

The Transfer, Carryover and Displacement of Canadian Literatures into German/y: a review of *Translating Canada. Charting the Institutions and Influences of Cultural Transfer: Canadian Writing in German/y*

Eds. Luise von Flotow and Reingard M. Nischik.

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When Catherine Porter chose the tasks of translation in the twenty-first century as the theme of her Presidential Forum at the 2009 MLA convention in Philadelphia, she challenged attendees “[t]o recognize the importance of translation in the modern world . . . to reflect on the number of different languages we human beings speak and on the need for transmitting knowledge across linguistic boundaries.” The term “translation” draws on the “[l]atin root *translatio* (transfer, carryover, displacement)” which, she suggests, conveys “translation’s basic function [namely] to move meanings from one context (often but by no means exclusively linguistic) to another.” In everyday usage, “translation” can refer to “such vital concepts as decoding, paraphras[ing], interpretation, and explanation” (Porter, letter, MLA listserve, 13 Nov. 2008).

Translating Canada considers the role that Canadian writing in translation performed within German culture between 1967 and 2000. The editors, Luise von Flotow and Reingard M. Nischik include translations into German from both French and English. Von Flotow and Nischik correctly value translation as “underlying and predating most other forms of cultural transfer, such as rewriting, adapting, anthologizing, staging, and even filmmaking” (1). Essay contributors “examine the motivations, processes, ‘translation effects,’ and responses” that have impacted the movement of Canadian fictional and non-fictional materials into Germany (1). The essays successfully chart the workings of government, media, and literary presses which have influenced cultural transfer.

The collection starts with von Flotow and Nischik’s introductory comments on the “deliberate activity” of translation itself, which according to them “means processing a text through the mind, emotions, and personal and public history of another intelligence, which is never neutral and always also subject to the vagaries of ideology, political pressure, funding problems, time constraints, and even indifference and neglect” (2). The editors ask four questions:

1. What kinds of materials are selected and “exported” by Canada?
2. Which materials are selected by German publishers?

3. How are these materials translated?
4. How are they received? (3)

Von Flotow's essay, "Telling Canada's 'Story' in German: Using Cultural Diplomacy to Achieve Soft Power," opens the collection by theorizing the place of literature in translation as a form of cultural diplomacy. By cultural diplomacy, von Flotow refers to generic forms of communication bearing influence within certain parameters of reception. The breadth of the essays which follow—written by scholars working in Austria, Canada, Germany, and Northern Ireland—embrace categories such as genre (for example, the short story), women's fiction (with special focus on second-wave feminism and Margaret Atwood), Native writing, Jewish writing, and literary and political theory. In addition, particular attention is paid to children's literature and theatre. As the contributors suggest, because translation in Germany is not government subsidized, texts which appear or are performed (as in the case of theatre) usually speak directly to consumer demand, thereby registering the interests, appetites and prevalent ideologies of German literary consumers. The collection persuasively shows that consumer interest is already somewhat shaped by the media, especially through literary reviews and the structuring of the books themselves—East German translations, for instance, provide endnotes and an afterword to guide readers' perception of the novel toward the values of the target culture.

The prevalence of Canadian writing in Germany since the 1980s is arguably a measure of the global ideological synchronicity of Canadian narrative themes and ideologies. Yet the translation of some works into what may seem unlikely contexts illustrates divergences as well. The fact that Germany was a divided country from 1949 to 1990, with the East following a socialist government and the West a democratic one, also resulted in distinct publishing and production policies. This resulted in simultaneous translations of Canadian works in East and West Germany, with significant effects.

Translation of the same Canadian text at roughly the same time by socialist and Western European publishers reveals both the usefulness and partiality of translation. For example, the comprehensive translation of Margaret Atwood's work affirms her importance to women's literature in Germany. Stefan Ferguson's essay, "Margaret Atwood in German/y: A Case Study" explores the double German translation(s) of *Surfacing* (1972) by the same translator, "yet featuring marked differences for the East and West German editions" (4). Ferguson concludes that an author's reception in a particular country is dependent on factors in her work acted upon by many limitations and norms of the receiving culture. These might include the production values of different editions (cover, paper quality, dimensions, and any other paratextual apparatus). The East German translation of *Surfacing* includes endnotes and an afterword, which provides an interpretation of the novel that conforms to East German culture, especially in its antipathy towards America. The use of

contextually specific terms is also taken up by Ferguson. The translation of the novel's mention of "late show sci-fi movies," for example, as "den letzten utopischen Monumentalfilmen" ("the last monumental utopian films"), carries its own set of cultural implications in East Germany and distinguishes its meaning from its West German counterpart, namely "Science-fiction-Spätfilmen" (Science fiction late films, my translation). This signals an understanding and perhaps even an approval of Western sci-fi movies.

Translating Canada includes revealingly close comparative readings, set within an analysis of broader issues concerning translation. International, interdisciplinary and multicultural, the book is consistently rich in interpretive insight. By moving texts from one location to another, translation stirs transcultural values. Themes bearing on the transfer of meanings across cultural spaces include the relationship between Leonard Cohen's pop star musical success and the wide translation of his work; the way Canadian works probing immigration and multicultural identity converge with post-Holocaust themes of remembrance and working through trauma in Germany; the attractiveness to German readers of Atwood's anti-American positions; renderings of the "noble savage" within Germany's national allegory, embracing past myths at the expense of reflections of contemporary First Nations' experience; the compelling debate over Michael Ignatieff's writings on human rights, nationalism, and war; and Charles Taylor's theses on multiculturalism. Of particular significance to the discussion of Canadian plays is the way their success is bound up with theatre production supported by Canadian federal government financial incentives. *Translating Canada* is a balanced, well documented book, which will interest readers specifically invested in German Studies. More widely, it will also appeal to those curious about the mechanisms of cultural transfer through literary translation.