THE ASCENSION OF THE TRANSLATOR IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract A contested notion, the figure of the translator—like that of the author—is (and has always been), I would argue, a travelling concept. It is, however, a powerful force, perpetually wielding a certain enchanting lure over those involved in the field of literary culture and academic studies. Nevertheless, the translator still currently lacks the appropriate symbolic capital. In the wake of poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial theories, my paper examines contemporary translation by mapping the network of interacting structures and transformations that underpin ongoing literary phenomena. The said conceptual frameworks start to fade with the expansion of planetary studies and relational aesthetics, and the birth of post-internet communication technologies. Globalization and digitization, as well as world and systemic approaches to literary studies, have decisively altered the structure of the field, establishing a 21st-century translational symptomatology. The importance of translators and the ways in which they work and transport works across international landscapes have, indeed, recently come to the fore. Nevertheless, the question of how the translator should be redefined in our late global society remains deeply contested. Defined either as a media construct or as a set of textual images, the translator still seems to inhabit the realm of authorial presence and/or absence. No work has hitherto examined the question of the translator in ecological terms, even if ecology and literature have, indeed, been associated in many ways. By exploring the diversity of translation theories and practices, my paper will reveal the mechanisms through which our current literary system works, showing that—in a post-critical age—'the ascension of the translator' constitutes an unfolding site of controversy and dissent.
Keywords Translation, the translator, ecology, authorship, travelling concepts.

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A contested notion, the figure of the translator—like that of the author—is (and has always been), I would argue, a travelling concept.[1] It is, however, a powerful force, perpetually wielding a certain enchanting lure over those involved in the field of literary culture and academic studies. Nonetheless, the translator still presently lacks the appropriate symbolic capital.[2] In the wake of poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial theories,[3] my paper suggests that contemporary translation should be redesigned by mapping the network of interacting structures and transformations that underpin ongoing literary phenomena. The said conceptual frameworks started to fade with the expansion of planetary studies[4] and relational aesthetics,[5] and the birth of post-internet communication technologies.[6] Globalization and digitization, as well as world and systemic approaches to literary studies, have decisively altered the structure of the field, establishing a networked, 21st-century translational symptomatology.[7]

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[1] Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

[2] Anthony Pym, "The translator as non-author, and I am sorry about that," in *The Translator as Author. Perspectives on Literary Translation*, eds. C. Buffagni, B. Garzelli, and S. Zanotti (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 31-44.

[3] Neil Brooks, Josh Toth (eds.), *The Mourning After. Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (Rodopi, 2006); Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

[4] Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru (eds.), *The Planetry Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, transl. by Mark Ritter, (London & Newbury Park, Calif.: SAGE, 2009) (1992), first published in 1986 in German; Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Liam Young, *Machine Landscapes: Architectures of the Post Anthropocene* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

[5] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, transl. by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du reél, 2002); Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces. From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016).

[6] Dal Yong Jin (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2021); and Dal Yong Jin, *Globalization and Media in the Digital Platform Age* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[7] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York: Verso Books, 2005); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, no. 1 (January-February, 2000): 54-68; Franco Moretti, "More Conjectures," *New Left Review*, no. 20 (March-April, 2003): 73-81; Pascale Casanova, *Le République mondiale des Lettres* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1999); David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003); David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (New Jersey: Wiley- Blackwell, 2009); David Damrosch (ed.), *World Literature in Theory* (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2014); Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016); Ben Etherington, Jarad Zimbler (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

If postmodernism represented the cultural logic of late capitalism, I would go ahead and agree with the idea that metamodernism might symbolize the new cultural logic or the structure of sensibility of what might be called cognitive capitalism. In this scenario, the translator is probably the most significant agent in a world of interrelated systems.[8] The importance of translators and the ways in which they work and transport works across international landscapes have recently come to the fore.[9] Nevertheless, the question of how the translator should be defined in our post-late global society remains, as we have seen, deeply contested.[10]

Defined either as a media construct or as a set of textual images, the translator still seems to inhabit the realm of presence and/or absence.[11] Some theorists have argued, for instance, that it is a performative cultural concept (presence),[12] while others have noted that translation is represented through the conglomerate of social conditions surrounding creative practices (absence).[13] Both parties have underemphasized, though, the importance of simultaneously accounting for these various planes of existence. No work has hitherto examined the question of the translator in ecological terms, even if ecology and literature have, indeed, been associated in many ways.[14] By exploring the diversity of translation theories and practices,[15] my paper will reveal the mechanisms through which our current literary system works, showing that—in a post-critical age—'the ascension of the translator' constitutes an unfolding site of controversy and dissent.

In recent times, digital developments have fast-tracked the processes of globalization. In current academic works on translation, then, the appreciation of translators as relational

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[8] See Alex Ciorogar, "The Ecology of Translation, or, The Translator as World Author," *Philobiblon. Transylvanian Journal of Muldisciplinary Research in Humaniaities*, XXVI, no. 2 (2021): 309-318, https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2021.26.2.12.

[9] Claudia Buffagni, Beatrice Garzelli, Serenella Zanotti (eds.), *The Translator as Author. Perspectives on LiteraTranslation* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011).

[10] Anthea Bell, "Translation: Walking the Tightrope of Illusion," in Susan Bassnett, Peter Bush (eds.), *The Translator as Writer* (London & New York: Continuum, 2007), 58-59.

[11] Rob Schwartz, Nicholas de Lange, "A Dialogue: on a Translator's Interventions," in Susan Bassnett, Peter Bush (eds.), *The Translator as Writer* (London & New York: Continuum, 2007), 13-17.

[12] Peter Bush, Susan Bassnett, "Introduction," in Susan Bassnett, Peter Bush (eds.), *The Translator as Writer* (London: Continuum, 2007), 1-2.

[13] Catherine Porter, "The Expository Translator," in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, eds. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 447.

[14] Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature. From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London & New York: Verso Books, 2015).

[15] Barbara Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014); Walter Benjamin, "The Taks of the Translator" in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913-1926 (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 253-263; Claudia Buffagni, Beatrice Garzelli, Serenella Zanotti, "Introduction," in Claudia Buffagni, Beatrice Garzelli, Serenella Zanotti (eds.), *The Translator as Author. Perspectives on Literary Translation* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011).

actors has persistently developed. Researchers have, indeed, studied the position of translators in the field of literary studies.[16] As previously mentioned, an ecological approach unfortunately remains absent in current, since experts have relied either on deconstructive or pragmatist accounts of translation.[17] Rather than submissive facilitators, then, I contend that translators epitomize an indispensable aspect of world authorship.[18] The fact that translators themselves should to be acknowledged as authentic authors is something that we need to currently think through.

Under the sway of poststructuralist deconstruction, many academics have attempted, on the one hand, to underline the prominence of invisibility in the task of cultural and linguistic transference, while others have, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of visibility in the course of imaginatively rewriting singular texts. It would appear, then, that scholars have, indeed, closely examined the role of the translator without, however, having really granted translators the prestige they nonetheless merit. My argument is that, far from being humble negotiators in the practice of literary migration, translators actually play an essential role in world authorship. In the late 20th century, the translator was sociologically reconceived, under the aegis of the postmodern turn, as a collective entity, turning away from the examination of linguistic practices. Showing that legal responsibility has precedency over material ownership, Gisèle Sapiro has explained how the separation of moral, political, and religious values has contributed to the emergence of the literary field and how the author was obviously the main player in this new configuration.[19] However, the responsibility of the translator's symbolic powers also needs to be acknowledged in social terms in today's neoliberal economy.

Translators are establishing passages between nations, idioms, and peoples, while also joining and manufacturing new systems of literary schemes. Literary data is merchandized throughout these pulsating and creative markets. Moreover, writers per se also have the opportunity to trade concepts, forms, and actions across the same framework. More than a way of internationally obtaining foreign fictional information, translators help reinvent one's own imaginative abilities. The translator is therefore tangled in more than just a method of naive domestication. This is because embracing global or outlandish ways of literary practice

[16] Serenella Zanotti, "The Translator and The Author: Two of a Kind?" in Claudia Buffagni, Beatrice Garzelli, Serenella Zanotti (eds.), *The Translator as Author. Perspectives on Literary Translation* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 86-87.

[17] Katerina Bantinaki, "The Literary Translator as Author: A Philosophical Assessment of the Idea", in *Translation Studies*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/14781700.2019.1668841, 8-9.

[18] Rebecca Braun, "The World Author in us All: Conceptualising Fame and Agency in the Global Literary Market," in *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 7, 2016, 457-475; Rebecca Braun, "Introduction: The Rise of the World Author from the Death of World Literature," in *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, vol. 51 no. 2, 2015; Adriaan van der Weel, "Literary Authorship in the Digital Age," in Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, Marysa Demoor (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 218-234.

[19] Gisèle Sapiro, "The Writer's Responsibility in France: From Flaubert to Sartre," *French Politics Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (March 2007): 1-12.

eventually aggregates into the development of crisp writerly strategies. In a globally digital age the translator seems to be splitting his time and energy between indigenous mores and customs, on the one hand, and transnational itineraries, on the other. The translator appears to be jammed among the jargon of local exercises and the eccentric requirements and opportunities of the intercontinental landscape.

Enabling new and radical ways of thinking about what it means to translate a text, posthumanist philosophies argue that digital technologies are redefining or, one should say, eliminating the essentialist definition of the translator.[20] This new definition of the translator indicates a non-binary and ecological conceptualization of the term. The idea of the translator should be thought of as a network-distributed and technologically-driven system of interrelations between organic, mechanic, and digital elements. The figure of the translator arises (ascends), then, in the action and methods of ascription executed by the several medial and rhetorical actors. The translator should be thought of as a multidimensional collection of agents and practices following certain ideological rules, norms, and conventions.

The practices of translation are—both at the level of organizations and technicalities—networked. Translation processes have, in fact, always been communal, combined, and cooperative. The translator works in unison with a series of elements and actors: tools, resources, methods, systems, locations, different forms of knowledge, tactics, codes, and establishments. The translator is, thus, accountable for the ways in which literature travels beyond its borders. They create diverse worlds and mend others. The translator is an active force in the international dissemination of a book and an author. An ecological definition of the translator integrates all its different levels of manifestation: social, financial, and moral (both human and non-human elements). World literature, then, is the product of this ecological working of translation.[21]

To put it differently, I would argue that world literature and authorship cannot exist without the ecological practices of translation. The translator is also the agent who not only fosters the virtual world of the text but he is also the one bringing it in contact with the physical field of literature. The figure of the translator is a malleable and multidimensional construct dependent on the inestimable environments in which it manifests. Whenever we think about translation and the translator we, therefore, need to systematically account for all the activities and entities that allow a text and a writer to travel across the globe. The work of the translator can be understood as a form of a transnational poetics. Taking my queue from Michel Foucault, then, I would also venture into saying that the function of the translator arises from the web of interconnected contexts and actors that go into the material act of

[20] See Michael Cronin, "Translation and Posthumanism", in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics* (Routledge, 2020); M. O'Thomas, "Humanum ex machine: Translation in the post-global, posthuman world," in *Target* 29, 2 (2017): 284-300.

[21] Atsushi Akera, "Constructing a Representation for an Ecology of Knowledge: Methodological Advances in the Integration of Knowledge and its Various Contexts," *Social Studies of Science*, 37, 3 (2004).

production and distribution of new literary worlds. The practices of translation reveal that literature cannot survive or thrive without crossing its cultural and historical borders.

Translation is a pilloried practice since it discloses the sociopolitical bedrock of rigid regimes and structures of power. Lawrence Venuti argues that translation is besmirched by dominant forms of copyright and authorship, particularly in national literary fields. The translator is capable of undermining authoritarian characterizations of authorial identity.[22] The relationship between the author and the translator has been one that could accurately be described through the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. However, translation practices showcase the fact that even authorship practices depend on prior material. Beatriz Zeller has convincingly shown that translation is not just a simple way of transference from one language to the next. Quite the opposite, she demonstrated that translation integrates extraneous stimuli through simulation, alteration, and conversion. The translator destabilizes not only the workings of language but also deterritorializes the limits of a cultural space.[23]

It lies in the peculiarities of our digitally globalized age that the practices of translation would encompass such complicated issues. Nonetheless, all present circumstances seem to point to a new phase in the morphology of translation. We need to foster and respect the agency of the translator. Michael Cronin also upholds the idea that one should employ a "self-aware and activist dimension of the role of the translator in the age of globalization,"[24] because digital technologies have established a new connection with translators and the way in which they are socially constructed. The issue is no longer one of originality or creativity. The skill of being a translator has now been externalized.

The value of the translator includes an innovative feature which could be described as a commitment with both domestic and international artistic policies. This broadened understanding of the translator—as containing multiple parts—is reflected in the circumstances of cognitive production. In a sense, translation appears to be, to employ an analogy, the bedrock of recent phenomena of conceptual creation. Conceptual poetry, for instance, seems to hang on this idea of transporting language from one context to another. In this sense, digital technologies have enabled translators to metaphorize texts, displacing them from a starting point to a radically different one. This also allows translation practices to entertain or to operate in an open-access framework. This new model or paradigm is obviously communal and material, while being mediated by digital technologies.

Nevertheless, one needs to account for the literal level of machine or technological translation in order to repair the errors and expand the effectiveness of intercultural diffusion. However, it is unclear how moral responsibility could be gauged in the realm of digital automation given the interrelations between the organic (authors, translators, editors, critics, scholars) and non-organic entities (institutions, magazines, journals, associations) involved in translation practices.

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[22] Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation* (New York - London: Routledge, 1998), 1-2.
[23] Betriz Zeller, "On Translation and Authorship," *Meta: Translators' Journal* 45, no. 1 (2000): 135-139.
[24] Michael Cronin, *Translation and Globalization* (London - New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-13.