

Book Review

Book Review of *Translation as Metaphor*

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Book Title: *Translation as Metaphor*

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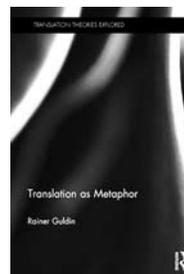
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Translation is commonly understood as the process of putting the words of one language into those of another. Translation studies, similarly, is thought of as the discipline that teaches students how to become better translators. Such views on translation and translation studies are not necessarily wrong, but they are far too restrictive and simplistic, according to Rainer Guldin in his ambitious new work *Translation as Metaphor*.

Similar claims have been made before, of course. As Guldin himself informs us, already in 1990 Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere had argued that it was high time for translation studies to take a “cultural turn.” They noted

that translation has always played an important role in the shaping of culture, and saw no reason why translation studies should not include cultural studies and comparative literature under its purview (pp. 74-75).

Guldin takes these views much further, and in a radically new direction. Consider, for example, his discussion of psychoanalysis and the interpretation of dreams, neither of which is usually associated with translation studies. A dream, writes Guldin, is strange and alien, its meaning elusive and obscure; as such, it is rather similar to a foreign language. And just as we need a translator to translate a foreign language for us, so, too, do we need a trained analyst to tell us the meaning of our dreams (pp. 78-82).

Thus Guldin allows us to see an underlying similarity between psychoanalysis and translation studies, two domains not normally thought of as having much to do with one another, and in the process he sheds light on both of them. It is the “metaphor of translation,” according to Guldin, which enables us to draw these connections (p. 81).

Many other disciplines are linked to translation studies in a similar manner. In Chapter Four, Guldin looks at how translation can help us make sense of not only psychoanalysis (4.3), but also anthropology and ethnography (4.4), postcolonial theory (4.5), and history and literature (4.6). In a similar vein, Chapter Five, the final chapter, examines how translation relates to sociology (5.1), media and communication theory (5.2), translational medicine (5.3), molecular genetics (5.4), and physics (5.5).

It might be said that in linking so many disparate fields to translation studies, Guldin is in effect obliterating their differences. Indeed, it would not be difficult to accuse him of reductionism; but to do so would be to misunderstand his intentions, for what he is really after, unless I am mistaken, is an overarching explanation of the process of exchange, of give-and-take, that we find in just about every aspect of our lives.

Whenever we have two separate systems, and something has been transferred from one of these systems to the other, then a translation of sorts has taken place, Guldin seems to be saying (p. 19). The migration of words, ideas, and cultures, across the centuries and from one continent to another, is translation. A review article is also a kind of translation, according to this view.

That which is translated does not even have to be man-made. At the molecular level, we are told, living organisms “interpret” genetic information and “convert” this information into proteins; our understanding of how this “translation” process operates is “the central dogma of biology,” according to Francis Crick, a co-discoverer of the structure of the DNA (p. 108). And thus “translation is not only the governing principle for culture at large, but also the very basis of life on earth” (p. 118).

This is obviously a very expansive view of translation. It is also a rather liberating one. Too often in translation studies our attention is focused narrowly on detailed comparisons between a source text and its translations. Who knows what we will find, Guldin is saying, if we turn our attention instead to the process of “connection, exchange, transfer and transformation” (p. 1) that we see in the world all around us.

His work is not without its problems. Its major fault, in my view, is that it contains far too much summary of the works of others. A summary, almost by definition, is a watered-down version of another work; it is also a distillation, an abstract, which by its very nature is dense and in need of unraveling and further explication. The problem with Guldin’s work is that too often it consists of one summary after another.

Here is an extreme example of Guldin’s method. From his list of references, we see that one of the major sources he consulted for his section on molecular genetics was Eberhard Passarge’s *Color Atlas of Genetics*, a work that is more than 500 pages long and, judging by its title, full of colorful illustrations

of cells, double helices, and other such things.

There are no colorful photos in Guldin's discussion of molecular genetics. What we find instead, in the space of three short pages (pp. 108-110), is a bewildering variety of technical terms, one after another: replication and transcription, DNA and RNA, nucleotides, error-checking mechanisms, amino acid chains, multi-subunit structures, ribosomes, anticodons, tRNA and mRNA, to name just a few. What has happened is that Guldin has taken a massive work on an extremely complex subject, and reduced it to a few paragraphs. It all makes perfect sense, as long as one has already taken a college-level course in molecular biology.

It was stated earlier that *Translation as Metaphor* contains a total of five chapters. Having looked briefly at the last two, let us turn our attention now to the first three.

In Chapter One, Guldin considers some of the most prominent theories of metaphor that have been offered in the course of western history. He begins his survey with Aristotle (1.1), whose observations on metaphor are so critical to all subsequent discussions on the subject. He then summarizes the views of I. A. Richards (1.3), Max Black (1.4), and Lakoff and Johnson (1.7), all of whom made critical advances in our understanding of metaphor.

The modern study of metaphor, from which Guldin draws many of his most important insights, is quite complicated, and he is right to present all this background information in the first chapter. As someone who has spent a considerable amount of time struggling to understand metaphors, I found his discussion to be clear and at times even enlightening.

At the same time, however, I could not help but wonder if the discussion would be intelligible to readers who have not had any previous exposure to metaphors. My feeling is that such readers will find the discussion hard to follow; even if they can understand it, it is all second-hand information unlikely

to make much of a lasting impression. Those who are truly interested in the subject of metaphors would benefit far more by turning directly to the primary sources cited by Guldin, most of which are readily available at university libraries. An even better plan, perhaps, would be to read the primary sources along with Guldin's analysis.

Whenever we discuss translation, Guldin writes, we almost always have to resort to metaphors; thus we often say that a translated work is a bridge between two cultures; or a plant that has been grafted onto another one, or transplanted into foreign soil; or a new item of clothing that one has put on; or a faithful lover, or an unfaithful one, as the case may be; and so on (pp. 24-28).

These and other metaphors used to describe translation are gathered together by Guldin in Chapter Two. He puts them into five main categories (art/craft, space, nature/body, power, and gender metaphors), and shows the strengths and weaknesses of each one. The result is an extremely valuable compendium, sure to be of use to all those who want to be more aware of what we talk about when we talk about translation, to paraphrase Raymond Carver.

Chapter Three, as Guldin helpfully informs us (p. 2), is a transition, between the first half of the work, which focuses on metaphors in general and metaphors used to describe translation, and the second half, which considers how translation has been used as a metaphor to describe other fields of inquiry. In this chapter, which is quite enjoyable and full of good insights, Guldin discusses the spatial metaphor at some length, the spatial metaphor being the most pervasive and important of the five types of translation metaphors.

Such, then, is an overview of *Translation as Metaphor*. At just 132 pages, it is a short and rather slender book; but the reader should not be misled by its length into thinking that it is a quick and easy read. It has the common fault of many works of a highly theoretical nature: it can be abstract and hard to follow,

and it makes numerous references to other theoretical works that most readers have never heard of, let alone read.

On the positive side, it contains many good insights. Guldin is respectful of his readers and takes great pains to make his meaning clear. He has taken the views of non-western cultures into consideration. He is also fair and perceptive. Those with the patience and fortitude to read the work through are likely to find that they have acquired a new and enlarged view on the nature and importance of translation.