

COMPARATIVE STYLISTICS:

A GUIDE TO THE ART OF TRANSLATION

I

The twentieth century has seen the appearance, one after the other, of interrelated sciences which go beyond the confines of specific scientific disciplines. For example, there is biochemistry, physical chemistry, and bionics. Within the humanities the science of stylistics also provides an example of a discipline closely related to other ones. In studying the synonymy of the means of expression (the word synonymy here being used in the broadest sense of the word) and above all synonymy in literary language, stylistics occupies a position midway between the theory of literature and linguistics. It is impossible to conceive of a theory of translation which would not take into account stylistics. The translator's role is not to create a new work, with everything that literary creation implies, that is to say, the indissoluble fusion of subject,

Translated by Martin Faigel

ideas, esthetics, and images. The translator only recreates an already existing work, making use of processes which belong to another linguistic system. He transcribes the original into another system of signs which are determined by another historical, cultural, and literary context, and especially by another linguistic structure. The object of a theory of translation is not to develop rules and formulas for translators, but to systematize the most general aspects of the translator's work, to distinguish those aspects which lend themselves to analysis.

Like every work of art, the translated work is unique in its genre. However, in every example of literary creation one can distinguish certain elements which in their entirety constitute the literary tradition. This lends itself easily to theoretical analysis, to schematization, and to classification. For example, in Shakespeare's poetic heritage, what is most difficult to classify is the individual contribution made by the highly original author of the sonnets to the patrimony of English poetry and of poetry throughout the world. It is more logical to begin by noting the part played by tradition in the sonnets of Shakespeare. One sees among the traditional elements the very form of the sonnet, developed by the Italian poets of the Middle Ages and modified by the English poets of the following period, the euphuistic poetics of Shakespeare's predecessors, whether his masters or not. The traditional aspects of his work (for example, the prosody and the composition) are readily classifiable. And it is only against the background of tradition that one can measure the value of Shakespeare's innovations.

The development of a theory of translation requires one to distinguish the elements that serve as the basis for work while, at the same time, they remain marginal to literary creation properly speaking. These elements are more numerous in translations than in the original works. Their abundance is explained by the fact that two linguistic structures collide in the translated work, two literary and artistic traditions, two conceptions of beauty, two levels of civilization, and, where the translation of verse is concerned, two systems of prosody.

Setting up comparative sequences, one discovers interior laws which govern the literary work of the translator. Theory is called on at the same time to help. This is the function of all theory: it

explains the development of already existent phenomena, and it contributes to their progress, for it foresees the future and directs it.

II

The first level of confrontation with which the translator must deal is that of linguistics, and sometimes he thinks that all he has to do is to resolve problems of language. This observation may lead him to pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of an adequate translation, and in fact, some linguists share this rather widely diffused point of view.

W. von Humboldt believed that language is part of one's mentality. In his classic work, *Über die Kawisprache auf der Insel Jawa*, 1836-1840, he affirms that each language creates a circle around its people, who are the carriers of this language. "One can leave it only by entering within the domain of another circle... The language of a people is its spirit, while the spirit of a people is its language." Thus, the circles which linguistic systems form around peoples cannot intersect. According to Humboldt, each language represents a finite system and expresses the mentality of a particular people, and it is impossible to translate this mentality with the means appropriate to another mentality.

Humboldt's ideas have been developed by many linguists who have drawn extreme conclusions from them. Among these notably are the hypothesis of Sapir-Worf about the influence of language on the formation of mentality and the ideas of German scholars such as Leo Weissherber and J. Trier. According to these linguists, each language provides a "conception of the world" (*Weltbild*) and has the ability to transform the mentality and to direct the process of knowledge. According to B. Worf, "The ideas of 'time' and 'space' are not experienced by men in an absolutely equal way; they depend on the nature of language or rather of the languages through which these notions develop."

In posing the problem of the duality "language and culture," Worf states that "linguistic models exercise a great influence on 'cultural norms'." In other words, he considers that the "metaphysics of language" in large part determines the spirit of a nation and its norms of behavior. According to the precepts of Worf, every language has its own metaphysics.

Leo Weissherber and B. Worf have not made special studies on the theory of translation. However, their “linguistic metaphysics” justifies the negation of literary translation from a theoretical point of view, especially the translation of poetry, a negation shared by theoreticians of literature whose ideas are indeed analogous. Thus, H. Seidler affirms¹ that “each linguistic unity is connected to its language, that this linguistic unity finds a way of expressing its picture of the world (*Weltbild*) and its interior attitude (*innere Haltung*) precisely in language.” He feels that anyone who wants to “pour” a given linguistic system into another linguistic mold runs into insuperable obstacles. According to him, the “linguistic incarnations” differ, and while the incarnate spiritual worlds are the same, it is above all in the specific character of its linguistic incarnations that the spiritual worlds express themselves. “They are different to the extent that their languages are different.”

Having established that the fusion of a linguistic system and of a given spiritual world forms a specific, indissoluble entity, Seidler concludes that this “entity” cannot be transposed into another linguistic and conceptual system. He feels that the linguistic system incarnates the spirit of the nation and consequently cannot be fully expressed by processes characteristic of another language. Out of this arises the supposition that “the differences are so much the greater when the languages are distant; it is easier to throw a bridge across between two related languages.”

However, the analysis of stylistic parallels between two related languages such as Russian and Ukrainian, Russian and Bulgarian, German and Yiddish, has shown by example² that translation presents more problems for related languages than for distant ones. Seidler stresses the untranslatability of certain words which express an historic and cultural experience (the German word *Gemüt*, the French *esprit*, and the English *spleen*). He compares similar grammatical forms whose stylistic value is different (as with Georg Trakl’s *Abgelebtes* and the corresponding Slavic form *отжившее*) and concludes that “in the latter case they have a stylistic value which is completely different.” Finally, Seidler

¹ *Die Dichtung, Wesen, Form, Dasein*, Stuttgart (1959).

² Cf. the work of V.M. Rossels.

observes that each language reflects an esthetic ideal which differs from that of other languages.

III

The confrontation of the points of view of Weisssherber and of Seidler provides sufficient evidence that the theory of translation relates linguistic problems to literary and esthetic ones.

Two tendencies in the theory of translation—linguistic and literary—have asserted themselves in the course of recent years. Each side supports its view with remarkable intransigency towards the other side. Those who are for linguistic theory consider that the role of translation is a linguistic discipline, for its primary role has to do with language. According to their adversaries, the theory of translation is part of literary theory, for translation is involved only with esthetics and its primary role ought to have a connection only with artistic elements.

Translation can be considered literary creation of the second degree. Therefore, it cannot be exempt from linguistic problems. They are inevitable. These are notably the problem of the relationship between thought and language, the problem of the role of language in the process of knowledge, and the problem of the correlation between linguistic systems and types of “national mentality” which the supporters of “linguistic metaphysics” speak about. Until these problems have been resolved, it is impossible to approach problems of an esthetic order, to understand the problem of the mutual relationship between form and content in the original and in the translation (especially for poetry), or the problem of the reconstitution of the original in its historic and cultural aspects via the processes proper to another linguistic system.

The irreconcilable contradictions that can be found in the domain of the theory of translation between linguistics and the theory of literature can be easily neutralized once one enters into the domain of stylistics or rather, to be more precise, into one of the branches of this discipline, comparative stylistics, which is only just now taking its first steps. The meaning of the term “comparative stylistics” needs to be made clear, the author of the present paper giving it a larger or at least a different sense from that attributed to it by some of his colleagues.

There have recently appeared, especially in France, a number of works on the subject of comparative stylistics (for example, the works published in the *Bibliothèque de stylistique comparée* under the direction of Alfred Malblanc, Paris, 1961 and 1963). These studies limit themselves to a comparison of the processes of language on a lexico-grammatical level; in other words, they deal more with the comparison of linguistics than with stylistics. The works in this series have a considerable interest, for they illustrate some of the basic characteristics of the languages under study. Indeed, their theoretical biases are the conceptions of Humboldt. The following passage (cited by Malblanc in the introduction to one of the books) could serve as an epigraph for the entire series: "Durch die gegenseitige Abhängigkeit des Gedankens und des Wortes von einander leuchtet es klar ein, dass die Sprachen nicht eigentlich Mittel sind, die schon erkannte Wahrheit darzustellen, sondern weit mehr, die vorher unerkannte zu entdecken. Ihre Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit von Weltansichten selbst. Hierin ist der Grund und der letzte Zweck aller Sprachuntersuchung enthalten."³ (One should note in passing that Leo Weissherber feels that this phrase of Humboldt sums up his own theory perfectly.) If one accepts the supposition according to which the very structure of language reflects (or rather *determines*) the specific characteristics of the national spirit, one would logically deduce that *everything in language is stylistics*, whether this be its morphological, syntactical, lexical, or idiomatic aspects. If this were the case, stylistics as a discipline would have no boundaries and would thus be autonomous and would be no different from lexicology and grammar.

In this context, one can consider the ideas of A. Malblanc extreme. Here are some very significant lines on this point: "Would it not be interesting to mark the limits of linguistic influences in the classic comparative works of two countries, to

³ "From the mutual dependence of thought and word it becomes clear that languages are not a means to present an already recognized truth: they are a means to discover a previously unknown truth. They do not differ from each other in sound and sign; there is, between them, a difference of conception of life itself. Here is the reason and the final purpose of all analysis of language." W. von Humboldt, *Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium* (1820).

find these influences reaching into even philosophy? Hasn't the maternal language or perhaps the increasing knowledge of another language given direction to the spirit of Descartes, of Maine de Biran, or of Bergson, as well as of Kant, Hegel, and Karl Marx? And what about Leibnitz, who was bilingual? H. de Nayslering declared that it is in language that the most profound philosophies dwell."⁴

And so the ideas enunciated by Humboldt a century and a half ago reach their logical result. The French stylisticians who follow these ideas have in a way lost the very object of their studies, for they identify stylistics with the language in its entirety. While we use the same terminology, we have a completely different conception from that of our French colleagues. Their researches into the domain of lexicology and of comparative grammar can serve only as the basis for a theory of translation.

The goal of comparative stylistics is the study of the rules which govern the art of translation. To discover these laws one must establish certain areas of confrontation:

- 1) The confrontation of two linguistic systems (grammatical structure, terminology, phraseology, etc.).

- 2) The confrontation of the stylistic systems of the two languages (for example, the laws of the formation of styles of language, the relationships in every language between literary form, dialect, jargon, and the spoken language).

- 3) The confrontation of traditional literary styles in the two languages (the styles of classicism, sentimentalism, and romanticism in their stylistic aspects; or the style of genre—odes, elegies, fables, etc.).

- 4) The confrontation of systems of prosody in their specifically national aspects (French syllabic prosody and Russian syllabotonic prosody; the metric prosody of antiquity and the tonic prosody of German or Russian).

- 5) The confrontation of cultural and historic traditions of two cultures to the extent that they are expressed in the literary tradition.

⁴ A. Malblanc, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'allemand*, Paris, Didier (1961), p. 16.

Comparative Stylistics: A Guide to the Art of Translation

6) The confrontation of two separate esthetic systems (that of the author of the original and that of the translator).

The complete analysis of a literary translation, whether it be the translation of a short story, a drama, a novel, or a lyric or epic poem, must include all these levels of comparison. It is only in their entirety that they form comparative stylistics as it is understood in the present paper. It follows from what has been said previously that this discipline must indissolubly unite linguistics and the theory of literature.

IV

The confrontation and the comparison of the stylistic resources of two languages is one of the conditions necessary for the elaboration of a theory of translation, without which literary translation is disserved. Each language follows its own rhythm in the modifications that a particular style of language undergoes. In the German language one can note strong changes in the official and journalistic style during the 1930s, brought about by the changes which the society underwent under Fascism. Thus, there was born a specific and artificial language which the German linguist V. Klemperer called by the abbreviation L.T.I.—Lingua Tertiae Imperiae. During the same period of time, the functional style of the French language did not undergo any change between the structure and the evolution of functional styles for the development of a theory of translation. The establishment and study of these correlations helps the work of translators.

It goes without saying that every translator has the duty of comparing the languages with which he is dealing from a stylistic point of view. But a theory based on a close analysis of stylistic comparisons would save him from premature conclusions and hazardous discoveries.

The theory of translation is as indispensable for translators as the theory of literature, of poetics, or of metrics and prosody is for poets and writers of prose. Comparative stylistics is the foundation without which it is impossible to erect a theory of translation.

The area of stylistic comparisons is much less studied than that of comparative linguistics. It is true that Russian translators often

made notes of their observations, but these were of an empirical nature. In his *Journal of a Writer* (1876) Dostoevski asks why one can translate just about anything from French into Russian while the translation of Gogol into French is impossible. "Even Pushkin is untranslatable, when it comes to most of his work. I believe that if one translated the sayings of the priest Avvakum, the result would be gibberish, or more precisely, the result would be nothing at all." Dostoevski asks why this is so and tries to provide an answer: "Perhaps it would be rash to affirm that the European spirit is less differentiated and more closed, more specific than ours, even though it has received an expression more finished and distinct than ours. But if this seems questionable, one can at least avow with hope and joy that the spirit of our language is uncontestedly varied, rich, multi-sided, and universal, for even with its forms still unstable it has been able to express the highest examples and treasures of European thought, and we sense that they have been translated with exactitude and fidelity." Dostoevski here expresses a general idea that is not motivated by a philological system but is based on his conception of the "Russian spirit." Other authors have tried to approach the problem of the comparison between Russian and French more concretely.

This problem has also preoccupied those French writers who have translated works of literature from Russian into French or who have studied Russian literature in the original. The ideas of Mérimée, a brilliant translator of Russian prose and poetry, are very interesting. Mérimée infers from the characteristics of the Russian language that it is in fact too rich, encouraging the writer to savor the language in itself, that is to say, an estheticism of style. In his article on Gogol and in other essays, Mérimée tries to compare the resources of the two languages and to evaluate their esthetic possibilities. Melchior de Vogüé, the author of the treatise *Le roman russe* (1886), is in agreement with Mérimée on this point. In his chapter on Pushkin, he remarks that he cannot quote this great writer, for his "language of diamonds" is not translatable into any other language. Vogüé is in agreement with Pushkin, of whom he quotes a portion of a letter to M. Golitsyn: the poet believes that nothing is more difficult than to translate Russian verse into French, for "given the conciseness of our lan-

guage, one can never be as succinct.” One should take note of the fact that Voguë considered the translation of poetry in general, and, more particularly, of Russian poetry, to be impossible. This not very encouraging point of view can perhaps be explained by the fact that he had tried to translate, without success, “from the most poetic language in Europe into the least poetic one.”

Other French writers have discussed the confrontation of French and German. For example, Madame de Staël in her treatise *De l'Allemagne* devotes many pages to the stylistic and linguistic comparison of the two languages. Cognizant of Humboldt's ideas, Madame de Staël believes that language materializes the national spirit, and it is from this point of view that she compares the possibilities of French and German. According to her, the latter “is more suitable for poetry than for prose and for written rather than spoken prose.” The French language is better adapted to the representation of society, and German to that of nature. French seems to her unsuitable for the translation of German poetry, but this is not a rule which she extends to cover all the works of German poets, without exception. Thus, Schiller's *Cassandra* is translatable, while the translation of *The Bell-Tower* seems impossible. Madame de Staël in fact translated a number of German poems, for example, the monologues of Faust. But nonetheless, she stresses the point that in principle they are untranslatable. She draws the reader's attention to the differences between the linguistic possibilities of the two languages and to the diversity of national esthetics and traditions. This last point seems essential to her. “... Unlike nearly all other peoples, we do not have two languages, that of prose and that of verse; and it is the same for words as it is for people: where rank and station are not clearly drawn and indicated, there is the danger of familiarity.”

Similarly, many writers have reflected deeply on the problems posed by the comparison of languages, of styles, of literatures. It goes without saying that these observations are not based on any scientific theory and that they express rather the impressions of their authors and their artistic tastes. Theory must instead be based on philological arguments. Nonetheless, neither men of letters nor researchers have thus far created systematic works on the comparative stylistics of linguistic equivalents.

The third aspect of comparative stylistics involves the confrontation of traditional literary styles, or to put it more concretely, confrontations within a genre. For the moment one can not do more than simply pose the problem. Its resolution requires an enormous amount of research in this field. The objective of this research would be the study of similarities and differences between related phenomena from the point of view of typology. It is in this way that one could draw parallels between the verbal styles of classicism, of sentimentalism, or of romanticism (for the Russian and German languages, or for French, for English, etc.). The same is true for the verbal structure of poetic genres in different literary systems.

Comparative poetics constitutes one of the autonomous branches of comparative stylistics. It is indispensable for the creation of a theory of poetic translation. The correlations between different systems of prosody have been studied very little in the U.S.S.R. as well as outside it. It is clear now that there are no sure recipes, to be established once and for all, which would permit the infallible translation of one system of prosody into another. The study of parallels in prosody begins in Russia with the works of Roman Jakobson and particularly with his work of 1923 dealing with Czech verse and its comparison with Russian verse. As the author says in the introduction, the book is devoted to the specific peculiarities of Czech prosody and how it differs from other prosody, notably Russian, and constitutes the "first draft of a chapter of a still unwritten book on comparative rhythm." Soviet philology has continued to evolve in this area thanks to the works of V. Zhirmounsky; and André Biely, with the acute perspicacity typical of him, has studied the parallels between Russian and German verse. One should also mention the names of B. Tomashevsky, J. Tinyanov, and of L. Timofeyev.

The study of the laws which govern the translation of poetry must keep in mind the relevant national traditions and make a systematic comparative analysis. For instance, Russian poetry of the 18th and 19th centuries developed in a context of close relationship with French poetry. Nevertheless, the tradition was established in France of translating verse into prose, while in

the evolution of Russian literature the opposite principle triumphed. Since the time of Tretyakovsky, Russian poets have always sought to reproduce the poems of foreigners in a corresponding Russian poetic form. They wanted to recreate in the Russian version not just the sense and the content of the poetic work but also all the characteristics of the form of the original. How does one explain this fundamental dissimilarity between two poetic systems which the excellent translations of Sumarokov, of Krylov, of Batyushkov, of Pushkin, and later those of Benedictov, Kurotshkin, and of Annensky have brought together?

One might try to explain this dissimilarity by the relative poverty of the French language, which does not have any very distinct rhythm and whose possibilities for rhyme are limited, but this would be an erroneous idea. Quite simply, the French language has other, different rhythmic resources than those of Russian or German and the variety of rhythms is rich enough for the poet to triumph in his own way over difficulties of a technical or artistic order. The fact that the French themselves sometimes deviate from this tradition of translating into prose or blank verse proves that French possesses the sufficient resources (the translations of Pushkin's verse by Alexander Dumas in his book *Voyage à travers la Russie* are interesting on this point). Moreover, at present most French theoreticians prefer to explain all the difficulties by the untranslatability of poetry as such.

Only an historical analysis can establish the true causes of the difference mentioned above. These go back to the tradition of French classicism of the 17th century. To see this one has only to reread Boileau's theoretical and polemical works. The theories of Boileau can be summed up in two theses. The first is related to esthetics in general, the second is of a polemical nature. The first can be summed up thusly: according to Boileau, verse is no more than embellished, ornate prose, and there is no fundamental difference between prose and poetry. The second is that Greek and Roman poets represent the apex of perfection. To translate them well means to reproduce all their esthetic characteristics. Nevertheless, when French poets translate ancient verse into French verse, they adapt ancient literature to modern taste. Thus, in the war of the ancients and the moderns, they are on the side of Charles Perrault, partisan of the "moderns."

The classic theory of the translation of poetry into prose seems to have been established for centuries. One should note that the art of translating poetry is an example of great conservatism. Translators are inclined to uphold norms and rules forever once they are established. In short, when Madame de Staël gives prose translations of the poetry of Goethe and Schiller in her *De l'Allemagne*, she is following the path indicated by Boileau to whose esthetics she was opposed. And when Elsa Triolet defends the translation of Mayakovsky into blank verse, she too is doing the same thing.

All this requires some final remarks:

1) It would be inexact to claim that the French translate poetry into ordinary prose. The prose text which they arrive at in the transposition of poetry created in another language is very different, from an esthetic point of view, from ordinary prose. One might say that the French have created a new literary style, that of "verse in prose" which possesses esthetic characteristics, and which leads to original poetic creation, such as Chateaubriand's *Les Natchez* or indeed, Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*.

2) For some time now, French poets and theoreticians have sought to go beyond the principles fixed for centuries, and they are in search of new paths. They want to adapt the French language and its prosody to the translation of foreign poetry. Thus, André Meynieux has translated all of Pushkin's poems, using an unrhymed, equimetrical structure, taking into account the modulations caused by the change from a syllabo-tonic system to a syllabic one. In her translations of the poems of Mayakovsky, Elsa Triolet has tried to overcome the limits imposed by French prosody.

Some theoreticians have tried to justify the principle of translating verse into prose by using the ideas expressed by Goethe in *Poetry and Truth*: "Ich ehre den Rhythmus wie den Reim, wodurch Poesie erst zur Poesie wird, aber das eigentlich tief und gründlich wirksame, das wahrhaft Ausbildende und Fördernde ist dasjenige was vom Dichter übrigbleibt, wenn es in Prosa übersetzt wird. Dann bleibt der reine vollkommene Gehalt, der uns

Comparative Stylistics: A Guide to the Art of Translation

ein blendendes Äussern oft, wenn er fehlt, vorzuspiegeln, weiss, und wenn er gegenwärtig ist, verdeckt.”⁵

One should remember, however, that Goethe is not referring here to lyric poetry but to the translation of Shakespeare and Homer. With respect to lyric poetry, Goethe was fully aware of the close connection between a poem’s form and content, and here one can echo what Goethe himself said about nature in *Allerdings*:

Natur ist weder Kern,
Noch Schale,
Alles ist sie mit einem Male.

⁵ “I appreciate the rhythm and the rhyme that make poetry real poetry; but what is really profound and operative, instructive and inspiring can be found after a poem has been translated into prose. Then, only the pure and accomplished essence will remain; and this essence, if absent, brings forth a striking way of expression; if present, it hides it.”