

***Literaturübersetzen. Ästhetik und Praxis*, by Rainer Kohlmayer, Series: FTSK. Publikationen des Fachbereichs Translations-, Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz in Gernersheim, Bern, Peter Lang, 2019, 213 pp., SFr.52.00/€42.10/GBP £35.00/USD \$50.95 (E-book) ISBN 978-3-631-79416-6**

***Kritische Übersetzungswissenschaft. Theoriekritik, Ideologiekritik, Übersetzungskritik*, by Rainer Kohlmayer, Bern, Peter Lang, 2020, 251 pp., SFr.58.00/€49.95/GBP £38.00/USD \$56.95 (hardback) ISBN 978-3-631-81193-1, (E-Book) ISBN 978-3-631-81674-5**

Rainer Kohlmayer, Professor Emeritus of the University of Mainz, is a prolific publisher of scholarly books and articles on translation theory and literary translation. His work is little known in contemporary Anglophone translation studies, in part no doubt to the increasing monolingualism of the discipline. Since retiring in 2013, Kohlmayer has published no fewer than four books: one per year since 2017. This review covers the two most recent books: *Literaturübersetzen* [Literary Translation], a pedagogically focussed outline of the aesthetics and practice of literary translation, and *Kritische Übersetzungswissenschaft* [Critical Translation Studies], a collection of previously published essays and case studies. It is not a bad idea to read these books in tandem, as I have done. The first book, *Literaturübersetzen*, takes a deliberately light-touch approach to theory, in part no doubt as a foil to the ‘overtheorisation’ and ‘cerebralism’ of which Kohlmayer accuses Germany translation studies (2019, 23; 136). At times, this light-touch approach risks being equated with a lack of sophistication, particularly in terms of how literary meaning and reading are conceptualised. The second book, however, offers a much more sustained engagement with these crucial conceptual questions, as explored further below.

Written in three parts (aesthetics, practice, and a short light-hearted epilogue), the central premise of *Literaturübersetzen* is that literary translation practice is underpinned by a specific and coherent theory (2019, 10) that has largely been overlooked by contemporary translation studies. It is this implicit theory that Kohlmayer seeks to lay bare, arguing that literary translation follows the three principles of subjectivity, linearity, and orality. Kohlmayer devotes a chapter to each of these principles, anchoring his explanations in translations and historical traditions of translation as elaborated in translators’ prefaces and afterwords. Orality, for example, which conceives of literary texts as inscribed performance (2019, 88; 145), is traced from the 15<sup>th</sup> century translator of Aristotle, Leonardo Bruni, via Erasmus von Rotterdam, Martin Luther and Johann Gottfried Herder to its ‘theoretical and practical perfection’ (2019, 13) in Novalis. These principles are opposed to the ‘wertneutralen Relativismus’ [value-neutral relativism] (2019, 32) to which theorists such as Susan Bassnett have, in Kohlmayer’s view, fallen prey: instead, literary translators strive towards ‘subjective optimal translation’ (2019, 33), and the quality of their translations can be judged on the basis of how well they have felt their way into the text, and reproduced its artistic qualities (2019, 34-40). In the various exercises that Kohlmayer sets for his readers in the second part of the book, he compares these mimetic translatorial skills to musical ability and invites readers to discover whether they possess these talents (2019, 124; 171), whilst also indicating that they are skills that can be honed (2019, 125). Kohlmayer also criticises the ‘vague notion of translatorial creativity’ (2019, 157) that permeates translation studies, arguing that translators are not composers but (only) performers or interpreters (2019, 54). *Literaturübersetzen* is thus in many respects a call to return to more traditional conceptualisations of translation – to return, metaphorically, to the view of translator as servant of two masters (2020, 23).

While there is much in *Literaturübersetzen* that is helpful for reflecting on and practising literary translation, I was left unconvinced by the claim that the book uncovers an implicit theory of translation underpinning modern-day literary translation. Many of the examples from published literary

translations are accompanied by a critique suggesting that the translations fall short of the subjective optimum proposed in each case by Kohlmayer. Following the book's logic that translation theory can be laid bare by studying translation practice, instances like these must give rise to the possibility that there is more than one such underlying theory, but this is not acknowledged by Kohlmayer. Instead, he suggests that all literary translation is underpinned by the theory he identifies, but that some translators are more skilled than others at employing it. For this theory to convince as one that truly emerges from and underpins translation practice, Kohlmayer would need to address this fundamental uncertainty in his methodology, engaging for example with other studies of literary translation practice which have uncovered other, potentially less admirable tendencies, such as the translator's 'unconscious drive to normalize the text' (Wright 2016, 139) or the 'negative analytic' of translation diagnosed by Antoine Berman (2012). In the end, we can only be certain that the theory Kohlmayer is making explicit is the one which underpins his own translation practice (many of the examples are drawn from his own work), which is itself embedded in the traditions of close reading in which he was trained in the 1960s, traditions which themselves have their roots in Western understandings of rhetoric and of writing as inscribed performance.

This impression is underscored by the second book, *Kritische Übersetzungswissenschaft*, which devotes several chapters to surveying developments in literary theory and hermeneutics, primarily, though not exclusively, within the German tradition. Taken together, these chapters represent a historical and theoretical contextualisation of the 'subjective optimal translation' approach outlined in *Literaturübersetzen*. In chapter three, for example, Kohlmayer criticises postmodernist views which elevate the role of the reader to such an extent that it becomes impossible to distinguish understanding from misunderstanding, arguing that although what is 'there' in the text is not everything, 'es steht tatsächlich etwas da' (76) [there is really something there]. In this, he aligns himself with Umberto Eco's (1990) efforts to place limits on interpretation. The fourth and fifth chapters, meanwhile, elaborate the principle of orality, advocating Herder's notion of 'Einfühlung' [empathy], Schlegel's 'implied rhetoric', and Novalis's 'written voice' over Schleiermacher's well-known 'either-or' formulation.

The theoretical approach that is developed by Kohlmayer is envisaged not least as a counterpoint to what Kohlmayer terms the 'invasion of literary translation by functionalism' (2020, 11), and the first two chapters of *Kritische Übersetzungswissenschaft* are devoted explicitly to a critique of *skopos* theory. The first (published originally in 1988) is based on a systematic dismantling of the supporting examples used by leading advocates of the theory (Honig & Kussmaul, Reiss, Vermeer) as part of their efforts to demonstrate *skopos* theory's apparent relevance for literary theory. Kohlmayer argues that these examples demonstrate a superficial engagement with the source text and an overconfidence in the ability of the translator to discern the needs and wishes of the target audience. *Skopos* theory, in Kohlmayer's view, actively *encourages* the curtailment of literary analysis. As such, and in contrast with the traditional approaches outlined above, attempting to apply *skopos* theory to literary translation will result in blind spots and misunderstandings, systematically and on a large scale (2020, 49). The bluntness of Kohlmayer's argument here is characteristic of his writing; Kohlmayer acknowledges this in the Introduction and makes no apology for it, perceiving himself as a lonely voice that needs to shout loudly to be heard (2020, 11). In the second chapter, Kohlmayer takes aim at the intellectual origins and development of Vermeer's *skopos* concept, contrasting it with the notion of *scopus* originally developed by the hermeneuticist Hans Georg Gadamer. Kohlmayer argues that Gadamer's *scopus* refers to the principle of reading individual parts of a text within the context of an understanding of the text as a whole: it is a concept that is connected with the rhetorical notion of *disposito*, and is about understanding texts on their own terms rather than subjecting one's reading of a text to the dogma of an external, authoritative body such as the church. Vermeer's *skopos* is

entirely different: it refers to something that arises not from a careful reading of the text itself but from the external situation into which the text is to be translated (2020, 61). In Kohlmayer's words, Vermeer turns Gadamer's *scopus* on its head, and not to the advantage of literary translation studies.

The other chapters in *Kritische Übersetzungswissenschaft* focus on the connections between ideology and translatorial and lexicographical decision-making. These include a fascinating case study of national socialist discourse in the German *Stilwörterbuch* [dictionary of correct usage], and an investigation of the 1935 German translation of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. At the time of its original publication in 1990, this latter essay would have offered a fresh angle for a discipline that was only just beginning to address the connections between translation, ideology and power; at the time of its republication in 2020, it no longer reads as such, but nevertheless still holds intrinsic interest. This point about Kohlmayer's collection is worth noting: the essays have been republished in their original form rather than being reworked to engage with subsequent scholarship in the field. Whilst this has the advantage of bringing vividly to light the vigorous debates that accompanied key developments in the discipline in the 1980s and 1990s – particularly valuable, in my view, in relation to *skopos* theory – it is also a disadvantage. Kohlmayer's thought-provoking critique of Schleiermacher, for example, would undoubtedly be enriched through dialogue with the volume edited by Cercel and Serban (2015) and in particular with Theo Hermans's recent essays (2015, 2018).

Nevertheless, Kohlmayer's books have much to offer today's students and scholars, not least with respect to their accessible overview of literary and hermeneutic traditions and their detailed critique of *skopos* theory. And I have a lot of sympathy with Kohlmayer's view that the traditional or "common-sense" approach to literary translation that he advocates has fallen out of fashion rather than relevance. To Kohlmayer's rather tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the success of Vermeer's *skopos* theory owed itself in part to its clear USP (2020, 60), I would say: yes, perhaps what this traditional, hermeneutics-based approach needs is a label, an acronym, one that can be listed in books on research methodologies alongside 'CDA' (critical discourse analysis) and 'CL' (corpus linguistics) (see e.g. Saldanha and O'Brien 2014). Perhaps. Perhaps not. To a certain extent, Kohlmayer himself is caught in this dilemma: he proffers a label ('subjective optimal translation') and argues that he is laying bare a coherent underlying theory, whilst at the same time militating against theoretical monisms (2020, abstract). On the one side, the pedagogical, pragmatic impulse: offering students a theoretical and methodological framework that is better suited to literary translation analysis than many of the more readily-packaged frameworks. On the other, the scholarly, intellectual aversion to distilling centuries of intellectual reflection on the inherently complex processes of reading and translating into a tidy, simplified format.

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