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Translation

Jacques Lezra

In the age of its global reproducibility, the university becomes a conforming, converting, *translating* machine: a differentiated, rhizomatic, industry of industry-relevant forms of legitimation and recognition helping to unify the global information economy, forms of legitimation translatable universally and universally consumable. The age of the global reproducibility of the university is the age in which the conception of “universality” tied to the ancient humanistic notion of the “university” has become primarily expressible in the lexicon of (economic and technological) “globality” (Lezra 2013).

To propose that “translation” should, under a renewed definition of the term, stand at the heart of another university and another sense of the humanities is not to assume a reactionary position, to restore an “auratic” experience of the university, or of the humanities, nor to return to the pristine and enlightened days of humanist universalism – days which were not “pristine,” “universal,” “Enlightened,” or particularly “humanistic,” since they turned on principles of national, racial, economic, and religious exclusion. To the contrary. A refigured “translation” allows us to envision a *version* of “universalism” and the “university,” a *version* of translation and translatability, and a *version* of humanism and of the humanities. It is “translation’s” *violence* – which is conceptually of an order quite different from the sorts of violences that

226 did indeed characterize the old myth of humanist universalism – that I'd like to enroll for thought, against and within the "global" university and against global university systems.

The coupling of "humanities" and "translation" echoes arcane debates regarding the differences between world literature, comparative literature, and literature taught in translation (Apter 2013; Casanova 2015; Damrosch 2009 and 2014; Thomsen, D'Haen, and Domínguez 2013). The question of how humanists make the case for the value of their disciplines to others – legislators, the great public, friends, and so on – is a matter of translation. Those things that the humanities take to be their concerns, their objects of study, protocols, ends – all need translating into the technical-commercial language ascendant in the era of austerity, economic competitiveness, and systematic and ideologically driven defunding of non-STEM disciplines.

"Translation" is a term nested *within* the humanities also serving as a gatekeeper *for* the humanities. As to the first, the function of "translation" within the humanistic disciplines, we're divided. Yes, absent some universal standard (the "human" as universal bearer of sense and value; as bearer of "universalism") the question is open whether a work, an Edgar Degas nude, say, or a concept like political autonomy, will be understood and valued, to what degree, how, and to what end, in different moments and societies. Recall the Terentian doctrine that what is "human" about the human animal is its universality. *Nil a me alienum puto*, the human is human inasmuch as it contains multitudes, inasmuch as it is the summation or the *end* of all beings, even (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's stronger claim, running in the contrary direction) inasmuch as it can *be* any being: I am not untranslatable into anything. Every form of life can be translated into the human and the human animal can, *qua* human, assume the characteristics of any other, translate him or herself into the quality of any other thing. Inasmuch as my *end* is not given, but lies in my potential translatability into any-being, whether animal,

angelic, or divine; or in the potential translatability of any-being into me – in this sense it is that I am human.

But on the other hand, we'll want to say something like this: Yes, the quality of general translatability ("nothing is alien to me, I contain multitudes," the shibboleths of humanist universalism) that makes me human cannot reciprocally, mutually, be translated back into every form of life. I share with other human animals, and with them alone, that undis severable, primary quality: What we call a humanistic discipline is just what resists translation about the object. It's what makes that Degas sketch different from a universally understandable term, or a term in a formal language, or a mechanically-reproduced or – reproducible drawing, that I'll be attending to: the *auratic*, the untranslatable. I'll be inclined to say that I affect to call disciplines humanistic when, and only when, their object of study is to a degree *untranslatable* into other disciplinary frames and into other systems of value. Non-reproducible, because non-mechanical, non-machinic.

And now to the second side of my frame, the side that understands "translation" to serve as a gatekeeper for the "humanities." Here too we're divided. The end of the humanistic disciplines, the neo-liberal economic model teaches us, is to convey cultural value across linguistic, historical, and geographic borders. At the same time, whatever it is that is thus conveyed or translated moves across borders in the way that other products, other commodities, do as well, and is to be understood and valued by analogy to such products. (A cultural commodity is the translation of an economic commodity.) The humanities are thus both instruments of globalization, ancillary to the great value-producing machine of global capitalism; a set of devices and practices for producing and assessing the value of cultural commodities traded on global and local markets; and the product of (one part of) the global economic system. I set the borders and the value of the humanities, and of the objects that the humanistic disciplines produce and affect to study, according to these three, not-quite-coherent, ways of understanding the

228 humanities as translating-machines and translatable-objects or commodities.

What results from the double status and the double value of “translation”? The term is at work *within* the humanistic disciplines and also at work *outside* these disciplines, as a principal device for designating and defining them, for drawing the edges and ends of their concept, for determining its use, for providing the index by means of which the value of the objects designated as “humanistic” are assessed. A peculiarly unstable, even violently unstable, term. Also, however, and in that same degree, an intellectually productive one, since the way in which the two ends of “translation” defeat, limit, and weaken one another will allow us to understand with some clarity what we mean by “value,” by the “humanities,” and by their relation.

We’ll call bare “translation,” the gate-keeper internal and external to the humanities and to the human animal, by a new name: “Machine translation.”

First let’s wrest the term from its old humanist home: just the domain of linguistic transformation, where we move, word-for-word or sense-for-sense, from one natural language to another. Translation, for *zoon logon echon*, will disclose whatever is not accidental (historical, contingent, ephemeral, glottal, merely regional, merely an aspect of this or that human’s articulated speech, accentual) about our relation to the word (Heidegger 2000; 1971). We maintain, generally, that this linguistic sense of translation is the philosophically densest and most compelling one, and also that it is (perhaps for that reason) the historical ground on which later declensions of “translation” stand, the literal term to future metaphorical usages, translations of “translation” into other improper or metaphorical domains. There’s ample historical precedent for this translation of translation, of course – the term and the practices it designates move around promiscuously in different cultures and at different times, designating transformations of wildly varying sorts, material as well

as symbolic. A quick example, taken from Spain: Juan de Junta, an editor in Salamanca in the mid-sixteenth century, publishes eight translations between 1544 and 1549 – from Italian and Latin. What we call “translation” he calls not only “*traducir*,” but also “*trasladar*,” “*sacar*,” “*volver*,” and “*romançar*.” The earlier word “*trujamanear*,” from the Arabic, nestles in the vocabulary of the conquest of America; Covarrubias’s 1611 *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* refers to “*verter*,” to pour. “*Transportar*” is not uncommon. A small controversy haunts even *traducere*, the most common humanist term for translation: Is it first used by Bruni, as Italian scholars maintain, or by Alonso de Cartagena, as some Spanish scholars suggest? A matter of claiming historical precedence for different schools and histories of translation; a matter of national pride (Pöckl 1996–1997).

Everything is staked on the possibility of translating the dispersed and contradictory semantic field that “translation” covers into a systematic and coherent vehicle for the production of subjectivities – subjectivities recognizable amongst themselves, associated on the minimal ground of that recognition, capable of carrying out transactions of an economic, social, and linguistic sort upon that basis. But the term’s irreconcilable senses and functions attest not to the systematicity and coherence of the term’s senses but to the machinic violence required to imagine that systematicity, and to its fictitious, even *compensatory* quality. Something disturbing but inescapable stands forth in the earliest uses to which “translation” is put, then – in the early modern definitions we have seen, for instance, or in the ways that Thomas Hobbes or Niccolò Machiavelli will construe the granting of “human” rights to sovereign instances and representatives under the aegis of a defective concept of “translation.” From the vantage of these sometimes violently antagonistic terms and from the futures into which “translation’s” divided semantic field appears to be translated, we knock into something other than the reasonable, contractarian system of mutual recognitions that appear to define the *human* animal in translation. This hard,

230 anti-humanist core renders systematic and properly conceptual the senses of “translation.” Machinic, it captures translation’s incompatible functions and semantic registers and translates them into a regulated and perspicuous field: a system for assigning (economic and other) values. It makes the transference of rights to others (humans, animals, institutions, positions) and the *recognition* of others as bearers of rights stand upon fictions. We call this hard, anti-humanist core at the heart of the university by the name of “machine translation.”

For technical and strategic reasons, it makes sense to turn the humanities toward the figure of translation, and to grant “translation” its patient and appealing sovereignty internally and externally. But this technical and strategic appeal to the human in translation should not keep us from understanding what *may* be the university’s genuinely revolutionary task in the age of the global reproducibility of the university-commodity, in the age of the effective transformation of the university into a machine for the production of what Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) calls “the indebted man.” That task is to help guard and produce the violence of translation, and on this condition to allow us to imagine, think through, and set in place formal, ephemeral, and reversible regimes of democratic association which are incompatible with the human in translation. It is in this machine inside the machine of the globally reproducible cultural commodity form, in this machinic, anti-humanist core, and on the basis of non-recognition, of the incoherence of the principle of translation, that democratic regimes can and should be imagined – that is, *produced* – today.

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