

MAMIHLAPINATAPEI: WORLD LITERATURE LETS THE SUBALTERN SPEAK!!

- Dr. Augusta Gooch

So, can the subaltern speak? Yes, in world literature she can! In world literature, the artistic face of the poets, the characters, and the literary landscape is changing. Many voices can be heard in the 21st century because of literary translation. Many voices have easier access to publishing because of technology. Many more voices share in our literary landscape. Still, scholars are concerned with related issues of cultural erasure, loss of language distinction, and inherent limitations of translating.

In her 2013 book, *Against World Literature*, Emily Apter challenges the international translation and publishing communities to consider what she understands as the cultural dangers of translation. For Apter, “world literature” is a narrowly based canon which privileges a dominant language – likely English- over other languages and cultures. The result is cultural erosion, loss of difference among languages, and a reducibility of style and expression. Apter’s defense is that language is ultimately untranslatable because layers of meaning are lost. The result is that translation culminates in cultural erasure as many languages get replaced by only one language. Meaning and variety are lost as the world is left with a commodity produced for an elite global marketplace.

Unfortunately, Apter presents very one-sided critiques of what can be considered world literature and what translation actually accomplishes. For her, world literature is determined by the entrepreneurial drive to anthologize – thus, privileging language, styles, and literary judgment. Only those works deemed worthy of being included become part of the literary scene. She also equates translation with language extinction because of a dominant monolingualism – that is, translation into English becomes the only option. Instead of translation, she opts for learning second (and third) languages, thus preserving the historical and cultural layering built into the original languages. But, as her title indicates, she decries the illusion of world literature. It is not the world but an arbitrarily selected few works picked out by anthology editors. This, she argues, results in cultural erasure, not cultural exposure. If a language cannot retain its ineffability, its specificity, its cultural singularity, then it should just not be translated. The global elite destroys by publishing everything in translation, eroding linguistic and cultural richness.

Her isolated theoretical claims about language and translation, her evaluation of the effects of a global commerce, and her dense prose style (“...militant semiotic intransigence”) have shifted her focus from her 2005 perspective. In her earlier work, she did try to reconcile two views: translation as erasure v translation as cross-cultural understanding.

J
H
E
R
S
O

In contrast to her current dismissive description of “world literature,” are the views of novelists, poets, essayists, and teachers. Her unfortunate conclusions ignore the facts that the rest of us see beauty everyday in reading literature. Matt Cardin, a literature teacher, speaks about the “positively magical power of language.” Through literature, we enter “in somebody else’s headspace and heartspace.” James Wood in his 2008 work, *How Fiction Works*, highlights the “delight” for the reader. Other writers, editors, and translators – Pascale Casanova, DjelalKadir, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti- all see the benefit from sharing literature and ideas around the globe. As co-editor of “World Literature Today” DjelalKadir says: we all benefit from a cross-cultural understanding by sharing poetic voices and images. In light of numerous contemporary affirmations of sharing literature, Apter’s narrowness just seems imbalanced. Economic globalization may, in fact, partially diminish opportunities for some authors, but it does not totally destroy the literary voice which delights, creates beauty, and provides an alchemical experience for readers and listeners.

Historically, the notion of “world literature” gets its name from the German poet, Goethe in 1827. His vision was built around the majestic German romantic literature. He felt it should become the universal literature for everyone of culture. This is not the understanding of “world literature” poets and teachers have today. Nor is our view influenced by Karl Marx who in 1848 linked a *weltliteratur* to economic compulsion. Literature has its own internal clarity and purpose: it is the voice of the poet within his/her cultural milieu. *Poiein* in Greek means to make. In Scottish a poet is a *makar*. Poets make, create, shape – the economic impulse is not a literary issue. The factual limitations of a literary canon are temporary: we all cannot read everything! All around the earth people tell stories, stories which share their cultural *weltanschauung*. Stories and poems are always present in our lives. The political decrying of limits of any literature is only a partial assessment of the nature of “world literature.”

A reader is “transmuted” by the craft of the author: issues of language alone are not the substance of “world literature.” The creative instinct which shapes our interior landscape is fundamental to the nature of world literature. The imaginative craft re-shapes the world around us; as readers, we have new influences to absorb and understand. The alchemical nature of literature cannot simply be subsumed under language or translation or information commodification. Erich Auerbach in 1946 said in *Mimesis*: literature is “a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures.” For Franco Moretti today, literature is a “planetary system” – it is subject to many forces. Edward Said speaks about the “deep sedimentations of history” embodied in the words, images, and narratives. In her critique of Apter, Gloria Fisk from CUNY-Queens says simply we should distinguish who is

defining “world literature.” Is it the literary critic who may have pre-established criteria? Is it the publisher who is concerned with a commodity? Is it a literary scholar who may have a specific historical perspective? Finally, is it the individual teacher who depends on the poet, the publisher, and the critic to offer options in order set a curriculum? Not all of these individuals are guided by the taste of the narrow elite or by the consequences of economic predictability. Rather, teachers and critics and translators are concerned with cross-cultural understanding, delight in literary moments, and transmuting our inner perspective. These are the legitimate means of defining “world literature.” As Gloria Fisk decisively says, Apter is ignoring many literary voices in favor of her own political speculation.

Part II

In addition to a weak definition of “world literature,” Apter is critical of translation. Perhaps this can be explained by the linguistic turn in philosophy whereby language is the foundation of all knowledge. Imperfect translation, then, is confusing and inaccurate. It negates the original language and diminishes its importance. For Apter, translation is just semiotic intransigence. The translator forces an alternative meaning, thereby subsuming the accuracy and flavor of the first language. This makes translation inherently flawed. As Apter says, translation is cultural plunder. Her primary defense is: many words are just untranslatable.

Both Walter Benjamin in the early part of the 20th century and Gayatri Spivak in the early part of the 21st century have more balanced views regarding the importance of translation. Gayatri Spivak has several wonderful phrases in describing translation: “love between the original and its shadow.” Because the translator loves, the act of translation is erotic, a kind of “giving in to the text.” Why? Because the translator has to listen to the text. Translating is not the mere transfer of meaning; it involves an awareness of the “traces” hidden within a cultural milieu. Walter Benjamin said something similar: “a real translation is transparent.” For Benjamin, language is altogether transformed in the translating. The translator has to let go...“so that it gives voice to the *intention* of the original.” It is clear to both Benjamin and Spivak that the “rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systematicity.”

Spivak says in *Outside in The Teaching Machine* (1993) about translation: *where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages.* That spacy emptiness is definitely more than a mere shadow. The translation is something new and takes on a life of its own. Benjamin describes translation as the “afterlife” of a work of art. Both of these descriptions emphasize that specialness of literary translation – it is not a dead transfer of archival materials. Spivak uses the term “archive” from Derrida’s “archive

fever.” An archive is hardened by its contents; it is not spontaneous and lived. Those who appreciate translations recognize its living character.

Praise for translation comes with caveats, too. Turkish scholar, JaleParla, speaks about the differing epistemologies which cross on an irreconcilable axis. Lying between the cracks is the literature of the original language. Fredric Jameson gives an interesting example to demonstrate his concerns with cultural intrusion. He uses the novel as a model of western form with a strict set of structural parts. But, non-western cultures that adopt the novel are re-arranging their own “stories” and *weltanschauung*. For Jameson, the local language is squashed by the borrowed form. Jameson’s example is historically accurate, but his conclusion is problematic. The novel has become the vehicle of choice for recognition globally. But recall the Italian sonnet form of Petrarch; it came to the English language and has surprisingly thrived in its new home. Sonnets in the English language are a borrowed form. The novel is also a borrowed form that can transfer to non-European literatures. The local material can reasonably be absorbed in the new literary contexts.

Australian essayist and blogger, Joshua Mostafa, is also concerned about indigenous languages lost to settler languages. Nonetheless, with DjelalKadir he agrees we need to translate. If we do not, it is as if we are complicit with terrorism – terrorism of the mind. The reshaping of language and culture through translation keeps small nations and cultures alive. Pascale Cassanova, a French literary scholar says in her 2004 book, *The World Republic of Letters*, minor literatures need access and exposure. Gayatri Spivak also has reservations about the autochthonic voice of the primary aboriginal world. But, language and culture are not static; it is hard to define an aboriginal presence. What seems novel and exotic to our technological western mind, may itself have been transformed over generations. It is perhaps a romantic idle to speak of the aboriginal purity of the other.

Loss of diversity among languages is not a new concern. In 1946 Erich Auerbach already voiced concerns. Erasure of linguistic ecology is not the necessary result of translation. With the efforts of skilled literary translators comes access. New voices gain prestige and can charm the next generation of readers. The subaltern does have access through translation: this is one of the main concerns of Spivak. The group 3% promotes literary translation and gives prizes to the translators. Apter’s claim that language extinction is the only result cannot be supported. Cross-cultural understanding through translation leads to further cross-cultural dialogue. Yes, the subaltern can speak and can have access—and traces of her voice will be preserved. I agree with Benjamin: language itself is transformed, naturally. It is not really a globalizing commodity or an arbitrary canon that guides literary and poetic efforts. Translation is another art form; it is not about untranslatables: it is about what is able to re-shape our imagination.

In the same way that the notion of a global literature has changed from Goethe's vision, so, too, has the "subaltern." Literary translation has totally changed the face of the subaltern. Who is today's subaltern? This is not a political issue when referring to literature. Are Vikram Seth and his characters part of a dominant culture because he writes in English? Edwidge Danticat living in the United States writes about Haiti. With the Nobel publicity for Mo Yan's views of China reshape our imagination about a Confucian world. The English translation of Han Kang has given us a new voice of South Korea. Born in Ghana, but growing up in a university town of Alabama, Yaa Gyasi's characters in her new novel, *Homegoing*, begin their journey in Ghana. Who these artists are and who they write about diminish the sharp dividing line of a politically charged gap between dominate culture and subaltern experiences. Poets do not simply use words. They create a new world which lives in our interior landscape. It is no different for sculptors and other artists: they do not simply use a variety of materials—they produce emotion, mystery, a vision of life. Chakaia Booker uses slices of rubber tires to produce ethereal drama. El Anatsui re-uses discarded aluminum can pulls to weave magical cloth. Ursula von Rydingsvard re-shapes pieces of wood enabling us to confront human limitations. Magdalena Abakanowicz is the 21st century Giacometti shaping fibres into headless bodies – reminding us of our fragile human condition. U-Ram re-imagines mechanical sculptures as living beings. Their materials cannot be reduced to their art. Similarly for the poet: her craft is not simply words. Her craft yields another world of consciousness. Her works are our *weltliteratur*.

So, literature is beyond simply using words. The language of the poet is transformed because of the vision is embodied within. Ultimately, Apter's political concerns do not fully capture the reality of the literary art. It is not a battle of a dominant culture erasing other cultures. It is about the shaping our interior landscape. In this landscape, the face of the subaltern has been changed. American artist Agnes Martin has a wonderful view of art. She says that Beauty is our response to life. All artists re-shape our literary perspective with their characters, their stories, their imagination. They guide our responses to life.

And, now: MAMIHLAPINATAPIE – pronounced: mami-lapi-nata-pei. Esther Allen, scholar and supporter of translations, hopes this word will gain common use. It is a word from the Yaghan language, spoken by a small community in the Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. It is a delightful word that expresses the complexity of human emotions and actions. In one breath, MAMIHLAPINATAPEI says in paraphrase: "you and I have some connection and we want to express it – let's go for it!!" So, is the word untranslatable? Is it another example of the "untranslatables" that Apter is concerned with as she translated Barbara Cassin's dictionary of technical philosophical terms? I don't think so. This word captures such a rich moment of human expression. It is too wonderful a word to just say: I'll archive it because its traces, its historical layers, its cultural resonances are likely

understated in the paraphrase. It is like a poetic sentence that sits just fine within the poem, but is hard to remove and explain. In her poem “Blandeur” American poet Kay Ryan has a superior line: “unlean against our hearts.” She is talking to god – the created world around us is always leaning on our senses, our minds, our hearts. But, how exactly does the world lean against us? The poet can phrase it within a few words; the rest of us need a paragraph. It is no different with MAMIHLAPINATAPEI. Now, we have a new access to a new culture through experimenting with translation. MAMIHLAPINATAPEI is a wonderful literary moment we can all share!!



J
H
E
R
S
O