

Translation, Aesthetics, and Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization

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Abstract:

Translation plays a preponderant role in bringing cultures into contact, but this role is not confined to connecting literatures or even presenting texts in other languages to readers with no linguistic skills to read in the original text. The importance of translation increases when it is considered as system, as it tends to develop national literature when the latter is in crisis, about to experience changes, or lives in a vacuum. This position may also uncomfortably serve to veil culture with conservatism or spread imperialism. The implications are deep since translation as an activity is imbricated with ideology, identity, and aesthetics. There is, however, a consensus, that through translation, literatures travel from one language to another, spread, and influence both local literatures and the diverse other arts. This helps the author to move to universality while all other artists may embrace his ideas and ideals. The influence between literature and art, therefore, is sealed. The major and

crucial task of translation is to help keep identity within universality.

Key words: Aesthetics, art, comparative literature, identity, ideology, Itamar, King Lear, translation.

Résumé:

La traduction joue un rôle prépondérant dans le rapprochement des cultures, mais ce rôle ne se limite pas uniquement à tisser un lien entre les littératures ou même à présenter des textes dans d'autres langues à des lecteurs sans compétences linguistiques à lire dans le texte original. L'importance de la traduction s'amplifie quand elle est considérée comme un système, car elle tend à développer la littérature nationale quand celle-ci est en crise, sur le point de connaître des changements, ou vit dans le vacuum littéraire. Cette position peut aussi désagréablement servir à voiler la culture avec le conservatisme ou à répandre l'impérialisme. Les implications sont profondes puisque la traduction en tant qu'activité est imbriquée avec l'idéologie, l'identité et l'esthétique. Il existe toutefois un consensus selon lequel, à travers la traduction, les littératures voyagent d'une langue à l'autre, se répandent et influencent à la fois les littératures locales et les divers autres arts. Ceci aide l'auteur à passer à l'universalité alors que d'autres écrivains-artistes peuvent embrasser ses idées et ses idéaux. L'influence entre la littérature et l'art est donc

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scellée. La tâche majeure et cruciale de la traduction est d'aider à garder l'identité dans l'universalité.

Mots-clés: Esthétique, Art, Littérature comparée, Identité, Idéologie, Itamar, King Lear, Traduction.

Between Comparative literature and translation

It has not always been easy to consider comparative literature as an autonomous field of study. In the beginning of the century, Benedetto Croce does not consider that comparative literature has any substance while René Wellek conceives that the field melts in the greater field of general literature as it has not developed its own tools of analysis.

In her *Comparative Literature, A critical Introduction* (1993), Susan Bassnett sees that the field 'involves the study of texts across cultures, that is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connections in literatures across both time and space.'¹ Reading is a comparatist act as such while it creates philosophical and literary *treffpunkts*, points of encounters, and creates reminiscences, therefore intertexts.

The development of comparative studies goes on with the discovery of the Orient and the emergence of new states sustained by (and sustaining) new ideologies. The *Other* becomes a

source of knowledge and study in terms of literature, while this very *other* tries to develop his own national culture through his own consciousness. Comparative literature in India, for instance, coincides with the rise of Indian nationalism. Most of the time, translation plays this preponderant role to bring forth the 'intrusive' literature, the awakening of the national literature and the creation of the multiplicity of cultural voices as well as influences within the same text.

In the 19th century, translation is still granted a lower status compared to the original copy while scholars' discourses are confined to fallacy and originality. In a paper entitled '*The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem*' (1990), Itamar Even-Zohar seems to reproach historians of culture their failure to recognize the role of translation in history. 'As a rule, histories of literatures mention translations when there is no way to avoid them... As a consequence, one hardly gets any idea whatsoever of the function of translated literature for a literature as a whole or of its position within that literature.'²

If comparative literature unveils the different influences on novelists and poets from different cultures, one can certainly evoke the role of translation as a field of the *treffpunkt*. Mohamed Dib in his *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* (1985) and Dino

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Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari* (1940) can sum up the salient role of translation in bringing connections. Bassnett is right when she states that 'once we begin to read we move across frontiers, making associations and connections, no longer reading within a single literature but within the great open space of Literature with a capital L, what Goethe termed Weltliteratur.'³

Being a sub-category of comparative literature is a vexed question, while scholars like Toury, Lefevere, Hermans think that the advent of translation coincides with the will to change. According to Even-Zohar, 'extensive translation activity takes places when a culture is in a period of transition: when it is expanding, when it needs renewal, when it is in a pre-revolutionary phase.'⁴

Translation as system

Itamar's contribution to the translation field is with his polysystem theory. For him, literature is a dynamic structure, subject to the influence of systemic cultural elements ranging from politics to economics.

Itamar tries to systemize the translated works and remove it from the individual contribution questioning the nature of the relation between them, to give them full theoretical studies. He introduces two argumentative points to explain the correlation

between translations: a) The choice of source-text and target literature correlation. b) Adoption of norms, behaviors and policies in the target literary repertoire as a result of ‘intrusion’ in the cultural, literary and intellectual home.

These arguments set translation in an active actor in the literary polysystem according to Itamar. As such, it plays a preponderant role in the blossom, development and flourishing of culture in general, and the translation studies in particular. ‘Thus, translated literature may possess a repertoire of its own, which to a certain extent could even be exclusive to it.’⁵ This exclusivity makes it clear that the study and analysis of translation works is imperative. Translated literature becomes a cornerstone in the literary environment or polysystem, to use Itamar’s concept.

Itamar’s influence by structuralism is clear although he perceives flaws in the system, so tries to adjust it in the synchronic approach. Just like language, culture is a system of systems. The analysis should be carried out at different levels or systems, hence the advent of the polysystem concept. Translation is at the heart of changes, movement, and witnesses the major events in literary history. This sounds true and verifiable. One cannot make a difference between an ‘original’ text and its translated production with all its philosophical

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features, poetic characteristics, etc. as they would be brought in vacuum. The emerging scholarly and literary production in the polysystem enshrines the pivotal role of translation and the rules governing the performance. 'It is clear that the very principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the (home) poly- system: the texts are chosen according to their compatibility with the new approaches and the supposedly innovatory role they may assume within the target literature.'⁶ There must be conditions, according to Itamar, for the performance success: he notes the youth of the home literature, when it is peripheral or still dependent to an agglomerate of other literatures, or when this literature is in crisis, about to experience changes, or lives in a vacuum. This is the high time when translation performs that crucial and central role because the local literature is in need of importing new material and substance, novelties and innovations.

If translated literature remains on the peripheral sphere of the polysystem, it becomes a factor to conservatism. Yet this point, I believe, is not always true as communication between the original literature and the translated one breeds healthy intellectual debates that might reject conservatism or at least raise questions about it while translation can protect and preserve the national and

cultural choices in terms of needs and interests, taste and traditional aesthetic choices.

Relation between art, literature and translation

Any translation is a natural lenient intellectual kinship between the author and the translator, the author's philosophy and that of the translator. The ideology is certainly of core importance although literature, in general, is about human experience. We have seen different translations of Shakespeare, and that of Voltaire is certainly one of the most striking instance of literary translation and literary history as it occurs in a time of enlightenment when the French author introduces a 'barbaric' Shakespeare to the scene of French theatre still fed by Racine and Corneille. Voltaire acknowledges that it is not the 'perfect' translation that creates the aesthetic taste, but probably the essence of the novelty. 'Faites grâce à la copie en faveur de l'original ; et souvenez-vous toujours, quand vous voyez une traduction, que vous ne voyez qu'une faible estampe d'un beau tableau... Ne croyez pas que j'aie rendu ici l'anglais mot pour mot ; malheur aux faiseurs de traductions littérales, qui en traduisant chaque parole énervent le sens ! C'est bien là qu'on peut dire que la lettre tue, et que l'esprit vivifie.'⁷ This new taste is to find favorable spirits especially among the romantics. Victor Hugo clearly displays the ideological trend of translation in the preface of his son François Victor Hugo's translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. 'Le goût

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bourgeois résiste à l'esprit universel. Traduire un poète étranger, c'est accroître la poésie nationale ; cet accroissement déplaît à ceux auxquels il profite. C'est du moins le commencement ; le premier mouvement est la révolte. Une langue dans laquelle on transvase de la sorte un idiome fait ce qu'elle peut pour refuser. Elle en sera fortifiée plus tard, en attendant elle s'indigne. Cette saveur nouvelle lui répugne.⁸

The most important aspect, it seems, in the translation of Shakespeare is the new philosophical ideology that remains close to man and his flesh, man and his blood. Victor Hugo confirms it when he states that 'ne pas être honteux du grand homme, l'avouer, l'afficher, le proclamer, le promulguer, être sa chair et ses os, prendre son empreinte, mouler sa forme, penser sa pensée, parler sa parole.'⁹ More than ever, this sounds to accommodate Terry Eagleton when he rightly states in his definition of the concept 'aesthetics' its proximity to the senses¹⁰. It belongs to the realm of the body, and no more to the values of classicism and the order of the spirit.

We can perhaps materialize the new romantic philosophy that, according to Victor Hugo, embodies Shakespeare's spirit in combination between skepticism and images. 'Quant à sa philosophie, elle est étrange ; elle tient de Montaigne par le doute, et d'Ézéchiel par la vision.'¹¹ The translational transfer

carries a linguistic, literary, ideological, imagery, and theatrical intrusions that enrich the hosting culture. We need to view translation not only as a mere technical transfer and stop at the concept of ‘equivalence’, which is important itself, but we have to consider other factors such as those complex decisions from a wide variety of choices, from poetic, cultural and philosophical national or supra national paradigms, to a whole underlying cultural system.

Shakespeare would continue to ‘travel’ carrying new spirits and other functions that might go with the Tudor’s ‘imperialistic’ vision, but it also depends on the translator and his ideology. ‘[D]e Voltaire à Stendhal, en passant par Mme de Staël, il remplira sans cesse des fonctions nouvelles, au gré des courants du moment.’¹² Translations and retranslations do not always consider the word, but the spirit of both the text and that of the French ideology and philosophy of the time. However, the socio-political functions of the theatre are the most obvious reasons for Shakespeare’s tragedies successes and fame in France.

The influence between arts and literature

Intellectual paradigms can find origins in the influence between literature and the visual arts. This can be Shakespeare’s influence on Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) when the latter paints several artworks

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under the influence of Shakespeare's tragedies notably *King Lear* (1608) and *Macbeth* (1623). Fuseli travelled to London in 1764 where he worked as translator. Painting 1 displays Lady Macbeth's solid will and Macbeth's infirm will and weakness after killing the King Duncan, his own guest. Having brought the daggers, Lady Macbeth ridicules him, as he is unable to go back to the King's room and leave the daggers there. It is a moment of intense fear and determination, life and death, loyalty and treason. Painting 2 below represents a very sensitive scene when King Lear disinherits his daughter Cordelia because she does not embellish her words like her sisters to express her love for him.

Fuseli's imagination sprouts out of a verbal construction and intense moments, two vital elements that create literature. Both art and literature aesthetically recreate a putative 'truth' of a violent moment. For Eugene Eoyang 'Our imaginations are given free rein to construct mentally what is implied. Our senses are not directly involved : our metaphoric instincts become surrogates for tasting, touching, seeing, hearing, and feeling.'¹³



**Painting 1: Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers
(1812)¹⁴**

'I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't
again I dare not.' Act II, Scene 2



**Painting 2: King Lear Admonishing Cordelia
(1790)¹⁵**

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee, from this, for ever. **Act I, Scene 1**

Fuseli's gothic dark images and the violent scenes have also inspired such writers as Mary Shelly (1797-1851) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) in their respective literary masterpieces *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839).



Painting 3: The Nightmare (1781)¹⁶

Mary Shelly is rather influenced by the dead, or at least seemingly sleeping, woman, and engraves the image of Victor's bride dying Elizabeth in her *Frankenstein*. The description in her novel seems to be a description of the painting (See painting 3): 'She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Every where I turn I see the same figure-her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier.'¹⁷

The same painting (Painting 3) above makes its way to Poe's reveries and it flows down in gothic images in his short story. He mentions by name Fuseli. 'For me at least, in the circumstances then

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surrounding me, there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.’¹⁸

If a national literature remains, despite its universality, within the national borders and perhaps chauvinism, comparative literature focuses more on the human condition and human experience far from any narrow chauvinism. Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994), for instance, parodies Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1623) to create his own *Macbett* (1970). If the comedy remoulds the original tragedy with its characters ; nonetheless, it is more engaged to display other themes more relevant to the time and context, but certainly not discussed in the original play. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* tells the tragedy of Macbeth who kills his own king to fulfill the prophecies three witches told him earlier. The third one is that Macbeth would be king. Out of ambition, his wife encourages him to murder Duncan the King after the fulfillment of the two first ones. Ionesco’s *Macbett* tells the story of general Macbett who plots to kill the archduke Duncan as the latter does not keep his promises after the general crushed a rebellion. Ionesco’s play is all about the absurdity of life, war brokers, death, ambition and a world that

goes insane although it shows the madness of man, power and intrigues.

We conclude that the spatial and historical distance in postmodern times does not posit an obstacle to translation at all since the act of translating is always renewable, hopping from one field to another. From an epistemological perspective, there seems to be a dialogue between literature and the artwork. In comparative literature, the most important thing is not comparing the differences articulated through themes, but the point of view and the perspective of articulation. Eugene is right when he states that

‘The object of comparative study is not to compare the differences between individual poets: that is neither necessary nor even very interesting. The object, rather, is to understand the different premises from which each literary masterwork proceeds. If comparison cannot yield any insights into the individual genius of great writers in any culture, yet can it provide insights as to how their works might, or should, be read...The comparative reader assumes the premises appropriate to the object of study. In this way, one not only understands the viewpoint of the other, one also gains a deeper understanding of what one is already familiar with.’¹⁹

Between translation, aesthetics, and identity in an age of globalization

One of Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear* (1608), seems to display the relationship between aesthetics, identity and communication. The following dialogues are all about the concerns of the 'word' and its tragic ramifications within ideology, aesthetics, meaning and identity.

LEAR: what can you say to attract a third more valuable than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.

LEAR: Nothing!

CORDELIA: Nothing.

LEAR: Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.

CORDELIA: I cannot express what is in my heart. I love your majesty as a daughter should. No more, no less.

LEAR: What, what, Cordelia?

CORDELIA: My good lord, You have fathered me, taught me, loved me. I return those duties as I should. I obey you, love you, and honor you most. Why do my sisters have husbands if they say all their love is for you? I hope that when I marry, my husband has half my love, care, and duty.

LEAR: Do these words come from your heart?

CORDELIA: Yes, my good lord.

LEAR: So young, and so hardhearted?

CORDELIA: So young, my lord, and truthful.

LEAR: Let your truth then be your dowry! By the sacred light of the sun, by all the stars that govern our lives, I hereby disown you! You are now a stranger to my heart and me. Stay away forever, my former daughter²⁰.

...

KENT: Farewell, King. If this is what you want, freedom is elsewhere.

(to Cordelia) The gods protect you, maid. Your thinking is right, and your words are true!

(to Regan and Goneril) May your deeds live up to your fancy speeches²¹ (Act 1, scene 1)

The dialogue between Lear and Cordelia unveils some important facts about the word, ideology, culture and identity. The king disowns his daughter because her words do not overlap the ideas he awaits for. They do not seem to target the very words he wants to hear. These words are simply put, neither beautiful nor aesthetic. It all seems that the king, therefore power and authority, prefers aesthetics rather than truth and meaning. We are also in front of De Saussure's arbitrariness of the sign; otherwise, there is an absurd miscommunication although they speak the same language. Cordelia becomes a stranger to her own father. There is certainly a loss of identity here because of 'misused'

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or crude words. The curse of the word hinders communication between a father and a daughter although they use the same language : English ! How is communication between two or more disparate languages going to be? How can one convey his thoughts in different languages?

Lear, as the political power, performs authority against the free expression of the word too; hence, repression brings about the loss of identity. If Cordelia expressed the same idea with eloquence, aesthetic, and rhetoric, the king's vanity and conceit would have been filled. The king accepts decorum and aesthetics but rejects truth. However, Goneril and Regan's, his other daughters' lies disguised in beautiful words, find echoes in his ears.

If Cordelia stands for the free from any ideology translator; therefore, the whole dialogue portrays the paradox between politics, aesthetics, the writer and the translator as co-author.

Kent, King Lear's honest earl and servant who stands against disowning Cordelia, is banished from the Kingdom. His loyalty/faithfulness to the King, power and ideology, compels him to assume a simple man's identity, Caius, another identity to remain always close to his king and serve him. Kent/Caius seems to have a binary identity: loyal to his king, but honest to his thoughts. Shakespeare

seems to give him death after Lear's death. Standing by Cordelia and approving her 'words' and truth, he metaphorically represents the translator who is torn between his devotion to his 'king' and loyalty to Cordelia. It is the faithful translation to the ideology but also to the deep thought before the aesthetics. It is the 'honest' translation.

From the above Lear's dialogue with Cordelia, and Kent's addressed words to again Cordelia and her sisters, one understands better the role of translation between ideology and power on the one side, aesthetics and decorum on the other side. Translation and identity are all about the devotion to power and policy within a country. 'Translation must be at the centre of any attempt to think about questions of identity in human society'²², especially in a culture that tries to remould itself, to invigorate the whole body of society.

In his *The Ideology of the Aesthetics* (1990), Terry Eagleton reminds the reader of the origins of the concept aesthetics while returning it to its Greek sources. The concept relates to the body and 'to the whole region of human perception and sensation.'²³ Aesthetics does not seem to belong to the realm of philosophy and abstract ideas, but it lives, grows and develops right close to our **senses** yet within the boundaries of the political stronghold. In fact, the latter dominates and overrules all human

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experience. Thus, the subjective and that which belongs to the sensitive strata of human experience remains under the control of reason. The major merit of literary and artistic performance is that it is the expression of personal experience, what is in Cordelia's heart, hence its authenticity. It is richer than the mere words Cordelia utters. 'I am sure my love is richer than my tongue can express.'²⁴

In fact, a translator needs to transfer the meaning despite its depth. It is evident that the word cannot always express deep thoughts, and this is one of the translator's obstacles. How is he going to translate these deep thoughts out of a paradigmatic axis of culture and ideas? In addition, style and rhetoric make it even more difficult. The chart below (Figure 1) displays the complexity of translation after the combination between deep thoughts and the aesthetic values of the text. Nature (deep thoughts) and culture (word) constitute two sides of the same coin though culture develops out of nature. An impermeable cultural layer that poetics and stylistics may constitute surrounds nature.

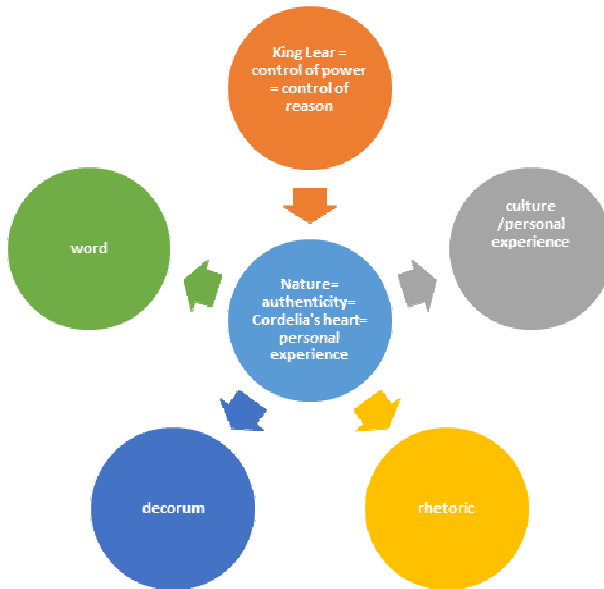


Figure 1: Untranslatability is the imbrication between aesthetics and wrapped hidden thoughts

Authenticity and truth belong to the realm of the untranslatable according to Ricoeur. In his *On Translation*, he knows that translation does not start from the word because the translator's concern is culture. Translation seems to operate the other way round:

Translators know it perfectly well: it is texts, not sentences, not words, that our texts try to translate. And texts in turn are part of cultural groups through which different visions of the world are expressed, visions which moreover

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can confront each other within the same elementary system of phonological, lexical, syntactic division, to the extent of making what one calls the national or the community culture a network of visions of the world in secret or open competition... These considerations lead me to say that the work of the translator does not move from the word to the sentence, to the text, to the cultural group, but conversely: absorbing vast interpretations of the spirit of a culture, the translator comes down again from the text, to the sentence and to the word.²⁵

Eugene Eoyang introduces new elements in his analysis of literature and society, literature and teaching. For him, western society in its development from feudalism to postmodernism has gone through labor, skills, knowledge and finally reached the insight with the postmodern²⁶. This insight that we can add to his conception of the teacher of comparative literature as a ‘facilitator’ can be aligned to that of the translator. The latter and the teacher-facilitator help in spreading the functions of literature as conceived by Eugene, notably ‘Creative imagination, vicarious sympathy, capacious intuition.’²⁷ However, how can one relate Eagleton’s definition of aesthetics and Eoyang’s functions of literature? Equipped with a deep insight, a translator

knows what to translate, when to translate, how to translate and for whom to translate.

The major task of translation is to keep the local colours of the source text (ST), but at the same time find ways to insert them in the cultural environment of the local culture in the target text (TT). Identity seems to converge with ideology when Bassnett and Lefevere state that '[t]ranslation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. Any rewriting, whatever its intention, reflects a particular ideology and particular poetics, and as such, they manipulate literature in order to make it work in a particular society, in a particular way.'²⁸ Theo Hermans goes on the same idea of identity and ideology when he speaks about 'manipulation' and 'particular purpose'. 'From the point of view of the target literature, any translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text with a particular purpose.'²⁹

Conclusion

The world is getting closer with the new technology advances, the economic ties, political relations and many other cultural bridges. The narrow nationalistic views tend to disappear although they show up in times of conflicts or imperialistic threats. Yet, it is important to state that men share a lot in terms of culture, values and their vision to the universe. We read the same fiction,

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enjoy the same poetry, see the same shows, hear the same news, and watch the same movies or adapted novels from *Robinson Crusoe*, to *Hamlet*, to *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, or any other fairy tale. We need to note, however, that the translational and cultural movement from the other side remains very slow and insignificant in front of the massive western cultural flood. We tend to build the cosmopolitan individual with diverse but common cultural skills. Man becomes a more complex and culturally sophisticated individual despite the weight of western values. However, on the long path of building this cosmopolitan individual, we come to conclude that the relation between comparative literature and translation cannot always be objective. A wide range of parameters, from personal to ideological, melt into the word.

On the unbalanced basis of cultural and literary exchange, we need to reshape a systematic enterprise of comparative, literary, and translation studies, if we want to refresh our vision to the new world around us and understand the *other*, the same way he wants to understand us. Unity in diversity should be one way to conceive the relationship between comparative literature and translation. After Lear's death, translation would certainly be mature enough to follow its own reason and the multiplicity of voices.

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