

# Why Translation Studies should learn to be homeless

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The following is a critical survey of possible institutional locations for Translation Studies. The basic question to be asked is whether Translation Studies really requires any of the homes that our institutions currently make available, starting with the fundamental relationship with translator training. The basic answer is that, whether we like it or not, we are heading toward homelessness, and this may well be the best location we can hope to establish.

## **Where is Translation Studies?**

When Monique Caminade and myself set out to compile a list of all the institutions that train translators and/or interpreters, we were surprised to see the world total climb to about 300 (although only 268 are in our 1995 checklist). This was more than fourteen times the 21 institutions that are currently members of the CIUTI, which is a European and North American club for the mutual recognition of ‘prestigious’ institutions. Clearly, to know what is happening in this field today one has to look at far more than the would-be hegemony of a self-selected top twenty.

A second surprise was the great diversity of the institutional locations involved in the training of translators (no, I am not confusing this with Translation Studies as such): independent translation schools, university translation departments, sections of business schools, departments of comparative law, programmes in comparative literature, science departments, European studies, European administrative institutions, straight modern language departments, interdepartmental bodies, national examination bodies, private language schools, paraprofessional training programmes, summer schools, and a few even more miscellaneous structures. Not all these institutions would claim to be doing ‘Translation Studies’ in any sense that separates the term from vocational training; and none of the few that *would* make this claim objected to their being included in a list focused squarely on translator training. So I have no reason to believe that Translation Studies—by whatever definition—could not be carried out in any of these 300 or so institutions. Better, I have no evidence to suggest that, from the international perspective, there is just one triumphant institutional location involved, nor that any particular structure is inherently more productive of Translation Studies

than another. The people doing Translation Studies are scattered all over various kinds of academic institutions: classes are taught, jobs are won and doctorates are defended in any number of locations.

Such is my initial problem, though I'm not sure it's worth calling a problem: Does it really matter that we have no firm institutional home? Does it matter that we have very few specialized departments of non-vocational Translation Studies? Is it worth forcing any separation between Translation Studies and translator training? And does our apparent lack of an unambiguous institutional location mean we must forego all hopes of having a corresponding discipline?

I doubt that the institutional structures matter very much. More exactly, I believe we should carefully distance Translation Studies from the available institutional locations. Our professional positions and networks inevitably influence what we say, whom we are talking to, and who is likely to overhear us; it would seem important that we are almost all within academic institutions of one kind or another, complete with buildings, salaries, students and power structures. But Translation Studies can still be done on the sidelines of all that. Indeed, it *should* be done with considerable indifference to the politician academics who seek to build us towers or claim to have discovered routes to scholarly paradise.

To explain why, I would like to consider the status of several possible locations: linguistics, comparative literature, an imperialistic version of Translation Studies, and cultural studies. I will argue that all these locations are inadequate in themselves, and that Translation Studies should become part of something wider, something that could even benefit from having no institutionalized academic structure at all.

### **Translator training?**

Let me show why I think translator training should be taken seriously. Figure 1 below shows the recent growth in the number of translator-training institutions, defined as any institutional structure offering an instruction programme whose title mentions the terms 'translation', 'interpreting' or cognates. The graph is based on the foundation dates of 249 such institutions world-wide (data from Caminade and Pym 1995):

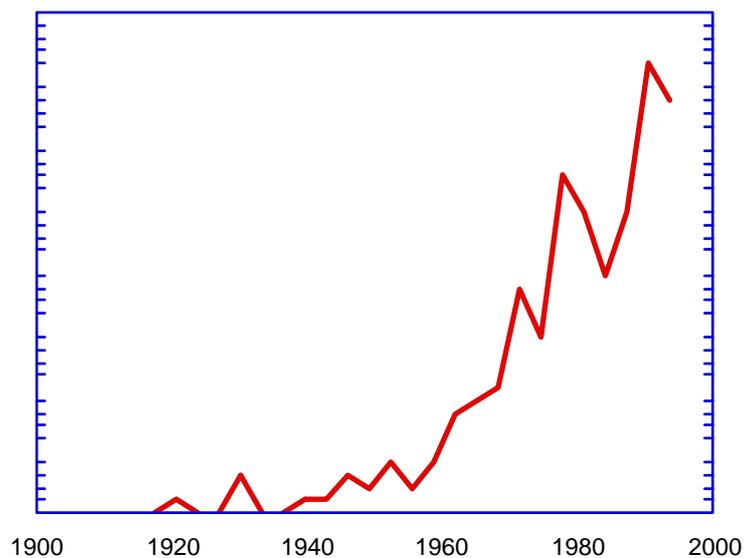


Figure 1. Frequency of creation of Translator-Training Institutions

On this institutional level, translator training expanded rapidly in the 1970s, decelerated in the early 1980s, and took off again to reach an apparent peak somewhere around 1990. This development has a certain correlation with other indices of Translation Studies (notably research programmes and publications figures), yet the trends here are so marked, and the institutional changes are so durable, that I believe the primary change has indeed been more in translator training than in anything else. This does not mean translator training is the cause of everything else, since research and publications undoubtedly help the training institutions to reproduce themselves. But it does mean that no discussion of contemporary Translation Studies can afford to ignore the considerable quantitative changes involved: the upward thrust of the curve represents a fair swathe of salaries, research budgets, library purchases, conferences, free trips and other tidbits of academic power.

### **Linguistics?**

Although the causes of the above curve are to be found in sociopolitical factors beyond our present concerns, the developments of the past two decades map strangely well onto certain academic struggles between linguistics and the idea of an independent Translation Studies. The rise in the 1970s was unambiguously associated with linguistic approaches to translation, notably Nida (1964), Catford (1965) and the range of theorists brought together by Koller (1979). In the 1970s the study of translation was widely believed to belong to linguistics. In the 1980s things fell apart: general interest in translation subsided; the few surviving machine-translation projects were scaled down; structural linguistics had led nowhere and discourse linguistics appeared not to

start anywhere concrete enough to be of much use to serious translation scholars. The result was a felt need for a new start, as might be gleaned from a few citations:

“Linguistics alone won’t help us. First, because translating is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process. Secondly, because linguistics has not yet formulated the right questions to tackle our problems. So let’s look somewhere else.” (Vermeer 1987: 29, cit. Nord).

“Linguistics, as the study of the tongue, has no reason to be equated with the theorisation of translation. No one doubts that carpenters work with wood, but how pertinent is the study of forestry to the practice of carpentry?” (Pym 1992: 185)

“...for the actual investigation of the translation process we cannot restrict ourselves to linguistics alone. The investigation of comprehension and production processes involves not only linguistic but also psychological, at least psycholinguistic and possibly also neuropsychological, knowledge and methods.” (Kusmaul 1995: 2)

“...la traducción, como operación lingüística real, con características propias y no moldeables, no puede pretender integrarse en ninguna de las escuelas que componen el panorama de los estudios de lingüística teórica, ni siquiera de las corrientes más recientes.” (Tricás Preckler 1995: 44)

[As a real-world operation with its own defining features, translation cannot be integrated into any of the schools, no matter how recent, that currently comprise the field of theoretical linguistics.]

Linguistics, it seems, isn’t exactly wrong; it’s just not right enough for the study of translation. So Vermeer sought revelation in fields like action theory, scenes-and-frames semantics and snippets of philosophy; Pym has meandered through sociolinguistics, semiotics and negotiation theory; Kusmaul draws on psycholinguistics and text linguistics; and Tricás Preckler, to sample a different tradition, one page after dispensing with ‘all the current schools of theoretical linguistics’, edges her attention just a few inches to one side: ‘And so we move to Applied Linguistics, which is the true frame for the teaching of translation’ [‘Con lo que nos trasladamos al marco de la Lingüística Aplicada que es el verdadero ámbito en el que puede moverse la enseñanza de la traducción’] (1995: 45).

This could be simply toeing the line: In Spain, where I now teach, the only official research area pertinent to Translation Studies is still ‘Linguistics Applied to Translation’, which is indeed the orientation that dominates Spain’s translator-training institutes. As if we all knew what Applied Linguistics was (Tricás doesn’t define the term); as if we were sure that action theory, constructivist semantics, psycholinguistics and the rest were not really linguistics; and as if this general development in translation theory had really broken with the general trends in linguistics. The important point is that linguistics itself has remained neither static nor ideologically closed; developments in pragmatics have drawn heavily on sociology and cross-cultural research; linguistics has itself been just as much an interdiscipline as Translation Studies would like to be.

Why, then, do we still find lines drawn between Translation Studies and linguistics? I humbly suggest the barricades are largely of mist. Consider, if you will, just one more citation:

“Colleagues in Eastern Europe should be encouraged to ‘cut the umbilical cord’ with the Modern Language departments as soon as possible. Students in the new programmes in Eastern Europe should not be permitted to attend ‘translation’ courses in Modern Language departments, as they would get an entirely wrong idea of translation and the profession as a whole.” (Motas et al. 1994: 433)

The statement reflects institutional struggle between translation departments and language departments as found Germany, Spain, and to some extent in all European countries. Since translation must apparently be taught in specialized institutions, it seems it cannot share the disciplinary bases of modern language institutions, notably ‘theoretical’ linguistics. Hence the call for Translation Studies must do something different. Even when it finishes up doing linguistics by other names.

Note carefully that the more up-front ideologies in European Translation Studies nowadays stress the move *away* from linguistics. Further, this is happening precisely within the institutions most heavily focused on translator training. It is thus not true that vocational emphases are inevitably linked with linguistic approaches; nor do I have any reason to believe that Translation Studies is being ‘held back’ by linguistics. Such criticisms are usually voiced by people who think there is no more to linguistics than praise of formal equivalence; that is, by people who haven’t really looked at what’s been happening in linguistics over the past twenty years. We are no longer in the 1970s. Yet I’m afraid we must concede that the link with linguistics has been significantly weakened, at least for the time being.

Alternative locations have been considered.

### **Comparative literature?**

Many of the best theoretical and historical studies of translation have actually been carried out by people working in comparative literature, or at least in departments of language and literature that condone the incorporation of comparative methodologies. This would seem to offer a vague home for a type of Translation Studies institutionally divorced from the brute concerns of vocational training; it might thus be the prime base for those given to criticizing any prior dependence on linguistics. But does this alternative really fare any better?

Please allow me a brief biographical detour in order to explain a few doubts. At one stage in my crab-walk career I sought ‘prequalification’ for the position of *maître de conférences* in France. This meant entering a centralized national system that obliged me to apply in one of ten categories, none of which mentioned translation. Not wanting to limit my chances, I applied in two categories: *Linguistique générale* and *Littératures comparées* (yes, plural). To my surprise I was successful in the first category and unsuccessful in the second, presumably because the word ‘translation’ in my publications was automatically associated with linguistics and not with a certain French

conception of comparative literature. So translation still means linguistics. Back to square one!

Yet spare some thought for the avatars of comparative literature. In France, to stay with the anecdote, one kind of comparativism is traditionally reduced to studies of authors, the tracing of fortunes and influences, mostly with one side of the binomials located in France. My more generalist approach to translation could thus be excluded. Another kind of comparative literature nevertheless tries to cast its net further: a *Précis de Littérature comparée* (Brunel and Chevrel 1989) actually includes a chapter on 'Translated Literature'. So is Translation Studies in or out? Or should we just let the French argue the toss?

The situation is not much clearer in the English-language tradition. As an undergraduate I was enrolled in a programme that was consecutively called 'World Literature and Literary Theory', 'Comparative Literature and Literary Theory', 'Comparative and English Literature', and possibly other things since, but I lost interest long ago. The same programme was associated with an emphasis on semiotics, which was later called 'Linguistics' (square one *bis!*). As the names might suggest, that particular brand of comparativism remained open to many comers, integrating the debates of post-structuralism, Althusserian marxism, connections with feminism, psychoanalysis, studies of popular culture (as it was then called), and the beginnings of postcolonial theory (that was back in the 1970s). Any disciplinary dressing for the salad might be described as general literary and cultural theory, mostly conveniently forgetting specific restrictions to literature and strict methods of comparison. Comparative literature didn't have to be comparative and it didn't have to stick to literature; it was virtually anything we wanted it to be. No one objected to my working on translation (perhaps thanks to reception aesthetics and Steiner's *After Babel*); no one insisted that I work on specifically literary translation.

Let this underscore a further point of perplexity: Since some of our most influential non-vocational locations have 'literature' in their names, a focus on literary texts has tended to dominate descriptive studies, sometimes to the point where other forms of translation seem not to exist. Yet is there any great need to respect this literary focus? I have been able to get away with work on literary translation in courses on technical language, and I've carried out studies of nonliterary translation while located in departments of literature. In fact, I make a point of mixing the two, since I see no reason why the division between literary and nonliterary texts should have epistemological priority over any other categories of translation. This occasionally upsets people: I have been criticized both for focusing too exclusively on literature and for ignoring literary specificity. But surely the only thing this really upsets is a purely institutional binarism that risks getting in the way of Translation Studies?

If we haven't quite said good-bye to comparative literature in any strict sense, perhaps we should have. Susan Bassnett has openly stated what many of us have felt for years: 'comparative literature as a discipline has had its day' (1993: 161). This is nothing to write home about. The end has come as a stagnation rather than a crisis. On the one hand, as noted, comparative literature programmes like the one I went through as an undergraduate abandoned the strict comparing of literatures long ago. On the other, more traditional departments like the American one I spent a year at have been relatively unable to respond to the fancy theorising being done in rival departments like French and occasionally German or English. Either way, comparative literature has produced few ideas or models adequate to the way the planetary configuration of cultures has changed over the past twenty or so years. The textbooks still give us one national literature here, another there, and some kind of jumping between the two (or three, or four—the geometry remains the same). More thought is urgently required.

### **A big Translation Studies?**

What should replace comparative literature? I suppose Susan Bassnett could be attributed with two replies. The first might be Warwick University's doctoral programme in 'Translation Studies, Comparative Literary Theory, Comparative Literature, British Cultural Studies, Modern British Studies and Post-Colonial Studies'.<sup>1</sup> Has anything been left out? I'm sure everyone can do what they want; some can even do Translation Studies. But whatever else this magnificent title might represent, it is not a disciplinary location.

Yet Bassnett has a second answer, more formal and even visionary. She has proposed that comparative literature become a subcategory of a wider field called 'Translation Studies' (in Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 12, and several elsewhere), among other reasons because, apparently, 'a great many of the problems that the Comparative Literature people could not solve were being solved by those working in Translation Studies' (1991: 18). The proposal, purportedly based on Barthes' positioning of linguistics as a subcategory of semiotics<sup>2</sup>, could be valuable as

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<sup>1</sup> 'In recent years, doctoral research has included a study of eighteenth century Shakespeare translations into Italian, an investigation into constructions of Egypt by French and English travellers between 1790 and 1850, a study of the theory and practice of African literary translation, a comparative analysis of Arab feminist writings, a study of representations of Turkey in twentieth century detective fiction in English, a comparative study of English and French renaissance women's writing, an analysis of post-modernist theories of translation, a history of English translation of Malay verse, a study of the process of "Englishing" the Bible, an investigation of the study of translation and reception of selected Brazilian literary texts, a study of the problems of translating theatre texts and many others.' (Bassnett 1994: 35)

<sup>2</sup> I must have misunderstood Bassnett's claim here. Saussure originally posited that 'linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology' (1916: 16). Barthes (1967) almost reversed this relationship by viewing semiology as a *translinguistique*, a science that was supposed to examine all sign systems with reference to linguistic laws (see also Eco 1977: 30). In effect, Barthes was restoring linguistics to its

provocation, perhaps in the tradition of Jauss. But I don't really understand it. Exactly *what* problems has Translation Studies solved that comparative literature couldn't (apart from the problem of trying to look new and attract students)? And what should be done with all the bits of comparative literature that were busy comparing nontranslational texts? Should they be in or out of the new queen-size Translation Studies?

Here lies the rub. Bassnett's formal proposal can only make sense if the distinction between translation and nontranslation is dissolved. This could also make the result compatible with the Warwick menu in Translation Studies and everything else. Of course, the distinction between translation and nontranslation has repeatedly been attacked in several ways: through Lefevere's superordinate 'rewriting' (1992, and elsewhere), through appeals to generalized intertextuality, and by rejecting exclusive definitions of translation as if they were no more than opinionated prescriptions. If you believe there are no such things as nontranslations, Bassnett's proposal must seem a great step forward. You might even agree that 'the growth of Translation Studies as a separate discipline is a success story of the 1980s' (Bassnett and Lefevere 1992: xi). On the other hand, if you believe that *nontranslations* do exist and can be described as such, that it would thus be at least strategically inept to have translation subsume all literatures and indeed all texts, this wonderful success story of the 1980s is more likely to reflect a lack of discipline, a disintegration of Translation Studies, and even a piece of swift intellectual opportunism.

Now reconsider the possibility that the underlying change has been the massive expansion of translator-training programmes since the mid-1980s, which has certainly tilled fertile ground for academic jobs and publications in Translation Studies. If comparative literature has to seek new territory, along with other plots of general cultural theory, then Translation Studies is a potentially lucrative prize. Hence, perhaps, Bassnett's interest in a merger.

But let's try to be fair. At least four other strategies have been formulated as ways of reaching the desired union:

- Various historians working within German-language reception aesthetics have long seen translation as one among many forms of literary reception. True, translations received little attention in Jauss's most influential texts (1970, 1977) and were more or less sidelined in Grimm's 'reception history' handbook (1977), yet they were granted full status as a 'reception form' in Stackelberg (1972) and have steadily gained in importance through the many publications of the Göttingen Centre for Research in

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position of dominance, a move that, as far as I know, he did not later reverse. As for the originality of Bassnett's proposal, note that Kloepfer had previously claimed that 'a theory of translation practically encompasses the study of literature' (1981: 36).

Literary Translation (Sonderforschungsbereich 309).<sup>3</sup> Although this general strategy is not at all oppositional (Translation Studies and literary studies are considered complementary activities), the focus is often on the forms of translation that are closest to critical commentary or inspired reworking.

- Rolf Klopfer (1981) espoused a parallel form of complementarity when envisaging literary experts happily helping translators to understand literary texts, as if translators were unable to find out about literature by themselves, and as if translating were not one of the more useful activities of literary experts.
- Theo Hermans (1985), among others, chose instead to protest about the way traditional literary scholars looked down on translations (he didn't mention translators). Translation Studies could thus enter as something radically new, oppositional, and even scientific in its insistence on non-evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Yet no one screamed too loudly. Literary scholars just started doing Translation Studies, sometimes calling the change a 'cultural turn'. Those who went looking for fights rarely found them.

Whatever tensions, unions or takeovers might have been projected on relations between Translation Studies and comparative literature, they seem not to have mattered much. Meanwhile, both camps risk being overtaken by yet another relatively undisciplined term.

### **Cultural studies**

To continue the above review (since there is no real rupture in evidence), a fourth kind of strategy can be found in Lawrence Venuti, who takes up cudgels not in defence of translated texts but on behalf of translators as a social group. Translators, it seems, form an oppressed profession, somehow in need of liberation. Since part of the blame for their situation can be traced back to traditional ways of thinking about translation, Venuti proposes a magnanimous 'intervention' by theorists of marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism and postcolonial studies (1992: 1, 6), concocting a mix strangely reminiscent of my undergraduate comparative literature. But no, the general solution is now called 'cultural studies'. Such a move would at least give the theorists a new purpose. Without it, they might be left like so many revolutionaries in search of a country to liberate. Nothing suggests translators ever called for leadership of this kind.

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<sup>3</sup> See the *Göttinger Beiträge zur Internationalen Übersetzungsforschung* (Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin), ten sizeable volumes of which have appeared at the date of writing. The relative success of literary Translation Studies in Germany must also be seen in the light of *Interkulturelle Germanistik*, the aim of which is basically to study the reception of German language and literature outside of Germany. The French sometimes call their version *Littérature comparée* (singular).

<sup>4</sup> Note in passing that the non-evaluation of translations - a principle espoused by Hermans and other descriptivists - functioned institutionally as an upwardly mobile re-evaluation of translations as objects and thus, indirectly, of translation scholars as subjects.

But that is surely beside the point. The belligerent decrying of exploitation has become grist to the mill of an expanding academic research industry, with a certain degree of strategic logic and success.

Exactly what is meant by ‘cultural studies’ in such a context? In the English-language tradition the term might be traced back to the study of popular culture, the foundational work of Raymond Williams, practical marxism, then the broadening of horizons that came from the impact of poststructuralism in all the fields listed above. In the institutional context of the United States, though, cultural studies is something that Venuti might claim to be doing from within a department of English, an academic location he shares with the Douglas Robinson, who seeks similarly interventionist goals within precariously broad horizons. In the American setting, appeals to cultural studies could prove useful for drawing impetus from anthropologically or ethnographically based borderland studies or intercultural linguistics, which would seem to be more intellectually dynamic than Translation Studies as such. Cultural studies might even be what happens when the term ‘comparative literature’ is unavailable or has been occupied by others. Whatever the case, it is certainly one of the names that can surface in situations where Translation Studies is done without visible institutional contact with translator training, of which there is proportionally very little in the United States (cf. Nida 1996: 62).

Yet cultural studies is an admirably manipulable term, adaptable to many local contexts. In Garmersheim, Germany, the department of Applied Linguistics added a kind of cultural studies to its name (giving a *Fachbereich Angewandte Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft*), and continued to train translators and interpreters, both linguistically and culturally. Elsewhere, in the universities of Leuven and Tel Aviv, important for non-vocational descriptive Translation Studies, translation scholars operate within institutional frames called ‘Cultural Studies’ (a postgraduate institute in the first case, a department in the latter). In Britain, the adjective ‘British’ can be prefixed to Cultural Studies to form a useful name for channeling funds from the British Council. The precise content of the term in such contexts is anyone’s guess.

These developments interest me to the extent that the term ‘cultural studies’, as a superordinate covering Translation Studies, would seem to have liquidated the illusions of any firm and lasting disciplinary location; it is already a name for a mode of academic homelessness. With or without that name, something like the Warwick doctoral programme, which incorporates most of this week’s developments, is perhaps the best that translation can expect from a university structure, at least on the condition that the resulting openness not be confused with intellectual strength. At the end of the day, translation might as well be studied anywhere else; our work might as well be sold to whomever will pay for them with salaries, promotions or prestige.

## Solving problems

What most bothers me in this story is that, somewhere along the line, our politician academics have forgotten that the basic task of intellectual work is to solve general problems. This concerns two aspects that I only have space to mention here briefly. The first is the naïve notion that translation in itself might be enough to solve problems. The second, that the real problem to be solved could well be that of intellectual work itself.

Behind all the calls for an institutionally established Translation Studies, or for the highly specialized training of translators and interpreters, there lies an implicit belief that problems will be solved if we can just improve, in one way or another, the theory and practice of this particular professional field. We thus avoid the possibility that translation in itself might be a cause of problems in a wider social context, especially to the extent that there are other modes of cross-cultural communication that are more visible, more human, or more efficient, and yet receive far less attention. The problem could even be that there is too much translating going on, too great a social reliance on translators, and too much manipulation of translation in the interests of nationalist ideologies. On this level, I believe, it would be strategically astute to locate translation as just one narrow mode of communication and to insist that it is always selected from a range of possible alternatives, the most important of which is currently the learning of trade languages. But in what kind of institution or department could such a strategy be fully deployed?

The second problem is even more difficult to grasp. In the footsteps of Frow (1995), one might surmise that cultural studies and the like broadly seek ways in which intellectuals should act on a global social level; yet the real challenge is to explain why current intellectuals *don't* act in such a way. The question is of some importance for theories that would place the effective social power of post-industrial societies in the hands of a broad class of information managers, of people who produce communication, rather than those who produce material merchandise or even those who own the means of communication. A revolutionary theory might even call on these information managers, of which translators and translation scholars are surely a part, to gain some collective awareness of their power and to change the world for the better. Isn't that ultimately the kind of thinking that underlies cultural studies and similar academic frames for people who know a bit of everything?

Yet there is little such awareness, and the reasons are not hard to pin down. Professionalism, for one, has everyone managing their own plot of information: experts in television produce television programmes, translators translate, interpreters interpret, state officials officialize, academics academize, and everyone would do so on the basis of specialized training and in response to segmental market demands; few expert translators or translation scholars are really in a position to ask if translation is the best

available mode of cross-cultural communication; they are experts first, intellectuals second (cf. Pym 1996). Second, the information managers, including translators and academics, are experts in manipulating discourses and thus in bringing about discursive change, breaking down identities, further fragmenting any idealized group unity of their own, moving on ever more quickly in order to capitalize on fleeting relative advantages. Third, the communications between information managers, and we are still among them, increasingly run cross the state boundaries by which we are paid, subsidized, made citizens of nations, put into buildings to live with each other and to create solidarity. When you are sitting in an office communicating across the planet, translating or theorizing, you are not going to care much about what part of the building your office is in. That's why the specialized university department can no longer pretend to be a home. That's why we shouldn't worry about it too much. We are already, in effect, homeless, selling our skills without having to promise allegiance.

Translation Studies is only a small part of this wider problematic. Yet it is an extremely significant part in that the material it studies, and the people it may help to train, are themselves directly placed in the world of intercultural information managers. A wider Translation Studies could be in an ideal position to form some general consciousness of this situation, in keeping with the old marxist dreams. At the same time, though, we fall victim to the logic of fragmentation every time we try to pit one institutional location against another, every time we choose literature over linguistics, theory over vocational training, society over technology, the one true translation over chimerical substitutes. Far better, I suggest, to name that fragmentation and to distance ourselves from it.

We should learn to live with this situation; we should learn to be homeless. This means adapting to many possible homes and communicating with many further homes. Let the academic politicians fight over the institutional structures. There is potentially great power to be tapped independently of departments, subsidies, bricks and mortar. All we need is poor technology and a lot of thought. As for what causes should be fought for from a homeless position, that, I'm afraid, is a question of ethics, and another story.

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