

## FORUM\*

### TRANSLATION, LANGUAGE, AND DIALOGUE: A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO *COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FOR THE NEW CENTURY*

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#### INTRODUCTION: A “CANADIAN” APPROACH TO COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Joseph Pivato’s and Giulia de Gasperi’s 2018 collection is undoubtedly a breath of fresh air in a field largely dominated by American theorists and schools of thought. Consisting of various contributions mostly from and about Canada, *Comparative Literature for the New Century* brings new voices and perspectives on the many theoretical, methodological, and critical debates that animate our discipline today. Although the collection is not exclusively concerned with Canadian matters, both de Gasperi’s introduction and Pivato’s review of the field in his own chapter make it clear that their aim as editors was to put forward a Canadian approach to Comparative Literature, one that most importantly distances itself from “American Agendas” (De Gasperi 4). The book implicitly argues that, in light of their experiences of official multiculturalism and institutional bilingualism, Canadian scholars are more attuned to questions of language, translation, belonging, and identity. In contradistinction to America’s “unilingual focus on theory” (Pivato 47) and in response to globalization

\* The contributions to this Forum are responses to Giulia De Gasperi and Joseph Pivato’s edited volume *Comparative Literature for the New Century* (McGill-Queen’s UP, 2018).

and the growing hegemony of English, the editors call for “the importance of language use beyond English” (De Gasperi 10) and the promotion of different languages in Comparative Literature.

One has to wonder if this will to distinguish Canada from the United States is not in fact a symptom of late cultural nationalism, articulated by the CanLit canon and Canadian literary criticism in the 1970s and onwards (see Dobson).<sup>1</sup> At first glance, this distinction would indeed seem to reaffirm an us/them dichotomy, which can enable not only a liberal, feel-good celebration of Canada as an open, inclusive, “multicultural” space, versus an evil, monolingual, racist United States, but also an unquestioned notion of the nation-state, which has by now been overwhelmingly challenged and deconstructed by many scholars in a number of fields. Indeed, the affirmation of a specifically Canadian way of doing Comparative Literature contradicts the call, made by some of the volume’s contributors, to transgress, dissolve, and subvert national boundaries (see Saidero 210; Seccia 158). One final concern with this approach is that this volume is far from exhaustive, leaving many “Canadian” issues, voices, and languages outside of its scope: the articles are written entirely in English, Indigenous issues are mentioned only in passing, and the chapters focus predominantly on the prestigious, canonical, and established genre of print literary fiction.

The questions raised above suggest the very impossibility of delimiting or specifying a Canadian approach to Comparative Literature. After all, as Pivato himself observes, Comparative Literature departments in Canada were, for the most part, founded by European immigrants, and today, at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, where I study, the majority of professors are not Canadian or do not work on Canadian corpuses, and there are as many international students as domestic students. Thus, in the spirit of self-interrogation and self-reflexivity that this collection so generously puts forward, I wanted to begin my response by questioning its starting assumption of a specifically Canadian approach to Comparative Literature. The volume indeed presents new, refreshing voices, and of course Canada’s sociopolitical context does partially determine the scholarship that is being produced here, but I wonder if it is really necessary to unify all voices under the umbrella of a “Canadian CompLit,” which could in turn neglect or obscure other perspectives, no matter how diverse or inclusive we want it to be.

That said, the collection offers fascinating insights from a diversity of scholars, both emerging and established. Its many chapters engage with crucial debates that are unfolding in our discipline throughout the world. It is undoubtedly a good addition to the field of Comparative Literature as a whole and should be of interest to any literary scholar interested in questions of language, translation, and culture, in Canada and beyond. The following discussion engages with three chapters that resonate with my own research interests: “The Languages of Comparative Literature” by Joseph Pivato, “Reading Literature Through Translation: The Case of Antonio d’Alfonso into Italian” by Maria Cristina Seccia, and “A Many-Tongued Babel: Translingualism in Canadian Multicultural Writing” by Deborah Sadeiro. All three essays engage with

two themes that are dear to me and are central to my own research: translation and the notion of language. Pivato, Seccia, and Saidero all consciously and explicitly mobilize translation, both methodologically and theoretically, to support their arguments and claims. And since it is impossible to talk about translation without talking about language, these three chapters also mobilize, perhaps less consciously and more implicitly, a particular notion of language that I wish to interrogate.

## 1. TRANSLATION: ITS LIMITS, POSSIBILITIES, AND METAPHORICAL USES

Taken together, these three chapters highlight both the limitations and the possibilities of translation, and its theoretical potential as a metaphor. They discuss translation from different standpoints, and point to the many productive ways in which we can engage with the practice and the theory of translation within comparative literary studies. When put into conversation, these papers cover a lot of ground: from a much-needed skeptical stance towards translation (Pivato) to a text-based comparison of actual translations (Seccia), and the use of translation as a metaphor to explore various literary and interpretative processes (Saidero); the authors tackle translation as product, process, and trope, providing a compelling overview of what translation has done and can do for Comparative Literature.

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### 1.1 ON THE LIMITS OF TRANSLATION

In “The Languages of Comparative Literature,” Pivato’s point of departure is that comparative literature is built on the study of different languages (41). According to Pivato, however, CompLit programs in the United States have come to rely massively and uncritically on translation for the reading of theoretical texts, which led to the “frequent lack of appreciation for working in original languages rather than in translation” (45). He claims that reading solely English translations, of French theory for example, creates important problems that scholars and departments should not ignore. Pivato suggests that “English translations [of Derrida, Foucault, or Barthes] tend to simplify the language for the sake of making it easier to understand, but may be distorting the intended meaning” (48). Pointing to “the failures and incompleteness of even the best translations” (51), he argues that we should maintain a “healthy skepticism with regard to French theory in English translation” (48). He thus argues that it is the experience of living in different languages within a multicultural society that allows Canadian comparatists in particular to develop a better understanding of the limitations of translation (48).

This argument has been presented differently elsewhere, particularly by American literary scholar Emily Apter, professor of comparative literature at NYU. In *Against*

*World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), Apter develops her concept of “untranslatability,” which she uses to critique the hegemony of English in the academic study of world literature, especially as it manifests itself in the forms of an excessive reliance on English translations and a facile assumption of transparency and equivalence between texts and their translations. I agree with Pivato’s and Apter’s reservations, particularly when they say that we should always be careful and skeptical when reading a translation, or any text, for that matter. One could hardly disagree with them when they argue that we should support “the study of languages and the reading of literature in the original languages” (Pivato 50). However, we should be wary of taking this skepticism towards translation to its extreme. As I have argued elsewhere with my colleague Robert Twiss, an overstated focus on the limitations—or failures, or impossibility—of translation can obscure its possibilities and its potential for comparative literary studies (see Des Rochers and Twiss).<sup>2</sup> Such a focus further posits translations as non-literary works, as texts that are not worthy of analysis or that should not be trusted. The assumption that translated texts convey the meaning of the source text in a transparent and neutral manner must be challenged, of course, but that does not necessarily mean we should disregard it altogether in comparative literary studies.

To be sure, that is not what Pivato suggests. He rightly points to the contributions of the field of translation studies for *Comparative Literature* (50-51). Rather than dismissing translation altogether, comparatists and literary scholars should indeed turn to the tools, methodologies, and theories made available to them by Translation Studies; by now, too much has been written in this discipline for literary scholars to ignore the field, especially when they explicitly discuss translation. However, Pivato leaves us with what is, overall, a negative view of translation, emphasizing only its limitations and inadequacies, portraying translation as mainly “inadequate to the transmission of literary and cultural specificity” with a “negative homogenizing effect” (51). This overlooks a variety of works and theories in translation studies and beyond that recognize the potential and the possibilities, political and otherwise, of translation. I would personally subscribe to a more positive view of translation, one that is nevertheless infused with a healthy dose of skepticism, to borrow Pivato’s words. As Twiss and myself have argued:

Because we cannot avoid translation, it would be better to try to understand how this new meaning comes about by studying the practice of translation and translated texts as originally meaningful per se, than to insist, again and again, that some things are sometimes lost in translation. We believe that translatability and translation [...can] help us grasp the richness and complexity of languages, texts, and ideas. (Des Rochers and Twiss)

## 1.2 ON THE POTENTIAL OF TRANSLATION

In her chapter “Reading Literature Through Translation,” Maria Cristina Seccia

starts by offering a much more positive view of translation, first positing that because they undergo a process of transformation, translated texts are subject both to losses and to gains (153).<sup>3</sup> She takes this argument further by using Marilyn Gaddis Rose's argument that literary works can, in fact, only gain in translation: "through their interpretation, translators can enrich the reading of the source text and add a further layer, which will guide the target-audience in its reading" (Seccia 154). Following Rose, acknowledging that translation is first and foremost an act of interpretation, not some transparent and neutral transfer of meaning, Seccia sees translation as a form of literary criticism, a practice that necessarily leads to the "expansion of a literary work and can enhance its understanding" (154). This is a very compelling argument that allows for a completely different angle for the reading and studying of translated texts, because it posits translation as an act of interpretation—as reading, basically—not as the transfer of some pre-existent, stable, original meaning that can get lost in the process. This can be an extremely productive way of conceiving of translation, as it makes room for both the translator's and the reader's agency, and implies that any translation is but one way of looking at a given text. Seeing translation as a form of literary criticism also emphasizes all the ways in which translation can produce meaning and knowledge around and about a given text. Finally, perhaps it would allow literary scholars—well versed in literary criticism—to approach the work of translators more generously, instead of always searching for their shortcomings and failures.

That said, this kind of approach also presents some methodological problems, as it prevents any meaningful critique of translations. In the chapter, Seccia offers a typical descriptive translation study (DTS), which takes the form of a lexical-based comparison between a source text—in this case, *Fabrizio's Passion* by Montreal-based author Antonio d'Alfonso—and its Italian translation. Her conclusions are hardly nuanced: the translator has "failed to lead Italian readers to grasp the narrator's transnational identity" and, as a result, has "failed to offer a critical reading of the novel to his Italian audience" (169). Seccia has spent the previous pages presenting and explaining her own interpretation of *Fabrizio's Passion*, against which she then goes on to measure the actual translation by Italian translator Antonello Lombardi. The problem is that the translation-as-interpretation approach is incompatible with the DTS methodology Seccia chooses for her analysis: if a translation is in fact an interpretation, then a translation can never be "right" or "wrong," as there simply exist many different (potential) translations of the same text. Here, Seccia assesses the quality of a given translation in relation to her interpretation, and then somewhat unfairly claims that the translator "fails to offer a critical reading" simply because his interpretation appears not to match her own—ultimately implying that there is one correct (or better) interpretation of d'Alfonso's novel. Put differently, Seccia's descriptive methodology and critique of Lombardi's translation end up negating her initial claim that as a form of literary criticism, translation can only add to a text. What she fails to acknowledge here is that her own interpretation, qua criticism, qua transla-

tion, sheds light on a specific aspect of d'Alfonso's writing—namely a transnational articulation of belonging—while Lombardi's translation perhaps draws attention to different aspects that she herself does not see. The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive; it is precisely the dialogue between various interpretations that can and do advance a collective understanding of that text.<sup>4</sup>

In short, after an exciting and optimistic but idealistic start, Seccia's article reads as another reiteration of the limits and failures of translation. Of course, I am not arguing here that we should never criticize translations; what I am suggesting is merely that we should also use a healthy dose of skepticism when it comes to our own interpretations and our own critiques of translated texts. Neither extreme—dismissing translation because of its limits on the one hand, or celebrating it uncritically for its potential on the other—is helpful nor adequate. What we should aim for in Comparative Literature is a nuanced, critical view of what translation can and cannot do, using the tools and methodologies of translation studies.

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### 1.3 ON TRANSLATION AS METAPHOR

This translation overview concludes with Deborah Saidero's chapter, "A Many-Tongued Babel: Translingualism in Canadian Multicultural Writing." Saidero does not tackle the limits or possibilities of translation, but uses it as a metaphor to analyze and theorize what she calls "translingual writing," published works of literature that are written in more than one language. Following a number of literary scholars who have framed translingual writing as self-translation (see Leclerc; Simon), Saidero writes that "translingual texts are a privileged space of translation" (211), and, further, that self-translation is the "privileged translingual practice" of the authors on whom she focuses throughout her chapter, including Dôre Michelut, Gianna Patriarca, and Antonio d'Alfonso (207). According to this view, translation is constitutive of translingual writing because it underlies both its process—translation as a process of cultural negotiation—and its product—on the page, the presence of elements of linguistic interference. This metaphorical use of translation is characteristic of many postcolonial theories, which use the concept to describe any kind of intercultural encounter or experience. It is also highly reminiscent of the use of translation in poststructuralist terms, according to which all texts and subjects are always already translated. From Salman Rushdie's expression "translated men" to Eva Hoffman's classic *Lost in Translation* and Gabriel Okara's strategy of literal translation, translingual writers everywhere have indeed used the concept of translation to talk about the experience of writing between cultures.

From the standpoint of literary criticism and literary studies, however, I wonder if the kind of writing Saidero analyzes would not be better viewed as precisely the opposite: as non-translation, or the refusal of translation. After all, as Myriam Suchet points out, "[l]à où la traduction substitue les langues les unes aux autres, le texte

hétérologue les fait cohabiter” (23). Translation is usually required *after* the fact of multilingualism, or the presence of multiple languages. The material presence of two languages in any given text is, thus, perhaps best seen as the absence or refusal of translation. Readers might have to practice some translation to engage, but to assume that diasporic or Indigenous writers translate when they write in English or French is misguided at best and paternalistic at worst. As Sto:lo author and scholar Lee Maracle explains: “[English] is my language, I earned it, my people died for it, they bled for it, they grieved for the loss of their children for it—it is mine” (145).

Seeing translanguaging writing as self-translation also assumes a monolingual ideal, or template, under which certain monolingual people, if there are such people, do not ever have to translate. In short, the idea that translanguaging writing is produced through translation, whereas monolingual writing is not, is rooted in what Yasemin Yildiz and others have called the monolingual paradigm, according to which “individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (Yildiz 2). And so, while using translation as a metaphor for framing and studying a diverse set of creative, interactive, and communicative processes can be fruitful for literary studies, we also have to dig deeper into what kind of assumptions a metaphorical use of translation actually makes.

Furthermore, a facile reliance on the translation metaphor usually presents translation as an unproblematized, celebrated, undisputable act. Throughout Saidero’s chapter, translanguaging writing qua self-translation is presented as an exclusively, undoubtedly, and unconditionally subversive and effective gesture: it constitutes “a discursive strategy to subvert colonial relationships” (203), “a transcultural model of communication that shatters the limits of monolingual perspectives of reality” (200), “a performative act of resistance” (199), and so on. Although all of these claims are valid to a certain extent, they create a superficial and congratulatory depiction of translation and of translanguaging writing. To Saidero’s claim that the incorporation of Swahili words “enacts an effort to cross-culturally reappropriate, criticize, and reinvent the English language,” for example, Chantal Zabus would respond that this strategy is actually a double-edged sword, as it helps to revitalize the colonial language through a less than reciprocal creolization, invalidating the strategy’s very premise (Zabus 7). Saidero also argues that the incorporation of heritage languages challenges the hegemony of French and English in Canadian literature. Many scholars, including Catherine Leclerc, Kit Dobson, and Anjali Pandey, have problematized this claim, arguing that translanguaging writing is *not* inherently subversive. For instance, Leclerc points out that the use of languages other than French or English in Canadian texts is often restricted to a stereotypical, exoticizing role (385), while Pandey argues that the kind of literary multilingualism Saidero discusses often works in the service of long-term monolingualism. Dobson warns of the commodification of cultural difference, especially in the Canadian context in which

Canada is now a global brand whose distinguishing feature is its diversity, its supposed liberal tolerance of difference. [...] This strategy is one that profits from images of diversity, rendering multicultural literary products susceptible to appropriation by a nation that promotes itself through those visions of inclusion. This marketing is alarming in a country that is still colonial from an Indigenous perspective. (116)

In short, as Sarah Dowling reminds us, “settler monolingualism subordinates other languages, making them minor, particular, foreign, heritage, or cultural. For this reason, even texts that use more than one language can support a settler monolingual paradigm” (4). All of this is to say that, perhaps, a more critical stance on translingual writing in Canada could have provided the reader with a more complete, nuanced, and meaningful portrayal of such writing, and that we should perhaps use that same healthy dose of skepticism when we call upon the metaphor of translation.

## 360 2. ON LANGUAGE AS UNDERLYING COMMON THREAD

One last observation I would like to make concerns the notion of language that permeates, even underlies, the three chapters to which I am responding. Despite all of its self-questioning and self-reflexivity, one core concept to which the discipline of Comparative Literature has not been sufficiently attentive, in my view, is the notion of language—in the most linguistic sense of the term. For all of our collective deconstructive work on the nation-state, citizenship, cultural difference, race, identity politics, and so on, a notion that seems to endure is that of language as a whole, fixed, bounded system. Where Pivato states that the future of Comparative Literature is “built on the study of different languages,” Seccia bases her analysis on a clear-cut distinction between the English and the Italian languages, and Saidero claims that the translingual experience involves “living between languages,” they all subscribe to a given and unproblematized notion of language as a bounded system. According to this view, languages exist as stable entities and, as such, are delimited by fixed and relatively clear boundaries.

However, critical sociolinguistics has been arguing for quite some time that this is a misguided and debatable view of language for decades now. According to James Milroy, standard languages are “fixed and uniform-state idealisations” (18), not empirically verified or verifiable realities. In fact, many sociolinguistic studies have shown that all languages, including major languages that would appear to be relatively fixed, are variable and volatile phenomena; in other words, languages are, empirically speaking, the opposite of uniform. Yet, the idea that they exist in static, invariant, and bounded forms still plagues many disciplinary discussions today, even in the field of linguistics. This notion of language as a bounded system, and most Western languages as we know them today, are actually the products of widespread nineteenth-century monolingual standardization projects in the name of European nationalism (see Gal). According to Eva C. Karpinsky:

The politics of monolanguage still remains undeconstructed in contemporary thought despite a relative undoing of such categories as gender, race, ethnicity, and identity as monolithic or essential “properties” of the subject. Monolingual hegemony is derived from the nineteenth-century ideal of linguistic nationalism and the importance of the nation-state as a territorial unity where one language is spoken. (224)

The way we categorize and delimit languages, and recognize “languages” as such, is therefore not a natural phenomenon but a social construction, brought about by active historical and political processes. In other words, the notion of language as a whole, bounded system is not an ontological truth but simply an ideological narrative that we *believe* to be true about language.

In her chapter, Seccia quotes *Fabrizio's Passion's* narrator, who challenges preconceived notions about his identity: “Answers to such ontological questions can never arise from a simplified concept like ‘country.’ What is a country? What is a territory? What is a nation?” (158). Seccia argues that the narrator, by moving across and dissolving national borders, cannot be confined to geographical boundaries. She observes that “the boundaries of a nation are not simple, straightforward, or certain, but shifting and ambivalent” (159). I would argue that the same thing can be said about the boundaries of any language; after all, languages were fixed and constructed much like nations were built. What if we added, to d’Alfonso’s list, “What is a language?” What if we did not assume boundaries between languages as a given? How would a more critical view of the notion of language—informed by critical socio-linguistic developments, for instance—change the way we see and do Comparative Literature? How would a different approach to language transform the ways in which we study and practice translation?

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These are all important questions that arise in a critical engagement with the contributions to *Comparative Literature for the New Century*. Ultimately, what is interesting about the articles discussed above is precisely that they raise so many different questions about so many different aspects of the work that we do as Comparative Literature scholars. This collection, and my response, make it clear that no individual can possibly tackle any debate or question from all possible angles at once, let alone all debates and questions that populate the field. In the end, it is only through interdisciplinary dialogue that we can build a truly critical and comprehensive Comparative Literature, in Canada and beyond. This collection is an attempt to bring different voices together, and most importantly to spark conversations and responses, and as such it has an incredible value.

## NOTES

1. Kit Dobson demonstrates how 1970s cultural nationalism, embraced by CanLit at the time, defined the Canadian nation and identity mostly in opposition to the United States: “the imagined national community becomes one of resistance to American neo-colonization, suggesting that oppositional logic maintains an important function at the same time as the signifier of ‘Canadian’ lacks its own specific

content” (67). He then shows that Canadian texts have “debated the national as a means of resisting transnational capitalism, especially as embodied by the United States. Such resistance involved constructing an alternative centre of power in Canada with which to identify” (71).

2. In this article, Twiss and I “object to the dismissal and neglect of the importance of actual translations and the workings of translatability for literary comparison and the understanding of literary texts. In our view, it is more interesting to explore why, when, how, and by whom, things are translated, mistranslated, or left untranslated, and the ways in which translation and translatability open up possibilities that untranslatability forecloses, such as the insights that can arise when we compare translations with their source texts, or when we compare multiple translations of the same text. As Gloria Fisk states [...], one-word affirmations like ‘untranslatability’ ‘mask much better questions like *where, how much, to whose advantage, and in what way*” (Des Rochers and Twiss).
3. The “loss” and “gain” terminology has been debated in Translation Studies because of its binary nature and its association with notions of “good/right” and “bad/wrong.” Most translation scholars prefer to use the term “translation shift” to talk about changes that occur in translation.
4. Seccia’s conclusion, brought about by the clash between her interpretation and the Italian translator’s rendering, is even more perplexing when we take into account d’Alfonso’s self-translation of his novel into French as *Avril ou l’anti-passion*. It is well known that this “translation” is extremely different from its “source text,” and even the titles function as opposites: “passion” versus “anti-passion.” Seccia acknowledges that the English and French versions show “substantial differences in content and perspective,” and that the French edition was published prior to the English one (154). One must wonder, then, why she regards the English text as the “original,” rather than the French or even both, and why she clings to the “the belief in a single or correct interpretation of a work of literature” (53).

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