Translation as Border-Crossing: Virginia Woolf’s Case

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1 The very term 'translation' has been used recently as a synonym for a wide variety of terms – linguistic translation, cultural translation, transposition, import, imposition, transcription, even certain kinds of cultural pressure. I would like to rethink some of these meanings, namely those which are beyond mere linguistic interpretation and much closer to inspiration. This is why I will speak of some translational 'cases' regarding Virginia Woolf. Her work, both her fiction and her poetry, has provoked various readings; moreover, the translation of A Room of One's Own has become a kind of demarcation point for the entrance of feminist theory (especially, in literature), an indication that the theory she represents has crossed a border into the countries of Eastern Europe, This, I hope, makes my case strong enough.

2 The term politics is used here in the sense of issues of everyday life and the (dis)balance of power, the application of tacit laws, the implied stereotypes and active work in making these elements visible. The term reading in this paper refers to the practice of understanding and interpreting a text within its con/text, in the way the Latin origin of these words indicates. Text as seen as texture, a field of meanings woven together, and con/text is viewed as the environment of that texture, comprising the surrounding threads which are also woven firmly together within the text. Con/text is seen as what–goes–with–and–into–the–text. One cannot do any reading/interpretation without reading the surroundings; or, seen from another point of view, if text is a texture, one cannot undo a text without undoing its contexts. Because every text’s meaning is embedded within its context, the reading of a text, that is, its meaning, depends on being able to read out the context as well. Although this refers to both the context of a meaning within a text, and the cultural context surrounding the text, the term will be used in this paper mostly in this second meaning. Here context will primarily refer to the public environment of a text which provides codes for understanding it. The very notion 'public environment' refers here to the social context including the reception and so called
horizon of expectation of a certain text. In this particular case, the public environment can be partially reconstructed by comparing which elements of the relevant, both fictional and theoretical texts, were translated at a certain point in time. This provides a broader framework for the appearance and reception of a particular text.

Finally, is there a translator in this paper? In his famous essay about the translator's tasks ('Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers'), Walter Benjamin aims to set the translator free by speaking about the impossibility of translation, in the sense that it is not meaning, but rather feeling; that should be transposed. Paul de Man, in his equally famous comment on this text ('Conclusions': Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator') points to the fact that translation in a way canonizes a text more than does the original. A text which is not translated is not yet definitive, and this is what translation does. In this text I want to explore not the abstract issues of translation, but rather the translator as a figure. While we see the translator as an ideal reader of linguistic signs, he or she is never merely a guide through a Babylon Tower Museum. The translator is any reader, a reader from any period of time and/or culture, that is – every reader, because, every act of reading means crossing some boundaries. I’d like to consider the figure of translator as a female. There are at least two reasons for that – the first is that I want to talk mainly about issues surrounding the translation of feminist theory, and the second, because the translator is often perceived as someone investing herself into the work of the other, which is a stereotypical role of a woman, making my figure of the female translator a political one. Although giving birth to a text into another set of cultural and linguistic codes, the translator seems to be deprived of identity, seems to be no/body. (Paul de Man noted that when the English and French translators of Benjamin's text, translated 'pain', they added 'of giving birth'. He argued that they could have also said 'pains of dying'. What de Man did not care about was their corporeal understanding of the text, which could have led them only to the pains of giving birth, as translation is giving birth in an/other language.)

It is the argument of this text that translators do have bodies, that their bodies are embodiments of the contexts they nomadically shift between, and that their experiences point to the fact that not only is the private political, but that the political is private because it is – corporeal. The figure of translator, who is any/every reader/ess, should remind us of this corporeality and political dimension of context.

I principally want to move closer to the idea of translation as inspiration – the very term which should set us free in regard to the original. In translation, in spite of very honest efforts to free the translator from obligations towards the original, an original is perceived as an ideal. It is in a way an unachievable essence, a perfect entity which makes the dynamics of the process of translation either tragic or neatly metaphoric – depending on our political standpoint. Translation as inspiration is close enough to interpretation – a reading, understanding, application – and securely far enough, deep there in the untouchable distance of creation, that supreme right of our own. It seems to have no borders, no coasts but, of course, we must begin by setting those very limits.

There are three stories on reading/translating which I would like to present and all three are, more or less, connected to Virginia Woolf. The first two are about limits and the third one, hopefully, about freedom.
The story of “improved” original

A few years ago, I received a paper from a very good student of mine, entitled ‘The Angel in Bleak House’, in which she was obviously applying Virginia Woolf’s usage of the Victorian image of Angel in the House. I was, however, unpleasantly surprised to realize that in her footnotes she traced the image to A Room of One’s Own. Another surprise was lurking – in the Serbian translation she was using, from the publishing house Plavi jahač group (fifth edition, published in 2003), the essay ‘Professions for Women’ was translated and appended to A Room of One’s Own, without its title or any note or explanation. Deprived of the title, it seems a kind of epilogue to the longer essay, and no one would have any doubt about its belonging there. It was, of course, good news to learn that ‘Professions for Women’ was translated into Serbian, but not to find it smuggled into another text. This anecdote, in fact, speaks of a period when gendered views of Woolf’s work appeared – the nineties, which were a time of violence and lack of scruple.

The moral of this story is that the political aspect of a translation may be both ideological and commercial, that is – immoral. The translation of A Room of One’s Own in a non-Western country has symbolic meaning – it is acknowledgment of the emerging importance of feminist theory and gendered readings. The reason I had never before opened the other, more commercial and violently ‘improved’ translation published by the Plavi jahač group, was that I had been using the translation by Slavica Stojanović and Smiljka Bogunović. Slavica Stojanović also published translations of Orlando, Between the Acts and a selection of Virginia Woolf’s prose from this period. Her translation of A Room of One’s Own appeared in the journal Feminist Notebooks. It is important to note that Slavica Stojanović has also been present on the Serbian feminist scene for decades as a well known feminist activist, co-founder of a number of women’s groups and editor of feminist magazines. In that way there are two translations of the same text in Serbia which aim at quite different effects – one that is connected both to the cultural and ideological heritage of A Room of One’s Own, and another that has treated the original as a commodity to be sold and re-sold, amended and ‘enriched’ according to the market. The sad thing is that the commercial one has been reprinted many times, while the one which was devoted to the cause and is much better in a linguistic sense, has become a rarity, a kind of Serbian feminist movement memorabilia.

The fact that there are two translations of Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own in Serbian, both completed and published in the same decade, with two different intentions, one ideological, the other commercial, seems to be quite simple to explain.

As a country that used to be called ‘a progressive socialist state’, that is, a socialist country open to Western influences, Yugoslavia saw the emergence of feminist ideas sometime around the late 70’s. Its hallmark was the large international conference Comrade Woman, held in Belgrade in 1978. The list of participants and texts translated for the Serbian audience, which included, for instance, parts of Luce Irigaray’s ‘Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un’, provides a picture of the well-developed interest in feminist theory at the time. The conference was seen as importing Western ideology and therefore judged in the official media as a kind of decadent event, abusing the freedom ‘given’ by socialist society. As for feminist literary theory, the documents point to the Institute of Literature and Art’s seminar held in Dubrovnik, in 1986, and the thematic segment in the literary magazine Književnost which confirm both the knowledge of the theory developed ‘abroad’
and the ability to translate it into our own terms and material. What do we have now, twenty or so years later as a result of this theoretical border – crossing into the domain of Western feminist theory and, especially, literary theory?

11 Exactly the ‘playful pluralism’ of methods, to use Annette Kolodny’s phrase.

12 Although closely modelled upon Western feminist thought (first upon the theories of l’écriture feminine, and later increasingly upon the so-called Anglo-American approach), feminist criticism in Serbia has been developing in its own way, without strictly following in the footsteps of Western theory.

13 In some recent theoretical works, the whole of Eastern Europe has been described using the concept of semi-periphery. The concept of semi-periphery was first introduced in the late 70s by Immanuel Wallerstein and has been regarded as extremely important for understanding world economy, especially in terms of globalization.

The condition of semi-peripherality, whether defined as primarily social, cultural, economic or spatial, can be understood as having both the consciousness of subordination and the means of resistance – unlike the core which may lack the consciousness, and the periphery which may lack the required means. Being in the contradictory position of the semi-periphery distances actors and observers from the taken-for-granted assumptions of the centre, while still being close enough to have an insider understanding of those assumptions and the state capacity to do something about them. In short, the semi-periphery is a provocative environment from which to study both the dynamics of closer global integration and resistance to globalization.

14 In her text on the production of gender and women’s studies, sociologist and feminist theoretician Marina Blagojević, speaking of Serbia as part of the semi-periphery, argues that the “creation of knowledge ‘from below’, from the contexts of semi-peripheral societies, is congruent with the very foundation of feminist epistemology.” If not created in its context, the knowledge produced in the semi-periphery is ‘translation of translation’.

15 What does it mean and how does it function when a break-through text, such as Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, is at stake? Why bother to translate at all, if both the periphery and the semi-periphery usually speak the language of the centre? And how do we create a context for new knowledge and let a context be created by it? If translation, as Benjamin intends it, is closer to theory of literature or criticism, by making a text final, definitive, the translation of translation would be a further ironical (in the the sense of Romantic irony he employs’) step toward endlessness. Benjamin said it could not be done – one cannot translate translation. But if we do it, if we de-canonize the canonized, undo what has been done as definitive, are we not creating the only possible theoretical act?

The case of the appended essay ‘Professions for Women’ seems like a bad joke regarding this issue, especially in view of, for instance, Toril Moi’s and Elaine Showalter’s dispute about the importance of the narrative strategies in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own. This theoretically illustrative conflict seems to be simply disregarded by this violation of the limits of an original. But this case tells us also, both literally and metaphorically, that a translation can never be the only one.

16 On the semi-periphery, I see our figure of translator at the middle point between growing and grown (contextual) knowledge and the knowledge offered from the core, most often in the form of the special terminology that should be superimposed on the stories from local real life or literature and art. If globalization means reconstructing the Tower of Babel with difference-proof material, do we take part in the process by trying to move...
away from our semi-peripheral position and closer to the core? Should we control our desire for the core and stay put, embedded and embodied in our contexts, waiting for a 'contextual knowledge' to grow out of our bones? Or shouldn't we insist on translation of translation as long as it fits our needs, explains our feelings and, especially, serves as inspiration?

The seemingly neutral story

The problem of language, style, the sentence that Virginia Woolf talks about in *A Room of One's Own* makes clear that there are differences in the styles of male and female writers. Another important point is that Woolf herself invented her own sentence and developed her own specific style in writing fiction, often designated as a type of *stream of consciousness* technique, whose main characteristics are sometimes described as very close to what was later designated as *l'écriture féminine*.

The second story is about the well known and established Serbian writer, Svetlana Velmar-Janković who, in her comments on the renewed and re-written edition of her first novel *Ožiljak* (*The Scar*, originally published in 1956, reprinted 43 years later), acknowledged that one of the main influences on her, while writing the original version, had been the translation of Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*. This influence is clearly visible in the structuring of the central heroine’s character as a sum of other characters' impressions. When the very style, or the sentence is at stake, however, the comparison between Woolf’s novel and Velmar-Janković novels indicates that the latter was not at ease with the gliding, complicated, spiral sentences of the ‘original’ impetus. On the contrary, Velmar-Janković writes in short, syncopated sentences. In a sharp critical assessment of the novel *Bezdno*, Svetlana Slapšak points to “... cutting sequences into short sentences, in order to enforce meaning and tension” as “the recognizable lack of Svetlana Velmar-Janković’s prose”.

Svetlana Velmar – Janković is one of those women writers who does not accept the label of ‘a woman writer’. She opts for being ‘just a writer’ - a universal, that is to say, male/mainstream figure. It seems no wonder that the discrepancy between her poetic aim and stylistic inadequacy is in the first place in her ‘unfemale’, or at least, ‘unwoolfean sentence’. While wishing to be ‘neutral’ in aspects of gender regarding both style and content, Svetlana Velmar- Janković and the novel *Ožiljak* itself, first, aims for political subversion. Written and first published in 1956, it is a novel about a girl from the then suppressed bourgeois class, the one marked by the *scar* which is a political mark becoming a private, intimate, corporeal designation.

The public environment of the text may offer a kind of clarification of what was going on in Serbia regarding the translations of both Woolf’s fictional works and the theoretical texts surrounding them. The novel *To the Lighthouse* was translated into Serbian by Zora Minderović in 1955 and it remains the only (and very good) translation of the novel. In the same year Milica Mihajlović translated *Mrs. Dalloway* and in the next year she also translated a selection of Woolf’s essays from the *Common Reader*. At the very end of the decade, M. Mihajlović published a translation of *The Waves*. These were Serbian translations, but Serbian readers were then part of a wider geopolitical wholeness – the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a socialist country whose official politics countered bourgeois values.
When considering the translations of the poetical and theoretical works of the time, we will see that the Leon Edel’s book *The Modern Psychological Novel* was translated in 1962; Monique Natan’s biobibliographical book on V. Woolf in 1964, and at the end of the period (1988) in Zagreb (the capital of Croatia, then also part of Yugoslavia) David Lodge’s book appeared. *The Modes of Modern Writing – Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* had a section on V. Woolf. Leon Edel’s book did not do justice to V. Woolf – she was presented as a kind of lesser Joyce. Lodge was, however, much more interested in the peculiarities of her writing and in her movement from the metonymical towards the metaphorical, together with Joyce and other writers. In *The Waves*, he said, the borders of an individual character are dissolved, in mystical impersonality rather than in mythic polysemy, which was the case with *Finnegan’s Wake*. This poetical and theoretical context thus supplies the public body of Woolf’s works in Serbia. Although experimental, she was seen mostly as a kind of ‘domesticated’ Joyce, or as an unhappy talented woman. In the political context, however, her seemingly neutral appearance was recognized and transposed, not as aesthetically fruitful, but into another story. The trait of the bourgeoisie in her novel, which was quite ordinary in Woolf’s social surroundings, made here, in another social environment, in another context, a political cut – a scar.

Thus, the moral of this story is that a seemingly neutral period may prove, on the contrary, to be quite political - that is, every translation is a political act, possibly, and most probably, subversive, but the political is, unfortunately, in no way necessarily poetical.

**A story from the very center of the world**

The third story only distantly relates to Virginia Woolf. When her nephew Julian Bell went to China in 1933, to teach English at Wuhan University, he met Ling Shuhua, a poet, calligrapher and painter, and the wife of the Dean of Wuhan’s University. Their love affair was discovered, and Julian left China for Spain, where he was killed in the war in July of 1937. This international gossip recently came to the attention of a wider international audience when Hong Ying published her fictional, but also factual, version of the love story. The book was translated from Chinese to Serbian and brought with it the first rays of the exciting story of communication between China and England, the *Crescent Moon Society* and Bloomsbury. It is interesting that this story is based on absences – Julian Bell arrived in China when one of the founders of the Chinese Bloomsbury, the charismatic Xu Zhimo, was already dead; Ling Shuhua and Vanessa Bell began corresponding after Julian was killed in the Spanish Civil War; Virginia Woolf and Ling Shuhua also exchanged letters but never met, because the latter came to Britain in 1947 and Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941. Vita Sackville West, who wrote the introduction to Ling Shuhua’s autobiography in 1953, published by Leonard Woolf, based that brief text on what she had heard about Shuhua’s writing it from Virginia Woolf, as well as on Woolf’s letters to the Chinese writer. Finally, Patricia Laurence, author of the comprehensive study on the Bloomsburies in China and England, entitled *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes*, came upon the first trace of the story in 1991, and the main protagonist of the story, Ling Shuhua, died in 1990 in Britain. These omissions, inevitable absences and delays, are clearly forces which distort the traces of this story.

But, let me ask you now, to which country would you ascribe the name ‘center of the world’ from my subtitle? To Britain, imperial power which really was the center of its
Commonwealth? Or to China, whose name is Zhong Guo – the central country? In another words, who represented the center – Julian or Shuhua?

Among the most interesting artefacts of their love affair are the manuscripts of English translations of Shuhua’s stories into English, with Julian Bell’s comments and editing. This seems to be the knot where the issues of colonialism, gender and language meet. Julian Bell was obviously interested in erasing all which seemed ‘too sentimental’ in these stories, destroying, as Laurence argues, her neat visual metaphors. He kept describing her to his mother Vanessa, ‘as one of us’. Travelling far away, crossing borders, he was carrying his Bloomsbury ideal along, as a measurement of other(s).

On the other hand, sometime later, Virginia Woolf advised Shuhua to write her autobiography in English in such a way as to preserve her ‘Chinese flavor’. This sounds completely in agreement with recent theoretical opinions according to which fluent translations are unethical, because they deny the Other. In such views, they seem ethnocentric and encourage cultural imperialism. Some scholars argue that it would be more ethical to translate in a foreignizing way, not in a domesticating one. Foreignizing translations are not fluent, they do not sound entirely natural, and that would be the point in this shift.

Isn’t that, however, also patronizing talk from the center of the language into which the other wants to step? Why deny her, our translator, the ability to speak as she wishes, to use a language as a mask of perfection, if she can? Is not insistence on difference a kind of cultural pressure just as is insistence on sameness?

Ling Shuhua belonged to a time and place which was marked by border-crossing. Lu Xin, Xu Zhimo, Hu Shi (theoretician of the May 4 movement from 1919) opened Chinese literature to European influences, without loosing its origins. And, to mention the inevitable fact, A Room of One’s Own had already been translated in Chinese in 1930.

Translating together, Julian and Shuhua were actually engaged in a complex relation. Julian wrote about this process:

I call it translating, but it’s a queer business really only possible given our very peculiar conditions. She turns her own Chinese into English – a quite comprehensible very grammatical language. Then I cross-examine her on the exact shade of meaning she wants, which usually involves some literal character translation... Having got the “exact” (general crossed out) idea of the meaning, I proceed to invent an English sentence and type it, putting in a good deal, particularly tenses, after expanding compressed words into images and supplying roughly parallel English idioms and conventions etc. The result is to me very exciting: I hope it is to other people. /Julian Bell, in a letter to his friend, March 20, 1936)

It is hard to say whether the product is exciting or not, because now one cannot distance oneself from the very context of this translation process – an erotic love affair of which the translations are factually the only surviving proof. And the very process sounds rather appropriative, masculine and – futile.

However – Ling Shuhua eventually translated not only her stories into English, she wrote her autobiography directly into the foreign language, and spent the other half of her long life in the very English language and country. She translated her whole self from Crescent Moon to Bloomsbury. It is this story of our inability to decide and firmly point to the centre, the core, the source of knowledge, the original with a capital O, which is for me the vision of translation as inspiration. Beyond ‘improving’ texts by what does not belong.
there; beyond futile efforts to emulate and beyond insisting on anything but a ‘playful pluralism’ of methods and resistance to any kind of cultural pressure. It is, to be quite honest, this erotic side of inspiration, this body of translator, this love affair, a lifelong becoming in some other language, which, I think, lures us into the whole process of the production of knowledge at some other place, a place of our own – corporeality.

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NOTES

1. During the same period, I translated two ‘seemingly neutral’ essays by V. Woolf – ‘The Art of Fiction’ and ‘The Decay of Essays’, but the issues of class did not seem to be interesting as much as the revelation of gender then. In 2001, finally, the translation of Three Guineas appeared, as a long awaited and necessary commentary to trauma of our own.

2. Književnost (Literature), a thematic section called l’écriture féminine, by Svetlana Slapšak, Novica Milič, Nada Popović-Perišić, and Slobodanka Peković from that conference.


6. Blagojević, Marina, ‘Canons and Contexts: Beyond Fragmentation’ (manuscript in English).


8. Neither the introductory part of Moi’s book, nor Showalter’s part on Woolf has been translated into Serbian, but the case is described in some articles.

9. Velmar-Janković, Svetlana, Ožiljak, Vreme knjige, 1999. Although not announced, the influence of Woolf’s novel is also obvious in her second novel Lagum (Dungeon, translated into English by Celia Hawkesworth), published in 1990.


ABSTRACTS

This text focuses on the "case of Virginia Woolf", that is, how the translation of her work relates to theoretical border-crossing, especially within the context of the arrival of feminist theory in the countries of Eastern Europe. The idea of translation is seen primarily as inspiration, which is both close enough to interpretation and seemingly without limits. The text is structured in three parts, of which the first two explore the limits of translation as inspiring readings of Woolf in Serbia, while the third part covers the East-West modernist relation and translation as border-crossing in literature and also in life.

Ce texte se concentre sur le « cas de Virginia Woolf », c’est-à-dire sur la manière dont la traduction de son œuvre se rapporte à un border-crossing théorique, notamment dans le contexte de l’arrivée des théories féministes dans les pays de l’Europe de l’Est. La traduction est pensée principalement comme inspiration, concept proche de celui d’interprétation et apparemment sans limites. L’article comprend trois parties, les deux premières explorant les limites de la
Este artículo se centra en el “caso de Virginia Woolf”, es decir, en cómo la traducción de su obra se relaciona con el border-crossing teórico, especialmente en el contexto de la llegada de la teoría feminista a los países de Europa del este. La idea de la traducción es considerada principalmente como inspiración, la cual se halla cercana a la inspiración y, en apariencia, carece de límites. El artículo consiste en tres partes, la de las cuales las dos primeras exploran los límites de la traducción como inspiración en las lecturas de Woolf en Serbia, mientras que la tercera se ocupa de la relación modernista entre el Este y el Oeste y de la traducción como border-crossing, tanto en la literatura como en la vida.

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