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Edited by Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood:

Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation

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Introduction

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There has probably never been a time when issues of nation, language, and translation have been more important or more troubling than they are today. In a world where individual nation-states are increasingly enmeshed in financial and information networks, where multiple linguistic and national identities can inhabit a single state's borders or exceed them in vast diasporas, where globalization has its serious—and often violent—discontents, and where terrorism and war transform distrust into destruction, language and translation play central, if often unacknowledged, roles. Though the reasons for this are undeniably complex, they are, at least in broad terms, understandable. Waves of migrating peoples have made the contemporary nation-state, and especially its urban centers, into global sites with multiplicities of languages and cultures.[1] At the same time, the international trade, finance, and information technologies that support these sites both depend upon and often seek to bypass translation for economic growth within world and regional markets.

The global reach of international law and politics only heightens the importance of language and translation. Military networks, governmental agencies, as well as international entities such as the United Nations, the United Arab Emirates, and the European Union translate for purposes of intelligence, negotiation, and the dissemination of information or propaganda, as do the growing number of nongovernmental (NGOs) agencies, be they religious or secular. Global media and information networks provide news and interviews on a minute-to-minute basis to serve multiple linguistic constituencies as well as specific cultural and political purposes.

In a world of rapidly transforming populations and technologies, where language and citizenship are caught up in tightly woven webs of economic, military, and cultural power, language and translation operate at every juncture. Indeed so central is translation's role that, as Ilan Stavans recently noted, with only a hint of hyperbole, "modernity . . . is not lived through nationality but . . . through translationality."[2]

Yet if language and translation have become increasingly important in national and international relations, and in the processes of "globalization" more

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generally, their role as cultural as well as linguistic entities is only beginning to be theorized. The social sciences, that have so well described our political, economic, military, and information networks, have, for the most part, ignored these issues or considered them simply a necessary interface. This is most likely because, in their very texture, these linguistic matters belong so fully to what we traditionally think of as the humanities. Yet closely considered, language and translation in fact open up the unavoidable complexities, the historically ingrained problems and prejudices, and the intense day-to-day negotiations that occupy our interwoven global communities, setting into stark relief the difficult suturing of global networks and the over-stressed joints of the international body politic. They tend to raise questions about linguistic power and the dissemination of texts in various media; they bring to the fore issues of human rights as well as intellectual property; they also illuminate disparities among states, nations, and local traditions, and the often tragic problems of linguistic and cultural diasporas; they reveal complex multiplicities in the shadow of apparent unity.

Only a more deeply nuanced understanding of these linguistic ligatures, and a heightened awareness of their relationship to the national as well as to the "post-national," and "subnational," can begin to parse the painful dialectics of local and global, past and present, that cross the contemporary world. Pursued in greater detail, they might begin to sketch a humanistic complement to the theorization of today's economic and information complex by the social sciences and urge, in the process, a very different, more reflective, and more culturally variegated "global consciousness."

The essays in this collection afford an opportunity to rethink national, subnational, and international connections and conflicts, their histories and their futures, from the specific standpoint of language and translation. Though the essays consider a large range of texts, languages, and cultures, all circle around the same densely interwoven issues: (1) the nation, both its discursive construction and its dismantling; (2) language, as a site of power, a means of active communication, and a scene of epistemological reflection; and (3) the ethics of translation, a topic that, as each of these contributions in one way or another reveals, underlies and amplifies our understanding of both of the other, apparently broader, themes.

The Legacy of Cultural Studies and Literary Theory

Wide-ranging in subject matter and diverse in approach, these essays depend upon a recognizable legacy of thought from both cultural studies and literary theory. The work of Benedict Anderson, Timothy Brennan, Partha Chatterjee, Neil Lazarus, Bruce Robbins, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gauri Viswanathan, Robert J. C. Young, and others has brought to our attention the many ways in which nationhood inevitably depends upon cultural—and specifically linguistic—means for its creation, its colonial and imperialist extension, and also its dismantling.[3] Benedict Anderson's well-known description of the nation as an "imagined community," Edward Said's discussion of Orientalism, and Michel Foucault's notion of "discursive formations,"[4] have underscored the cultural—and especially linguistic—build, maintenance, and "unbundling" of national identities. Though foundational narratives might claim an originary moment and underlying unity, these more recent critical voices show that nationhood is better described as a never-ending, conflictual process driven by changing cultural practices. They reveal, moreover, that a "nation" need not be syonymous with a "state." The two are often articulated in frankly problematic ways, as any number of territorial disputes attest.

The role of language in the process of nationhood is both powerful and complex. As a means of communication that is notably tied to the *demos* (the "we-creating" sense of belonging invoked in essentialist descriptions of the nation)[5] language has always been a defining feature of national identity, even—especially—when this "nation" has become diasporic. Nor is language a neutral element. Consciously or unconsciously, it performs deft feats of appropriation and exclusion, supported by a dialectic of otherness. Creating and relying upon notions of cultural difference, groups underscore our "we," our identity and our solidarity. Through what Said has identified as Orientalism, through racism in its multiple forms, or through apparently more benign forms of ethnic, religious, or national enthusiasm, we create solidarity by excluding, marginalizing, if not vilifying and making enemies of, groups identified as other. The rhetoric of war or of propaganda provides ready examples of this strategy. Yet, as Hegel and his heirs have taught us, the "other" so firmly rejected thereby invariably inhabits any sense of self, any notion of identity. It is a strategy we live with in the public world, as in our private lives, on a daily basis.

From this awareness of language's role in the creation of identities have emerged powerful literary and cultural critiques of nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism, and an intellectual vigilance about the complex heteronomy that inheres in all of our constructed solidarities. Seeking to describe, interpret, and ultimately emancipate cultures and literatures suppressed by a legacy of more powerful groups, values, and paradigms, literary and cultural critiques have opened new paths. This has been particularly notable in studies described by the debated term "postcolonialism," a multifaceted approach seeking to understand and rectify the literary and cultural consequences of colonialism in both colonizing and colonized countries, now and in the past.[6]

As is well known, language has often been implicated in efforts to mute a past and, with it, a sense of cultural identity. In the current era, the problem of linguistic 'colonialism' continues in a specific form. Compelled by financial and literary pressure, authors seek to write in English or in one of the other major commercial languages—or else to be quickly translated. Yet despite what is known as "global English," and other locally hegemonic tongues (French, for instance, in parts of Africa and the Middle East, and Mandarin in East Asia), liberatory efforts to assert historical languages and their literary traditions nonetheless persist.

Though efforts to retrieve past languages and literatures extend to cultures and discourses of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as to those buried within dominant cultures in Europe and North America, they may also include gender-specific and class-specific languages and literatures that have failed to find a "home" in the Euro-American space. The importance of such archaeologies, undertaken by peoples around the globe, can hardly be overstated. Unearthing forgotten or excluded linguistic traditions, noting their inevitable interactions with other, more powerful ones, and bringing this knowledge into current discussion are surely some of the most compelling tasks faced in the history of literary studies.[7] Such critiques raise explicit, and often difficult, ethical and political questions concerning the relationship of the national to the international as well as to the subnational, the local to the global, and the esthetic to the political. More self-reflectively, they also highlight ways in which categories of critical analysis can unwittingly subsume the very historical and local particulars they mean to reveal.[8]

Though the discursive reality of nationhood and its dialectic of otherness often drives the literary or cultural critic, the very complexity of language as often makes her pause. For one, language remains radically contingent upon specific local histories and contexts. Cultural practices produce and sustain—and are in turn sustained by—the lexicon and syntax of a given language. Highly particularized cultural markers must therefore be taken into account in any linguistic interpretation—in principle, an infinite task, and a necessarily self-reflective one. Interpreters can always find yet another access to meaning, another pertinent insight, as language weaves its way through dense and rapidly changing webs of culture.

Contemporary epistemological reflections further the sense of a complex alterity at work within language. Inquiries developed throughout the twentieth century in the philosophy of language, psychoanalysis, literary theory, and especially deconstruction, underscore a shared awareness that language can never be viewed as a simple mental tool, or as a transparent medium of representation.[9] On the contrary. Conceived as a process of difference and deferral, scripted by the unconscious, by memory, and by texts and contexts immemorial, language neither mirrors a pure "truth," nor simply reflects discrete referential meanings. Language remains radically impure, haunted by endless semantic contexts and, as emphasized by Derrida and DeMan, an insuperable undecidability. Harboring its own epistemological "otherness," language imposes internal barriers to appropriative understanding as well as to transparent communication. Translation only multiplies this awareness of otherness that inhabits languages as it inhabits human society more generally.

Translation and the Ethical

Indeed, translation (commonly defined as "the rendering from one language into another")[10] illuminates both the *cultural otherness* at stake in contemporary studies of nationhood and the *epistemological otherness* at work in language itself. Engaging both with "nation" *and* with "language," with "cultural studies" *and* with "theory," as well as with more traditional literary history, with close reading and, not the least, with everyday experience in a global context, translation has itself become an important border concept in the humanities, affecting some of the most salient intellectual and ethical issues of our time. It requires attention to cultural values, to economic and political inequalities, to individual choices and, perhaps most obviously, to otherness in its linguistic and cultural forms. In the process, it foregrounds some explicitly ethical questions.

From Schleiermacher's early discussion of the role of translation in the creation of German nationhood (analyzed by Venuti)[11] to twenty-first-century "legal transplants" (discussed here by Legrand), the study of translation has raised important cultural issues of local homelands and "foreign" nations, of national or ethnic histories and global aspirations, as well as of changing power relations. Translators have long agreed that the effort to render one language system into another requires a keen awareness of broad cultural as well as specific linguistic values. It also requires existential choices that are bound to have wide-ranging repercussions for the text and its audience. How much of the "otherness" of the "foreign" should the translator highlight? How much of the foreign should he mute or erase in order to make texts easier for the "home" (target) audience to assimilate? The problems posed demand judgment calls as ethical as they are practical or cognitive.

Translation's distinctive ability to offer insight into the language process itself aligns it with ethics and the question of the foreign in a different, though not unrelated, way. As is frequently noted, translation's etymology—*trans* (across) and *latus*, the past participle of *ferre* (to carry)—suggests a transportation of meaning, a physical displacement. The German *übersetzen* implies the same.[12] Yet only if we conceive of language as a surface element, ready to collapse into meanings that could take a commanding role and, moreover, be fixed in some univocal way, could translation be a simple "carrying across" of concepts from one signifying system to another. The very impossibility of such a feat, long recognized in the history of translation studies, argues for the need to envision language in the more complicated fashion common to twentieth-century theorists. Here, each language bears its own vast and endlessly transforming intertext of socially and historically grafted meanings, along with their graphic and acoustic imagery. Though different languages clearly provide some semantic 'overlap' in their efforts to relate to the referential world, this overlap is only partial, as is attested by Benjamin's famous example of "*Brot*" versus "pain" or Saussure's equally well-known discussion of "*mouton*" versus the English "mutton" *and* "sheep."[13] If language is not a simple nomenclature for pre-established and universally recognized "meanings," as most contemporary language philosophers agree, translation can never be a complete or transparent transferal of semantic content. Yet even in its imperfect, or simply creative negotiations of difference, translation provides a necessary linguistic supplement that bridges cultural chasms and allows for intellectual passage and exchange.

Such linguistic reflections raise intriguing philosophical as well as practical questions. If, for instance, both translation and the "original" text are, in Benjamin's words, "recognizable as the fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are parts of a vessel," what is the nature of this "greater language"?[14] Does it refer to an archaic essence, or rather to a harmony, where differences and Derridean "différance," with its endless deferral of meaning and therefore of "essence," persist?[15] Though the former describes a return to divine origins, the latter suggests that translation participates in an ongoing creative process, in which the outlines of a greater human language are drawn through the work of translation itself, as each new rendering contributes to the virtually endless delineation of language and understanding. Or might Benjamin's phrase open up an even broader concern, the greater language of human experience in which Levinas's "face of the Other" will be found? In this case, the noncognitive horizon of otherness that human being and language present—and to which we are ultimately responsible—stretches within and beyond each linguistic sign and each effort at translation.[16] Regardless of one's views, the very nature of such questions suggests that the "exorbitant" quality of language, that which remains mysteriously "other" within it, is never more salient—or perturbing—than in the culturally other-directed work of translation. It also suggests that the translator's task is inevitably an ethical one. In attempts to translate, we become most aware of linguistic and cultural differences, of the historical "hauntings," and of experiential responsibilities that make our languages what they are and that directly affect our attitudes toward the world.

Highlighting the difficult alterity within language that makes any transparent or "literal" translation "impossible," Western contemporary theory nonetheless makes strong claims for translation's necessity. According to Benjamin, translation is essential to the "living on" of texts.[17] Indeed, without translation, and its close kin, interpretation, the original will die. As translation reinterprets the original for different audiences, it provides for its continued flourishing and, in the process, for the future of national and transnational cultures.

Indeed, translation might be effectively re-thought in historical and temporal terms rather than only in ontological and spatial ones. Though traditional understandings of translation define it largely in terms of a mimesis, reflection, or attempted correspondence to the "truth" of an original, one might just as easily think of it in terms of a history of "instances," as Weber suggests, or of linguistic negotiations occurring over time, each a poiesis, each establishing a new inscription and, with it, the possibility of new interpretation. The advent of media technology in the last two centuries has already questioned the very notion of a single "original." But seeing translation in more historical terms, focusing on its role in perpetuating and transforming our cultural heritage, explains its ongoing effectiveness as it accommodates our notions to changing media and the new temporality they imply.

In light of considerations such as these, translation not only takes on the role of a border concept between "cultural studies" and "literary theory."[18] It also plays out its destiny as an essential genetic component of literary and cultural histories. In so doing, it foregrounds its peculiar double bind, expressed in the works of Derrida and Spivak, among others—a double bind with far-reaching repercussions.[19] If we must translate in order to emancipate and preserve cultural pasts and to build linguistic bridges for present understandings and future thought, we must do so while attempting to respond ethically to each language's contexts, intertexts, and intrinsic alterity. This dual responsibility may well describe an ethics of translation or, more modestly, the ethical at work in translation. It can at least provide a moment of reflection in which an ethical relationship to others and to the self, to language and its international dissemination and transformation, might be conceived. Such reflections have, in fact, already led to new modes of literary and cultural analysis.

Recent genealogical inquiries into the linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts in which translation occurs, or into its purposes and relations to the future, often rely upon "thick descriptions" of conflictual historical and cultural hauntings inscribed in the text and its subsequent interpretations. As several of the essays insist, discussions along these lines, as well as along more strictly linguistic and theoretical lines, have also prompted a major rethinking of the aims and methods of comparative literature, the literary discipline that has defined itself from the first in terms of linguistic, national, and disciplinary border-crossings. Here, the questions raised by nation, language, and the ethics of translation have already begun to produce a more thoroughgoing interdisciplinarity, as well as a geo-linguistic decentering of major proportions, and intense self-reflection.

Yet these ethical issues have, I would suggest, still broader educational import. Though we have every reason to resist any reduction of literary texts to a set of "relevant" political or religious beliefs, the intertwined issues of nation, language, and translation argue forcefully for an ampler sense of this term. For little could be more relevant to the United States or to other nations in the contemporary world than the range of texts in need of translation and a heightened awareness of the complex negotiations among peoples and languages that translation, in its various modes, reveals. Indeed, without more refined and sensitive cultural/linguistic translations and, above all, without an education that draws attention to the very *act* of translation and to the interwoven, problematic otherness that it confronts, our global world will be less hospitable; in fact, it could founder.

An educational focus on our "translationality" would allow for a heightened attention to some of the most challenging issues facing us—as literary scholars and as world citizens. We might read literary texts as well as the daily news in a more informed and critical light. We might consider in different ways the intricate circulation of texts and its bearing upon nation and post-nation. More and better translations of non-English texts could, for instance, clearly help the Anglo-American reader to engage literary worlds and historical cultures that are not her own. Similar effects could be gained by more translations in other parts of the globe. A focus on translationality might even urge rethinking of globalization itself in more carefully defined, more humanistic terms.

Reflecting upon translation does not mean rejecting the rise in technology or the interwovenness of our cultures. But it does insist on seeing global society not only in the grand lines of financial, information, or military networks, but also in the interstices, the nodes, those endless, precarious junctures where translation between cultures and languages takes place. Be it in the workplace, in the newspaper, on television and films, on the Internet, in literary texts, there is an ever-increasing need to deal with more than one language—and therefore with translation. Here conflicting histories make their claims, with their stories of passions felt and decisions taken. Here lie the poems that make the surprising leap from culture to culture, but also the cliches of prejudice and superstition that, left unconsidered, can tragically undermine dialogue and compromise. In these junctures lie unheard, muted voices of past and present as well as possibilities for different, better-negotiated futures.

In such an imagined community, an education in translationality might well rely upon the close readings and thick descriptions characteristic of literary study. These offer models for denaturalizing a world that can be too tightly packaged and too simply described, and begin to provide space and time for words lost or forgotten. At every juncture where there is translation—in the law, military, news, finance, movies and television, information technology, and not least in literature—there is, along with problems of misunderstanding, deception, inequality, and linguistic oppression also hope for insight, reciprocity, and therefore creative negotiation, if never perfect resolution, between languages and peoples, between values, enmities and loves. There is, in short, an opportunity for the exercise of judgment and of a situated, ethical wisdom.

It is to such seldom theorized issues, and to such cautiously articulated hopes for a deepened understanding and more humane alternative to current conceptions of the globalizing present, or its views of the past, that these collected essays ultimately speak. They do not represent a unified linguistic, political, or literary view. But their various insights, drawn from specific contexts where cultures and languages meet, begin to limn alternative futures.

The four sections—"Translation as Medium and across Media," "The Ethics of Translation," "Translation and Difference," and "Beyond the Nation"—are each introduced separately and invite the reader to rethink the issues of nation, language, and translation in concrete, linguistically and culturally specific terms. Through such situated readings, a new and surprisingly different understanding of our world, its languages, and the individual cultural and historical perspectives so important to its flourishing, begins to unfold.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); also *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: New Press, 1998).

2. Neal Sokol, "Translation and its Discontents: A Conversation with Ilan Stavans," *The Literary Review* 45 (3), spring 2002, p. 554.

3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities:Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopoli-*