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Literature in Translation: Teaching Issues and Reading Practices
Edited by Carol Maier and Françoise Massardier-Kenney
Literature in Translation

Teaching Issues and Reading Practices

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Carol Maier

and

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To Greg Shreve, for his unwavering support of so many in translation studies.
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Introduction

Carol Maier and Françoise Massardier-Kenney

The last several decades have seen college and university students across the United States reading a wide variety of literary works from around the world, as literature in English translation has made its way onto the reading lists of courses in such disciplines and interdisciplines as anthropology, creative writing, ethnic studies, gender studies, philosophy, world literature, and sociology. On the one hand, this is cause for rejoicing. Students in this mostly monolingual society, which often forgets its own plurilingual origins and development, are still not learning foreign languages in sufficient numbers; but through translation, they are at least becoming acquainted with the multilingual world in which they live and in which they will work. Moreover, many world literature courses have expanded their reach. Starting from a conception of world literature as the teaching of “great books” culled from the literary canon of Europe and America, world literature is slowly becoming what David Damrosch has referred to as “a mode of reading” (281) that will allow students to engage with worlds that are beyond their own time and place. This expansion, which enables readers to become aware of other cultures and to connect them with their own, cannot but lead to an appreciation of “linguistic diversity and alterity” (Pizer 7).

However, the positive impact of reading books from other countries is not always maximized, because literature in English translation is often taught as if it had been originally written in English. This means that students may not be familiarized with the context in which that literature was produced and thus not made aware of the cultural, linguistic, and literary effects that translation involves. Although students may read foreign works, they submit them to their own cultural norms. If, as Roland Greene has suggested, we must “learn ‘to live with translation strategically,’” it is crucial that instructors and students...
understand both the context of the original work and the principal issues of literary translation (Feal 5). Without such an understanding, students read translated material, but they do not read in translation, and the benefits of intercultural communication may be jeopardized. It is not enough for books from other languages and countries to be available in translation; the positive contact that literature in translation can offer must be fully exploited if readers are not, in the words of William Deresiewicz, to impose their own image on the world (23).

Here a true challenge arises for an instructor. All too frequently, books in translation contain no introductory information about the mediation that translation invariably implies or about the stakes involved in the transfer of another culture into English. Nor can one count on finding suggestions for further reading about the author or the culture of the source text. Instructors are often left on their own; lacking the appropriate pedagogical tools, they may find themselves unable to provide information about either the original work or about translation itself. They may also feel uneasy about teaching material for which they lack adequate preparation; in fact, they may believe that it is neither professional nor ethical to do so (see Arrojo, Rose, and Maier). Consequently, they may restrict themselves to teaching well-known works in translation with which they are already familiar, or work originally written in English, when available (as in the case of literature from Africa or India).

The purpose of Literature in Translation: Teaching Issues and Reading Practices is to address this pedagogical lack, which is seldom addressed in discussions about comparative literature, world literature, or translation pedagogy. The isolated treatments of this subject that do exist are found in collections of essays (Dingwaney and Maier; Venuti, “Teaching in Translation”; White), journals (Maier, “Teaching Monolingual Students”), book chapters (Venuti, “The Pedagogy of Translation”), or essays about teaching specific works (Maier, “Teaching the Literature”). In addition, most current instruction-related research in the area of translation is devoted to translator training. (See, for example, Sonia Colina’s Translation Teaching: From Research to the Classroom). Our volume is not intended for instructors who train translators but for both undergraduate and graduate instructors across the curriculum who use in their classrooms literary material that has been translated into English. It is our hope that this collection of essays will provide a substantial introduction to the varied and complex issues involved in reading and teaching a work in translation. We have chosen contributors
who reflect the wide range of scholars, practicing translators, and translation theorists currently working in the field; all of them are actively engaged in translation and have experience teaching literature in translation. They were asked to draw upon examples of both well-known works currently taught in English translations and works that, although available in translation, are rarely taught in American classrooms. In addition, contributors were each assigned a particular topic and were asked to assist instructors in reading and presenting translations as translations by providing them with background information, sources, and practical suggestions (methodology).

The chapters in part 1, “General Principles,” introduce general guiding principles for instructors who teach texts in translation and should be considered as a whole. In “Choosing and Introducing a Translation,” Carol Maier offers recommendations for assessing translations and selecting a version or versions that can be used confidently in the classroom. She also suggests resources that teachers and students can use to evaluate translations. Her discussion is followed by Françoise Massardier-Kenney’s discussion of the four hierarchical relations that have shaped discussions of translation throughout history. As Massardier-Kenney explains, readers of translations do not have to be well-versed in translation scholarship to be informed readers; but their responses to translations are enhanced if they are familiar with the major theoretical issues that inform the production and evaluation of literary translations. She refers to select essays that are written in a way that makes them accessible to both instructors and students.

The two opening chapters are followed by Isabel Garayta’s “‘Toto, I’ve a Feeling We Aren’t in Kansas Anymore’: Reading and Presenting Texts in Translation from ‘Familiar’ Cultures.” One of the major issues in teaching texts in translation is presenting the cultural, historical, and literary conditions that give a work a specific place in the literary landscape of the country in which it originates. Reading in translation without having an awareness of those foreign conditions can give rise to the rejection of a work or to the misleading assumption that one has understood it fully. This chapter outlines specific strategies for identifying and presenting unfamiliar contexts of cultures with which American readers may assume they are familiar. Yunte Huang’s essay deals with the same issues as those Garayta addresses, but within the context of more distant cultures and the specific problems they may present to a student. Huang focuses on Chinese concepts of self, time, and the relation of subject to object that differ considerably from their
counterparts in Western culture. Like the preceding chapter, this one offers strategies and suggestions for research and teaching. It includes a bibliography of resources for analyzing major linguistic and cultural differences between pertinent language pairs.

Another informative way to explore the act of translation is to look at translators themselves, both living translators and fictional representations. In this context, Rosemary Arrojo turns to works of fiction ranging from Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” to the recent novels of Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar in the mid-1990s and Portuguese author José Saramago. She examines the subversive nature of translation and its undermining of traditional beliefs in the stability of meaning, in order to explore the role of the translator as it relates to some of the key issues of translation theory and practice. In particular, she endeavors to make more explicit the apprehension and distrust that translation often seems to trigger. By using such texts in the classroom, instructors can prompt students to consider and discuss translation from a critical perspective and encourage them to reflect on the relation between originals and their interpretations, and between authors and interpreters. Sergio Waisman, on the other hand, is a living translator who works from his personal experience as a translator from Spanish to discuss the presence of the translator in the text. Showing readers how they can detect such a presence, Waisman discusses the mediation of the translator and questions the notion of fidelity that many critics take for granted.

Ronald Christ’s essay, “Translation Transvalued,” which closes part 1 of our volume, provides a rarely seen view of the material context surrounding publication of translations in the United States. Christ, a publisher, editor, and translator, helps instructors understand the commercial concerns that bear heavily upon the publication of translated material by candidly discussing such issues as the market for literary translations in the United States, the status of translators and translation, and the hierarchies that exist between languages.

Part 2, “Issues and Contexts,” presents a series of essays that examine the production of works in several literary traditions, with a focus on three major themes—identity and relationships, power struggles, and beliefs and values—that are particularly relevant to specific geographical areas or linguistic and cultural communities. This grouping around different sets of issues and a simultaneous emphasis on different geographical areas work together to foreground the discomfort that can result from reading in translation—in this case, the discomfort that might be caused by the unsettling of familiar
categories and the consequent need to assume altered points of view. For instance, our definition of “region” includes various geographical points of view, ranging from one relatively small area with a single dominant linguistic and literary system (Japan or Israel), to large areas that exceed the borders of individual countries but are unified by the dominance of one or two languages (Latin America), to areas with multiple cultures (Eastern Europe), to whole continents (Africa). These diverse visions stimulate the complex process of reading in translation: readers are encouraged to ask what the geographical grids they use to configure other languages and cultures reveal about their own postures.

The grouping of essays in part 2 also foregrounds the range of perspectives suggested by multilingualism (South Asia, Africa) and monolingualism, echoing the discussions in part 1 about the integral relation between translation practices and the uneven positions of languages and literatures in the “World Republic of Letters.” For instance, using literary texts as anthropological, rather than literary, data means one thing in the context of Latin America, which has reached a position of power since the triumph of magical realism; it means quite another in the context of Africa, a continent not yet constituted as a central force in the literary field.

The essays in part 2, whether they address translation practices in specific national contexts or translating difficulties, benefit from being read side by side with (or against) the more general essays in part 1, rather than in isolation. Similarly, an issue discussed in the context of one language may be usefully applied to another, such as the region with which the reader is most familiar. In the first cluster of chapters, the authors use the issues of identity and relationships to consider texts from three different contexts: Asia, Latin America, and Scandinavia. Tomoko Aoyama and Judy Wakabayashi explore the connections between self, identity, and language, and they discuss the challenges that the Japanese concepts of the self and interactions present to translators into Western languages, and indirectly to readers of the English versions. Their examples range from a traditional novel like The Tale of Genji to the works of the major modern writer Sōseki. Similarly, Michelle Yeh’s consideration of Chinese traditions shows how translation and pluralist readings (i.e., use of multiple translations) can be used to gain insight into Chinese cultural practices. Her comparative readings range from the Book of Songs to the great Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber, providing essential contexts for a tradition little known in the West.
In her essay, Kathleen Ross addresses these same themes of identity and relationships through a consideration of Latin American texts from three genres—novel, poetry, and the testimonio—drawing on examples from Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda, and Rigoberta Menchú, as well as less-known contemporary authors. These examples both confirm national myths about national identity and reflect cultural differences throughout Latin America. She provides a nuanced discussion of identity from both dominant and marginal perspectives, and her methodology, which considers literary works in terms of their cultural content, can be usefully applied by instructors of other translated works. Scandinavia, the last region included in this section, is often less studied than others in the West, but it is an integral part of the Western tradition. Niels Ingwerson and his colleagues discuss the major linguistic, literary, and cultural features of Nordic languages through detailed analysis of key concepts in works ranging from the Finnish Kalevala to those by such well-known authors as Strindberg, Ibsen, Dinesen, and Andersen.

The next cluster of essays focuses on power struggles. In her examination of power struggles in South Asia, Christi Merrill encourages instructors to reconsider Western assumptions about literature and translation. She convincingly argues that the multilingual nature of South Asian countries has led to a “translating consciousness” that values translated works as able “to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original.” She shows that “such an approach promotes a flexible heterogeneity that might serve as a model for challenging us to rethink the ways we demarcate difference in the rhetoric of nationalist-minded or even globalized identitarian politics.”

This issue of power struggles is also addressed by Paul Bandia, in the different context of the African continent. Bandia discusses the key role of translation in shaping the literature of many African countries and examines translation practices in representing African sociocultural realities and worldviews. He describes the complex situation of African literature and calls for reading and teaching strategies that bring to light “both the writing-as-translation strategies used by creative writers and the interlingual translation processes involved in the translating of intercultural writing from non-Western societies.” Bandia’s focus on specifically literary questions and on European languages in Africa indirectly forces us to confront the legacy of colonialism in our speaking of “Africa.” This discussion of translation in Africa is paralleled by Kelly Washbourne’s analysis of Latin American “transnational writers.” Washbourne also describes the effects of transla-
tion on the hierarchical relations that exist between languages—in this case, between Spanish and English. He focuses his discussion of these linguistic power struggles on two contemporary generations of Latin American writers (the “McOndo” and “Crack” groups) who rebel against their magical realist forebears and embrace North American values.

The essays in the last section of this volume feature translation issues as seen through the prism of beliefs and values, first in the context of Eastern Europe and second in the Middle East (both in Arabic-speaking countries and in Israel). Brian Baer shows the West’s tendency to perceive Eastern Europe as the less-developed other, and he analyzes how the choices of texts translated and the approaches chosen to translate these texts have contributed to the formation of a problematic view of this complex configuration of cultures. He traces the different translation moments that have shaped our ideas about “Eastern Europe” and forces readers to reconsider their homogenizing images of these literatures.

Allen Hibbard also outlines the tendencies that have marked translation, here in the case of Arabic. He focuses in particular on exoticization and domestication, and he discusses the specific linguistic and cultural differences that make translating from Arabic a particular challenge to Westerners. His analysis of linguistic characteristics such as cumulative patterns, diglossic styles, and code-mixing, as well as his recommendations for approaches and readings, provide the reader with an entry into a literature that embodies some of the tensions that exist between the West and the Arab world. Current cultural and political conflicts are less present in Chana Bloch’s discussion of the translation issues presented by Hebrew literature, but the centrality of the Bible to the Western canon makes the discussion of the impact of its translation essential reading. Bloch shows how intertextuality and the multiplicity of meanings caused by Hebrew’s particular lexical root formation has had a significant impact on the Bible, which has been disseminated through translation. She then turns to the work of contemporary Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, explaining that what characterizes his work is precisely an intertextuality that resists translation and presents challenges to translators.

In short, then, through a consideration of general translation principles as well as an attention to specific but complex regional, cultural, and linguistic patterns, the editors of this volume and their contributors hope to provide instructors with a range of resources that will both encourage and enable them to create a hospitable space for the foreign in their various classes.
Works Cited


PART ONE

General Principles
Choosing and Introducing a Translation

Carol Maier

We sleep in language, if language does not come to wake us with its strangeness.
Robert Kelly, “On Translation"

A promise of exposure to the unfamiliar—and the perception of its allure! What better way to preface an essay about choosing a translation? The question is not merely rhetorical, because writing this chapter presented a challenge that can be summed up nicely as the absence of “a consensus among translators, readers, and critics as to what a translation should do” (Stanton 620). At the same time, however, as a reader of two translations of the same poem will no doubt sense instinctively, some translations are better than others. Consequently, the goal of this essay, despite the lack of established, reliable guidelines, is to provide a set of recommendations that will enable an instructor to select an appropriate translation for a given course and to introduce it to a class. There may not be much help available in the way of specific criteria, but the task of choosing a translation (whether there is one option or many) offers the opportunity to think about both literature and language from an altered—or what Robert Kelly might call awakened—perspective. The following recommendations should encourage an instructor to entertain the unfamiliar and make informed choices.

Be aware of expectations. Even before beginning to read the available versions of a particular text, it is important to review one’s thoughts about translation. Instructors who teach literary works, be they canonical or not, often find themselves faced with a variety of options. Availability, price, and the extent of ancillary information are no doubt considered automatically;
and those are important considerations. It is also important, however, for instructors—both as readers and as scholars—to be aware of their own assumptions about translation and their criteria for evaluating a work in translation. Those assumptions and requirements are often unacknowledged, but they affect the way a reader approaches literature in translation. This is not to suggest that one’s preferences be set aside, but it is to suggest that they be held in abeyance as options are reviewed.

For instance, an instructor might be tempted to forgo a reading of Keith Waldrop’s prose translation of *The Flowers of Evil* because of a conviction shared with many who, like Walter Martin, another of Baudelaire’s translators, find the preservation of “rhymes and regular strophes” essential in the translation of poetry (441). But not to read Waldrop’s versions because of his use of the verset (“a measured prose that allows the sentence to dominate . . . checked by a sense of line that restricts it” [xxiv]) would deprive that instructor of the opportunity to engage with Baudelaire in the words of an accomplished contemporary poet and translator. Whether or not instructors decide to use Waldrop’s versions or other prose versions because they cannot be considered poetry per se, they will find their acquaintance with Baudelaire enriched by a reading of those versions. After all, readers guided solely by their expectations and preferences jeopardize their chances of experiencing the risky readings that can put one unexpectedly in touch with language used in unanticipated ways. Again using Waldrop’s *Flowers* as an example, Lucas Klein has suggested that, while the lines are indeed not lines of poetry, the English “constantly points to the forms of the original” (34).

*Read well.* In other words, read, or at least consult, as many versions of the original as possible, and read with awareness that the work being read is a work in translation. The first of those suggestions is a question of research, persistence, and the openness called for above. As Nicholas Lezard comments in a review of Robin Kirkpatrick’s translation of Dante’s *Inferno*, even if one has read multiple versions of a work, it is useful to read yet another: “You could entomb yourself . . . with the huge number of available translations, [but] you should still have a look at this [new] one” (18). The second suggestion involves reading with an eye to translation, to the ways in which translations, no matter how imperceptible the translator’s work, will bear signs that they were written in a language other than English. Here, fortunately, it is possible to point to a reliable guide, two in fact: David Damrosch’s wide-ranging discussion in *How to Read World Literature* of “the fascinating problems raised when
we read in translation” (4) and Lawrence Venuti’s “How to Read a Translation,” which offers five “rules” for reading translations. Advising readers to (1) attend to the formal features of a work rather than read primarily for the meaning, Venuti also urges them (2) to accept unfamiliar usage, such as terms and forms of address; (3) to recognize and investigate, whenever possible, the cultural milieu of the original; (4) to read any accompanying material provided by the translator, as a way of learning not only about the original but also about the approach that guided the translator; and (5) to bear in mind that all literary works, no matter how singular, belong to a complex web of traditions and that in order to understand those traditions it is necessary to read more than one translation. Venuti’s rules have been summarized here very briefly, but both his essay and Damrosch’s bear reading in full; they are replete with commentary and examples that will sensitize one to the issues that translation involves and will lead to a reading both more pleasurable and more knowledgeable.²

Consider the purpose. Given that multiple translations exist for many canonical works, an instructor will need to bear in mind the purpose and context for the work’s inclusion in a course. While the instructor of a class in world literature, for example, might prefer Edith Grossman’s recent translation of *Don Quixote*, the instructor of a course in the history of the European novel or the novel of the eighteenth century might choose Tobias Smolett’s version, made in 1755. Similarly, for a course focused exclusively on poetry, an instructor might make a point of using translations of Pablo Neruda’s work by North American poets such as Robert Bly or Nathaniel Tarn, who were his close contemporaries. Different considerations, however, might lead an instructor to choose John Felstiner’s versions in *Translating Neruda* or Steven Kessler’s versions in Barry Brukoff’s *Machu Picchu*.

For drama courses, purpose, audience, and venue assume particular importance. Absent gross errors of meaning, as Michael Ewans has explained, the crucial requirement here is that a translation be “actable—that it be composed of words which actors can easily speak” (123). Ewans’s comments are based on his work with Greek tragedy, but they apply to work with drama in general. Of course, the extent to which “actability” (as opposed, for example, to a desire for annotations or a definite preference for rhyme and meter) is a factor in an instructor’s selection and the context in which performance is to be considered will be determinant. One thinks of the contrasts between recent translations of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* by David
Grene and Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Tony Harrison, Ted Hughes, and Alan Shapiro and Peter Burian, to cite just one example of translations that would be acceptable in some situations but not in others.

*Remember that no translation occurs in a vacuum.* All translations have histories; they are all, to use Jerome McGann’s term, “social acts” or “specific deeds of critical reflection made in a concert of related moves and frames of reference . . . that constitute the present as an interpreted inheritance from a past that has been long fashioned by other interpreting agents” (137). As such, all translations are “coded and scored with human activity” (136), and in order to make an informed choice of one rather than another, an instructor will want to know as much as possible about the circumstances in which that activity took place. This is true even if, like McGann, one considers translation not “scholarly” but “performative” interpretation—that is, forms of interpretation such as translation and parody that involve the “direct commentary” described by Dante Gabriel Rosetti, in which many questions of interpretation are addressed and resolved “without discussion” (from the preface to Rosetti’s *Early Italian Poets*, qtd. in McGann 130). For, like the discussion-laden scholarly interpretations discussed by McGann, translations also have authors: the translators whose work both reflects and responds to the conventions of the time in which they work. In addition, like scholarly interpreters, translators often deal with texts that have long histories of editions and variants that make them less than definitive; and like scholarly interpreters (perhaps even more so), translators too negotiate the publication of their work with editors, publishers, and sometimes even authors.

Recent work in translation studies (carried out by scholarly interpreters who scrutinize translators’ performative interpretations) has begun to document the coding and scoring that marks translations and to prove the points of interpretation on which translators have not often commented. In this context, instructors will benefit from reading, for example, Alberto Mira’s fictitious dialogue between a translator and an editor about the translator’s authority, or Isabelle Vanderschelden’s essay on retranslation, or Yopie Prins’s discussion of translations of Sappho’s poetry in Victorian England, or Jean-Marc Gouvanic’s use of Pierre Bourdieu’s work to explore the contributions of three twentieth-century French translators. Information about the translators and the situations in which translations were produced is often difficult, if not impossible, to locate, particularly for noncanonical texts. However, instructors will want to read any additional translations by
the translators whose work they consider and to read whatever they can find about those translators themselves. (Gregory Rabassa’s *If This Be Treason*, Donald Keene’s *On Familiar Terms*, and Denys Johnson-Davies’s *Memories in Translation*, for example, contain information about the work of those translators from Spanish and Portuguese, Greek, and Arabic, respectively.)

Instructors will also want to read any comments made by the translators and pay close attention to the edition(s) they used, the people whom they consulted, and the conditions of publication. Translators’ comments are often quite substantive, even though they can also serve as self-justifications, and they can shed light on the ways in which one translation differs from another. For example, Tom Lathrop’s lengthy introduction to his translation of *Don Quixote* will be of interest to instructors who work with Cervantes’s novel, no matter which translation they select. The same could be said with respect to William Gass’s *Reading Rilke* if one is teaching the *Duino Elegies* or E. H. and A. M. Blackmore’s introduction to their volume if one is teaching Victor Hugo’s poetry.

Consult reviews, review essays, and criticism. Reviewers of literary works in translation are notorious for either neglecting to note that the work was not originally written in English or for describing a translation or its translator with a single adjective. What is more, reviewers who explicitly state their evaluative criteria are the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, however, reviews can be very helpful, because they often contain information about the original work or its author; about the inclusion (or lack) of commentary, notes, or glossary; or about the reception of other English-language translations of works by a book’s author. This is particularly true if a reviewer also explains or at least alludes to the criteria that served as a basis for judgment. For example, the comment with which Thomas F. Dillingham closes his review of Waldrop’s *Flowers* makes clear a preference that has underlain his discussion, despite his praise for passages in which he finds “strength and beauty” (20): “this reader longs for the effort to recreate the prosodic energy as well as the thought of the great poet” (20). William Logan’s comment that Christopher Logue “has the significant advantage, for a radical translator, of knowing no Greek” (178) is similarly telling, alerting the reader that for Logan, a thorough knowledge of the language of the original is not a requirement.

Fortunately, substantive, thoughtful reviews of translations are appearing with increasing regularity in a number of literary magazines and journals (although one could not go so far as to consider it a trend). This is especially
true in the case of retranslations, which often give rise to relatively long reviews or review essays, affording a reviewer the space necessary not only to describe a translation but also to evaluate it, frequently in the context of previous versions. Almost invariably, and no matter how opinionated the reviewer, these reviews will prove useful to an instructor. For example, instructors of *Anna Karenina* have the advantage of the reviews published when the latest translation of the novel appeared (that of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, in 2001) in addition to Liza Knapp’s discussion of all the versions available, as well as extensive commentary in magazines and newspapers about Tolstoy in translation (for instance, David Remnick’s “The Translator Wars”).

Journals in translation studies also publish reviews, and those reviews usually include a discussion of the issues involved in evaluation itself, in addition to comments about the title or titles under review. Anthony Pym, in his discussion of two translations of *Don Quixote* (those of Tobias Smollett and Edith Grossman), for example, refers to many other translations and offers an overview of Cervantes translations across the centuries. Even when translation scholars focus on a single translation, their reviews tend to place the work in a cultural and historical context, in addition to (or even instead of) comparing the translation and the original or the translation and other translations of the same work. A good example here is Maria Tymoczko’s essay on the variety of ways that she would evaluate Seamus Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray* (*Buile Suibhne*).

*Choose one, use many (if not all).* Arguably (as most things are when one discusses value and quality in literary translation), this is the most important of the recommendations. As Jorge Luis Borges has explained eloquently (in the words of translator Eliot Weinberger), “the concept of the ‘definitive’ text corresponds only to religion or exhaustion” (69). Consequently, to limit oneself to one version when more than one version is available is to deprive oneself (or one’s students) of the pleasure of awakening to the strangeness of language that is often revealed strikingly by variations, even small ones, among multiple versions of a given text. Asking students to purchase more than one version would in most cases be inappropriate, but instructors can explain their reasons for choosing the translation they did and provide students with information about or access to additional versions; they can also use those versions in class. Even if neither the instructor nor the students can read the original, variations such as a small difference in titles can give rise to a provocative discussion. Think, for example, of Gabriela Mistral’s “La
extranjera” as “The Foreigner” (Doris Dana, Ursula K. Le Guin), “The Alien” (Kate Flores), and “The Stranger” (Langston Hughes), or of Victor Hugo’s “Mes deux filles” as “My Two Daughters” (Blackmore) and “My Two Girls” (Brooks Haxton). In both cases, an instructor would certainly want students to read each version. No choice should be considered final, however. Instructors need to stay alert to new translations, new editions of existing translations, and translations of work by authors of whom we have yet to learn.

Present provocatively. A student’s first step toward a knowledgeable reading of a work in translation is “an overt recognition” that translation has occurred, as Isabel Gayata explains in her essay in this volume. The importance of this recognition cannot be overemphasized, and once a translation is chosen, an instructor’s first task is to prompt it. To a large extent, this involves setting the students on the path the instructor followed in selecting the translated work they are reading. Consequently, even before students are asked to read the text, they should be encouraged to consider their expectations of both a translated work in general and of this translated work in particular. One of the best ways to initiate such a consideration is to ask students to reflect on any previous experiences they might have had with translations and translated literature. For example, have they done any translation or interpreting themselves? Have they read translations before? Do they have preconceived notions about the role that translation might play in the transmission of a work, perhaps by compromising its credibility? What might they know about the author, the author’s language and culture, or the period in which the original work was written, and how might that knowledge—or its lack—affect their responsiveness to the work?4

With respect to the work itself, preliminary questions for discussion can focus on the translator’s status in the literary market as evidenced by the publisher’s presentation of the translation and the degree of prominence granted to the translator. Does the translator’s name appear on the cover, for instance, and does the book’s cover copy include a mention of translation? Does the publisher hold the copyright for the translation instead of the translator? Until quite recently this was routinely the case, and in some quarters it still is, even in a large publishing house like Farrar, Straus and Giroux, which holds the copyright for Krishna Winston’s translation of Peter Handke’s *Crossing the Sierra de Gredos*. When the translator does hold the copyright, as Sarah Adams does for her translation of Faïza Guène’s *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, the ramifications of a comment such as the following can be discussed: “This
translation is an edited version of Sarah Adams’s translation.” If there is an introduction, was it written by the translator, or by someone else, such as a scholar or English-language author whose attention and praise the publisher (and perhaps the author and translator as well) hope will lend credibility to the work? Each of these questions will encourage students to read with translation in mind and will lead to further attentiveness to the presence of translation—or its apparent absence.

Once the translation has been presented as a translation, students can be asked to note the use of foreign words, names, and references as they read, and to consider whether such usages contribute to or detract from the reader’s understanding of the text. A similar question can be asked if there are translator’s notes or a glossary. If there is a translator’s preface or afterword, students can consider whether the translator seems to have interpreted the work appropriately and to have presented his or her own work reliably. Further discussions will probe the role of translation further, but those discussions will be most fruitful if translation has been in the minds of the both the instructor and the students from the very start.

NOTES

1. This is not to say that all versions are equally accomplished. On the contrary, as indicated at the beginning of this essay, some translations are superior to others. Disparate versions, however, are often likely to result from divergent readings rather than from inaccuracy, and readings in translation will be enriched by exposure to those plural readings. It is also worth bearing in mind here Jeffrey R. Di Leo’s comment that “there is just as much to say about bad books as there is to say about good ones” (3) and R. M. Berry’s admission that “no book has ever made a difference to me that someone whose judgment I respected didn’t find execrable” (3).

2. For an extended discussion of reading and evaluating translations, see Antoine Berman, Toward a Translation Criticism: John Dunne (trans. Françoise Massardier-Kenney; Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009). The method of “productive criticism” that Berman proposes requires a knowledge of the original text, but his comments about the different forms of translation analysis, his detailed examples, and his insistence that the reading of translations is a skill in itself will enrich the understanding of any teacher.

3. One thinks, for example, of the New York Review of Books or the Times Literary Supplement, but thoughtful reviews of translations are also found in such publications as the American Book Review, Bloomsbury Review, Bookforum, Rain Taxi, and numerous others.
4. For further reading about presenting literary works in translation, see Damrosch, Lefevere, Maier, and Venuti (“The Pedagogy of Literature” and “Teaching in Translation”).

WORKS CITED


