I. Problems

World literature's natural home is comparative literature, a discipline born from and shaped by, as Vilashini Cooppan elegantly puts it, "scholarly engagements with the categories of migration, exile, diaspora, and globalization" (15). However, world literature has frequently been framed as a problem for the discipline, in large part because of its dependence on the ever-vexing and still mistrusted specter of translation. In light of the longstanding anxiety toward both world literature and translation, I propose here that comparatists do ourselves a terrible disservice if we do not urgently take up the questions raised by this disciplinary tension. Translation - in all of its attendant struggles with ethics, aesthetics, appropriation, authority - is not the problem, but, rather, should be understood as a key critical lens for comparative and world literature.

In order to establish academia's frustration with this subject, one need look no further than the "Three Reports to the America Comparative Literature Association on 'Professional Standards'" (dating from 1965, 1975, and 1993), which return repeatedly to the problem of reading translated literature, circling around it with intense ambivalence. The moral of their story seems to be that translated texts are integral to comparative literature at the same time that they threaten its existence by undermining disciplinary exclusivity in foreign language expertise and by shining a sort of spotlight on all that literature which comparative literature may sometimes "condone" (as one of the reports puts it) but to which it does not often actively attend. Even Goethe had Western European languages and literatures firmly in mind when he coined the term, "Weltliteratur." Translations can't help but point up the limits of the "four [likely European] languages" proposed as minimal standards for graduate students by the Green and Bernheimer reports, and on the strength of which a comparative literature department would presumably distinguish itself from departments of English, media studies, and so on. The discipline, one comes to understand, must hold translation at arm's length, or, preferably, secreted behind its back, embarrassed that it can't just give the mess up.

For more recent evidence, I point to Stanley Corngold's 2005 "Comparative Literature: The Delay in Translation" and find, in this essay, a collision of ideas from those early ACLA reports with the inroads made by translation more recently. Crystalizing a view that I have heard frequently from comparatists, Corngold continues in the vein that perceives translation as a threat to comparative literature, renewing the old call for segregation of elite comparative literature students from those students who would read merely in translation. Corngold's anxiety seems to stem from a fear that comparatists like Andre Lefevere and Haun Saussy have gone too far in their embrace of translation, edging toward the seductive notion that "Comparative Literature is a kind of translation" (139).

Corngold roundly rejects this idea, arguing that while "translation means carrying over a piece of foreign language" into a target language, "comparison" necessitates lingering in a space between languages - or beyond them, Corngold says appealing to Benjaminian "pure language" for reinforcement (141). Corngold calls this "place of thought where the target language is absent" the "delay" (141). He asserts that comparatist metaphysically inhabits this space of "delay," the in-between languages, cultures, texts, and that engaging with translation avoids this delay and fails to be comparative. I'll leave Corngold and entrenched disciplinary concerns there for a moment in order to turn to the other half of the problem: the landmines one must navigate in talking about world literature.

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Even a cursory examination of the "world literature debates" finds them circling around three persistent concerns. The first of these I'll call appropriation, or the violence done in the de- and re-contextualization of
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texts...

an objectively demonstrable 'accurate' correspondence between original and translation could be exposed much more easily than the corresponding failure attendant on the philological endeavor” (136). He places comparative literature's sustained two-facedness toward translation within the historical context of discipline-defining, saying that its "early line of defense against philological attacks had to be ambiguous," because, in its infancy, at a time more under the Romantic sway of sacred, inviolate notions of text, "by upgrading translation and translations, comparative literature would forfeit any claim to academic, or at least institutionalized, respectability" (137). Lefevere goes on to argue that, this threat having passed and the discipline now safely established, the time has come for comparative literature to reconcile its fraught relationship with translation.

I'd go further and argue that there is still a threat to comparative literature's respectability and, ironically, it lies in precisely this reluctance to admit its limitations and turn its translational Achilles heel to a strength, reaping the great benefits this relationship can offer the discipline. The mantra tells us that translation is the closest of readings, but it could likewise be called the most comparative. The translator-reader is forced to work out the rhetorical positions, literary antecedents, and contingencies of the first author, not to mention tonal and structural currents, audiences, publishing demands, and so forth, and then to weigh (or compare) these against the possibilities available to a version in another language, culture, literary tradition, and time. Were comparative literature departments to embrace translation studies and practice, they would produce students far better equipped to read literature in a worldly, critical, comparative way. Furthermore, the demands of the subject matter mean that students necessarily must grapple with translation's (and literature's) underlying issues of selection bias and world distribution, authorship, linguistic non-equivalence, and originality; they must consider its implications for gender and otherness, post-colonialism, globalization - the ideological forces that create knowledge across disciplines and shape communication across cultures.

And, immediately, we begin to see the impact on those seemingly intractable problems of world literature. Teachers, students, and readers wrestling thus with translation studies are far less likely to fall into the traps of "appropriative" anthologies and surveys. The critical lens of translation studies helps us to rethink world literature not as a canon of books or genre of writing, but as a mode of "reading literature in a worldly way," the relationality inherent to translated literature teaching students to read relationally and comparatively between literatures as well (Coopan 11). As expressed in "Problems," it is nearly impossible for a professor (or, frequently, graduate student instructor) to have anything approaching the wide-ranging preparation in language, history, and literary context to "legitimately" teach a course that "surveys" literature from across time and global space. And to read or teach only what is available in translation (and mass-produced paperback) risks engaging a pool already filtered by so much selection bias as to be dangerously compromised.

However, express engagement with translation studies and recourse to its methods goes a long way toward addressing or circumventing these problems. Resistance to appropriative readings can be further nurtured by framing techniques: the extra-textual aspects of the published work (such as a prominently displayed translator's name and supplementary note) that encourage an encounter with the translated text as something translated. Frequently discouraged or minimized by publishers, these techniques subtly ask for the reader's awareness and consideration of the text's mediation. Likewise, one excellent solution to legitimacy concerns can be found in the comparative study of multiple translations of the same source text. This sort of comparative study sheds light on the artistic and ideological norms of the original and translating cultures at the time each original and translation was written. The efficacy of the approach can be profound, shining light on exactly that which has been strengthened, weakened, lost, gained, reimagined, or otherwise transformed, sometimes opening up the first text more effectively and provocatively than direct linguistic access could. This strategy may perhaps sound obvious, but comparative translation study has been scandalously under-utilized due to the reluctance to admit translation into the conversation. Finally, translation-attuned students, teachers, and readers are far less likely to support the publishing prejudice that Americans will not buy foreign literature. Even a small uptick in the number of classes assigning translated texts would have a major impact on the (mostly small) publishers who value translation, and a rising tide of non-translation-averse readers could profoundly increase the demand for more and better translations, from more languages, viewpoints, and parts of the world. This expanded, less ambivalent university focus on world literature in translation could even lead to increased attention to a world literature on the high school level and in popular culture, enriching global literacy in a timely, invaluable way.

Finally, coming to terms with translation studies allows comparative literature departments to make world literature an even greater source of disciplinary strength, enrollment numbers, and recruitment of interested students. There is no other place in most universities where students routinely have the opportunity to encounter works from a variety of traditions, to put them in conversation with one another and to

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read in Coopan's "worldly way." In contrast to specialized (and disappearing) national literature departments, some comparative literature departments already successfully enroll curious multi- and mono-lingual students from across the disciplines, boosting enrollment with worldly, relational courses that bring together 20th century Korean and Vietnamese war literature or read Faulkner's construction of Yoknapatwappha County against García Márquez's vision of Macondo. All too seldom, though, are even these courses substantially informed by translation studies, sometimes to the point of ignoring the fact of the text as translated. While some students in such classes might read texts in the original language and even be recruited to major in comparative literature, there exists a tremendous opportunity for all students to be asked to grapple with the aforementioned array of theoretical and practical problems that translation can illuminate, bringing this new critical insight and worldly perspective back to their own projects and disciplines.

In "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from New Nightmares," Haun Saussy says that comparative literature has "won its battles," that the field's methods and theoretical frameworks have "gone out into the world and won over people who have no particular loyalty to the institutional bodies of comparative literature" (3-4). I believe that there is yet more work comparative literature can do, and that translation must be its next battleground. In order to thrive and fulfill its principles, comparative literature must open its grand, ever-morphing disciplinary arms wide enough to embrace both specialists and the cultivated generalism of translated world literature. We can go a long way toward addressing both comparative literature's translation problem and world literature's landmines by undertaking, in earnest, to include basic training in translation studies and practice into undergraduate and graduate requirements, as well as weaving it into the fabric of dedicated world (and worldly) literature classes. The metadiscipline of comparative literature is not identical to, but is functionally and theoretically inextricable from that of translation studies, and the direct, honest engagement of the two will further the dissemination of translatory, worldly, comparative ways of thinking across the disciplines and beyond them.

Bibliography


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Datum objave: 04.11.2011