

# Translation and Modernism: Mapping the Relationship

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**Abstract** *The 'Translation and Modernism: Twentieth-Century Crises and Traumas' conference hosted at the University of Warwick on 22–23 January 2016 explored new research pathways in the emerging interdisciplinary field of modernism and translation. It brought together leading academics, early career researchers, and postgraduate students working in translation studies, comparative literature, modernist studies, English studies, and modern languages. The conference participants engaged in a lively interdisciplinary dialogue, considering new research questions and sharing recent methodological developments. The papers presented at the conference shed new light on the key role of translation in twentieth-century literary culture. The three main themes discussed at the conference addressed the modernist re-evaluation of translation as a compositional technique, the idea of translation as a form of cultural memory transmission, and the ways in which translation was theorised by twentieth-century authors, translators, and philosophers.*

Keywords: modernist studies, translation studies, comparative literature, twentieth century, cultural memory

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Since Steven Yao published his seminal study, *Translation and the Languages of Modernism* (Yao, 2002), there has been a revived interest in research into twentieth-century authors' engagement with different languages, literatures, and cultures by means of translation, adaptation, pseudo-translation, or non-translation (Davison, 2014; Taylor-Batty, 2013; Miller, 2011; Piette, 2003). The Translation and Modernism: Twentieth-Century Crises and Traumas conference held at the University of Warwick on 22–23 January 2016 aimed to reflect on new research into the relationship between modernism and translation. With the support of the Institute of Advanced Study, the conference brought together an interdisciplinary group of forty-six academics and students from twenty-three universities, including eight international speakers. Presentations examined a wide range of topics, from the twentieth-century translations of classics to guided tours in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. The

keynote lectures were delivered by Susan Bassnett (Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Warwick), Jean Boase-Beier (Emeritus Professor of Literature and Translation, University of East Anglia), and Peter Davies (Professor of Modern German Studies, University of Edinburgh). The speakers explored the rich and complex relationship between literary modernism and translation from a variety of perspectives. The three main themes which most of the papers addressed included 1) the twentieth-century re-discovery and re-evaluation of translation as a compositional technique, 2) translation as a mode of transmission of cultural memory and construction of inter- and transnational memory, often related to traumatic historical events, 3) modern ways of theorising translation as a compositional, literary, and cognitive mode.

The early years of the twentieth century brought about an increased interest in translation. The most influential translations and reflections on the process of translation of the time include Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, W.B. Yeats's *Oedipus Rex*, Louis and Celia Zukofsky's translations of Catullus, Walter Benjamin's seminal essay 'The Task of the Translator', José Ortega y Gasset's 'The Misery And The Splendour Of Translation', and Jorge Luis Borges's 'The Translators of The Thousand and One Nights', to name just a few. What these writers, translators, and thinkers had in common was their shared belief that translation should be viewed as a creative compositional process that offers unique and invaluable aesthetic opportunities. By putting one's literary language into contact with other languages, by making their texts multilingual, twentieth-century authors sought to enrich and rejuvenate their language and, more broadly, literary culture. As Juliette Taylor-Batty (Leeds Trinity University) argued in her paper on modernism's crisis of originality, when translation came to be perceived as a proper mode of composition, the opposition of originality and plagiarism became blurred and often difficult to pin down. Taylor-Batty illustrated this point by offering an insightful reading of Jean Rhys's original work in parallel with her translations of Jean Lenglet's works (**Taylor-Batty, 2013**). Multilingual poetics, or using other languages in one's writing, served also as a trope that linguistically illustrated and re-enacted modernism's cosmopolitanism and experimentalism, as well as a sense of crisis and discontinuity. Jason Harding (Durham University) discussed this in detail in his thought-provoking paper "'Making Strange": Translation and Non-Translation in *The Waste Land*' (**Harding, 2017**).<sup>i</sup> Analysing T. S. Eliot's foreignising strategy in the context of modernism's attempt to develop a new poetic language, Harding drew attention to the powerful sense of alienation, discontinuity and fragmentariness that the aesthetic of non-

translation (i.e. not providing translation of foreign words, phrases, and quotations introduced into the text) creates.

The second important perspective on researching translation and modernism that was discussed and examined by a number of speakers interrogated ways in which translation allowed for the transmission and dissemination of the memory of traumatic events. The historical events that defined the period of modernism – the World Wars, the rise of totalitarian regimes, the redrawing of national borders – were of multilingual nature, affecting diverse linguistic communities and cultures. These traumatic events left traces in the cultural memory of many countries, and were then transmitted into other languages and cultures by means of translation. How have such texts been translated? How have such translations been received? How should we read them? A number of speakers offered answers to those questions. Jean Boase-Beier (University of East Anglia) in her keynote talk ‘Translating Holocaust Poetics and the Multilingual Mind-Style’ focused on the importance of close textual and contextual engagement with a text that is born out of traumatic experiences, offering her translation of Paul Celan’s poem ‘Mit Äxten Spielend’ (‘Playing with Axes’) as a case study. She advocated the practice of ‘reading for translation’, which consists in as a careful unravelling of the original text’s cognitive context – the public and private narratives related to its composition – and which allows the reader to reconstruct and recreate the text’s complex and often multilingual layers of meaning (**Boase-Beier, 2015**). Peter Davies (University of Edinburgh), whose keynote “‘New literature’ vs. ‘old religion’? Holocaust testimony, secularism, and translation” opened the second day of the conference, discussed Holocaust testimony in translation, focusing on a comparative reading of two English translations of Elie Wiesel’s *La Nuit* (by Stella Rodway and Marion Wiesel), and on possible English translations of the poem ‘Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk’ (‘The Song of the Exterminated Jewish People’) by Yitzhak Katzenelson. Davies examined the translator’s engagement with Holocaust literature, arguing for a need to consider the ethics of translation which pays closer attention to the victim’s perspective (**Davies, 2014**). Finally, Angela Kershaw (University of Birmingham) examined the importance of transnational migration of texts during and immediately after World War II. Presenting the rich translation and publication history of Joseph Kessel’s *L’Armée des ombres* (*Army of Shadows*), she argued that it was the ‘zones of hospitality’ – in Kessel’s case: London, New York and Algiers – that allowed writers to articulate their responses to the Nazi occupation of Europe. Kershaw drew attention to the political dimension of translation and the complex relationship between language, politics and location, showing how

political sponsorship and censorship influenced the publishing market of the 1940s. These and other papers opened up a wide range of questions to be discussed in future research: what are the specific moral dilemmas involved in translating the traumatic experience? what linguistic and critical tools are required to render traumatic narratives coming from different contexts and languages and make them enter shared cultural memory? what role does socio-politics play in translation and international migration of texts related to particular historical traumas?

The third main theme of the conference focused on new ways of theorising translation. A number of papers argued that to be able to grasp the complexity of certain twentieth-century works we need to work with a broad and open understanding of translation. This new perspective not only makes us reconsider the theory and practice of translation, but it also forces us to rethink the nature of typical modernist literary practices, such as the rewriting (or retranslation) of classical myths. In her opening keynote address, Susan Bassnett (University of Warwick) drew a number of parallels between translation and travel writing. Both of them involve negotiation between cultures, which are both meant for domestic consumption, and both involve constructions of identity and difference. They also require the translator/writer to show creativity and independence, and the reader – to put trust in the text they read. This conception of translation as a journey was further developed by Nathalie Segéral (University of Hawaii-Mānoa), whose paper examined the use of the myth of Orpheus in Charlotte Delbo's *Spectres, mes compagnons* and Cécile Wajsbrot's *Mémorial*. Segéral showed how the rewriting of the myth could be perceived as an act of translation in which women writers address traumatic memories from the past and reclaim lost agency. She argued for a broad understanding of translation which would include such practices as the rewriting of myths involving the subversion of the male perspective. Nazry Bahrawi (National University of Singapore), who delivered a paper entitled 'A thousand and one rewrites: Translating modernity in the Arabian Nights', spoke of translation as both rewriting and rereading. He discussed three translations of the Arabian Nights by Arabic and Western authors, unravelling ways in which particular translators attempted to make the classical work relevant to various modern sensibilities and aesthetic forms. Finally, Michelle Bolduc (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) gave an insightful talk on 'Jean Paulhan and the Translation of Rhetoric'. Her paper showed how Paulhan's concept of translation as a mode of literary renewal consisted in reviving rhetorical figures that in the course of time had been discarded and forgotten. For Paulhan, Bolduc argued, translation was a way of illuminating how rhetoric can retain its concreteness by turning to ancient tropes and figures, which she

persuasively illustrated with her reading of Paulhan's translation of Brunetto Latini's Old French adaptation of Cicero's *De inventione*.

As the great variety of topics addressed at the conference proves, translation and modernism is a research area with an incredible potential. Translation played a central role in twentieth-century literary culture, and its presence can be traced in a number of ways. One can examine ways in which particular modernists used texts coming from other cultures, periods, and languages, and incorporated them in their works, creating multilingual palimpsests. One can also research journeys taken by those texts, from one country, culture, language, socio-political context into another, and how those journeys affected the final shape of the translated text and its reception among the target readers. Finally, one can investigate the manner in which translation was theorised by twentieth-century poets, writers, translators, and philosophers, and literary, cultural, socio-political meaning that was attached to it. As Susan Bassnett observed in her closing remarks, the real strength of current research in all those areas, as presented at the conference, is its rootedness in close textual and contextual research, which brings to light much detail that has long been ignored or forgotten. Attention to such detail can effectively change our understanding of what both modernism and translation mean.

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### **Conference website**

[www.warwick.ac.uk/translationandmodernism](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/translationandmodernism)

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<sup>i</sup> The full version of Jason Harding's paper is forthcoming in Jason Harding and John Nash (eds.) (2017), *Modernism and Non-Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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