Translating “High” Literature for Public Diplomacy

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In the autumn of 2006, the United States government, represented by Laura Bush, announced the Global Cultural Initiative, a program designed to export American culture, bring the cultural productions of other societies and countries into the United States, and to generally foster cultural connections beyond the borders of the country. Coming in the wake of a number of studies that had commented on and sought remedies for the currently catastrophic image of the United States abroad, and that argued for efforts in cultural diplomacy as a way to defuse the increasing animosity felt worldwide toward the United States, this initiative seems to subscribe to contemporary ideas about “public diplomacy.”

Public diplomacy has come to be seen as an important alternative to “classic diplomacy” in that, contrary to traditional diplomacy where elite representatives of governments talk to each other behind closed doors, it uses cultural products and culture workers to reach out to and “seduce” the elites of other cultures. As one specialist on the topic writes, “Public diplomacy is the effort by the government of one nation to influence public or elite opinion of another nation for the purpose of turning the policy of the target nation to advantage” (Potter 2002, 3). By exporting its culture, a nation can make itself interesting and attractive, and persuade other cultures to sympathize with its agenda or empathize with its challenges. And, perhaps more importantly, buy its products (Anholt 2002). Also, by importing the cultural products of other nations, a country can display interest in others, reduce its cultural isolation, broaden the perspectives of its own population, especially its educated or educable elites, and appear more open and tolerant.

In cultural or public diplomacy government agents and policies are focused on the cultural elite of a country – the politicians, media owners and disseminators, university professors and students, literary agents and publishers, and upper-class sectors interested in culture – and thus the audience is considerably wider than in classic diplomacy. The USA’s Global Cultural Initiative seems particularly aware of this group, focusing as it does on “high” culture – and importantly, for those of us involved in translation studies, on “high” literature. Indeed, the very
first program funded by this initiative is for literary translation, with the National Endowment for the Arts participating in selecting partner countries and works. As the announcement says:

The National Endowment for the Arts Partnership
International Literary Exchanges: Building upon the National Endowment for the Arts’ poetry anthology project with Mexico, the NEA, working with the State Department, will establish International Literary Exchanges, a program designed to initiate literary translation projects and publications between the United States and other countries. Projects are in development with Pakistan, Russia and Mexico. The program will provide American readers with access to literary works from abroad and foreign readers access to highly talented American writers, especially poets. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/scp/2006/72972.htm, accessed March 31 (my emphasis).

The focus on “poets” is of particular interest to me. Why poetry, and not fiction? Why not political philosophy or essays? I am fascinated by the notion of exporting and importing poetry, the densest and most complex type of text to read and understand in the source language, let alone in translation. Whom does this program hope to reach? Who are the translators translating for, and with what purpose?

Contemporary academic work on cultural or public diplomacy tends not to address the difference between “high” and popular culture in this version of foreign affairs. It is very aware, however, of the effect of the Internet and cyber-communication, and the capacity of these media to multiply and diversify international possibilities. Potter, for one, acknowledges the role these communication systems can play “We are entering a new world in which knowledge, culture and communications are the key [...]” (1) but he is aware like so many others that within the global opportunities provided by this “key” system, “there is concern that the powerful engine of the global economy will roll over cultural diversity, fragile social and political systems, and state sovereignty itself.”(1) Could the deployment of “high” literature in public diplomacy be motivated more or less consciously as an attempt to counteract this globalizing factor by asserting identity and diversity, and justifying “unique or particular social and political systems,” thus, in effect, offering some resistance to the “powerful engine of the global economy.” In this environment, “high” culture may be the last stand of cultural specificity, the last expression of “the local.” Nevertheless, since
no one sector controls the communications media, government programs to influence the diffusion of selected materials are often relatively ineffective. As Ron Robin (2005, 346) writes, the “waning resonance of the nation-state” in this multilateral world of international communications is further eroding control.

Yet, “high” culture (specifically, “high” literature) continues to play a role in public diplomacy, mobilized in support of national, and often local, governments’ two main objectives:

- to create interest and sympathy/understanding for the exporting culture, which will allow that culture to better assert its agenda in external affairs, and
- to render the exporting culture’s products attractive, which will increase its GNP, and further expand its commercial influence.

The hoped-for result of these objectives is “soft power.”

In most of the literature, any activity carried out abroad that attracts positive attention can be culturally diplomatic: film festivals, literature fests, art shows, international literary journals, traveling music and dance companies (Von Eschen 2005), the establishment of university chairs and joint academic publications, academic student and teacher exchanges, or mixed cultural events. In Canada, the grants made available to foreign publishers who translate and publish Canadian writers, subsidizing writers’ travel as well as the translations, are part of a policy that focus on “high” arts, reflecting Canadian culture outwards (Schneider 2005). The activities of the Canadian “Trade Routes” initiative (http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/ac-ca/progs/rc-tr/progs/pccr-trcp/index_e.cfm) are typical of the second objective which clearly links the export of Canadian cultural materials with the sales of Canadian goods.

In the following discussion, I will restrict myself to “translated literature” – not only because literary translation is the first program undertaken by the recent US Global Cultural Initiative but because in so-called “B” countries (countries that are part of the developed West, yet not particularly powerful international players), a similar focus on literary translation has quietly existed for years as part of cultural diplomacy. The many different European “centres for literary translation” – in the UK at the University of East Anglia, in Seneffe, Belgium, in Arles, France, in Straelen, Germany, in Amsterdam, Rhodes, and on the island of Wisby, Sweden – to mention only a few – all of these participate in the public diplomacy initiatives of their respective countries, at least partially funded by the national governments and by the EU, and in turn, supporting foreign translators who disseminate the literary works
of their countries.

Contrary to other commentators on public/cultural diplomacy, I am interested in the apparent focus on “high” culture in these translation initiatives: why does cultural/public policy in the area of literature and translation maintain an emphasis on complex, dense, and challenging literary texts – which is how I propose to define “high literary culture” - rather than on materials that might be easier to market or “globalize.” What do cultural bureaucrats, who make the decisions on which activities or products to support, hope to achieve with this version of culture? What does it represent? And does this focus raise issues around neo- and post-colonialism that have often been associated with the politics of translation?

Cultural/Public Diplomacy’s Focus on “High” Literary Culture

One of the more recent documents to underline the incontrovertible importance of “high” culture in the area of public diplomacy is entitled “Cultural Diplomacy. The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy” and was submitted to the USA State Department by a group of “concerned citizens” in autumn 2005, one year before the Global Cultural Initiative was launched. It claims that “high” culture reveals a “nation’s soul,” specifically “the enduring truth of the American experience – that we are a people capable not only of espousing, enacting, and spreading our noblest values but also of self-correction” (22), and it cites the “first flowering of American literature – the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, the stories of Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, and the poetry of Emily Dickinson” as presenting examples of these American qualities. For the writers of this document, the dissemination of high literary culture abroad is one important way to mitigate America’s “latest fall from grace” and continue a “tradition upon which to build a permanent structure of cultural diplomacy” (22). In regard to the effects of literary translation of other cultures’ literary products into the USA, the document asserts rather carefully that “translation lies at the heart of any cultural diplomacy initiative; some misunderstandings between peoples may be resolved through engagement with each other’s literary and intellectual traditions; the poverty of insight displayed by American policy makers and pundits in their view of other lands may in some cases be mediated by contact, in translation, with thinkers from abroad” (12). Indeed, because only an infinitesimal number of books by just such thinkers is available in English in the USA (the same problem
exists in other English-speaking countries), the "concerned citizens" behind this document warn that "we (Americans) are not privy to the conversations – literary, philosophical, political and spiritual – taking place in much of the world" (12). This gap in knowledge and experience is not only cumulative, but also dangerously isolationist and an important factor in the development and support of short-sighted and ill-informed foreign policies.

It is interesting that the references made to "high" culture in this document all hark back to the 19th century, and a time that preceded so-called "mass culture." In Canada, too, where translation grants are available to foreign publishers, these are awarded not for "mass culture" but first and foremost for prize-winning literary work: "literary excellence is the dominant criterion for approving a translation request." (Schneider 14). Are such materials seen as the repository of the national culture, that indeed "reveal the soul of the nation?" Are they one of the primary locations of local culture? Do literary works of a high quality contain and maintain a culture's "local" expression, while most other cultural products have been homogenized or globalized through mass media treatment and marketing? The theoreticians of public diplomacy do not address this.

In many minds, the democratizing aspects of mass culture – its availability and accessibility – have undermined "high" culture at least since the middle of the 20th century, though some trace this back to the late 19th century at least in North America (King 2005). To take only one critic in regard to post-WW II developments, Harold Wilensky, writing in the American Sociological Review in 1964 already warned that instead of the promise of cultural abundance and gradual improvement of mass tastes that television held out, the medium actually threatened high culture, and provided those consumers who had "high-brow" tastes with the opportunity to become full participants in mass culture. The net outcome, Wilensky asserted, would be cultural uniformity at a slightly higher than average level.

While it is not easy to assess this outcome in any objective way, the uniformity of current globalized mainstream culture, created and disseminated for profit by large international media groups, is perhaps evidence enough. While the process of uniformization took place gradually over some fifty years in the West and may have allowed the development to pass almost unnoticed, it slowly eroded much that might be specific to a local context. In the case of the Soviet Union, however, where a sudden change to "democratic mass culture" occurred, after the collapse of the system in 1989, the change to low-level cultural
uniformity became immediately apparent. In 1993 already, Nadezhda Ashgihkina, a cultural journalist in Russia, wrote that “high culture” suddenly had to become a marketable merchandise for a market that arrived with its own set of laws, bringing along its “favourite child: pop culture” and “forcing out” high culture through the indiscriminate translation and widespread dissemination of science fiction, detective novels, erotic novels and various kinds of pop psychology. In this situation, the Russian writer or artist who was once the “revered and dominant influence in society has become” she says, “a mere creator of cultural values” (Ashgihkina 1993, 44).

If cultural uniformity at a relatively low level is indeed the norm across wide swaths of both national and international publics, why focus public diplomacy on “high” literature? And when government agencies do so, to what extent are they involved in using the writer as a mere creator of cultural values? In Canada, for example, a government document from 1995 on foreign policy lists the “export of Canadian culture and values” as one of its three basic objectives (Canada in the World 1995), thus lining up culture and values as exportable commodities, and potentially using the work of the most gifted writers as grist to the international seduction mill. Indeed, much as some theorists would like to refer to a golden age of 19th century literature, it is not at all certain that those 19th century writers have not simply become 21st century “culture workers,” more or less useful for the design and the marketing of the national image.

One well-documented case of a particularly focused campaign of cultural or public diplomacy dates from the period of the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Implemented after World War II, it seems to confirm both the importance ascribed to “high” culture and the role of “culture worker” assigned to the creators. In The Cultural Cold War. The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters, Frances Stonor Saunders traces the CIA deployment of cultural materials and culture workers from the USA throughout the centres of Western Europe in the decades immediately after 1945. This activity, supposedly necessitated by the exigencies of the Cold War (but also driving it), was funded with millions of tax and private dollars funneled through fake foundations and other fronts, and undertaken as an independent foreign affairs mission without the approval of the US Congress. It targeted largely western European elites, especially the many intellectuals whose left-wing (anti-fascist) ideas did not mesh with a certain American “free-enterprise, free-world, capitalist” ideology, and had several major aims. One was to convince skeptical European intellectuals that there was such a thing as American
culture, and to fight the "European non-acceptance of America on matters other than Coca-Cola, bathtubs and tanks..." (125). Another was to impose the ideology of free-market capitalism on Europe, and establish the USA as the bulwark against the new Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union. A third objective was to undermine Soviet and Soviet-bloc politics and policies at every possible turn, using cultural means to do so, and luring left-wing intellectuals away from the Soviets.

These aims, and the free rein the CIA had with huge amounts of public money, led to many cultural events ranging from large conferences on the politics and meaning of "cultural freedom," to all-expenses paid month-long excursions of American orchestras and opera companies (featuring Black artists such as Leontyne Price, in order to undermine European prejudices about America’s uncivil rights), to the establishment and funding of literary/culture journals such as Partisan Review, Encounter, and Perspectives partially written and edited by CIA agents, and often distributed in translation to various European countries in order to "offer a version of America far removed from ‘movies, hard-boiled detective stories, comic books and magazines in which there is more advertising than text’" (140). It included the establishment and complete funding of Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, broadcasting eastward, and finally, the conscious and deliberate selection and aggressive promotion of Jackson Pollock and other American abstract expressionist painters as artists whose abstract expressionist work epitomized "the free world" and represented the "free culture," a powerful alternative to Socialist Realism.

Both within these initiatives, and as separate programs, translation played a vital role with the East European Fund (a CIA fund financed by the Ford Foundation) supporting the purchase of proscribed Russian works, and the translations into Russian of western classics, for example, but also in mass publication projects. As Sonors asserts, by 1977, the CIA had been involved in the publication of at least 1000 books, including translations such as Doctor Zhivago, new editions of Machiavelli’s Il principe, a work entitled Halfway to the Moon – New Writing from Russia, the works of Chekhov and T.S. Eliot, and so on (Sonor 245-246). It had also seen to it that Orwell’s Animal Farm and 1984 had been turned into accessible films. Interestingly, the organization focused its efforts in this regard on the same public that contemporary public diplomacy is targeting: the elites, described as "the only group that counts [...] that numerically limited group capable of and interested in manipulating doctrinal matters, the men of ideas who pull the intellectual strings "in forming" or at least pre-disposing the atti-
tudes and opinions of those who in turn lead public opinion” (Sonor, citing Charles Burton Marshall (1953), 150). Sonor explains this “high” culture factor in the 1950s Cold War version of public diplomacy – then often called psychological warfare - as strongly motivated by the CIA’s leaders’ and operatives’ own elitist origins: advanced degrees from Ivy League universities, generations of WASP tradition and privilege, literary ambitions (many were published writers) who had themselves been raised on the “modernist culture of Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, and Proust” [...] . For them, “high culture was not only important as an anti-Communist line of defence but also the bastion against homogenized mass society [...] viewed with horror as ‘the spreading ooze of Mass Culture’” (249).

Today, not much seems to have changed, except the funding. Where there were millions of US dollars available in the 1950s and 1960s to combat the “Communist” influences of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe by exporting high culture, these funds diminished and finally completely disappeared in the 1990s as the Cold War was “won” (Scott-Smith, accessed 2007). American libraries and cultural centres all over the world were closed, and budgets for cultural diplomacy were severely cut. In Canada, where Canadian culture was still in its infancy in the 1950s, at least as an officially recognized entity, ideas about exporting it did not surface until the mid- to late 1970s, when Canadian Studies programs were born to target and attract the interest of foreign academics, and in the late 1980s when the translation program for the export of Canadian literature was initiated.

While it is hard to say how much the CIA activities and practices of the 1950s and 1960s have influenced today’s very similar focus on “high” art in public diplomacy, the parallels are striking. To sum up, it seems that North American public diplomacy continues to deploy “high” literature as a propaganda tool for various reasons:
- to demonstrate to other nations and cultures that its culture is capable of creating such literature;
- in the belief that the dissemination of this culture will reveal some essence of the specific and local that cannot be or has not yet been reduced to the globalized mass of popular culture;
- to seduce and influence other cultures.

Post- and Neo-colonialism in Translating “High” Literature

The seduction and influencing of other cultures has often been
viewed as a colonialist activity where the less powerful "natives" are educated by their colonial rulers. And translation has often played a role. In a recent book on translation and post-colonialism, Changing the Terms. Translating in the Postcolonial Era (Simon and St-Pierre 2000), Sherry Simon begins her introduction with an anecdote about the literary texts available in the ancestral home of the Indian writer, Amitav Ghosh, when he was a child. These were works of European literature, all translated into Bengali, a collection of books that could be found in much the same form in all corners of the (then) British Empire. They represented, on the one hand, the family’s access to the European world of letters, and, on the other, they were the physical representation of a certain canon of recognized works, “identifying middle-class tastes in genteel settings” (Simon and St. Pierre 2000, 9). In Simon’s words, as texts that came from outside Indian culture, they served “the imperialist, Orientalizing cause” (10).

Much of what has been called post-colonial theory in recent years, and applied to the translation of literature, takes a dim view of translation. People argue that translation has appropriated (i.e. stolen) indigenous materials for the thoughtless pleasure of the colonial power (a prime example is Fitzgerald’s version of The Rubayyat by Omar Khayyam; another is Helene Cixous’ “abuse” of Clarice Lispector for her particular version of feminism (Arrojo 1999). Translation has been accused of deliberate misrepresentation for the purposes of marketing, a story Tejaswini Niranjana traces in all its cynicism in her 1992 book Siting Translation. It has been seen as imposing colonial texts as the norm, to the exclusion, denigration and stereotypification or Orientalization of local culture. This has been traced in Indian work on the subaltern and rejected in anti-colonial movements such as négritude, by writers such as Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who refuse to write in the colonial language, as well as in much theoretical work by and since Edward Said. In this scenario, then, translation and translators have often (but not only) been seen as the henchmen of colonial and neo-colonial powers, and their work has been described as strongly affected, even ruled, by the power differential in place between the cultures in question.

While this work on the colonialist aspects of translation has been vital in understanding the deliberate, and sometimes accidental, instrumentalization of translation at different times, it has also had a very positive effect for translation. Translated literature has been recognized as an integral part of a bigger picture that includes “the economic and political fields through which ideas are circulated and received”
(Simon and St. Pierre 2000: 17). Literature in translation, in other words, has been found to rarely circulate innocently or by chance. It is circulated – by certain powers, at certain times, for specific purposes.

In the case of contemporary North America, the reasons are ideological and mercantile, much as they have always been. While the spate of post-colonial theorists will choose to see and record the damage done, others will describe the way ideas inevitably circulate, texts move, translation transfers materials between cultures in many different, fluid, serial, and often uncontrollable ways – whether or not there is funding by some government bureaucrat or agency.

The American citizens who produced the document entitled "Cultural Diplomacy. The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy," certainly do not see the translation of literature as a nefarious form of neo-colonialism; they simply say that “culture matters.” They also assert that “cultural diplomacy reveals the soul of a nation,” which is exactly where the “local” may come in, where the response to the homogenizing force of globalization may be located – depending of course on how the “soul of a nation” is defined. For this group of citizens, cultural diplomacy via the translation of literature is a strategy that can restore the view that America is a beacon of hope rather than a “dangerous force to be countered”, while at the same time serving to broaden the horizons of the reading public of the United States.

Is this a deliberately innocent stance? Is it naïve? Is it misleading? Especially given the considerable work of scholars working in the area of post-colonialism, and given Sonor’s revelatory book on how the CIA (often posing as “concerned citizens”) implemented very similar policies? To what extent does neo-colonialism play into this scenario? And does literary translation indeed run the risk of participating in the “continued control [...] of native elites compliant with neocolonial powers” as one writer describes neo-colonialism (Yew 2006). These are difficult and recurrent questions, and there are doubtless as many answers as there are perspectives.

To look at just one possible response, related to Eastern Europe (since some of our focus has been on the former East Bloc), recent scholarship on the translation trends in post-Cold War East Central Europe certainly shows that translation of Western European and North American books – in the humanities and social sciences as well as fiction, biography, self-help, etc. – into the various languages of the former East Bloc experienced an enormous upswing after 1989, financed by various Western organizations such as the Soros Foundation, the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences, the Central European University
Mihalache, who focuses on Romania, has not, however, found only deliberate and deleterious influence-peddling or Western "cultural colonialism" in these activities; she views them as well as "nourishing the cognitive activities" of a society in transformation (2006, 117). In considering the situation from the perspective of the translating culture that chooses its texts, she writes:

La "production traductive" dans la Roumanie postcommuniste pourrait être vue comme une oscillation entre transmettre la signification d'une manière rationnelle (envisager Other-as-reason [...] et traduire la "normalité" occidentale) ou relier cette signification à une expérience préverbale (approcher Other-as-mystery). Un ethos qui projette la traduction comme étant constamment "contrôlée" par des représentations de la société traduisante. Mais aussi, une traduction solidement ancrée dans et explicable par un recours à l'histoire des croyances de la société traduisante. (123)

[The "production of translations" in post-Communist Romania can be seen as oscillating between the rational transmission of meaning (seeing the Other-as-reason and translating the "normality" of the West) and the linking of this meaning with a preverbal experience (seeing the Other-as-mystery) - an ethos that views translation as constantly "controlled" by the representations of the translating culture. But also, a translation that is solidly anchored in and can be explained through recourse to the history of beliefs of the translating culture. (My translation)]

In other words, the translating culture is as much, if not more, involved in the selection, circulation and interpretation of the foreign materials as any neo-colonialist force providing the funds to make this possible. Further, Mihalache notes that in this post-communist context, the waves of translation from the West have triggered strong responses from local writers and intellectuals as counterbalances that are "fonctionnels dans la création d'un mécanisme de défense et dans la promotion d'un idéal nationaliste, anti-occidental." (2006, 124) [that function to create a defense mechanism and promote a nationalist,
anti-Western ideal], thus forcing local publishing houses to revise their programs and lists. Indeed, a third discourse develops from what others might proscribe as neo-colonial translation, which may be seen as a desire to resolve a social conflict on the imaginary level of translation, and which, in this case, recommends a “critical though positive distancing from the West” (2006, 126) (My translation).

Mihalache’s work represents a tempered view of what others might see as a strong example of current neo-colonialist translation, and is interesting for its mitigating focus not only on those (Western) forces behind the translations, but also on the reception and effect of the translations from the West. These translations are not only oppressive, repressive, “abusive” materials imposed on a helpless readership; on the contrary, they trigger responses from that readership, and in turn have an effect on local publishing policies. There is movement, discussion, disagreement and innovation as a result. Neo-colonialism or “cultural colonialism” does not simply blanket a helpless target culture; it also triggers responses, shakes things up, and stimulates a third discourse.

This seems to be what the American authors of the Linchpin text have in mind, when they couch their ideas in terms of “dissemination,” “widening of horizons” and even the revelation of “a nation’s soul”. They say little about aggressively exporting values and culture, but keep their purpose very general. For them, the translation of literature is a useful and desirable form of exchange, the fruits of which – the dissemination of information and ideas, the inculcation of nuanced views of foreign cultures, increased empathy and understanding, the recognition of our common humanity – will be on display for a long time. (12)

The contemporary discourse on the dissemination of “high” literature, and especially poetry, coming from the USA and other Western nations may be couched in romantic language evoking horizons and souls, and Eastern European nations may be able to resist its propagandistic aspects, or create a “third voice” in response; however, others are more suspicious, rejecting it outright as neo-imperialist. Nalina Taneja, writing for People’s Democracy, the weekly organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), responded to the Global Cultural Initiative by labeling it as an “initiative through which the US intends to hijack debates on and influence the discourses on religion, identity, sports and other concerns of everyday life, in the interests of imperialism.”
When the Targeted Readers Respond: A Case Study from Germany

Canadian cultural diplomacy, where the translation of literary work has been touted as the primary vehicle of cultural diplomacy since the mid-1990s, has been irregularly financed by the Canada Council for the Arts, a federal agency, and by the Department of Foreign Affairs since the 1970s. Yet Canadian literature has been translated into German for over one hundred years. I have been concerned with only the last thirty years—since Canada’s centenary in 1967—and I formulated four questions in order to study the matter: how are texts selected for translation and for translation funding, and is this selection steered by the Canadian government (as a branding strategy, for example); how do German publishers make their decisions on what to publish and sell; how do the translations themselves deal with the details of Canadian culture, politics, history, and environment—all the specificities that set a text in Canada; and lastly, how are these translations received. What do reviewers (or the targeted readers) make of these materials from such a different place? The results of this project are due to be published in Translating Canada (Flotow and Nischik 2007).

The study shows that the vagaries of public taste, publishing contracts, government funding, literary prizes, and local (target) culture conditions are so complex that control of this process by the government of the exporting country, in this case Canada, is highly unlikely. Equally unlikely is the imposition of a particular literary item or fashion. In the case of two “B” nations like Canada and Germany, where the power differentials that are so telling for postcolonial and neo-colonial theory are far less obvious, it appears that it is the importing culture that makes the decisions in regard to selection. Canadian officials at federal and provincial funding offices and at embassies and consulates merely aid in promotion, financing travel, and defraying the costs of translation.

On the other hand, the history of the German translation of Canadian work seems to show that a joint effort between German publishers and modest Canadian funding has begun to bring some of the mild results that the American committee projects: some dissemination of ideas and information, some nuanced views on Canada, and perhaps increased empathy and understanding.¹ There are, however,
three quite telling moments in the last thirty years of the Canadian-German connection that also show how important the interests of the importing culture are in determining the kinds of materials it will translate. The issues raised in post-colonial or neo-colonial theory seem almost irrelevant here.

One of these moments is the “wilderness-ization” of Canada, especially in translated children’s books, which seem to focus on bad weather, backwoods and bears, and feature only real men braving the elements in the wilderness. The images of Canada promulgated by such books have not changed much over the past 100 years, and the books keep getting re-printed, with Canada remaining the stronghold of the tough male. Only the interpretation changes with the times, with the country moving

from an adventure playground for male protagonists in the 1920s, to a “survival of the fittest” arena for the Aryan heroes during the Nazi regime, to an escape haven for post-war Germans, and finally to a place of spiritual healing and self-discovery that today qualifies as an ecological paradise. (Seifert 2007)

It is interesting that Canada’s cultural policy has had little or no effect on these images; they are disseminated to meet German tastes and fashions. Further, such fashions have occulted other children’s books, those set in urban spaces or featuring female protagonists, for example, thus hampering the development of Canada’s new image or brand as “youthful, diverse, creative, modern.”

In adult writing, literary translation practices and effects have been less obviously homogeneous. In fact, no coherent or sustained translation of adult work began until the 1980s, with women writers then quickly coming to the fore. Much of this translation derived from the success of one person – Margaret Atwood – who became Canada’s bright young talent. In her case, Canadian government policy played a considerable role – supporting her with writing grants, allowing her to travel widely to promote her books, and financing all the translations. Her success in Germany carried over to many other Canadian women writers of the time: Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, Barbara Gowdy, Bonnie Burnard, Mavis Gallant, Elizabeth Hay, and others, whose work was translated and marketed in Germany after Atwood. Again, this was only partly due to Canada’s cultural policy; it had as much to do with international feminism and German feminism, and German readers’ needs that had been created and now had to be met. Virtually every German publisher set up series of “women’s writing” and these had to
be filled. The German literary landscape itself, where feminist books or women’s writing were in a different space, often seen as aggressive crude, shrill, and programmatic, or too introspective, was also an important aspect. Indeed, reviewers constantly return to the judgment that Canadian women were writing texts that addressed women’s lives and interests, but that refrained from polemics, and best of all, told good stories. In other words, a gap in the local production of women’s writing – at a time when such material was fashionable – was filled by importing Canadian books. Not much Canadian government policy was directly involved.

Finally, in the 1990s, Canadian writing of a different sort became useful in Germany; this was multicultural writing, the work produced by so-called “international bastards” (Flotow 2003) who had been born somewhere else, ended up in Canada, and usually continued writing about that other place: Michael Ondaatje (from Ceylon), Alberto Manguel (from Argentina), Rohinton Mistry (from India) are examples. They became interesting for Germany as examples of “multikulti” possibilities, at a time when Germany after unification in 1991 was facing difficulties integrating foreigners into the society. The stories these Canadian writers told, writers who were foreigners and often members of “visible minorities” but also Canadians, were seen to serve as examples of an even more multicultural but much less conflicted situation. Again and again, German reviewers point to their colourful personal backgrounds, focusing more on them than on their literary works, and again, allowing translations to fill a gap in the local literary landscape.

Conclusion

Increased efforts to mobilize “high” literature in translation in the interests of public diplomacy are clearly visible in many countries of the West today, and certainly in the United States, which has to repair the considerable damage done to its image by and during the current Bush administration. These efforts systematically resort to “high” literature as an important element that can “reveal a nation’s soul”, i.e. seduce the target audience through the revelation of the local and the “real,” an aspect of the cultural that is lost in homogenized and globalized popular culture. This activity is, however, redolent of that undertaken by CIA agents and operatives in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, and should perhaps be viewed with caution. Further, such old-fashioned approaches may simply fail because of the much more highly-powered and energetic influence of cyber-communication which bypasses much
government control and in which “high” literature plays a miniscule role. Finally, it appears that targeted cultures have lives of their own, and are not like dry sponges that will soak up another culture. They will often answer back to attempts to propagandize them, or simply select what they view as useful or functional for their particular moment. Whether poetry anthologies or “high” literature carefully selected as bearers of the nation’s soul will arrive intact and seductive in the other culture is far from being certain.

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**Notas**

1 It is noteworthy that this "joint effort" has only caused Canadian work to be imported to Germany. No German works are imported to Canada.