

Untranslatability: The Rebirth of Theory?

BYRON TAYLOR

Abstract: Using Galin Tihanov's recent remarks on World Literature as my point of departure, this paper suggests that the recent theme of untranslatability may, counter-intuitively, be as useful for Translation Studies as it is for Comparative Literature. After outlining Emily Apter's contribution to this area and Lawrence Venuti's subsequent response, I go on to suggest that the notion of the 'untranslatable' can be highly innovative for research and pedagogy, specifically in the field of what is usually deemed literary theory. This reinforces the mutual dependency and insight that either disciplines can afford each other.

Keywords: Untranslatability, translation studies, comparative literature, world literature, Emily Apter, Lawrence Venuti

Theory is a mandatory component in literary and translation departments around the world. It is being taught in classrooms every year. The word derives from the Greek word *theôria*, meaning 'contemplation' or 'speculation,' a word which itself derives from *theôros*, meaning 'spectator.' This optical aspect designates theory as a means 'to see' or 'to look upon something' in a different way. However, the overwhelming majority of students in classes on theory do not know this; at the very least, they are not being taught the skills to be able to learn such things. In what follows, I will suggest that untranslatability provides the logical next step in the teaching of theory, so that such skills become an inherent part of its development.

As I will go on to argue, notions of untranslatability could provide theory with a new lease of life. One that engages students in ways that are more proactive and demanding, and that ultimately cast light on the urgent centrality of translation to the humanities. Beginning with Galin Tihanov's recent remarks on what he considers the dilemma of World Literature, I will go on to explain the ongoing debate on untranslatability, with reference to its proponents as well as its adherents, before suggesting a pedagogical methodology by which the claims of both are proven and a new dimension of mutual dialogue is opened in Comparative Literature and Translation Studies.

I begin with Galin Tihanov, whose body of work has carried out extensive treatments of German, Russian and Eastern European intellectual history and culture. In *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* (2019), Tihanov locates interwar Eastern and Central Europe as its birthplace. He goes on to elegantly systematise the Russian contribution to literary theory through what he refers to as 'a regime of relevance':

'The history of ideas about literature can be told as the history of attempts to conceptualise the changing regimes of its relevance. By "regime of relevance" [...] I mean the prevalent mode of appropriating (both interpreting and using) literature in society at a particular time. Any such regime or mode is in competition with others, and at any one point a constellation of different regimes is available, shaped by a plethora of factors [...].'¹

While we ourselves may be forced to acknowledge that literature 'is no longer endowed with special status,' Tihanov continues, as it must compete 'for attention as one of the many commodities of the leisure industry,'² he argues for the contribution of the Russian

Formalists to be reconciled with the broader importance of theory, and for theory itself to assume a more historical character in our analysis of it: ‘For the historian of intellectual formations, radical historicity is the only credible approach; I would even submit that our understanding of literary theory has been greatly skewed and impoverished by our reluctance to historicise it.’²³ This is a significant claim, one we will later come back to.

‘Literariness,’ or *literaturnost*, was introduced by Roman Jakobson in 1921, who claimed that ‘the object of literary science is not literature but literariness, i.e. what makes a given work a literary work.’²⁴ It was a concept that would come to define the Formalist movement, and Viktor Shklovsky would later develop this notion into the idea of *ostranenie*, or ‘estrangement,’ suggesting that what makes writing conform to the status of literature was its ability to estrange everyday language. It referred to the difficult-to-define feature that made writing *literature*, a formal property on which much of their varied debates and writings would converge.

Yet, however linear ‘*The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*’ (2019) may sound as a title, its conclusions are far more circular. After a series of close analyses of how Russian Formalists like Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Eikhenbaum recognised ‘the autonomy of literature’ as an art form alongside ‘its presumed “literariness,” embedded in the workings of language,’²⁵ Tihanov ends his book by bringing this debate back to the present, laying his findings at the feet of World Literature. With a certain disparagement, he claims that World Literature ‘usually refers to a particular liberal Anglo-Saxon discourse grounded in assumptions of mobility, transparency, and a recontextualising (but also decontextualizing) circulation that supports the free consumption and unrestricted comparison of literary artefacts.’²⁶ As Tihanov sees it, World Literature, as promoted by scholars like Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch and Franco Moretti, is, in actuality, a discipline underpinned by the same dilemma as its Russian forebearers:

Let me repeat: the current discourse on “world literature” is an iteration of the principal question of modern literary theory at the time of its birth: should one think literature within or beyond the horizon of language? This specific iteration recasts this question, while retaining its theoretical momentum. [Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum] both faced the foundational conundrum of literary theory: how to account for literariness with reference to both individual languages and language *per se*; if this response was to be seminal in terms of theory, it had to be a response that addressed both the singularity of language (the language of the original) and its multiplicity (the multiple languages in which a literary text reaches its potential audiences in translation).²⁷

In other words, it is impossible to think of literature theoretically without accounting for translation. This is a point that should not be overstated. What began as an aspect of Formalist thinking a century ago, according to Tihanov, is now redefined as the grounding principle for a discipline with a broader global and historical circumference:

‘The Anglo-Saxon discourse on world literature, foremost in the works of David Damrosch, has proceeded – or so it seems to me – in the steps of Shklovsky by foregrounding the legitimacy of working in translation. Damrosch has implicitly confronted the tension between the singularity and multiplicity of language by concluding that studying a literary work in the languages of its socialisation is more important than studying it in the language of its production, not least because this new priority restricts and undermines the monopoly of methodological nationalism in literary studies.’²⁸

Conclusively, Tihanov positions translation as the key issue of theory in our present century, foregrounding its importance for the future of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies alike.²⁹ Subscribing to his assumptions above means advancing his argument by way of a concept that has received increasing attention in recent years – yet, on the face of it, appears to dismantle the priority of translation altogether – untranslatability.

With reference to Barbara Cassin and Emily Apter's projects on untranslatability, their broad reception, and their response from Lawrence Venuti, I will outline in the following pages how this debate has developed, pointing out the ways its interpretations differ (sometimes dramatically). However, I will salvage amongst this debate some points of overlap that have been sorely overlooked. I will suggest in what follows that untranslatability could well provide the logical next step for literary theory, in a move with potential benefits for Comparative Literature, World Literature, foreign language-learning and Translation Studies. I will suggest that adopting certain methodologies (in classrooms and syllabi) could lead to these disciplines benefitting from the intervention of untranslatability, in ways that rejuvenate them, reviving fresh dialogue, collaboration and correspondence between them.

Untranslatability

First, however, that negative prefix deserves our consideration. How can we better define what the 'untranslatable' negates? Is language ever, in fact, 'untranslatable'? Translation, one could counter-argue, is something we do every day. In this sense, it is less a skill than a reflex. Every time we read a text or hear a statement made we are engaged in a process of interpretation as we translate it into something appropriate to ourselves.

Translation Studies has risen from a derivative, neglected role in previous centuries, to become, in the 21st, an area of unprecedented growth and demand in the Anglo-Western academy, acquiring leading scholars like Susan Bassnett, Antoine Berman, Anthony Pym and Lawrence Venuti along the way. Yet the discipline has clearly reached the maturity of schisms, claims Mauricio Mendonça Cardozo. Noting how it tends to be increasingly split between the literary and the technological, he asks if the contemporary state of the field can 'really allow us to speak consensually of *one* real subject, of one subject that can be taken unequivocally as the *real* one'?¹⁰

This is a fruitful inquiry, but for present purposes another question worth posing is: what happens to the terms that *cannot* be so easily exchanged? What about the 'untranslatable' words that refuse to be assimilated into such economies, that struggle to be exchanged into the currencies of other languages? What do we do with national idioms, around which are wrapped myths by which a nation understands itself? Duncan Large has suggested that the concept of untranslatability stems from the German Romantics, and is hence – somewhat ironically – a concept older than the institution of Translation Studies itself.¹¹

It was the French philosopher Barbara Cassin, leading a hundred researchers, who made the first significant leap in this direction, editing and publishing '*Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*' in 2004.¹² Cassin's project was premised on providing explanations for various philosophical terms in the European tradition – words like *logos*, *ousia*, *mimesis*, *alèthia*. Words, she writes, in a definition that has earned as many critics as admirers, that are 'not what one does not translate, but what one never ceases to (not) translate.'¹³ This may appear to be a curious definition of what 'untranslatability' refers to. Yet a cursory glance at the words listed above, as well as the contributors to Cassin's volume (with Alain Badiou and Étienne Balibar among them) certifies what translators call a target-audience: those within the French and German-dominated field of Continental Philosophy. It was a book largely written by philosophers, for philosophers, while the authority of its title inevitably garnered attention from other quarters.

Yet Cassin's '*Vocabulaire*' still does not provide a solid answer as to what 'untranslatability' really means, or what 'untranslatable' words look like. Either way, Cassin's definition has satisfied some and angered others. Among the latter were those in the field of Translation Studies, many of whom are practical translators themselves.¹⁴ This is self-evident and understandable. Surely, the idea that certain words are 'untranslatable' renders their efforts at best suspect, and at worst meaningless?

However, among those who were satisfied, and even inspired by Cassin's project and its attendant definition(s), was Emily Apter. Having established herself within the field of French and Comparative Literature, both '*Translation in a Global Market Place*' (2001) and '*The Translation Zone*' (2006) made her interests in this area clear, and her convergence with Cassin almost inevitable. In collaboration with Michael Wood and Jacques Lezra, Emily Apter was appointed to edit the English-language version of the book. It was no small feat: taking over a decade, the '*Dictionary of Untranslatables*' (2014) involved contributors ranging from linguists to translators to philosophers, from Judith Butler to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. With each word, we see its etymology, genealogy, its altering usages and philosophical purchase. It may well be one of the most important academic publications of our era.

Apter would not only oversee the book's publication, but in the process develop Cassin's project in her 2013 publication '*Against World Literature*.' Here, we see Cassin's notion travel from the sphere of philosophy to that of comparative literary criticism, without, in either case, fully landing in the designation of Translation Studies. Apter claims, in her book's opening, that its aim 'is to activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature.'¹⁵ Her polemical title challenges the recent branding of World Literature pushed by scholars like David Damrosch and adopts Cassin's notion of untranslatability to do so. Damrosch has famously claimed that works of World Literature are, effectively, those which travel beyond their place of origin and find reception and influence elsewhere.¹⁶ Apter does not take issue with this idea so much as she does with its implementation. According to her, in practice, this approach ends up producing little more than a sanitised and commodified set of syllabi and a plethora of 'global' anthologies in English: falling prey 'inevitably to the tendency to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground.'¹⁷ Meanwhile, the 'untranslatable' is, in Apter's thinking, incompatible, irreducible, and in-exchangeable: therein lies its value.

She elaborates on the entries of the recently completed Dictionary, interfacing various 'untranslatable' terms with a variety of global contexts, from the checkpoints of the Gaza Strip to the translations of Karl Marx's daughter, from American author Don DeLillo to Japanese translator Hsiao-yen Peng. By tracing the previous scholarship on the topic (albeit in a largely Francophone and theoretical vein), she offers a range of 'untranslatable' terms that she argues be introduced as theoretical tools. While Tihanov's polemic rests on the idea that World Literature cannot escape its dependency on translation, her book, by contrast, 'beckons one to run the experiment of imagining what a literary studies contoured around untranslatability might be.'¹⁸ More importantly, it aspires to make us 'think of translation as a kind of philosophy,' or as a new 'way of doing theory.'¹⁹

Apter and Cassin's reception

The reception of both the '*Vocabulaire*' and the '*Dictionary of Untranslatables*' has been immense, with the range of its responses emphasising its cross-disciplinary significance. Leading historian Carlo Ginzburg confessed that 'nowadays, anybody working on the history of ideas in a global perspective must take into account' Apter and Cassin's volumes.²⁰ However, Ginzburg also points out a weakness in their assumptions. Rereading Cassin's definition of the 'untranslatable,' Ginzburg interprets this as meaning that

Since any translation is inevitably inadequate, the process of translation is endless. But are we allowed to assume, at some metalinguistic level, that 'incorrect translations' also exist? In the domain of everyday life the answer would undoubtedly be 'yes': let us think for a moment of the distinction between 'left' and 'right' being misinterpreted by a foreigner with poor English, walking in, let's say, New York... But if incorrect translations exist, Barbara Cassin's relativistic assumptions are untenable.²¹

In other words, Ginzburg recognises how Apter and Cassin's project unconsciously assumes there is no room for human error or contingency. From the perspective of Analytic Philosophy, Tim Crane's review claims that 'if it is a dictionary, it is closer to those of Pierre Bayle or Dr Johnson': because instead of a point of reference for future students, 'the choice and relative size of entries is eccentric. We have "demos" but not "democracy"; the very different ideas of "description" and "depiction" get a shared entry; "idea" gets a half page, "Imagination" the same. "Event" gets a quarter page, but "*Ereignis*" (as used by Heidegger) gets a page and a half.'²² Beyond the eccentricity of its entries, Crane also takes issue with the way the book challenges the analytic establishment via more continental lines of inquiry:

like it or not, "Anglo-analytic" philosophy dominates the academy in the US, the UK, Australasia and many parts of continental Europe; and like it or not, the French approach embodied in this dictionary is on the decline worldwide. One way to see the dictionary, then, is as an extended lament for the decline of French as a "preeminent language of philosophy."²³

However, despite the accusations that the philosopher and the historian aim at Apter and Cassin's editions, neither can deny their importance and erudition. Still, both reviews throw light on the way in which Apter and Cassin's project does not entirely fit into the strictures of any one discipline, but rather overlap many, in ways that are contentious, fascinating and problematic. As World Literature's chief institutional architect, David Damrosch's review of '*Against World Literature*' was not as polemical as Apter's title would lead one to expect. He begins sarcastically that it 'is surely a mark of some kind of success, when a movement begins to be attacked by its own participants.'²⁴ While admitting that her book contains much to admire, Damrosch points out that Apter's text remains 'little engaged with current scholarship in world literature' and 'equally selective in its reference to translation studies.'²⁵ For Damrosch, this lack of dialogue with scholars invested in the very project Apter is addressing, somewhat weakens her broader argument: 'The tough linguistic and political analyses that Emily Apter rightly wishes comparatists to pursue will best be carried forward by widening our cultural and linguistic horizons,' inclusive of much of the Translation Studies that Apter – curiously – avoids.²⁶

Duncan Large's co-edited collection '*Untranslatability*' (2018) continues the debate, from a broader set of perspectives. The criticisms of Theo Hermans and Helen Gibson raise equally valid points:

[Apter is] treating untranslatability as that which inhibits translation, the bumps in the road which give translators occasion to pause and reflect. But if every hesitation is an index of untranslatability, this inflates the concept to an unhelpful degree.²⁷

... in favouring a "big picture" critique of how translation can create a presumptuous sense of equivalence, of "translatability" between cultures, Apter's narrative does not allow space for the ways in which individual translations are not silent parties in these debates but repeatedly engage with and provide contemporary comment on these issues in unpredictable ways.²⁸

These reservations are considered, their critiques nuanced, yet commonalities between them become visible. The sheer breadth of the '*Dictionary of Untranslatables*' renders it difficult to not recognise its staggering achievement altogether, but many critics point out that there is still an underlying, glaring absence of translation analysis. Until this is rectified, these critiques imply, it is impossible to really utilise either Dictionary in the way they were intended. So how can this absence be reconciled? Is it possible to enforce this reconciliation in ways that retain Apter's original and seductive suggestion, that doing so provides 'a new way to do theory'?²⁹ Leaving this question in suspense a moment, I will turn firstly to the most significant critique of Apter's book, written by one of its most significantly absent sources: Lawrence Venuti.³⁰

Venuti's critique

No critic thus far has offered so impassioned and so sustained an account against Apter's and Cassin's work as Venuti, who has long and eloquently postulated how translation's legitimacy is in dire need of reappraisal. Venuti's latest book, *'Contra Instrumentalism,'* (2019) finds him at his most seething. The time for 'coolly detached reasoning' on the topic is past, he claims; rather, 'the provocation of polemic has become necessary to realise and redirect it.'³¹

The book insists on a binary distinction in translation: the instrumental, and the hermeneutic. Instrumental translation is, according to Venuti, one that subscribes to the idea of 'a semantic invariant' in the text that can never be reproduced – which means that translation is always doomed to failure, into producing, at best, something of a reduced or secondary significance. Hermeneutic translation, by contrast, encapsulates what Venuti has long claimed: that the translator is a creative force in their own right, and are met at every turn with decisions that demand a broader understanding of the source-text, the place and era from which it originated. That translators therefore deserve greater creative license; and, conversely, greater appreciation for those responsibilities.

In relation to *'The Dictionary of Untranslatables,'* Venuti echoes Ginzburg when pointing out that since 'the terms are repeatedly mistranslated in Cassin's view, calling them "untranslatable" doesn't seem precise.'³² As to the analysis of translation itself, he concludes that 'the translation analysis raises more questions than it answers.'³³ Yet the worst culprit of all is Apter. Venuti bemoans that she attempts to elevate untranslatability 'to a methodological principle, unfortunately, and the results seem misguided.'³⁴ Claiming that Apter's preoccupation with French theory renders her analyses retrograde, even risking 'turning back the clock in comparative literature'³⁵ to its Eurocentric past, Venuti goes on to explain that because 'Apter's notion of untranslatability is essentialist, it cannot enable an account of the contingencies of translation.'³⁶ He passionately argues that, at its simplest, 'Apter is interested in theory, not in translation,'³⁷ leaving 'the materiality of translation' to be 'evaporated into abstraction.'³⁸

Why does he harbour such vitriol? His concern is that notions of translation as a straightforward process have been 'so deeply entrenched,' and for so long, 'as to be unconscious, knee-jerk, rote.'³⁹ It is this conviction to overturn prior assumptions that lends energy to his critique. In many ways, Venuti is correct. Yet his derision towards publications considering the 'untranslatable' overlooks the attention it has brought to the field. This may be indirect, its theoretical positions may indeed be problematic, but that it has brought more attention to translation is undeniable. Venuti concedes that

any project that generates a conversation about translation might be welcomed in Anglophone cultures [...] Yet if Cassin's dictionary were to become the main source of the talking points, the marginal status of translation would persist, unaffected, and may actually worsen.⁴⁰

He rejects the perceived devaluation of his field, firmly believing this devaluation lies inherent in the very word "untranslatability" – but how can this be remedied? If Apter is indeed 'interested in theory, not translation,'⁴¹ then how can we ourselves set forth a way of working that reconciles both projects productively? Is it possible to pursue Apter and Cassin's central idea while heeding Venuti's critiques? From my own perspective, the fact of the matter is that the 'untranslatable' only reinforces Venuti's claim for the translator's visibility: for it is when faced with foreign idioms that the creative abilities of the translator are best tested.⁴²

To 'worsen'⁴³ the status of translation is in no scholar's interest. We must therefore think of ways in which a new, more globalised approach to theory can be practically implemented, in ways that are more resourceful of translation, as an exercise, a discipline,

and as a resource. One can detect, among the critiques above, the idea that ‘untranslatability’ is a concept better developed in academic institutions than by translators engaged in their practical profession.⁴⁴ I firmly reject this distinction. By establishing such a binary, critics like Venuti overlook the possibility that the ‘untranslatable,’ as concept, holds the chance to pedagogically render the teaching of literary studies and translation more institutionally dynamic, mutually beneficial and globally orientated. Yet if one is to walk the tightrope between Apter’s ideas and Venuti’s forewarnings, we must find a way to critically approach the ‘untranslatable’ as Apter insists, while also being mindful of what Venuti calls ‘the contingencies of translation’⁴⁵ at the same time.

Theory redefined

The answer, I suggest, involves asking whether ‘untranslatable’ words can be interposed onto literary texts in other languages. What if our task is not just about translating a foreign word into another language, but translating a foreign *concept* into another context, as a theory of its own? When applying an ‘untranslatable’ to foreign texts, what cultural resonance occurs, what new insights are provided, and can such a foreignizing methodology rejuvenate (if not replace) theoretical literary readings? Is so, does this mean a new ‘way of doing theory’, as Apter suggests? Why would a ‘new way’ be necessary to begin with?

This is a question of broad dimensions. However, given that courses and seminars on theory are taught in almost every literature department worldwide, it is a question that deserves an equally global response. Literary theory is often historicised as an area of research that lasted from Russian Formalism to the death of Jacques Derrida, though its institutional conscription in literary syllabi has not dwindled since. Having taught both literary and translation theory at University College London, I can confirm how the lack of new developments within this field lead many students to wonder why these methodologies are still relevant. On the strength of Tihanov’s argument, the following work addresses this issue with a more international, and more contemporary, answer. That is because it is one that seeks to identify the ‘regime of relevance’ that literature now occupies: one that is undeniably global, and, hence, indivisibly premised on translation. Coinciding with this reality, the form of literary theory this article proposes is one that lets foreign terms do the conceptual work that has usually been done by theory – foreign terms that Apter, Cassin and their contributors deem ‘untranslatable.’

If contemporary literature today necessarily inhabits a global ‘regime of relevance,’ whereby authors new and old publish their original work with its future translators and translations in mind,⁴⁶ then this would imply that literary theory should itself make requisite changes. If World Literature has in fact proved overly ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in its orientation, or sanitised in what it produces, then surely it is up to formative syllabi to alter this in ways that are positive in the longer term. Can terms assumed to be ‘untranslatable’ in one language, act as theories when reading texts from another? Could ‘untranslatable’ words in each of these languages lend fresh inquiry onto the texts of another: to awaken and articulate theoretical claims, textual properties and (con)textual parallels not otherwise visible in previous scholarship? Were this methodology – of using ‘untranslatable’ terms to intervene in texts from other cultures – exerted pedagogically in the University, my hypothesis would be as follows.

Comparative Literature

A student of Comparative Literature is invariably engaged in learning the language, culture or writings of at least two other cultures. A student of languages may well be studying two or more in tandem (as is the prerequisite at some Universities), may be

studying one (which differs from their first language) or may simply study another language as an optional, online, additional or extra-curricular course. None of these scenarios prevent the following methodology being implemented.

In any of these cases, what I propose is that students can choose a pedagogical route whereby they are encouraged to locate a word from one of their languages that is deemed 'difficult' to translate (if not outright 'untranslatable'). They may want to choose a word from Apter and Cassin's Dictionary (not to mention the African, Arabic, Chinese and Russian editions currently forthcoming), or something they have come across elsewhere. Students could be expected to provide a summary of that word, taking stock of its genealogy, its history, its usages, its context. Students could also be asked to find essays by philologists, philosophers, authors, linguists, theorists or translators that refer to, retranslate or exposit this word specifically. The pedagogical challenge would be to encourage these students to gather as much as they can from this term, before applying it to a work from another culture. This second culture could be the other language they are studying, or it could simply be a text from their own culture.

What results from this would, as I see it, effectively fulfil the criteria by which coursework in literary theory is constituted. It requires that the student grasps an idea or concept before applying it to a case study, justifying its relevance, overlap and interference in the process. It involves the cross-cultural diversity that Comparative Literature champions, while also requiring the ability to define, apply, justify and conclude one's argument in their imposition of a theory towards a text. This will entail students exploring each word via its etymology, its cultural history and varying usage in literary, philosophical, linguistic, political and social contexts, before investing it with the necessary theoretical dimensions needed to see whether it can work as a theory for reading a foreign text.

This would demand, on the part of the student, the ability to work independently in one's area of focus (whether that be one language or a combination of several), embedding themselves fully within the etymological trajectory of that term as well as the contexts it has come to accommodate, before applying this word as a conceptual vehicle in their reading of another text. The gesture of doing so is inherently, and inescapably, comparative. On the part of the educator, this allows the *'Dictionary of Untranslatables'*, contrary to Crane's judgement, to in fact prove itself a useful guidebook for teaching theory. The teacher may choose to allocate words from the Dictionary to their students at random, or encourage the students to find them independently, depending on the level that one is teaching.

Let's imagine, for instance, a student of French and Spanish (the most popular combination in both the U.S. and the U.K.). The student could find a term like *l'ésprit d'escalier* in French. In the first part of their work, they would be forced to explain, whether via presentation or coursework, how the contexts of the word have altered over time, tracing its etymology from its first appearances to its contemporary definition, using textual examples that show the journey of those shifts. The second part of their work would require them to find resembling terms in Spanish. What are its equivalents? If there aren't any, then what words in Spanish carry a similar connotation, or require knowledge of a similar set of social conventions? Can the student find works in Spanish literature or episodes of Spanish history which can be reframed through this term? For example, does the idea of going up stairs and regretting not having said something help us understand the dilemmas, ideas and characters of the Spanish Empire, Pedro Almodovar's films or Isabel Allende's novels?

Altogether, such a pedagogical route would provide not only a revitalised alternative to literary theory as it is often taught (and continues to be), but a means whereby the same standards of intellectual effort are made but with more creative responsibility and with a more cosmopolitan and comparative emphasis. It demands that students become theorists

themselves, and in the process realise how essential translation is to accomplish this. Judging on the decision of the educators involved, they may wish the students to play to their strengths, picking words from the languages they are familiar with, or to choose words with which they have little familiarity. By emphasising the translational aspect of these terms, it would allow students (and future teachers) of Comparative Literature to ‘apply their energy and expertise to learning how to read translations as texts in their own right,’⁴⁷ successfully reinventing the teaching of literary theory while broadening the student’s appreciation for translation in a global context.

Translation Studies

For students of translation, thinking about how philosophy and theory map onto each other leads students to realise the agency of translation, and its role as ‘the core of the humanities,’ as Venuti puts it.⁴⁸ Picking terms from Apter and Cassin’s Dictionary, students are then able to study the variety of strategies by which these words have been translated over time. Managed successfully, this offers them a comprehensive way to trace the genealogy of ideas, and to realise the hermeneutic pathways by which such words have contributed to present debates. The students may choose to follow the word’s semantic and conceptual migrations into another language, or several, or even its appearance (or untranslated omission) in one single text. In ‘What Is a “Relevant” Translation?’, an essay translated by Venuti, Jacques Derrida reflects how

In 1967, to translate a crucial German word with a double meaning (*Aufheben*, *Aufhebung*), a word that signifies at once to suppress and to elevate, a word that Hegel says represents the speculative risk of the German language, and that the entire world had until then agreed was untranslatable – or, if you prefer, a word for which no one had agreed with anyone on a stable, satisfying translation into any language – for this word, I had proposed the noun *releve* and the verb *relever*. This allowed me to retain, joining them in a single word, the double motif of the elevation and the replacement that preserves what it denies or destroys, preserving what it causes to disappear.⁴⁹

This text provides a novel insight into how philosophers are sometimes forced to confront foreign terms and to turn to the strategies by which a translator operates (even if a philosopher’s explicit thoughts on translation are not usually so easy to find, the translator’s introduction or preface to philosophical or theoretical works can just as easily suffice). When looking at the terms in Apter’s edition of the Dictionary, there are no shortage of terms that could benefit from a historical study of their movement through time, space and discourse. I would suggest that exercises like this encourage students to not think of translation as an instantaneous, moment-by-moment commission or job but as a broad and complex history on which much of our knowledge of one another depends; and, as such, one that deserves a dramatic and substantial reevaluation.

If Tihanov is correct that ‘our understanding of literary theory has been greatly skewed and impoverished by our reluctance to historicise it,’⁵⁰ then students and teachers of translation should not shy from their considerable ability to contribute to this end. If Crane’s belief that continental philosophy ‘is on the decline worldwide,’⁵¹ then exerting these kinds of pedagogical activities transcends the Dictionary from being what he terms a ‘lament’⁵² into being what Walter Benjamin famously termed translation itself, an *überleben*, or an afterlife, to which translation students are welcome to subscribe to.⁵³

A crucial point is this. In neither of these cases, whether modelled for students of Comparative Literature or Translation Studies, does this pedagogical activity necessitate the conviction that these words are, in the literal or practical sense, ‘untranslatable’: that word, in itself, becomes a challenge for students to overcome. In the former case, ‘untranslatable’ words are transcended onto the literature of other cultures entirely, demonstrating

their flexibility and applicability in other contextual horizons; in the latter case, the examples of the word's translations serve to reinforce the difficulty (but, ultimately, success) of translating these terms. Finding words that 'the entire world' agrees are untranslatable, or 'a word for which no one had agreed with anyone on a stable, satisfying translation into any language,'⁵⁴ is surprisingly easy. Moreover, were these courses taught in unison or collaboration, the mutual benefit to either discipline or Department would be far more visible. When entertaining such possibilities, it is difficult to see how such enterprises could indeed 'worsen'⁵⁵ the status of translation.

It is a proposition that appeals to the concerns of students and educators alike. I have heard many academics bemoan the tired formulas by which students are taught a theory, then to apply it to whatever text they choose. As Martin Ruehl once said during a lecture, 'if we have a theory in mind, of course we will find what we are looking for in the text in front of us. How does this improve our reading of it?'⁵⁶ The results can often seem shallow, inconclusive or unconvincing. Again and again, names like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler appear in theory syllabi, though the scope of their relevance is geographically constrained and their relevance at times in question. Students, equally, feel their ability to grasp a theory and apply it does not always demonstrate a great deal, nor necessarily contribute to a conversation that is still alive and ongoing.

If our Departments can indeed reinstate the 'regime of relevance' to which they belong, making good on the global promise with which Universities advertise themselves can be carried out in new, challenging and counter-intuitive directions. Theory need no longer be the designation of a handful of European countries but can instead become a space for words from all over the world to be rigorously conceptualised and then translated, or transcended, into other contexts. Theory, explored and exercised in this way, becomes *praxis* for students on several levels. The educators can help students become researchers in their own right, generating theories from a far wider resource than many single-language syllabi provide, ultimately making theory less a space for repetition and more a space of conversation where concepts can be introduced and global referentiality extended, debated and encouraged.

To those who complain that this potentially threatens the sanctity of theory as it has hereby been taught, I would respond that actually it differs from the norm surprisingly little. In reality, terms like '*mimesis*,' '*jouissance*' and '*unheimliche*' have been introduced by various literary theorists and imbued with a significance and agency that extends far beyond their formal definitions, before being applied to various literary texts. Analytic philosophy prides itself on beginning with the stating of definitions, before then developing its arguments. Literary theory, when done well, requires a similar formula.

This is a task for which Comparative Literature and Translation Studies are especially and singularly equipped. I personally believe it is no longer enough to conclude, as Harrison does, by demanding more language classes, more language teachers, and more language learning.⁵⁷ That is effectively a tautological request, one that in any case overlooks the concrete budgetary issues of institutions. Untranslatability should be grasped not as an injunction against translation; but rather, as a topic that offers the chance to be more creative, dynamic and innovative in *how* we teach languages, and how we ourselves learn them.

Epilogue

If students are faced with foreign terms without simple equivalents, they are forced to understand that word better. The only way to do so, as any practical translator will attest, is via context. By being mindful of not just the target-text but also the source-*concept*, strategies of untranslatability could well benefit both literary and translational theory in

ways that critics like Venuti appear too polemical to acknowledge. If Tihanov is right that ‘our understanding of literary theory has been greatly skewed and impoverished by our reluctance to historicise it,’ (5) then there is every chance that this combination of theory and translation reinstate that priority for a new era of discourse.

I believe it would be a disservice both to translators at work as to students and professors in their seminars for their activities to remain mutually discrete: it is their ongoing engagement that members of either profession should aim for, and the ‘untranslatable,’ counterintuitively, is one path among others. Venuti complains that Apter is interested in theory, not translation – but this does not, as I have set forth – mean that her work cannot lead others to do both.

Epistemically, one can trace the source of Apter and Cassin’s project to Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. In the case of the former, Heidegger is mentioned in the Dictionary no less than 155 times, while Derrida (18 times in the Dictionary; 26 times in *Against World Literature*) forms a central part of Apter’s text, as Damrosch points out.⁵⁸ Considering their appearance in radically historical terms, as Tihanov recommends, one notes that between 1974 and 1976 Barbara Cassin worked part-time at the Étienne-Marcel hospital in Paris, where she assisted Françoise Dolto with the care of traumatised children. This early encounter with an uninterpretable language was significance to her later project. She later attended the Lycée Condorcet, where she was taught by Jean Beaufret, a friend of Heidegger. She would come to be appointed the Director of the Collège international de philosophie, co-established by Derrida in Paris in 1983.

But what makes Derrida and Heidegger’s work relevant to untranslatability beyond these simple facts? If one rereads their work, one finds continually a form of argumentation that differs from the Anglo-analytic norm: namely, of stating definitions, proving and confirming arguments, and justifying one’s case. Rather, language plays a foregrounded role that rewards meta-analysis. Justification appears to stem from definition. They will take a word, unbound it from its supposed meaning, trace its etymology, and use this process to finalise their claims. Heidegger would do this incessantly, morphing the German language into what Steiner called a ‘violent ordinariness’ to conduct his arguments.⁵⁹ ‘But can Heidegger reasonably support his phenomenology with etymology?’ Ballard enquires rightly:

This is an important point inasmuch as it is common for Heidegger to appeal to historical etymology to establish his own, seemingly stipulative, definitions. He does this largely due to his judgement that the force of words tends to degenerate in the course of time and that ontological hermeneutics ought first, if not mostly, to retrieve original meanings.⁶⁰

It is this vein of Continental thought that could be a potential template for what I am proposing. To salvage language and ‘retrieve original meanings’ via etymological strategies is not a bad way to conduct one’s scholarly arguments; what is crucial, however, is that it is a process more informed by translational realities and contingencies, historical contexts and solid argumentation.

From my own perspective, while I do not believe that any word is truly ‘untranslatable’ in the practical sense (hence my decision to put this term in quotation marks here and throughout), this does not render the present suggestions redundant. Venuti is right: we need to correct the assumption that words “lose something significant” in the hands of the translator; my suggestion is that we should wonder what words can, instead, *gain* in the hands of the translator, theorist, the literary critic and the student of language. To transcend the ‘untranslatable’ word onto a corresponding foreign context, shows students of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies the fallacy that such a thing as an ‘untranslatable’ word exists to begin with. The efforts to conduct this imposition could lead them to reflect on the effort of translators at work, and the ways in which translators make leaps back and forth between cultures, histories, languages and lives.

From a political perspective, the very *claim* of untranslatability is, in and of itself, a fascinating one. Given more attention, it could well entice students into studying cultures and languages to begin with. Amidst a surge in nationalist sentiment around the world, surely a question worth asking educators and students is: Why does nationalism profit from idiomaticity? The late George Steiner contentiously argues that the separation of languages is borne from a human desire for privacy and differentiation.⁶¹ When asking why certain words nominate a certain sense of cultural essentialism, Kyra Giorgi finds that such words tend to provoke a mixture of ‘nostalgia, melancholy and fatalism’, evincing ‘the production of memory and the politics of hope.’⁶² Simply put, we cannot understand power *or* politics without understanding language. With an eye to the ‘regime of relevance’ we currently occupy, given the recent rise of ethno-nationalisms worldwide, studying where, when and how claims of untranslatability are established may be more important for humanists now more than ever. Students must grasp the enormity of contextual baggage with which words circulate if they are to use them successfully in a globalised discourse. As I see it, such students will come out of this process with a better understanding of where words come from, how they are shaped, *how they shape them* and why, encouraging a better grasp on political discourse and vocabulary. Cassin’s project could well become the touchstone for a still more ambitious project: encouraging Europeans to develop their own political vocabulary, one that is not recycled from American society and discourse.

If Tihanov is correct, then the question underpinning World Literature – whether we should think literature ‘within or beyond the horizon of language’⁶³ – is one that makes its attempts to interact, correlate and flourish vis-à-vis Translation Studies not so much desirable as necessary, for the survival, renewal and cross-integration of both disciplines. As Apter puts it,

Both translation studies and World Literature extended the promise of worldly criticism, politicized cosmopolitanism, comparability aesthetics galvanized by a deprovincialized Europe, an academically redistributed area studies and a redrawn map of language geopolitics. Partnered, they could deliver still more: translation theory as *Weltliteratur* would challenge flaccid globalisms that paid lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal “big tent” syllabi taught in English.⁶⁴

However, reservations must be acknowledged too. When surveying the contents of Apter’s Dictionary, Venuti believes that much of its error lies in a nagging presentism. In other words, it risks the possibility of imposing contemporary ideas on thinkers of the past, for the sake of furthering one’s argument and appropriating it to fit in with a preconditioned standpoint. Venuti claims this approach tends to ‘turn the past into a mirror of’ contemporary academic trends: ‘This form of cultural narcissism we can do without.’⁶⁵ I agree that it would be essential for those who followed the suggestions above to avoid this possibility. Yet, I would also point out, that this is a challenge further complicated by the fact that the Dictionary takes much of its entries specifically from contemporary thinkers in the first place. Earlier in this article I mentioned Tihanov’s belief that theory has much to gain from being studied with more ‘radical historicity.’⁶⁶ What could meet this demand better than the etymological study of a term, coupled with the hermeneutic ability to trace its semantic and cultural journey to its present definition? It is, after all, precisely the lack of historical rigour that has afforded Apter and Cassin so much critique. Making this an imperative avoids this issue henceforth.

The methodology argued for here does not require the ‘fetishizing’⁶⁷ of untranslatability that Venuti and other practitioners dismiss, nor need it ignore the issues of Apter and Cassin’s work. To be clear, I am not advancing an argument for the fetishization of language; what untranslatability offers is the chance to understand why words are fetishized, *when* and *by whom*. The late Harold Bloom once famously referred to the proponents of

literary theory as ‘The School of Resentment,’ criticising their emphasis on identity politics at the expense of what he saw as legitimate literary analysis.⁶⁸ Yet if we made attempts to develop the limits of what theory can *be* – into a model conditioned by a greater rigour of etymological and translational analysis and involving a broader circle of languages – then it is more difficult to be dissuaded from such a training. If students can present their understanding of a word in its historical and philosophical totality, then this could create a form of theory far harder to dismiss. I have suggested that it encourages a globalised framework for criticism as well as translation, one that can be built continually, whereby the mutual benefit (and dependency) of these disciplines as well as the mutual benefit of Apter and Venuti’s ideas are made visible to all who wish to see them.

University College London, UK

Notes

¹ Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* (Paolo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 20.

² Tihanov, p. 30.

³ Tihanov, p. 5.

⁴ Roman Jakobson, Krystyna Pomorska & Stephen Rudy, “On Realism in Art” in: *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1987), p. 19.

⁵ Tihanov, p. 4.

⁶ Tihanov, p. 174.

⁷ Tihanov, p. 182.

⁸ Tihanov, p. 182.

⁹ Nicholas Harrison has already made suggestions in this direction, claiming that while Damrosch seems to emphasise the global and foreign forms of reception that literature can endure (and that helps it survive), ‘it is difficult to see how this could be caused by anything other than translation.’ See: Nicholas Harrison, ‘World literature: what gets lost in translation?’ *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49.3 (2014): pp. 411–26.

¹⁰ Ed: D. M. Spitzer, *Philosophy’s Treason* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020), p. 120.

¹¹ Large claims the German Romantics were keen on ‘philosophising translation in a minor key,’ convinced that “translation proper” ‘lies ever elsewhere and does not correspond to the kind of translation one might actually be doing at any one time,’ but, also – somewhat confusingly – that ‘such “translation proper” might actually be constituted by untranslatability.’ See: Large et al, p. 55.

¹² Cassin, *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

¹³ Large et al, *Untranslatability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Routledge 2018), p. 15. Co-edited by Duncan Large, Moroko Akashi, Wanda Józwickowska and Emily Rose, this volume is a collation of conferences at both Nottingham University and the University of East Anglia. It is the first volume of its kind to address the topic of untranslatability from various disciplinary perspectives, and acts, in many ways, as a series of responses to Apter and Cassin’s projects. My review of this book for Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation is available online via: https://www.academia.edu/39390440/Ed._Duncan_Large_et_al_-_Untranslatability_Interdisciplinary_Perspectives; <https://www.occt.ox.ac.uk/cct-review/untranslatability-interdisciplinary-perspectives-edited-duncan-large-et-al>.

- ¹⁴ As Duncan Large, drawing on his experience of translating Friedrich Nietzsche's complete works, assesses the term in the practical context when the phrase "I can't translate this" becomes "This is untranslatable": 'In other words, they extrapolate from a perception of their own individual failure to a structural impossibility. Untranslatability in this sense simply functions as an excuse: it can be invoked by the individual translator from time to time; but it is tantamount to a concession of defeat, and hardly something to be celebrated.' (See: *Untranslatability*, p. 51)
- ¹⁵ *Against World Literature*, p. 3-4.
- ¹⁶ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003). Damrosch writes: 'My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike... A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read *as* literature, second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin.' pp. 5-6.
- ¹⁷ *Against World Literature*, p.3.
- ¹⁸ *Against World Literature*, p. 18.
- ¹⁹ *Against World Literature*, p. 247.
- ²⁰ Ginzburg, 'Ethnophilology: Two Case Studies,' *Global Intellectual History* 2:1 (2017) pp. 3-17, p. 3.
- ²¹ Ginzburg, pp. 3-4.
- ²² Crane, Review: Dictionary of Untranslatables,' *The Times Literary Supplement* (January 28th, 2015).
- ²³ Crane, Review: Dictionary of Untranslatables,' *The Times Literary Supplement* (January 28th, 2015).
- ²⁴ Damrosch, 'Review: Against World Literature,' *Comparative Literature Studies* 51:3 (2014), pp. 504-8.
- ²⁵ 'Review: Against World Literature,' p. 506
- ²⁶ 'Review: Against World Literature,' p. 508.
- ²⁷ Large et al, pp. 38-39.
- ²⁸ Large et al, p. 138.
- ²⁹ Apter, p. 247.
- ³⁰ 'Apter was by no means the first critic to question cultural substitutability via translation... We could say that in translation studies Venuti (in turn most likely influenced by Bakhtin) espoused "a politics of untranslatability" in seeking ways to act against homogenising tendencies in English-language literary translation contexts. Apter does not acknowledge Venuti's influence, but when she highlights the geopolitical implications of assuming that one text or culture can automatically 'stand for' another text or culture his work inevitably informs the critical background to her endeavour to rewrite comparatism.' See: Large et al, p. 138.
- ³¹ Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism* (Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 2019), p. 37.
- ³² *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 68.
- ³³ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 56.
- ³⁴ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 65.
- ³⁵ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 65.
- ³⁶ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 67.
- ³⁷ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 71.
- ³⁸ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 73. If any passage in particular confirms Venuti's reading, it is when Apter writes: 'If there is a philosophy of untranslatability in Badiou, it has little to do with language. It derives from an incommensurability at the heart of mathematical Platonism.' See: Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 12. See Damrosch's more extensive discussion of Apter's theoretical limitations in footnote 56.
- ³⁹ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p.37.
- ⁴⁰ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 62.
- ⁴¹ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 71.
- ⁴² I have covered this debate in more detail in Byron Taylor, "Untranslatable Testimony: Paul Celan in Back-Translation," *Translation and Literature*, Vol. 29, 2020, pp. 411-426.
- ⁴³ *Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 62.

- ⁴⁴Klaus Mundt, in particular, claims that ‘untranslatability is a concept that seems to work best in an artificial, theoretical environment with deliberately narrow definitions of translation... untranslatability as the impossibility of translation is a relatively recent invention, and possibly one motivated by politics.’ See: Duncan et al, p.65.
- ⁴⁵*Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 67.
- ⁴⁶See: Rebecca Walkowitz. *Born Translated* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Walkowitz identifies how a series of contemporary authors, from J. M. Coetzee to Mohsin Hamid, realised that their books would be published in multiple languages at once, constraining their ability to add too much cultural specificity or local detail. This culminates, writes Walkowitz, in an ‘unidiomatic writing that seems [...] like no language in particular.’ (175) As she understands it, ‘translation is not secondary or incidental’ to these works but is rather ‘a condition of their production.’ (4) therefore they are effectively born as works of World Literature.
- ⁴⁷*Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 46.
- ⁴⁸*Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 40.
- ⁴⁹Jacques Derrida & Lawrence Venuti, “What is a “Relevant” Translation?” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2001), pp. 174–200. p. 196.
- ⁵⁰Tihanov, p. 5.
- ⁵¹Crane, Review: Dictionary of Untranslatables,’ *The Times Literary Supplement* (January 28th, 2015).
- ⁵²Crane, Review: Dictionary of Untranslatables,’ *The Times Literary Supplement* (January 28th, 2015).
- ⁵³Lawrence Venuti & Mona Baker, *The Translation Studies Reader* (London & New York: Routledge Books, 2000), p. 17.
- ⁵⁴Jacques Derrida & Lawrence Venuti, p. 196.
- ⁵⁵*Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 62.
- ⁵⁶This lecture was delivered as part of the compulsory course on Literary Theory, as part of the MPhil European, Latin American and Comparative Literatures and Cultures, University of Cambridge, late 2016.
- ⁵⁷Nicholas Harrison, ‘World literature: what gets lost in translation?’ *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49.3 (2014): pp. 411–26.
- ⁵⁸Damrosch writes how Apter views Continental Philosophy itself through a selective lens. Symptomatic is a page-long listing of influential translations of Continental works... Her examples of these pivotal translations are: Derrida’s French translation of Husserl, followed by English-language translations of Derrida, of Lacan, and of Derrida again; then of Foucault, of Derrida again, of Kristeva, of Irigaray, and of Derrida yet again – twice – and then of Deleuze, Agamben, Rancière, Malabou, Badiou, Lacan, and again Badiou, ending with Judith Butler in French. Neither here nor anywhere in the book do we find Lukács, or Bakhtin, or Gadamer, or Gramsci, no Ricouer, no Althusser. In place of any of these figures, we have Derrida six times.’ (508).
- ⁵⁹George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 84.
- ⁶⁰Bruce Ballard, *The Role of Mood in Heidegger’s Ontology* (USA: University Press of America, 1991), p. 15.
- ⁶¹Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- ⁶²Giorgi, *Emotions, Language and Identity on the Margins of Europe* (London: Palgrave Books, 2014), p.8.
- ⁶³Tihanov, p. 182.
- ⁶⁴Apter, pp. 7–8.
- ⁶⁵*Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 59.
- ⁶⁶Tihanov, p. 5.
- ⁶⁷*Contra Instrumentalism*, p. 71.
- ⁶⁸See: Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London & New York: MacMillian Press, 1995).