

## THE TASK OF THE THEORY TEXTBOOK AUTHOR

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In an essay entitled “The Homeric Versions,” the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote, “With famous books, the first time is actually the second, for we begin them already knowing them. The prudent common phrase ‘rereading the classics’ is the result of an unwitting truth” (69-70). Somehow, I was reminded of this phrase when reading Hans Bertens’s reflections, “On Writing a Theory Textbook,” although in that piece the author does not mention translation or translation theory per se (interestingly, an entire field not often considered in many literary theory textbooks). In that essay, Borges makes the case for the impossibility to distinguish the text itself from its interpretations, or rather, insists that when speaking specifically of translations of a text, either they all are faithful or not one ultimately is, a paradox that simultaneously exposes and celebrates the vexed notion of the original. “Translations,” Borges writes, “are a partial and precious documentation of the changes the text suffers. Are not the many versions of the *Iliad*—from Chapman to Magnien—merely different perspectives on a mutable fact, a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphases?” (69). Borges’s reflections seem to illuminate in a certain way how literature and literary theory have come together, or more accurately, as Bertens argues, “how [literary] theory and practice are inevitably connected and have always been connected” (emphasis in the original). In this respect, it is interesting to consider the practice of literary theory under the guise of a “translation,” to consider Bertens’s task of “translating” literary theory for practical use in the classroom, namely, his book *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Some of the issues that come to my mind concern the role and responsibility of the author of a theory textbook as a translator (and there are many consequences to this thought experiment) and the idea of the practical engagement of theory with literature as a form of translation.

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée

CRCL SEPTEMBER 2008 SEPTEMBRE RCLC

0319-051X/08/35.3/238 ©CANADIAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

Bertens begins his reflections on his own experience of writing a theory textbook by citing two well-known theory primers that he read in preparation for his own forays into this topic. He notes that he was put off by both Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory, An Introduction* and Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory*, mainly because of their strong leanings toward Marxism and poststructuralism, respectively. He aspired instead "to write a rather traditional, non-partisan book" in the style of Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. While I agree in principle with Bertens's view that there is a place for textbooks with a less "heavy-handed" approach from a particular perspective (whether it be Marxist, poststructuralist, or liberal humanist, for that matter), it seems to me that a couple of issues merit closer attention: first, the claim that a textbook can be "non-partisan," and second, that a so-called partisan textbook has little to offer to a student of literature. To this effect, it seems interesting to consider the analogy with translation.

Among non-specialists, there is a widespread (mis)conception of translation as a purely linguistic (quasi mechanical) operation that is somehow supposed to yield a transparent, so-called faithful version of a text in a different language, and that the translator's agency is limited to this self-effacing operation, something that inspired Lawrence Venuti's celebrated book *The Translator's Invisibility*. For some years now translators and translation theorists have been challenging this commonsense assumption alluded to in Borges's essay I quoted above, casting translation instead as a very deliberate "game of omissions and emphases." In the case of Culler and Eagleton, such operations become obviously more marked not only because of their prior political/theoretical commitments, but also perhaps as an argument that literary theory and its translation into a textbook, like translation proper, are never entirely transparent or apolitical. Furthermore, they signal that the theory textbook author like the translator—despite his or her attempts at "faithfulness" or "impartiality"—arrives at the task with a set of political leanings, preferences, and agendas of his or her own, which will inevitably find their way, whether consciously or not, into the end product. In a remark that may reveal something about his own leanings, Bertens confesses that he struggled with opposition to his inclusion of practical criticism and New Criticism, trends often dismissed by other authors as "too traditional" but which he considered should be in the mix because he deemed "that there were more closet-humanists than publishers specialized in poststructuralistically inflected literary theory suspected."

The second issue has to do with the usefulness of a "highly-inflected" theory textbook as a pedagogical tool. This issue too may be seen under the lens of translation. One may want to ask not only what a theory textbook (or a translation, for that matter) should be, look or read like, but, rather, what one *wants* out of them. In recent years, translators and translation theorists have come to speak of both "domesticating" and "foreignizing" translations, the first being the one that seeks to eliminate the foreign feel of the original, catering as much as possible to the target language and audience, and the second, privileging the original, assuming a certain degree

of foreignness will and should make it through to the translation for political but also linguistic reasons—Ezra Pound, for instance, spoke of expanding the limits of English through translation. There is a pedagogical role, I believe, to be played by translations that never let us forget they are translations and that unsettle our linguistic and cultural assumptions. Similarly, a theory textbook that adopts a, let's say, "theorizing" attitude might also play a role in making students aware that even the translation (read "exposition") of theory is not a transparent operation. Perhaps precisely their inflected nature might lead students further into questioning the very perspective such books are attempting to put forth. In any event, the existence of many (potentially unlimited) translations of a single text (whether foreignizing or domesticating), could very well serve to better illuminate an unstable object (text), producing, as Borges notes, "different perspectives on a mutable fact." Much in the same way, theory—another mutable if not unstable object—might not be poorly served by a plurality of approaches, i.e., by more or less "partisan" translations.

**240** The agency of the translator in producing a "foreignizing" or "domesticating" translation, and the effect of such an operation leads me to another reflection about the role of the theory textbook and its author related to the Latin etymology of translation. "Translatio," as Richard Sieburth observed, "also refers to the transfer of the relics of saints or pieces of the true cross" (102), or, more generally, as in the phrase "Translatio studii et imperii," to the act of transferring cultural capital and political rule from one civilization to another in the process of creating an empire. Translation as an operation that transfers from one language and one culture the spoils of another one is in this way also analogous to the operation of assembling—in a textbook—the variety of perspectives on literature coming, in many cases, from abroad for use in the mainstay of academia, particularly in the Anglophone world. As a graduate student, I recall attending a yearly event at NYU where the luminaries of deconstruction and poststructuralism, Derrida, Cixous, Kristeva, etc., would appear before packed lecture halls. The running joke was, of course, that "French Theory" didn't exist as such in France, that is, it was very much a product of its translation (linguistic and geographic) from French and across the Atlantic. In France, people like Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, and Cixous, enjoyed stable reputations outside the field of literary studies as philosophers, psychoanalysts, and creative writers. "French Theory" is a North American phenomenon, born out of the translation of intellectual trends into the North American academic environment. The translator as well as the theory textbook author thus have a crucial role in bringing about the creation of this (as) theory and its dissemination. Jonathan Culler and Gayatri Spivak, while being also theorists in their own right, illustrate the role of textbook authors and translators as cultural mediators and their activity as one of cultural transfer.

The case then may well be the opposite of what Bertens notes towards the end of his essay. In other words, not so much that "[l]iterary theorizing has branched out in all possible directions and has become hard to distinguish from some forms of contemporary philosophy," but rather that the literary theory label that certain

philosophical thinking gained as a result of its transatlantic transfer may well have worn off, and such theorizing is beginning to be seen for what it originally was, not strictly literary. This may explain Bertens perplexity at the fact that at times so-called literary theory “[deals] with admittedly important but not specifically literary issues such as the nature of sexuality, the possibility of agency, the role of language, and so on and so forth.”

Still, I do not lament in the same way the decay or transformation of literary theory as “the assimilation of one particular brand of philosophy into literary studies.” An undergraduate background in philosophy, particularly Anglo-American philosophy, often made me wary of the label “theory” when preceded by the adjective “literary,” or of legitimate yet not strictly “literary” questions such as, “does literature exist apart from its interpretation?” and “what is meaning?” It always seemed to me that these were all philosophical questions lying outside the domain of literary interpretation. Moreover, literary theorists are always somewhat anxious about admitting that perhaps the trouble with literary theory comes from its very institutional origins, the fact that for years, the research model favored by institutions has been the scientific method. But all demonstrations, proofs, and “theories,” however convincing or rich in explanatory potential, are inevitably shaky in their foundations. The appeal and perhaps peer-pressure of the sciences produced in literary studies what I would term “theory-envy,” the necessity to ground literary studies in something more “solid” than subjective interpretation. But the object of philosophy is often its own concepts, or rather it has been emptied out of its object, which is not the case for literature, where the text (in some form) remains “there” even while all its workings are called into question. In this sense, I’m not certain that, as Bertens claims, “the words have largely disappeared.” Perhaps it is not the business of literary theory to probe or attempt to establish those foundations, but to provide fresh angles from which to look at texts, promoting “new” readings, unleashing “new” meanings, providing “new translations” of texts (including non-literary ones) that don’t necessarily cancel others. Like translation as a dynamic site of potentially countless versions, theory feeds on a systematic debate with the preceding “school” or trend and of neighboring disciplines. The task of theory and of the theory textbook author perhaps could be construed as assistants to the task of “rereading” (past & future) classics because, as Borges rightly claimed, they come to us already read.

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