

Hangping Xu
Stanford University

REVIEW ESSAY:
**UNTRANSLATABILITY AS METHOD:
SLOW AND DEEP READING IN *WELTLITERATUR***

*Against World Literature:
On the Politics of Untranslatability*
By Emily Apter
Verso, 2013. 240 pages.

What endows Apter's political critique with a theoretical sophistication is her move from cultural to philosophical translation, since "questions of untranslatability are rooted in theology, hermeticism, hermeneutics and epigraphy" (11). Engagement with philosophers like Jacques Derrida thus abounds in the book. Behind this extensive engagement lies the book's effort to define the Untranslatable in philosophical terms, and as such to discuss its problematics as well as promises. Let us single out one of her major examples. Apter puzzles over untranslatability by contrasting Alain Badiou with Barbara Cassin. Badiou the philosopher turned into a translator of Plato demonstrates his "faithful" infidelity to Platonic mathematical ontology by his linguistic freedom in rendering Plato's Republic insofar as the communication of the Idea succeeds. He thus subordinates translation to philosophy, positing "a philosophical Untranslatable" that "derives from an incommensurability at the heart of mathematical Platonism" (emphasis original, 24). Cassin, on the

Xu, Hangping. "Untranslatability as Method: Slow and Deep Reading in *Weltliteratur*: Review of *Against World Literature*, by Emily Apter." *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 2:1 (2014): pp. 174-176. ISSN 2325-2871.

contrary, writes a history of mistranslation in Anglo-American philosophical traditions, thus pointing out how philosophy gets philologically entangled. To conjugate Cassin's "linguistic relativism" with Badiou's "subjective truth," as Apter contends, demands "a practice of Weltliteratur that takes full measure of linguistic constraints and truth conditions in the investigation of singular modes of existing in the world's languages" (27).

Apart from the Introduction, the book consists of four chapters (or parts), each of which includes either four or five sub-chapters. In Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, respectively entitled "Oneworldliness" and "Doing Things with Untranslatables," what Apter does is to lay out various concepts and terms constituting her thesis of the Untranslatable in World Literature. Apter then devotes Chapter 3 to an account of three influential humanists (Erich Auerbach, Edward Said, and Jacques Derrida) as well as a Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilito. For Auerbach, certain cultural expressions are untranslatable and hence his "incomparative literature." His existential conditions of exile led to a sense of history conflated with theology. To him, the ultimate untranslatability lies in the temporal rapture that philology embodies. And Saidian humanism, especially in Orientalism, manifests a vision of cultural translation that is critical of international justice. In this chapter Apter's ultimate goal is to demonstrate how various kinds of humanism think through literature as world-making, particularly as they pertain to philology, international politics, theology, and ontology.

In Chapter 4 entitled "Who Owns My Translation?" Apter first offers a succinct analysis of what she calls "the biography of a translation" (266), namely, Eleanor Marx's translation of *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. She gives E. Marx a remarkable place in the history of translation. Via a contextualization of Eleanor's translational practice and her "model of unalienated literary labor" (289), Apter shows how Marxism, founded by Eleanor's father Karl Marx, went on to influence her rendering of Flaubert. Further, Apter looks at the ways in which Paul de Man treated Eleanor's and other translations of this French novel to show how translation helped de Man—father of Deconstructionism—philosophize the profound inner contradictions of language. After questioning the elusive ownership of translation, the chapter ends on a note that concerns the ontology of our contemporary planet. It reads as deeply post-post-modern. What she calls "planetary dysphoria" resembles Gilles Deleuze's pathologization of late capitalism.

To contrast with Moretti's "distant reading," we might characterize Apter's as a mobilization of slow and deep reading. Her reminder that there is the Untranslatable inevitably slows down our reading when Weltliteratur has in fact witnessed a "tendency to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground" (3). It is deep reading because untranslatability requires one's critical attention to philological paradoxes and their inherent power dynamics. It thus encourages deep learning from our students when "the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world" trains them to be consumers and tourists of global fiction (3). Indeed slow and deep reading defines humanities in the first place. At a post-Fordist moment when capitalism has re-territorialized literature into its commodification machine, in other words, Apter hopes to recuperate the humanistic features of World Literature.

Why "against World Literature"? It is precisely globalization, and the insidious forms of domination and coercion in globalism, that Apter critiques as they are imbricated in the current mechanism of World Literature; she discerns a critical difference between globalization and "planetary"¹ in terms of their relations to the global apparatus of neo-liberal capitalism, deeming planetary thinking to be an intervention into globalization. Note here World Literature with upper case, meaning that the book concerns Weltliteratur as a scholarly discipline: its conceptions and practices and, above all, the "philosophical concepts and discourses of the humanities" surrounding its "semantic predicament" due to the Babelian hermeneutic question of language (31). The result is a daring project whose impact will be felt not only by literary comparatists but also by humanists broadly conceived.

¹ This notion is of course indebted, as Apter acknowledges it, to Gayatri Spivak's call in her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003) for "a critical, 'non-globalized' area studies" (Apter, 5-6). Planetary thinking, in other words, is transnationally sensitive while remaining critical of the political economy of colonialization and globalization.