

Wither Production?

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Abstract

The argument that *Against World Literature* makes about why we might perceive translation as a form of anti-capitalist or 'deowned' property does not jibe with basic features of the material organisation of the publishing industry and the intellectual-property regime on which it depends. While it is perhaps unfair to expect everyone to be a cultural materialist or literary sociologist, I point out a number of features of the organisation of the World Literature industry that trouble Apter's arguments about the anti-capitalist implications of our recognition of the untranslatable. Ultimately ownership is not a matter of perception, and non-owned literature, like non-alienated literary labour, cannot exist under capitalism. These circumstances will not change in the absence of some fundamental reorientation of the class dynamics of writing, publishing, and reading. To deown literature, the whole material constitution of the industry would have to be abolished and replaced with something else.

Keywords

cultural materialism – Marxist cultural criticism – world literature – translation – authorship

Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, London: Verso, 2013

Scholars have been discussing world literature's status as an elite commodity for some time, beginning perhaps with Timothy Brennan's important critiques, first expressed in the late 1980s, of celebrated 'Third World' writers. Since then a number of studies of postcolonial literature – a category of text that tends to be subsumed now into the world-literature canon – have argued for the

importance of understanding that literature in relation to the markets for it. The basic narrative that these works construct is one in which the label 'world literature', for decades applied to a canon of classics curated by acquisitive publishers located in the West, signals now little more than a predictable set of moderately 'different' works. These works are said to be written in such a way that they are ideal for transport from peripheral to core locations, or, when a less one-way flow is evident, they are said to be produced and consumed by the taste-making elite who inhabit the world's networked cultural capitals.¹

David Damrosch's well-known approach to world literature might seem to offer a contrast, since he suggests that world literature is not a homogeneous object unified by particular thematic concerns or aesthetic parameters. For Damrosch, rather, any work that has travelled across a border to meet its readers in localised moments of consumption can be deemed a work of world literature.² Yet even if it is only a heterogeneous aggregate of mobile works consumed in disparate locations, world literature can still be read as a cultural accompaniment to an encompassing process of global market expansion. Indeed Damrosch's own project of insisting that every literary work is unique, and that every act of consumption of a literary work is irreducible to any other, is highly compatible with contemporary capitalism's fetish for particularity and diversity.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels famously wrote that an imperative to expand markets 'chases the bourgeoisie over the surface of the whole globe', and so they 'nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere'.³ They argued that the rise of a genuine *Weltliteratur* – an international literature moving easily across hazy borders – would parallel the expansion of the world market and the intrepid travels of its bourgeois beneficiaries. More recently, Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova have formulated the most influential expansions of this kind of claim, arriving at theories of world literature that are attentive to the imbalances and inequities that determine the distribution of cultural and economic resources, and cognisant of the ways in which economic unevenness impinges upon the literary field. Moretti's 'Conjectures on World Literature' is the first of his interventions discussing world literature as 'literature of the capitalist world-system', and so necessarily, like that system, 'one, yet unequal'. Moretti elaborates:

1 See Brennan 1989; Huggan 2001; Watts 2005; Brouillette 2007.

2 See Damrosch 2003.

3 Marx and Engels 1967, p. 84.

the world-system school of economic history, for which international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: *one* literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it's profoundly unequal.⁴

For her part, in *La République mondiale des lettres* Casanova insists that the world's national literatures have been defined by the hierarchised and iniquitous cultural field in which they circulate. She argues that there is a fundamental connection between liberal capitalism and the literature we tend to esteem, since the literature that is celebrated by the industry is the work that believes in and strives for a version of aesthetic autonomy compatible with bourgeois liberalism: committed to formal perfection and to the freedom of the writer to do as she pleases.⁵

This is the broad field that Apter's *Against World Literature* enters. Its concerns are in some ways continuous with Apter's other big book about translation, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, as both are at heart motivated by polarising debates in the field of translation studies. Is everything translatable, or nothing? Do we insist on universals or on particulars, on the planetary or the local, on a global World Literature or a disparate array of national traditions? Do we, with Alain Badiou, engage in the elevation of 'univocity over equivocation, of idea over language, of transparency over opacity, of transmission over hermeneutics' (p. 23), or does such a manoeuvre justify a potentially annihilating blindness to the specificities of local cultural traditions? *The Translation Zone*, published in 2005, does not take sides, but rather elaborates a variety of middle positions. So, for instance, Apter argues that while 'it has become commonplace . . . to bemoan the hegemony of global English as the lingua franca of technocracy', we should lament the 'insufficient attention paid to how other global languages [such as Chinese] are shifting the balance of power in the production of world culture.' Or, further, she claims, 'translation, in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and big populations, condemns minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the culture heritage of "small" literatures, or guarantees a wider sphere of reception to selected, representative authors of minoritarian

4 Moretti 2000, pp. 56–7.

5 See Casanova 2004.

traditions.⁶ More broadly, translation itself is presented as an act doomed to failure but, nevertheless, necessarily undertaken. The fact that it is impossible to translate completely does not mean that one should not translate at all.

This sort of ambivalence – recognising what translation affords and what it misses and even threatens – is still there in some form in *Against World Literature*. However Apter's tone now is significantly less hopeful, and she insists more that it is the untranslatable which should command our allegiance. Part of her inspiration is Barbara Cassin's 2004 *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, a dictionary of nearly 400 terms that have proven difficult to translate – words such as *Dasein* (German) and *pravda* (Russian). Yet Apter wearily extends Cassin's practical and philosophical interest in the untranslatable in the direction of Speculative Realism, such that failure to translate becomes just another measure of the failure of all our hubristic human drives. She adopts from the Speculative Realists an image of 'a planet in the grip of revolutionary *ressentiment*: sullen, wounded, and ready to retaliate against the hubris of humans who "forget" that their own psychic fates are tethered to the earth's distressed crust, depleted mineral veins, and liquid, molten, nihilism' (p. 338).

The result of this combination of elements and influences – Badiou, Cassin, the Speculative Realists, and many more – is an intimidatingly learned and capacious book, and one that rarely comes together in a cohesive way. I cannot treat its many currents in this short space. What I will do here instead is focus on the book's construction of its main target, World Literature, and of the main force poised against that target, the untranslatable. *Against World Literature* is not opposed to a globalised canon for comparative literary study. Nor does it discuss how particular works or writers of world literature are insufficient to an identified task. Instead, as a whole, the book works to suggest that the study of comparative literature offers two paths to the scholar.

To take the wrong path is to be affiliated with World Literature, which serves as a catch-all category signifying a host of objectionable ways of thinking about globalised cultural expression and about the translation projects occasioned when culture crosses borders. At its worst World Literature is associated with what Apter calls 'oneworldedness', defined as a way of imagining the planet as 'an extension of paranoid subjectivity vulnerable to persecutory fantasy, catastrophism, and monomania' (p. 71). Apter suggests that World Literature – which she treats as a monolith rather than as an array of disparate texts and practices – presents no challenge to the 'centrifugal pressure of dominant world languages and literatures' or 'to the homogeneity of culture produced

6 Apter 2005, pp. 3–4.

under capitalism', and nor does it do anything to counter the spread of oneworldedness as a 'delirious aesthetics of systematicity' (p. 72). It involves imagining that there is such a thing as easy translation between languages. It entails positing seamless borders between nations and between texts, borders that are – in Apter's argument – wrongly thought to matter very little to how we function in the world or read the texts presented to us.

To take the wrong path is to consume a select roster of world-literary titles, aligned to a globalising and homogenising capitalism, and to pretend that they grant us uncomplicated access to foreign experiences. It is to consume these works like any other commodity, and thereby deny their fundamental difference. Or, in another possibility, these works are themselves from the beginning designed for easy consumption by complicit writers and publishers with little interest in what cannot be translated across cultures, and we read them in the same spirit. Apter thus writes of her 'serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded "differences" that have been niche marketed as commercialised "identities"' (p. 2). She quotes with approval Simon During's argument that world literature is a 'genteel leisure industry', part of 'the recent rapid extension of cross-border flows of tourists and cultural goods around the world'; and states that she is 'uneasy in the face of the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources' (pp. 2–3). World Literature is – again contributing to a troubling oneworldedness – 'a relatively intractable literary monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference' (p. 83).

Of course Apter does not want us to consume literature in this way. She wants us to struggle with it. She wants it to present barriers to easy comprehension. The figure for all the ways to approach the text that are not subsumed into World Literature, and that thus represent the preferred path for scholars, is the untranslatable. In her view we must constantly acknowledge that there are things we cannot assimilate. Despite the fact that the writers in question are all in various ways subjects of capitalism, we are meant to hold in our minds the fact that there are ways of being and having that cannot be reduced to World Literature's homogenous same. There are modes of literary expression that are not straightforwardly palatable and cannot be easily appropriated. Her ambition in celebrating this untranslatability is broad indeed:

the aim is to activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature with bearing on approaches to world literatures, literary world-systems and literary history, the politics of periodization,

the translation of philosophy and theory, the relation between sovereign and linguistic borders at the checkpoint, the bounds of non-secular proscription and cultural sanction, free versus privatized authorial property, the poetics of translational difference, as well as ethical, cosmological and theological dimensions of worldliness. (pp. 3–4.)

As the reference to ‘free versus privatized authorial property’ indicates, a major figure throughout the book, wrapped up in her separation of World Literature from the untranslatable, is ownership. The argument is that World Literature fosters ownership, assimilation, and easy consumption, while the untranslatable – which is present in every act of translation, despite whatever myths of easy transfer we maintain – somehow manages to resist all these drives and so fosters, instead, a disavowal of possession. This disavowal of possession is where she locates the politics – an anti-capitalist politics – of the untranslatable.

Apter writes that:

one reason why literary studies falls short as anti-capitalist critique is because it insufficiently questions what it means to ‘have’ a literature or to lay claim to aesthetic property. Literary communities are gated: according to Western law and international statute, authors *have* texts, publishers *have* a universal right to translate (as long as they pay), and nations *own* literary patrimony as cultural inheritance. Translation, seen as authorized plagiarism, emerges as a form of creative property that belongs fully to no one. As a model of deowned literature, it stands against the swell of corporate privatization in the arts. (p. 15.)

To be clear, her argument here is that anti-capitalist critique is a matter of perceiving translation correctly. If we can only see that translation is ‘authorised plagiarism’ we will have a model of ‘deowned literature’ to pit against the private hold over aesthetic property we might otherwise pretend that we have. She expands on this point in later chapters, arguing that translation is a ‘counter to Romantic values and myths of avant-garde originality’ because it ‘exalts in the art of the copy, flaunts its derivativeness, and proudly bears the lead weight of predication on literary antecedent’ (p. 303). Translation thus ‘challenges legalistic norms of ownable intellectual property’ (ibid.). It is sanctioned theft.

However, what if in fact translations are protected by separate copyright precisely because the legal regime recognises the creativity involved in their writing? It recognises that there is no seamless process of moving a text from one language into another language. A new translation of a work

is granted separate copyright because it is acknowledged that there is more than plagiarism involved in it. It is a creative act precisely because there are things that cannot be exactly translated and reasons to avoid the most literal transpositions. In a very basic sense Apter's vaunted untranslatability is fully inscribed in the intellectual-property regime. Within that regime the fact of the existence of the untranslatable or the imperfectly translated is not a threat to the ideology of Romantic creative genius and ownership but rather a prop to it. Translations are protected separately from the originals from which they are drawn precisely because they contain a sufficient portion of that Romantic creative originality to warrant a claim to distinct authorship. Moreover, the translator's work may not trouble the original author's authority. In fact the opposite is true most of the time. Most translations result in more cultural capital – and often some portion of the royalties from sales – flowing to the original author. It is common for publishers' marketing departments to boast that a particular work has been translated into many languages. The fact merely adds to a work's prestige and saleability, and is often of great value to the author's construction as a genius authority worthy of acclaim. It is a valorising move.

I point these details out – and the others below – because Apter's philosophical arguments about the status of the translation as anti-capitalist deowned property do not jibe with basic features of the material organisation of the publishing industry and the intellectual-property regime on which it depends. It would be easy to dismiss my concerns as arising from the fact that my methodological tendencies differ from Apter's (she is not a cultural materialist or sociologist). But I would argue that in *Against World Literature* the lack of engagement with material realities of the production of culture is actually a problem for the analysis. There are features of the organisation of the World Literature industry that invalidate her arguments about the anti-capitalist implications of our recognition of the untranslatable.

Consider as a further instance Apter's argument that, correctly conceived, translation 'effects a subtle generic shift in how we view the literary text' (p. 292). In her preferred vision of translation – as authorised theft, and as always harbouring what cannot be translated – the literary work can no longer be 'viewed as a stable object owned by a single author'. Instead, 'it emerges as a site of translational or editorial labor' (p. 293). Yet the idea that any work is simply a stable object of a single author's creation and possession, including of course works written by one person and never translated into any other language, has been thoroughly discredited for some time now. The whole field of literary sociology, exemplified best by Pierre Bourdieu's take on the field of cultural production, is premised on the argument that it takes a large social

set to authorise the author. It is this social milieu or field that constructs and valorises her authority and makes it possible for her to benefit from the social fiction that she is the sole creator of her work. The point is precisely that the author *is* successfully authorised in the process. Our *view* of the literary object as unstable, as owned by an individual only in a commercial sense or only ideologically, does nothing to upset the fact that these objects are protected by copyright and owned more by some particular individuals than by others.

More simply, of course, as Ignacio Sánchez Prado points out, the field of practice of translation is thoroughly shaped by hierarchies of cultural power that reflect the continued pressures of colonial and imperial ideologies. He writes, for instance: 'This is why most major contemporary American writers are widely available in Spanish, while almost no major Latin American writer, save [Roberto] Bolaño, is translated by a major commercial press in English. It is because, as a practice, readers and consumers of literature in Latin America participate in the ideologem that US and European literature is "superior," while many readers in the US think of Latin American literature as this secondary tradition that is only worth a writer per generation ([Jorge Luis] Borges, [Gabriel] García Márquez and Bolaño respectively).'⁷ Translation is often a condition of possibility and a practical necessity for a given corpus of writing. In such conditions, does the privileged status of the untranslatable still hold?

Consider the case of India, where multilingualism is foundational and translation is a constant and everyday practice, and where translation into dominant languages like English, Hindi, or Bengali might be the only thing that saves a writer from invisibility. In the case of Dalit writers, invisibility is more than a literary matter. Sarah Pollack's treatment of the continued prominence in the US of Latin American-boom writers cites statistics showing that a mere 3 per cent of all new books in all genres published in English are translations (including titles published in the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), while in the US perhaps 0.7 per cent of all books published are translations of literary fiction and poetry.⁸ Though major transnational media firms such as Bertelsmann may be headquartered in Europe, their publishing companies release a great deal of material in English, which is more and more the global vernacular of literary fiction despite the fact that it is not the world's dominant first language. Eva Hemmungs Wirtén's explanation is convincing: 'English is the vernacular of the world because power is assigned in the interstices between linguistic supremacy *and* control of the industries that capitalize on

7 Private correspondence, 2 September 2014. See also Sánchez Prado 2012.

8 Pollack 2009, p. 354.

content, information, knowledge, or other assets of intellectual property *in that language*.⁹ Given such realities – which are shifting every day, to be sure – is untranslatability not in fact much easier for writers in English to celebrate than many others? Would it not be the case that for many writers more translation would be a better option than less, even including, perhaps most pressingly, more translation into a conquering English, ambivalent though such a process might be? *Against World Literature* does not attend to these realities. Its celebration of the untranslatable does not stem from any engagement with the details of how what is treated as World Literature is actually constituted at a material level.

Apter's treatment of Eleanor Marx's translation of *Madame Bovary* is perhaps most symptomatic. Apter's major concern is to argue that, despite its flaws, Eleanor Marx's translation has continued to capture imaginations because it subtly affirms the original text's Marxism 'of sorts' (p. 286). The view of the senior Marx's materialism necessary to this argument is quite specific. Apter aligns Flaubert to Marx because Flaubert 'can be seen as an intellectual worker or laborer of the "real" of realism', and because his work attends to fashion and commodities in a way that 'prefigures' Marx's 'theories of exchange-value and commodity fetishism' (p. 287). Here she quotes Peter Stallybrass's argument that Marx's idea of the commodity fetish 'inscribes immateriality as the defining feature of capitalism', writing that '[o]ne could say that this immaterialized materialism also defines Flaubertian realism, which emerges as a "Marxist" genre in its obsession with the mystificatory capabilities of objects.' It is this feature of the novel that is 'underscored by the addition of Eleanor Marx's signature to the novel's English translation' (p. 287). Yet the crucial feature of Marx's analysis of the commodity fetish in *Capital* is the fact that the immaterial and mystificatory are precisely not the 'defining feature of capitalism'. Instead, to reckon with what defines capitalism one must descend with him into capitalism's 'hidden abode', where value is produced.¹⁰ Commodity fetishism is the lie that there was no work involved in the production of the material thing itself. It is what results from the process whereby every product of labour is transformed into a 'social hieroglyphic'.¹¹ It is the consequential fiction that the thing just has immaterial meanings attached to it by those who wish to sell or consume it. To leave out reference to the 'hidden abode' behind the fetish-appearance is to overlook the heart of the matter.

9 Hemmungs Wirtén 2004, p. 54.

10 Marx 1992, p. 279.

11 Marx 1992, p. 167.

Apter goes on from here to consider the preface that Eleanor Marx wrote to her translation. She concludes that in such writings, as well as in her practice as a translator, she put forward a rare model of unalienated literary labour based on the ideal of writing from the centre of one's being rather than for the market. A few points should be made here. The interconnected ideals of unalienated labour, and of creating not for profit but from the centre of one's being, are absolutely integral to the literary field. There is no clear split between writing from the centre of one's being and writing for the market. If anything the relationship is dialectical: literary work is marketable to the extent that it appears to disavow its market status. Faith in the freeing possibilities of the 'labour of love' is central to the economy of literary production rather than a mode of opposition to it. Indeed there are few ideas with a more mystifying function than that of the creator producing from the centre of her being, as if the object's only purpose were its expression of the inner world of some genius thinker. This is how ignoring the actual nature of the production of capitalist culture gets justified.

So, when Apter concludes that Eleanor Marx's edition of *Madame Bovary* 'affords a glimpse of a language of labor released from a transcendental, capitalist logic of equivalence, exchange, project and credit' (p. 297), I may sympathise with the desire behind the assertion. However, I find the idea that an edition of a novel by Flaubert could be a fit mode of expression of this language of labour unconvincing. When labour is released from capital it will be free to produce collectively in its own interests. Where is this collective of labour in *Madame Bovary*, and where is it in Apter's account? There is no hidden abode in evidence here. The value of the work is produced by the author's Marxism 'of sorts' and the translator's labour of love. There is no social and material production of the literary work. Any economy of literary production impinges on her arguments only in a very metaphorical way: capitalism writ large is a homogenising and reifying force that World Literature supports because it moves across borders with seeming ease and traduces national allegiances, and work like Marx's *Madame Bovary* charts a different course because its translator longed for unalienated labour. Yet, it is just as easy to argue that capitalist cultural economies thrive on diversity and difference; and it is just as easy to argue that Eleanor Marx's self-conception was symptomatic of the mainstreaming of the ideal figure of the writer motivated by internal directives rather than gross commerce. This ideal is itself highly saleable.

In sum, Apter argues that by championing a particular vision of translation we will be opposing the 'bulimic' drive of our contemporary globalised capital's World Literature. Being interested in ways to challenge 'legalistic norms of ownable intellectual property' is laudable, to be sure, but Apter's suggestion

that the Marxist position is to dispute that textual property of any kind 'can or should be owned' (p. 305) does not go quite far enough. It is indisputable that the kinds of literary work she actually discussed are owned. Owned is not all that they are, but they are owned. Ownership is not a matter of perception, and non-owned literature, like non-alienated literary labour, cannot exist under capitalism. Certainly, there are works that are privately circulated, there are works that were never designed to be protected by copyright, and the terms of copyright have themselves been shaped by opposition to the possibility that they might become too restrictive. The US resisted international copyright law so long as it favoured being able to freely pirate materials – that is, until it could claim to be a major producer of exportable content. After World War II some underdeveloped nations wanted the same opportunity, but the more powerful parties to those talks managed to install extensive and restrictive universal copyright quite easily. Apter does not discuss these actual struggles and the actual limits to copyright's hold over culture. Instead she celebrates the circulation of works of literature that emphasise their own untranslatability. But these works do not present an alternative. They just make up another branch of the industry. If I conceive of my literary work as something I do not entirely own, and embrace the idea that what I do for money is not as alienated as some other options, I am still the work's author and still hold the copyright. These circumstances will not change in the absence of some fundamental reorientation of the class dynamics of writing, publishing, and reading. To deown literature, the whole material constitution of the industry would have to be abolished and replaced with something else.

Wendy Griswold has argued that there is 'a reading class' made up of 'habitual readers of print with a distinct demographic profile'.¹² In Griswold's portrait, the tail-end of what Raymond Williams described as 'the long revolution', which made leisure-reading habitual even for working-class people, was in fact an exception to the general rule, and a geographically unevenly-distributed practice at that. Throughout most of literate history only a distinct social elite read for anything other than basic information. Now, too, the culture of literary reading is in fact in decline, and the reading class is shrinking and closing ranks. It seems too obvious to say that the literature we read tends to be written by a certain class of people because of the nature of capitalist social relations. The literary marketplace is part of capitalism's cultural infrastructure, and the animus against the commercialisation and globalisation of a homogenous culture, the attempts to imagine a time when culture was more autonomous from capital, and the subtle gradations of accommodation to and distance

¹² Griswold 2008, p. 1.

from commercial imperatives, have not done much to challenge what Marx and Engels recognised in *The Communist Manifesto* in their claim that *Weltliteratur* was a cultural accompaniment to an avowedly economic reality. A market better able to accommodate a more diverse array of writers doing more sophisticated, political, and less translatable things would not solve our problems, not least because literacy levels and access to literary works are fundamentally determined by status in hierarchies demanded by the division of labour. These are hierarchies that a better or more representative world literature (more complex, more sophisticated, less translatable, more committed) cannot hope to affect. The production of literature, and the production of scholarship about literature, are fundamentally unavailable for any sort of redemptive reform while these capitalist social relations persist. If it is work written to circulate and sell – work that is protected by copyright law – it is fundamentally and irredeemably heteronomous, no matter how we envisage it.

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