PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON THE TRANSLATION/COMPARATIVE LITERATURE CONNECTION

An underlying question: What routes into comparative literature might a reconceived model of translation provide us with?

THE TRANSLATIONAL MODEL

By ‘reconceived model of translation’, I mean the theory/philosophy of translation developed in *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* and *Translating the Perception of Text: Literary Translation and Phenomenology*, of which I give a brief and unargued account. Translation should not be about the interpretation of texts but about the phenomenology of reading. In the interests of this shift, we should translate: from the linguistic towards the paralinguistic; from the textual towards the performative (insertion of text into environment); from the bilingual towards the multilingual; from *langue* towards *langage*; from the single version towards the multiple; from the linear (perspectival) towards the tabular (planar); from the exclusively linguistic towards the multi-medial; from the timeless towards the time-filled. Translation is not about the preservation of a text, but about the projection of a text into its possible futures. To capture these possible futures, translation should operate not through a system of choices and exclusions, but through metamorphosis and inclusiveness; languages are modulations, continuous variations, of each other. This projective, rather than recuperative, approach necessarily implies that the literary can, through the agency of translation, be constantly re-located and re-conferred; this in turn challenges translation to create and develop its own literature, its own literary forms. None of the objectives of this reconceived form of translation can be achieved if we continue to put the monoglot reader at the centre of the literary translational enterprise; literary translation must have a polyglot reader in view.

THREE QUESTIONS

1. If literary translation is designed, not for the monoglot reader, but for those with a knowledge of the source language, if, therefore, questions of fidelity, reliability, preservation, become irrelevant, what should be the purpose of translation?
2. If it is a characteristic of literary translation to produce not a *single* translation, the fairest of fair copies, but infinitely proliferating versions, how should the translator proceed?
3. If it is the business of literary translation to preoccupy itself not with the meaning of the source text (interpretation), but with the readerly experience of that text (phenomenology), what kind of text should emerge?

DIAGNOSIS

The shortcomings of comparatism are at the moment, it seems to me, twofold:

1. In the area of languages, comparatism concentrates too exclusively on the textual-linguistic and not sufficiently on the performative-paralinguistic. This has as its result the fact that there is, for example, a comparatism of metre (e.g. the iambic pentameter versus the alexandrine) but not of rhythm, and that there is a comparatism of fixed forms (e.g. Shakespearean versus Petrarchan sonnet) but not a comparatism of free-verse forms. (Lying behind all this, of course, is an implicit assumption that rhythm and free-verse forms have closer ties with the paralinguistic than with the linguistic).
2. In the area of media, comparatism concentrates too exclusively on relationships between the canonic arts (painting, sculpture, literature) and not enough on what Kurt Schwitters would call ‘the combination for artistic purposes of all conceivable materials’. Comparatism has not come to terms with event-art, land-art, site-art, happening, or what Richard Kostelanetz calls ‘the theatre of mixed means’ (1970). This, it might be argued, is all part of a larger and persistent parochialism; world literature and comparative literature have yet to come to a proper understanding of each other.

The theatre of mixed means offers more general challenges to translation/comparatism:

1. How are these two ‘disciplines’ to do proper justice to the dynamics and temporality of a work’s activity or unfolding? Here, I do not mean the history of a text’s reception, nor of its intertextual life. I mean the time, the kinesis, of the work’s assimilation, of its being read, being listened to, being seen, in short, the time of its being responded to. To treat translation/comparatism as process not product.
2. How are these two disciplines to incorporate materials which are more disparate, hybrid and unauthorized by art?
3. How are these two disciplines to orchestrate ‘the autonomous behavior of simultaneous events’ (Cage, quoted by Kostelanetz, 1970, 20), that is, coexistent events which have no ostensible comparative agenda?

In proposing that translation should translate towards the performative, we already commit ourselves to certain characteristics of performance (N.B. ‘performance’ always means BOTH performance *of* the text, extra-textually, AND performance *in* the text, on the page), e.g.:

1. Performance is the natural agency through which different arts/media converse with each other, supplement each other, become part of each other’s business. Once again, we must understand this as including ‘the combination for artistic purposes of all conceivable materials’. It is this conversation which the tabular facilitates.
2. At the same time performance tends to free us from the sense of an obligation to a canonized and sequential tradition. Performative reading is no longer determined by the fixity of a work’s place in either time or space, or by its formal and generical givens. What might it mean to listen to a Shakespearean sonnet ‘cubistically’, or to read the same sonnet with the voice of a hard-boiled American private eye? How would the sonnet/love poetry be re-orientated? (projective comparatism/translation)
3. Performance is a refusal to let a text acquire a documentary status. What does ‘documentary’ mean in relation to text? A text we can no longer do anything to. A text we can only write about, but cannot write. A text that forces us into metatextual positions.
4. Performance turns a two-dimensional text into a three-dimensional, whole-body, experience. CS 05.02.2013