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Emily Apter. *The translation zone: A new comparative literature*.  
Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. xii + 298 pp. ISBN  
0–691–04997–1. 12.95 £. [Translation/Transnation.]

Reviewed by Anthony Pym (Tarragona)

This book attempts to redefine Comparative Literature in terms of translation, deemed to have become a key factor in the post-9/11 world. The text begins with twenty theses on translation, the first of which is "Nothing is translatable" and the last of which is "Everything is translatable". Along the way we have insights like

“Translation is the language of planets and monsters” and “Translation is an oedipal assault on the mother tongue”. It’s one of those books. Once she gets into her stride, Apter produces neat chains of such assertions, as in the following:

Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements. (p. 6)

For anyone versed in the recent avatars of American literary studies, these are all good things, with theoretical resonance across whole lists of set texts. Of small import that none of those things necessarily ensues from translation in the narrow sense of a norm-governed means of cross-cultural communication; none of these things strictly requires different languages. “Translation” here obviously embraces much more than that (the sentence following on from the above actually focuses on the process of learning a foreign language, which some might see as an alternative to the use of translations). The stage is set for a discourse that can run free.

And it does. We are treated to an engaging comparison of Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer in Istanbul, the latter being seen as the origin of (American) Comparative Literature, with Edward Said later calquing a humanism on the two. Then we consider the fate of Algerian literature in translation, selected as a case where relative non-translation precludes international circulation. *Ensuite*: a survey of Oulipo literature and fellow travelers, in French and English. Next: the politics of the Balkans and the role of international English, somehow related to technology and “a nuclear attack on the language of humans” (some pun mileage is apparently had from the ideology of “nuclear English”). Followed by: the literary usages of defective and taboo English, contrasted with something called “CNN English”, seen as a world-dominated technological Creole (personally I love hearing the Australian accents on CNN, but that’s obviously beside the point). Subsequently: hybridity and Creoles in literature, and the creative use of media technologies. Then, as if by condescension, some comments on a translation in a narrow sense, except that it turns out to be a pseudotranslation (not) from the Japanese, justified here because it helped the development of American Beat poetry. Here we pause to inspect the methodology, at a point where Apter’s discourse might speak to most readers of this journal.

The American poet Kenneth Rexroth translated poems from Japanese and Chinese (and Spanish), sometimes working in tandem with speakers of those languages. His 1974 anthology *One hundred more poems from the Japanese* includes translations for which there were no corresponding Japanese poems. He attributed these pseudotranslations to the invented woman author Marichoko. Apter makes

a meal of this apparent scandal (pseudotranslations are actually common enough), and she skillfully shows that her scholarly eye can see through the hoax:

Detection of Rexroth's forgery becomes easier the more closely the poems are examined. Superficial similarities can be found between a Yosano Akiko and a Marichiko poem: a shared hair motif, for example, allows parallels to be drawn between Akiko's "A hair unbound, in this / Hothouse of lovemaking. / Perfumed with lilies, / I dread the oncoming of / The pale rose of the end of night" and Marichiko's "I cannot forget / The perfumed dusk inside the / Tent of my black hair. / As we awoke to make love / After a long night of love" which, Rexroth writes disingenuously in a footnote, "echoes Yosano Akiko." Further consideration, however, reveals the sexual realism of the Marichiko texts to be more graphic, more prone to Orientalist kitsch... On close scrutiny the Marichiko poems fall apart as credible simulations of Japanese women's writing. (pp. 218-219)

I quote the passage *in extenso* not just for the obvious pleasure of writing "hot-house of lovemaking" but in order to show the critic at work. Apter claims she can tell Rexroth's work is a forgery by comparing it with... what? She appears to have no direct access to Japanese, so in order to show authentic "Japanese women's writing" she necessarily has recourse to... a translation, somehow assumed to be an authentic representation (as it turns out, the translation of Akiko is also by Rexroth, and Apter has lifted the comparison directly from Chapter 4 of Gibson 1986, but originality is clearly no longer a value anyway). In order to show that the pseudotranslation is inauthentic, Apter necessarily assumes that the translation is authentic. That would be dandy were it not for the transitory conclusion drawn from the exercise:

The revelation of a translational false coin leaves the reader aware of the dimension of epistemological scam or faked-up alterity inherent in all translation. (p. 220)

All translations, one supposes, except the one Apter has just had to rely on as a surrogate for Japanese. Then comes the grand all-seeing social critique:

The translation business is geared to keeping his scam from view, for it wants to convince readers that when it markets an author in translation, the translated text will be a truly serviceable stand-in for the original. (p. 220)

Heaven forbid that any of us should fall into that infernal trap!

Methodology is not one of Apter's strong points, and basic contradictions like this appear all too frequently. The well-meant call for a multi-cultural humanism (which deserves much support) is framed by a Comparative Literature that can only be US-based in its origins and avatars (Spitzer, Said) and is thus ultimately parochial. The selection of Algerian literature as a case of non-translation never asks why this particular case is selected (the currency of Cixous might be there *pour quelque*

*chose*, as must the availability of French, since Algerian Arabic literature is not discussed, let alone Berber, and there is no awareness of the distribution of texts across the Arabic-speaking world). And Apter's fine awareness of French and French-language cultures is constantly offset by her challenging usages of German (to the extent of a one-page example apparently being the wrong example, pp. 202–203).

At the same time, some of Apter's myriad quick connections turn out to be genuinely serviceable. Immediately after her disastrous detection of the pseudo-translation she dubs Rexroth's practice the literary equivalent of "cloning from code", allowing many references to contemporary genetics and informatics: "digital code holds out the prospect, at least, of translating everything into everything else" (p. 227). Now, even though Emily Apter knows little about contemporary translation technologies (she rarely gets beyond hearsay) or indeed about the localization industry (not on the horizon here), this notion of "cloning from code" could and should portray precisely what is happening out there. The combinations of controlled writing, obligatory terminology bases, translation memories, incorporated machine translation, content management systems and general management systems do indeed mean that in technical domains, cross-cultural communication is working from standardized codes, and no longer from texts. In terms of this particular sector, *malgré* her untheorized restriction to literature, Apter has seen true, and for that deserves real credit.

Beyond the good and bad, what kind of Translation Studies is this? Apter invokes a short list of pioneers: "George Steiner, André Lefevere, Antoine Berman, Gregory Rabassa, Lawrence Venuti, Jill Levine, Michel Heim, Henri Meschonnic, Susan Sontag, Richard Howell, and Richard Sieburth", with Walter Benjamin perhaps turning in his grave somewhere beneath all of them. This is contrasted with a traditional Translation Studies that has apparently only been concerned with *adequatio*, "the measurement of semantic and stylistic infidelity to the original literary text" (p. 5), — Apter again does not question the literary frame. One might also contrast her generally American-Francophone literary heritage with the kind of Translation Studies developed over the past 40 years in some parts of the world that actually depend on translators for their internal politics, as well as for a good deal of their literature. For example, Apter makes no mention of anything that might have appeared in *Target* over the past 18 years. How is that possible? Consider for a moment the fact that Apter finds her definition of "pseudotranslation" in the *Routledge encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (in an article written by Douglas Robinson — even that definition had to be American). Presumably she at least touched a biggish book that traces how much has actually been done in recent decades, very little of it concerned with merely prescriptive accuracy. Somehow Apter manages to ignore most of that encyclopedia. Indeed, she might be accused of using no more than the aegis of translation, deceptively practical and engaged in

real-world exchanges, to repackage the contemporary fare of American Comparative Literature. Translating from code, indeed.

Let me confront the underlying problem. Some American literary scholars, with international extensions, are using the term “translation” to refer to far more than translations. Sometimes this gives results that are simply embarrassing; while the very next page might bring a truly useful phrase. What are we to make of this?

On the one hand, the extended dynamics of “translation” might be a timely counterbalance to a European and Canadian Translation Studies (with extensions) that has spent decades trying to become an empirical scientific discipline. Translation does concern the way cultures interrelate at all levels, in a globalizing world that is shifting the fundamental categories. Our structuralists (in Descriptive Translation Studies) and our positivists (especially in Interpreting Studies) have been unable to address those changes, and they have developed no audience for such a discourse anyway. Anything that can make us engage with large-scale social and intellectual problematics should be welcomed with open arms. After all, some of us have been trying to move in that direction for years, with wider labels like “Transfer Studies” (Even-Zohar) or “Translation and Intercultural Studies” (subtitle of a journal somewhere, and of several PhD programs). The model of the New York intellectual might serve this purpose quite well. Approaches like Apter’s will perhaps allow our boring old Translation Studies to gain a foothold in the American academic agenda, and from there it will undoubtedly spread like flavor-of-the-month to countless adepts of Cultural Studies, Literary Theory, Comparative Literature, and so on, all over the world, wherever students await news of intellectual trends (in Istanbul, or Puebla, or Bahia, for example, to list no more than recent conferences on the wider metaphors of translation). This is our Panama Canal, and Professor Apter, editor of the series “Translation/Transnation” at Princeton University Press, might become our most valuable pilot. We should treat her much better than I have done here (sorry about that).

On the other hand, that European-Canadian Translation Studies (with extensions) has long had a dynamic connection with its societies, mainly through the education of translators, interpreters, and mediators of all kinds. We have not only trained the practitioners (*adequatio*, if you will) but we have also spent years studying translators and translations, and we are doing so in terms of Linguistics, Literary Studies, History, Cultural Studies and increasingly Sociology (check the biggish book, due to come out in a new edition). Paradoxically, a narrow concern with accuracy has far more to do with the scholars who Apter names as her guides, most of whom have been prepared to argue for or against certain ways of translating. The European-Canadian lineage, on the other hand, went through a descriptivist cleansing. We are thus in a position to deal with the relations between trans-

lation and migrations, translation and technology, translation and global English, translation and minority literatures, translation and globalization, for example. And within that European-Canadian compass there has been no general need, so far, to call all of those things “translation”. From that perspective, a translation is still something that happens when there are presumed to be two or more languages involved, plus directionality. Translations are still texts of some kind. We still produce them; our societies still use them; we are seriously living Translation Studies in that deceptively regressive narrow sense. Further, the enhanced interdisciplinarity we surely need may come through cooperation with professional sociologists, professional historians, professional psychologists, professional legal experts, professional IT experts, and so on. Much has to be done in that direction. But that kind of interdisciplinarity is quite different from the model of the intellectual who knows it all already, whose view of translation includes many things that occur quite happily within the one language (English, and in Apter’s case French), and who is quick to lance the grand critiques.

Far be it from me to defend *adequatio*, but I finished this book with an image of Emily Apter as a part of the cultural system that gave rise to Colin Powell’s infamous address to the United Nations, the one on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (well, she wants to talk about the post-9/11 world). The intelligence was bad, the translations were missing (the translators from Arabic were missing!), but no matter, we might now say: just as Rexroth was justified by Beat poetry, so Powell was justified by the invasion of Iraq. And so to foreign deserts, to set the world aright. That is perhaps unfair (New York intellectuals are on the other side of politics, of course), but wait:

Between love and disruption, between self-knowledge and Modernist denaturalization (I pick up the terms of Apter’s opening sally), somewhere, somehow, there must be an attempt to understand the other. There is not much of it in this book.

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