

Literary Translation and Comparative Literature: An Interview with Professor Andre Lefevere

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ABSTRACT

This article is an interview on the relationship between literary translation and comparative literature. The interviewee is Prof. Andre Lefevere, a well-known comparatist who treats the nuances between *translating* and *translation*, the rapport between translation and comparative literature, and the influences upon translation studies from other literary discourses, such as postmodernism, deconstruction and postcolonialism, whose insights will help, from a more productive perspective, situation studies in a cultural-specific context.

KEY WORDS

translating
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collaboration

translation
refraction
rewriting

Andre Lefevere: Professor in the Departments of Germanic Languages and Comparative Literature at the University of Texas, Austin. His publications include translations as well as works on translation and literary theory. He is the editor of the famous Routledge Series Translation Studies (in collaboration with Susan Bassnet). In March 1996, three weeks after this interview, he passed away at the age of 52, which was a great loss to the Translation Studies and Comparative Literature of the world.

Luo Xuanmin: Professor Andre Lefevere, I am talking to you with a hope of bringing some insights into the studies of literary translation in China. In the United States, Eugene Nida and you, among others, represent respectively the linguistic school and the literary school in the field of translation studies. Nida is well-known in China, but you are known in a smaller circle. The popularity of linguistic approach does indicate that one school or approach is more acceptable in a certain period of time, but it can never prove that the other schools or approaches are out of time, or less significant. Would you like to say a few words about the differences between you and Nida?

Andre Lefevere: It has become gradually clearer to me and to many others (cf. Roger Bell, who, in his latest book, makes exactly the same distinction I make, and we did so independently of each other) that a distinction should be made between translating, on the one hand, and translation on the other (In a way it is a pity that English is not a tonal language, like Chinese: it would be much easier to speak of translaTING and translaTION). What many people have done in the past, Nida foremost among them, is to study translating, not translation. Nida and others of that persuasion are interested in making the pro-

duction of what they believe the best possible translations not only possible, but almost inevitable, by training translators to produce the best possible translations. What people who study translation do, on the other hand, is to gauge the impact of translation on a culture, or on the interaction between cultures. This has much less to do with the actual process of translating (and there is no attempt to teach it), but rather more with the product of that process, the actual translation, and its reception. It is easy to see that the finality of the two approaches is very different. Nida—and I shall now use his name as a shorthand for an approach—wants to train the best possible translators because he wants the Bible to be translated into as many languages as possible, as fast as possible. I, on the other hand, and people who think like me in the matter, would study the Bible translation of Eusebius Hieronymus (Saint Jerome), for instance, to see what it has meant in the formation of the West, and also in the shaping of the attitude toward translation in the West. It would not occur to us to tell people to translate the same way Hieronymus did.

Luo: I do agree with you on this point, however, the terms which I am using are different. In my article “Literary Translation and Translated Literature,” I talked about something similar to your notions of translating and translation. I regard literary translation as an activity carried out in the process of translating literary works, but when one literature has been translated into another, it becomes a “being”. It is this “being” that attracts literary critics, as we can see now in literary criticism that translation is treated quite differently. The emphasis is more on misreading, culture conflicts, mishaping and reception. In this approach, a translator is given more freedom and novelty. Would you illustrate translation studies with regard to colonialism, and post-modernism?

Lefevere: In terms of post-modernism this means that Nida is not really interested in the “other.” His concept of “dynamic equivalence” makes that impossible. Whatever is strange, different, or “other” has to be naturalized into the target language and culture, so that it is immediately understandable. For me, the different strategies different cultures develop toward the other, as reflected in strategies of transla-

tion, is one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of the study of translation. You can easily see how this can be connected with colonialism, e. g., and why this makes translation studies more important in literary and cultural studies as a whole. And these strategies and obviously developed against a certain socio-historical background: the great Chinese translators of the nineteenth century had to translate into classical Chinese and into the “elegant” style simply because nobody would have read them otherwise. Hieronymus, on the other hand, could not do so, as he had an audience of slaves and the less educated.

Luo: What you have mentioned about Chinese translators at the turn of the twentieth century is true. The great scholar and translator Yan Fu proposed three-character standard for translation, they were “faithful-ness, expressiveness and elegance.” Some people criticized the last one “elegance”, doubting if the original text is not elegant, how could the translation be elegant? They failed to understand, however, that an elegant translation would be more acceptable at that time of China’s Westernization Movement. In this way, Western civilization could be more easily introduced and accepted. It is a misleading word, but it is powerful. How do you think of the deconstructionists’ attitude towards translation? And what is its significance on this aspect?

Lefevere: What post-modernism, especially deconstruction, has done for translation is also important: it has given the phenomenon the visibility it deserves. The other side of the coin is that Derrida, de Man, and many deconstructionists who write or on translation behave as if the only person who ever wrote on translation is Walter Benjamin, and that Derrida treats translation as a metaphor, rather than anything that is available for empirical investigation. One can see why deconstruction should be so fascinated with translation: translation allows the translator to transcend the fixed language of the text he is translating, and to go “beyond” language, to take part in what Humboldt called the “energeia” of language, its unfrozen, unfixed power. That, of course, has to fascinate deconstructionists, and that is all to the good. The problem, though, is that that is a very small part of the

much more general problem of translation, and that general problem should never be reduced to it.

Luo: Literary translation to comparative literature is like water to fish, they can not be separated. All literary activities originate from translation and interpretation. One of the several secondary units in the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) is that of translation, do you think that translation has been adequately emphasized and studied in comparative literature? Do you think that the “corpus concept” is rampant in literary thought?

Lefevere: It would be nice if that was the case. But it has not been for a long time, and it still is not completely so. When Comparative Literature was first constituted in the West, it opposed translation, rather than encouraging it, because of academic prestige. Comparative Literature constituted itself after the national philologies had constituted themselves on the model of the then dominant classical philologies. In both the classical and the national philologies, the reading of the text in the original was of a paramount importance (which also explains why the national philologies concentrated so heavily on the study of older periods of the languages that were their objects of inquiry: Middle English, Middle High German, Old French). Since it could not afford to be seen as less rigorous, Comparative Literature also banned translations, an act which, furthermore, relegated the study of translation to obscurity, or even non-existence, within Comparative Literature.

Things have become better in the meantime, but they have taken a long time to do so. And they have changed not because of translating, i.e. the production of translations, but of translation, i.e. the study of the production and reception of translations and the circumstances within which those take place. Since post-modernism emphasizes the notion of the “other,” and since translation is perhaps the most obvious way in which cultures deal with their “others,” the future for the study of translation within Comparative Literature is now much brighter, but the same does not hold true for the study of translating, which does not assume the same importance within Comparative Literature.

Luo: Well, in talking about translation and translating, I'd like to ask you a question: Do you still insist on as you did ten years ago in your article "Literary Theory and Translated Literature" that a distinction between so-called literary and non-literary texts can be upheld?

Lefevere: I think the finality in translating is different, but not the actual act, or process or translating. Both kinds of texts are, of course, produced in language, and the basic operations of translating are, therefore, the same. The difference originates with the use of language for certain effects, and that use of language depends on the type of text. You will want to achieve different effects in a poem than in a text explaining the workings of an infusion pump, for instance. I am now beginning to think that human beings interiorize a textual grid and a conceptual grid as they grow up, and that these grids pre-exist language. The first decision a translation makes in translating is not: what does this particular word mean and how can I translate this, but rather: what kind of a text is this, and can I produce a similar text within my own culture? As you know, my favorite example of this is the total failure of all attempts to translate the pre-Islamic qasidas, considered as the early classics of Arabic literature, into any Western language in any way that would let readers even suspect why readers of Arabic attach such a great value to them. This, I maintain, is not because there are no Western Arabists who know that individual words mean, but because the text type (or literary genre, if you prefer) of the qasida is so different from any text type that belongs to Western culture, that is cannot be reproduced in Western culture in any way that comes even relatively near to the original.

Luo: What you have said just now concerns the textual grid, would you say something about the conceptual grid that plays an important role in our analysis of text?

Lefevere: Similarly, the conceptual grid is instrumental in the selection of texts for translation and in the way these texts are translated. Perhaps the most obvious example here is that of the Victorian translations of the classics. As you know, I did spend some time studying the translations of Catullus in the nineteenth century. Many translations leave out the so-called "obscene" poems altogether, yet still call

themselves “Complete Poems,” though they manifestly are not. Others translate the obscene poems in part, or leave out certain words. The same holds for the first Victorian translation of Aristophanes’s play *Lysistrata*, which does not translate the last quarter of the play, not because the translator suddenly forgot all his Greek, but because he decided, based on his conceptual grid, that the audience would not stand for it.

Luo: It is very interesting of your introducing the concept of “refraction” into translation theory. It is true that many American poets and scholars are familiar with Chinese poems because of the refracted texts of Arthur Waley and Ezra Pound. Your point reminds me of another question, which I put in my lecture on translation at Loyola University, Chicago, last September: many Chinese film directors could find from Chinese literary works what they wanted and produced films that won awards repeatedly on the international film festivals, e. g. “Farewell to Concubine,” “To Live.” In the New York film Festival held last October, the film for the opening ceremony was a Chinese film “Shanghai Triad” directed by Chang Yi-mou, which caused a stir in America. Their refractions are apparent. How can a translation be so influential and powerful? Is it because the media of a film is more powerful? Maybe. But it is not so simple. I think “refraction” (a term you put in your same article “Literary Theory and Translated Literature”) is one thing that needs studying in this case. Do you still use the term?

Lefevere: I have more or less given up using “refraction,” and I am now using “rewriting” instead. I don’t think the word makes much difference. The basic idea is and remains that writers have rewritten the same stories for a long time. In the West these stories have often been based on Greek myths, of course. These rewritings have been produced subject to certain constraints, which I have identified as follows: (i) ideology, or world view, (ii) poetics, or a combination of the genres/motifs/symbols and the attitude to literature dominant at a certain time and in a certain place, and (iii) universe of discourse, or the collection of objects and concepts available at the time of writing to writer and audience alike. If you think in terms of Euripides’ play

Hippolytus, for instance, and the rewriting of it by Racine called "*Phaedra*," you see that the ideology is different. For Euripides' *Hippolytus* is flawed because he oversteps the "golden mean." The fact that he does so by being excessively chaste is merely one way in which that golden mean can be overstepped. It is hard to imagine any tragic hero being punished for being too chaste in a Christian world view. In *Phaedra*, therefore, *Hippolytus* is different. On the level of poetics, to give but one example, Euripides works with a chorus, as was customary in his time. Racine does not, because the chorus had disappeared at the end of Antiquity and was not resurrected in the new Western theater that ultimately had its roots in the Middle Ages. Finally, Racine refers to the Christian God, a concept that did not exist in Euripides' time.

Luo: I have held the idea for a long time that a good translator of literary works is creative. The creativity depends not only on his ability to grasp the spirit of a great work and put it in the target language, but also on his penetrating studies in the works translated and relevant works of the author. An excellent translator will never translate for the sake of translation. He takes it as a part of his creative power, when he translates, he becomes, at the same time, an expert on the writer, on the canon. And his translation becomes the carrier of culture. Do you think this is also a kind of refraction, or rewriting, which might activate the translator as well as the readers?

Lefevere: Yes, I used the concept of refraction/rewriting precisely to emphasize the creativity of the translation, which brings us to your question. I would hold that the translator of literature is different in degree, but not in kind from the writer who rewrites previous works. That would make the translator a creative artist indeed, working under the constraints listed in my answer to the previous question, with the proviso that "language" should be added as the fourth constraint. Accordingly, the translator should be regarded as a creative artist. This does not preclude the translator from being a scholar as well, of course. In fact, translation is probably the most intimate analysis of any text, and translators who take their task seriously will be good scholars of the texts they translate. Whether they are able to recreate

that work to the satisfaction of the audience depends on their skill as artists, as you point out in your previous question, to a great extent on the medium in which the rewriting/refraction takes place. Obviously, the film medium is much more pervasive and popular these days than the written word. To sum up; I did use refraction/rewriting to stress the creative part of the translation of literature.

Luo: Nowadays people are inclined to argue whether one should take a linguistic approach or literary approach (the terms may not be concordant with what you have defined). Some people propose to build a new branch—translatology so as to solve the problem. They think only in this way, can translation be treated well according to its different functions and context. What are your suggestions on this point?

Lefevere: I think function is what distinguishes different types of translation and very little else. You could, for instance, translate whole passages from *Moby Dick* and they would be what is called “technical translation,” because they concern whaling. Yet they would be counted as “literary” translation because they happen to be in a novel. Or maybe ultimately it’s not the function either, but the “initiator,” whoever wants/needs the translation to be made, is willing to pay for it, to further the translator’s career, etc. And here it gets interesting again, of course, because initiators cannot just claim to fill a need in the target culture by having texts translated; they can also create needs in order to then have to fill them. Much of this ultimately revolves around power and money, which puts translation squarely on the same footing as so many other phenomena in our world. Power may demand that certain texts are not translated at all, or only in certain ways—think of the Roman Catholic Church’s stance toward translating the Bible; money nowadays needs translation to make more money. It is highly doubtful, to say the least, that Mitsubishi or Hyundai would sell many cars in the US without translation.

I also don’t think it matters much what you actually call the field, or whether there should be something like translatology or not. The main distinction, as I indicated before, is between translaTING and translaTION, and those two are mutually exclusive.

Luo: This is a complicated question. I think we can have a further

discussion on it. As far as I know, you have also done a lot of translation practice besides translation studies. Can you tell us in what cases your rendering of some concepts in the source language is able to create new treatment for the studies of translation in the target language and for the literature in a plural context?

Lefevere: Practice has, of late, got me interested in the problem of the translation of the so-called “hybrid” text, or text that is written in more than one language. I think this is a phenomenon that is here to stay and the more “multicultural” nations will arise (like South Africa, for instance, but also like virtually any African state, and India, and Pakistan, and there are many others), the more texts will be produced that are very closely linked to a certain mixture of cultures, texts that can only be understood by people who actually live in that mixture of cultures, and live that mixture of cultures themselves. After the end of apartheid, for instance, both English and Africans in South Africa have become a lot of “blacker”. It is not an exception to read sentences in English texts like “Jong, I mca this,” which, translated into British/American English would mean: “Boy (Man) I like (love) this.” How can one ever translate the flavor of this, even though it is quite possible to translate the sense? And yet sociolinguistic and regional markers are very important in this sentence. They are another example, on a much smaller scale, of what I mean by the message sent by the form, which is just as important as the message sent by the content. Again, Bourdieu and Foucault will loom large in discussion of this in the future.

Luo: I have recently sent to the journal *Foreign Languages and Translation*, of which I am the editor, an article by Dr. Nancy Hodes at Harvard University about her experience of translation in collaboration with a Chinese graduate. Their experience was exciting and fruitful. What do you think of translation in collaboration, especially the kind of translation with a lot of connotations, say, poems? What are the requirements for collaborators?

Lefevere: I think in some cases it is the only way to proceed. I wish it would be practiced to a much greater extent in translating from Chinese, for instance, and especially from other Asian languages that are

less widely spoken than Chinese. I always get somewhat sad when I read the English produced by no doubt very good and very well-meaning Chinese scholars who try to translate Li Ho, or Su Dongpo into English, and whose English is not adequate to the task. Rather than make the attempt alone, and fail they would be much better advised to invest their time and effort together with someone whose command of English is adequate to the task, but who is not enough of a scholar to really understand the allusion and the connotations. And, come to think of it, this does not only hold true for Chinese scholars, even though it may be more obvious in their case. I think the Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yuchen Lo's anthology *Sunflower Splendor* could have benefited from the kind of collaboration I am advocating. It is a marvelous anthology for people like me, who do not know Chinese at all, and who find a wealth of information about allusions and connotations. But the translations themselves do not always "turn the reader on," so to speak. I think Burton Watson at his best, or even slightly below his best, is very good. But he can't do everything. I would be delighted to collaborate with Chinese scholars/translators, because there is still so much that is not known in the West. Moreover, translation in collaboration has a rich and venerable tradition in China. Think of how pleasant it must have been to work as one of the members of a team in the "Carefree Garden" in Chang An.

Luo: Yes, I hope someday we shall have chance to translate Chinese poems in collaboration. I think there are a lot of things to be done about it. At the moment, I'd like to ask you another question. Anne Dacier, a French translator and philologist, says in her introduction to her translation of the *Iliad*, "Good translations keep the spirit without moving away from the letter." Do you agree with the assertion? Do you agree if we put the statement in another way: "A good translator can keep the spirit moving forward with the letter?"

Lefevere: I would rephrase her statement, only to agree all the more with it where she says "the letter," I would say "the form." I think we are finally approaching a state in Western thinking about literature in which "form" as such is no longer a dirty word, and in which you can again be a "formalist," without being accused of all kinds of sins and

deviations. I think it is extremely important for translations from non-Western cultures that the Western reader gets an idea of what the form of the original is like. This does not mean that I think the translator should actually try to reproduce that form, because in most cases that is impossible. Even Waley might have done more good by explaining what T'ang poetry looked like than by trying to reproduce the five character line by five beats in his English line, not to mention Florence Aynsclough and her attempts at "mock-Chinese sprung rhythm." What can be done, though, and what should be done, even though publishers are more often than not reluctant to allocate enough space to it in their books, is to educate the reader in the formal characteristics of the original, as Liu and Lo do so well in the introduction to their anthology. If we do not do this, most Western readers of classical Chinese poetry will continue to think that there is a lot of jade in it, many rivers, the occasional deer or doe in a forest, and sleeves soaked with tears. And that all of this has, obviously, been written in free verse in the original, simply because that is the impression one gets by reading many translations of classical Chinese poetry, with Rexroth's translations perhaps as the most obvious case in point. If we do not realize that the form sends a message, just as much as the context does, we shall not be able to withstand the temptation of analogy and we shall, eventually, succumb to what I have called the "Holiday Inn Syndrome," where all translations into English from all languages all begin to look alike and all adopt British and American idioms and customs, just as all Holiday Inns all over the world all look alike, with the exception that you get a cowboy hat in the coffee shop of the Holiday Inn in Austin, and a sampan in the coffee shop of the Holiday Inn in Hong Kong. That, I think, is not meant when we speak of translation as "enriching" the target culture. Rather, it is a form of leveling, in which everything is remade in the mirror image of the target culture.

Luo: You have expressed your views on translation studies. Would you tell us your initial experience as a critic on translation? What is your experience both as critic and translator, teacher and researcher?

Lefevere: I don't really write much criticism of translation any more,

except in interviews, as you can see. I think what ought to be done is for the "critic" not to praise or damn out of the blue, but to try to reconstruct the situation translators found themselves in when they translated certain texts: who initiated the translation, with what goal(s) in mind, what audience was it aimed at. Once we (think) we know that, we can then discuss the various strategies used by translators and point out where they failed to do so, and why. This is not only more constructive, but also pedagogically more interesting. If you don't do it that way, you are in great danger of simply pontificating and imposing your own views and your own style on students, who, especially in the beginning, are willing and helpless victims. If I ask a class to translate a given poem, and all translations read the same, namely like mine, I have obviously failed as a teacher, although I have, just as obviously, pontificated so effectively that I achieved, on a small scale, what I warned against at the end of the answer to your previous question.

Once you have translated for a while, and not necessarily for a long while, you unfortunately seem to lose your innocence: you can no longer read a text without thinking, involuntarily and almost at once, "how would I translate this or that?" This may put you in danger of becoming a pedantic caricature of yourself, much like professional editors who can, after a while, no longer read a newspaper without getting their pencil out to edit what they actually happen to be reading, even if it is the sports page.

Luo: Yes, how about your research on translation, then?

Lefevere: I think I am also approaching the end of my usefulness as a researcher. I think I have one and a half books left in me, maybe two and a half. The half is already written, and will be published in collaboration with Susan Bassnet. The others go further afield from translating and even from translation, in that they investigate the role of translation in the shaping of literary canons, and that they try to study the part translation plays in the circulation of "cultural capital," the term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, which will no doubt be very influential among the next generation of researchers in the field of translation.

But I am very happy looking back on my work as a researcher in the field of translation. When I and others of my generation first began to publish, translation was treated as a marginal subsection of applied linguistics. I think we have succeeded in moving it much closer to the center of theories of culture and intercultural relations, which is where it so obviously belongs.

Luo: What courses about translation did you give to graduates or undergraduates in the past few years?

Lefevere: I teach a course in Theory of Literary Translation on the graduate level every year, and an undergraduate course in German-English translation, also every year. The first one is more theoretical, the second one more practical in orientation.

Luo: As far as I know, there are two major journals about translation in America: *Translation* by Columbia University and *Translation Review* by Texas University at Kansas. Each has its own characteristics. The former deals with translations in literature, the later, critics and information about translation. Translation is still going well. What is the fate for *Translation Review*? The last issue I was able to find at Yale library was one of 1990. That is why I worry about it.

Lefevere: As far as I know, *Translation Review* has had some troubles, recently. They always were a little erratic in their publication schedule, and they seem to have become more so as time goes on. The review also seems to have turned more and more into a vehicle for the same crowd to talk to the same crowd, without many transfusions of new blood. And it definitely stays on the level of translaTING, which it has every right to do so, but which perhaps makes it less interesting to a wider audience. Comparative Literature has recently published a special issue on translaTION, for which I served as guest editor, and there are more of those to come. In fact, more and more journals in the US and in Britain are publishing "Translation Issues," in which the focus is on translaTION, rather than on translaTING. And of course many literary magazines, big and small, do publish translations in every issue.

Luo: The series of books of translation studies which you are editing with Susan Bassnet is really an ambitious project. Would you say

something about it? What are the other “new” researches on translation carried out in and outside the United States?

Lefevere: The series tries to integrate approaches to translation with approaches to translating. This is not always easy, because people concerned with translating often thought books about translation had nothing to say to them (meaning, often, that they were no help in solving a particular problem), whereas people who were interested in translation have been known to think the same thing, but in the other direction, thinking that books on translation were, of necessity, limited to one language pair, and that they lost themselves in details, making up categories for the sake of categorization. There is the wonderful statement by the medieval English philosopher William of Ockham that should be applied to this type of books: “*entia praeter necessitatem non sunt multiplicanda,*” meaning something like: “entities should not be multiplied when there is no need for it.” And of course, there has been some backbiting in the past and some stabbing of elbows into ribs, but it is time to forget these symptoms of adolescence and to move on. It is obvious, by now, that there are many mansions in the house of transla-what-translatology? And that people with different career and research interests can live in them side by side, and learn from each other.

Kent State University Press is publishing another interesting series of books on translation, dealing mainly with non-literary aspects, and with the pedagogy of translation. Further North, in Canada, and more obviously in Quebec, the Editions Balzac are publishing beautiful work in French. The women translators in Quebec are doing pioneer work in the field of translation and gender, and I think the most important links between translation and cultural/literary theory will arise in the fields of colonialism/postcolonialism, and in the field of multiculturalism.

Luo: Before ending my interview, I’d like to ask an institutional question about translation. In January this year the College of International Studies of Changsha Railway University, in which I am working, was authorized by the Educational Committee of China to run a Master of Arts Program in Translation Theory and Practice, only seven universi-

ties in China have the honor. As the director of the program, I hope you can give me some information about how your Department runs the M. A. Program in Literary Translation?

Lefevere: It is not an M. A. in Literary Translation, but in Translation, one of the few of its kind in the US. Students have to write a thesis, which can be either a translation or an item of theoretical research. They take three “core” theoretical courses, one in theory and one in history of translation, and one in interpreting. They have nine hours of practical translation, spread over as many text types as possible, and a few weeks of internship in a translation agency. They also have three hours of practical interpreting. Finally, they have nine hours of further study of the country of countries into and out of whose languages they translate. To be accepted in the program they must know both their source and target languages well already. We do not engage in language teaching; that needs to have been taken care of before. This also allows us to give good training in relatively little time.

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