

Helen Petrovsky

*For a Theory of Translation*¹

Can there be an independent theory of translation or is translation theory necessarily an addendum to more «important» (pivotal) theoretical concerns? Are the theories of translation that we know (W. Benjamin, J. Derrida, to mention but the most cited examples) themselves not translations or adaptations of broader theoretical frameworks? In other words, to what extent is translation more than a metaphor in theory?

It seems that the topic of translation in critical theory emerges every time the limits of communicability are put to test. Translation is problematized there and then where and when language is no longer seen as transparent – where what is at stake is nothing other than the displacing mechanism, or shift (to use Maurice Blanchot's term for translation) that accounts for language being a creative transformation, encounter, event. In other words, translation is that which allows to theorize communication, to discover its historical opacity. It outlines a communicating collective that itself is made or in the making – for communication is characterized by different layers (levels)

¹ Presentation at the roundtable on critical theory within the framework of the conference «Tasking the translator: on the practice and theory of translation in/for our times» (Cornell University, USA, March 11–12, 2005).

within the enunciation itself. Enunciation as a dialogical structure, one that calls for the other, which immediately implies an ethical imperative: this call to communicate precedes any enunciation proper, it is already there, so to say. Enunciation as connected to the multilayered structure of society where what is spoken is intertwined with what remains unspoken, but not in the sense of some underlying depth – for the unspoken, the silent or the marginalized is part of the structure of enunciation, if it is to be understood in broader terms than the purely linguistic. If enunciation, in other words, is related to knowledge and power. Communication as a power strategy itself – this is what translation seeks to explore.

The very word «translation», however, persists in its technical usage, the underlying assumption being precisely that of transparency and general communicability. Even the difficulties and ambiguities of translation are treated so as to underscore their temporary nature: the bar can be set higher, to be sure, but it all boils down to a matter of prowess – if not for the actual translator, then for the translator to come. Speaking of the untranslatable from this perspective simply points to the actual limits of knowledge that will be progressively removed. (Knowledge of cultural context, specific linguistic practices, etc.) «Translation», therefore, is implicitly inscribed within a certain paradigm – we may choose to call it modernistic. The tensions involved herein – between theory mapping out new territories under the name of translation and translation in its habitual disguise – are understandably great.

However, the question remains – to what extent is translation *not* a metaphor for theory? I would suggest that a theory of translation has yet to be developed and that in its comprehensive state it will have to do with community and the historicizing of affect. It will have to account for our very integration into history – after language has proven its inexpressible corruptness. It will have to do with what is not simply at the limit, but beyond communication, that is, it will have to come to terms with historical experience. This experience is translated into the most unstable medium of all – into the fantasies or dreams of transient collectives. A theory of translation will have to come to terms with these collectives formed (and informed) by affect.

A theory of translation is itself, therefore, essentially historical. Not only does it come at a time when new collectives and subjects, indeed *collective* subjects, emerge, but it seems to be a sign of the pending reevaluation of theoretical frameworks – theory is called upon to come up with an understanding of the multiple, as well as the common. For such are the indications of a shared experience in our contemporary world. It is that multitude (to use a catchy word) which precedes the institutionalized spaces of democracy, which keeps the promise of the latter without betraying it. That «people», or, if one is suspicious of the term, that public space being neither fully formed nor controlled – that space of anonymity which opens onto a new mode of being-in-common. Within and beyond the global world.

A theory of translation will reflect the movement of displacement – on various levels. It will speak from the margins, from the periphery of a global empire (provided there is one). It will come as itself a displacement, featuring the disowned and dispossessed. (And in this way it will be critical and materialist – even if dispossession has to do with the suspension or loss of historical identity.) A theory of translation will not envisage a happy end – «the translated» entering into a global community, this new form of salvation or this new image of communion. It will definitely serve no «end». But it will allow precisely to *translate* that which has remained without «voice» or «reason», that for which no word has perhaps been yet invented. It will translate affective communities which are so many momentous instances, indeed flashes, of a shared historical existence.

A theory of translation will *not* be metaphorical. It will likewise be a lifestyle or, if you will, a technology of selves. The theory of translation will facilitate recognition – on the part of collectives *and* the collectives themselves. It will articulate the singularity of the common, the common having so many historical faces. It will integrate various modes of expression by highlighting those whose clarity is the greatest. (I am specifically thinking of art, art that has reached its own expressive limits, that has productively denied, virtually erased itself – all for the sake of translation. I am thinking of the art which is conveying the message of community.)

A theory of translation seems to be deferred. And yet it is something which is always happening – now, at this very moment; here, in this room, where I am addressing you from within a language that is not my own, and you are simultaneously attending to the mediation and the message. But also it is happening beyond this room – in the practice of the everyday, in the invisible performance of the common. The difficulty lies in the fact that we have poor means of referring to what we so inconspicuously share. To the speeds and patterns of this sharing. And yet it is this aspect of reality that has to be most carefully thought out.

To conclude: I have high hopes for this project which in itself is something that cannot be carried out in isolation. For a theory of translation would require giving up one of the biggest ambitions – that of authorship (and likewise that of possession). A theory of translation belongs to no one in particular, even if separate individuals spend their days and even lives elaborating its concepts. A theory of translation is a different perspective on the rules for constructing theories as such – it presupposes an unprecedented blending of its object and its generators. For one has to learn how to articulate the common, being a common person, after all. How to translate that which is not considered worthy of translation, i.e., which has not been endowed with any value whatsoever. To put it another way, how to translate *before* any possible translation (which is a lofty undertaking, to be sure). This theory is tasking us today.