Translation and Transculturation: Transmission and Innovation of Culture

Ileana Alexandra ORLICH

Since the study of comparative literature today extends from such diverse materials as Akkadian epics to Maya incantations, the formulation of a working definition of cultural transmission and the significance accorded to the mechanism of translations of works written in the less commonly spoken Eurasian languages require special attention.

Although far from addressing all the issues involved in an exhaustive definition, a conceptual elucidation of cultural transmission, and subsequent innovation of culture, depends upon a cultural system that exists as an ideal order, a hypothetical mental construct conditioned and operating primarily within a national context and its distribution system. As exemplified in technology, cultural innovation includes effective patterns of local high prestige and authoritative weight that through outward projection and outright appropriation shape and reframe the cultural context. Furthermore, the selection of works included in such a category would be weighed against what is lost and what is gained in the transmission and innovation of culture as the result of the intertwined shifts of language, era, region, religion, social status, and context that incur in the move from their point of origin out into a new cultural sphere.

Last but not least, the issue of translation – which is my own interest in research, in general, and in this discussion, in particular – would have to take into account today's broad movement toward cultural context, a shift that is especially significant for many works of world literature. Specifically, new attention is given to figures from "marginal" cultures and major figures already in the canon are being newly positioned. In the former category, the Serbian Milorad Pavic, who has been almost unknown outside Yugoslavia, became instantly famous with the translation in 1984 of his *Dictionary of the Khazars*, by all account a runaway success around the globe. The situation of Franz Kafka is a case study for the second category. Traditionally regarded as the quintessential portrait of a culture-transcending artist established in such publications as Mark Anderson's 1989 collection *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics and the Fin de Siècle*, Franz Kafka is more recently giving way to portraits of the artist as a Prague Jew.

Also relevant in any discussion that involves translation is what Fernando Ortiz described as early as 1940 as *transculturación* – a liminal zone or "impassioned margin" where diverse cultures converge without merging. For the translator, the growing critical interest in ethnicity and local roots which stresses, in the words of Frederick Karl in *Franz Kafka: Representative Man*, that "we cannot separate Kafka from Prague," finds further challenge in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea that a "minor literature" is not so much the literature of a small country as a minority group's dialect carved out of a major language. (Again the case of Kafka, whose language foregrounds the use of a

BDD-V2414 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:26 UTC)

regional German, an Austrian German or a Prague German vocabulary, with rich infusions of Yiddish and East European Slavic syntax.)

Added to these concerns is the perennial problem translators face when dealing with any work written before their own generation, whether to render the text in a manner consistent with the time in which it was first written or in something close to contemporary style. A case that immediately comes to mind is my recent translation of Sadoveanu's *Hanu Ancuței* (Tales from Ancuța's Inn). Clearly, I had to consider that while a purely modern Sadoveanu is a kind of historical falsification, it would be completely impossible to translate Sadoveanu into today's English, a language that does not even include words for specific cultural issues relating to mid-eighteenth-century Moldavia.

This train of thought prompts me into commenting on various aspects that a translation like Sadoveanu's novel engenders. As the translated title indicates, the English version loses some of the original's original framing; without rearranging the body of the book, the translated title anticipates the new ways the book would likely be received and read by new, English and North American audiences. Specifically, the translation quite directly accommodates this outsider's perspective by establishing a slightly different context that suggests similarity with other Western literary productions, such as *The Canterbury Tales* and thus positions itself best to catch the attention of the international market. Without trimming and toning down Sadoveanu's vividly oral, colloquial style and folkloristic vignettes the translation suggests through its title analogies with other literary works that are consonant with the Romanian author's own prose style – his return to an ancient culture based on seasonal rhythms, simple values, and a mystical vision of harmony. Ultimately, the translation aims to integrate Sadoveanu's Moldavia with the broader, transnational collectivity and promote a cosy mythification not unlike Chaucer's while remaining deeply tied to a small country and a "minor" literature.

My point is that while a dramatic acceleration of globalization has greatly complicated the idea of a world literature, one must not engage in scholarly panic. The idea of world literature can usefully continue to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language. (Virgil has long been read in Latin in Europe.) In an expansive sense, good translations can ensure that literature can include any work that has reached beyond its home base, becoming actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture. Gyorgy Lukacs, one of the most influential Marxists, wrote only in Hungarian or in German. His most ambitious work, *Die Eigenart des Aesthetischen*, is still not available in English, although it would be indispensable to those who represent Marxist theory in literary scholarship. And that sort of project, of course, makes a translator's job both an inviting and a gratifying endeavor.

BDD-V2414 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:26 UTC)

Traducere şi transculturație: transmitere şi inovare a culturii

Ideea pe care aş dori să o subliniez este că recenta globalizare a literaturii nu trebuie să producă în nici un fel panică în rândurile celor care se ocupă de traduceri. Să nu uităm că un autor cum ar fi, de pildă, Franz Kafka a scris numai în germana pragheză, cu infuzii serioase de vocabular din idiş şi o sintaxă specifică limbilor slave în spațiul cărora se afla situat autorul. Şi totuşi, aceste aspecte nu îl împiedică pe Kafka să fie unul dintre cei mai populari autori incluşi în antologiile de literaturatură comparată ale limbilor „internaționale." Mai departe, deşi traducerea în limba engleză a romanului sadovenian *Hanu Ancuței* nu a fost un proiect de duminică, totuşi prin abordarea textului din perpectiva culturală a binecunoscutelor *Povestiri din Canterbury* am găsit, ca traducător, o cale de a comunica şi pe înțelesul cititorilor dinafara specificului regional al lui Sadoveanu. Convingerea mea este că interesul vădit pentru studii culturale manifestat pe plan internațional este de mare folos traducătorilor din orice limbă, care se pot baza, la ora actuală, pe conştientizarea culturală pe care suntem obligați cu toții să ne-o insuşim, indiferent de statutul „minoritar" lingvistic deținut.

BDD-V2414 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:26 UTC)