

Arianne Des Rochers & Robert Twiss

Against Untranslatability: Two Translators' Response to Emily Apter

Abstract

In *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013) and elsewhere, Emily Apter appeals to “mistranslation” as a basis for 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. In this article, we argue that the theoretical shortcomings with Apter’s concept of “untranslatability” render it ineffective as a tool for the critique and analysis of actual, translated texts. Taking the problems with Apter’s “untranslatability” as a point of departure, we argue that attention to the ways in which difference in translation (and mistranslation) creates meaning can help us better understand both translations and their source texts. In contradistinction to Apter’s invocation of inscrutability and untranslatability as a plea to respect the distinctiveness of texts, languages, and cultures, we defend the importance and productivity of the study of translated texts and translation practice as a means of better understanding this distinctiveness. In this view, looking at “mistranslations” reveals itself as a productive tool that can help us grasp the richness and complexity of languages, texts, and ideas.

Résumé

Dans son ouvrage *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013) et ailleurs, Emily Apter fait appel à des « erreurs » de traduction pour soutenir son concept d'intraduisibilité, qu'elle utilise pour critiquer l'hégémonie de la langue anglaise dans les études littéraires, laquelle se manifeste en particulier dans le recours excessif aux traductions anglaises et dans la présomption naïve qu'il existe une transparence et une équivalence quasi naturelles entre les textes littéraires et leurs traductions. Dans cet article, nous avançons que les faiblesses théoriques du concept d'intraduisibilité tel qu'Apter le développe le rendent inefficace pour la critique et l'analyse de textes traduits. Prenant les contradictions et lacunes de l'intraduisibilité d'Apter comme point de départ, nous démontrons plutôt comment les différences qui émergent en traduction (et en métraduction) créent de nouvelles significations, qui à leur tour nous en apprennent davantage autant sur les textes de départ que sur leurs traductions. À l'opposé d'Apter qui invoque l'inscrutabilité et l'intraduisibilité pour défendre l'unicité des textes, des langues et des cultures, nous défendons l'importance et la productivité de l'étude de textes traduits et de la pratique traductive pour le respect, précisément, de cette unicité. Dans cette perspective, l'analyse de « métraductions » s'avère être un outil fructueux qui nous permet de saisir pleinement la richesse et la complexité de différents textes, langues et idées.

Mots-clés

intraduisibilité – littérature comparée – traduction – Emily Apter

Key words

untranslatability – comparative literature – translation – Emily Apter

Référence électronique : Arianne Des Rochers & Robert Twiss, « Against Untranslatability: Two Translators' Response to Emily Apter », © 2018 *QuADERNA* [en ligne], 4 | 2018, mis en ligne le 7 décembre 2018, url permanente : <https://quADERNA.org/?p=748>.

Tous droits réservés

Against Untranslatability

Two Translators' Response to Emily Apter

Arianne Des Rochers & Robert Twiss, University of Toronto

Introduction

If you've read or heard the term "untranslatable" or "untranslatability" recently, it might be in connection with Emily Apter's *Against World Literature: On the politics of untranslatability* (2013), or with one of her other recent projects to which the notion is central.¹ Apter did not coin the term, but she appears to be the scholar in the field of comparative literature who has developed her conception of "untranslatability" most fully and who has made the most sustained use of the concept. Apter defines the untranslatable "[...] as a term that is left untranslated as it is transferred from language to language, or that is typically subject to mistranslation and retranslation"². Apter's "untranslatability" is not exclusively a property of linguistic elements such as words and texts, and the kind of translation apparently denied by this property is not always the textual-linguistic kind, i.e. the rendering of an utterance in a new language. However, the textual-linguistic kind of translation is inescapably central to her discussion, and we hope to show that textual-linguistic practices of translation necessarily challenge her proposition.

Apter's project of using "untranslatability as an epistemological fulcrum for rethinking philosophical concepts and discourses of the humanities"³ is laudable, but we are curious as to why she does not use "translation," or "translatability," instead of its negation, to pursue this goal. Our reaction stems perhaps from our academic and professional background⁴. In fact, our intellectual trajectories are approximately the opposite of Apter's, in that she approaches translation from a background in comparative literature, while we were translators and translation scholars before coming to the field of comparative literature. From our practical experience and academic focus on translation praxis, we are familiar not just with the (very real) shortcomings and frustrations of translation, but also with its potential—potential for new meaning created in translation, for "finding" things in translation, for productive mistranslation—for which the notion of "untranslatability" leaves no room.

We therefore lament the defeatist implications of "untranslatability", namely, the very impossibility of what we do, the inescapable failure of translation, and the inevitability of loss

¹ Emily S. Apter, "Untranslatables: A World System", *New Literary History*, 2008, 39:3, p. 581–598.; Emily S. Apter, "Philosophical Translation and Untranslatability: Translation as Critical Pedagogy", *Profession*, 2010, p. 50–63.

² Emily S. Apter, "Preface", *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, dir. Barbara Cassin, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. vii

³ Emily S. Apter, *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, London and New York, Verso, 2013, p. 31.

⁴ See below.

in translation, in other words “the widespread notion that [...] a translation is no substitute for the original”⁵. We are dissatisfied with this negative perspective of translation that has somewhat uncritically permeated various fields of study in the past years (see, for instance, leading critical theory journal *Paragraph*’s 2015 special issue on “Translation and the Untranslatable”, and the collection *Untranslatability Goes Global* published by Routledge in 2017). So with a view to engaging in the conversation Apter has started within comparative literature, we find ourselves asking, how is the concept of untranslatability useful as a tool for the practice of translation and the reading of (mis)translations? What can Apter’s concept of untranslatability tell us about language? Does untranslatability, by focusing on the impossibility of translation, distract us from the possibilities of translation? This article offers a critique of Apter’s concept of untranslatability from a pragmatic perspective, before turning to an optimistic and productive view of what translation generates with what she calls “untranslatables”. In response to Apter, we argue that attention to the complex and often frustrating workings of *translatability* helps us to better contextualize and engage with the texts we are reading.

Apter’s concept of untranslatability

Apter’s adoption of untranslatability seems to be inspired largely by the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), edited by Barbara Cassin, the 2014 English translation of which Apter co-supervised. It is a vocabulary of philosophical terms from various European languages that seeks to define the concepts they denote in terms of the multiple linguistic networks in which they are situated, as well as the historical context of their use by certain philosophers. The point of departure for Cassin’s *Vocabulaire* is a problem encountered by translators of philosophy, namely, that terms for philosophical concepts in different languages rarely carry the same cultural and semantic baggage. There are two important consequences of this for Cassin’s conception of the “untranslatable”, a term for which she employs scare quotes in her introduction to the *Vocabulaire*. The first is that untranslatability is a quality generally conceived of at the level of words or phrases; the second is that it is highly dependent on context: “The untranslatable is also a question of case by case”⁶ For Cassin, an “untranslatable” word is a “symptom” of the differences between languages⁷. Nevertheless, she does not mince words regarding whether or not “untranslatables” can be translated: “To speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not & cannot be translated”⁸.

We conclude from this that Cassin’s use of the word “intraduisible” is somewhat playful, and that she is concerned with the nuances of philosophical concepts rather than the

⁵ David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, London, Faber and Faber, 2011, p. 37.

⁶ Barbara Cassin, “Introduction”, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, *op. cit.*, p. xix

⁷ *Ibid.* p. xvii

⁸ *Ibid.* xvii, original italics

(im)possibility of translating philosophical texts.⁹ She insists that the aim of the *Vocabulaire* is “as far as could be from [a Heideggerian] sacralization of the untranslatable, based on the idea of an absolute incommensurability of languages and linked to the near-sanctity of certain languages”¹⁰. For Cassin, “untranslatability” is a useful concept for understanding certain philosophical terms as well as the history of philosophy in Europe – her goal with the *Vocabulaire* is to put forward “another way of doing philosophy, which does not think of the concept without thinking of the word”¹¹. Untranslatability, here, is only tangentially related to the activity of translation or the existence of translated texts.

Apter yet co-opts the concept in *Against World Literature*, in which she invokes “untranslatability as a deflationary gesture towards the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors.”¹² This shift from philosophy to literature is, as we hope to show, not without consequences. Observing that comparative literature mostly studies “world literature” in English translation, she opposes what she calls a “translatability assumption,” i.e. the “reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability”¹³. This position is similar to Lawrence Venuti’s critique of the translator’s “invisibility”¹⁴, namely the assumption that translated texts convey the meaning of the source text in a transparent and neutral manner, as if translators had no agency and translation were free of ideological manipulation, whether deliberate or unconscious. Many translation scholars, such as Mona Baker, Michael Cronin, and Maria Tymoczko¹⁵ have shown the importance of translators’ interventions and decisions for the forms and meanings of texts in translation. In line with Apter’s concerns, this scholarship from translation studies makes clear that we can never assume the easy or complete equation of a text with its translation, or that translation offers a pure, undistorting mirror of another culture.

While we absolutely agree that we need to be wary of “flaccid globalisms that [pay] lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal ‘big tent’ syllabi taught in English”¹⁶, we find Apter’s equation of “cultural substitutability” with “translatability” confusing, not least because texts should not be equated with cultures. Something can be

⁹ Cassin writes in her introduction that the goal of the *Vocabulaire* is to “constitute a cartography of European and some other philosophical differences by capitalizing on the knowledge and experience of translators” (B. Cassin, “Introduction”, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, op. cit., p. xx).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. xvii

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. xx.

¹² E. Apter, *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 2

¹⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995.

¹⁵ Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006; Michael Cronin, *Translation and Identity*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2006; Maria Tymoczko, “Translation: Ethics, Ideology, Action”, *The Massachusetts Review*, 2006, 47:3 p. 442–461; Maria Tymoczko, *Translation, Resistance, Activism*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.

¹⁶ E. Apter, *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, op. cit., p. 7.

culturally unsubstitutable *and* be translated at the same time.¹⁷ In translation studies, scholars have shown for decades that the activity of translation is one of interpretation rather than replication¹⁸. Of course translation does not provide a “perfect” transparent copy of the original, but neither do translations always present themselves as such—footnotes and other paratextual means frequently signal important information that might otherwise be missed in translated texts. So while Apter is right to warn against the facile assumption of cultural substitutability, we disagree with her dismissal of the productivity of translation and the study of literature in translation in *Against World Literature*.

Why does Apter not use “translation,” or “translatability,” instead of its negation, as an “epistemological fulcrum” for challenging the hegemony of English in North American academic environments and the transparency of translation? We object to her easy equation of “non-translation, [and] mistranslation” with “incomparability and untranslatability”¹⁹—just because a word *has* not been translated, or has not been translated in a way we find satisfying, does not mean it *cannot be* translated in such a way. After all, Cassin, from whom Apter borrows the concept, later defines the “untranslatable” as “that which we never cease – to not – translate”²⁰ clearly playing with the idea that untranslatables *can* actually be translated, therefore refusing to conceive of “untranslatability” as a fundamental underlying property of texts qua cultures.

We also 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 in her incisive critique of Apter’s project, one-word affirmations like “untranslatability” “mask much better questions like *where, how much, to whose advantage, and in what way*”²¹.

¹⁷ To take just one very famous example, Benjamin explains how the words “Brot” and “pain” are not culturally interchangeable, but that they nevertheless function as translations of each other: “The words *Brot* and *pain* ‘intend’ the same object, but the modes of this intention are not the same. It is owing to these modes that the word *Brot* means something different to a German than the word *pain* to a Frenchman, that these words are not interchangeable for them, that, in fact, they strive to exclude each other. As to the intended object, however, the two words mean the very same thing.” (Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in Venuti, Lawrence (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 15-25, p. 18)

¹⁸ See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975.; Lawrence Venuti, “Genealogies of Translation Theory: Jerome”, *The Translation Studies Reader*, dir. Lawrence Venuti, London and New York, Routledge, 2012.

¹⁹ E. Apter, *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁰ Barbara Cassin, *Éloge de la traduction*, Paris, Fayard, 2016, p. 24, our translation.

²¹ Gloria Fisk, “Against World Literature: The Debate in Retrospect”, *The American Reader*, 2014, <http://theamericanreader.com/against-world-literature-the-debate-in-retrospect/>.

Beyond the fact that *Against World Literature* reads “for the most part like a verbal snow machine, spattering its tracks with such a thick layer of dropped names that the reader glides over them without ever getting much of a grip”²², we want to question the very notion of untranslatability Apter develops and its potential usefulness for both the practice of translation and the reading of translations in comparative literature.

Deconstructing “Untranslatability”

We question the value of Apter’s conception of “untranslatability,” both as a general theoretical tool and as it relates to her project in *Against World Literature*. In this section, we articulate some general problems we encounter in her theory and show how those problems impede her attempts to apply it.

The notion of untranslatability as developed in Apter’s writings lies on an understanding of translation as an activity that operates exclusively at the word level. That is to say, she discusses translation as if it were something that happens to or is done to words. Remember that she defines the untranslatable “[...] as a *term* that is left untranslated [...] or that is typically subject to mistranslation and retranslation”²³, and note that the second part of her book, entitled “Doing Things with Untranslatables”, consists of five chapters, each of which addresses one or two “untranslatable” words, such as “Sex”, “Gender”, and “Monde”.

This focus on the word as the “untranslatable” is perhaps the biggest problem with Apter’s approach, and illustrates how far removed her work is from both the theory and the practice of translation. This appears to be a result of the concept’s displacement from philosophy to literature: where Cassin’s focus is on terms that are used to express philosophical concepts, Apter’s focus is on the translation of certain terms in literary texts. David Bellos, a professor in comparative literature at Princeton as well as a professional translator, puts it this way: Apter’s idea of untranslatability goes hand in hand with “the elementary but widespread error of believing that translation is or ought to be an operation on *words* (whatever those things are when they are not at home in a dictionary), whereas in practice, as all translators know, it operates on utterances”²⁴. The meaning of every word, sentence, and paragraph is related to and dependent on the previous and the next. The discourse (or, at the very least, the text) is the translation unit. Another way to put this might be that words do not mean anything in and of themselves: context is always key.

²² See David Bellos’ short but scathing review of *Against World Literature*, where he further points out that Apter’s book is full of mistakes: “Hebrew is spelled backward, German words are randomly capitalized and put in inappropriate cases, Russian words are mangled (*obscina* for *obshchina*, for example), agreements in French are wrong, and many incidental facts have not been checked (Romain Gary, for instance, did not win the Goncourt Prize in 1958, and he had not written nineteen novels “by the age of 73,” since he shot himself in the head at the age of 66).” (David Bellos, “Against World Literature by Emily Apter (review)”, *Common Knowledge*, 21/1, 2015, p. 110-111, p. 110)

²³ E. Apter, “Preface”, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, *op. cit.*, p. vii, our emphasis.

²⁴ D. Bellos, “Against World Literature by Emily Apter (review)”, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

The consequence of treating the word as the translation unit is the implication that there does (or should) exist for most words in a given language other words in other languages which function as natural equivalents. This view of translation as the search for natural equivalents (x word in language 1 = y word in language 2) is not only extremely impractical, but also romanticized and outdated²⁵. The problem stems from a confusion of two senses of the word “word”. The concept of a “word” can be understood in two ways. The first would be a “word” as an abstract generalization, a component of a lexicon; the second would be “word” as a concrete iteration, a component of a sentence²⁶. Lexicographers work on the first kind of word; translators work on the second. We find Apter’s theoretical foundations shaky because she does not distinguish between “words” as abstractions, which are not ever translated, and iterations, which are the only things that are. The terms in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, considered as abstractions, are indeed untranslatable. But as soon as these are put into context (ie. used in a sentence), they become translatable²⁷.

Apter appears to acknowledge these problems when she writes that: “Apart from its neglect of the fact that some pretty good equivalencies are available, [our] proposition rests on a mystification, on a dream of perfection we cannot even want, let alone have. If there were a perfect equivalence from language to language, the result would not be translation, it would be a replica” (2014: xiv). Despite this admission, however, she continues to argue that the multiplicity of possible translations of a given word, or the fact that various words in one language can all be translated by a single word in another, is proof of the word’s untranslatability. Apter condemns, for instance, the English translation of *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Carol Clark because, “where [...] English uses the word “law” four times—law court, law school, rule of law, force of law—the original French uses *justice* once, *droit* twice, and *loi* once”²⁸.

In our view, these examples do not prove that the French words “justice”, “loi” and “droit” are untranslatable; they only show that in certain contexts, they can all be translated by the same word in English—because context will specify which connotations and meanings they convey. Apter knows this; she underlines that “the question is which of these meanings is in play at any given time”²⁹. But that does not deter her from going down the path of untranslatability, when she follows with the questions “Do we know which [meaning]? Does the speaker know which?”³⁰. To answer “no” to these rhetorical questions is to affirm the importance of Apter’s concept of untranslatability, and this answer appeals to our sense of skepticism and humility. But if we rephrase the questions as statements in the negative (“We do not know which meanings of a given word is in play at any given time; the speaker does not

²⁵ See Pym, 2010: 20–22 and 38–42.

²⁶ This is the sense to which Bellos refers when he writes “whatever those things are when they are not at home in a dictionary”.

²⁷ Cassin is clearly aware of this fact: she writes in her introduction that the goal of the *Vocabulaire* is to “constitute a cartography of European and some other philosophical differences by capitalizing on the knowledge and experience of translators” (B. Cassin, *Éloge de la traduction*, *op. cit.*, p. xx.)

²⁸ E. Apter, “Preface”, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, *op. cit.*, p. x.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. x.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. x.

know”), we have cause to be skeptical of Apter’s skepticism, and might pose a rhetorical question of our own: “Can we not understand each other despite polysemy and ambiguity?” Context is precisely the thing that allows us to distinguish between the multiple meanings of a word in use. To quote Bellos once again, “The only expressions that are truly untranslatable are those you do not understand well enough (or at all)”³¹ The problem with Apter’s untranslatables, according to Bellos, is their inscrutability, not their untranslatability. To insist that certain terms are untranslatable is thus tantamount to implying that translators do not understand the texts they are translating.

Our critique of Apter’s “untranslatability” pertains not only to its dismissal of the activity of translation and of the knowledge and expertise of translators, but also to the concept’s lack of usefulness for countering “the reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability”³² and the translator’s invisibility. In light of her project, the measure of the value of untranslatability as a theoretical tool would seem to be the degree to which it hinders the facile endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability. In other words, “untranslatability” would be a useful concept if identifying and describing untranslatables helped us understand cultural difference and unsubstitutability that are obscured by translation. We believe that Apter’s untranslatability fails to add value as a conceptual tool for the study of literature in translation precisely because her “Untranslatable” is a decontextualized word or term, an entity foreign to the practice of translation, rather than a contextually determined utterance or unit of discourse.

The inapplicability of Apter’s untranslatability as a result of her refusal to engage with translation theory or practice becomes apparent in part two of *Against World Literature*, which consists of “case studies of untranslatables”³³. For example, the second chapter of this section presents as untranslatable “ewigen Friede” (“perpetual” or “eternal peace” in German) as it appears in Kant’s essay “Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf” (“Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project”). Her method of analysis, which she describes as “[w]orking philologically in a free style”³⁴, is highly idiosyncratic. She begins her reading of the texts as follows:

The phrase *ewiger Friede*, controversially rendered in English as “perpetual peace,” refers back to the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s *A Project for Settling on Everlasting Peace in Europe* (1712). What comes to the fore in comparing the German, French and English is a translation loop, in which semantic and acoustic nuances lost in one language are displaced to or recuperated in another. In this case, the Abbé’s *perpetuelle* [sic], in its guise as the English word “everlasting,” draws closer to Kant’s *ewigen*, while the English translation of Kant’s *ewig* by “perpetual” recoups Saint-Pierre’s original French word *perpetuelle*.

³¹ D. Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³² E. Apter, *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 118.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 131.

Why does this matter? Because the way we translate the qualifier *ewigen* has consequences for interpreting Kantian peace and the lexical circuits of synonyms and word-worlds that derive from it³⁵.

It is strange that Apter points to an English translation of a French text in order to safeguard the distinctiveness, unsubstitutability, and untranslatability of the German word *ewig*. But this paragraph constitutes the first and last appearance of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's text in the chapter. Apter does not mention any substantive connections between the two texts, such as ways in which the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's ideas might have inspired Kant.

Apter continues: "*ewig*, like its pendant term *heilig* [sic] (to make holy, to make blessed), sounds a distinctly ecclesiastic note typical of liturgical expressions like 'peace everlasting'"³⁶. Apter appears to use the fact that *ewig* rhymes with the German word for "holy" to introduce a Christian metaphysical dimension to the adjective in Kant's title: "*Ewig* in this sense is a word destined to culminate in the Christian belief in eternal bliss (*Seligkeit*)"³⁷. Note the decontextualization: Apter has removed "*ewig*" from Kant's essay to consider it in a different context. She then proceeds with an extended discussion of the German word "*Ewigkeit*" ("eternity") in another essay by Kant (yet another context), which she describes as "a scene of *Dasein*'s grand exit from *Zeit*"³⁸. The implicit reference to Heidegger introduces yet another context, the relevance of which is not explained, and which is all the more confusing because of its anachronism.

Apter proceeds to consider the alternative translation of *ewig* as "perpetual":

If we go back to the standard translation of *ewiger Friede* as "perpetual peace," the word peace is framed from the perspective of property (as when a holder of a lease or title lays claim to a property "in perpetuity"). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "perpetual," in a rare usage, can designate "a perpetual position, possession, or the right of ownership." To have peace in perpetuity would then be comparable to possessing a right to own some piece of peace; to have a stake in it, as one might in a trust, or testate, or commodity future. Kant's notion of "cosmopolitan right" (*das Weltbürgerrecht*), while it doesn't directly mine this proprietary dimension of the perpetual, contains the phrase *den Völken der Erde*—"the Earth's peoples"—a phrase that implicitly assigns Earth the position of proprietor-in-chief³⁹.

Apter jumps immediately to the rare usage of the term and makes no pretence of considering context. She does not cite Kant or explain the relevance of his concept of "cosmopolitan right"⁴⁰

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 132.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 132.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 132–133.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 133.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 134.

⁴⁰ How the *notion* of the "cosmopolitan right" can contain the phrase "*den Völken der Erde*" is unclear. If Apter is referring to a text here, she does not cite it.

to the translation *ewiger Friede* before jumping into this new conceptual territory. Her very short interpretation of this concept leads to the following conclusion: “The ownership paradigm is thereby converted into one in which the rights of nations and the claims of superstates have been deprivatized”⁴¹. The dense concepts of “nation,” “superstate,” and “privatization” have not appeared in the discussion before this sentence, making it next to impossible to interpret this conclusion.

By focusing on words as abstract entities and refusing to consider Kant’s title in the context of his essay and the situations in which it and its translations might be read, she charges with gusto into a version of what people used to call the etymological fallacy. Certainly, we *may* interpret Kantian peace in light of a rare usage of the term “perpetual”, but Apter never provides any reasons why we *should* or any reason to believe anyone *does*. Worse, perhaps, is her failure to articulate what this method of inquiry has to do with World Literature or the problems of the hegemony of English within the academy. In fact, what becomes clear from her analysis is that the various possible interpretations of *ewig* only appear *after* the term’s (mis)translation into English. In spite of herself, Apter moves towards a demonstration of the productivity of translation and the value of the study of translations, something we will try to articulate in the final section of this piece.

Focusing instead on how these terms are *translated*

While we admit that the original exercise that takes place in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* is extremely interesting in philosophical terms (analyzing the etymology, history and applications of words and concepts in different languages in order to better understand how meanings arise in linguistic networks), we remain unsure that it can be useful for the practice of translation or the reading of translations in the field of comparative literature. In addition, we find that the discourse of untranslatability emphasizes only what translation does not do or cannot do. It does not raise questions about our expectations of translation or the understanding of language and textual meaning these reflect, or draw attention to the effects of translation, i.e. the ways in which translation generates new meaning through difference.

Translating the Untranslatable: Montaigne

For literary scholars and critics, the comparison of the translations with each other and with the source text provides a richer, more complex reading context. Sometimes, noticing that something is “lost” in translation is what allows you to notice that it was there in the first place. Alternatively, a mistranslation might point to an aspect of the text, or of the topic of the text, that you had not previously noticed. To see how this works, let’s look at one of Montaigne’s essays, entitled “Nos affections s’emportent au-delà de nous.” In this essay, Montaigne reflects on the importance people may attach to their reputations after they are dead (using his usual mixed bag of anecdotes from antiquity, European history, and the new world). The essay has

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 135.

been translated into English four times, twice in the 17th century and twice in the 20th. The first translation, by John Florio, appeared in 1603. It was succeeded by Charles Cotton's translation which was published in 1685. The essays were not revisited until 1958, by Donald Fame. The most recent translation, published in 1993, is by M.A. Screech. The title of Montaigne's essay was translated as:

- Our affections are transported beyond our selves (Florio)
- That our affections carry themselves beyond us (Cotton)
- Our feelings reach out beyond us (Fame)
- Our Emotions Get Carried Away Beyond Us (Screech)

We could observe the various (re)translations of the title of the essay and declare it “untranslatable” as a result, or we could ask which questions these translations raise about, for instance, the potential connotations for modern English readers of placing “get carried away” beside “emotions”, or the progression from “affections” to “feelings” to “emotions” as a translation of the French word *affections*. But what stands out most for us is the question of voice. Where the French uses an active, reflexive verb (*s'emporter*), Florio uses a passive construction (are transported), Cotton uses an active, reflexive verb (“carry themselves”), Fame uses an active verb that is not reflexive (“reach out”), and Screech uses a passive construction (“get carried away”). The different translations present different images, which in turn suggest different interpretations of the essay with regard to the agency of our “emotions.” The active constructions (Montaigne, Cotton, and Fame) attribute agency to our emotions, while the passive ones (Florio and Screech) do not. If the emotions have no agency, who or what is carrying (or transporting) them away, and can this be resisted or encouraged?

The French title, on its own, is much less likely to raise these questions, which reappear at other points in the essay. For example, in the first paragraph, Montaigne writes that “La crainte, le désir, l'espérance nous élancent vers l'avenir: et nous dérobent le sentiment et la considération de ce qui est, pour nous amuser à ce qui sera, voire quand nous ne serons plus”⁴². Screech translates this as “Fear, desire, hope impel us towards the future; they rob us of the feelings and concern for what now is, in order to spend time over what will be—even when we ourselves shall be no more”⁴³. Two points in this sentence are relevant to the question of the agency and power of our emotions. First, with regard to whether the force of our concern for the future can be resisted, Screech, Cotton, and Florio, respectively translate “nous élancent” as “impel us,” “push us,” and “draw us,” verbs that indicate merely a force in a direction; Fame translates this verb as “project us,” implying an inescapable displacement. Second, regarding the desirability of this concern, Screech and Fame translate the French verb “dérober” as “rob” and “steal,” making criminals of these emotions, while the early modern translators use the more neutral verbs “deprive” and “remove”.

⁴² Michel de Montaigne, *Essais I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1580[2009], p. 131.

⁴³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech, London and New York, Penguin, 1580[2003], p. 11

Even if none of the translation solutions presents a definitive direction through which to interpret the essay, without these different possible readings suggested by the different translations, there is no apparent reason to consider these aspects of Montaigne's text.

Translating the Untranslatable: Camus

A focus on untranslatability therefore distracts from translation's potential to create and draw attention to meaning. Another example comes from the English translations of Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*. Like the title of Montaigne's essay, Camus's use of the word "maman" in the book's famous opening sentence, "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte" (literally, "Today, mom died"), would fall into the category of "untranslatables" according to Apter—it was translated differently three times, including one where it was left untranslated. Ryan Bloom argues in *The New Yorker* that all three translators mistranslated "maman": "Mother" (Gilbert) he considers too impersonal; "My mother" (Smith), not tender enough; "Maman" (Ward), too "foreign". Bloom also considers and rejects other possibilities such as "Mommy" (too childish), and "Mom" (too abrupt). What we would like to draw attention to here is that it is only when the French word is compared with its various translations that all its various connotations and nuances come to light.

Instead of focusing on the "untranslatability" of "maman" and trying to find an ideal, mystical equivalent for it in English, we prefer to pay attention to what its different translations bring to the table; focusing on the transformations the word undergoes instead of the "loss" of meaning. It is precisely these translation shifts that draw our attention to the particularities of the French word "maman", prompting questions about what assumptions readers should make about Meursault's relationship with his mother at the outset of the narrative. The idea of untranslatability implies that perfect translatability exists on the other side of the spectrum: those translations of "maman" might not be perfect, but they work—they are meaningful, considered on their own (by French readers) and when compared to the original French (by critics or scholars)—and we cannot expect translation to be perfect, ever.

Interestingly enough, this obsession with the difficulty of translating the word "maman" seems to have distracted all of Camus's translators from another translation problem, namely the syntax of the sentence, since they all wrote "Maman/Mother/My mother died today," bringing the temporal marker to the end of the sentence. As Ryan Bloom rightly notes in his *New Yorker* article on these translations of Camus's famous opening line, the ordering of words in the first sentence of *L'Étranger* is no accident:

Rendering the line as "Mother died today" completely neglects a specific ordering of ideas that offer insight into Meursault's inner psyche. Throughout the course of the novel, the reader comes to see that Meursault is a character who, first and foremost, lives for the moment. He does not

consciously dwell on the past; he does not worry about the future. What matters is today. The single most important factor of his being is right now⁴⁴. (Bloom, 2012)

This demonstrates, again, that translation is not only a matter of the selection of words, but also of the combination and ordering of words. Dictionaries cannot address such syntactical shifts or other grammatical plays, but translators can and do. Hidden by the problem of the so-called untranslatable lexical item, other subtleties get... lost. Trying to achieve perfect translatability for certain words is not only purely impossible; it distracts us from other important, non-lexical elements in a text.

Conclusion

While Apter's aims in *Against World Literature* are laudable, the concept of "untranslatability" she has developed to pursue them is fatally flawed, and we hope to have demonstrated that the notion has not survived its relocation outside of Cassin's *Vocabulaire* and into the real world of practice and context. It is certainly important that readers understand that translation is not a magic window into another cultural world, but this problem cannot be addressed by singling out an idiosyncratic list of terms as "Untranslatables"⁴⁵. By now, too much has been written in translation studies for authors from any discipline to ignore the field entirely, and one uncontroversial conclusion from the decades of academic attention to translation could be phrased as follows: before translation, there is one text with a potential number of meanings, and after translation there are two texts, each with a potential number of meanings. There is more meaning in the world after translation. 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, in contrast to untranslatability, do more to help us grasp the richness and complexity of languages, texts, and ideas. In the words of Boris Buden: "Translation is impossible. Let's do it!"⁴⁶.

Bibliography

APTER, Emily S., "Untranslatables: A World System", *New Literary History*, 2008, 39:3, p. 581-598.

⁴⁴ Ryan Bloom, "Lost in Translation: What the First Line of The Stranger Should Be", *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/lost-in-translation-what-the-first-line-of-the-stranger-should-be>, 2011.

⁴⁵ If these terms were indeed untranslatable, that would mean that other terms are purely and perfectly translatable, and therefore that translation can be, and sometimes is, a magic window into another cultural world. Note here how Apter's argument turns its back on her main goal, namely the challenging of the illusion of transparent translation.

⁴⁶ <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1206/buden/en>

- , “Philosophical Translation and Untranslatability: Translation as Critical Pedagogy”, *Profession*, 2010, p. 50–63.
- , *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, London and New York, Verso, 2013.
- , “Preface”, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, dir. Barbara Cassin, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014.
- BAKER, Mona, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006.
- BELLOS, David, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, London, Faber and Faber, 2011.
- , 2015. “*Against World Literature* by Emily Apter (review)”, *Common Knowledge*, 21/1, 2015, p. 110–111.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. “The Task of the Translator” in Venuti, Lawrence (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 15–25.
- BLOOM, Ryan, “Lost in Translation: What the First Line of *The Stranger* Should Be”, *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/lost-in-translation-what-the-first-line-of-the-stranger-should-be>, 2011.
- CASSIN, Barbara. *Éloge de la traduction*, Paris, Fayard, 2016.
- , “Introduction”, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, dir. Barbara Cassin. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004[2014].
- CASSIN, Barbara (dir.), *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Paris, Seuil, 2004.
- CRONIN, Michael, *Translation and Identity*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2006.
- FISK, Gloria, “*Against World Literature*: The Debate in Retrospect”, *The American Reader*, 2014, <http://theamericanreader.com/against-world-literature-the-debate-in-retrospect/>.
- MONTAIGNE, Michel de, *Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, London, The Navarre Society, 1580[1923].
- , *Essays*, trans. John Florio, London and New York, Everyman’s Library, 1580[1973].
- , *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech, London and New York, Penguin, 1580[2003].
- , *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M. Fame, London and New York, Knopf, 1580[2003].
- , *Essais I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1580[2009].
- STEINER, George, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975.
- TYMOCZKO, Maria, “Translation: Ethics, Ideology, Action”, *The Massachusetts Review*, 2006, 47:3 p. 442–461.

—, *Translation, Resistance, Activism*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.

VENUTI, Lawrence, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995.

—, “Genealogies of Translation Theory: Jerome”, *The Translation Studies Reader*, dir. Lawrence Venuti, London and New York, Routledge, 2012.

Robert Twiss holds a bachelor's degree in translation and a master's degree in translation studies from the University of Ottawa. He is the English translator of Alain Poissant's *Le Sort de Bonté III* (University of Ottawa Press, 2015). Arianne Des Rochers holds a bachelor's degree in translation from Concordia University and a master's degree in translation studies from the University of Ottawa. She has translated several books into French, including Glen Sean Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* (Lux Éditeur, 2018) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Islands of Decolonial Love* (Mémoire d'encrier, 2018). Both now pursue doctoral research on literary translation at the Centre for Comparative Literature, at the University of Toronto.