

Border Crossing: Translating Theory

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Abstract

American literary theory has been translated and appropriated in all parts of the world. If literary theory examines the use of language in literary works so as to transform history, society and individual life style, then how can theory overcome national, language and cultural borders? These features of literary theory would seem not to permit this kind of translation because theory depends on the grammatical features of the original text. If good literary theory often comes from reading literary works, how can theory break away from its local origins? The Hebrew and Christian bible story of *Ruth* can serve as a parable of the process of theory transformation. Originally brought up in the Moabite culture, Ruth crosses the border into Israel and transforms or is transformed herself by the new cultural syntax, and is thus assimilated. However, the personal characteristics that she brings with her cannot be completely translated and integrated. Literary theory is similarly stubborn and tenacious, yet it can still be assimilated into other cultures and languages. Several centuries ago, in the West, there were numerous translations, mistranslation or appropriations of the book of *Ruth*. Although theoretical insight often originates from locally specific readers, unless it relates to that reader it is useless. Nonetheless, that insight transfers from its place of origin into any language at the time of reading. Theory's openness to translation is a result of the fact that a theory, despite appearances, is a 'performative', not a cognitive use of language. Just as the performative words of the Christian wedding ceremony are functional only during a specific part of that ceremony, the same words nonetheless can be used

innumerable times to marry innumerable couples; similarly, the formulation of literary theory, derived from the unique act of reading, can be effective in unique new contexts.