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Translation Pedagogy in the Comparative Literature Classroom: Close Reading and the Hermeneutic Model of Translation

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This paper considers how an increased awareness of translation in the language classroom might impact the instruction of Comparative Literature, and literary studies more broadly. Despite the arguments for translation's centrality to the study Comparative Literature (Apter, 2006; Bassnett, 2006; Newman, 2017) translation pedagogy is still under-studied and under-practiced in the Comparative Literature classroom. Among Comparative Literature instructors, close reading is often given pride of place, an emphasis echoed in commonly-assigned textbooks such as *Writing Analytically* (Rosenwasser & Stephen, 2019). Yet the practice of close reading is arguably one of the most challenging concepts for beginning literature students to master, in part due to the resistance of some instructors and other literary professionals in modeling how to close read a translated text (Venuti, 2004, 2017). By outlining specific lessons, this article shows how employing a hermeneutic translation model (Steiner, 1975; Venuti, 2017, 2019; Laviosa, 2020) in the literature classroom can help literature students conceptualize this central building block of literary studies. The article closes with a discussion of some of the ways in which a greater awareness of Translation Studies in the Comparative Literature classroom could unite theory with practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the second week of the semester, a student called into Zoom office hours to discuss “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” by the American writer Katherine Anne Porter (1939), a novella I’d assigned in my Reading and Composition class. The theme of this class, which I had selected for my third semester of remote instruction due to the Coronavirus pandemic, was “Stay-At-Home.” Porter’s novella follows a woman named Miranda as she falls ill with the flu and is hospitalized during the 1918 Influenza epidemic. My student had a very specific question about the text; she wanted to know what light symbolized in the novella. It was, she had noted, often mentioned—especially in the long passages that describe Miranda’s hospital room, her fever-dreams and then, in the wake of these descriptions, her recovery. Miranda’s sense of self, and her perceptions of the world around her dramatically change after her illness. What had once been reassuring to her, such as a bright day, she describes numbly in the final paragraph of the novella as “the dead cold light of tomorrow” (Porter, 1939: 317). My student had surmised that the numerous references to light meant *something*, and wanted me to reveal the answer. I have had a variation on this same conversation many times with students in the early weeks of the semester; beginning literature students often approach texts as if they were codes

to be cracked, if one could only gain access to the proper key. The author—or in this case the professor, as the author’s nearest proxy—only needs to be asked and the key will be handed over.

As a Translation Studies scholar and instructor, I seek to reframe such pedagogical impulses. When my student asked what light symbolized in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” I found myself borrowing terminology from Translation Studies to explain why I was asking her to shift her interpretive approach. Because the text was written in English, we hadn’t (yet) addressed the question of reading in translation, but I responded by redirecting her focus away from symbolism. The problem with focusing on symbols, I said, was that it tended to present a one-to-one correspondence between the object and the thing it symbolized, when in reality texts are much more nuanced and complex than such an equivalence would suggest. In our Reading and Composition class, I explained, we were most certainly interested in tracking how certain patterns, like the repetition of light, worked within a text as a fundamental part of literary analysis. But, instead of assuming that these moments could reveal a fixed and predetermined meaning imparted by the author, we would use them to arrive at our own interpretation of what light might mean in the story.

My encounter with this student reveals how the tools and terminology of Translation Studies, in this case its critique of exact equivalence, can shape a literary pedagogy for both translated and non-translated texts. I adopt what Lawrence Venuti refers to as the hermeneutic model of translation (Venuti, 2000, 2017, 2019) in teaching a range of undergraduate literature courses. This model of translation decentralizes the assumed hierarchy of the traditional literature classroom, and it helps disrupt the concept that the author is the final arbiter of truth. While not an explicitly pedagogical model, scholars have implemented the hermeneutic model of translation in teaching the courses and programs described in *Teaching Translation: Programs, Courses, Pedagogies*, (Venuti, 2017) and have shown how its implementation shapes Translation Studies pedagogy (Laviosa, 2020). These scholars have discussed their methods in an effort to map developing pedagogies particular to Translation Studies as a field. In this article I turn my attention instead to courses in translation-adjacent fields that do not have an explicitly translation focus, in particular literature courses offered in Comparative Literature and language departments. The classes I will discuss are undergraduate literature and writing courses, not Translation Studies courses, but they nonetheless feature translated literary texts as regular objects of study and their language of instruction is English. In teaching these courses I have found the hermeneutic method of translation promotes a deeper understanding of literary analysis and here I will focus on one important aspect of literary analysis: the practice of close reading.

TRANSLATION STUDIES AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

An increased engagement with Translation Studies methods since 2000 led scholar Doris Bachmann-Medick to declare a “translational turn” in the humanities (Bachmann-Medick, 2009). The Modern Language Association, the largest organization of literature and language instructors in the United States, had issued a special report in 2007 on the instruction of second languages that anticipated Bachmann-Medick. In it language instructors were encouraged to shift emphasis away from fluency, which had been the gold standard in language education, and to focus instead on “translingual and transcultural competence,” which emphasizes “the ability to operate between languages” (MLA, 2007). Soon after, the 2009 MLA conference’s theme was translation-focused, inspiring a wide range of scholarly conversations about translation (Bermann & Porter, 2014). Since that time there has been a documented push in

literature departments to help implement and systematize the study and instruction of translation (Maier & Massardier-Kenney, 2010), especially in the United States, where Translation Studies remains an emergent, less institutionalized field compared to other Anglophone countries such as Canada and the UK (Venuti, 2017).

Comparative Literature is a transnational and interdisciplinary field, and a natural interlocutor with Translation Studies—even if the relationship between the two has been marked by an “uneasy ambiguity” (Lefevere, 1995, p. 1). The emphasis on national literatures, as well as a focus on classical and European languages, prevented translation from taking a more prominent place in Comparative Literature as it emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth-century (Lefevere, 1995; Venuti, 2017). Comparative Literature’s turn to translation in recent decades responded to the call of cultural and area studies scholars who sought to make the field less Eurocentric (Bhabha 2004, 1994; Spivak 2003, 2005). Around the same time scholars such as Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere argued for a “cultural turn” within Translation Studies, bringing the two disciplines closer together (Snell-Hornby, 2006). Comparatists from widely ranging theoretical and methodological approaches also turned to translation as interest in retheorizing world literature grew (Damrosch 2003, 2009) and in the wake of the many global crises arising around and from the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. Emily Apter’s *The Translation Zone* (2006), for instance, argued that translation might present a new direction for Comparative Literature in the wake of September 11th by acknowledging the unequal power dynamics in language politics. Translation and untranslatability are of interest for Apter for the way they foreground difference and the impossibility of commensurate expression, and for the way they engage with and extend poststructuralist theories, Jacques Derrida’s writing in particular (Apter 2006; 2013). Yet when Comparative Literature scholars such as Apter engage with translation in their research, along with the rich theories that have mobilized it, they often overlook Translation Studies as an interdisciplinary focus of study. This emphasis on the figure of translation on the part of Comparative Literature scholars, what scholar Ning calls as an engagement with “metaphorical translation” (Ning & Dominguez, 2016, p. 298) may in fact be complementary to the aims of Translation Studies, but more often constitutes impasse between the disciplines for its apparent lack of dialog and practical application. Scholars have argued that one of the future directions of Translation Studies is to continue to mediate between theoretical research on topics of translation and the applications of translation practice (Colina & Venuti, 2017), an effort that should extend to research in Comparative Literature as well.

The tendency on the part of comparatists to think of translation first as a theoretical framework, and Translation Studies as a distant discipline, may be changing. The translation theme of the 2009 MLA conference initiated a series of institutional shifts in the way that translation is recognized in academia, including a push for translations to be recognized on the tenure track dossier, an omission long lamented as an obstacle for translation scholars and translators working in the academy (Venuti, 1998). These changes were accompanied by a call for more literary Translation Studies programs at the doctoral, masters and undergraduate level to train scholars in translation (Venuti, 2017). Scholars note that while language and literature departments have been working to integrate translation pedagogy into the classroom at least since 2009 (Maier & Massardier-Kenney, 2010), with few tenure track faculty and little pedagogical scaffolding to guide them, the effort seems incomplete (Baer & Mellinger, 2019). In his recent study on translation pedagogy in the U.S., Peter Constantine found the majority of translation pedagogies in the U.S. underscore professionalization, with an emphasis on translator training (Constantine, 2020) rather than careers in the humanities more broadly. In the U.S. there continues to be a general lack of systematic approaches to the instruction and

professionalization of literary translation (Constantine, 2020; Baer & Mellinger, 2019) though it is one the subgenres of Translation Studies that is most ubiquitous in literature classrooms and Comparative Literature programs.

Regardless of the institutionalized changes that have taken place, Lawrence Venuti argues that little change will take place in the perception of translation unless there is a shift at all levels of scholarship away from the dominant “instrumentalist” model of translation, in which “translation is seen as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, whether its form, its meaning, or its effect,” (Venuti, 2017, p. 6). Venuti advocates instead for a wider adoption of the hermeneutic model of translation, a term he takes from George Steiner’s *After Babel* (Steiner, 1975). Steiner’s “hermeneutic motion” is comprised of four stages: trust (the initial assumption of the translator that there is meaning in the source text), aggression (extracting it), and embodiment (recreating it in the translating language). A final stage, restitution, is crucial for the hermeneutical model, as it acknowledges the imbalance of the process, and seeks to create something in exchange (Steiner, 1975, p. 312-319). While the individual parts of Steiner’s theory have been critiqued (Chamberlain, 1988; Johnston, 2017, p. 95), for Venuti, the hermeneutic model is of value since it counters the limitations of the instrumentalist model. Venuti defines the hermeneutic model via poststructuralism as “an interpretation that varies the form, meaning, and effect of the source text according to the intelligibilities and interests of the translating culture” (Venuti, 2000, p. 6; Venuti, 2017, 2019). My pedagogical approach to translation instruction in the literature classroom emerges from a more general application of Steiner’s theory, via Venuti, in which translation is a form of interpretation. My goal in employing this model is to dissuade students of their convictions about translation as the representation of an objective communication from the author of the source text, a goal that echoes with my approach to literary analysis as well. To return to my earlier anecdote, it serves to challenge my student’s belief that there would be one answer to her question about what the motif of light meant in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” by underscoring the ways in which any interpretive act (be it a translation of a poem or an undergraduate reading of a motif) exists in a larger, and infinitely more complex, set of relations.

CLOSE READING

Close reading is a pedagogical approach commonly used in the literature classroom, though, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has argued, it is too broad to be properly labeled a methodology (Herrnstein-Smith, 2016). Developed in Anglo-American universities in the 1930s and popularized by New Critics as a corrective to historical-philological methods that dominated the literature classroom at the time, it placed the text itself (most often a poem) at the foreground of discussion, as a “living object” (Ransom, 1937). This approach had the added benefit of making literature accessible to a wide range of students, as one did not need endless hours and degrees to approach a poem, only the poem itself and some basic understanding of its formal properties. As a pedagogical approach, close reading gained traction with the influx of college students following WWII due to the GI Bill, and petered off in the 1970s with the rise of other pedagogical approaches to literature (DeBois, 2003), but it is still practiced today in a wide range of literature classrooms, ranging from elementary school to college and beyond—judging by the some of the many pedagogy books that feature close reading (Oczkus & Rasinski, 2015; Greenham, 2019; Flygare, 2018). As a term, it is often now applied to any literary pedagogy that pays careful attention to the form as well as the content of any given piece of literature.

Among Comparative Literature instructors, and literature instructors in general, close reading is often given pride of place as one of the key components of a successful student literary analysis paper, both at the high school and college levels. This stress is echoed in writing pedagogy books—for instance the popular first-year writing textbook *Writing Analytically* (Rosenwasser & Stephen, 2019), which explicitly connects analytical reading with analytical writing. Yet the practice of close reading is arguably one of the most challenging concepts for beginning literature students to master, as it is a skill that must be tailored to each text and context. This problem is compounded when the text in question is a translated text, given the resistance on the part of professors and other literary professionals to model how to close read a translated text (Venuti, 2004). Even scholars who regularly teach translated texts argue that there are other modes of literary analysis that more fully account for translation in a pedagogy setting, including historicization, distant reading, and translation comparison (Emmerich, 2017, p. 149). This challenge is amplified by the fact that the practice of close reading a translation can offer multiple issues and problems within a text, when students are often taught in high school to develop and prioritize a simplified sustained argument about a literary text following the “five paragraph” model (Campbell & Latimer, 2012). If a student (or instructor) can’t ascertain whether the diction, imagery, or language of a certain poem are equivalent in a source text, as something that can then be neatly plugged into a body paragraph of a “five paragraph” paper, they often abandon the effort all together.

Right around the time that Comparative Literature scholars were reconsidering their interdisciplinary roles in an increasingly globalized world, close reading was also put under critical pressure. For comparatists one of the most lasting critiques of close reading has been Franco Moretti’s theory of “distant reading,” an approach which involves digital and corpus-based approaches to the reading of literature (Moretti, 2000), a polemic which managed to challenge but not completely unseat the focus on close reading in comparative practice. Despite the many phases and critiques of close reading over the last near-century, from its pervasiveness in the literature classroom one might assume that its wide-ranging pedagogical applications have helped its longevity in the classroom (Herrnstein-Smith, 2016). But while close reading may be a fundamental part of literary analysis, it is also arguably one of the most difficult skills that instructors are asked to teach, and students are asked to acquire in the Comparative Literature classroom since it requires a special attention to both the formal and semantic elements of each text, and these approaches can and must vary widely from classroom to classroom and text to text.

Translation as Introduction to Close Reading

I have adapted the hermeneutic translation model to the instruction of close reading in a variety of courses that I have taught in Comparative Literature, English, and Italian Studies departments at UC Berkeley. While each of the exercises I will describe were implemented in courses that had differing scopes and objectives, they shared a central goal: for beginning literature students to develop, demonstrate, and hone skills in critical reading and writing. For more advanced students and courses, the goal is to practice techniques of literary analysis. The first of these classes is a Reading and Composition course, a university-wide requirement for first-and-second-year undergraduates. It is offered in most humanities departments at Berkeley and is known informally as R&C. Texts are selected by the instructor around a set theme (“Stay-At-Home” was my example above). Most students who enroll in R&C are intended Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) majors and the class will likely be their

first (and sometimes only) small seminar-style class during their time at Berkeley. R&C's learning objective is to develop analytical reading and writing skills that can be applied to a range of academic settings during their time at Berkeley, and at the end of the R&C two-semester cycle students are required to submit a long research paper. While many of these students speak or are learning a language other than English, there are no requirements for students to have any working knowledge of any language other than English to enroll in the course.

In R&C classes I regularly use translation to introduce students to literary analysis in a comparative setting. I do so with an early comparative translation exercise. The lesson's objective, as a first day or early-in-the-semester exercise, is to establish literary translation as a kind of interpretation. By modeling differences in diction, word choice, and syntax between different translated texts, and encouraging students to observe what effect these choices have on their understanding of the text, I foreground translation as one interpretive act among many that can happen in the literary classroom, with both scholarly criticism and student writing as variations on the same approach.

A text I often use for this lesson is the first paragraph of *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, in English translation. A canonical piece of world literature, the Spanish early-modern novel has been translated many times over the years, and students have sometimes heard of or encountered it before. The fact that it is translated from Spanish grabs the attention of the heritage learners and Spanish speakers in the class, and it is an ideal text for beginning literary analysis students because students can usually read and process its opening paragraph quickly. It begins with a vivid description of the titular character and without much context students get a sense of some of the main textual elements— such as the characterization of Don Quixote, the role of the narrator, as well as what key words and themes shape the description. I hand out or project copies of Edith Grossman's (2003) translation of the text, one of the most recent translations of *Quixote*. It reads as follows:

Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing. An occasional stew, beef more often than lamb, hash most nights, eggs and abstinence on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, sometimes squab as a treat on Sundays—these consumed three-fourths of his income. The rest went for a light woolen tunic and velvet breeches and hose of the same material for feast days, while weekdays were honored with dun-colored coarse cloth. He had a housekeeper past forty, a niece not yet twenty, and a man-of-all-work who did everything from saddling the horse to pruning the trees. Our gentleman was approximately fifty years old; his complexion was weathered, his flesh scrawny, his face gaunt, and he was a very early riser and a great lover of the hunt. Some claim that his family name was Quixada, or Quexada, for there is a certain amount of disagreement among the authors who write of this matter, although reliable conjecture seems to indicate that his name was Quexana. But this does not matter very much to our story; in its telling there is absolutely no deviation from the truth. (p. 19-20)

I ask students to read silently to themselves, underlining and noting words and passages that seem particularly important to them in this description. I then ask the students to read the passage aloud by going around the room, and each student reads a sentence. To focus our discussion of the passage I ask some guiding questions common to close reading methods— who is speaking? who is the subject of the passage? what happens in the passage? who is the audience? The first and last question I include to draw their attention to the form of the text,

and to encourage them to step beyond summary. Students remark on the importance of the narrator, especially in the first and final sentences of Grossman's translation. (Who is the "I" who doesn't care to remember the details about Don Quixote's town, and why? What does it mean that there is no deviation from the truth, when so much is forgotten or unsaid?) They also comment on the level of detail included (and omitted) from the description: what Don Quixote eats and when, the age of those in his household, and his physical appearance. We also talk about his financial condition, and the importance of naming (and what it might mean that his name isn't provided in this first paragraph, just variations on it). Occasionally, students find irony or humor in the description, but usually they are working hard to track the details of the description amid the wide range of unusual vocabulary and terms ("squab," "dun-colored coarse cloth," etc.) so I usually make a point of it in our discussion, as humor and tone are crucial elements of any literary text.

After our large group discussion of Grossman's text, I then turn to the comparative part of the lesson. I tell students we will be focusing only on the English translations, rather than the Spanish text. Grossman's translation becomes our "baseline" translation, against which other translations are compared. This is immediately destabilizing for students who have inherited an instrumentalizing approach to translation. While in part the choice is practical, as not everyone will have access to Spanish, it importantly helps me to distinguish translation from source text. What's more, I've found that focusing just on English translations helps students concentrate on literary qualities rather than leap to personal judgment about the text. To this end I share a quote from Edith Grossman about translation: "Fidelity is surely our highest aim, but a translation is not made with tracing paper. It is an act of critical interpretation" (Grossman, 2007). I ask students to read these translations as different critical interpretations of *Don Quixote*, and to reflect on the translators' strategies in introducing Don Quixote's character, in comparison to Grossman's translation.

For this comparative exercise I break the students into four groups and distribute to each group the following translations of *Don Quixote* in English: James Montgomery (2009), John Ormsby (1885), Tobias Smollet (1755), and Thomas Shelton (1612). I assign one translation per group, and ask them to read their group's translation aloud to one another and to focus on places in which "their" translator has chosen to interpret the text differently from Grossman. What word choices are different between the versions? How does this change lead to a different understanding of the main character, or the narrator? As they are the only ones who have read that particular translation, I then have them present their group's assigned translation to the class. While I do not give much historical biographical context for each translation at this early point in the semester, I make sure to mention the date of *Don Quixote's* publication (1605), and point out that the older translations are significantly closer in time to Cervantes's text than Grossman's version. The oldest translation of the group, by Thomas Shelton, is from 1612, and reads as follows:

There lived not long since, in a certain village of the Mancha, the name whereof I purposely omit, a gentleman of their calling that use to pile up in their halls old lances, halberds, morions, and such other armours and weapons. He was, besides, master of an ancient target, a lean stallion, and a swift greyhound. His pot consisted daily of somewhat more beef than mutton: a gallimaufry each night, collops and eggs on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, and now and then a lean pigeon on Sundays, did consume three parts of his rents; the rest and remnant thereof was spent on a jerkin of fine puce, a pair of velvet hose, with pantofles of the same for the holy-days, and one suit of the finest vesture; for therewithal he honoured and set out his person on the work-days.

He had in his house a woman-servant of about forty years old, and a niece not yet twenty, and a man that served him both in field and at home, and could saddle his horse, and likewise manage a pruning-hook. The master himself was about fifty years old, of a strong complexion, dry flesh, and a withered face. He was an early riser, and a great friend of hunting. Some affirm that his surname was Quixada, or Quesada (for in this there is some variance among the authors that write his life), although it may be gathered, by very probable conjectures, that he was called Quixana. Yet all this concerns our historical relation but little: let it then suffice, that in the narration thereof we will not vary a jot from the truth. (p. 1-2)

I provide students with definitions of the more obscure words (for instance, “puce,” “jerkin,” “pantofles”), and allow them to look up any words they weren’t sure of on their own. The students assigned to this translation immediately pick up on difference in diction and tone, often identifying the antiquated language as more “formal” than Grossman’s translation. Regarding the portrayal of the narrator, they also identify the differing treatments of the first line (“the name whereof I purposely omit”) compared with Grossman’s (“whose name I do not care to remember”). This allows us to make some preliminary guesses as to the role of the narrator in the description more broadly. Students are generally interested in the translators’ differing treatment of the narrator’s so-called “reliability”; Grossman’s version undercuts this quality, while Shelton’s presents the narrator as more in control of the elements of the story. I ask students to reflect on how this interpretation of the role of the narrator may have consequences for our understanding of Don Quixote as a character. Students also note Shelton’s description of Don Quixote as a “master” as another marker of authority and control, compared with Grossman’s rendering (“our gentleman”). Students present their findings to one another, and after all four groups have presented their observations we reflect on the overlaps and differences between the translations. By spending so much time on these few paragraphs students quickly register how close their attention needs to be to make observations about a literary text. This exercise also models how wide a range of interpretations can emerge from attentively reading texts that, at a cursory glance, appear to say the same thing.

I’ve taught variations on this lesson over the years and have found that students respond well to the structure, the direct prompts, and the comparative exercise. This latter point is perhaps due to the fact that many of them are familiar with compare-contrast exercises from elementary school education on (MacArthur & Philippakos, 2010). This exercise adapts pedagogy from Translation Studies to a literary context, by using techniques of comparative translation not with the goal of deepening the students’ knowledge of the source text, since the source text is omitted. By bracketing conversations about accuracy and fidelity vis-à-vis the source text, students are encouraged to see translation as an interpretation that holds meaning not only in relation to the source text, but in relation to other translations as well. Distinctive verbal and stylistic choices of the translator come alive for the students in comparison, showcasing how what appears to be a slight shift in diction, syntax, and tone can have broader implications for an understanding of a text. This *Don Quixote* exercise models for students the kind of engagement I hope to foster in the class (collaborative, close readings of texts in order to put forth an interpretation), and students experience the level of attention to detail necessary in close reading (it’s always a slower and more careful process than they anticipate). The exercise sets the groundwork for themes we will continue throughout the course, namely that interpretations of a text are not fixed, but fluid and always in dialog and relationship with one another.

Translation as Introduction to Literary Analysis

Once the fundamentals of close reading are introduced in the preliminary exercise I’ve described above, I find students are ready for more traditional models of comparative translation analysis by adding the source text into the equation— if it is short and the guidelines for analysis are again clearly delineated. To expand our discussion beyond European literature I turn to *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (Weinberger, 1987). Weinberger’s book reprints 19 different versions of one 8th century Chinese poem, “Deer Park” by the poet Wang Wei, with accompanying commentary, making it an accessible and rich pedagogical tool. As with *Don Quixote*, the language choice is significant, as many of my students at UC Berkeley are Chinese speakers or Chinese learners. Unlike the *Don Quixote* exercise described above, this exercise includes a class discussion of the original. Since I do not speak Chinese I rely on Weinberger’s interpretation of the literal poem, and always ask Chinese speakers in the class to contribute to his analysis—especially with regard to the sound of the poem (reading it out loud), and its literal translation. Our reading of the poem as a class is highly collaborative, and helps continue to decenter my role as ultimate keeper of knowledge— as students with prior familiarity with the short poem, or proficiency in Chinese step in and contribute their thoughts on the meaning of the poem.

In *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* Weinberger prints the Chinese text, a transliterated version, and a character-by-character translation, but does not include a “literal” version. Between those reference points and the students who have access to the Chinese text to help guide us, we discuss the short poem, which describes a meditative moment in a landscape. Here is the source text and Weinberger’s character-by-character translation:

鹿柴

空山不见人，

但闻人语响。

返景入深林，

复照青苔上

Empty	Mountain(s) Hill(s)	(negative)	to see	person people
But	to hear	person People	words conversation	sound to echo
To return	bright(ness) Shadow(s)	to enter	deep	forest
To return Again	to shine to reflect	green blue Black	moss lichen	above on (top of) top

(Weinberger, 1987, p. 7)

To aid our discussion, I ask students in pairs to use Weinberger's character-by-character translation as the basis for their own informal, literal translations, which they share before we turn to the other versions included with the essay. Puzzling out the literal meaning, in a collaborative setting, with perhaps disparate readings (such as: what color is moss? who is speaking?) reinforces translation as an interpretive act, in which there is no simple "right" or "wrong" answer. Weinberger also includes some basic information about Chinese grammar and he also anticipates some challenges to translating the poem: "Of particular difficulty to the Western translator is the absence of tense in Chinese verbs: in the poem, what is happening has happened and will happen again" (Weinberger, 1987, p. 7). Students share their literal versions, and in our analysis of the source poem I build from *Quixote* by returning to the importance of description: what details matter, and how do they shape an understanding of the poem? The translations Weinberger includes are in English, but there are also French and Spanish translations of the poem included in *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, providing the students with an early and important reminder that translation does not always need to involve the English language to be accessible to literary analysis in English—an important point in a Comparative Literature classroom.

While I find *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* an invaluable teaching tool, Weinberger's essay is a detailed but idiosyncratic version of comparative translation analysis. Weinberger does not shy away from making value judgments about the translations, often intimating that one translation is superior to another. For instance, in his analysis of Witter Bynner and Kian Kang-hu's 1929 translation Weinberger asserts: "where Wang is specific, Bynner's Wang seems to be watching the world through a haze of opium reflected in a hundred thimbles of wine" (Weinberger, 1987, p. 11). While entertaining, this kind of comparative critique quickly becomes inscrutable to beginning literature students. In their own analyses, I ask students to point to concrete ways the translations differ, such as variations on syntax, word choice, and prosody, rather than judging them subjectively. For this reason when I teach the book early on in the semester I ask students to read only Weinberger's description of the source poem and skip his assessments of the translations themselves. When I do ask students to read the whole essay, I point out Weinberger's stance on these translations and encourage students to question or disagree with them, and his strong opinions often encourage students to hazard their own readings of the poems. I remind them to ground their claims in moments they've noticed in the poems themselves, reinforcing that this is a process separate from value or aesthetic judgment.

After having produced a collaborative analysis of the poem and its translations, at the end of the unit I ask students to produce their own translation of Wang Wei's poem for homework, based on the interpretations that they feel are most in line with their own understanding of the poem. I have also assigned this as an in-class assignment, asking students to "collage" together their favorite lines among the different translations, and then explain why they chose the ones they did in a short written statement. Like the *Don Quixote* lesson, asking students to engage with 19 different versions of one short poem, as it is framed through one approach to critical analysis in Weinberger's essay, foregrounds translation as yet another a mode of interpreting the text. Students come away from the unit with an expanded understanding of the many potential approaches translation can represent as well as practice in literary analysis, by being able to discuss variations in word choice, rhyme and meter, and the effect of the imposition of western grammar and syntax onto the Chinese structures. These are examples of kinds of things they need to attend to in reading a literary text, and the lesson,

paired with the *Don Quixote* lesson, helps me to further expand on the concept of translation as a critical act in and of itself.

Translation in Upper Division Literature Courses Taught in English

The hermeneutic model of translation can also help focus and guide upper-division students already conversant in literary analysis, as I found when I taught an upper-division survey course in the Italian Studies Department at UC Berkeley entitled “Dante’s *Inferno* in English.” The inclusion of the English language in the course’s title was for communicative and administrative purposes—letting students know that they would not need to read the 700-year-old poem in Italian, and that readings and lectures would take place in English. Of the fifty enrolled students, only a handful had the ability to read the Italian. I took the title and structure of the course as an opportunity to foreground translation itself, with the goal of asking students to think critically not only about Dante’s poem, but to interrogate their own role, as readers of English, in the creation of its literary legacy.

The first half of the class was dedicated to a reading and analysis of *Inferno* in Robert M. Durling’s (1996) translation, a preferred translation for instructors of Dante for its bilingual presentation, its prose translation, and emphasis on semantic equivalence. I asked students to bracket questions about form and language in relation to the poem, and asked them to read for the broader themes and questions the text is raising, in order to establish a baseline text for analysis—as I had done with the Grossman translation of *Don Quixote*. This seemed a crucial first step, for, as anyone who has read the *Inferno* knows, it is never a straightforward task to navigate the dense layers of autobiography, history, and religious belief that help construct the poem. Had I left it at that, the course may have aligned more with the instrumentalist approach to translation critiqued by Venuti (2017), since our class discussions relied on Durling’s translation for semantic equivalence without complicating the notion of translation. But in an early lecture I had briefly framed the issue of translation in an effort to guide students’ interpretations of the translated text. In a lecture slide, one that I later shared with the students, I wrote:

In this course it’s important to proceed with the awareness that you are analyzing a translation. So, you are not reading the author’s “original” words, but a translator’s interpretation of them. We can ignore this for the most part, and just enjoy what we are reading and where it leads us. But this serves as a good reminder to avoid writing “Dante intends to communicate X through this use of alliteration, etc.” And rather say “the text’s (or translation’s) use of alliteration has this effect...”

It was my first time teaching the course, and the more discerning students pointed out the problems in my imperfect application of the instrumentalizing method. When I assigned a close reading exercise of Durling, a student wrote to protest: “Since we’re reading a translation, I’m not sure how honing into certain words could tell us anything about *Inferno*; I understand that semantically, a translation could bring us close, but when it comes to the sounds of the words or the meter, I’m not sure how we are to accurately analyze that, since they’re completely altered.” Her question hit at one of the fundamental paradoxes of teaching literature in translation without first foregrounding questions of translation: without the theoretical or conceptual framing of the translated text, any close textual analysis is essentially treated as suspect or partial. In my response I encouraged her to consider Durling’s version as a close

interpretation of Dante, a near stand-in. I explained we would be tackling issues of translation after midterm, but that for now to simply state the fact that it was Durling's translation, rather than Dante's words, in her close reading was all that I was requiring in this particular assignment.

My student's question spoke to a larger problem endemic to not only large lecture courses on translated work, like the one I was teaching, but to the issues that underpin comparative literary studies in general. In omitting an explicit discussion of translation as interpretation, whether it be cultural or linguistic, we ask students to suspend their disbelief for the purposes of our own institutional or pedagogical limitations. With concerns about enrollment, accessibility, and representation, it is generally difficult to think of requiring undergraduate students taking general-education courses at a public institution to be able to read Dante's *Inferno* in Italian, or to have knowledge of a foreign language at all—even when that course is taught in a language department. As language and literature departments turn increasingly to meet the needs of a more global student population, foregrounding translation is one way to address the very real disconnect between the translated texts we teach and the pedagogy that shapes our students' understanding of them.

In the second half of the semester, after we had established a preliminary reading of *Inferno* in Durling's translation, I shifted the focus on the class to translation, and created separate units to trace the long history of translation and adaptation of Dante into English, with an emphasis on the interventions of the different interpretations of translators who brought the *Inferno* into English. I selected a range of Anglo-American translations of the text from the last 150 years, including translations by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1867), Dorothy Sayers (1949), John Ciardi (1954) and Mary Jo Bang (2012). For each translator featured I selected one or two cantos, so that we essentially re-read the text, but this time as a kind of collage of the text in English, focusing on the different interpretations of each translator along the way. To introduce this practice of re-reading translations themselves I had students read and listen to Caroline Bergvall's poem "Vias: 48 Dante Variations." Bergvall is a contemporary poet, and the poem gathers 48 different translations of the famous first tercet of *Inferno* in a way that highlights the sheer quantity of translator's interpretations of the first lines of the poem in English, but also challenges students to think of the oeuvre of *Inferno* translations in English as its own kind of literary sub-genre. I assigned some foundational statements in translation theory to establish a baseline of vocabulary, including texts by John Dryden (1680) and Roman Jakobson (1959), to help students conceptualize translation not as a question of accuracy or judgment vis-à-vis the Italian text (though this proved a challenge for some) but rather to frame the work of translation via the hermeneutic model, to underscore how translators make choices that reveal their interpretations.

Before beginning with our readings of various translations I also focused on questions of form, since Durling's prose translation largely oversteps the issue of translating terza rima, the interlocking rhyme scheme and meter that Dante used for *Inferno*. Students read works that adapted terza rima in English, including canonical works and authors from the across the traditional English canon: Medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer, Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Modernist T.S. Eliot. Reading and, in some cases for my students, revisiting these English-language poems as responses and homages to the poetic form of *Inferno* asked them to see Dante's translators as working within a rich textual tradition in English that went beyond translations, and I asked students to meditate on the role of the terza rima in relation to these different English poems (connecting concerns of form to content) as a way to set the stage for a re-reading of Dante's poem by formalist translators such as Dorothy Sayers, who reproduce Dante's terza rima form.

A close study of Dante translations as *translations*, with the aid of some guiding theory foregrounding the hermeneutic model, also helped us more adequately frame the question of “adaptation” which came as the last unit of the semester, as students saw the interpretation of Dante’s text by other writers and artists in a continuum that included Dryden’s theory of imitation (Dryden, 2012/1680) and Jakobson’s of interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic translation (2012/1959). We read a range of adaptations of the text including Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* (2001/1965) and Ron Howard’s film *Inferno* (2016), and in doing so focused on how translations and adaptations of the *Inferno* have reinterpreted and revived Dante’s vision for a modern audience. By first establishing their own interpretations of a certain textual moment in the first half of the semester through their encounter with Durling’s translation (how did they interpret Dante’s treatment of his teacher, Brunetto Latini in Canto 15? what effect did it have on their reading when Dante is silent when Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti asks about the fate of his son, Guido in Canto 10?) students were then prepared to recognize and identify what kind of intervention and re-interpretation these adaptations were presenting.

To combine theory with practice, towards the end of the semester I asked the students to submit a creative project, in which they demonstrated their interpretation of a canto of Dante’s *Inferno* through their own intersemiotic translation (Jakobson, 1959). I asked students to expand our discussion of intersemiotic translation as an encounter between verbal and non-verbal art forms, with an emphasis on different media. Due to the pandemic, material needed to be presented digitally, and the results were as engaging as they were diverse: from comic books to podcasts, websites to playlists and films. One student illustrated a set of tarot cards inspired by Dante’s different circles of hell; another created a chilling Edward Gorey-esque children’s story book. The assignment asked students to revisit their understanding Dante’s medieval text, and to reshape their interpretations of Dante in a different medium than the standard papers and written discussion posts that they had submitted previously for the class. Instead of thinking about imagery and literary citations, students thought instead about colors and forms, style and technique, how best to represent their interpretation of *Inferno* in a different medium. An expanded interpretation of translation through Jakobson’s conceptualizing of translation allowed them to revisit themes that had returned over the course of the semester through a non-verbal means. But it also required them to expand their working definition of translation itself, building from their analysis of different literary translations and adaptations of Dante, to an understanding beyond literary interpretation and towards the other modes of critical interpretation that translation makes possible. A student wrote me after the class had ended to let me know that she had brought up our discussion of translation theory in a conversation with a friend about fanfiction based on Japanese anime in translation, reminding me how the broader application of translation theory, though introduced in a context as specific as a course on Dante’s *Inferno*, resonates for students beyond the literary classroom and into other areas of their lives.

CONCLUSION

Many of the students in the classes where I taught these exercises had preconceived notions of translation, though few, if any, of them had been introduced to translation in an academic setting. My students were familiar with translation through translating for family, primarily, and through the internet. The “tabula rasa” with regards to translation pedagogy (Baer, 2017) would be impossible with my students, many whom are multilingual and active

members of an increasingly globalized society; translation is already a fact of their lives. Rather, my experience teaching has shown that some sort of beginning knowledge of the challenges of translation on both a practical and theoretical level will enhance the level of engagement with a literary text, even if working definitions of translation need to be explicitly addressed and redirected.

An increased focus on translation in the second language classroom would create a ripple effect outward into adjacent fields, and provide one more inroad to Translation Studies from other disciplines in the humanities. Instructors who teach language classes are often required to teach literature and culture classes in English for general education requirements mandated by the university; foregrounding translation in the language classroom would provide them with more pedagogical tools for addressing the learning objectives particular to the literature classroom— here I have described a few related to the practice of close reading and literary analysis. Comparatists in particular often receive joint appointments between language and literature departments, or have their courses cross-listed in language departments, and Comparative Literature students of all levels frequent the language classroom in order to gain the expertise in second language necessary to perform their research, or, as instructors, in order to gain the pedagogical experience necessary to make them competitive on the job market. Students who have been introduced to the fundamental aims, methods, or vocabulary of Translation Studies through language instruction would set foot into the literature classroom already aware of the complexities that underpin the analysis of any text in translation that they might encounter there. This familiarity would in turn enrich their approach to reading and making claims about literary texts in translation, through the hermeneutic model described here. Due to the regular overlap on the part of both students and instructors between language and literature classroom contexts, prioritizing translation in the language classroom would amplify the call of scholars such as Colina and Venuti (2017), by creating yet another scenario in which theory and practice of translation can be brought closer together for Comparative Literature scholars. Bolstering the presence of translation in language pedagogy would also help the effort on the part of Comparative Literature scholars who are trying to propose translation courses in their own departments.

As the study of literature becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, the return of Translation Studies to the language classroom compliments the direction that Comparative Literature seems to be heading in, keeping pace with our increasingly digital, increasingly globalized campuses. In this way a “translation turn” in the second language classroom (Carreres, et al., 2017, p. 99) echoes the turn that has already begun in the humanities, but which is still in process of being realized. From the perspective of Comparative Literature, an increased familiarity with Translation Studies could help bridge the so-called divide between theory and practice in literary translation. As our students become increasingly conversant in Translation Studies from their experience in the second language classroom, we as literature instructors would need to catch up. As literature instructors we might be forced to update our methods of teaching translation in the comparative classroom, putting aside “metaphorical translation” (Ning & Dominguez, 2016) in which translation is of primary interest as a theoretical representation of transfer or difference, for instance, or our insistence on a suspension of disbelief, what I’ve described earlier as a pedagogy of translated literature that ignores the particular fact of a text’s translation, and other theoretical applications to dominate our approach to the instruction of literature in translation. We could finally turn our attention to creating a more systematic approach to the instruction of translated texts in the literature classroom, one that could acknowledge

the larger aims of Translation Studies while still being grounded in interpretation and the core tenants of literary analysis.

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