

# PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSLATION

» BRIAN NELSON AND RITA WILSON

## RECOGNISING TRANSLATION

Translation still elicits widespread distrust or disregard. In recent years, however, there has been increasing recognition of the creativity of translation.<sup>1</sup> Translation is rightly seen as a form of writing (or, more precisely, re-writing) just as all writing, however original, involves processes that are a kind of translation. Consider what, exactly, translators do. As Catherine Porter, former President of the American Modern Language Association, has written:

[Translators] must ask questions. In what contexts, for example—literary, rhetorical, social, historical, political, cultural—was the source text embedded ...? What type of text is being translated? ... To what extent and in what ways is the source text innovative or deviant in its own cultural context, and how can these innovative or deviant aspects be represented in the target text? What aims and effects can be seen in the original, and how can they be produced in the translation? What was the nature of the original audience, and how can the anticipated new audience be characterized? What range of voices, registers, and subject positions can be identified in the source text, and what adaptations will be required to render these in the target language? Once these determinations are made—subject of course

to revision and refinement as the translation progresses—the translator can begin to engage with the text itself: word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence.<sup>2</sup>

The choices made by the translator are the result of careful analysis, informed by varying degrees of intuitive understanding, of the work being translated. My aim in the five novels by Émile Zola I have translated<sup>3</sup> has been to transform Zola's prose into something that communicates to contemporary readers the spirit of the original as embodied in language. I've tried to capture the tone and texture, the structure and rhythms, the emphases and lexical choices—in sum, the particular style and textual intention—of the novels in question. Literary translation is anything but a mechanical task. It is, to begin with, an act of interpretation. Specifically, it may be regarded as both a form of close reading (applied literary criticism) and a form of writing (an art and a craft).

Zola founded the so-called Naturalist school in opposition to 'polite' literature. His Naturalism, with its emphasis on integrity of representation, entailed a new explicitness in the depiction of sexuality and the body. *Pot Luck* (*Pot-Bouille*, 1882) centres on the body. The bourgeois go to extreme lengths to maintain the segregation between themselves and the lower classes, whom they insistently portray as dirty, promiscuous, stupid. But class difference is shown to be merely a matter of money and

(above)  
Homer's *The Odyssey*.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FRED KROH. ORIGINALLY USED FOR MEANJIN'S SPECIAL ISSUE, ON TRANSLATION, VOL. 64, NO. 4 (2005).

power, barely holding down the raging forces of sexuality and corruption beneath the surface. What we're left with is a kind of stew, a melting pot, a world where no clear boundaries remain. This is expressed in the novel's title. Literally, *pot-bouille* is a culinary term; its nearest English equivalent is a stockpot containing leftovers bubbling on the stove. In nineteenth-century France it also meant, by association, the ordinariness of everyday life. And two further associations are exploited by Zola: *faire pot-bouille avec quelqu'un* meant 'to shack up with somebody'; and *faire sa pot-bouille* meant 'to feather one's own nest'. So Zola's title embraces central elements of his novel: its dirty kitchens and stingy meals; its urges and frustrations simmering 'under the lid' of an artificial domestic respectability; its satirical versions of 'shacking up'; its selfishness and self-interest;

a huge bonfire. This was the time when the rush for spoils filled a corner of the forest with the yelping of hounds, the cracking of whips, the flaring of torches. The appetites let loose were satisfied at last, shamelessly, amid the sound of crumbling neighbourhoods and fortunes made in six months. The city had become an orgy of gold and women. Vice, coming from on high, flowed through the gutters, spread out over the ornamental waters, shot up in the fountains of the public gardens, and fell on the roofs as fine rain. (My translation, p. 112.)

The striking stylistic point about those sentences is that, syntactically, human subjects are eclipsed by abstract nouns and things, suggesting the absence of any controlling

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and the dull routines of bourgeois life. Some translators have simply kept Zola's original title. I decided to call the novel *Pot Luck*—in an attempt to echo the original while evoking some of the confusions and contradictions of bourgeois life as well as the activities of the novel's philandering protagonist, Octave Mouret, as he runs up and down the stairs 'trying his luck' with the various bourgeois ladies he encounters. The problem of the novel's title is a good example of the nature and problems of translation generally: the need to achieve a form of equivalence, which often involves making creative adjustments.

Translating the spirit of a text is frequently a matter of voice, register and syntax. Zola is famous for his physical descriptions. And the challenge for the translator is how to capture the dynamism of these descriptions, which express the very meaning, and ideological tendencies, of his narratives. *The Kill* (*La Curée*, 1872) is about the rebuilding of Paris by Haussmann during the 1850s and 1860s and the widespread corruption that accompanied it.

The Saccards' fortune seemed to be at its height. It blazed in the heart of Paris like

human agency and expressing a vision of a society which, organised under the aegis of money and the commodity, turns people into objects.

Voice and register are nowhere more important than in *L'Assommoir* (1876), Zola's first great novel of working-class life. *L'Assommoir* (which I have not translated but have used extensively in teaching) focuses on the life and death of a washerwoman, Gervaise Macquart. But what scandalised and disoriented contemporary critics most was not so much the novel's subject matter (a washerwoman who becomes a tragic heroine) as its style: its use of working-class language and urban slang. The characters' language is woven into the fabric of the narrative, absorbing the written discourse of the narrator. It's as if the characters themselves take on a narrative function, telling their own story. Zola's brilliant ability to capture popular speech patterns, even when writing indirectly, has significant ideological implications, for it brings the reader into more direct and sympathetic contact with the characters and their culture than would have been the case with conventional narrative. So the translator, in his or her attempts to

capture Zola's own stylistic ventriloquism, must make appropriate choices in terms of register and voice.

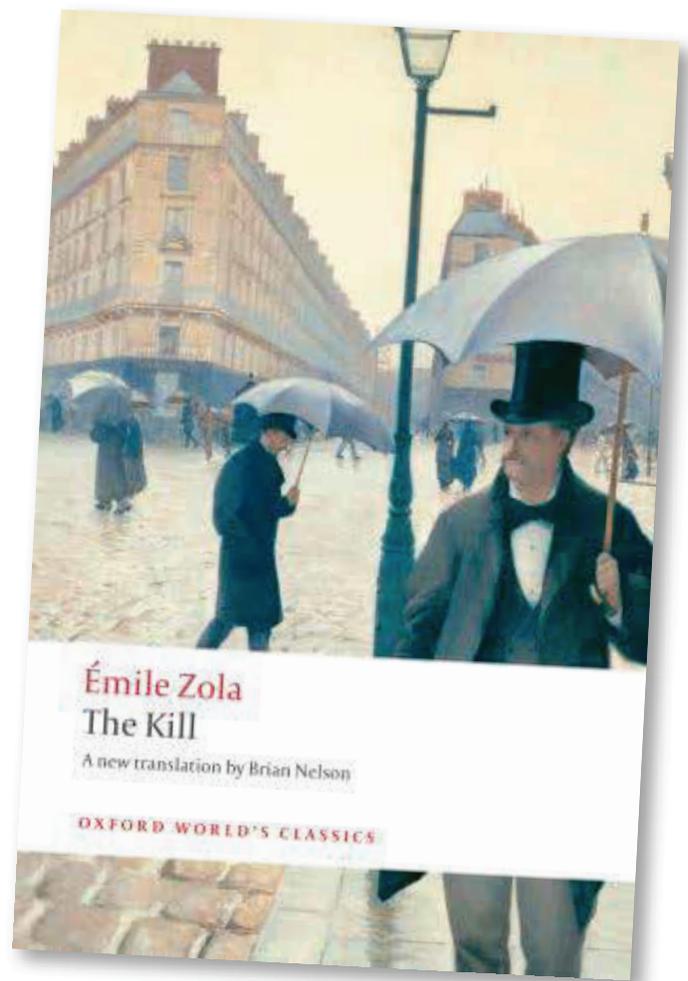
The novel's central chapter (Chapter 7) describes Gervaise's celebration of her saint's day with a great party, where food, drink and companionship are the focus. The sheer extravagance of the feast suggests the lurking dangers of dissipation; but above all, it expresses defiance, through recklessness and prodigality, of the constrictions—the prudence and thrift—of a life always on the edge of starvation. The meal becomes an orgy, and the mounting excitement of the characters is matched by that of the narrative voice, which appears to blend joyously with the voices of the assembled company.

Here is Arthur Symons' version of a representative passage, in his 1894 translation:

Oh Lord! it was a tightener, sure enough! When you're at it, you're at it, eh? And if you only get a good tuck-in now and again, you would be a sap not to stuff yourself up to the ears when you get a chance. Why, you could see the corporations getting larger every minute! The women were big enough to burst—damned lot of gluttons that they were!—with their open mouths, their chins bedabbled with grease; they had faces for all the world like backsides, and so red too, that you would say they were rich people's belongings, rich people bursting with prosperity.

And the wine too, my friends, the wine flowed round the table as the water flows in the Seine.

Even allowing for the fact that Symons was writing in the late nineteenth century, there are clearly some problems of register here. It's like listening to the voice of a Victorian gentleman holding forth from his armchair in a London club. It's a very good example of middle-class domestication. Symons renders in genteel or euphemistic terms items belonging to a vigorously colloquial register. The register of the original—direct, simple, robustly colloquial—reflects the language of the characters. The characters' language is woven into the fabric of the narrative,



blurring the distinction between narrator and characters. A single voice dominates. The jovial apostrophe 'my friends!', its author and addressees uncertain, draws the reader into sharing in the general euphoria. The narrator sits at the table with his characters, participating stylistically in the revelry and implicitly inviting the reader to join in too. And this form of narration subverts the moralistic perspectives on the workers' intemperance that so strongly marked contemporary discourse on social issues and contemporary reactions to (and translations of) the novel. Is it because Gervaise is self-indulgent and given to excess that she undergoes the tragedy of working people? Or is it, rather, because she undergoes the tragedy of working people that she becomes self-indulgent and given to excess?

I would propose the following translation:

God, yes, they really stuffed themselves! If you're going to do it, you might as well do

(above)

Cover of *The Kill*, by Émile Zola, New Edition trans. by Brian Nelson (Oxford University Press, 2008).

it properly, eh? And if you only have a real binge once in a blue moon, you'd be bloody mad not to fill yourself up to the eyeballs. You could actually see their bellies getting bigger by the minute! The women looked pregnant. Every one of them fit to burst, the greedy pigs! Their mouths wide open, grease all over their chins, their faces looked just like arses, and so red you'd swear they were rich people's arses, with money pouring out of them.

And the wine, my friends! The wine flowed round the table like the water in the Seine.

The fact that the urban proletariat were considered by the bourgeoisie to be beyond the limits of narrative, that is to say, beneath the level of narrative representation, was held implicitly to justify their exclusion from political representation. If the workers could take over the novel, they might also take over the government. And this politics of representation is inseparable from a politics of translation: how we translate the novel is inseparable from how we read it.<sup>4</sup>

The most crucial element of a translator's work is finding a voice for the text being translated. Every translation of a text is a *performance* of that text as reflected in the selection and sequence of words on a page. Literary translation is a highly complex activity, involving a multiplicity of exact choices about

They wouldn't think that way about an actor or a musician; nor should they about a translator. The activity of the writer and that of the translator are indivisible.

## LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION

**Edith Grossman**, in her incisive little book *Why Translation Matters*, shows how the very notion of literature would be inconceivable without translation, citing Goethe's belief that without outside influences national literatures rapidly stagnate.<sup>5</sup> Milan Kundera, in his personal essay on the novel, *The Curtain*, first published in French in 2007, argues similarly that there are two contexts in which works of art can be understood: the 'small' context of the nation and the 'large' context of the world, encompassing the supranational history of art forms themselves. Provincialism is the inability to imagine one's national culture in the large context, and Kundera thinks it has done great damage to our understanding of literary history.

If we consider just the history of the novel, it was to Rabelais that Lawrence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot, it was from Cervantes that Fielding drew constant inspiration, it was against Fielding that Stendhal measured himself, it was Flaubert's tradition living on in Joyce, it was through his reflection on Joyce that

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voice, tone, register, rhythm, syntax, echoes, sounds, connotations and denotations, the colour and texture of words—all those factors that make up 'style' and reflect the marriage between style and semantic content. In that sense, literary translation is a form of close reading of a text in its totality. Furthermore, in the case of translations of so-called 'classics', it is the result of scholarly reappropriation and recontextualisation. People sometimes think of translation as a kind of subservience, imagining that the translator subjugates his or her own creativity to the demands of the original text.

Hermann Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the possibility of departing from tradition to "write another way." ... [G]eographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace the *large context* of world literature, the only approach that can bring out a novel's *aesthetic value*—that is to say: the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear; the novelty of form it has found.<sup>6</sup>

The entire history of literature, we might argue with Kundera, is informed by a process of transmission—a process which is inseparable from an appreciation of translation. Susan Sontag was right to remind us, in her 2002 essay on literary translation, ‘The World as India’, that translation is ‘the circulatory system of the world’s literatures’. Literature, in its broadest sense, is sustained by translation; and, as Susan Bassnett has observed, there is something ‘curiously schizophrenic’ about recognising the central role of translation in shaping literature while downgrading it into a second-class literary activity.<sup>7</sup> The case for translation as the life-blood of literature was made in a particularly compelling way by Sontag in her essay, the essential argument of which is that a proper consideration of the art of translation is a claim for the value of literature itself:

My sense of what literature can be, my reverence for the practice of literature as a vocation, and my identification of the writer with the exercise of freedom—all these constituent elements of my sensibility are inconceivable without the books I read in translation from an early age. Literature was mental travel: travel into the past and to other countries. (Literature was the vehicle that could take you *anywhere*.) And literature was criticism of one’s own reality, in the light of a better standard.<sup>8</sup>

The cultural significance of translation could not be stated more clearly. Translation signifies encounters with otherness, bringing the ‘foreign’ closer.

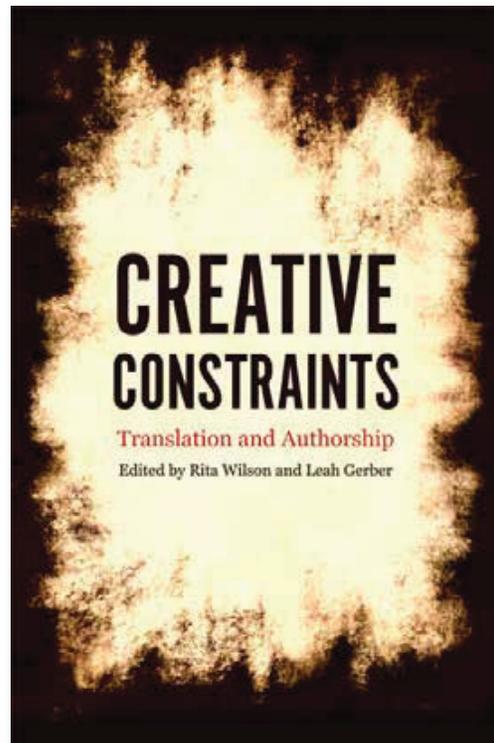
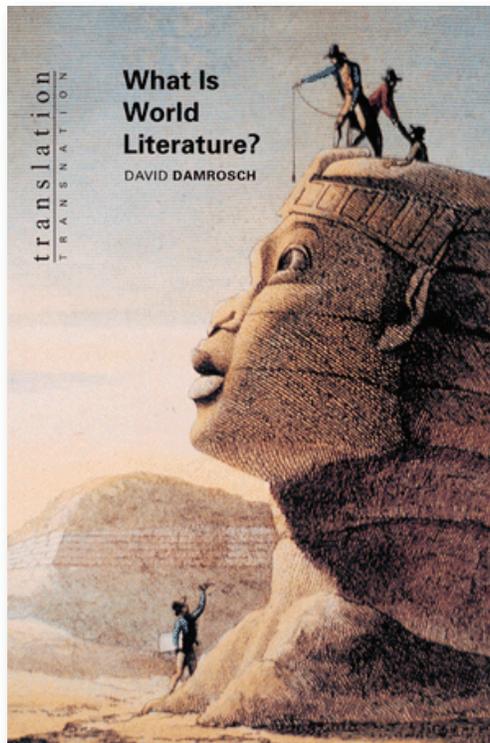
Translation understood as a cultural activity has been central to the interpenetration of the global and the local throughout history. But this interpenetration has accelerated dramatically over the last twenty years, thanks among other things to the revolution in communications, and it has led to what we know as ‘globalisation’. The revolution in communications has coincided with massive movements of peoples around the globe, with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the civilisational confrontation between Islam and Christianity, and the rise of Asia. Globalisation has brought about an ever-greater consciousness not simply

of cultural difference but of the world as one in space and time.

For universities, engagement with the globalised contemporary world implies the development of programs and models of inquiry designed to increase awareness of the diverse cultures and languages of the planet, and of globalisation itself.<sup>9</sup> Translation studies as a distinct disciplinary field has grown exponentially with the advance of globalisation. Translation, by its very nature, is transnational; it embodies intercultural exchange. And in the cognate field of literary studies a global approach has been reflected in an upsurge of interest in paradigms of ‘world literature’. A particularly influential critic in this regard is David Damrosch, whose approach to world literature is predominantly relational.<sup>10</sup> The study of world literature, for Damrosch, concentrates on following the movement of works as they travel between contexts, eras and languages. World literature is defined by the translatability inscribed into the act of translation. Thus conceived, it is a kind of writing that *gains* in translation. In the context of the study of literature in segregated national containers, with their emphasis on national cultural roots, translation necessarily appears as loss; but in the context of world literature translation appears as gain in the sense that it’s the means by which texts transcend their culture of origin, acquiring new depths of meaning and horizons of interpretation as they enter new contexts. Translation clearly has a vital role to play in the propagation of world literature. ‘The study of world literature,’ Damrosch writes, ‘should embrace translation far more actively than it has usually done to date’.<sup>11</sup> The translator, traditionally characterised as a traitor, is now transformed into a kind of hero, a central figure in the world republic of letters.

## THE HUMANITIES AND TRANSLATION

There is widespread recognition in academia that translation studies is growing in scale and expanding in scope, while other areas in the humanities are experiencing some decline. This recognition reached its peak in the Anglophone world in 2009, when the Modern



Language Association made translation the presidential theme of its annual conference and proclaimed that ‘translation is the most important concept in cultural theory today’.

The rise of translation studies can largely be attributed to the fact that it has done more than merely draw on other disciplines; it has assimilated and adapted conceptual and methodological frameworks (from cultural studies, sociology and anthropology, among other disciplines) to employ them in the theory and practice of translation. Further, not only has it paid particular attention to the linguistic processes involved in the transfer from source to target text, it has drawn attention to the social and cultural factors that influence both the production and the reception of translated texts. This move from the linguistic to the cultural turn and beyond opens up questions related to the conceptualisation of interdisciplinary relations within translation studies, but it also draws attention to what lies outside the margins of contemporary translation theory: the migration of concepts and methods across disciplinary boundaries that is increasingly evident in research in the humanities today.

Robert Scholes has argued recently for a

reconceptualisation of the humanities by emphasising our need to regain our sensitivity to language, grammar and style—and their importance to both the generation of meaning and the act of interpretation—and to ‘learn how other people think and how they see us’.<sup>12</sup> To do this in any meaningful way, Scholes argues, ‘we need to know how their languages represent the world,’ a statement that, if taken at face value, would seem to call for a radical reappraisal of how we educate our students, especially with respect to the importance we place on foreign-language learning. The interdisciplinarity of translation studies invites innovative approaches to pedagogy by merging the creativity and discipline that inform the practice of interlingual translation with translation theory, and channelling these into a debate with other areas of the humanities (and the social and political sciences). Translation theory is reformulating the parameters of cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and comparative literature—in short, reframing the study of the humanities.

Increasing recognition of translation in the academic world may be attributed in part to the increasingly global nature of literary programs.<sup>13</sup> It is an important trend, but it



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Cover of **What Is World Literature?** by David Damrosch (Princeton University Press, 2003).

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Cover of **Creative Constraints: Translation and Authorship**, edited by Rita Wilson and Leah Gerber (Monash University Publishing, 2012).

is only one aspect of the larger strategy we should be pursuing to increase the role of language, literature and culture in education. A complementary aspect should focus on the insights into the process of cross-cultural communication provided by translation. As translation educators, we are invited to teach students to understand and communicate new global realities. Preparing students for a globally interdependent world requires the ability to communicate across multiple kinds of difference. The need for expertise in languages other than English is not only essential for purposes of mutual intelligibility between different 'national' languages and cultures, but also for the larger processes of cross-cultural hybridisation that are creating new and different types of identity. Translation denotes not only the art and craft of the 'literary' or 'professional/technical' translator, but also a larger cultural formation that emerges through the global flow of migrants and refugees.

sufficient numbers of qualified translators for some languages and language combinations. Similar difficulties are being experienced in Australia with regard to 'new and emerging' communities of migrants and refugees.

At the time of the 2004 EU enlargement it became clear that development of the translation profession and modernisation of the higher education systems in line with the Bologna process required much closer cooperation at the European level in order to raise the standard of translator training and foster cooperation between universities. That cooperation is now being extended to universities outside Europe. In 2012, Monash University was granted full membership of CIUTI (Conférence Internationale d'Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes), an international association of tertiary institutions offering degrees in translation and interpreting. Membership is limited to institutions that incorporate in the curriculum the EMT-specified competencies

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A GLOBALLY INTERDEPENDENT WORLD REQUIRES  
THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE ACROSS MULTIPLE KINDS OF DIFFERENCE.

As we seek to develop translation programs and their supporting curricular structures in Australia, it is instructive to look at the European example. The European Union (EU) recently formed the European Master's in Translation (EMT), an elite association of European universities that offer master's degrees in translation that meet rigorous curricular standards.<sup>14</sup> It is well known that translation is a specialty that has long been offered in the EU, and that programs of high calibre exist in almost every EU nation. The initiative to create an EMT network was conceived in response to two concerns: on the one hand, the rapidly growing need for high-level language services in a globalised environment and, on the other, the dramatic increase in the number of official EU languages from eleven (in 2004) to twenty-three (in 2007). These successive EU 'enlargements' revealed how difficult it was for the European institutions to recruit

for professional translators. These are outlined in a 'skills-oriented framework' encompassing language competency, intercultural competency, 'thematic' or subject field competency, information mining and technology proficiency. Applicants for EU programs are required to demonstrate language proficiency in two languages in addition to their native language and to choose either a literary or a professional track for their studies.

It is in this international context that we in Australia must chart our course. In the short term, we need to think about how digital technology is changing the field of translation studies, both in the realm of text interpretations and in the way readers and translators will interact with texts. Digital technology offers something that was not available before: it allows us to present the interpretation of texts in a highly comprehensive manner—verbal, visual, and aural components can all be included to create a

multiple sensory experience. Digital technology allows us to create a fuller understanding of a work, providing a more extensive way of recording the 'movement' of the translation process (from source to target text) as well as making it possible to establish continuous interaction with the work.

A new specialty not to be overlooked is the field of audio-visual translation, one of the most complex and dynamic areas of the translation discipline, including the fascinating subject of translating films, video games, and other media. Film translation, encompassing subtitling, dubbing, and voice-over, is a highly technical skill that is in great demand. It is also a growing area of research as evidenced by the number of book series and scholarly journal articles on subjects related to multimedia translation and interpreting and their various social roles.

It is precisely recent research on multimedia translation that enables us to argue for the inclusion in the curriculum of approaches that not only theorise methods of 'how to translate' but also recognise literary translation as a social event—an activity that is usually well beyond the control of the individual 'translator as a person', and always occurs in a social system and context. Students need to be encouraged to develop a sense of translator agency by moving beyond binary thinking with regard to translation 'accuracy' and the differences between two languages and 'cultures'. The application of systems theory, which is gaining ground in the study of translations, provides useful tools for understanding translation as both a system in its own right, with its own properties, and as a social subsystem, one of the many interacting and competing systems at work within a society and which also affects the way a society interacts with other, foreign societies.<sup>15</sup>

First used in the early 1990s to consider the dynamics of literary translation in relation to a nation- and language-building exercise in the target culture and society,<sup>16</sup> the set of systems theories and research methodologies was later incorporated in descriptive translation studies.<sup>17</sup> Descriptive translation studies engage with the individual translated text, examining it through contrastive analyses with the source text and other translations and

assessing it as a product of its time, translator, publisher, marketing system, etc. to shed light on socio-cultural power struggles otherwise left unobserved and undetected. Today, sophisticated systems theories derived from Niklas Luhmann help to map the complex system of institutions, individuals, practices and values involved in the international circulation of texts. By focusing on the agents of translation (publishers, the media, the academy as well as individual translators), such approaches deepen our understanding of both the purposes and the effects of translation in a globalised society.

We are entering an era of convergence in the arts, humanities, sciences and, inevitably, education. The concept of the university and its curricula as a collection of autonomous disciplines is giving way to one that acknowledges that 'big questions' of our time are most fruitfully explored through cross-disciplinary approaches. Translation, the art of creating connections across boundaries, can help this new, integrative vision to take hold and flourish. The expanding field of translation studies, profoundly comparative in nature, is rapidly transforming old notions about cultural as well as academic boundaries and is giving new energy to the humanities. ¶



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1. See Susan Bassnett and Peter Bush, *The Translator as Writer* (London & New York: Continuum, 2006); Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella, *Translation and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies* (London & New York: Continuum, 2006); Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Rita Wilson and Leah Gerber (eds), *Creative Constraints: Translation and Authorship* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2012); Brian Nelson and Brigid Maher (eds), *Perspectives on Translation: Creation, Circulation, Reception* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2013).
2. Catherine Porter, 'Translation as Scholarship', Address, ADE-ADFL Summer Seminar East, Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island), 11 June 2009.
3. *The Ladies' Paradise* (1995), *Pot Luck* (1999), *The Kill* (2004), *The Belly of Paris* (2007), *The Fortune of the Rougons* (2012)—all published in the Oxford World's Classics series.
4. For an extended discussion of this issue in relation to Zola's use of working-class speech in *L'Assommoir*, see Brian Nelson, 'The Politics of Style', *Meanjin* (On Translation), 64:4 (2005), 90–98.
5. Grossman, *Why Translation Matters*, p. 22.
6. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), pp. 35–36.
7. Susan Bassnett, 'The Translator as Writer' <[http://www.upf.edu/factii/\\_pdf/llicons/bassnetto607.pdf](http://www.upf.edu/factii/_pdf/llicons/bassnetto607.pdf)> [accessed 18 January 2013].
8. Susan Sontag, 'The World as India', in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), pp. 156–79 (p. 179).
9. This was the central theme of Sandra Berman's Presidential Address to the 2009 American Comparative Literature Association: 'Working in the And Zone: Comparative Literature and Translation', *Comparative Literature*, 61:4 (2010), 432–46.
10. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Damrosch, *How to Teach World Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
12. Robert Scholes, 'Presidential Address 2004: The Humanities in a Posthumanist World', *PMLA*, 120:3 (May 2005), 724–33 (p. 732).
13. With regard to the recognition of translation practice as research, see 'Evaluating Translations as Scholarship', Modern Language Association, <[www.mla.org/ec\\_guidelines\\_translation](http://www.mla.org/ec_guidelines_translation)> [accessed 12 February 2013]. In Australia, the introduction in 2011 of a new PhD (Translation Studies) at Monash University is a significant milestone in the recognition of translation practice as an area of graduate research (see <<http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/translation-interpreting/phds/>> [accessed 12 February 2013]).
14. 'European Master's in Translation', European Union, <[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/index_en.htm)> [accessed 7 June 2012].
15. See Sergey Tyulenev, *Applying Luhmann to Translation Studies: Translation in Society* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
16. Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar first used early systems theory to examine the massive translations of European works of literature, philosophy, and culture into modern Hebrew in the 1950s. The idea was that the Israeli implementation of translation on such a large scale could not be adequately explained only in terms of literary aesthetics.
17. See Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995).