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Translation in the field of ideological struggle

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"Cultural translation", as vulgarised in cultural studies, presupposes a notion of culture akin to the conception of language that has prompted the very introduction of the "secondary" notion of culture: it implicitly conceives culture as "a system of self-identical norms" (Voloshinov). In the strong version (Butler), cultural system is modelled upon the juridical ideology, and participates to the juridico-political universalism that presently legitimises various imperial enterprises (bringing democracy and law to Ukraine, Georgia, Kirgistan, Iraq, ...). In its soft version (Bhabha), the notion organises itself around the presumably non-translatable "element of resistance", and participates in the identitary preoccupations of the "politics of recognition" (Taylor). The two variations define the field of the contemporary *koiné* of domination.

Voloshinov traces "abstract objectivism" in linguistics back to the philological tradition, which initially works upon foreign and dead languages, and finally treats any language as "dead and foreign". It should be added that linguistics becomes science in the modern nomothetic sense rather late in the philological tradition, and only when preoccupation with ancient languages gives way to the treatment of modern languages, their genealogies, accomplishments and their spirit – that is, with the articulation of

philology to the nation building. At that historical moment, language was directly conceived as "culture" (Herder, Humboldt), and, accordingly, the aporias of universalism and relativism, which our times encounter on the level of "culture", then tended to emerge within the properly linguistic horizon. The category of "national language", however, made it possible to by-pass or at least to alleviate these contradictions, as it was capable outwardly to operate as specification of human universality, and inwardly as neutralisation of ideological plurality. Or, in other terms, "national language" could support a universalistic construction by functioning in an egalitarian way within the homogeneous dimension (every language was supposed to be in principle equal to any other), and could integrate a contradictory society by the hierarchical impact of its "neutrality" within the heterogeneous dimension (operating as a "neutral" matrix of mutual translatability of discourses, national language simultaneously established a hierarchical order among them; indeed, not even its various usages were supposed to be of an equal value).

In the time of cultural identities, this solution no more applies. What used to be "the spirit of a people" (*Volksgeist*), is now either a pre-modern survival and an obstacle to the blessings of globalisation, or an irreducible kernel of a unique experience to be nurtured by an identitary group and recognised by the apparatuses of universalism. Although the two figures are opposed to each other, they are not necessarily antagonistic, since they both radically *de-politicise* social relations. They are currently used as complementary strategies to block resistances and to integrate local particularities into the system of domination.

According to the romanticist view (Schleiermacher), a translation could either bring the original to the reader's language, or bring the reader to the original: in the first case, it deformed the original

experience, in the second, it denaturalised the reader's mother tongue. What was formulated as the aporia of translation in Romanticism, takes the form of a double process of de-politicisation *cum* domination to-day: translation of the Afghan or Iraqi social relations into what we are told we should take as a "democratic" idiom, re-articulates those societies in "tribal", ethnic, religious terms; but at the same time, this translation deeply transforms the post-revolutionary institution of (bourgeois) democracy. Translated into "our" Western idiom, those societies sink into intestine war; translation once performed, "our" democratic idiom is no more the same, for it is now an idiom of ethnic, religious etc. strife.

Goethe was more optimistic, and distinguished three stages in the process of translation: starting from the appropriation of the foreign text in one's own terms, translation could eventually achieve an "identical" rendering of the original – having passed through an intermediary phase where "one tries to put oneself into the situation of the foreigner, but really one only appropriates and reproduces the foreign in one's own sense". This intermediary phase, Goethe claimed, could be called "parodic in the purest sense of the word". Goethe's enigmatic formulation cannot be resolved by resorting to a Greek dictionary. The best ones would refer you to Quintilian: parody is a chant modulated in a similar way as some other chant, and this imitation can also be abusive. While always being a parallel song (*Beigesang*), parody can at times be a mocking song (*Gegengesang*) (Lloyd).

And so is translation: it attempts to "follow" the "original", its pre-text – and at times, it fails. In a fundamental sense, translation is a

discourse oriented towards another discourse. Bahtin distinguishes two main types of such an orientation:

1. One-directional discourse runs in the same sense as the discourse towards which it is oriented; translation would normally be of this type.

2. In multi-directional discourse, however, the other-oriented discourse runs in a direction differing from, or opposed to, the direction of its other. Bahtin's example of this type is precisely parody. But such would also be a translation at the places where it eventually fails.

Goethe's "parodic in its purest sense" would then be "parodic in its amphibolic sense", and would perfectly describe the vagaries of the process of translation. However, if we take Bahtin's theory seriously, neither orientation towards another discourse nor one/multi-directionality could be viewed as a privilege of certain genres and, in a modified sense, of translations: any discourse necessarily entertains multiple relations with other discourses – this is the reality of the struggle for the "meaning". Without referring to other discourses, a particular discourse would not be able to produce meaning; it would actually be unable to produce itself.

A translation certainly can one-directionally follow a multi-directional pre-text. Its specificity *qua* translation resides rather in the risk to assume a multi-directional course because of failing to follow the pre-text at the point where it (one- or multi-directionally) refers to another discourse. The distinctive feature of translation may lie in the specificity of its possible failure: it may turn multi-directional because of missing a particular instance of other-orientation of the pre-text. That would mean that it may

unwillingly, actually unknowingly, ignore, and ultimately exclude, a certain piece of the pre-text's historical materiality.

This, however, is again a familiar mechanism of inter-discursive operations, e.g., in the production of "tradition" or "history": post-communist constructions about "totalitarianism" efface past political struggles and paradoxically bring the endeavours of the past power-holders to a completion that they could not have achieved in their time. Such constructions obliterate past potentialities in order to block the present ones. They totalise the past in order to close down the horizon of the present. In this sense, they certainly contribute to the building of a "culture". And in this perspective, one could call them "*cultural translations*".

But then again, it would be theoretically more productive to treat them as *verwandelte Formen*, *prevrashchennye formy* (Mamardashvili). Such an attempt might actually further develop some of the motives that remain on the level of intuitions in Mamardashvili's text. Here is a sketch.

"Communist totalitarianism" is a *verwandelte Form* in the following sense:

1. It articulates two "spheres" one of which over-determines the other. In Marx, the two spheres are production and circulation; in our case, the two "spheres" would be the multiplicity of historical processes and the instable conjuncture of their provisional, temporary effects.

2. It is an element within the "sphere" that is over-determined, and it there "takes the place" of one or more elements or processes within the over-determining "sphere". In Marx, profit is, within the sphere of circulation, a transformed form, and a supplement, of what is surplus value in production;

salary transforms-supplements the value of labour-force etc. In our case, a certain selective presentation of historical processes would constitute an important element-mechanism in the conjuncture: "liberation from communist totalitarianism" is presented so as to legitimise the conjectural imposition of certain historical processes and social relations against the others.

3. It retroactively constitutes, within the over-determining sphere, the element which it supplements within the over-determined sphere, and thus saturates, totalises the over-determining sphere itself. In Marx, the value of a commodity is defined as the socially necessary quantity of abstract labour spent in its production; but this quantity is only determined when the commodity is "realised" upon the market, i.e., within the sphere of circulation, and then only by the mediation of the general profit rate (which, as an element of circulation, is itself a *verwandelte Form*, dependent for its constitution upon the very value it retroactively fixes). Our case is simpler: "communist totalitarianism" retroactively determines the form of certain historical processes (it deprives them of their political and conflictual character) and their contents (repression and submissive resignation). It thereby totalises them into a historical "past", articulated to the "present" by the very *impossibility to think* the link between the two. It determines *how* the "present" is to be over-determined by the "past".

4. It imposes its own formulation of over-determination as a systemic constraint upon the over-determined sphere. In Marx, competition among singular capitals governs over them *als äußerliches Zwangsgesetz*, disciplines them to act in the interest of the capitalist class as a whole and to reproduce

> capitalist relations, and breaks down the sum-total of the surplus value, produced proportionally to the input of the necessary labour, into aliquots of the forwarded capitals. In our case, a transformed presentation of past relations of domination imposes present domination as necessary, and disciplines both the dominating and the dominated into their respective roles.

We could now start to develop a concept of translation as a mechanism of transposition that results in the production of a *verwandelte Form*. We could eventually call such a translation "cultural", since it in fact has to do with ideological mechanisms. However, such a term would be misleading. Although the modern autonomous cultural sphere has been established as being "beyond" the political struggles and as basically a-political; although the oblivion of the socio-historical mechanisms of its emergence has always been one of its constitutive moments; and although its very production was a manoeuvre in the historical rise of the new classes, and the basis of a new class-compromise (Breznik), culture has nevertheless always defined itself in opposition to the existing political sphere – whilst now, culturalisation is a mechanism of the destruction of political sphere.

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