

The Systemic Approach, Postcolonial Studies, and Translation Studies: A Review Article of New Work by Hermans and Tymoczko

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**Louise von Flotow,**

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## Louise von FLOTOW

### **The Systemic Approach, Postcolonial Studies, and Translation Studies: A Review Article of New Work by Hermans and Tymoczko**

This review article is about two books that in several ways and in several contexts deal with the systemic approach and its variations in the study of translation, literature, and culture: Theo Hermans's *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and System-oriented Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1999. 191 pages) and Maria Tymoczko's *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1999. 336 pages). These two books are wonderfully complementary: Hermans' clear review and, at times, critique of descriptive and systems-oriented approaches to translation studies prepares the way for Tymoczko's work, a demonstration of how some of the best aspects of descriptive and systems-oriented approaches can be applied in translation studies that moves well beyond "mere" descriptive methods to address the inherently ideological nature of translation. In a nutshell, Hermans provides a thorough, historical account of DTS (descriptive translation studies), the "Manipulation School," and other systems-oriented approaches to studying translation. As an important player in this field -- he edited the first "manipulation" volume entitled *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation* (1985) -- he is well-qualified to do so. His account is that of an informed insider, who has had personal contact with many of those involved in this work and good knowledge of their research projects. Yet these personal contacts do not hinder him from uttering sharp criticisms of the more categorical or dogmatic uses systems-oriented theories may be and have been put to.

Hermans begins by describing the move toward DTS as an attempt to find grounds that "can explain why there is what there is" in translated writing. An approach that "takes translation as it comes rather than as we might have wished it" (6), it developed in reaction to the prescriptive aspects of earlier work on translation, in a kind of "invisible college" that included researchers from various translating countries: Israel, the Netherlands, and Belgium being the most important. Various labels have been attached to the DTS approach; these include terms such as target-oriented, systemic, polysystem approach, manipulation group/school, and they all differ somewhat in focus. Starting with a discussion of an important, but somewhat neglected, essay by John McFarlane (1953), Hermans traces the development of the DTS approaches through the works of Czech theorists such as Jiri Levy and Anton Popovic in the 1960s, who advocated relational and contextual approaches to translation studies and viewed the translator as a social agent (for a reworked version of Popovic's 1976 *Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation*, see Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's "Towards a Taxonomy for the Study of Translation" in *Meta: Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal* 40.3 (1995): 421-44 and chapter 6 in his *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* [1998], pp. 215-48). Hermans sees James Holmes's 1970s focus on the need for "pure research" in the field rather than prescriptive "how-to" work as having been instrumental in developing the domain in the West. Hermans seems to view the 1980s as the "high time" of the DTS approach, a time when it was explored and applied in various research endeavours and led to a number of important publications. The major focus in this decade was on translated literature as part of a system, one of many interdependent elements. Description of translations "as they are" was paramount, and Hermans provides good examples of the kind of work done, admitting all the while that despite the "purely descriptive" approach, complete objectivity was impossible. Some scholars, Gideon Toury in particular, soon veered away from description and tried to establish "laws" of translation while others, Dirk Delabastita and Lieven D'hulst, claimed to operate as objective observers -- attitudes that Hermans views sceptically. A second important element of DTS at this time was the focus on translated writing as a target text, as work deliberately initiated and produced for a specific audience. The translator's intentionality -- his/her choices, judgements, motivations -- needed to be included in the research, and as importantly, the relationship between source and target cultures required investigation, although this ran counter to Gideon Toury's assertion that translations relate only to the target culture. The focus on systems, through the application of Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory,

provided a useful framework not only for making the emerging discipline of translation studies academically acceptable but also for displaying what Hermans calls its "radically innovative potential" (42). He links this "radical potential" to the focus on power that underlies polysystem theory, and which views literary and cultural life as a perpetual struggle for power between various interest groups. This focus soon became central to the work of André Lefevere on poetics, patronage and ideology as systemic influences on translation, editing and rewriting. Finally, also in the 1980s, the norms and constraints that govern and mold translation were explored in numerous comparative case studies contextualizing and historicizing translated works.

From this brief historical overview of the development of DTS, Hermans delves more deeply into systems' approaches to the traditional problems of translation studies. Chapter 4 addresses the question of "equivalence" and the definition of translation, and makes much of Toury's "bold, decisive and liberating" move, which was to accept as a translation any text the target language accepts as such (49). Yet, Hermans also points to the new definitional problems raised by Toury's postulates (51ff), which on the one hand re-invent the notion of equivalence, yet on the other suffer from the rigidity that adherence to laws and postulates of any kind imposes. Bringing in theorists such as Thomas Sebeok, Jonathan Culler, Jacques Derrida, Andrew Chesterman, and Ernst-August Gutt, Hermans shows how notions of "equivalence" in translation continue to haunt both translations and translation research, often impeding recognition and examination of the highly unequal power relations that underlie translation relations. Chapter 5 describes and discusses a number of research projects carried out over the course of the 1970s and 1980s using models developed from DTS approaches. Toury's "Adequate Translation" (AT) model is shown to have been extremely labour intensive and applicable only to short, "representative" passages of longer works; this raises the question of objectivity in deciding what is representative (56-58). Detailed research done by Kitty van Leuwen-Zwaart on a number of Spanish works in Dutch translation also developed and imposed analytical DTS models on translations and produced interesting findings, among others that "when different readers come away with different impressions of a translation, the differences can be pinpointed with reasonable accuracy" (62). Yet, the application of the model involved strong interpretive elements, and proved problematic with complex textual phenomena such as wordplay, allusion, irony and intertextuality. Work by Jelle Stegeman involved reader responses to translations which, in Hermans view, "tell us more about the psychology of reading in an artificial laboratory situation than about translation description and analysis" (64), while research undertaken by José Lambert and Hendrik Van Gorp from the 1970s onward sought to develop models that might explore the two entire communicative processes involved in translation. Their check-list on preliminary data, macro and micro-level analyses, and the context of source and target texts provided a framework along which researchers might work, yet despite the apparent multidimensionality and flexibility of the projects its frame of reference proved essentially binary and schematic. Hermans concludes that "neat schemes are apt to sustain convenient myths" (69), and that while models may help in offering hints and pointers, they remain ancillary.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Hermans "works with norms" and goes "beyond norms," respectively. He presents a thorough account of the development of norm theory by McFarlane, Levy and Popovic, and Mukarovsky (71-75), and then describes its application in recent DTS. Toury's categorizations -- preliminary, initial, and operational norms -- are discussed in some detail, as are Chesterman's social, ethical and technical norms, and Christiane Nord's distinctions between constitutive and regulatory norms, with the latter two viewed as a "clear advance on Toury's list" (79). Hermans himself sees norms as both constraints and templates in the construction of texts, and views the study of norms in a wider context as a way to juxtapose and balance their regulatory aspect with the translator's intentionality.

Consequently, he spends considerable time on translation research where the question of norms has played an important role: in borderline cases such as aural/phonetic translations, i.e. the Zukofkys' mimetic translations of Catullus, or in cases of ideological interference and exclusion where political contexts may impose certain norms. Hermans' conclusion that correctness in translation is linguistically, socially, politically and ideologically relative can be applied equally to

translation and to translation research, as his Chapter 7 shows. Certain theorists such as Gideon Toury aim to move "beyond" DTS, deriving a "set of laws of translation behaviour" from descriptive research, a quest that Hermans considers very doubtful (92-94). Others use norm theories to explore and demonstrate the cultural and ideological construction of knowledge through translation that occurs under different sets of social and historical conditions, and to historicize translation and translation theory. The next two chapters of Hermans' book make the connection between DTS and various systems approaches, with the caution that systems do not exist but "can be traced, established as a kind of grid leading to greater insights" (103). Polysystem theory is discussed at length in Chapter 8, and although Hermans sees it as a powerful instrument in translation studies that has given the discipline an enormous boost placing it squarely into cultural studies, he is troubled by the value judgements that its categorizations inevitably bring with them, and which its proponents are not necessarily aware of. Hermans' description of several research projects that have used polysystem theory as "ingenious, intricate, wide-ranging, and bloodless" (117), largely because they do little but describe translation, brings him to a discussion of the projects of Tymoczko (1999) and Lefevere (1992) that move well beyond the description of textual phenomena.

In Chapter 9 he examines these and other projects which have been "receptive to the social realities and ideological contexts of translation" (119), and taken researchers beyond polysystem theory. He cites the influence of Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann whose work on the sociology of culture is relational and has been of increasing importance in translation studies, enhancing the potentially rigid and sterile adherence to models. Lambert's work on "mass communication mapping" is described as quite forward-looking since it points to the complexity of contemporary international communication and pushes beyond binary (source-target) models, offering suggestions toward a sociocultural geography of language processing. And Lefevere's work too is discussed with great sympathy as it moves well beyond merely descriptive approaches to consider larger issues such as patronage and ideology in rewriting, and includes the operations of criticism, reviewing, adaptation for children or for audio-visual media in its discussions. Finally, Hermans moves to work by Jean-Marc Gouanvic and Daniel Simeoni, which has extensively explored the usefulness of Bourdieu's ideas of "habitus" and "field" for translation studies (131-36). The importance of the individual translators, their corporeality, and their "incorporation" into the systems and processes of rewriting, publication, and ultimately, meaning-production, comes out of this work.

Hermans's last chapter focuses on ways that Luhmann's theories of social systems might be used for the study of translation. Relying on work done by Andreas Poltermann, the first to apply Luhmann's ideas to translation studies, Hermans discusses literature as a differentiated social system, subject to literary and translation norms, genre expectations and contextual communication situations. He juxtaposes Luhmann's view of social systems as systems of communication and the idea of translation as a functional system whose primary function consists in producing representations of anterior discourses across semiotic boundaries. This representational, communicative function - within and between systems -- can be approached via Luhmann's work on social systems as can translation's, or better, translators' self-reference. Re-translations, marks of literal translation, mimetic translation, translators' prefaces, etc., are all examples of the "translator's signature," self- reflexive moments in translation. They raise the issue of first and second-order observations, and tie in to Luhmann's work on social systems being self-reproducing and self-referential, processing input in their own terms. For Hermans, Luhmann's work may be most useful in addressing questions about objectivity in translation research, about the fact that "describers [and translators] are always positioned somewhere, and have blind spots" (146).

Throughout this lucid book, Hermans's concern for blind spots has been evident. And while he has included many 'internal' criticisms of the blind spots of various DTS approaches, the final chapter deals with other critics -- notably, Peter Newmark, whose continued focus on the prescriptive paradigm for translation studies leads him to discount systems approaches, the Göttingen centre's discomfort with the more strident views of the manipulation school, Antoine

Berman's sceptical response to the "secondary" or peripheral status assigned translation in polysystems theory, and Anthony Pym's view that the mechanistic application of norm theory will further downgrade the importance of the individual translator's agency. Hermans presents and discusses these criticisms, and goes on to present the value of other, related, approaches to translation studies: Postcolonial, cultural-materialist, and gender-based work that vigorously foreground the social, political and ideological contexts and effects of translation.

Maria Tymoczko's *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* is one of the best current examples of work in translation studies that incorporates, and goes well beyond, polysystem approaches. Focusing on early Irish literature and its English and Anglo-Irish translations, Tymoczko explores the many social, cultural, historical and ideological aspects of cultural transfer and power relations that can be revealed in translation. The book begins with an important introductory note on early medieval heroic Irish literature in general, and the Ulster Cycle in particular, and takes a postcolonial perspective, immediately focusing on language as one of the most powerful instruments of colonialist oppression. A lengthy introduction setting out the relationship between colonialist language use, and discourse analysis, translation, and translation analysis, as well as the historical context within which the Ulster Cycle was translated and re-translated provides excellent theoretical and contextual information on her project. Ten chapters of incisive and detailed discussions of particular issues in the translation of these Irish epics follow, which, though they may appear to be limited to a very specific domain, are brilliantly linked with contemporary translation studies methodology from which generalists can draw substantial benefit. Since a number of these chapters were originally published as articles, the table of contents gives an abstract of each, which strikes me as a great improvement over the usual terse headings. The volume has been awarded the Michael J. Durkan prize for best book on Irish language and culture for 2000 by the American Conference for Irish Studies and it was designated as an "Outstanding Academic Book" by *Choice*, a publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries, USA.

In her introduction, Tymoczko states that at the heart of her project lies a study of translation of early Irish texts "as one of the discursive practices that contributed to freeing Ireland from colonialism ... that took its place among other discursive practices shap[ing] Ireland's resistance to England and eventually lead[ing]to political action and physical confrontation" (15). She thus places translation squarely into the many discursive activities and systems that are part of historical social interaction, and she argues that this activity continues to be fundamentally vital as the "world gets smaller." All the more reason to study how access to translated literatures has shaped the work of Salman Rushdie, say, or how the writers of 'minority' languages such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o from Kenya or Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill from Eire position their work with regard to translation into "world" languages. While translation may facilitate cultural contact, it is generated by difference and deals with difference. Traditionally, translation has been viewed as representing the other, writes Tymoczko, yet "these representations will shift as they are constructed by different groups with their own senses of identity, groups both internal and external to a nation" (18). What is more, these identities themselves depend on a perception of difference, "a difference that is often established by translations. Thus, the process of translation is powerful, and it is not innocent" (18).

This introduction immediately provides examples of how the history of the English colonization and oppression of Ireland can be traced in translation practices -- the most obvious being the imposition, partially through translation, of English names on the Irish landscape; but growing Irish resistance from the eighteenth century on is also visible in translation. A colourful, but not unproblematic, example of this resistance is seen in the translation of the battle frenzy of Cú Chulainn from the Ulster Cycle. A translation produced in Ireland in 1878-80, at the height of Victorian imperialism, completely suppresses the text excerpt that details the warrior's pre-battle transformation into a sort of raging beast. Tymoczko explains that English stereotypes about the Irish love of violence, readiness to fight, love of battle, and tendency to violent passions were at that time providing powerful arguments against Irish self-governance: "Not surprisingly, therefore, [the translator] omitted the motif in building his document of cultural nationalism" (23). Another translation, produced in 1969, however, half a century after the independence of the Irish state,



"and after decades of Irish quiescence and Irish neutrality during World War II" (23) provides the entire text. In Tymoczko's view, it is "a celebration and assertion of cultural distinctiveness and difference ... formed in a context of increasing influence of American mores and cultural standards on Ireland, and it spoke to resistance against continued Victorian and Catholic mores in the Irish state, asserted in a climate of renewed consciousness about British oppression in Northern Ireland" (24). In this brief example, both translations are placed in their historical moment, and discussed from that perspective, a method that throws light on the cultural ambiance that influenced the text production and allows speculation about the influence the translations themselves might have had. Tymoczko's method throughout is to set translations in time, and by extension, in politics, ideology, economics and culture. It is a method that clearly derives from descriptive translation studies and polysystem theory (25), a method that de-aestheticizes translation and moves it to larger questions of historical poetics and politics.

Obviously, one of the larger questions is the colonial/postcolonial context of Ireland, and each one of the subsequent chapters addresses it in a different way, applying postcolonial theories, yet nuancing them. Another important issue is the age of the texts; they date from the beginning of the eighth to the middle of the ninth century, and their translation thus raises the problem of "information overload". Every text evokes metonymically the larger literary and cultural contexts from which it comes, and in Chapter 1 Tymoczko examines the challenges for translation posed by the many unfamiliar references and now virtually extinct cultural information that such ancient texts comprise. Translating this material is tantamount to "telling a new story." In the process of this telling, certain elements of the old story are privileged over others, depending on the translating culture and environment. The translator constructs an image of the source culture, and this has ideological implications, which the following chapters explore.

In Chapter 2 Tymoczko's focus is on the translation -- or absence of translation -- of ancient Irish myths in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She argues that certain nationalist aspects of these translations present ancient Irish heroes as an ideal of militant Irish heroism and emphasize violence toward brothers or friends as the price of fulfilling group loyalties, thus setting a trajectory that led to Easter 1916, and later, violence in the North. Chapter 3 studies the challenges that arise in translating ancient Celtic material whose formal aspects differ substantially from those of the translating European target cultures. Translation and reception of texts from a colonized, minoritized, distant culture are shown to involve a dialectic between assimilation to and alteration of the standards of the receiving culture. Translation in this environment is "parallel to scholarship but independent and distinct from it as a mode of exploring a text, and by extension, literature and culture in general" (114). Chapter 4 is perhaps the most important for using and going beyond polysystem theory. It shows that while the systematicity of English translations of early Irish materials can be clearly established and linked to their socio-political environments, the presence of two complementary and competing sets of translations -- "monuments of style" on the one hand and scholarly works on the other -- makes for systems that are so differentiated they demonstrate the impossibility of facile historical determinism in translation studies as well as the problems of binarism in any discipline that analyzes human culture.

Chapter 5 examines indeterminacy in translation, a concept developed by Quine (1960), and reworked many times since in translation theory. Here, Tymoczko is writing from the perspective of translating the "dead" language of early Irish texts. She opens with a devastating critique of the imperialism in Quine's thought experiments on the translation of "jungle" (146-50), commenting at one point that "If allowed to stand or if accepted, Quine's thesis of radical indeterminacy by extension absolves metropolitan or dominant-culture investigators of "jungle" from the necessity of paying close attention to their subject, from any serious commitment to relating to other cultures on their own terms, and from any committed attempt at precise communication" (149). This central chapter lays out the problematic of translating from a real, although long dead, language (early Irish rather than Quine's hypothetical language), and shows how and why translation from such a language will inevitably be indeterminate, with each translation creating meaning, "each [translator] building on the insights or revisiting decisions of predecessors" (155). These comments on indeterminacy in translation apply not only to ancient Irish writings but to the

reading and rewriting of any literary text, since "no literary text is ever fully determinate or closed, permitting only one reading" (156). Yet, in the case of dead or distant languages/cultures, the larger problem of indeterminacy of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, arises. In such situations, meaning may emerge through translation; and while this is inevitable as translators rely on earlier versions and interpretations, Tymoczko points out that radical versions of indeterminacy in translation à la Quine may give license to represent subaltern source texts in ways that benefit dominant cultures. Translation in such cases plays into the power dynamics between cultures, and Tymoczko asks whether a case cannot or should not be made for a certain determinacy of translation, an evaluation of translations according to specified parameters established by the principle domains of scientific and cultural investigation, among others descriptive translation studies, polysystem theory, and the humanistic disciplines.

The three chapters that follow this central piece focus on three specific questions regarding the representation of the texts of colonized peoples and minority cultures through translation. Levels of determinacy in translation and their reflection/refraction of patterns of difference are at the heart of the matter. Chapter 6 examines the representation of culture, using theoretical perspectives offered by Bourdieu and contrasting three translation strategies employed for the translation of early Irish writings - an assimilationist strategy, a dialectical strategy and an ostensive strategy. Tymoczko looks at concepts, beliefs and practices central to the idea of Irish culture, and displayed in the attributes ascribed to the heroic Cú Chulainn, discusses their historical provenance and significance as well as their continued existence in the culture today, and then examines the translations of these concepts in three different periods, ending with the "decolonized" translation strategy used in Thomas Kinsella's 1969 *The Táin*. Chapter 7 studies the translation of humour, which, always difficult, is not made easier in a dead or archaic language. Hinging on orality, on puns and wordplay, neologism, parody, and literary play in general, forms of the comic have their referential basis in the oral, literary and material culture of their time. Tymoczko provides and discusses many early Irish text excerpts where 20th century readers may miss, be baffled by, or simply misunderstand the source text humour. She describes humour as instantiating the broadest sort of cultural patterns that face translators, and drawing parallels between Thomas Kuhn's argument about scientific paradigms and humour as a cultural paradigm, she refers to polysystem theory yet moves beyond its parameters to study the ideological and political issues and the moral conventions that have interfered with the translation of early Irish humour into English. In Chapter 8, "The Names of the Hound," Tymoczko addresses the problem of translating proper names in a colonial setting. In the Irish play "Translations," by Brian Friel (1980), the re-naming of Irish place names provides one of the most bitter accounts of the connection between imperialism and naming, raising translation issues for the general public. Tymoczko enlarges on these, citing the "information load" in proper names, their semantic, semiotic, sociolinguistic significances which indicate tribal and family affiliations, and give information about class and gender as well as racial, ethnic, national, and religious identity. She argues that the sounds of names can be as important in carrying cultural significance, but that attempts to represent such names have led from phonological to sociolinguistic problems: the translation of Irish names Eochaid, Feidlimid and Cairpe as "Yohee," "Faylimy," and "Carpy," respectively (229), are problematic since the names ending in the sound [i] in English are homophonous with diminutives, and suggest that the characters are servants, or children, or members of the lower class. Similarly, the totemic aspect of names in early Irish myth enhance the problems for English translation, a culture where with the few exceptions of certain women's names "Rose, June, Faith, Prudence," or the naming-practices of colonized groups -- Native Americans, Africans, Indians, names are relatively void of semantic meaning. Tymoczko argues then that naming is connected with self-definition and self-determination, with identity, boundaries, and knowledge: the translation of names in a colonized situation, she goes on to show, is at the crux of ideological relations between the two cultures in contact.

The final two chapters of the book, on philological translation and metonymics, address other aspects of translation theory. In Chapter 11, Tymoczko demonstrates that philological (read scholarly) translations that seek to apply the positivist "science of the word" are reductive; they



turn literary language into non-literary language, clear up ambiguities and difficulties in source texts, produce material that is whole, unambiguous, penetrable and familiar, and if necessary, eliminate and silence those features of texts that cannot be rendered "clear." She sees a link between positivist European philology of the nineteenth century and European imperialism, with philological translation being the colonization of the past, and she demonstrates how this principle has often done disservice to early Irish texts. Chapter 12 interrogates the dominant metalanguage of translation theory and description which views translation as metaphor and disregards its metonymical features. In Tymoczko's eyes, translation as metaphor, where substitution is the main task of the translator/translation, lends itself to normative approaches that are inevitably vulnerable to the "recapitulation of established cultural hierarchies and hegemonies" (283), breeding a discourse about translation that is dualistic, polarized, either/or, right/wrong. A metonymical approach, on the other hand, or the type of approach Tymoczko has herself adopted in this book, moves away from the study of translation as a process of substitution, viewing it instead as work on the contextures, contiguities and connections of language, form and culture. It investigates translation's power of hybridity, its partiality, and its partisanship. This examination of translation from a postcolonial perspective provides a powerful, well-documented, well-argued, and readable text. Tymoczko's eye for detail, her immense knowledge of the intricacies of early Irish epics, and her ability to render this material interesting and valid for contemporary translation studies as a discipline is a huge achievement. Her concluding sentence that "[translation] is a matter of power" has been amply demonstrated by the ten preceding chapters.

Reviewer's Profile: Luise von Flotow teaches translation studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Her publications on gender issues in translation include *Translation and Gender: Translating in the "Era of Feminism"* (St. Jerome Publishing and University of Ottawa Press, 1997). Currently, Flotow focuses on ideological questions in translation and has edited the Winter 2001 issue of *TTR: Traduction Terminologie Redaction* on the same topic and she is coeditor, with Dan Russell and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, of a collected volume, *The Politics of Translation in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (University of Ottawa Press and the Arizona State University Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001). Her work in translation most recently includes *Life is a Caravanserai Has Two Doors I Came In One I Went Out The Other* (Middlesex University Press, 2000), Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* and *Doubly Suspect* (Guernica, 2000), Madeleine Monette's *Double suspect*. E-mail: <[vonfloto@uottawa.ca](mailto:vonfloto@uottawa.ca)> and <[vonfloto@hotmail.com](mailto:vonfloto@hotmail.com)>.