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The Answer is in Translation

Tomislav Longinović / Boris Buden

Boris Buden: The most interesting question raised in your "Manifesto of Cultural Translation"[1] is its literary form, the typical modernist form of the manifesto. Whether Communist or Futurist, Surrealist or Dadaist manifestos are constructed in view of something historically new. They address the broader public, not in order to inform or explain, but to act. This performative quality is characteristic of every manifesto. Hence, we will search in vain for a clear-cut definition of this phenomenon in the "Manifesto of Cultural Translation." Cultural translation is for you rather an activity, *praxis* or a "practice of everyday life." You openly stress its performative character. It is therefore a form of subjectification as well. In their first manifesto, the Russian Futurists assert the right "to stand on the rock of the word *we*." There is a similar "we" in your manifesto, the "we" of "cultural translators."

My questions are very simple: first, who are those cultural translators?

Tomislav Longinović: It is true that the performative iteration inhering in the form of the manifesto calls for new subjects and new becomings inherent in the task of cultural translation. The

question of translators' identity remains at all times within the horizon of crossing boundaries between communities and their particular idioms, in displacements informing their particular routes of cultural exchange. It is also within the perspective of possible futures that the likelihood of new communities based on the experience of identity-in-translation is theorized through the manifesto, the convergence of cultural translators outside the extensions of particular ethnic communities characteristic of the dominant immigrant experience nowadays. It is especially important to theorize this movement away from the ethnically-based diaspora, since these are often responsible for the development of hard ethnic cores of identity politics.

Boris Buden: What is their aim?

Tomislav Longinović: Whether migrant workers, itinerant intellectuals or war victims, these subjects experience the hard edges of the cultural divide as they struggle for identity in the game of cultural and linguistic survival. Their aim is therefore informed by the heteronomy of continuing life and therefore irreducible to a single teleology. Manifesting difference is part of this sequence of becoming across cultures, as the new subjects are produced by travel and translation. Since thinking itself has undergone a profound crisis under the conditions of the postmodern cultural regime, the manifesto invokes the horizon of a possible solidarity based on the common experience of cultural difference, therefore the use of the "we," the suspect pronoun so maligned by the mass ideologies of the past century. The imagined forms of possible thought are therefore the counterweight to the pessimism haunting the postmodern intellectual often locked in the glass cage of academic research and expertise.

Boris Buden: How do they wish to achieve this aim?

Tomislav Longinović: The practice of cultural translation is an experience set by the exchange between subjects caught up in the flow of global identifications. This aim may be theorized *a posteriori* as an attempt to appropriate social power by the practice of cultural translation, which is a position they seek within the adoptive culture and are denied by the monocultural biases of the homelands they seek to make their own. The oxymoronic turn of the phrase contained in the concept of the "adopted homeland" is symptomatic of this predicament of cultural translators caught up in the perpetual in-between. The resolution of the assimilation/resistance binary within the host culture determines the success or failure of identity produced in the process of translation, which is the philosophical category that will become dominant in the globalizing universe we are increasingly facing.

Boris Buden: What you are saying is that we can think of cultural translation in terms of a specific cultural experience and that this cultural experience has its social substratum – exiles, immigrants and refugees, in short, people who share the experience of translation as a "practice of everyday life." However, they don't constitute a common political subject, at least, not yet. This of course doesn't mean that they don't share a certain political experience, for instance, the experience of, as you write, "global inequality" or "fearful asymmetry in the rate and value of the minor culture's representation." What do you mean precisely by this? Can we speculate here about a certain "passage to politics" as being an intrinsic potential of cultural translation?

Tomislav Longinović: Choosing the form of the manifesto has definitely been guided by the desire to articulate a certain type of emergent practice in the fallout of economic globalization and its mostly devastating effects. It is also unavoidable to take up a certain position, since nowadays the naïve trust in the position outside the political can only be constructed by those who are in power and need to cover up their operating mechanisms. The process of cultural translation "lays bare" the mechanisms that naturalize existing asymmetries and inequalities, since most of the agents of cultural translation perceive the shortcomings of monolingual fantasies due to their in-between position on the border between different national discourses. It is true that I find myself speaking "in the name of" those who may not choose to speak themselves, hoping to manifest the very possibility of a new type of transnational/translational political horizon beyond the binaries of global/local, capitalist/communist, cosmopolitan/provincial etc. This kind of political motivation is also the starting point of my research project *The Secret of Translation: A Manifesto of Border Cultures*, which has taken up most of my thinking in the past decade. Using the tools of translation theory, I try to extend its reach into the realm of the politics of representation and de-naturalize hierarchies offered to the contemporary consumer of news, images and sounds. So, hopefully, my writing "in the name of" will neither turn into the hypocrisy of the latter-day commissars nor into the apathy of the latter-day yogis, to use Arthur Koestler's metaphor. The passage to politics based on a common ecological platform would therefore be a very desirable outcome of cultural translation, since humanist-based thought needs to confront the limits of its planetary survival and move away from the myths promoted by both the nationalists and the

globalists in the current simulation of politics without a proper subject.

Boris Buden: Can you tell us more about this research project *The Secret of Translation: A Manifesto of Border Cultures*. What is its field of research precisely, both theoretically and—in a broader sense—culturally? What is the role of literature – including the experience of literary translations – and literary theory in the project?

Tomislav Longinović: My interest and motivation for writing a book devoted to translation broadly conceived has grown out of *The Cultural Translation Project (CTP)*, a research initiative funded by the International Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the duration of three years, between 1999-2001. As the director of this higher education initiative, I have done all I could to introduce translation studies into the traditional humanities curriculum based on the "national" paradigm. The project was imagined as a gathering of a varied group of faculty and students from different disciplines in the humanities. Their diverse approaches to the notions of "culture" and "translation" opened up a new perspective on the ways in which both individual and group identities are understood, i.e. as movement and exchange across the boundaries of a particular notion of culture, rather than as monumental categories petrified by the malignancies of the nationalist imaginary. The workshops, speaker series and seminars were devoted to the traversal of cultural interfaces to witness the performance of new transnational identities and hybrid artistic and intellectual practices.

The *CTP* was founded in part as a response to the University of Wisconsin's call to re-imagine the humanities in the context of a global, post-national and post-disciplinary intellectual environment. Partly, the need to create this advanced learning entity was based on research that moves beyond traditional models for understanding transnational cultural exchanges (Derrida, Spivak, Bhabha, Appadurai etc). The restrictive models or highly idiosyncratic understandings of the matter "exchanged" between cultures, of the cultures themselves and of both the material and intellectual means employed in these exchanges were exploded with the demise of the notion of the nation. As global subjectivity was increasingly determined by communication across languages and cultures, the universe emerging between interacting economies was rooted in processes of translation beyond the linguistic, as a far broader scope and rate of cultural exchange emerged at the end of the passing era of nations and their simplified imaginary totalities.

This meant that a strong expertise in "foreign" languages was not only essential for purposes of mutual intelligibility between different "national" cultures, but also for the larger processes of cross-cultural hybridization, which produce new and different types of identity that are crucial for understanding the directions of cultural development in a posthumanist universe. Translation also heightened the awareness and need for non-translation, the in depth study of languages which articulate a particular vision of culture by resisting crossing over to the other side by featuring various strategies of untranslatability. The *CTP* forwarded the notion that "translation" denotes not only the art and the craft of the "literary" or "technical" translator, but also a larger cultural formation that emerges through the global flow of exiles, emigrants and refugees I mentioned before. Therefore, the concept of cultural translation simultaneously encompassed an emergent

field of humanist study and imagined a model of everyday life for a global community.

Boris buden: In order to accomplish his or her task today's cultural translator should, as you write, identify with the role of the medieval alchemist. What is the point of this comparison?

Tomislav Longinović: The metaphor of the alchemist was employed to invoke both the political position of the person involved in the processes of cultural translation and to reference the field itself. On the one hand, the alchemist stands at the very cusp of change between the medieval and the modern understanding of the universe and its realities, bringing together the spiritual and the material, faith and science through the work of the *transformatio*. I believe that we also stand at the cusp of change in the historical arena as well—the postmodern condition persists despite the seeming exhaustion of the forms and models it recycles, yet the horizon of change we see in the political arena, for example, Latin America's turn to the Left, denotes a certain response that goes beyond the expected in the neo-liberal universe of economic determinism. An interesting cultural translation project would be to trace the displacements of "the specters of Marx" from Eastern Europe to Latin America, to observe how the movement of communist-based ideology migrates from one continent to the other and to scrutinize the transformation of cultural forms it takes in the process. This is connected to the second reason for invoking alchemy: the mercurial nature of culture itself, the unpredictable flows of which seem to hide the secret of each collective identity shrouded in its own veil of untranslatability. This secret is often based on some violent and

traumatic cultural artifact, which the work of cultural translation strives to externalize and render readable in order to mitigate the effects of silence and secrecy on which most authoritarian politics base their power.

Boris Buden: You mentioned Arthur Koestler, one of the best examples of a "multilingual" intellectual of the 20th century. Interestingly, his most famous novel *Darkness at Noon* exists only as a translation without an original. Its German original has been lost, so that the German *Sonnenfinsternis* is a sort of "translation from translation" or a *Rückübersetzung* (translation back) into German. But the very topic of the novel – the experience of terror we call totalitarianism today—seems to transcend particular cultural and historical contexts. Can you too think, in a figurative sense of course, based on your own experience of a "darkness at noon" today, meaning the bloody collapse of former Yugoslavia in the wake of the "democratic revolutions" of 1989? I am asking about your personal motivation behind the task of cultural translation, a motivation that is personal precisely since it has a historical meaning, in short, the experience of history in its utmost personal sense.

Tomislav Longinović: I have a story similar to Koestler's regarding my first novel *Moment of Silence* (Burning Books: San Francisco, 1990), which was first published in English and only seven years later in Serbo-Croatian as *Minut Ćutanja* (Radio B92: Belgrade, 1997). The novel was the work of mourning for the last lost generation of Yugoslav youth. It was a case of *Rückübersetzung* and also a case of translating back-and-forth in which a sense of what is the original and what is the translation gets radically confused. And

I suppose the same issue is at stake in the question of my own identity and personal placement regarding issues of translation. This question really points to the true motivation behind the project, since I have been strongly affected by the collapse of Yugoslavia in my own writing and ways of relating to matters of theory. Although I left the country in 1982 to participate in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, the events of the next decade profoundly shook me in my sense of being and belonging. I can truly say that I left Yugoslavia in the last moments of its existence, at least for a generation of youth I was involved with at that time. The intensity of cultural exchanges between the then twenty-somethings from Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo and Zagreb pointed to a clear European integration of the entire country. Of course, most of those creative kids did not support the unified cultural space of Yugoslavia as some nebulous project of the party ideologues—they simply lived toward a common future based on popular culture (the so-called *new wave* in music acted as a unique cultural medium of exchange) and were interested in overcoming the narrow-minded practices of the communist party apparatchiks of the day. Paradoxically, they all shared a common left-of-center orientation from the peace and hippie movements, tempered with a certain post-punk irony. It was truly tragic to watch as the older generation began tearing the country apart, first with its retrograde rhetoric and then with snipers and bombs. People were forced to take sides in nationalist disputes, as silent cores of traumatic memory were given free reign to find surrogate victims. The outside world responded with its own cultural labels of the region, resurrecting visions of the Balkans as the "powder keg" of Europe and as the realm of endemic ethnic disputes. In the meantime, innocent civilians died while the nationalist elites stuffed their pockets with stolen resources of the former common state. So, while the global media's gaze enforced a

vision of "tribal warfare" and local media involved itself with demonizing their newly found ethnic others, I decided to try and find the idiom through which the "third voice" could be heard. The medium of translation seemed the best way to approach this minefield, since you always run the risk of being accused of a number of intellectual crimes by all sides involved. Therefore, when I visit my native Belgrade, they see me as "American" as soon as I raise my voice against their nationalist phantasmagorias—while in the United States I am never allowed to declare myself as "Yugoslav" without the inevitable second and third question about "who are you really?" I guess the answer is in translation only.

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1 Tomislav Z. Longinovic, "Fearful Asymmetries: A Manifesto of Cultural Translation," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 35, No. 2, "Translating in and across Cultures" (Autumn, 2002), pp. 5-12