

World Literature through Translation

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- In the current international literary scholarship, discussing the issue of world literature has become an important and cutting edge theoretical topic, especially along with the acceleration of globalization in literature and culture. Although scholars might have different opinions on whether globalization has made some favorable or unfavorable impact on the development of world literature, I should say that world literature, as the earliest stage of comparative literature, was born under the direct influence of the appearance of globalization from economy to cultural and intellectual production.

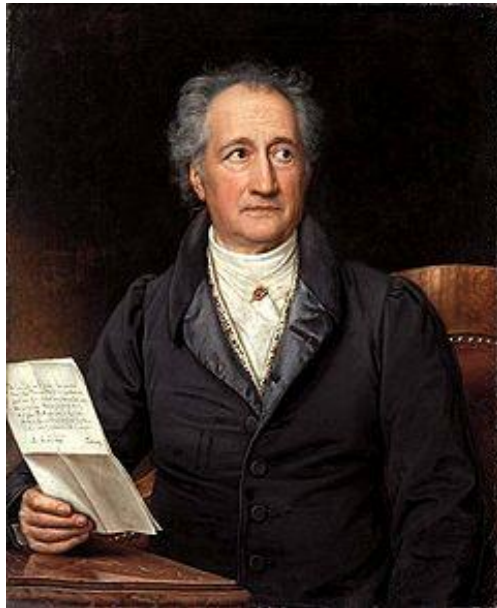
- And in today's context of globalization, comparative literature has culminated in world literature along with the dissolution of Eurocentrism and Westcentrism and the rise of Eastern culture and literature. Since cultural globalization has brought about both cultural homogenization and cultural diversity, translation is playing a more and more important role not only in building up ones' national and cultural identity or identities, but also in reconstructing a new world literature not only crossing the boundary of languages and nations but also crossing that of literary and cultural traditions.

(1) Word Literature Reconsidered

- In the context of cultural globalization, we may often hear such questions: is there only one world literature? If the answer is yes, what is the relationship between it and various national literatures? Indeed world literature has now been a much talked about topic not only by comparatists but also by scholars of individual national literatures as the latter have found their literature as part of world literature. And all national literatures, be they strong or weak, would move among the forest of world literature if they do not want to isolate themselves from the outside world. But as for what world literature really means today still invites various debates and discussions.

- Obviously, the term world literature (Weltliteratur) was first conceptualized by Goethe in his conversation with Eckermann in 1827, in which Goethe sums up after his access to some non-Western literary works, including some of the Chinese literary works of minor importance: “Poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men.... National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”

- **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** (1749 – 1832) was a German writer and polymath. Goethe is considered by many to be the most important writer in the German language and one of the most important thinkers in Western culture.



- So in today's context, to associate the phenomenon of globalization with the issue of world literature is fully reasonable. From a disciplinary point of view, world literature is actually the very early stage of comparative literature, coming out of the process of economic and financial globalization. Thus Goethe himself is called one of the “fathers” of comparative literature.

- In order to highlight the function of literary and cultural studies in the current era of globalization, we should certainly have a comparative perspective and international view on which we could achieve some new advances in our literary studies. If we say that the above-mentioned phenomenon is only the early form of a utopianist world literature, then, in today's context of globalization, along with the remapping of global culture and global Englishes, re-emphasizing the construction of world literature is of particular significance.

- As we all know, in today's literary studies, the traditional boundary of national literatures has been more and more obscured. No literary scholar can claim that he just studies one individual national literature only without referring to other literatures or social and cultural backgrounds, for cultural and literary trends have been marked with regional or even global characteristics.

- In this sense, world literature also means those literary works with “transnational” or “translational” significance, common aesthetic quality and far-reaching social and cultural influence. World literature is thus by no means a fixed phenomenon, but rather a traveling concept. In the process of its traveling and circulation, translation plays a very important role, without which some of these literary works might always remain “dead” in the contexts of other cultures and literary traditions, or even “marginalized”.

- And in the process of their traveling world wide, some of the literary works which are of originally national influence will become internationally well known and have their continued life or “afterlife” in other cultural contexts. Others might well lose their significance and value in the process of traveling largely because of their inappropriateness to the particular cultural soil or literary context.

- When we talk about world literature, we usually adopt two different attitudes: cultural relativism and cultural universalism. The former emphasizes the equal value of different national literatures, while the latter lays more emphasis on the universal and common aesthetic and criterion of value judgment, which finds particular embodiment in anthologizing literary works in translation.

- Although various anthologies of “world literature” have often used the term to market a largely European canon, the past three decades have given rise to a much more expansive conception of literary interest and value. Recent books such as David Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?*, for instance, define world literature as a category of literary production, publication and circulation,

- rather than merely using the term for the purpose of evaluation. It is also used for the domain of its objective influence. Arguably, this is closer to the original sense of the term in Goethe and Marx and Engels. Therefore, according to Douwe Fokkema, in the discussion of world literature, “two major problems will emerge”.

Wang Ning is lecturing at Harvard Humanities Center



- Similarly, in viewing the acceleration of globalization in culture, one tends to see its homogenizing tendency while overlooking its diversifying aspect which is actually more and more conspicuous in the process of cultural globalization. In this way, I would rather adopt a cultural relativist attitude toward cultures and literatures of all countries, thinking that such a world literature is represented in different languages. So it should sometimes be described in plural form.

- That is, there should be no such thing as singular world literature only. Thus we have both *world literature* in general, and *world literatures* in particular: the former refers to a universal criterion to evaluate the highest level of literature of world significance, and the latter refers to the different representations, including translations, of literatures from all countries. I will chiefly focus on the former from a theoretical point of view in this lecture.

Damrosch's definition of world literature

- In describing how world literature has formed through production, translation and circulation, Damrosch puts forward his threefold definition focused on the world, the text, and the reader:
 - *1. World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.*
 - *2. World literature is writing that gains in translation.*
 - *3. World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.*

- David Damrosch (1953-), one of the most important scholars in world literature studies, is Ernest Bernbaum Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University.



- Actually, in his insightful book, Damrosch touches largely upon non-Western literary works, and sometimes in their original languages and mostly through translations, which is undoubtedly a great progress made by mainstream Western comparatists. Since world literature is represented in different languages, one cannot read all the excellent works in their original languages even if they intend to. In this sense, translation plays an inevitable and important role in reconstructing such world literatures in different languages and cultural backgrounds.

- In the past decades, the postcolonial literary attempts have also proved that even in the same language, for instance, English, literary writing is more and more diversifying, hence the birth of international English literature studies. Thus the concept “world literature” is no longer determinate, for it has evolved in the historical development of literature of all countries.

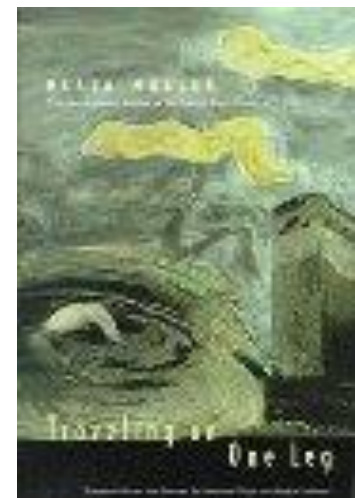
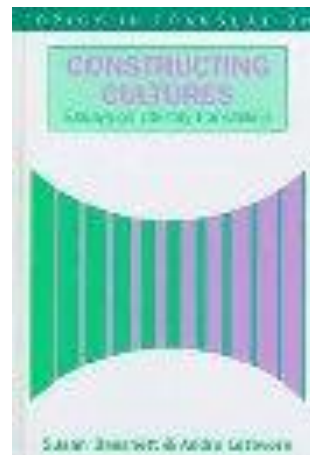
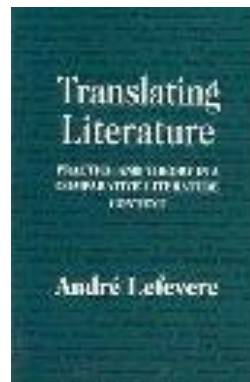
Wang's reconstruction of world literature

- Starting from Damrosch's definition, I should revise a bit further by referring to the development of Chinese literature. In my opinion, when we use the term "world literature," we actually endow it with at least the following connotations:
- A canonical body of excellent literature of all countries, whether Eastern or Western.
- A global and cross-cultural perspective and comparative horizon in our study, evaluation and criticism of literature in general.
- A literary evolution through production, circulation, translation and critical selection in different languages.

(2) Beyond Word for Word Translation

- Literary translation, different from any other types of translation, has always invited various debates and discussions, but it is particularly significant to the circulation of world literature. According to André Lefevere, (literary) translation is a type of “rewriting”, which might well “manipulate” the fame of the writer. If it is true in a sense, it will largely depend on whether it will enable the translated work to gain and become part of world literature.

- **Andre Lefevere**(1945–1996) was one of the most important translation theorists of the second half of the twentieth century. When he died he was Professor of Germanic Studies in the University of Texas in Austin.

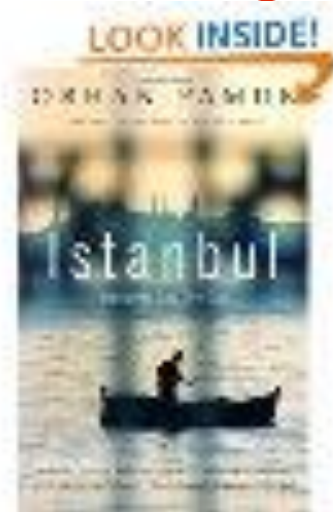


- Take the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk for example. Without translation, he “would be unknown outside his native Turkey; thanks to translations, his haunting novel *Kar* can be found in Mexico City airport under the title *Nieve*, bought in Berlin bookshops as *Schnee* and ordered from Amazon.com in its English version, *Snow*.” Thus, it is translation that “paved the way for Pamuk to win the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, and it is in translation that he and a host of other writers will usually be read in world literature courses.” It is also the translation of his major works into Chinese that enables some of the Chinese graduate students to write their dissertations on Pamuk.

Orhan Pamuk (1952-) is a world famous and Nobel Prize winner Turkish novelist from modern times.

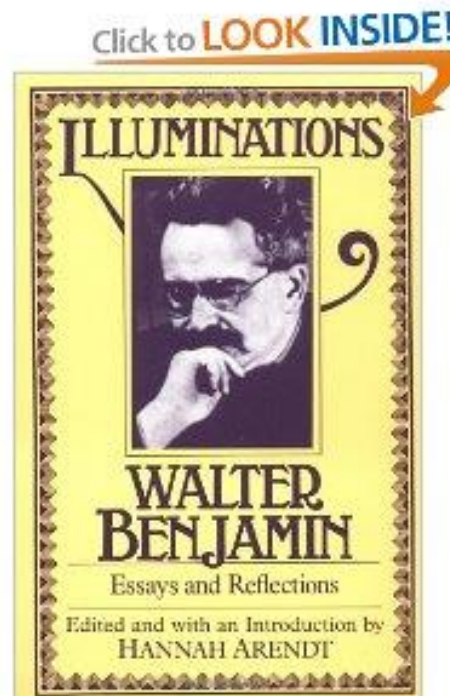
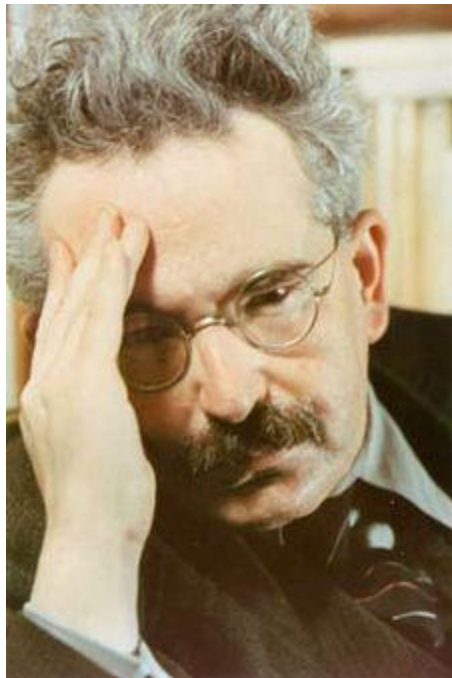


- **Ferit Orhan Pamuk** (1952-) is a Turkish novelist. He is also the Robert Yik-Fong Tam Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, where he teaches comparative literature and writing.



- In discussing the function of translation in highlighting and canonizing literary works in other languages, one cannot but start with Walter Benjamin, who in dealing with the task of the (literary) translator, pertinently points out, “For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity.”

- **Walter B. S. Benjamin** (1892 – 1940) was a German-Jewish intellectual (philosopher, sociologist, literary critic, translator, essayist) occasionally associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory.



- It is true that to Benjamin, translation is no longer merely linguistic rendition, or word for word translation only. It has some other functions, among which it helps a literary work to become international or cosmopolitan. So according to Benjamin, it is translation that endows a literary work with a “continued” life or an “afterlife”, without which it might remain dead or “marginalized” in a particular literary and cultural tradition.

- It is true that when we decide to translate a literary work which we think might well have some transnational or international significance, we must measure its “translatability” inherent in the original work and predict its potential market. If a translated work should have a “continued” life in another language and cultural background, it must have a sort of translatability, which will guarantee a successful translation of a literary work in the target language.

- Obviously, to Benjamin, translator is not a passive recipient of the original, but rather, a dynamic interpreter and creative representer of the original since a work produced by the author is far from complete. Once a literary work is published, it does not belong to the author only, and the author even has no influence on its possible “continued” life and afterlife. For its significance could only be exploited by different readers-interpreters of both his generation and the later generations.

- [The] translator thus plays three different roles at the same time: a value judge of whether the work he wants to translate is worth doing or will have a potential market, or whether it is of certain translatability; a close and intimate reader of the original who is subject to the original; a dynamic interpreter and a creative representer of the original to complete the incomplete task of the author. In this sense, a translator's function should be treated equal to the author.

- Apart from the above mentioned function of a translator, his most important function perhaps lies in whether the translated version is good or bad will directly decide whether the original work will have a “continued” life in another language and cultural background. Judging by the situation of translation practice in China, I think that there might be three cases in the relations between the translator and the author: (1) the translator’s level is higher than the author; (2) the translator’s level is as high as the author; and (3) the translator’s level is lower than the author.

- Obviously, in the first case, the translator most possibly intervenes too much in recreating the original, like some of the translations done by Chinese translator Lin Shu in the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. The second case is a most ideal one, in which the translator co-works with the author with complete understanding, and the translator not only renders the subtle meaning between the lines and behind the lines of the original but also represents the author's style, as the Chinese translator Fu Lei translated Balzac's works in the 1950s and 1960s, which made Balzac the most famous and canonical author of French literature in China.

- 林纾（**1852—1924**）中国近代著名文学家，小说翻译家。原名群玉、秉辉，字琴南，号畏庐、畏庐居士，别署冷红生。



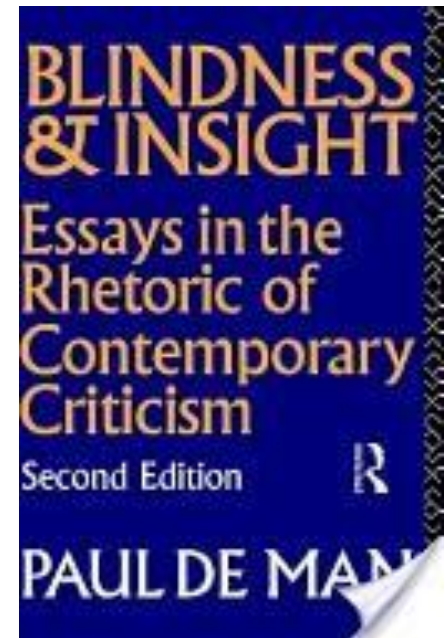
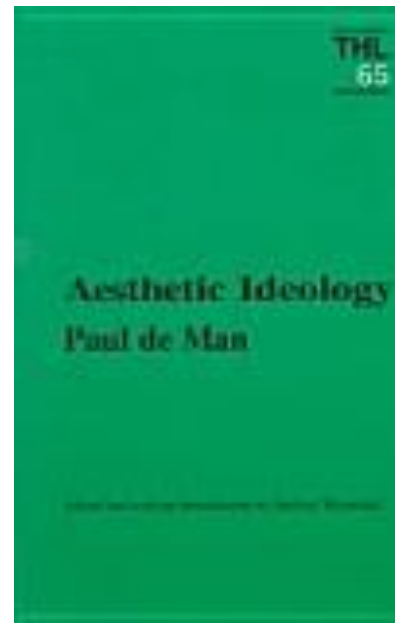
- 傅雷（1908—1966），字怒安，号怒庵，上海市南汇县人，翻译家，文艺评论家。



- The third case is most popular in today's translation circles, in which many green hands involve themselves in serious literary and academic translation. That is the very reason why many of the Chinese translations of foreign literary and theoretical works cannot be read and understood. Thus, the function of translator is all the more important than merely a faithful information transmitter. A good translator may well make an originally good work better and even canonized in the target language, while a bad translator may not only ruin an originally excellent work but also decanonize the work in the target language.

- As a pioneering figure of deconstructive translation theory, Benjamin's essay has strongly influenced the whole generation of contemporary translation theorists or literary scholars: Paul de Man not only largely agreed with him but even developed his ideas later on. In Derrida, translation is viewed both "inevitable and impossible", but a "relevant" translation could still be achieved by the efforts of the translator.

- **Paul de Man** (1919 – 1983) was a Belgian-born deconstructionist literary critic and theorist. At the time of his death from cancer, he was Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University.



- Although Derrida's translation theory is not highly regarded among the conservative translation studies circles, and is not even viewed as a guide to translation practice, it has at least opened up some new possibilities for translators to approach. For to him and other deconstructionists, you cannot say that you have obtained the truth (faithfulness); what you have done is only approaching the truth (original). So translation is always an incomplete process which can be advanced by the efforts of one generation after another of translators.

- Perhaps the most powerful institutional authority in the 20th century to manipulate the fame of an author as well as his work is the Swedish Academy which gives the Nobel Prize for literature, which may well make an unknown writer become world renowned and canonize his work in a very short time. But even so, just as Horace Engdahl, who was once the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, illustrates frankly, “The Nobel Prize for literature basically rests on the Western concept of literature that took shape with the Brothers Schlegel.”

- **Horace Oscar Axel Engdahl** (1948-) is a Swedish literary historian and critic, and has been a member of the Swedish Academy since 1997. He was the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, i.e. its spokesman, from 1999 to June 2009.



The old building of Swedish Academy



- As for its power for canonicity, he points out, “Canonicity is a function of forces that cannot be controlled and do not form a closed and identifiable system. Cultural authority is only one of these forces and perhaps not the strongest. The symbolic power that the Nobel Prize has accumulated over a hundred years is demonstrably insufficient to make an author canonical, but sufficient to arouse the curiosity of posterity.”

- I think it is more than enough to “arouse the curiosity” of the reader about one non-canonical writer. So if Engdahl is modest in belittling the symbolic power and cultural capital of the Nobel Prize in canonizing a literary work, the last sentence I quote here is certainly true: the prize-winning will make the author world renowned and his work become part of world literature. And he and his works will be studied by critics and scholars in later generations.

- **Jorge Mario Pedro Vargas Llosa** (1936-) is a Peruvian writer, politician, journalist, essayist, and Nobel Prize laureate.



(3) Translating Chinese Literature in a Global Context

- If we recognize that globalization has impacted studies of an individual national literature, then it has also promoted studies of comparative literature and world literature: it makes traditional elite literary studies largely expand its domain and comparative literature studies merge into cultural studies and world literature. That is, it is possible to put literary studies in a broader context of cultural studies in an attempt to transcend literature's proper.

Translating China Conference in Beijing



Wang Ning is speaking at the American Literary Translators Association Annual Conference



- Globalization has brought about two aspects of influence to China's literary and cultural studies: its positive aspect lies in that it brings cultural and intellectual production closer to the governance of the market economy rather than the past socialist planned economy. But on the other hand, it makes elite cultural production more and more difficult, thus enlarging the gap between elite culture and popular culture. In the current era, formalistically oriented literary theory has been replaced by more inclusive cultural theory or just theory.

- Any theory produced in the Western context, if it intends to become universal or global, should be appropriate to interpret non-Western literary and cultural phenomena. Similarly, any theory produced in a non-Western context, if it is intended to move from “periphery” to “center”, must be first of all “discovered” by Western academia and translated into English. The same is true of literary translation in China.

- In the past century, Chinese literature, under the Western influence, has been moving toward the world by means of translation. To those conservative intellectuals, this opening up to the outside world and cultural modernity is a sort of historical process of colonizing Chinese culture and literature. In this way, the May 4th Movement started the process of Chinese modernity, destroying the mechanism of China's long-lasting nationalism.

- To many people, the Chinese language was also largely “Europeanized” or “Westernized” in this “colonizing” process. But to my mind, this is undoubtedly the direct result of China’s cultural and literary modernity which is different from Western modernity. One of the conspicuous phenomena is that numerous foreign literary works and theoretic trends were translated into Chinese, thus strongly stimulating Chinese writers’ creative imagination.

- On the other hand, world literature is always traveling, in the process of which it might have its continued life and afterlife. This fact finds particular embodiment in China's large-scale translation of Western and Russian literary works. There is also a subjective and dynamic selection of world literature in the Chinese context. And it is this selection of translation that enables world literature in China to have its unique canon which is not always the same with its original form in the West and in Russia.

- So transnationalism has been built up largely through translation, and it has its own tradition and unique form in China: in the old society, when China was poor and Chinese culture and literature were backward, having no place in world literature, its writers simply called for translating foreign literary works into Chinese so that modern Chinese literature could move from periphery to center and finally toward the world.

- Today, when China has become a strong power, both economically and politically, it is urgent to recreate it as a cultural and literary power. In this way, translation will play an even more important role to bring Chinese literature closer to the mainstream of world literature. But this time, we will shift our attention from translating Western literature into Chinese to translating Chinese literature into the various languages of the world.

- Obviously, if we re-examine the positive and negative consequences of the May 4th Movement from today's perspective, we may well reach such a conclusion: in bringing various Western cultural trends and theories to China, the May 4th writers and intellectuals did overlook the attempt at introducing Chinese culture and literature to the outside world. Similarly, in destroying the Confucian temples, they also got rid of the positive elements in Confucianism, thereby anticipating the “crisis of belief” in contemporary China.

- Now, what is the consequence of globalization on Chinese, the most popular language next to English? As we have already noticed, Chinese has also undergone several changes: from a national language to a regional language and, finally, to one of the major world languages. The popularization of Chinese literature world wide has undoubtedly changed the established framework of world culture. The construction of Chinese modernity or modernities has also deconstructed the “singular” modernity characterized by Western-centrism.

- The advent of globalization has all the more blurred the boundary of nation-states as well as that of languages and cultures, paving the way for a new world language system to come into being. In this new framework of world language and culture, the transnationality of Chinese language and culture will become more and more conspicuous.

- And, in this way, we may well think of translating Chinese literature on both the interlingual level as well as in the intercultural level, for the latter practice will highlight Chinese literature and culture more effectively in the current world. The former practice will make it possible for Chinese literature to be better known to the non-Chinese speaking world.

- Thanks for your attention!