AGAINST WORLD LITERATURE BY EMILY APTER

Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability, Emily Apter. New York: Verso, 2013. £19.99. ISBN: 9781844679706.

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During the Super Bowl earlier this year, an advertisement for Coca Cola was televised in which the patriotic anthem 'America The Beautiful' was sung in seven different languages. Within minutes, not just #AmericaIsBeautiful but also #SpeakAmerican and #BoycottCoke were trending on Twitter. Despite many positive reactions from commentators embracing the celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity in the United States, the advertisement also spawned angry tweets along the lines of 'Nice to see that coke likes to sing an AMERICAN song in the terrorist's language' and 'I feel un-American for drinking coke today'. The polarisation of opinion regarding multilingualism and multiculturalism, and the vehemence with which it is expressed is precisely why Emily Apter's *Against World Literature: On The Politics of Untranslatability* is so timely and pertinent a volume. The fear discernible in these fervent responses to linguistic otherness epitomises what Apter terms 'Oneworldnessness': a pervasive paranoia about global interconnectedness and our inevitable drive towards self-destruction. The major achievement of this volume is in revealing the power of that fear, and in demonstrating that we ignore the fact of cultural and linguistic untranslatability at our peril.

Born out of her part in a collective project to translate Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), Apter's volume critiques World Literature's blindness to cultural and linguistic specificity and market-driven tendency to homogenise and endorse cultural equivalence. Her central thesis is that prevailing paradigms in the humanities neglect aspects of incommensurability and, importantly, *untranslatability* between literatures and cultures. Rejecting the assumption that every utterance is universally accessible, she draws on philosophies of translation and the way the 'Untranslatable' is given substance in Cassin's dictionary to develop a new approach to world literature that 'recognises the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability' (p. 4).

It is a shame, then, that Apter insists on stretching the 'Untranslatable' trope so thinly. What is at base the ubiquitous practice of linguistic borrowing (there is no semantic equivalent to 'sushi' in English so we use the Japanese word), when pushed to encompass not only linguistic incompatibility but also unconventional periodisation and global paranoia, emerges as a convenient excuse to conjecture on wildly disparate matters. Shying away from the close reading of individual texts, Apter instead explores an array of 'loosely affiliated topoi' (p. 16), which provide different ways of looking at the role of untranslatability in literary studies. These topoi, around which her central argument struggles to cohere, range from the politics of check-points and geo-political borders to theologies of translation, periodisation and intellectual property ownership.

In foregrounding that which does not easily traverse language boundaries, Apter puts herself in the rather unfashionable position of arguing that a translation is no substitute for the original. She criticises 'big tent' university World Literature syllabi that abandon reading texts in their original language, and takes issue with David Bellos's conviction that all text is translatable, arguing his stance is prompted by professional pride in having to overcome difficult translation hurdles. Apter reveals that although a translation can approximate many dimensions of a text, it must cast aside what Bellos calls the 'dimensions that don't matter', and which she calls 'Untranslatables' (p. 20). She encourages us to see what is 'lost' in

translation as 'a linguistic form of creative failure' (p. 20). Taking translation failure as an unavoidable fact, she sees it not as a technical problem to overcome, but rather as a useful way of identifying significant differences in philosophical thought between languages and cultures. Throughout, Apter is determined to highlight the political as well as the linguistic implications of downplaying untranslatability.

This is a book incorporating multiple approaches and countless sources. The fields Apter is attempting to reassess - World Literature, Comparative Literature, Translation Studies – are as vast and heterogeneous as her frame of reference, such that the overarching thread of her argument is sometimes buried in her eagerness to point out every relevant connection. Her style has been called 'relentless', 'dizzying' and 'exhausting' – for all its breadth and rigour, her prose lacks both clarity and accessibility, reaching the peak of its opacity in the unrelentingly pessimistic final chapter, 'Planetary Dysphoria', which bursts with neologisms and etymologically obscure terminology.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first explores the clumsily named 'Oneworldedness' (this too, apparently, is a self-coined 'Untranslatable'), in which Apter critiques Moretti's experimentation with the world-systems paradigm and his quantitative attempts to reconcile literary history with hard science, arguing that 'rarely are the rewards of this abstracted, digital account of World Literature made clear' (p. 56). Again somewhat tenuously recycling the concept of the 'Untranslatable' in an interesting rethinking of 'eurochronological' conventions of historical periodisation, Apter advocates the adoption of non-western, anachronic 'Untranslatables of periodicity' in place of centuries and decades, or style-defined eras such as classical, gothic or romantic. Walter Benjamin's *Jeztziet* ("now-time"), for example, is offered up as a dynamic alternative to 'the static, periodized label of "the contemporary"' (p. 67); one driven by a fear and political urgency that are inescapably current. The state border checkpoint is then held up as a site of cultural untranslatability, used to iterate the prevailing power of state police in the field of language politics and to undermine popular metaphors of fluid border crossing and easy cultural meaning-exchange within translation studies. The 'Untranslatable' here refers generally to knowledge that is neither securable nor readily accessible, or to any concept with a definition that is temporally or geographically fluid.

The volume's second part, 'Doing Things With Untranslatables', is perhaps the most straightforward, mirroring a dictionary format by adopting keywords as chapter titles. 'Cyclopaedia', 'Peace', 'Fado and saudade', 'Sex and gender', and 'Monde', are resistant to simple rendering in other languages and have contentious philosophical and political nuances. They allow us to appreciate the specificity of expression at a particular time, in a particular place, and to resist the assumption that they can be easily transplanted. Meanwhile Apter suggests *Cyclopaedia* as the answer to the unnerving generic instability of the very 'motherbook of all definitions' (p. 123) – Cassin's dictionary itself, while Portuguese Untranslatables *fado* and *saudade* allow her to decentre powerful European philosophies and attempt to activate the smaller, less influential lusophone lexicon and culture via the rich aesthetic histories of these philosophical concepts.

In 'Translating World Literature', Apter draws on work by Auerbach, Said, Derrida and Kilito, including a thought-provoking discussion of safe-guarding the right *not* to be translated, invoked by private or sacred texts and tongues. The unifying concept in the book's last section, 'Who Owns My Translation?' is that of dispossessed literary properties. Apter calls for a more thorough examination of how translation challenges what it means to 'have' or lay claim to aesthetic property, via a 'biography' of Eleanor Marx's translation of *Madame Bovary* and its impact on the book's literary history, and an examination of world literature as trafficked cultural artefact. As with her previous monograph, *The Translation Zone* (2006), this latest volume concludes a long way from where it began. Apter chooses a

deeply pessimistic note on which to end, reflecting on the precariousness of human existence on a planetary scale. She brings into focus a sense of impending catastrophe that has pervaded the text thus far, envisioning for world literature, as it is currently exists, a similarly inevitable trajectory towards apocalypse as is imagined in Lars von Triers' *Melancholia* (2011).

This volume is an arduous read, but ultimately a rewarding one, despite Apter's attempt to mould each of her disparate ideas into the shape of an 'Untranslatable'. The global relevance of translation has just begun to be understood in relation to public policy, legal conceptions of authorship and intellectual property, and international security; relationships which Apter draws out, calling for a more politically engaged approach to literary comparatism and translation. Adding her voice to those of David Damrosch (2014), Franco Moretti (2013), Rebecca Walkowitz (2008; 2013) and Eric Hayot (2012), Apter is an important contributor to the recent explosion of debate about World Literature theory, and her volume should prompt further reassessment of dominant paradigms in the humanities.

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