

An Intercultural Approach to Translation Literature, Soft Power and Global Diplomacy

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Cultural Paradigms: Polarity in Cultural and Literary Studies

SOME PRELIMINARY theoretical considerations are essential for the present scientific undertaking. In this respect, the term cultural paradigm may be defined as an overarching concept of literary and translation studies, emerging from and revolving around a fundamental pattern characteristic for a particular age or area and indomitably subject to cyclical shifts or radical changes triggered by the natural though unpredictable evolution of society as well as the turning point in the relation between an obsolete past and an unforeseeable future. A paradigm shift, akin to a crisis likely to activate the creative potential, incorporates change and connections, equally reflecting and affecting cultural production and its context. Challenging established assumptions most often encounters resistance and reluctance in the process of awakening and making us aware of different perceptions and enriched perspectives of reality. As Edward de Bono, renown philosopher and intellectual, also warned: “We see what we are prepared to see. We see what we want to see. We see what we are used to seeing. We see what our emotions have sensitized us to see.” He further reinforced the idea: “We are excellent at analysis but not nearly so good at design, because design needs a different kind of thinking.”¹

Challenging traditional views and disrupting habitual patterns is part of the inexorable evolution of humankind, whether human-created and enforced or rather a metaphor defined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his widely celebrated book as the “Black Swan” theory of randomness and uncertainty, a “combination of low predictability and large impact” shaping a great puzzle. “Black Swan logic makes *what you don't know* far more relevant than what you do know” and it is also prone to shaking individuals out of the complacency in accepting standardized perspectives, making us aware of “the fragility of our knowledge.” “What we call here a Black Swan (and capitalize it) is an event with the following three attributes. First, it is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of regular expect-

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tations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact (unlike the bird). Third . . . human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence *after* the fact, making it explainable and predictable.”² Thus, taking up on de Bono’s principles, a paradigm shift, from “rock logic”—the embodiment of a system of antithetical thinking and judgment—to “water logic”—unhindered by the straightjacket of rigidity and self-centeredness, will ultimately lead to creative and constructive thinking.³ Since a paradigm is primarily a pattern, this may be defined as a standardized perspective, equally misleading, biased and subjective, also called a “cultural grid” or “mental map”—a mediated and thus highly selective representation of the world, evolving from distorted perceptions of cultural and human geography, reinforcing pre-established polarities and strengthening poles of power, highlighted by three mechanisms: centrality, volume and articulation. The first one, centrality, essentially means a “tendency to place one’s own country in a central position, at least, in a more central position than it would be in others’ maps and to group the rest of the world around it. Simultaneously, there is a tendency to make other countries and, indeed, entire continents peripheral.”

Secondly, volume refers to a “tendency to enlarge the surface of one’s own country, to inflate it disproportionately in comparison to others” in addition to a “tendency to deflate other areas considered as irrelevant.” Finally, articulation is defined as the “tendency to render one’s own country in great and characteristic detail, and to reduce other countries and continents to shapeless blobs. On the one hand, this is a very ‘logical’ result. On the other hand, it also betrays the collective narcissism in which we are all imbued.”⁴

Any accurate and unbiased approach requires multiperspectivity which, according to Robert Stradling, “is not just a process or strategy, it is also a predisposition . . . a willingness to accept that there are other possible ways of viewing the world other than one’s own and that these may be equally valid and equally partial; and . . . a willingness to put oneself in someone else’s shoes and try and see the world as they see it, that is, to exercise empathy.”⁵ Mark Monmonier accurately delineated the essential characteristic of maps, straddling between objective representation of the world and subjective perception of the viewer or, rather author of maps, with a wave-lie impact on the reader or interpreter of maps. “To portray meaningful relationships for a three-dimensional world on a flat sheet of paper or a video screen, a map must distort reality . . . There’s no escape from the cartographic paradox: to present a useful and truthful picture, an accurate map must tell white lies.”⁶ At this stage of our analysis, we find it relevant to resort to the concept of “mental framing” whose applicability and significance include literary, media or communication studies, where centrality equals subsequent control and influence upon the periphery, despite the fluidity of such representations. *Mutatis mutandis*, world literature tends to revolve around a “center” holding the satellite literary productions of other cultures considered “minor” or “peripheral” mainly for reasons other than literary, where “small/minor” literatures also contribute to the validation of the ‘great’ ones and, implicitly, to the (re)construction of the concept of ‘world literature’ because, in the end, a world without peripheries is a world without centers, And a world without centers . . . would be a fiction that cannot hold either.”⁷

The “center” may also be viewed as a hub of creativity and artistic innovation triggering “connectivity” both in terms of the interdisciplinarity of various forms of art: music, painting, literature, sculpture, architecture; as well as the lively interaction artists, most of them exiled to a land with vibrant artistic resources particularly reflected by Modernism. The center is almost always related to the notion of power emanating its influence to the periphery; however, a duality should be noted: most often, dominance in resource-rich zone will be reflected in all areas of life: economic, political, cultural, artistic and will also be associated with prestige, whereas the other perspective encourages a relative independence of artistic life from economic and political life, highlighting both a polarization of literary spaces, in geographical terms, according to the availability of resources and an internal duality and inequality of the intensity of growth or the hierarchy of forms of dominance. The recent volume, edited by the renowned literary critic and theoretician David Damrosch, defined the world of literature as a “paradoxical sort of market place . . . functioning according to its own set of values” whose uneven “distribution of literary resources” is organized “around two opposing poles”: the former “freest from political, national or economic constraints . . . endowed with literary heritage and resources”, mainly affiliated to European spaces—eager and ready “to enter into transnational literary competition”; the latter ones, actually the newcomers, marked by increased heteronomy and where “political, national and commercial criteria hold strongest sway” are the “spaces most lacking in literary resources . . . most subordinate to commercial criteria.”⁸

Furthermore, the context of literary and artistic creation enjoys a relative degree of autonomy compared to other areas of life, as well as an independent evolution regardless of temporary economic growth or political waves of consolidation or rather turmoil. The polarization of the centers of power is wisely outlined by David Damrosch, in his scholarly study on *World Literature in Theory*, who thoroughly and accurately painted the landscape and mapped the European counterpoint of tangible and intangible resources from a historical perspective, based on Braudel’s astute, judicious and perceptive record of the juxtaposition of creativity and productivity between the 15th and 18th centuries: “Venice was the economic capital of the 16th century, but Florence and its Tuscan dialect were intellectually in the ascendant. In the 17th century, Amsterdam became the great center of European trade, but Rome and Madrid triumphed in the arts and literature. In the 18th century, London was the center of the economic world but it was Paris that imposed its cultural hegemony.” Moreover, Damrosch accurately and thoroughly concluded that “in the late 19th and early 20th century, France, though lagging behind the rest of the Europe economically, was the undisputed center of Western painting and literature; the times when Italy and Germany dominated the world of music were not times when Italy or Germany dominated Europe economically.”⁹ We might thus infer that the center shifts and revolves according to criteria that correspond to the waves of cyclical historical development.

Hence, the cultural turn did not overlap with the wave of economic growth in the same context and at a given time; moreover, two new concepts gained momentum in art—cultural geography and digital humanities—highlighting the interdisciplinary character of literary and cultural studies, particularly enhanced by the contribution of

geography and history, in addition to sociology, anthropology, linguistics and, more recently, statistics. Apart from the famous Charter of Transdisciplinarity, we found *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* a most enlightening study authored by Mieke Bal, who competently noted in this most recent and comprehensive guide to cultural analysis, that “the *field* of cultural analysis is not delimited, because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you *question* a field. Nor are its *methods* sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they, too, are part of the exploration. You don’t apply one method, you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field” convincingly advocating for “interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in *concepts* rather than *methods*.”¹⁰

Since culture is one of the most complex terms with multifarious meanings and values, mention should be made, at this stage, of the influential theory set forth by Harold Innis concerning *space-biased* and *time-biased* societies and civilizations, subsequently reflected in contemporary media and communication. Additional clarification of concepts is required to enhance our abilities of effective communicators and consequently overcome any source of miscommunication that might arise from a divided instead of a comprehensive approach. In this respect, the influential theory set forth by Harold Innis concerning *space-biased* and *time-biased* societies and civilizations, subsequently reflected in contemporary media and communication, reminds one of the monochromic vs polychromic time theory in understanding cross-cultural communication.¹¹ Equally relevant in this context is the distinction *high-context* and *low-context* culture, highlighted by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his seminal book, *Beyond Culture*, in view of making culture a vector for facilitating effective and creative communication rather than approaching cultural differences as a source of misunderstandings.¹²

The most recent paradigm in literary historiography is a *planetary turn* defined as “the cultural-discursive matrix of innovative art . . . advancing on a plurality of modernization paths” and wisely theorized by Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru in a thoroughly pertinent and topical essay on the “planetary condition” noting that “like other critical ‘turns’ before it—postcolonial, postmodern or global—the shift under scrutiny here concerns artists’ and critics’ new speculations about our world, one which seems to be outgrowing modernity’s reigning sociological, aesthetic and political-economic systems.”¹³

Literary Historiography: A Balanced Approach between Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

AS LITERATURE is a fundamental pillar of our analysis, it is a prerequisite to understand the transition from an abstract concept of world literature—“anything in the world that is literature”—to a more comprehensive concept of global literature—“more attuned to the diversified cultural praxis of literature . . . and individual works are increasingly informed and constituted by social, political and linguistic trends

that are not only limited to a single nation or region”¹⁴ bringing to the forefront the new vista of reading and interpreting literature across time and culture. Moreover, there is a consensus in understanding, reading and perceiving the contemporary literary context from an all-encompassing perspective, expanding the geographical and cultural borders—“after all, the literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system”¹⁵—pointing out that literature is not a product but rather a process, a lively interaction among the world as a bio-system, the work of art and the reader. World literature may be approached from a twofold perspective: both a subjective selection of works of art, called the “canon,” and a cumulative, at once chronological and comparative, of literary masterpiece. Prior to any understanding “how to read world literature” (David Damrosch) it is a prerequisite to decipher the code of literary historiography, particularly the shift from the long-established and firmly-rooted close reading of the text to the more challenging, engaging and disquieting distant reading with an increased focus on context and networking.

This paradigm shift in literary studies may also be interpreted as a change from qualitative—genre-based, cultural patterns, subjective selection, meaning—to quantitative analysis: chronological, summative, sequential, fact. The current status and the most recent wave in the study of literary historiography is marked by the emergence of digital humanities and the growing impact of technology, championed by Franco Moretti, where the notions of cultural geography and mapping literary territories, computational criticism, serial or distant reading emphasize and bring to the forefront a quantitative approach to humanities favoring interpretation which “does not arise from reading a text” instead “it arises from looking at atomistic words”; “interpretation has to do with the fact that quantitative analysis creates distributions, frequencies, patterns over diagrams etc.”¹⁶ The paradigm set forth by Franco Moretti is not a brand new concept though and we will further elaborate on this theory. Nonetheless, the challenge addressed by Moretti implies a new approach to reading world literature, unlike close reading whose downside is its dependence “upon an extremely small canon” and whose perspective is drastically limited despite “investing so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter.” Franco Moretti’s novel perspective, scholarly theorized and widely acknowledged, is distant reading “. . . where distance . . . *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say Less is more. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich, concepts are abstracts, are poor.”¹⁷

Essentially, both in terms of authorship and readership, literature undertakes the challenging mission of providing a unique exploration of the inner world—facilitating and inviting a process of self-reflection, probing the mind and awareness of identity and memory—as well as the outer world—enabled by cultural mapping and human geography, a call to adventure, connection, examination of worldwide knowledge. “Literature is the human mind at the very height of its ability to express and interpret the world around us. Literature at its best does not simplify but it enlarges our minds and sensibilities to the point where we can better handle complexity. Why read literature? Because it enriches

life in ways that nothing else can. It makes us more human.”¹⁸ World literature may also be perceived, from afar, as a network, a worldwide web of cultures, enacted imagination, individual and collective memory all summed up under the motto of “only connect”, both in abstract and more technical terms, experience, space and more recently digital humanities. There is this apparently contradictory relation between the world and the text: on the one hand distant reading is the accurate means of understanding and interpreting a text in its wider and complex context whereas the system of literature creates closeness and connection among individuals, communities, geographic or cultural areas, spatial or temporal contexts—“despite geographical or racial distance, human beings’ sentiments have much in common”—thus a unified approach in the study of literature is a reliable contemporary method.¹⁹ To sum up this section, we need both literary historiography—a sequential, chronological, linear approach, a story of given time and space, “following the course of human intention through all history . . . we must read history and literature to understand humanity”—and comparative literature, enabling a wider perspective of reality mediated by language, culture and enabled by translation, a field “at the crossroads of philosophy, aesthetics, ethnology and anthropology” in order to achieve coherence, continuity, unity, diversity and multiplicity of perspectives.²⁰

Translation and Global Diplomacy: Effective Means of Soft Power in Mapping the World

TO BEGIN with, philology is indissolubly connected with globalization, and the two horns of the dilemma—from “nothing is translatable” at one end to “everything is translatable” at the other end—as set forth by Emily Apter in her sagacious, informative and enlightening book *The Translation Zone*,²¹ highlight not only the potential to be attained by translation but also the challenges and complexity of the process, both the linguistic and cultural dimensions, stemming from a philosophical interpretation of terminology in addition to an inherent ambiguity or rather polyphonic correspondence and reception of terms in different languages. Words acquire meaning in their home language and culture and enrich the latter with new connotations in specific contexts. At this stage of our analysis we shall recall Wittgenstein and Heidegger, where the former upheld the view that all philosophical problems have a linguistic origin, and that “philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” He makes “a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts.”²² Language, most often, conceals reality—Being, as Heidegger names it; whereas in poetic language Being is brought into presence, is awakened into consciousness. Thus, literary language becomes truly performative. Heidegger considers common language usage to be an occlusion of the real, like Nietzsche; and both believe that poetic language draws formerly non-existent awareness and concepts into being, hence literature can be defined in terms of depth of meaning. Ordinary language shall be better replaced by ‘ambiguity’ (Empson), ‘paradox’ (Brooks), ‘ambivalence’ as well as richness of imagery and of metaphor.²³

Heidegger upholds the idea that “poetry is the saying of the unconcealment of what is. Language itself is poetry in the essential sense. Poetry takes place in language because language preserves the original nature of poetry.”²⁴ He sees ordinary uses of language deviating from this original poetry, which is itself crucial, since it “first brings to word and to appearance.” Poetry is an art which exploits the resources of language in such a way that words ‘become’ what in non-literary discourse they merely represent, as “the poet uses the word not like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word.”²⁵

An additional perspective, in the tradition of the discontinuity between the language of poetry and the language of prose, sets forth the argument that poetry is untranslatable and non-paraphrasable, whereas novels are apparently translatable, thus a parallel though not similar approach to Emily Apter’s theory of untranslatability. On the other hand, David Lodge argues that not all novels are fully and accurately translatable and that poems are not completely untranslatable. In the field of translation studies, literary translations act as a factor of endorsing and promoting cultural diversity by means of connecting the more familiar and neighboring or rather distant areas of the planetary network, providing an informed though inevitably subjective perspective of another culture, successfully mapping the cultural geography of the world.

The art and craft of translation is to explore the full linguistic potential in addition to the complex process of encoding and decoding the cultural matrix and values of a particular area determined by physical geography, and shaped by history, tradition, ideology, or the cyclical waves of growth and decline.

Concluding Remarks

MORE RECENTLY in a poignant manner, as well as in the distant past, literature, as a sustainable pillar and most enduring component of culture, has significantly contributed to the construction of nation states whereas translations have further promoted national identity and collective memory worldwide, as “most literature circulates in the world in translation”²⁶ The relation between literary historiography and translation is shaped by a continuous interaction with culture, both in the selection of canonical texts with worldwide impact and the choice of languages enabling the circulation and reception of a linguistic and culturally mediated text. “Cultures develop distinctive assumptions about the ways literature should be created and understood . . . one cannot read a foreign text in ignorance of its author’s assumptions and values . . . texts are culture bound.”²⁷ A prerequisite for an accurate translator is the ability to connect the word in source language to its most congenial correspondent subsequent to an exploration of a wide network of possibilities, thus the expertise and talent is testified by the mastery of turning even the “untranslatable” into a functional “translatable” equivalent.²⁸

Untranslatability by no means indicates the impossibility of finding the proper means of expression, it rather highlights the arduous process of turning the unfamiliar and distant into something familiar and recognizable, as well as reconciling high context

culture and low context culture by finding a common ground. It is precisely this unmatched propensity and quality of literary texts to connect the mind and soul from nearby or far away that challenges the readers to read across cultures and hence “expand the literary and cultural horizons far beyond the boundaries of our own culture.”²⁹ Translation studies straddle both culture and language—the two most influential and enduring components of humanity’s evolution and longevity—revolving around the notion of power, both in ancient times as well as in a changing multi-polar world, either as a means of promotion or as a form of dominance.

According to David Crystal’s theory, the global span, usage and acceptance of a language is primarily linked to the concept of power and dominance: whether military, technological advancement, the surge of new information and communication technologies, economic development and competitiveness, mass media and the promotion of cultural values. “Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are . . . Without a strong power-base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication . . . A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people.”³⁰

In keeping with our preliminary thesis of the present paper, global power and dominance, exerted from the center to the periphery, may also very well reflect the notion of centrality, both as self-perception with subsequent effects of preeminence and influence over other areas of the periphery or in terms of ongoing competition urging aspiring nations to play a more significant role on the global map thus triggering the incessant and changing interaction between center and periphery, majority and minority, with cyclical waves of paradigm shifts stemming shaped by history, geography, culture. The concept of centrality makes us aware, at the same time, of the useful ability to be receptive to other “cultural grids” and accommodate a multiplicity of “mental maps”—subjective and selective views of the world—a mediated representation based not on empirical observation but rather on biased perception and understanding ‘by proxy’ of geographical areas and cultural territories, meant to perpetuate and reinforce standardized polarities with pre-established values, such as East/West and North/South.

Reinforcing our fundamental argumentation, we shall resort once more to Emily Apter, who thoroughly pleads the case for translation as the most efficient and effective facilitator of the circulation of “minor” literature to the “center” and its interaction with “major” literature³¹ as well as the most congenial means of cultural exchange and encounter of “otherness,” a genuine tool of soft power enactment contributing to the reconstruction of national literature and the growth of world literature, literary translation facilitating the dissemination and accessibility of literature worldwide.³² To sum up, comparative literature provides an all-encompassing view of the world enabling the reader to access the spirit of the times and the soul of humankind, spanning across time, space and culture with an enduring selection of universal values over a fluid mapping of the world.³³

In her widely acknowledged and scholarly study on translation, Susan Bassnett endorsed the claim that language is “the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy”³⁴ Her thesis relies

on the theories of Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf and Juri Lotman arguing that “no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center the structure of natural language.”³⁵ Such a claim is further endorsed by Umberto Eco, in his *Experiences in Translation*, appealing to our understanding that translation is a “shift, not only between two languages, but between two cultures—or two encyclopedias.”³⁶ Language and culture are intrinsically connected, emphasized by the complex and intricate translation process which is “not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextual, psychological and narrative competence.”³⁷ To conclude, the novel is equally an “anthropological force . . . which redefined the sense of reality, the meaning of individual existence, the perception of time and language” and it is also culture, being the “the first truly planetary form: a phoenix always ready to take flight in a new direction, and to find the right language for the next generation of readers . . . the novel is always commodity and artwork at once: a major economic investment and an ambitious aesthetic form” and, above all, “the novels of the world provide a unique and compelling combination of “the pleasure of storytelling” with the impact of “social power” contributing to a unified architecture of the world.”³⁸

Both reading and writing are processes that address and engage a global audience, thus requiring not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness in view of achieving connection among and amidst humankind in addition to finding a common denominator enabled by unbiased comparison and adapting to the shifting cultural paradigms.



Notes

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Abstract

**An Intercultural Approach to Translation:
Literature, Soft Power and Global Diplomacy**

The paper undertakes a thorough analysis of recent paradigm shifts in the areas of cultural, literary and translation studies, in view of highlighting their interdependence as well as their power to facilitate the construction of and shape the concept of world literature. Literature and translation are inescapably related to globalization, whereas comparative literature provides an all-encompassing view of the world spanning time, space and culture. The paper argues that language and culture are intrinsically connected in the translation process. We also point out similarities and differences between the concepts of world literature and comparative literature.

Keywords

literature, cultural paradigm, translation, diplomacy

