

TRANSLATION IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

I have been a translator for over thirty years, translating different kinds of documents into English. Next year at the MLA I will speak on a project of translating from the French into Bengali. Through the experience of translation, it is my conviction that translation ought to be taught as a practice rather than embraced as a convenience with no footprint. I should also mention that I have been involved with a vision of globalizing comparative literature even longer than I have been a translator, unless you count the lost translation of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* into Bengali while I was preparing to take my punishing BA honors exam at the University of Calcutta in 1959.

It is taken for granted these days that the United States is a monolingual country. I will not go into the theoretical details of the monolingualism of the other here. I will simply note that living in New York, there is a daily reminder that it is a bilingual city at least. If you keep your ears open on the streets, you can begin to hear the 200 languages that are spoken. The many languages are proof of the fact that borders are becoming porous. They are not present in the kind of deep learning status that we can encourage at universities and colleges. But then, as I said, we take it for granted that the United States is monolingual in English and, additionally, that speed is the essence of our brief as University teachers, speed producing results that can be ascertained.

There are at least two things that contradict this last bit in my academic experience. One, I have myself been an undergraduate in continuing education at Columbia for the last five years, learning Chinese. The extraordinary enthusiasm of the undergraduates as they go into the mysterious thickets of this language never ceases to amaze me. And two, I direct the Institute of Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia, which carries an undergraduate major, where all of the students are ferocious language-learners, often learning in great depth languages that certainly do not fall into the purview of commonly taught languages.

Therefore, I continue to cherish a conviction that translation ought to be taught as a practice. However, I must also listen to the wisdom of the times. I have therefore been teaching a “History of Literary Criticism” in English translation for about a decade now, if not more. There was some initial objection to my teaching this course, because I’m not a trained classicist. But I think my colleagues have come to accept my pigheadedness and I am allowed to teach this from time to time. I am not going to give you a syllabus of this course because, although the method is appropriate to our discussion, I devised the course not with a view to the teaching of languages, but simply to make the students aware that texts, especially ancient texts, were sometimes written or composed before English came into being. To develop a historical sense, if you like.

In the rest of the paper I will present a specific sample course rather than speak theoretically. What I am going to describe is a course devised specifically for the

possibility that students, especially undergraduate students, would become interested in learning languages if the teacher taught through “problems in translation.” The method is to introduce a language-conscious comparativist element into undergraduate teaching, using the strengths of traditional Comparative Literature. With the budget crunch and the consequent cut in the humanities budgets the course is utopian. I have always had an obstinate disinclination to cut myself down to the size prescribed by circumstances where the humanities are considered expendable and I don’t change here. It should also be said that perhaps this plan fits more elite institutions of education. The reader will make the necessary calculations, without ignoring the ideas altogether.

I believe that “globalizing” the curriculum must be distinguished from culture wars and canon debates. A globalized world does not provide or endorse a pure non-Eurocentric gaze. Unless we include Europe in our attempt at a historical study of regionalist and world-system intuitions, teaching through problems in translation will exoticize, and not offer a practical program, moving between the relatively familiar and the unfamiliar. This sample course will, I hope, point the way to what may be called cross-civilization courses. Unlike most courses of this type, this course is primary-text-based. The course covers a significant depth of time, with a transdisciplinary method, placing the discussion of ethical systems at the center. The text-based nature of the course will, I hope, reveal to the students that we cannot access ethical systems without deep language learning. I hope that this will provide the means for breaking down the opposition, now operative, between Western and other “Major” cultures.” The course I describe here focuses on the

Mediterranean. Ideally, such courses could include material on cultures which have been excluded from the category of “Major,” such as those of Southeast Asia.

Typically, the students read the texts in English. The instructor, who has a deep knowledge of the original language, teaches through attending to the problems of translation, on a level accessible to the young student with no such knowledge. Given the global constituency of the New York classroom, there is usually a single student, or a group of students who can navigate the original better than the rest of the class. This creates patterns of sharing that are most pedagogically useful. Typically the class is taught by guest professors for different languages. Postdoctoral fellows, or graduate teaching assistants with special language skills can be used in the teaching of these courses.

Here, then, is the sample course:

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## OCEAN RIMS: THE MEDITERRANEAN

The general idea behind the “Oceans” formats for teaching language-interest through problems in translation is the assumption that ocean rims are more interesting cultural units than continentally defined “civilizations.” The Mediterranean rim is especially fertile ground for developing this thematic. The Ocean Rim course can also be taught with reference to the Indian Ocean Rim, the Asian Rim, Oceania, and the like. This series is also particularly appropriate for undergraduate training in the context of the deleterious effects of “the clash of civilizations” concept. The description below is a general outline. The designer is not a specialist of the area. Such a course needs a group of teachers, with different language skills, thinking new thoughts in this innovative area.

This particular course is based on the idea of the Mediterranean to be found in Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean World In The Time of Phillip II*. For the students the explanation of our task will come from Polybius: "Hitherto the affairs of the world had been as it were dispersed . . .; since this date [220 BC] history has formed an organic whole, and the affairs of Italy and Africa have been interlinked with those of Greece and Asia, all tending towards one end (I, 3, 3–4)."

The languages needed for this course are Greek, Latin, Arabic, Middle French, French, Turkish. Once again, this type of course can only be a colloquium course taught by a group of teachers.

Texts:

Week 1

Selections from The Odyssey

Background Reading:

Jon Elster, Ulysses and the Sirens (1984)

Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos" (1992), Richard Rand et al eds., Logomachia

François Hartog, Memories of Odysseus

The teacher should be able to convey to the undergraduates that the Odyssey is not only a text of classical European antiquity but also, and perhaps more important, a text of the ancient Mediterranean.

Week 2

Selections from Herodotus, The Persian Wars(440 BCE), outlining his sense of "Egypt and Greece."

Background Reading:

François Hartog, Mirror of Herodotus

Jean-François Breton, Arabia Felix from the Time of the Queen of Sheba: Eighth Century B.C. to First Century A.D.,tr. Albert LaFarge,

Charles Freeman, [Egypt, Greece, and Rome: Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean.](#)

Week 3

Selections from Polybius, [Histories](#) (200-118 BCE), Book 1

Background Reading:

Paul Cartledge et. al., eds., [Hellenistic Constructs: Essays in Culture, History, and Historiography](#)

Craige B. Champion, [Cultural Politics in Polybius's Histories.](#)

Maria Eugenia Aubet, [The Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies and Trade.](#)

G.W.B. Huntingford, [The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea.](#)

Arrian in A. Diller, [The Tradition of the Minor Greek Geographers.](#) p. 102-146.

O.A.W. Dilke, [Greek and Roman Maps](#) , p. 130-144.

Week 4

Augustine, [Confessions](#) (397-401)

Background Reading:

selections from Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession" (2000)

J.E. Merdinger, Rome and the African Church in the time of Augustine

Week 5

Selections from Abu Hayaan (987-1076)

Background Reading:

Gil Anidjar, "Our Place In Al-Andalus" (2002)

Luscombe, David et al. eds. The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume 4, c.1024-c.1198, Part 1.

Week 6

La Chanson de Roland (1040-1115)

Background Reading:

Norris, H. T., Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society Between Europe and the Arab World

Sharon Kinoshita, Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature.

Donald J. Kagay and Joseph T. Snow, eds. Medieval Iberia: Essays on the History and Literature of Medieval Spain.

Week 7

Selections from Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), Al-Muqaddima

Background Reading:

Selections from:

Antony Black, History of Islamic Political Thought: from the Prophet to the Present

Aziz al-Azmeh, Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship: A Study in Orientalism.

Yves Lacoste, Ibn Khaldun: the Birth of History and the Past of the Third World.

Muhsin Mahdi, Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture.

Lenn E. Goodman, Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age.

Louis Baeck, Mediterranean Tradition in Economic Thought.

Barbara Freyer Stowasser, Religion and Political Development: Some Comparative Ideas on Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli.

Week 8

Leo Africanus, Selections from History and Description (1526)

Background Reading:

Natalie Davis, Trickster Travels (2006)

Augustus St. John, Lives of Celebrated Travellers.

W. B. Yeats, A Vision (1939), selections

Tabish Khair, ed. Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing.

Week 9

Evlia Celibi (1611-1684), Book of Travels

Background Reading:

Charles Montesquieu, The Persian Letters

Critical material from Alexander Pallis. In the Days of the Janissaries

Introduction and selections from Robert Dankoff, The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman

Caroline Finkel, Osman's Dream

Week 10

Assia Djébar, Fantasia (1993)

Background Reading:

Jacques Derrida, The Other Heading (1991)

Mohammed Arkoun, The Unthought in Islamic Thought

Marnia Lazreg, Eloquence of Silence : Algerian Women in Question.

Week 11

Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul (2003)

Background Reading:

Henry Maguire, Art and Eloquence in Byzantium

Philip Whitting. ed. Byzantium: an Introduction

Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, eds., After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-building: the Soviet Union and Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires

H. C. Armstrong, Gray Wolf

In conclusion, I would like to go back to the history of literary criticism course that I mentioned in the beginning and cite just one small example. In that course, I teach, extremely incompetently, I must add, texts of Sanskrit aesthetics by Abhinavagupta and Anandavardhana. It is a fact that all of the examples in those texts are from Prakrit or “the natural language,” as opposed to Sanskrit or “the refined language.” This detail is lost to the student if s/he thinks that the text as translated into English – and indeed Jeffrey Masson’s translation is excellent – is where its footprint began. This opening up the origin also relates to my long-standing interest in the work of Jacques Derrida. This can be shared with the student without naming names or constructing a “vocabulary.” The important thing here is that, if the teacher can begin to welcome the student into understanding why the examples come from Prakrit – the idea that Creole follows the dominant language begins to waver. By the time, in the second part of the course, we come to Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*, that ancient Sanskrit gesture begins to take on a completely different kind of value in terms of locating Dante also as simply another origin, especially the origin of European nationalism. Later this evening I will be speaking on Goethe and world literature – and this access to a world, celebrated by our brilliant colleague Pascale Casanova as a kind of beginning, can be questioned in the simple process of undergraduate teaching if the origin is attended to. This of course also relates to the reading of the *Dhammapada*, which is often included in “other cultures” courses – although not in my literary criticism course, of course. The fact that Gautama Buddha had made the critical gesture of encouraging the texts of his preaching to be in the creole when, as a prince, he certainly had access to the refined language, and the

further fact that this gesture was undone within a century by translation into Sanskrit and Chinese is lost on students if problems of translation are not discussed.

Commenting on Professor Casanova's work, I had invoked that extraordinary page in Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebook number 29 where he talks about all historical grammar as comparative, and indeed an account of struggle. We should welcome our students into the struggle if they are going to become citizens of the world. Otherwise any notion of Globalizing the Curriculum is a cheap shot at speedily Americanizing every bit of the globe that is useful to us.