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(Lectures from the pre_history of globalization)

Translating Cultures in a Global Context

Translating cultures is a task motivated by the desire for a non_hierarchical encounter between two or more languages, traditions and identities. The material but almost invisible act of translation is an exemplary practice where this encounter continually takes place. Although the shadow of Samuel Huntington's hierarchy of cultural values presently determines global political behavior, perceptions and representations of supposedly clashing macrocultural forces of religious tradition and "civilization" are complicated by the borderline identities which emerge through postnational encounters and exchanges and perform a less combative vision for the future of global cultural coexistence.

The commitment to a universal force of subjectivity which transcends particular linguistic and cultural belonging insists on emancipation from the strictures from the native articulation of class, gender and identity. This hybrid performance of the cultural "in between" is defined by the communication across languages and cultures, the universe of translation that emerges between the interacting economies.

The strong need for expertise in 'foreign' languages is not only essential for purposes of mutual intelligibility between different 'national' languages and cultures, but also for larger processes of cross_cultural hybridization that produce new and different types of identity. Translation therefore denotes not only the craft of the 'literary' translator, but also a larger cultural formation that emerges through the global flow of exiles, emigrants and refugees. The interaction between two or more 'national' traditions is affected by the processes of translation whose articulation requires not only a constantly shifting theoretical endeavor, but also the combination of empirical research and intellectual practice committed to the non hierarchical study of global cultures.

It is not only "literary" and "technical" translation practices that are important in these processes. Besides these invaluable_yet underrated semiotic practices, there is a translation that occurs as a "practice of everyday life" for those who find themselves in the ranks of exiles, emigrants and refugees. These diasporic identities experience displacement as a result of ethnic conflict, economic pressures and other factors which contribute to the processes of globalization.

Cultural origins of different nations are often narrated through the agonistic vision of "one's own" specific story of collective glory and its past, present and future adversaries. The concept of cultural translation is meant both to describe the emergent field of academic study devoted to the cultural "in_between" and a performative theory of everyday life within different regions of the global community.

Academic experts interested in crossing between traditional area studies boundaries will confront a type of knowledge that requires a dialogic or polylogic articulation, making the expertise in "lesser_taught" languages even more important. Some of the questions opened up by the contact between cultures are the following: What happens when disparate 'national stories' are placed into interactions in cases of forced displacement or global economic migrations? How do relationships between cultures of birth and exile affect core definitions of the "native"? How do these new, hybrid forms of cultural interaction 'translate' and domesticate particular political practices?

The emergence of postnational identities may themselves be rooted in a long prehistory of cosmopolitan co_existence pointed out by James Clifford in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Harvard UP, 1997), 276. While not forgetting that most of the examples cited by Clifford came into being within the political framework of empires (Levantine culture studies by Amiel Alkalai, for example) let us also add the Balkans to the list of topographic nodes where at times violent encounters between European and Asian powers unleashed not only ethnic authoritarianism, but also a complex interaction of cultural traditions that produced multidimensional and hybrid cultural identities.

The task of Walter Benjamin's translator was to bear witness to the strangeness of languages and cultures in their perpetual encounter. It was exactly the space of the cultural "in_between" opened up by translation that recognized layers of possible meanings which could be used both to obscure and elucidate "the original". The diasporic cultures evolving out of political and economic collisions are given the possibility of articulating a different mode of identity in the fallout of almost always agonistically intoned histories rooted in narratives of the homeland and its memories.

Within the context of present global migrations, Clifford's and Brecher's call for a "globalization from

below" sounds truly appealing, since both the translational performance of everyday life for persons immersed in diasporic complexities and the unchecked transnational neo_racism of global corporations require a theoretical discourse that would keep the striving for cross_cultural dialogue alive. Resisting the globalizing screen song of the new world order is not an easy task, since the message of all_consuming universalism has no root in any recognizable discourse of identity or difference, but builds the very notion of transgression into its message.

According to Aleida Assman, longing for a universal culture was born within Christianity as a fable and a faith that the confusion of tongues after punishment for the Tower of Babel will be fixed through the missionary work of the clergy guided by the mysterious contradiction of the holy spirit. Christian relationship to language as a universal mission and power was effective in advancing the Western civilization because disciples and apostles were defined as agents of the holy spirit that promoted the all embracing reach of the divine.

The following fragment of Eastern Orthodox liturgy manifests the pentecostal rapture of those whose tongues were burning with the fire of identification with the divine:

"Once, the tongues were divided at the occasion of the Tower of Babel. But now, tongues are filled with wisdom due to the glory of knowing God. [...] The epiphany of the holy spirit has united the divided tongues of those who were parted in strife. [...] When he confused the languages, the Holy One divided the nations. When he distributed the tongues of fire, he summoned all to unity." Ernst Benz, Geist und Leben der Ostkirche (67)

According to Assman, a fundamental paradigm shift took place in Christian semiotics, introducing the split between the material letter of the Hebrew Bible and the immaterial meaning opened by the agency of the holy spirit in the Gospels. The Gospel truth was guaranteed beyond language by the mysterious third element that supplements the binary bond between the writer and the reader. "In establishing a norm of such a spiritual core of meaning, language and writing are reduced to conventional sign systems."

(Assman: Iser, 87). Therefore, writing's aura of holiness fades as translation and interpretation intensify by separating themselves from "the origin~ holy spirit displaces and supplements the material letter and promotes transcendence and translation from Hebrew into Greek and Latin at first. Translations into a myriad of vernaculars in the modern period are followed by the increased faith in the unifying agency of the transcendental meaning as the literal Hebrew is

gradually suppressed, while its speakers, Lyotard's "the jews", are transformed into a people with whom Europe cannot come to terms, but often prosecutes and repeatedly eliminates them. The mythic linguistic differentiation at Babel was visited upon the chosen nation as a result of human arrogance in usurping the fulness of divine signification. The pre_Babelic universe was imagined as a place where there is no need for translation. Painful misunderstandings between nations no longer exist, there is no need for war and aggression, since language is now in the order of the Hebrew ekhad. According to Aleida Assman, the pre_Babelic language perhaps used only intransitive words.

The imaginary relationship between linguistic unity and disorder displayed in Babelic mythology is the most powerful symptom of diasporic narratives tied to the Jews and their Christian tormentors. The cultural translation failed repeatedly as significations of the host countries were articulated on the level where only strangeness and foreignness could describe "the jew" as he remained separated from the horizontal domination of Christian transcendence that began with Christ's messianic performance and continued through the translational agency of the Holy Spirit. The metaphor of the fiery tongue employed by the gospels functions as a figure of desire for regained unity in Jerusalem.

The instance of the figurative in language, displayed in Christian fiery tongues, may be rooted in this detachment from the literal into the ambiguous zone of cultural meanings that are subject to the translational processes of constant negotiation. Wolfgang Iser turns to the concept of performance to account for the continuing operation of translational forces within language.

If connotation in language arises out of a translation of the literal into the figurative, the literal meaning is simultaneously bracketed yet visible in order to provide guidance for what is to be figured. What is bracketed and not meant is used to delineate what the figurative adumbrates, and this reshuffling can at best be described as a performance, arising out of the difference between the literal and the figurative. (The Translatability of Cultures, 295)

The capacity of language to gradually internalize this translational dimension ostensibly betrays the use of writing contained in the indivisibility of ekhad. The imaginary quest for regained unity at Jerusalem

that guided medieval Crusades was based on this figurative quest for unity as a foundation of most Western conceptions of universal civilization. The colonial project of empires was deeply rooted in this spirit of mission and conquest that employed translation both to organize daily administration and produce hybrid identities as a side effect of cultural translation across the colonial divide.

Within the post_colonial context, the translator's role is performed between the poles of collaboration with the dominant cultural forces and a resistance articulated through the transformative intervention in the existing global hierarchies. Lawrence Venuti presents the translator's dilemma as a struggle for emergence from the invisibility imposed by the monocultural bias of English.

The translator, who works with varying degrees of calculation, under continuous self_monitoring and often with active consultation of cultural rules and resources (from dictionaries and grammars to other texts, translation strategies, and translations, both canonical and marginal), may submit to or resist dominant values in the target language, with either course of action susceptible to ongoing redirection. Submission assumes an ideology of assimilation at work in the translation process, locating the same in a cultural other, pursuing a cultural narcissism that is imperialistic abroad and conservative, even reactionary, in maintaining canons at home.

Resistance assumes an ideology of autonomy, locating the alien in the cultural other, pursuing cultural diversity, foregrounding the linguistic and cultural differences of the source_language text and transforming the hierarchy of cultural values in the target language. Resistance too can be imperialistic abroad, appropriating foreign texts to serve its own cultural political interests at home; but insofar as it resists values that exclude certain texts, it performs an act of cultural restoration which aims to question and possibly reform, or simply smash the idea of, domestic canons. (The Invisibility of the Translator, 308_9)

The translational reality produced by the collision of the universalising forces of empires with the local contexts of colonized populations is performed through at least two interactional modes, symptomatic of different theories of cultural translation symptomatic of assimilation and resistance.

Aleida Assman illustrates the Interactional Mode of the One or 'assimilation' by a quote from J.W. Goethe: "The most beautiful metempsychosis is the one in which we recognize ourselves in the shape of the other." The Romantic desire for metempsychosis, for leaving the cocoon of the mundane reality and morphing into the other is characterized by the assimilationist tendencies that intimidate or annihilate the other. The narcissistic recognition of "my own" self in the other denies similar pleasures to the other, as it relegates it to the position of the mirror or the screen in which the Hegelian self contemplates its self_reflection. This masculinist theory of cultural translation could be appropriated for colonial projects in which the other is loved with the embrace that transforms its otherness into a function of the self or leaves the other rejected and scorned as lower and inferior.

To counter this theory of the choking embrace, Assman presents a quote from Hugo von Hoffmannstahl: "In the embrace, strangeness and estrangement are fatal, cruel, paradox__ in the encounter, each is shrouded in its eternal solitude as in a precious cloak." This is the Interactional Mode of the Two which recognizes the shroud which separates the participants in the seductive encounter between cultures, where giving oneself over to the other is not prescriptive and normative but situational and performative. This mode of interaction is characteristic of diasporic and migrant cultures which pair survival with performances of the in_between of languages and identities. Homi Bhabha calls this indeterminacy of diasporic identity "the migrant culture of the 'in between, the minority position" which "dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability; and in so doing, it moves the question of culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream, or the racist's nightmare, Benjamin's 'full transmissal of subject_matter' and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference." (IOC,224)

Von Hoffmannstahl's precious cloak of solitude guarantees the singularity of culture as an effect of difference, a guarantee that the encounter will leave shrouded what each of the participants regards as better left unspoken. The silence of the nation finds itself best performed when one is outside the native territory, locked in the diasporic encounter with the adopted idiom, almost always bound to bilingual or multilingual situations. The constant displacement of the 'old self' or the native country by the mere volume of increase in the steady amount of silence in the native language is responsible for a certain "cultural fadirlg" which increases personal diversity at the expense of the "native." The art of cohabitation of cultures, nurtured by translational performances of finite duration give birth to the cosmopolitan side of

globalism.

Let me end with the dilemma of epistemological clarity that results from the hybridization of cultures through translational processes as articulated by Gabriel Motzkin in his excellent essay on "Memory and Cultural Translation:"

The blurring of cultural boundaries obscures the task of translation. Cultural interpenetration appears to mean that the act of translation becomes less difficult. But is this so? Or does the convergence of cultures not rather make translation more difficult as the boundaries between the own and the other seem to fade? Does not translation rather imply that what is read, assimilated, and therefore remembered, hovers at the edge of identity, as something that is neither quite own nor quite other? (~C 26)

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