

Fostering Literary Translators: A UK Perspective
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Introduction

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I must begin by offering my sincerest thanks to the Literature Translation Institute of Korea for inviting me to speak to you this morning and for sponsoring my visit to Korea. It has been a great pleasure getting to know LTI Korea colleagues through their visits to the UK over the last year – most recently at the 2015 International Literary Translation and Creative Writing Summer School which we hosted in Norwich and which featured an LTI-sponsored Korean translation workshop – so it is a great honour now to be able to get to know your country itself at first hand. I can only apologise for not being able to address you in Korean!

I represent the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT),¹ which is based at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. The University was founded in 1963 and so has recently celebrated its first half century of existence; BCLT was established in 1989 and recently celebrated its first quarter century. BCLT was the brainchild of acclaimed writer and critic W.G. (“Max”) Sebald, who was based for over thirty years at UEA, where he latterly held the post of Professor of European Literature. Sebald founded BCLT in 1989 as a place of residence to host visiting literary translators and as an institution dedicated to promoting and celebrating the art of literary translation. The organisation has changed a great deal over the years, but it is fair to say that it still remains true to its foundational values. Historically, the mission of BCLT has been:

- offering a public programme of support and continuing professional development to literary translators at all stages of their careers;
- developing new audiences for translated work through events, publications and online;
- providing information and advice;
- stimulating public awareness and interest in literary translation;
- and generating and encouraging academic debate.

The university itself has changed a great deal over the last 25 years and there have been myriad institutional reorganisations around BCLT: it is currently situated within a School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, and this has proved to be a particularly productive and apposite context for BCLT to be working in, as I shall explain in more detail shortly.

I joined BCLT only last year (from Swansea University in South Wales, where I was Chair of German and Head of the Department of Modern Languages, responsible for introducing a Masters in Literary Translation in 1996). I joined BCLT in the role of Academic Director, a new role which reflects the fact that the University is looking to orientate BCLT more towards the role of an academic research centre and prioritise the goal of “generating and encouraging academic debate” which I mentioned just before. Till now, BCLT was funded not by an academic research council but by Arts Council England for an extensive programme of public-facing, translator-focussed activities. This meant that BCLT has

¹ For further information, see < <http://www.bclt.org.uk/>>.

hitherto always been an unusual, hybrid organisation, a kind of “foreign body” doing the larger part of its work outside of academia, both nationally and internationally, but sitting within a university environment otherwise devoted to teaching and research in academic subject areas. I believe that this hybrid role has been BCLT’s main source of strength, so although my brief is now to develop research strength in translation studies, I certainly don’t see this as separate from the task of fostering literary translators, and indeed I want to argue that the two sides of BCLT’s activity – the university environment and the public programme work – have been mutually reinforcing.

I speak as an academic, then, with various research interests in translation studies, most notably in the history of translation (with specific reference to Bible translation) and the translation of philosophy. I am also a teacher who offers courses in translation theory and practice at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels as well as currently supervising eight PhD students on different topics in translation studies. I am also a practising translator, though, who has published two book-length translations of philosophical works from the German for Oxford University Press, one from the French, and is currently engaged in editing a multi-volume series of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* in English translation for Stanford University Press. I consider it of crucial importance that I am able to draw on this practical translation work in my teaching and research, and in guiding the BCLT in its efforts to foster literary translators. In my talk this morning, then, I will inevitably be considering the question of “Fostering Literary Translators” from the point of view of my own experience, but I want to try to broaden the context of my remarks as much as possible so that I can draw on the work of BCLT and also introduce you to the work of some of our partner organisations outside of academia, reflecting on the ways in which literary translation is fostered within the UK more generally, both within universities and outside, insofar as this represents a model of good practice. The situation in the UK is very varied, and there are plenty of aspects to discuss. I want to begin close to home, by looking at how we foster literary translators at UEA, within the university environment, then move out to consider the vibrant scene outside of academia in the literary translation sector, for we never forget that the academic route is only one way into the profession.

Fostering Literary Translators within a University Environment

The position of literary translation within higher education in the UK is, unfortunately, all too precarious. While most literary translators have a university degree, their degree is certainly not in literary translation, for there is not a single undergraduate degree course in literary translation within UK academia. The default undergraduate degree scheme for literary translators in the UK is Modern Languages, although that subject is very much in retreat and finding it very difficult to recruit students. The retreat of Modern Languages is counter-balanced to some extent by the rapid rise of Translation or Translation Studies as an undergraduate subject area, which you can now take at no fewer than thirteen UK universities in addition to UEA (which offers two distinctive translation-related programmes at undergraduate level).² The presence of literary translation on these courses is nonetheless very limited, reflecting the general retreat of literary study across the Modern Languages curriculum in the last 20-30 years. Moreover, whereas historically literary translation was used as one of the primary methods for language learning at British universities, nowadays

² Aston, Birmingham, Cardiff, Heriot-Watt (Edinburgh), Hull, Leicester, London Metropolitan, Middlesex, Newcastle, Nottingham, Roehampton, Swansea, Westminster. For further details, see the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (<https://www.ucas.com/>).

only a handful of places like Oxford and Cambridge retain it, and over the last twenty years the exercise has been effectively phased out in favour of non-literary translation and other pedagogical methods.

At UEA the undergraduate students I teach are mainly in English Literature, not Modern Languages, but nevertheless we offer these students one module in literary translation at each level, as a way of fostering literary translators who might continue on to our postgraduate programme, and although the numbers are relatively small (twelve for the second-year module “Reading and Writing Translations”, for example, which I introduced this year), thankfully my University is enlightened enough to allow relatively small modules like that to exist. Literary translation is always going to be a relatively niche market, and for it to survive as a subject area at university it needs a university to be willing to invest in a subject area without very much potential for scaling up (a luxury most universities are understandably unwilling to afford).

The national position for literary translation at postgraduate level is hardly any better: despite the general popularity of Masters courses in Translation, the Masters in Literary Translation (MALT) which we run at UEA is now the only one of its kind left in the UK. Until relatively recently there were others (at Essex and Swansea, for example), but they have been discontinued – in the case of my former university Swansea it has, typically, been subsumed under the much more successful MA in Professional [i.e. Technical] Translation. I should say that at UEA we also have a technical translation MA that is offered by a different School (MA Applied Translation Studies), but that the two schemes thankfully run alongside each other and have not proven to be mutually exclusive. The fate of the Swansea MA in Literary Translation is, I think, more generally instructive, because students voted with their feet in favour of a different course which was much more overtly vocational. We found out the hard way that students are not going to take courses in literary translation if they are not persuaded that literary translation is a viable career choice and that studying a degree in it can lead more or less directly to a job in it afterwards. In the UK, at least, university study has become a great deal more expensive in recent years, and students can literally no longer afford to take subjects which they do not perceive as direct investments in their future employability. Gone are the days when we had a captive undergraduate audience going on to MA-level study, and now we need to try much harder to recruit. Specifically, persuading students that literary translation is a vocational degree course is crucial to the success of any such programme.

Historically, though – in the UK at least – most literary translation courses were never set up as vocational programmes, but rather as low-maintenance bolt-ons to undergraduate modern languages programmes, allowing people who had enjoyed translation at undergraduate level (where it was mostly used as pedagogical tool) to spread their wings more. An MA programme in Literary Translation was also seen as a way for staff of focussing again on literary translation at a time when increasingly the kind of translation included in undergraduate programmes was moving away from the literary. Offering an MA in Literary Translation was a relatively low-cost way of responding to the call that went out from university managements to develop new MA schemes at a time when the undergraduate student market was being stifled by caps on numbers: it didn’t involve interpreting, didn’t involve expensive investment in CAT tools and other software (and retraining of staff in order to teach it). The main problem with this approach was its resigned recognition that there would be no chance of a career in literary translation to go on to. We tried harder in Swansea than most to dispel this impression, but the gravitational pull of the much larger Professional Translation programme proved irresistible to most students. Especially when

the Swansea Professional Translation programme was accredited by the European Union in the first wave of members of the European Masters in Translation Network, and more recently added a suite of popular interpreting modules. MA schemes in applied translation are benefitting from the fact that careers in non-literary translation have mushroomed in recent years (thankfully!) with the exponential development of the internet, transnational computer games, subtitled films and TV series, glocalisation of so many commercial products, etc.

Professional (or Applied) translation, as the name implies, sees itself as much more vocational from the outset, and (as we found to our cost in Swansea) it does literary translation programmes at university no favours to be set against such courses (implying that literary translation is by definition therefore not professional, not vocational). At UEA we've always resisted this assumption (that literary and professional translation are somehow mutually exclusive, or that the profession of literary translation is a contradiction in terms), and the relative success of the MA Literary Translation, in particular, derives in my view from a refusal to divorce literary translation from the vocational and professional sphere. To be sure, it is to some extent a different kind of marketplace from the other language industries. As the media are increasingly recognising, though, translated literature finally appears to be having a real impact on the market in the UK, and there is a growing English-language market for literary translations, even if the starting point is a remarkably low base level in international comparison. Correspondingly there is a career in literary translation! UEA has always recognised this, and embedded its literary translation teaching within an environment that emphasises literary translation as a kind of writing which, if you play your cards right, can lead to commissions from literary publishers and a professional career. The location of the MALT programme and the BCLT more generally within a School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing with a thriving Creative Writing programme and a prestigious suite of Creative Writing MAs has made a big difference to the practicability of such a market-facing approach. So we run weekly translation workshops where practising literary translators (many of them alumni of the MALT programme or other UEA programmes) return to give practical advice on everything from issues in translating between specific language pairs to editing for publication. MALT students are given the opportunity to acquire further editing skills through producing the annual publication *Norwich Papers*, and we involve them in the literary sector activities of the BCLT as much as we can. We took four MALT students to the Literary Translation Centre at the London Book Fair earlier this year, for example, and just recently I took four of this year's students to a weekend event in London. We run student internships in the BCLT, and (until the retirement of Jean Boase-Beier this January) we ran an internship in collaboration with the specialist poetry publisher Arc Publications, too, giving students hands-on editorial experience producing volumes of translated poetry. Last year saw the launch of a new venture, the *MALT Anthology*, as a showcase for student translation work and mirroring the anthologies produced by the MA creative writing students. We encourage students to take on paid translation work while they are still at university, too, and ideally accumulate a translation portfolio, especially through their MA dissertation where they can translate a work which they might ultimately be able to pitch to a publisher.

It is often difficult to account for the success of a degree programme, but I firmly believe that it is the unique mix of theory and practice that has kept the UEA MA Literary Translation afloat. One other important advantage that UEA has over many other institutions in this regard is geographical, for London remains the centre of the UK's literary and publishing scenes, and Norwich is simply much closer to London than is Swansea, for example, and that

is not going to change any time soon. Norwich itself has a thriving literary culture, too, and a critical mass of writers and translators who live in or around the city: we are proud to be England's first (and as yet only) UNESCO City of Literature, which means that there are many literary readings and other events going on at venues across the city during the university term. The successful bid for City of Literature status was led by Writers' Centre Norwich, a literature development agency in the city which is a key strategic partner for BCLT. Under its dynamic Executive Director Chris Gribble the WCN has embarked on an ambitious programme of expansion with a recent move to the medieval Dragon Hall and the aim – blessed by Arts Council England – to morph into the National Centre for Writing by 2017.³ WCN runs the annual Worlds Literary Festival which brings many international writers to Norwich for a week every June and provides a platform for celebrating literary translation. This wider literary scene in Norwich is also reflected on campus (UEA is outside the city centre on a purpose-built campus estate), with the UEA Literary Festival every year attracting distinguished writers to the university – many of them alumni of UEA's MA in Creative Writing (the UK's first, founded in 1970). Literary translation students benefit hugely from being immersed in this literary culture, and from the fact that literary translation is celebrated as one kind of creative writing among others. Many of my academic colleagues who are not formally attached to BCLT are translators and involve translation (and translations) in their teaching and research, for example George Szirtes, a prizewinning poet who teaches creative writing but also translates into English from the Hungarian, including the work of Laszlo Krasznahorkai, who was awarded the 2015 Man Booker International Prize. The University has recently established the British Archive for Contemporary Writing (on the back of a significant bequest by Doris Lessing), and translators' archives are an important aspect of it, with the university looking to acquire new ones to go with those previously acquired under the guidance of my predecessor Terry Hale when he was BCLT Director in the 1990s.⁴

Before I move on from the context of fostering literary translators at university I should point out that these various literary sector-facing activities for students on the MALT are all in addition to a rigorous academic programme of translation studies which trains our translators to reflect on their work and account for their choices through exposure to the history and theory of translation. I don't want here to open up the very large debate about the presence of translation theory within translator training (except insofar as to say that as the teacher of the module in "Translation Theory and History" which I just described I am naturally disposed to argue that these aspects are an essential complement to the students' practical translation concerns). A small but significant number of MA students then choose to pursue a more academic path and study for a PhD in Translation Studies. The undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes are complemented by a substantial PhD programme, and this gives rise to a lively research culture in translation studies, with BCLT organising regular seminars and colloquia such as the postgraduate symposium on "Untranslatability" which we are hosting later this month, or the two-day conference on the translation of Indian literature, specifically literature by Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables), which we hosted in June of this year together with partners from Nottingham Trent University and the University of Montpellier in France.

For literary translation to have a future within higher education it is crucial that it should have gravitas as an academic subject and, in addition, attract external research funding. All subject

³ See <<http://www.writerscentrenorwich.org.uk/>>.

⁴ See <<https://portal.uea.ac.uk/library/archives/bacw>>.

areas within UK HE are obliged to subject themselves to a periodic research review (currently called the “Research Excellence Framework” or REF), to which a great deal of research funding is attached, so it is essential for the continuing funding of any academic area that it have a research presence, in order to justify the time taken up in translating by academics like myself. This is a very live issue at the moment, and thankfully the momentum is in our favour, with increasing recognition of translation as a research activity.

Fostering Literary Translators Outside the University

So far I have been focusing on the way in which we foster literary translators within the university, but as I was mentioning earlier BCLT has always also, crucially, had a public-facing role and been dedicated to supporting literary translation in all its guises both nationally and internationally. Let me turn next to describe some of the initiatives which we have been responsible for in this regard. I should say at this point that some of these initiatives will in future be undertaken by Writers’ Centre Norwich, for in April this year (by mutual agreement) we began a formal collaboration with WCN to deliver a number of aspects of the public programme together, funded by Arts Council England. The reason for this was explicitly to allow the promotion of literary translation in the UK to benefit from a considerably wider pool of resources.

I mentioned earlier that when Max Sebald set up BCLT his intention was for it to mirror the residential “translator’s houses” of Europe such as the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium [European Translators’ College] in Straelen, Germany, which proudly announces itself as “worldwide the first and largest international centre for translators of literature and non-fiction”.⁵ It has always been difficult to fulfil this brief effectively within a university environment, although BCLT remains the only UK member of the RECIT network of European literary translation centres.⁶ We work in partnership with the Charles Wallace India Trust to host an annual three-month residency by an Indian translator,⁷ and periodically we also host shorter visits by translators and academics (such as, last year, colleagues from Norway and Poland), usually sponsored by the European Union under its Erasmus+ programme. One resource which is particularly attractive to such visitors is the BCLT Library, which has accumulated several thousand volumes of translations, reference works and translation-related secondary materials over the years and complements the already substantial holdings within the University Library building.

Our flagship residential event is the annual International Literary Translation and Creative Writing Summer School, which has been running since 2000 and we now run in collaboration with WCN. For a week each summer we host a series of translation workshops running in parallel, each co-ordinated by a workshop leader in the presence of a writer on whose text the group works, aiming at a consensus version for presentation to the rest of the groups by the end of the week. In addition to the workshop in Korean which I mentioned earlier, this year’s BCLT summer school also featured translation workshops for Dutch, German, Italian and Norwegian, plus two multi-lingual workshops for prose and poetry. The workshops were complemented by a session each morning of creative writing for translators (an innovation this year which was particularly well received), and a plenary session after lunch each day with presentations and discussions, acting as a showcase for UEA research activities. The Summer School is BCLT’s main contribution to continuing professional development for

⁵ <<http://www.euk-straelen.de/english-information/kollegium>>.

⁶ <<http://www.re-cit.eu/>>.

⁷ <http://www.wallace-trusts.org.uk/cwt_india.html>.

practising literary translators, although it is also open to our own students at a preferential rate, and all of last year's MALT students availed themselves of the opportunity to attend. Our Summer School is not the only one available, either, and in recent years City University in London have been running a non-residential programme called Translate in the City which has also proved popular and demonstrated the increasing demand for provision of this kind.

The summer school model forms the basis for an ambitious programme of international translation workshops which my colleague Kate Griffin has been exporting worldwide for a number of years and will continue to do so under the aegis of WCN in the years to come. In the last year alone BCLT organised many international translation workshops, masterclasses, summer/winter schools and boot camps (in Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Qatar, Singapore, USA), with attendant publications, sponsored by Arts Council England, the British Council and a wide range of other funders. Within the UK BCLT has been very active in representing literary translation at literary festivals up and down the country (largely thanks to my indefatigable former colleague Daniel Hahn, who left BCLT last October to take up the Chair of the UK Society of Authors). This is another area that is being taken over by our partner WCN, along with the set-piece events which raise the public profile of literary translation within the context of the publishing and literary sectors more generally. These include a substantial presence for literary translation at the annual London Book Fair, badged as the "Literary Translation Centre" and co-organised with English PEN and Free Word Centre ("an international centre for literature, literacy and free expression" based in London).⁸ Also to be considered under this heading are several annual events which BCLT is involved with at the British Library in London and which attract substantial general audiences for literary translation. These include a "European Literature Night" in May and an "International Translation Day" (a day of literary translation-related lectures, seminars and workshops) in September/October. Our flagship public event is the annual Sebald lecture, named after BCLT's founder, which takes place every spring and where we invite substantial cultural figures to lecture on an aspect of literary translation from their perspective. Speakers have included Tariq Ali, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Carlos Fuentes, Seamus Heaney, Germaine Greer, Susan Sontag, Marina Warner, Ali Smith, Will Self, Boris Akunin, Margaret Atwood and A.L. Kennedy.

As part of the outreach work which we do in order to raise the profile of literary translation, engage with new audiences and create new readerships for translations, we work with public libraries and schools. In the latter context we acknowledge the invaluable work being done by the Stephen Spender Trust and their project Translators in Schools,⁹ which sponsors translators to work with schoolchildren (at both primary and secondary level) on various kinds of fun project related to translation and multilingualism, especially involving so-called "community languages" such as Bengali or Polish, spoken by immigrant populations. In the last six months I have led workshops on Bible translation for a large study group at Norwich Cathedral and a smaller masterclass event at London Review Bookshop. Our efforts in this regard are encouraged by the increasing desire on the part of universities generally to ensure that academic research generates an "impact" on non-academic audiences, which includes, of course, practising literary translators. Where possible we will work with publishers in order to ensure that their lists feature translated books: I mentioned Arc Publications, but there are many others on which we also draw for people to present at our translation workshops, Summer Schools and other events. In the past, BCLT colleagues have judged the

⁸ <<https://www.freewordcentre.com/>>.

⁹ <<http://translatorsinschools.org/>>.

Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and other competitions; I am currently part of the steering committee for *New Books in German*, the twice-yearly publication sponsored by a number of German-language funders which presents English-language publishers with a juicy selection of possible titles for which they might want to purchase translation rights, and then subsidises any subsequent translations.

An important partner of BCLT which I haven't mentioned yet is the Translators Association (TA), the national organisation for practising literary translators in the UK.¹⁰ BCLT is represented on the TA Executive Committee and is currently collaborating with the TA, for example, on an event next spring marking the 80th birthday of the renowned translator Anthea Bell. The Translators Association is hugely supportive of literary translators in the UK through its programme of events (which include workshops on very practical matters like how to handle your tax affairs as a freelance translator), through its advisory service on translation contracts, its lobbying activities, and its periodical *In Other Words*, which appears twice-yearly and engagingly addresses many aspects of the literary translation profession. In order to be eligible for membership of the Translators Association, though, you must already have secured a contract for at least one book-length translation, which means that a great many potential members are excluded and there is a kind of "twilight zone" into which literary translators threaten to fall on emerging from university study, before they become properly established. It is to address this very real potential problem and give support to translators in this position that prizewinning translator (and alumna of the UEA MALT) Rosalind Harvey set up the Emerging Translators Network, "a forum and support network for early-career literary translators working into English".¹¹ This group functions primarily as an e-mail forum, but increasingly it is organising real-world events outside the virtual realm.

BCLT has always recognised the importance of fostering "emerging translators" in particular, and over the years much of our programme has been dedicated to this group. (NB: although most emerging translators are relatively young, the term is deliberately chosen so as to cover translators of all ages who are looking to find a foothold professionally.) Four years ago we launched a complex International Emerging Translation Mentorship Programme which pairs up an emerging translator with an established translator for six months of coaching and advice, across a dozen languages. This has proved a very popular and successful scheme: very often these collaborations lead to contracts for new translated books, but in any event excerpts from the work produced are published annually in the collection *First Lines*, which is launched in July at the Free Word Centre with an evening of readings and a reception. The mentorship programme would not exist without substantial financial support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Foyle Foundation, the European Union and a range of national cultural organisations. After long years of collaboration with the British Comparative Literature Association, BCLT continues to sponsor the annual John Dryden Translation Competition, which provides emerging translators with another opportunity to gain public recognition.¹² A final word in this section about a relatively new project with which we have become involved, and which represents a concerted effort to promote literary translation across Europe. The project is PETRA-E, a European Union-funded network of eight university and non-university partners that are collaborating to produce an agreed framework for literary translator training, focussed on the interface between university and the world beyond, and specifically how literary translators make the transition from a

¹⁰ < <http://www.societyofauthors.org/translators-association>>.

¹¹ < <https://emergingtranslatorsnetwork.wordpress.com/>>.

¹² < <http://bcla.org/prizes-and-competitions/john-dryden-translation-competition/>>.

university course to a career afterwards. The initial aim is to develop a Framework for Literary Translation by July 2016 which attempts, at least, to do justice to the great variety which exists within the field across Europe at the moment.

Conclusion

As I hope you can tell by now, BCLT is at the heart of a network of national and international organisations supporting literary translator development in the UK and beyond, comprising universities, private sector agencies, government bodies and cultural promoters, publishers, charitable foundations and other funders. Together with these partners, we work to help increase the recognition of literary translation and to bring literary translators more into the ambit of the professional sector. I feel incredibly lucky to be working within a unique organisation which is in a position to make such a material difference to literary translation in my country, and I am very well aware (not least through contact with PETRA-E European colleagues) of how privileged we are at UEA, and in the UK more generally, in having such a developed support network. I am also well aware, though, of how successful LTI Korea has been recently in revolutionising the public profile of literary translation from Korean and substantially bolstering the number of titles available in English translation through your sponsorship of the Library of Korean Literature at Dalkey Archive Press. It seems to me that you have already taken great strides in fostering literary translation in your own context, and there is much that we can learn from your successes, but I can only hope that some of the things I have been describing will have struck a chord with you.