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Book Review

What Is Cultural Translation?

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Sarah Maitland (2017). *What Is Cultural Translation?* London: Bloomsbury, 177 pp. £24.99 (paperback), £90.00 (cloth). ISBN 9781472526861.

Few concepts in translation studies in recent years have been as controversial as cultural translation. It is a metaphor whose appeal in a wide range of fields derives from its apparent flexibility. Whatever meaning it once had (and even that is in dispute), the term risks being emptied of it now, as scholars with conflicting interests and goals use it to mean whatever they need it to mean.

This observation is Sarah Maitland's starting point in *What Is Cultural Translation?*, a book in which she argues not only that it is possible to define the term in a substantive way, but also that it provides a lens through which we can come to see our interactions with others in a new, ethical light. She grounds her analysis, first, in the practice of translation in the conventional sense of interlinguistic reexpression, and second, in the hermeneutic theories of Paul Ricoeur and George Steiner.

For Maitland, cultural translation consists in a hermeneutic cycle of interpretation, distanciation, appropriation, transformation, and finally emancipation. With respect to the first stages, she says we must begin by moving past the red herring of authorial intention. On the one hand, in a face-to-face conversation we can know a person's intention—which for her is an aspect of psychology, a form of desire directed outward toward the world—because we can ask, "What do you mean?" On the other, when faced with a written text, we cannot. We are removed from the author in both time and space: the author's present is our past, and their surroundings are not ours. We have only the words the author has arranged in a certain order, but not the author themselves to explain that order.

In this way, an author's intention is lost to us, and *tant mieux*, as its inaccessibility frees us to interpret texts ourselves. The author chose words intended to evoke certain associations for listeners, which in turn would evoke others (and then still others...), in a chain of associations at once idiosyncratic (different listeners, having experienced different things, will arrive at their own interpretations) and intersubjective (at a minimum, some meanings must be shared or speakers would have no tools for communicating at all). But in *our* world, here and now, the chains of associations have evolved. The author's words move through them differently, opening a different world for us. As we shift our interpretive attention from the author's now-inaccessible intention to the text itself, we also shift the responsibility for interpretation from the author to ourselves as readers.

This shift takes a paradoxical form. By engaging the text on our terms, we incorporate it into our world. Of the possible worlds opened by the text, we choose one, closing the door on the others. This appropriation becomes the dialectical counterpart of the temporal and spatial distanciation that has put the author's intention out of reach. We are staking a claim and transforming the meaning the text makes: it can no longer make meaning the way the author intended and instead works through our intervention.

However, the potential for new, divergent readings remains, as other interpreters, for whom our reading is just one among others, can come along and open the text anew. Although our appropriation might appear as an act of aggression against the author (we are, after all, substituting our interpretation for theirs), our need to defend it

means, on the contrary, that it "is not so much a possession of the world around us as a *dispossession* of the certainty with which we might presume to understand" the world—or a text within it (p. 139).

The emancipatory potential of cultural translation resides in this paradoxical dispossession. Without the author's intention to appeal to, we must defend our interpretation on its own merits, a task we can accomplish effectively only if we distance ourselves from it to see it from the perspective of others. Our reading becomes a text in its own right, whose interpretation by others we cannot control, in the same way that the authors whose work we read cannot impose their meaning on us. In a field of competing interpretations, this second distanciation puts people in a position where they must examine their own ideological stance. It becomes a way to challenge oppressive ideologies. In this way, cultural translation bears an ethical charge: "To qualify as cultural translation a phenomenon of human expression in the social sphere must be shown to engage in a contemplative work of understanding addressed towards a particular substance, but it must also have as its primary objective nothing short of the transformation of human hearts and minds" (p. 53).

This is a very persuasive book and a genuine pleasure to read. Maitland moves handily between dense theory and examples drawn from contemporary popular culture (at one point, for example, quoting Bruce Springsteen and Jimmy Fallon), which illustrate the theoretical ideas. One contribution not to be overlooked is her redemptive reading of Steiner's *After Babel*, a foundational text in translation studies when it was published in 1975 but an object of considerable critique since then. She finds in it a value that has long been neglected. Indeed, throughout the book, she has provided scholars in translation studies—and other fields—a valuable set of tools for examining a promising, if vexing, metaphor.