**Translation, Literature and Ethics: Reading J.M Coetzee, Cynthia Ozick and W.G. Sebald**

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*Abstract*

This thesis examines translation within the literary oeuvres of three twentieth and twenty-first century writers, J.M. Coetzee, Cynthia Ozick and W.G. Sebald. An analysis of their distinct bodies of work reveals translation as a complex device that manifests differently in each case, yet also points to important common ground, in which the discourse of translation reveals the underlying ethical notions invested in each writer’s vision.

Rather than focusing on translation in comparative form, as an evaluation of “source” and “target” texts (and their differences, similarities, losses or gains), in this study translation is considered within a literary work, where it surfaces as a thematic component, a stylistic feature, and a guiding element in its reception, what has been termed the “afterlife” of a literary work. Translation is thus regarded as a border concept between cultural studies and literary theory, and fictional works treated as sites of activated meaning, an approach that takes into account questions of readerly activity and the demands made by each author on their readers.

As such, the thesis addresses a gap in theory regarding “intra-textual” translation, the myriad ways translation can appear within a work of literature, and it examines the significance of the practice for these multilingual writers while underscoring the ramifications of moving through their different languages.

Following what has been called the “cultural turn” in the late 1990’s, the discourse of literary translation expanded from an inquiry centered on fidelity and translation practices, to one that considers the significance of both the cultural history that informs translation, and the position of the translator and the translated text. This study is in line with the “cultural turn” in its evaluation of translation and is also inspired by more recent developments that have highlighted its significance for literary theory from different‒even disparate‒points of view, such as Rebecca Walkowitz’s formulation of the “born translated” literary work and Emily Apter’s notion of the “translation zone” and defense of untranslatability, as well as Bella Brodzki’s account of translation as both cultural loss and survival. In addition, the analysis draws from literary criticism that pertains to the philosophical aspects of reading, writing and critiquing texts, such as Derek Attridge’s work, infused by continental philosophy.

Coetzee, Ozick and Sebald are contemporaries who are not only writers, but critics and translators as well; they share the dual position of critic and writer, a unique vantage point that is crucial for their engagements with translation. Among the many points of similarities between the three, the interplay between their nonfiction and fiction results in a dual (or in-between) position comparable to that of the translator, as is argued in each case. What’s more, translation also illuminates the manner in which these writers negotiate their place within the literary world.

In Coetzee’s case, translation has been significant from the outset of his career as both a critic and a writer, and has marked his entrance into “world literature” and subsequent canonization. Chapter one, “Complicity”, addresses Coetzee’s work, fleshing out his dual role as a prolific writer and a critic and illuminating the manner in which he writes with an awareness of his own historicization. Although translation appears throughout Coetzee’s fictional oeuvre, it defines his early works in a striking way, therefore the study focuses on two of his novels, his debut *Dusklands* (1974) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the latter work solidifying his canonical status within “world literature”. In *Dusklands,* translation is inexorably linked to colonialism and casts the act of writing as complicit, with the translated text potentially usurping the original. The dual nature of translation (original/copy) and its potential for duplicity manifests in Coetzee’s use of author doubles, a prominent feature throughout his oeuvre, and one that is particularly pronounced in *Dusklands*, which involves a figure of the translator as an author double who is complicit in the colonial act and its historical documentation. In Coetzee’s later work, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) translation has a key role, functioning as a metaphorical, stylistic and thematic feature of the novel. Furthermore, *Waiting for the Barbarians* underscores the significance of gender in translation and the manner in which it relates to power and the colonial context. My analysis also demonstrates the manner in which translation surfaces in subtle, literary ways, evident in Coetzee’s treatment of language and in the invitation he extends to his readers to take an active interpretive role in his works. I thus argue that these early novels prefigure Coetzee’s later aesthetic engagements with translation (expressed most recently in the Jesus trilogy) and form a core component of his ethical vision of writing in the English language as an act of complicity.

While Coetzee negotiates writing in English as complicit in the colonial act, Ozick’s position as a writer in English is deemed an act of transgression; firstly as it defies the taboo on idolatry in Judaism and secondly as it departs from Jewish languages. Chapter 2 of the study, titled “Transgression”, demonstrates that translation links the central concerns of Cynthia Ozick’s work, which include the role of the critic, the clash between Hebraism and Hellenism, the cultural significance of gender, as well as the broader question of language, crucial to Ozick’s conception of a Jewish literature in English. I argue that Ozick carves out a role as a Jewish writer that both entails transgression and enacts a transformation of English in order to accommodate Judaic thought. The analysis also considers the different attitude Ozick displays towards Hebrew and Yiddish, specifically as the latter is seen to need safeguarding (and translation) as opposed to Hebrew, a holy and thus eternal language. The related issue of the gendering of Hebrew and Yiddish is addressed as well.

Along with Ozick’s prominent works of nonfiction such as her lecture “Towards a New Yiddish” (1970), I analyze Ozick’s cast of defiant female characters who resist or subvert patriarchal notions of authorship and creation, and often take on the role of the translator. Two fictional works are discussed in detail: the novel *Foreign Bodies* (2010), a rewriting of Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* (1903) and the novella “Envy: Or Yiddish in America” (1969). *Foreign Bodies* introduces the notion of translation as a moral endeavor (it can literally save lives) and engages intertextual allusion for a form of *tikkun* that suggests a literary vision inclusive of gendered “bodies”, their silences and accents. While “Envy: Or Yiddish in America” features a defiant female translator, it also emphasizes the particularities of the Yiddish language, sociolinguistically and historically, underscoring both the destructive and restorative forces of its literary translations. The study illustrates how in this novella Ozick takes on the paradox of translation as obliteration/cultural survival, and gives translation a dual function as both a theme as well as a performance within the work.

While Coetzee and Ozick employ translation as subversion or even *tikkun* (respectively), in their native English language, W.G. Sebald engages with English as a translation. Thus, the third chapter, “Restitution,” which relates to Sebald in English (and as writer deeply invested in his translations), expands to address the reception of a literary work and conversely, its production as well— how an author can participate in the rewriting of his works through translation. As will be argued, translation has also proved revelatory of problematic aspects in relation to the poetics and ethics of representation, one of Sebald’s chief concerns. Two works are analyzed in detail: Sebald’s last published piece of fiction, *Austerlitz* (2001), and his most well-known collection of nonfiction, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999). Since *Austerlitz* is entangled with translation, memory and linguistic states of paralysis, this study focuses on the novel’s employment of “already translated” narrative, and the role of the narrator figure (and author double) as a translator. I argue that *Austerlitz* is a novel complicated by a movement of translation, adaptation and appropriation, with regard both to the positioning of narrator/author figure as translator and to Sebald’s unauthorized incorporation of biography in this work. Relatedly, the role of translation in the reception or “afterlife” of *Austerlitz* is addressed, and the important manner in which it continues to define Sebald within Anglophone literature. Translation has also played a role in the reception— and anticipated reception— of *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999). The analysis of *On the Natural History of Destruction* (trans. Anthea Bell 2003), the English translation of the lectures, pays particular attention to Sebald’s “insider/outside” position, his rewriting of an original, and the discourse of fidelity that inevitably arises in relation to translation of this work. I argue that *On the Natural History of Destruction* enacts Sebald’s project of literature as “restitution”, illustrating how the attempt to restore or compensate involves translation and raises complex ethical questions engrained in its nature.

Each of the three authors considered demonstrates an interplay between their critical and fictional writing that broadens the understanding of their bodies of work. Moreover, as will be argued, the dual role (as writer and critic) taken by each is analogous to the dual position of the translator —as the creative fusion of reader and writer— foregrounding intertextual and metafictional elements in their works, which is one of the focal points of my analysis. Therefore, this research offers not only insight into the works of Coetzee, Ozick and Sebald, but also a different framework from which to read their works, which accounts for their dual position. The study aims to demonstrate the range and uniqueness of this duality, an approach to language that may entail complicity, transgression or restitution. Despite the significant disparities that exist between the three writers considered, this thesis illuminates their important common ground: the underlying ethical notion invested in writing from a translator’s perspective.