

Oriana Palusci – Katherine E. Russo  
(edited by)

# TRANSLATING EAST AND WEST

15

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Collana di anglistica

Oriana Palusci, Katherine E. Russo (edited by), *Translating East and West*  
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# The Eastern Wave in Translation Studies: Remapping the Field beyond Eurocentric Conceptions

*Eleonora Federici*

We are living in a moment of transition and transformation for both Translation and Literary Studies. Firstly, it is a watershed moment where the main issues connected to the definitions of cultural translation such as the collapse of binary distinctions between the original and the translated text, the fortune of translated texts in the receiving culture, the problematic use of the terminology of translation itself, the role of translation and translators in society, the emergence of Translation Studies as a discipline in itself, should be connected to a reflection on the changing world situation, to the continuous movement of people from one continent to another and to the questions linked to globalisation. Secondly, the 1980s debates in Literary Studies used the terminology of translation metaphorically, so that cultural translation was used as an interpretative category and a useful tool for analysing multilingual and multiethnic texts. On the one hand, acknowledging notions of 'location', postcolonial scholars utilised translation as a metaphor for identity. The famous sentence «we are translated men» (Rushdie 1991:16) was used and abused in order to visualize a hybrid multilingual/cultural identity and the status of writers in exile. On the other hand, new value was added to the metaphorisation of the translating practice and to the translator's role, not only subverting and deconstructing some old metaphors for translation, but also coining new ones. Thirdly, it is a watershed moment because it is time to rethink translation theories broadening our Eurocentric horizons and dialoguing with non-Western scholars.

The current theoretical debate is the result of the interweaving and dialogue with other fields of study such as Deconstruction, Postcolonial, Gender and Cultural Studies, which yielded new

insights into translation. The ‘Cultural Turn’ gave new frames of research and demanded answers to many questions about historical perspectives, translation conventions, strategies, contextual situations and the translator’s role. ‘Cultural’ meant a continual confrontation with different cultural formations together with a reflection on the construction and representation of cultures. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefèvre visualised a «Translation Turn in Cultural Studies» due to the necessity of moving beyond Eurocentric beginnings to enter a new internationalist phase. They outlined a common agenda for Translation Studies and Cultural Studies based on: 1) «the way in which different cultures construct their image of writers and texts»; 2) «the ways in which texts become cultural capital across cultural boundaries»; 3) «the politics of translating» (Bassnett and Lefevre 1998:138).

These issues were tackled also by Postcolonial Studies scholars who challenged some of the approaches of Western Translation Studies as being inadequate to understand the complex methodologies of translation within postcolonial nations. Complicating the romantic notion of ‘national literature’ circulating across national borders, postcolonial scholars unveiled the material conditions of this circulation and the power relations informing it. They also focused on transforming Europe’s understanding of itself as the ‘original’ critically remapping dominant notions of centre and periphery and overcoming the conceptualization of fixed identities. The major texts on Postcolonial Translation were published in the 1990s: Teswajni Niranjana’s *Siting Translation* (1992), Eric Cheyfitz’s *The Poetics of Imperialism* (1997), Douglas Robinson’s *Translation and Empire* (1997), Ovidi Carbonell’s *Traducir al otro* (1997) and Bassnett and Trivedi’s *Postcolonial Translation* (1999). In the same years Doris Bachmann-Medick began her study on “Cultural Misunderstanding in Translation” in which she argued that the traditional European idea of translation was based on a conception of the text as an «unmistakable, individual identity rooted in its cultural origin» (Bachmann-Medick 1996:5), a notion in contradiction with texts and experiences arising from multicultural contexts. In 2006 in the volume *Cultural Turns* she envisaged a «Translational Turn» in the study of literatures and cultures where translation was considered as a model conceptually connecting various disciplines. This idea was further de-

veloped in a special issue of *Translation Studies* (2009) in which she asserted that «it is not enough to disengage the category of translation from a linguistic and textual paradigm and locate it, as a cultural practice, in the sphere of social action, where it plays an ever more vital role for a world of mutual dependences and networks» (Bachmann-Medick 2009:3). From this perspective, Bachmann's concept has been used by the Japanese scholar Naoki Sakai who has imagined a 'bordering turn' which accompanies the 'translational turn' in which «translation is not only border crossing but also an act of drawing a border» (Sakai 2009:84). Analysing a «cartography in the representation of translation» (Sakai 2009:84), the scholar believes the translator can map the «incomprehensible». Thus referring to the schematization of co-figuration – also used by Comparative scholars in order to deconstruct the East/West dichotomy – Sakai talks about a global shared vision of the world where the translator is «a subject in transit» (Sakai 2009:87) who renders difference representable. In the emblematic volume *Spectres of the West and the Politics of Translation* (2000) Sakai and Yukiko Hanawa dismantle the schematic trope of dialogue 'The West and the Rest' and criticise the idea of the West as a category that in itself lacks conceptual coherence and contains many contradictions.

Another crucial issue is the portrayal of a 'postcolonial moment' for Europe where it is necessary to recognize that Postcolonial literatures contribute to the making of European cultures. Paul Gilroy's *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) are important studies for rethinking translation as a 'cross-category' challenging Eurocentric points of comparative reference. This line of thought demands a contextualized and historicized approach to translation that should be developed overcoming Eurocentric categories and terminology.

Translation Studies have been enriched also by the fruitful debate taking place in Comparative Studies which challenged the Eurocentric points of comparative reference. In her essay "The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective", Rey Chow (2004) called for the substitution of the term comparative with terms such as 'global', 'international', 'planetary' and 'cross-cultural'. According to Chow hierarchical



frames of comparison should be overcome by a new paradigm based on cultural difference and a reflective judgment on the question of representation. This new paradigm should «designate a relation of temporality with Europe being experienced not exactly spatially as a chartable geographic location but much more as a memory, a cluster of lingering ideological and emotional effects whose force takes the form of a lived historical violation, one that preconditions linguistic and cultural consciousness» (Chow 2004:305). Similarly, Bella Brodski (2007) has disputed the notion of translation as a category in itself and opened a debate on memory and translation in European contexts.

The fecund reflection on literature in the era of globalization began with Franco Moretti (1998 and 2005) and was followed by David Damrosch's works (2003). While Moretti did not develop an argument about translation practice as such, he borrowed concepts from the polysystem theory to discuss literary exchange and interference with reference to the novel. Damrosch too referred to questions already tackled in TS, to the relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world deriving from the dramatic acceleration of globalization that have «complicated the idea of a world literature» (Damrosch 2003:4). A recent book by Mads Rosendal Thomsen (2010) challenged the idea of 'World Literature' through the notion of 'transnational literature'. Borrowing Damrosch's idea of reading 'across time', 'across culture' and 'in translation', Valerie Henitiuk (2012:34) affirmed that we need to be mentally «translated readers» and able to interpret transcultural texts. Henitiuk considers translation as an instrument for the internationalization of texts and their re-packaging for different markets. Referring to the well-known study by Azade Seyhan (2000), Henitiuk underlines the difficulty of totally detaching a text from its source culture and completely assimilating it into the target one. For her translated texts are transnational.

Today the presence of cross-cultural texts, linguistic creolization and multilingualism has highlighted the importance of transnational writing, emphasising the necessity of redefining theoretical approaches. As I am outlining, in the last two decades new perspectives in translation theory and comparative criticism emerged, inviting a decentring of world literary systems and a more open discussion towards non European approaches

together with the need to de-Westernize theories and practices. This new wave in TS began with the publication of volumes such as Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre's *Changing the Terms* (2000) and Marilyn Gaddis Rose's *Beyond the Western Tradition* (2000) which envisioned an international frame for TS. A dynamic and complex engagement with the many issues of TS was considered also by Maria Tymockzo, who was well aware of the markedly Eurocentric presuppositions of TS grounded on «a rather small subset of European cultural contexts based on Greco-Roman textual traditions, Christian values, nationalistic views about the relationship between language and cultural identity, and an upper-class emphasis on technical expertise and literacy» (Tymockzo 2005). Similarly, Theo Hermans in *Translating Others* (2006) and *The Conference of the Tongues* (2007) offered a critical reflection on translation theories and methods and utilised translation as an interpretative category for an analysis of multilingual and multiethnic European texts and contexts. Another well-known scholar, Michael Cronin added a new term to the discussion and referred to a «transnational history of translation» where «it is no longer possible to limit histories of translation to literary phenomena within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state» (Cronin 2006:23). In Italy a recent volume edited by Bosinelli and Di Giovanni, *Oltre l'Occidente* (2009) has introduced Italian readers to an international and broader perspective on TS while a new journal, *Translation*, edited by Siri Neergard has offered an international panorama on TS. In 2011 a special issue of *Translation and Interpreting Studies* has focused on Eurocentrism in translation and the editors, Peter Flynn and Luc van Doorslaer, have remarked the necessity of a more flexible conceptualization and definition of translation. In this issue Dirk Delabatista stated that «Westerners have a tendency to assume that their values, ideas and representations of the world have universal currency: being so deeply engrained in our thinking, these categories exist in mental and discursive spaces beyond critical self-scrutiny and naming» (Delabatista 2011:143). He has envisioned an «international turn» in TS which should take into account a 'postcolonial sensibility' and a global, culturally balanced approach to translation: «that makes it possible to deal with the worldwide variety of cultural situations and their inter-relatedness in a truly comparative way» (Delabatista 2011:155).

I believe a joint and more valid discussion can be reached through what I have called the «Eastern Wave» in TS that is, a group of Asian scholars that are presenting new perspectives in translation theory and practice. I refer mainly to scholars from mainland China and Hong Kong who have exposed the fallacy of translation theory models as universally applicable. From their works it is clear that it is not possible to use the same paradigms for a discussion on translation. In 2003 Wang Ning edited a special issue for the journal *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, entitled “Translation Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches” where he collected many voices from China dealing with issues such as: translation as the language of alterity, the untranslatability and unspeakableness of Chinese literature and culture, the complex role of the translator as reader/writer, the linguistic and cognitive abilities of translators, the status of the canonical author to be translated, the relationship with the readership. Through a post-colonial approach to TS he observed that the process of globalisation is positively influencing the development of humanities, and that a dialogue between China and the West can constitute a new course of this development. He argues that translation studies is capable of removing the boundaries between the centre and the periphery and points out that TS is undergoing great changes from literal translation on the linguistic level to cultural interpretation and representation. Since translation is an act of dialogic practice among authors, translators, texts and readers it is important to build up national identities and literatures that can cross national borders. The translator becomes «a dynamic interpreter» (Ning 2010:7) who renders the work canonical in another language realising the «travelling of literature» (Ning and Sun 2008:85) from one context to another. Translation becomes part of a cultural transformation encouraging a ‘transnational spirit’ for text consumption abroad. According to Ning, globalisation does not necessarily homogenise national cultures but brings about the diversity or plurality of culture, «in the age of globalisation, along with people migrating from one place to another, their national and cultural identity will also split into multiple and different identities» (Ning and Sun 2008:85). Fears of ‘Westernisation’ or ‘colonisation’ of modern Chinese literature and culture should be overcome and ‘Westernised’ trends and ‘colonised’ discourses should intersect with Chinese cultural

elements. Another important question is the 'glocalisation' of Chinese cultural TS in an international context. What is meant is that in receiving Western theories Chinese scholars have glocalised Western traditions producing Chinese versions of these theories with their cultural strategies and practices. Xie Ming (2008) envisions translation as an interaction but also a collision of languages and cultures and proposes a 'creative' reception of Western theories, while Wang Dongfeng (2008) asks for the construction of a broadened translation critical vocabulary to be adopted in China. Another scholar, Sun Yifeng (2003) declares untranslatability as part of cultural incompatibility and outlines how a global community emphasises the value of intercultural communication.

While reading these theorists we must be aware that mainland China has a long history of translation based on faithfulness and elegance. Translation has always been studied as a science that needs an appropriate technique and accuracy. Chinese scholars have looked for a universal translation criterion and this is partly the reason why Western linguistic theories (Nida, Catford and structuralist approaches) were translated and adapted to the Chinese context. Another theory that acquired relevance in the Asian context was the polysystem theory used for example, by Chang Nam-Fung (2002 and 2005) as a framework to reflect upon translation practices, the ideology behind these practices, the social system and the economic situation of China. He also points out how social-cultural factors, for instance, the relationship between Chinese culture and Western cultures, may affect the development of TS in China. The choice of source texts, translation strategies, the function of the target text in the cultural system, the translator's poetics and ideology are important factors to be taken into account. Another important influence has been Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation. For Wang Dongfeng the conflict between domestication and foreignisation as contradictory strategies can be seen as «the poetic, cultural and political, rather than mere linguistic extension of the continuing controversy over free translation and literal translation» (Dongfeng 2003:63). From another perspective Sun Yifeng (2003a) analyses the alleged 'invisibility' of the translator and outlines how «norms underlying social and cultural establishment regulate the practice of translation as an agency, since

acceptability remains the primary concern» (Sun 2003:66). The translator domesticates the text according to a certain ideology and poetics. After conducting a survey on translators over the last two decades in China – a period of ‘cultural fever’ after the resurgence in the 1970s for a cross-cultural dialogue – Mu Lei and Shi Yi (2003) address the subjectivity of the translator in relation to the translating process, his/her increasing awareness of the target culture and the reader’s reception of the text. They highlight the importance of an «intersubjectivity» between the translator, the author and the reader (of both ST and TT). Other important voices in TS in this area are based in Hong Kong, an area that has always been exposed to Western influences. One of them was certainly Martha Cheung who edited a special issue of *The Translator* (2009) and published an *Anthology on Chinese discourses on translation* (2012); another one is Eva Hung (2005) who stressed the importance of translation in cultural changes.

All these voices – I quoted only a few of them who are accessible in English – infuse a new blood in the TS debate today. They make us aware of the importance of an ethical positioning for scholars in TS which starts from an opening up to new models of translation practice and to a non Western reservoir of conceptualizations about translation. What I call here the ‘Eastern wave in TS’ can bring us to a new shore in TS where the positive aspects of globalization make us able to communicate cross-culturally and widen our perspective on theory and practice. It is time to create a transversal methodology in TS that goes beyond hierarchical frameworks of comparison and universalizing models and finally create a fruitful international dialogue.

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