the dominant ideology helped to anatomize cultural processes hitherto vaguely visible in the traditional studies in reception or comparative literature. Yet the multitude of

studies brought to light mechanisms in which the apparent extravagances of literary translators became reduced to perfectly ordered (one is rather tempted to say 'structured') cultural regularities. Also recently the rapid growth of interpreting studies, the development of machine-translation and telematics, and the ever present preoccupation with globalization processes, has left little scope for the return to the question of individual motivation and penchant of the former traffickers in ideas. Ironically enough, the most vocal arguments as regards the status of a literary translator have been verbalized by Lawrence Venuti who, while negating the translation policies of the Anglo-American publishing market, coined the catch-phrase of, *nomen omen*, the translator's invisibility.

***Polysystem revisited,
or back to where it began***

In view of these developments, it is all the more surprising that the incentive to redefine the conceptual framework of translation phenomena has come from the very author of the Polysystem Theory which proved so instrumental in the infant years of Translation Studies. In 1997 Even-Zohar again stirred debate by publishing his article "The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer". The new theoretical proposal passed over the Polysystem Theory, offering instead the concept of culture repertoire, and signalling the author's growing preoccupation with the socio-economic relations conditioning the selection and integration of foreign material and the profile and intensity of the activities of agents effecting cultural exchange. Significantly enough, the new (or, in fact, reorganized) concepts met with articulate resistance on the part of the critical milieu of Translation Studies, and pushed

Even-Zohar into vigorous defence of his standpoint. Both in the article and the subsequent reply to the critical opinions, Even-Zohar maintained the view of translation as part of an all-inclusive traffic which serves to extend and vary the repertoire.

The repertoire of culture, a term conceptually much broader than the literary polysystem, denotes “the aggregate of options utilized by a group of people, and by the individual members of the group, for the organization of life” (1997: 355).⁶ The repertoire enables members of the group to view the world (passive repertoire) and equips them with a set of instructions and tools for acting in life. From a point of view of literary translation, the crucial part of the model pertains to the expansion of the repertoire which is effected by domestic invention and import. These seemingly generalized insights potentially signal a major breakthrough in the way we theorize literary translation. If we accept the premise that translation *is* (not ‘is like’) a form of import, our consent in the long run shall imply all the mercantile consequences of trading in foreign commodities. Therefore rehearsing well-digested rules concerning import which occurs when goods are to fill certain functions absent in the target market and when members of the group are willing to consume them, Even-Zohar comes to an equally placid conclusion that “import may necessitate organization skills and marketing” (1997: 358). “When a successful transfer occurs it is not only the

goods themselves which become domesticated”, further argues Even-Zohar, “but rather the *need* for them” (1997: 359, emphasis by Even-Zohar). And who arouses the appetite for foreignness? It is the labour of agents i.e. the people engaged in the making of repertoire, replies Even-Zohar. Significantly enough, *these* agents act clearly in the interest of their home repertoire by *challenging* the prevailing *status quo*, installing new habits, advertising and marketing novelty. Their actions are profiled by the logic of commerce which implies profit as an underlying motivation. Is this a final and annihilating blow to the Romantic myth of a literary translator, a genius boldly transgressing the limitations of his time and place to see, embrace and deliver home foreign treasures? Should books be assessed in terms of their merchantability? Does literary translation hinge on the forecast of sales?

Whether willingly or not, it is the somewhat afflicting concept of agents which brings us back to the question of the status of literary translators. Are they all agents and all engaged in the same type of activity? Anthony Pym, in a rather sceptical response to Even-Zohar’s formulations, inquires:

The images projected into society by the people engaged in the making of repertoire agency belongs to rather special people – are these translators or professional intermediaries?... Agents can import (why is export not mentioned?), they can globalise as much as they like, but the more significant cultural work is reserved to home-group souls who construct their truly organizing repertoire (1997: 360).

Pym’s division into translators and professional intermediaries in fact implies a return to the more traditional perception of translators whose main preoccupation lies with the text rather than with thinking of the ways of distribution and sale, least of all, marketing. Such an approach allows us to save faith in

⁶ The cultural repertoire does not replace the concept of the polysystem, and the relations between them resembles the relations between function and its domain. Thus the polysystem denotes the existing relations among objects, whereas the repertoire denotes the totality of options at the disposal of a group. Compare also Even-Zohar “The Literary System” (1990: 27–44), and “Factors and Dependencies in Culture” (1997).

the prevalence of aesthetic judgement of the men of letters over the mercantile interest of merchants of books. However, what seems to be the heart of the matter here is that the model, with all the reservations, effectively re-centres the critical debate on the actions of specific individuals rather than on the impersonal evolution of the system. The focus on individuals stands firm even if we are asked to see them engaged either in producing ideas, or in propagating and commercialising them. In fact, it is precisely the reflection on the variety of roles of transfer agents which constitutes the core of Even-Zohar's most recent inquiries.

Retelling the success story

With his usual propensity for existentialist riddles, Even-Zohar begins with a seminal question of why some people are more successful than others. In search of an answer, in his article entitled "Idea-Makers, Culture Entrepreneurs, Makers of Life Images, and the Prospects of Success" (2005), he focuses on the study of groups which, braced with specific intellectual and entrepreneuring abilities, form the progressive forces of their communities. These groups of "idea-makers, culture entrepreneurs, and makers of life images" envision, implement and propagate novelties, whereas their success stems from the availability of resources and conducive combination of skills and abilities within a group. It is precisely the emphasis on cooperation and complementarity of an innovative group which offers an interesting methodological framework for the study of literary translation, especially with regard to modern readership so much dependent on publishing policies. The model acknowledges the importance of the commercial factors, and

the necessity of marketing intellectual goods, and yet by placing literary translators in the economic or entrepreneuring context, it does not deprive them of the sense of discovery and mission. Thus idea-makers come up with new ideas which may be converted into new or alternative options of the repertoire, yet they themselves may show very little initiative or skill in implementing these ideas. Even-Zohar explains:

... if we mean by promotion of ideas some sort of activity towards implementing them, that is, making them not only heard and accepted, but also converted to socio-cultural reality by implanting them into the active repertoire of the relevant group, then we would find that idea-makers are clearly divided throughout history to those who are mostly engaged in producing and preaching their ideas and those who in addition also become active towards their implementation (2005: 10).

The special status of literature as intellectual goods is further emphasised by the incorporation into the model of "makers of life images", or in other words, of semiotic products such as literature or art in general⁷. Hence apart from those who identify options and those who know how to implement them, culture holds a special reservoir of intellectual energy where hypothetical options are rehearsed, tested and understood. Apparently, the fictional nature of "life images" places them safely far away from the stern reality of commerce. And yet the images of life which-is-not-but-might-be, provide the necessary stimuli and conducive ambience for those who in due course can make real life different. They endow them with the necessary confidence and faith in their

⁷ The category has been derived from Russian semiotics and its analysis of literature as a major contributor of potential models of life.

enterprises, and even a cursory look at pennames and business names assumed by various organizations and institutions proves how strong this inspiration is. Yet the fact that life can be freely imagined hardly denies the possibility that those very life images can be marketed and sold.

The Thinking Business

The evolution of Even-Zohar's research models in many ways reflect the turns of Translation Studies which has searched for an adequate methodology ever since its establishment. The early preoccupation with the literary (poly)systems indeed cast light on the mechanisms and regularities in translation processes and redefined the role of the target culture. The new concepts have affected also the status of literary translators, so gracefully edified in the Romantic age. One can hardly avoid the impression that the systemic thinking relegated the translator to the role of a servant of the hosting culture, assigning greater priority to the aesthetic or ideological properties of the target system than the personal abilities of an individual. However, the growth of the publishing market has posed new questions, of which most obvious is the role of economic profitability in publishing policies. The issue gains particular urgency in markets such as, for example, the Polish publishing market where the annual share of translated literature in the overall production approximates 50% in terms of the number of titles, and 85% in terms of the number of copies (the figures for 2003 and 2004)⁸. Significantly enough, also the

yearly percentage of translations of new titles in *belles-letters* reaches 50% which best exemplifies the dynamics of our literary import. Given the scale of the phenomenon, the link of the literary translator with the publishing market appears much stronger than in the past, and much more evident than the link with the critical milieu, with an implicit conclusion that it is neither ideology, nor aesthetics, but rather commerce which decides on what is translated. By positioning translation in the domain of import, the cultural repertoire model not only allows economics into the translation theory, but also *rationalizes* the concept of a literary translator by drawing them into a necessary alliance with publishers. In this way, literary translators side with efficient merchants and trendsetters, networking and trading in books we have not read yet.

The transfer model of Even-Zohar shows obvious similarity with various social movement theories or economic models such as, for example, Everett M. Rogers' seminal theory of diffusion of innovations, a cornerstone of modern macroeconomics. And yet by differentiating among various roles of transfer agents, Even-Zohar secures the necessary room for actions, clearly overstepping the boundaries of well-calculated feasibility studies. Thus it is not only the market forces, but also the imaginary forces of impractical idealists and impossible dreamers which account for the growth of the repertoire of options. Providing that the risky business of thinking scores its well-deserved price. In other words, it positions literary translators neither, traditionally, in relation to the original nor in relation to the broadly understood hosting culture, but sees them as members of a group whose dynamics and strength decide about the success of a new idea. In more sense than one, the updated framework helps to reconcile systemic regularity, personal

⁸ Significantly enough, 46.7% of all foreign literature with regard to the number of copies is American literature. All data based on Bańkowska-Bober 54–55.

ability and, whether we like it or not, good fortune.

Will the evolving status of literary translators affect literature in general? Can the pressure of the publishing market prompt the requiem for postmodernism? Certainly a sobering distance is needed to pass more poised judgement on the specificity of the literary practices of the beginning of the 21st century. Hence we miss certainty as to which texts will eventually survive in the literary canons. And yet we do

know that whatever new quality is resurfacing in literature now shall be instantly seized by the hungry hands of market specialists who know better how to give this “airy nothing” “a habitation and a name” far beyond the local. And translators will play their important part in projecting this image of the global advent of novelty. Whatever comes, it will come soon and with an ear-splitting rumble. The market hates stagnation.

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