

Hijacking Translation: How Comp Lit Continues to Suppress Translated Texts

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Uneven Developments

Academia is slow to change. The snag, as Pierre Bourdieu observed, is resistance to new ideas, which favors those that currently enjoy authority in a particular field.¹ Academics harbor an anti-intellectualism, ironically, bred by the splintering of intellectual labor into so many institutional compartments. To specialize, however productive the yield in quantity and depth of knowledge, is to clap on a set of blinders.

Take the field of comparative literature. It originated in late nineteenth-century Europe, and from the mid-1950s onward it was firmly established in the United States, housed in departments and programs at many academic

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1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 94–95.

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institutions. By 1975, a total of 150 schools offered degrees or concentrations at both the undergraduate and graduate levels; currently, that figure stands at 187.² Despite this remarkable growth, comparatists took more than a century to recognize that the field was grounded on fundamentally Eurocentric and nationalist assumptions.

During this period, the notion of comparing literatures amounted in most cases to a methodology that contained three critical moves. Resemblances were located among forms and themes from a canon of European works read in their original languages; differences were made intelligible in terms of the national languages, traditions, and cultures in which those works were rooted; more sweeping generalizations, whether transnational or universal, might ultimately be ventured, depending on the comparatist's assumptions about literature, society, or humanity. Erich Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis* (1946), a locus classicus for this methodology, surveys "the literary representation of reality in European culture" from antiquity to the twentieth century, explicitly excluding the "consideration" of "foreign influences" (*fremde Einwirkungen*) as "not necessary" (where "foreign" means transnational as well as non-European).³ Comparatists were expected to master a minimum of four European languages, including English, regardless of the fact that they increasingly came to rely on translations in their research and teaching. Not until the early 1990s, when the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) commissioned Charles Bernheimer to submit a committee-drafted "Report on Standards," did the field publicly confront its long exclusion of non-European cultures as well as the stigma it had attached to translation. The 1993 Bernheimer Report aimed to bring comparative literature in line with what were then perceived as "progressive tendencies in literary studies, toward a multicultural, global, and interdisciplinary curriculum."⁴

2. "The Greene Report, 1975: A Report on Standards," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 30. The current figure for US-based departments and programs was provided by Corinne Scheiner, who serves as the secretary/treasurer of the Association of Departments and Programs of Comparative Literature and is overseeing the 2014 *Report on the Undergraduate Comparative Literature Curriculum* (e-mail correspondence, February 7, 2014).

3. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 23; Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: A. Francke, 1946), 30.

4. "The Bernheimer Report, 1993: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century," in Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 47. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CLAM*.

Yet not much changed. Postcolonial theory emerged, decades after the militant anticolonial movements, amid an already expanded canon that encompassed African, Asian, and Latin American literatures. By the 1990s, this expansion had been institutionalized in myriad courses, publications, conferences, and professorships. Nonetheless, canons are by definition exclusionary because they necessarily create margins where literatures, authors, and works lie in the shadows of neglect. Even European literatures can be overlooked by all but the most narrowly focused specialists (consider Catalan, Hungarian, or modern Greek). And although the Bernheimer report recommends that “the old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated” (*CLAM*, 44), translation studies remained peripheral in the United States. Translation gained legitimacy in the British Comparative Literature Association during the 1980s, and British universities witnessed a mushrooming of degree programs that trained translators and specialized in translation research. US comparatists, in contrast, continued to concentrate on original compositions by canonical writers. With rare exceptions, a scholar’s decision to translate or to study translations was likely to jeopardize an academic career.

As the Bernheimer report made clear, comparatists still looked askance at translation because of their investment in “the necessity and unique benefits of a deep knowledge of foreign languages”—even though translation can’t be studied or practiced without such an investment (*CLAM*, 44). At the start of the new millennium, however, the continuing marginality of translation also seemed to result from an uncertainty as to what it is and does. Haun Saussy’s subsequent report for the ACLA, “The State of the Discipline, 2004,” includes an unprecedented essay on the valuable contribution that translation might make to the study of comparative literature.⁵ But Saussy’s own essay expresses a certain disdain for translation by implicating it in “thematic reading”: “What comes across in thematic reading (a tactic devised in response to conditions of our encounter with translated literature) is not necessarily what is most worth knowing about a work” (*CLAG*, 14). The misguided reader is able to concentrate on theme, Saussy believes, because in translation “nothing of the work may survive the process but the subject matter” (*CLAG*, 14).

On this point Saussy agrees with Auerbach. Although Auerbach’s

5. Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). This essay collection includes Steven Ungar, “Writing in Tongues: Thoughts on the Work of Translation,” 127–38. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CLAG*.

ideal audience commands eight languages at various stages of historical development (namely, Hebrew, ancient Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and English), for his less knowledgeable readers he provides German translations of the passages he discusses. He assumes, in effect, that the translations transmit the content necessary to make his readings intelligible. Yet this belief seems oddly credulous for comparatists with the range of languages known by Auerbach and Saussy (who was trained as both a classicist and a Sinologist). Translation can maintain a semantic correspondence, but surely this relation to the source text shouldn't be confused with giving back its theme unaltered. Any literary work is a complicated artifact that supports meanings, values, and functions specific to its original language and culture. During the translation process, however, it is dismantled, disarranged, and finally displaced, so that the translated text, even while maintaining a semantic correspondence, comes to support meanings, values, and functions that are specific to the translating language and culture—and most likely new to the source text. Hence Saussy can assert that “a translator always perturbs the settled economy of two linguistic systems” (*CLAG*, 29). But then why does he also think that “a translation always brings across most successfully aspects of a work for which its audience is already prepared” (*CLAG*, 26)? How can a translation at once frustrate and satisfy reader expectations, particularly if it merely transmits content?

The uncertainty reflected in Saussy's essay, given its appearance in a report on the state of the field, may well be representative of comparative literature in the United States. So we shouldn't be surprised to learn that over the past decade some departments and programs have created curricular space for translation. Or that they remain a small minority. A trawl through college and university websites indicates that approximately 25 percent of the schools currently offering comparative literature in some form include translation theory, history, and practice in their course inventories; a few have even instituted certificates. But the figure seems appallingly low for a field that could not exist without the extensive use of translations. And the situation seems not to have changed much since 2005, when a report on the undergraduate curriculum in comparative literature showed that 76.2 percent of the forty schools responding required courses on world literature in translation, but only 14.3 percent required courses in the theory and practice of translation.⁶ The courses in translation, moreover,

6. Association of Departments and Programs of Comparative Literature, “2005 Report on the Undergraduate Comparative Literature Curriculum,” in *Profession 2006* (New York: MLA, 2006), 181.

are staffed by faculty who had already nurtured an interest in translation or who were willing to retool in a new area. Not until 2011 did a department of comparative literature (at the University of Oregon) conduct a search for a tenure-track assistant professor with a specialty in translation studies. The search has so far proven to be an isolated instance.

These institutional developments were motivated in part by the most decisive change that the field has witnessed since the influx of European theoretical discourses in the 1960s and after. Goethe's concept of "world" literature was revived, now informed by categories drawn from Bourdieu's sociology of cultural value and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory. As a result, the purview of comparative literature became international on a planetary scale. In controversial yet groundbreaking studies like Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (1999) and Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000),⁷ global literary relations consist of a competition for the unequal distribution of cultural prestige and authority, on the one hand, and linguistic and literary resources, on the other. Metropolitan centers in the West (Paris, London, New York) assign value to national literary traditions as well as to specific authors and works through such practices as publishing, translation, and award-giving. Genres like the novel evolve in different literatures through the combination of foreign, usually European forms with local content.

This approach to world literature suffers from an Occidentalism, to be sure, ignoring the centers that exist in peripheries (Arabic publishing in Beirut, for instance, or English translations published in Calcutta). But it emphasizes the changing hierarchies in which literatures around the world are positioned, and it recognizes the crucial importance of transnational influence and reception, challenging the notion of autonomous national traditions. This sort of comparative thinking is far more compelling than the Anglocentric work on transnationalism coming out of English departments—Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), say, or Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015)—where the aggressive monolingualism of the US academy entirely excludes foreign languages and literatures.⁸ Neither

7. Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, n.s. 1 (January–February 2000): 54–68.

8. Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World*

Ramazani nor Walkowitz gives any serious consideration to *interlingual* translation, effectively emptying terms like *transnationalism* and *translation* of much of their significance while reaffirming the global hegemony of English. In Walkowitz's case, this exclusion is especially fraught with inconsistency. She argues that "translation saturates our everyday culture of reading, writing, and viewing," but discusses no translated texts, even when she quotes Kazuo Ishiguro—an author to whom she devotes substantial attention—as saying that "the rhythm of my own prose is very much like those Russian translations that I read" (*BT*, 1, 98). Walkowitz's notion of contemporary novels as "born-translated" refers primarily to original compositions in English that deploy translation as theme and trope or as code-switching and shifts between dialects. The suggestion she attributes to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*—that "the repression of translation may be tied . . . to the repression of transnational impulses within national projects" (*BT*, 28)—bears an uncanny resemblance to her own project in its maintenance of a canon of Anglophone novelists taught in US English departments.

In the meantime, the discourse on world literature among comparatists has developed unevenly, even in contradiction. David Damrosch's study, *What Is World Literature?* (2003), ranging widely over works from antiquity to the present, made an appreciable advance: the literature that deserves the label "world," Damrosch argues, is quite simply literature that crosses borders.⁹ It is not a canon of works but a mode of receiving them, and translation is preeminent among the practices that perform the worlding. All the same, Damrosch's multivolume collection, *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2004), does in fact cleave to a global canon that is immediately recognizable, packaging it chronologically for classroom use and printing every non-English work in English translation.¹⁰ Despite this absolute dependence on translations, the pressing questions raised by teaching translated literature—Why was a particular translation chosen? What interpretation does it inscribe in the source text? How does that interpretation answer to the Anglophone cultural situation where the

Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Walkowitz hereafter cited parenthetically as *BT*.

9. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

10. David Damrosch, April Alliston, Marshall Brown, Page duBois, Ursula K. Heise, Djelal Kadir, David L. Pike, Bruce Robbins, and Jane Tylus, eds., *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, 6 vols. (New York: Longman, 2004).

translation was produced?—these questions go unformulated by the army of editors who assembled the volumes. A step in this direction was taken in the second edition (2009) with the inclusion of subsections called “Translations,” short essays that comment on differences between source texts and English versions. Yet this step, even though promising, is hindered by the editors’ rhetoric of loss: far from regarding translation as interpretation, the commentary faults the versions for failing to transfer features of the source text. In “Goethe’s Mignon,” commenting on two translations of a song from *Wilhelm Meister*, the editor adopts this rhetoric throughout: “Translations are always less evocative than their originals. . . . The poetry lies in the tiniest details, the ones translators cannot but traduce.”¹¹

An anthology that deploys Damrosch’s emphasis on border-crossing could be a fascinating experiment. It might show not only that the patterns of influence and reception constitutive of world literature are historically variable, coalescing in different canons and margins over time, but also that world literature involves diverse practices, including translation, adaptation, and editing, as well as diverse readerships, elite and popular, professional and pleasure-seeking. This anthology wouldn’t be the darling of publishers: its selections can be no more than provisional, depending on how certain editors interpret literary history and which works they choose to illustrate their interpretations. Different anthologies might be edited at different moments, as global literary relations unfold through cultural exchange and as images of the past are revised in academic research. What we call world literature would thus be constantly shifting, and its contingency might illuminate the many ways that literatures develop under the impact of transnational tendencies, whether in peripheral cultures or in metropolitan centers. It would also be seen as undergoing geographical redefinition according to the language through which a text crosses cultural borders. A reception-oriented anthology could pose such questions as why, in the current Anglophone canon of world literature, writers like Orhan Pamuk, Roberto Bolaño, and Yoko Tawada have displaced Italo Calvino, Gabriel García Márquez, and Assia Djebar as focuses of interest. It might even be able to explore differences in the worldwide reception of a particular contemporary writer, say, Lydia Davis or Haruki Murakami, by juxtaposing selected translations (along with annotated English versions) and sampling critical commentary. The anthology would be less a collection that affirms an existing canon than

11. “Goethe’s Mignon,” in *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Marshall Brown and Bruce Robbins, vol. E of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2009), 198, 199.

a workbook that interrogates the changing conditions of canon-formation by studying the circulation of texts through publishing, translating, reviewing, and teaching, among other practices.

Damrosch's contribution to the 2004 Saussy report, as a matter of fact, gestures in this direction.¹² He observes that world literature upsets the "older, two-tiered model" of canonicity, divided into "major" and "minor" authors, and so he posits "three levels," which he labels "a *hypercanon*, a *countercanon*, and a *shadowcanon*" (PH, 45). He bases his thinking on data from the *MLA Bibliography*, admitting that this source "is an imprecise measure" (PH, 46). The imprecision, however, has less to do with the reliability of statistics based on a single academic bibliography than with the kinds of documents excluded by the Modern Language Association: literary works, translations, reprints, reviews of literary and scholarly works, textbooks, syllabi, lesson plans, courseware, how-to guides, letters to the editor, obituaries, and "self-published material."¹³ The exclusion of these varied yet pertinent documents shows that a bibliography of primarily academic articles and books is too limited in scope to encompass the broader, more intricate process by which literary canonization is initiated and sustained today. With contemporary authors in particular, that process is set going by print, electronic, and digital media as translations move onto book markets and feature in promotion and marketing, reviews, Internet forums, and blogs. Besides, scholars are more likely to get wind of newly translated works through mass media, especially if they are not specialists in the languages and cultures where the works originated.

Missed Translation

Although Emily Apter nowhere mentions Damrosch's Longman anthology, she evidently has it in mind when she castigates "the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources, as evinced in projects sponsored by proponents of World Literature."¹⁴ Her recent book, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of*

12. David Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," in Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 43–53. Hereafter cited parenthetically as PH.

13. Modern Language Association, "Scope of the Bibliography," www.mla.org/bib_scope (accessed May 16, 2014).

14. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically as AWL.

Untranslatability (2013), attacks what she sees as the facile form of translation driving the field of comparative literature as it enlarges its remit. Her remedy is to advocate “incommensurability,” otherwise known as “the Untranslatable,” so as to question “a critical praxis enabling communication across languages, cultures, time periods and disciplines” (AWL, 3, 8). This endeavor is not as perverse or nihilistic as it may at first sound in opposing “communication”: it does lead Apter to gather “an array of loosely affiliated topoi—oneworldedness, literary world-systems, terrestrial humanism, checkpoints, theologies of translation, the translational interdiction, pedagogy, authorial deownership, possessive collectivism” (AWL, 16). It quickly becomes apparent, however, that “untranslatability” does not allow her to say much that is useful about translation or the ways that it might deepen thinking about these topics.

The problems start with Apter’s heavy reliance on French philosopher Barbara Cassin’s “dictionary of untranslatables,” a work of some fifteen hundred pages that Cassin describes as “a cartography of philosophical differences.”¹⁵ Published in French in 2004, it has appeared in a substantially revised English version coedited by Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood.¹⁶ Each entry explores a term in multiple languages, sketching its historical transmission through differences that are at once linguistic and cultural, discursive and geographical. Concepts undergo transformations that coincide with difficulties of translation. Examples—I give the English terms here—include “Subject,” “Justice,” “Peace,” “Sex,” and “World.” “Each entry,” Cassin remarks, “sets out from a node of untranslatability and proceeds to the comparison of terminological networks, the distortion of which comprises the history and geography of languages and cultures” (VEP, xviii).

Distortion? Since the terms are repeatedly mistranslated in Cassin’s view, calling them “untranslatable” doesn’t seem precise. In her cryptic explanation, they are “what one does not stop (not) translating” (VEP, xvii). Translating them is so hard as to require resourceful—and, for trans-

15. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), xxi. Hereafter cited parenthetically as VEP. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine, and they are made to serve the present interpretive occasion.

16. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall, Christian Hubert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathaneal Stein, and Michael Syrotinski, translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). Hereafter cited parenthetically as DOU.

lators, rather routine—strategies like coining a neologism or assigning a new meaning to an old word. Instead of demonstrating untranslatability, then, the entries actually document a succession of forceful translations, so that the terms reveal an eminent *translatability*, usually stretching from Greek antiquity deep into European modernity. In Cassin’s dictionary, however, some translations are permitted while others are not, and the impermissible are branded mistranslations. In poring over the entries, you soon feel that the very nature of translation is in doubt, that different contributors assume different but unstated notions of what translation is, and that even the entry on the term “To Translate [*Traduire*]” doesn’t help to sort out the muddle.

Consider the entry on “Subject,” authored by Cassin, Etienne Balibar, and Alain de Libera and translated into English by David Macey. Apter, treating it as typical of Cassin’s project, presents an extended quotation. Here is a key part:

One of the most famous statements, in which Averroës appears to introduce the notion of the subject, is the passage on eternity and the corruptibility of the theoretical intellect—the ultimate human perfection. It asserts: “Perhaps philosophy always exists in the greater part of the subject, just as the man exists thanks to man, and just as the horse exists thanks to horse.” What does the expression mean? Going against the very principles of Averroës’s noetics, the Averroist Jean de Jandun understands it to mean that “philosophy is perfect in the greater part of its subject (*sui subjecti*),” or in other words “in most men” (*in majori parte hominum*). There are no grounds for this interpretation. We can explain it, however, if we recall that Averroës’s Latin translator has confused the Arabic terms *mawdu* [word in Arabic in original] (subject or substratum in the sense of *hupokeimenon*) and *mawdi* [word in Arabic in original] (place). When Averroës simply says that philosophy has always existed “in the greater part of the place,” meaning “almost everywhere,” Jean understands him as saying that it has as its subject “the majority of men,” as every man (or almost every man) contributes to a full (perfect) realization in keeping with his knowledge and aptitudes. (AWL, 32–33; Apter’s brackets)

Any idea that Averroës’s statement addresses human subjectivity is wrong, the consequence of an error made by the Latin translator of his Arabic commentary on Aristotle’s Greek text, *De Anima*. And the mistranslation

later misleads the fourteenth-century French thinker Jean de Jandun, even though he is recognized as an “Averroist.” Apter uncritically accepts this account, repeating its rhetoric of translation loss and agreeing with the French authors’ conclusion that the mistranslation, as she puts it, “haunts modern concepts of free will, egoic autonomy, and transcendental subjecthood” (AWL, 33). Nevertheless, the translation analysis raises more questions than it answers, ultimately showing that untranslatability lays a shaky foundation for an approach to the history of philosophy, let alone world literature.

Analyzing a translation requires first that a source text be established. This step may seem a simple matter of locating the text used by the translator. But editing is hardly an innocent or transparent procedure, especially with an archaic text that has undergone a complicated transmission. The authors seem aware of this problem, admitting “that Averroës’s *Long Commentary on the De Anima* is, given the current state of the corpus, fully accessible only in Latin, or in Michael Scot’s tricky translation (the Arabic original having been lost)” (AWL, 32). Yet, if this is the case, on what basis can they quote Averroës’s Arabic to identify the Latin mistranslation? Instead of quoting an extant source, they have *invented* it, and their authority seems to be merely their own Arabic translation from an unspecified Latin text—buttressed by their interpretation of the Andalusian philosopher’s “noetics,” his conception of the human intellect. To identify an error in a translation, the source text and its contents must be fixed so as to exhibit a departure, and that fixing is an interpretive act, here speculation based on the authors’ understanding of Averroës’s philosophy.

A second factor needed to analyze a translation is a concept of equivalence, a relation between the translation and the source text that functions as the criterion of correctness. This relation usually specifies a textual unit or division on which the translator’s work focuses. The unit of translation might be the individual word, but it can just as well be the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, even the entire text. Taking any of these divisions as the unit of translation would affect how the translator renders specific words and phrases. Cassin and her contributors, just by choosing the genre of a dictionary, take the word as their unit and assume that the translator must maintain a word-for-word correspondence in meaning between the translation and the source text. Yet because a unit is a *formal* division of a text, any unit would allow a translator to maintain some kind of semantic correspondence, whether the meaning is exact or paraphrastic, explicit or equivocal. A translator of poetry, for example, might take the

poetic line as the unit of translation, selecting words so that the syllables create a certain meter or rhythm, a sound effect that might accompany the communication of meaning. Ezra Pound called this practice translating the “cantabile” or song-like values of a poem.¹⁷

What concept of equivalence did Averroës’s Latin translator apply? Given the lack of the Arabic source, this question can’t be answered with any certainty. The French authors’ discovery of only one error suggests that, in their view, the translator had more than a passing acquaintance with Arabic and sought to maintain a semantic correspondence throughout. Could what seems to be an error really be a deliberate choice, reflecting a unit of translation that goes beyond the word? Medieval practices constructed various relations between the translation and the source text, some of which were much more freely inventive than the strict word-for-word equivalence that prevails today. Sandra Laugier makes precisely this point in her entry on “To Translate,” noting that to consider medieval practices from a modern perspective would be “misleading” (*DOU*, 1148).

A third factor for translation analysis is the introduction of a code or theme that enables the assessment of the translation as an interpretation. Fixing the source text, applying a concept of equivalence, introducing a code—these steps are usually taken all at once during the analysis, determining accuracy, imprecision, or downright error on the translator’s part. The French authors’ code is their own interpretation of Averroës’s noetics, the conception of the intellect they use to criticize both the Latin translation and Jean de Jandun’s understanding of the philosopher’s thought. But behind that code lies another, a basically poststructuralist or posthumanist discourse that inevitably highlights opposing concepts, like the autonomous, transcendental subject, and pegs them as errors. Once again, as with their modern concept of equivalence, the authors seem to have made an anachronistic move: they have imposed on medieval texts a *bête noire* of contemporary French philosophy.

Any charge of mistranslation conceals the various steps in a translation analysis because it assumes an instrumental model of translation. Here *to translate* means to reproduce a semantic invariant, an essential, unchanging meaning which is believed to be inherent in Averroës’s Arabic text, but which both the Latin translator and Jean de Jandun failed to reproduce. Yet Jean was a distinguished master in the arts faculty at the Uni-

17. Ezra Pound, “Cavalcanti,” in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), 196.

versity of Paris. He formulated a noetics that was at once Aristotelian and Averroist, eliciting criticism from Thomas Aquinas much as Averroës's own philosophy did. Intellectual historians regard Jean as giving an Augustinian cast to the Aristotelian tradition, particularly through his readings of Averroës's commentaries.¹⁸ Jean, like the Latin translator before him, offered a bona fide interpretation, inscribing in Averroës a distinctly Christian concept of individual subjectivity. But this interpretive possibility is reduced to verbal error by the instrumental model of translation that underpins the entry in Cassin's dictionary.

As an understanding of translation, instrumentalism is conceptually impoverished. On the one hand, it removes a translated text from the cultural situation and historical moment that invest it with significance as an interpretive act. On the other hand, it installs the translated text in a timeless, universal realm where judgments of correctness or error are summoned to advance, through an analytical sleight of hand, a competing interpretation. As these points suggest, I am sympathetic to the critique of the autonomous, transcendental subject in Continental philosophy. But to smuggle that critique into the analysis of a medieval translation without registering any historical difference is to turn the past into a mirror of the analyst's own intellectual obsessions. This form of cultural narcissism we can do without.

Made in USA

The English version of Cassin's dictionary exacerbates rather than remedies its problems. The editors have commissioned some twenty new pieces, distributed as freestanding entries or inserted as boxes in the entries translated from the French text. Most of the additions don't give much attention to translation issues; some none at all. When they are taken up, the instrumental model of translation comes into play, bringing about confusion.

18. See Stuart MacClintock, *Perversity and Error: Studies on the "Averroist" John of Jandun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956). MacClintock's title refers not to Jean's work, it must be noted, but to his modern commentators: "Previous treatments of Jandun (not to speak of other medievals) have suffered from a hasty application of too neat and too easy a picture of the doctrinal currents of the Middle Ages" (3). See also Edward P. Mahoney, "John of Jandun," in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 5:106–8; and James B. South, "John of Jandun," in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 372–76.

Anthony Vidler devotes most of his entry on “Chôra” (variously defined as “land,” “place,” “space,” or “room”) to a carefully detailed interpretation of its “special significance” and “corresponding ambiguity” in Plato’s *Timaeus* (*DOU*, 132). He relies solely on Francis Cornford’s 1937 translation with commentary, although no consideration is given to how Cornford’s particular style of translation might have inflected Vidler’s account. Instead, Vidler asserts that “in subsequent rereadings and reinterpretations, the Platonic *chôra* was subjected to oversimplification (Aristotle) and overinterpretation (Chrysippus, Proclus)” (*DOU*, 133). With this assertion, Vidler effectively sets up his own Cornford-based interpretation as right while tossing later Greek philosophy into the garbage can of error. The entry then summarizes Jacques Derrida’s remarks on the term and the difficulty they pose for translation, concluding that “there is, therefore, no question of proposing ‘le mot juste’ for *chôra*; rather than reducing it falsely to a name or essence, it has to be understood as a structure” (*DOU*, 134). Yet it is only by reducing the term to an essential meaning, unchanging since Plato, that Vidler can determine which interpretations or translations qualify as “oversimplification” and “overinterpretation.”

Occasionally, an Anglophone contributor seems much bolder than his French colleagues in impugning a translation. Ben Kafka’s entry on “Media/Medium (of Communication)” juxtaposes two different versions of a passage from Freud where “words [*Worte*]” are called a “Vermittler” (variously translated as “mediator,” “intermediary,” and “broker”). Kafka rejects Jean Laplanche’s French rendering, “les instruments,” while strongly preferring James Strachey’s, “media.” Why? “Because,” Kafka quips, “it works so well, perhaps better than the original” (*DOU*, 626). Sure enough, once he starts to justify his choice, his judgment depends less on “the original” than on the question of which “term makes it easier to understand Freud’s claim”—according to Kafka’s interpretation of that claim, of course. Between the German source text and the English translation, a third category has intervened, Kafka’s own understanding of the German, and it is on that basis that a particular translation is preferred—even at the cost of besmirching the source text. An accomplished psychoanalytic theorist like Laplanche could no doubt have justified his rendering of “Vermittler” according to his own interpretation of Freud. To adjudicate between renderings in two different languages, shouldn’t we consider where and when they were devised? Or does Kafka’s investment in the global lingua franca (English) preempt a more thoughtful treatment of a French translation?

Interestingly, the polylingual context enhanced by the translation of

Cassin's dictionary exposes limitations in both sets of contributions, French as well as English. Alain Pons's entry on "Sprezzatura," the neologism that the Italian count Baldassare Castiglione coined in 1528 for the courtier's peculiar gracefulness, considers only French translations. Readers familiar with European Renaissance literatures, however, will note that Pons missed an enlightening case by ignoring Sir Thomas Hoby's 1561 English version, "recklessness," with its implicit condemnation of courtly behavior.¹⁹ By the same token, Susan Wolfson's note on "Fancy" as distinguished from "imagination" cites only English romantic authors, stripping the terms of their genealogy in German philosophical traditions. Although she mentions how Samuel Taylor Coleridge construed them, a reader without Wolfson's period specialization doesn't receive the slightest indication that Coleridge linked his thinking to a line stretching from Johannes Nikolaus Tetens to Kant to Fichte.²⁰ The very languages in which the contributors write seem to have curbed their expositions.

The most remarkable aspect of Cassin's dictionary in English is the editors' effort to assimilate the French text to the current critical orthodoxy in comparative literature as it is institutionalized in the United States. Apter's preface is explicit on this point: "We felt compelled to plug specific gaps, especially those pertaining to 'theory,' understood in the Anglophone academic sense of that term" (*DOU*, xi). Hence several well-known theorists were enlisted to provide summaries of their own work, including Judith Butler on "Gender and Gender Trouble," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on "Planetarity," and Robert J. C. Young on "*Colonia* and *Imperium*." Other theorists who have achieved prominence in the United States, notably Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou, play bigger parts in the English version than in the French source. This Anglocentric spin produces curiosities like the box on "Postcolonial, Postcolonialism," written by Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, the attaché for university cooperation at the French embassy in Washington, DC, who cites only Anglophone theorists. Who is colonizing whom here, you might wonder? The English version so domesticates Cassin's project as to raise the question of whether the result is more academic navel-gazing. This encounter with the foreign does not

19. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Walter Raleigh, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London: David Nutt, 1900), 59: "to use in every thing a certain Recklessness, to cover art withal."

20. Seamus Perry, ed., *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 75: "In the Preface of my Metaphys[ical] Work I should say—Once & all read Tetens, Kant, Fichte, &c—& there you will trace or if you are on the hunt, track me."

put domestic institutions to the test: it enshrines rather than interrogates the theoretical and critical discourses that currently dominate the study of literature in the US academy.

What happens when Cassin's dictionary is transplanted from an academic to a popular venue? Is it merely popularized for mass consumption? The questions are prompted by articles about the book in such venues as *Publishers Weekly*, the *Huffington Post*, and *World Literature Today*.²¹ Written by coeditor Michael Wood, evidently to support the publication of the English version, these pieces must be considered much more than a promotion strategy or even applications that elaborate on specific entries. Insofar as the magazines have a combined readership that reaches into the millions, any exposition of Cassin's ideas can work to shape commonly held conceptions of what translation is. Of course, any project that generates a conversation about translation might be welcomed in Anglophone cultures, where so little gets translated and what does is little noticed.²² Yet if Cassin's dictionary were to become the main source of the talking points, the marginal status of translation would persist, unaffected, and may actually worsen.

This impression is borne out by Wood's piece on "Translating Rilke." It opens with the assertion that "no literary work corresponds more closely than Rilke's to the definition Barbara Cassin offers of the untranslatable: 'ce qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire' (what one keeps on [not] translating)" (TR, 46). For Wood, Rilke's writing qualifies as an untranslatable because it has been constantly retranslated into English: beginning in the

21. Michael Wood, "13 Untranslatable Words," *Publishers Weekly*, April 11, 2014, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/61813-13-untranslatable-words.html; Wood, "What 'Justice' Means around the World," *Huffington Post*, April 17, 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-wood/justice-meaning_b_5161369.htm; and Wood, "Translating Rilke," *World Literature Today* 88, no. 3–4 (May–August 2014), 46. The last article hereafter cited parenthetically as TR.

22. The figure for translated titles in the United States has usually been given as 2–4 percent of total annual book output, which currently hovers around 300,000 for print titles. But translation statistics are very difficult to come by, especially since the publishing industry seems not to gather and publish them. For figures on print publications, see "Print Output Rose in 2012," *Publishers Weekly*, August 6, 2013, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/manufacturing/article/58608-print-output-rose-in-2012.html. Translations of poetry and fiction amount to a smaller percentage: recent figures indicate roughly 500 new translated titles annually. See Chad W. Post, "Translation Database Update, Including 442 Titles Coming in 2014," *Three Percent*, May 20, 2014, www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threeppercent/index.php?id=11222.

1930s, the number of selections, complete works, and anthologizations has grown so quickly that they now exceed one hundred books, making Rilke the most translated modern poet into English.²³ As Wood tries to account for this compulsion to retranslate, he offers a caution: “Let’s not reach for the ineffable, the notion of something mystically secreted in Rilke’s language and not available anywhere else” (TR, 46). And he commendably grounds his discussion on actual translations, although what he finds, after examining multiple versions of the same lines from the first of the *Duino Elegies*, is admittedly not a great deal: “Everyone,” he remarks, “respects the word order,” and “everyone translates *Dasein* as ‘existence’” (TR, 47). He finds, in other words, that despite their enormous number, the retranslations don’t reveal much variation in strategy or even in lexicon and syntax. He takes this fact as evidence of untranslatability, but in doing so he ignores his earlier caution and reaches for the ineffable: “We begin to sense something of the genuine disappointments of translation, our reasons for keeping on, for searching not for a final or better version but something else, something closer to a sharing of what can’t be shared” (TR, 47).

“What can’t be shared”? In a translation? That phrase turns Rilke’s German text precisely into a mystical secret. Why does Wood’s account devolve into contradiction instead of becoming more incisive and illuminating? Why doesn’t he frankly state what is too obvious: that the retranslations haven’t justified their existence, that their minimal variation points to weak, entropic interpretations that put into question whether Anglophones need yet another and another and another version? This admission would require Wood to look elsewhere, away from Rilke’s poetry—which clearly cannot in itself explain the repeated retranslations—and toward the translating culture, where literary traditions and values always inform the choice of texts for translation. Rilke’s poetry has proven to be so irresistible to Anglophone literary taste, one argument might run, because British and American poetries from the beginning of the twentieth century have been dominated by a belated romanticism that bears some resemblance to Rilke’s forms and themes, right down to the idea that poetry should be evocative of the ineffable.²⁴

23. For a bibliography of translations up to 1997, see Ian Hilton, “Rainer Maria Rilke, 1875–1926,” in *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, ed. Olive Classe (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 2:1160–67.

24. In a letter from 1923, Rilke explains that his writing aims “to correct wherever possible the old repressions which have taken from us our secrets,” including the “formidableness” of “life itself”: “Anyone who has not acknowledged the fearsomeness of life on

In following Cassin, however, Wood stresses only the relation that the translation constructs to the source text, neglecting the relation to the translating culture that ultimately takes priority in translating. Glimpses of the latter relation appear in his recurrent expressions of dissatisfaction with the translations: “Shouldn’t we be looking for something more inventive here?”; “Instances of similar difficulties and shortfalls arise with translations of the end of the fourth *Duino Elegy*”; “We all have ‘understand’ for *einsehen*, but why can’t we do better?”; “The last attempt seems just wrong” (TR, 47, 48, 49). But such expressions imply the application of a criterion of judgment that remains unstated, whether some notion of a good poem or an interpretation of the German text that is assumed to be inherent in it (possibly both). Thus Wood’s discourse displays the instrumentalism of Cassin’s project, a formal or semantic invariant is hinted at but never articulated (the ineffable again), and the reader who seeks to be enlightened about the English Rilke winds up getting only Wood’s personal preferences: “It does, to my ear, feel less contorted”; “Even the word *stehn* has for me a curious ambiguity”; “I have a fondness for ‘farewell’ in this context” (TR, 48, 51). The notion of untranslatability defangs Wood’s examination of the retranslations, locking it into a rather old-fashioned comparison between the translated and source texts and preempting a more self-conscious analysis that would avoid mere self-regard.

Untranslatability as Word-Surfing

Cassin’s dictionary, whether in French or in English, is an astonishingly rich compendium of European philosophical traditions. But readers should treat her notion of untranslatability with suspicion. Apter’s *Against World Literature* elevates it to a methodological principle, unfortunately, and the results seem misguided, if not merely foolish. Relying so heavily on

occasion, even acclaimed it, will never fully take possession of the ineffable authorities of our existence” (trans. Robert Vilain). The letter is quoted by Thomas Martinec, “The Sonnets to Orpheus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 97. For the belated romanticism of twentieth-century Anglophone poetries, see, for example, Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), chap. 8; and Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), chap. 1. A more direct connection is argued in Russell T. Fowler, “Charting the ‘Lost World’: Rilke’s Influence on Randall Jarrell,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 30, no. 1 (1984): 100–122.

Cassin's dictionary not only straitjackets Apter's interpretations in a peculiarly French philosophical discourse; it also risks turning back the clock in comparative literature, returning to the Eurocentrism that characterized the field in the past. Except for Arabic and Hebrew, only European languages contain untranslatables for Cassin and her contributors. (The English version hushes up this aspect of Cassin's project by deleting the word *euro-péen* from her title.) When Apter gets down to particular cases, furthermore, she translates with such glib facility that her criticism of the proponents of world literature applies to her own work—in spades.

Her chapter on two Portuguese words she designates as untranslatables, *fado* and *saudade*, is typical. It opens with translations of them, the former as “melancholia, pleasure, ecstasy,” the latter as “nostalgia, moral ambiguity” (AWL, 138). But since untranslatability for Apter means not the inability to translate but repeated, relentless translation, she gives the English parenthetically and without comment, as if it didn't matter. Then the translations that interest her begin, as she rapidly segues between disparate texts where *saudade* is said to figure as a “keyword” (*fado* disappears). They include novels by the contemporary Portuguese writer António Lobo Antunes, the entry on the Portuguese language in Cassin's dictionary, Arthur Rimbaud's “The Drunken Boat,” Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the Italian novelist Antonio Tabucchi's *Requiem: A Hallucination*, Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul*, Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*, and finally the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux's concept of “transfinitude,” which becomes the ultimate meaning of the Portuguese untranslatable. An interpretation that had initially seemed local, relating the words to Portuguese history and politics through Lobo Antunes's novels, then expansive by incorporating a wider range of reference, turns out to be utterly reductive: Apter detaches texts from their traditions, situations, and moments, quotes them in English translations without commenting on those translations (except for Samuel Beckett's Rimbaud, said to be “alive to the *saudade-effect*” [AWL, 146]), and ends up equating everything to a single concept. Apter occasionally inserts self-conscious qualifications—“Saudade here risks becoming overly capacious” or “Such a translation, monstrous though it may be”—but these comments never betray the slightest awareness that the literature is being read so superficially (AWL, 145, 148).

Chapter after chapter shows that Apter's exposition intensifies the questionable effects of the instrumentalism she inherits from Cassin's dictionary. Apter defines the untranslatable as “an incorruptible or intransigent nub of meaning that triggers endless translating in response to its singu-

larity" (AWL, 235). Yet if meaning is "incorruptible or intransigent," we are dealing with an invariant, not a variable interpretation, and she has articulated a semantic essentialism leading to judgments of mistranslation that favor her own interpretation. Hence she describes her task as "gauging the deformations, reformulations, and temporal *décalages* of translated works" (AWL, 249). This description boils down to a centuries-old idea of translation: it preserves the source text under a romantic concept of original integrity—the means of measuring the "deformations"—and thereby disparages translations as the destruction or contamination of that integrity, treating them as perpetual yet insufficient compromises.

It is one thing to recognize that translating constantly confronts incommensurability but another, very different thing to call the resulting translation a "deformation." Translating operates by building an interpretive context in a language and culture that differ from those that constitute the source text. When translated, therefore, the source text becomes the site of multiple and conflicting interpretations—even when the translator consults a dictionary on every word (indeed, dictionaries can proliferate the possibilities). Witness the history of Bible translation or the retranslations of the great modernist writers, Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and Italo Svevo. To erect one interpretation over others requires a justification that amounts to another interpretive act, the cogency of which, as with every interpretation, is contingent on the institutional conditions under which it is performed. These conditions involve procedures of reading and conventions of documentation that permit certain interpretations to the exclusion of others, preferring translations that maintain the status quo and marginalizing those that contest it—unless, of course, they foster the emergence of a new consensus. Because Apter's notion of untranslatability is essentialist, it cannot enable an account of the contingencies of translation. Not surprisingly, she considers only one translated text with any sustained attention: Eleanor Marx Aveling's English version of *Madame Bovary* (1886). The analysis, however, is less than convincing.

Taking the same unit of translation as Cassin's dictionary, Apter discusses only a few words in Marx's version (although, strangely, none is called an untranslatable). She praises Marx's choice of "wealth" instead of "riches" to render Flaubert's use of "la richesse" because "wealth" reflects the ideas of her father, Karl, "as if Eleanor Marx were intent on not letting Anglophone readers forget that luxury items . . . were dressed-up versions of money, hardened into congealed capital" (AWL, 284). True, "wealth" appeared in Adam Smith's famous treatise, which Karl Marx sought to chal-

lenge, but if the word denoted some theoretically specific economic or political meaning in the late nineteenth century, it isn't documented in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where "wealth" and "riches" are synonymous. Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1976) includes a useful entry on "Wealth" in which he observes that "the modern sense is clear enough" in the fourteenth century, when wealth was said "to make us riche for evermore."²⁵ Even if "wealth" did carry the suggestion of a Marxist critique, would the translator have plausibly assigned it to Emma Bovary, whose point of view seems to govern the passage where it is used, the description of the Vaubyessard ball? No, "riches," if it is indeed less conceptually sophisticated, even somewhat poetical, would better suit Emma's ingenuous romanticism. If the translator had rendered "la richesse" as "capital," the translation might justifiably be called Marxist. But Apter doesn't think through these issues. And she presents no evidence for construing "wealth" as she does. So much for translation analysis.

To make sense of Eleanor Marx's translation, more than one word obviously needs to be considered. Much can be learned about her particular interpretation by examining her treatment of important episodes in the narrative, analyzing how her verbal choices nuance point of view and characterization. On the basis of such passages, we can infer not only the concept of equivalence she applied in her translating, but also the values, beliefs, and social representations that may have guided her shaping of the characters and their actions. These factors of the translator's interpretation—*interpretants*, I prefer to call them, both formal and thematic—can be articulated only against the analyst's interpretation of the French text, which then becomes the means of indicating points of conformity and divergence. More can be learned by situating Marx's strategies in relation to Victorian practices of translating prose fiction. The aim is not to consider her translation as an original composition but to analyze it as a text in its own right, intervening into a particular cultural situation at a particular historical moment and for that reason relatively autonomous from the source text it translates. To historicize a translation at once distinguishes it from the present and allows its differences to mark the limitations of the analyst's time-bound interpretation and method. It is only this sort of analysis that can provide compelling evidence for the social significance of Marx's work, the ideological determinations that Apter wants to locate in it.

25. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 280.

Apter argues that Marx's brief prefatory comment on her translation, as well as her practice, "affords a glimpse of a language of labor released from a transcendental, capitalist logic of equivalence, exchange, project and credit" (AWL, 296). She quotes most of Marx's comment, assuming that the translator's self-characterization as a "conscientious worker" is sufficient to support her reading. But Marx was a professional translator, politically committed yet nonetheless dependent on translation for her livelihood.²⁶ Given the generally low rates paid to translators in her period, her labor on even a notorious novel like *Madame Bovary* was likely to have earned her much less than her publisher's return on his investment. We don't know what Marx got paid in 1886, but Russian translator Constance Garnett received £40 for her 283-page version of Ivan Goncharov's *A Common Story* in 1894, when an unfurnished London flat might cost a middle-class working woman an annual rent that ranged between £24 (for two rooms) and £69 (for four).²⁷ The fact that humanistic translation still doesn't pay a subsistence wage in Anglophone cultures makes Apter's call for translators to "deown" their work not an "activist" strategy but sheer capitulation to exploitive copyright codes and publishing contracts (AWL, 319).

Worse, Apter's quotation of Marx's comment is incomplete. After Marx describes her translation as "faithful," stating that she "neither suppressed nor added a line, a word," Apter omits a passage that displays Marx's obsession with equivalence:

That often I have not found the best possible word to express Flaubert's meaning I know; but those who have studied him will understand how impossible it must be for any one to give an exact reproduction of the inimitable style of the master. He spent "days seeking one word." The consequence is that he invariably gives one word that fully expresses his meaning. We may search through all Littré and find none other so appropriate; and yet, while feeling its absolute fitness, we may not be able to give its exact equivalent in another tongue.²⁸

26. See Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 2 vols. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972–76).

27. Garnett's fee is cited by Margaret Lesser, "Professionals," in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 4, 1790–1900, ed. Peter France and Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 88. The rent figures come from the anonymous article, "Ladies' Residential Chambers," *Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions* 20, no. 193 (1889): 271–73.

28. Eleanor Marx Aveling, introduction to Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Manners*, trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling (London: Vizetelly, 1886), xxii.

Eleanor Marx assumed an instrumental model of translation: the author's intended meaning is "fully" expressed in his text, and the translator's job is to reproduce it. Yet this model, along with her idolization of "the master," could only dampen the spark of inventiveness necessary to emulate Flaubert's style. Far from breaking with capitalist logic, her preface and her practice are inextricably caught within it, whether materially in her own exploited wage labor or metaphorically in the equivalent form she worked to produce in her translation, the economy of one word exchanged for one word. By linking the impossibility of translating Flaubert to "those who have studied him," Marx unwittingly belies her instrumentalism: her remark shows that translation is hermeneutic, dependent on commentary articulated independently even as it inscribes its own interpretations.

Apter has simply asserted her reading of Marx's translation, not argued it with textual analyses and historical research. For the fact is that she really isn't interested in translation. After dismissing centuries of "philosophy in translation studies" because it refers to "professional practice," she announces that "what interests me most is something more pointed: what does it mean to think of translation as a kind of philosophy, or as a way of doing theory and its history?" (AWL, 247). Yet the priority Apter gives to "theory" is retrograde: it signals her nostalgia for the moment of High Theory in the 1980s, such that the only "philosophies of translation" she recognizes are those "developed by Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samuel Weber, Barbara Johnson, Abdelfattah Kilito and Edouard Glissant," in addition to Cassin (AWL, 3). Apter's unexamined investment in these "philosophies" leads her to draw the naive distinction between theory and practice that appears in the remarks of so many translators as well as the many academics who must use translations, all of them unaware that no verbal choices can be made in translating except on the basis of theoretical assumptions. A translation of a travel guidebook or a restaurant menu can therefore be a way of doing theory, too, although it lacks the cachet of the critical orthodoxy to which Apter subscribes. Her allegiance, however, is inconsistent. She has apparently forgotten Derrida's paradox: "Nothing is translatable," but "nothing is untranslatable."²⁹

Perhaps the most lamentable consequence of Apter's book is to feed the malaise that has recently beset left-wing thinking. Although she claims to offer a theory of translation that represents a conceptual and political

29. Jacques Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 178–79.

advance over the theories circulating in comparative literature and translation studies, she sheds no light on the kind of translating that occurs routinely, whether in the publishing industry, in academic institutions, among diasporic communities and exiles, or in diplomacy, occupied territories, and military conflict. She devotes an entire chapter to the argument that the use of “border-crossing” as a metaphor for translation ignores the “checkpoint” where sovereignty and occupation are enforced (*AWL*, 99–100). Fair enough. But she considers only projects by artists, architects, and writers, and untranslatability becomes a metaphor for getting stopped at the border. No effort is made to engage with the now substantial body of research on translation in asylum hearings and wartime, books like Robert Barsky’s *Constructing a Productive Other* (1994) and Moira Inghilleri’s *Interpreting Justice* (2012) as well as Vicente Rafael’s articles on interpreters in the Iraq War.³⁰

Here untranslatability is not an aesthetic or philosophical category but a set of lived relations to opposed constituencies, provoking suspicion, insult, and violence. During the US occupation of Iraq, Rafael points out, Iraqi nationals who served as Arabic interpreters for the American military were “targeted by insurgents and reviled by most Iraqis,” while for the soldiers their “indispensability [was] also the source of their duplicity, making them seem to be potential insurgents” (NIE, 16, 17). This predicament puts the lie to “the American notion of translation as monolingual assimilation with its promise of democratic communication and the just exchange of meanings” (NIE, 18). But it also leads to alienation, destruction, and death. Rafael deploys a notion of untranslatability that resembles Apter’s: translation “consists in the proliferation and confusion of possible meanings and therefore in the impossibility of arriving at a single one” (NIE, 17). We come away from Rafael’s account, however, with a renewed sense of the importance of translation in realizing utopian aspirations for social life: we can choose to question and avoid any assimilative notion of translation by studying and practicing it as an interpretive act.

Apter discourages any academic who wishes to investigate the politics of translation by smearing translatability as dubious. This confused

30. Robert Barsky, *Constructing a Productive Other: Discourse Theory and the Convention Refugee Hearing* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1994); Moira Inghilleri, *Interpreting Justice: Ethics, Politics, and Language* (London: Routledge, 2012); Vicente L. Rafael, “Translation in Wartime,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (2007): 239–46; Rafael, “Translation, American English, and the National Insecurities of Empire,” *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1–23. Rafael’s second article hereafter cited parenthetically as NIE.

thinking is already influencing comparatists. The 2014 meeting of the ACLA featured a seminar titled “The Right to Untranslatability,” using Apter’s project to criticize an opposing “right to translation” as “neoliberal.”³¹ Yet a mass protest movement, to take one form of political action, might very well be supported and expanded by various kinds of translation. The mobilization of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) occurred in September 2011 in the wake of contacts with such comparable movements as the uprisings in the Arab world and the Spanish *Indignados*. “The People’s Library” created at Zuccotti Park contained such translations as Stéphane Hessel’s *Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!* and the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection*.³² At the same time, a cadre of indefatigable translators were translating the OWS General Assembly’s English-language documents into twenty-six languages, disseminating its goals and strategies and no doubt helping the movement to go global. Political action requires communication and translation, even if what translation communicates can be only an interpretation, one among other possible and competing interpretations. Trans-

31. “The Right to Untranslatability: Multilingualism, Translation, and World Literaricity,” American Comparative Literature Association, March 23–27, 2014, New York, NY. The call for submissions to this seminar is no longer available on the ACLA website, but it can be found on Facebook: www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10151964078494919&id=140066444918 (accessed August 6, 2014): “Apter’s recent rebuttal ‘Against World Literature’ (2013) encourages scholars in various fields to contemplate and theorize what it means to claim a ‘right to untranslatability.’ A result of the World Literature debate (Damosch, Casanova, Moretti, etc.), this concept of a right to untranslatability requires us to think beyond the technical, the institutional, and the market-pragmatic affordances of translation, and towards a newly vigorous line of thinking about literature, signification, and language as such, whether that thinking be global, planetary, or neither. How for instance in recent debates on World Literature has the right to untranslatability been so seamlessly eclipsed by a charismatic, neoliberal right to translation, translatability, translatedness, and communication? Why are the latter considered virtuous, convivial, populist, and progressive, while the former presented as vicious, self-indulgent, elitist, and recalcitrant? What does this symbolic division of labor reveal about modern/postmodern/postcolonial conceptions of monolingualism/multilingualism? This seminar invites case studies about literary texts and other symbolic artifacts/constellations that may help us to flesh out, situate, and conceptualize what it means to claim a right to untranslatability in 2014. Theoretical, translational, exegetical, and literary-anthropological approaches are most welcome.” The conference program guide is available at www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/Full_Program_Guide_2014.pdf (accessed 6 August 2014). The seminar involved twenty-five papers.

32. Stéphane Hessel, *Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!*, trans. Marion Duvert (New York: Twelve, 2011); Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009). No translator is named for the latter.

lation is still a means of establishing a common ground, even if riddled with linguistic, cultural, and social differences. How could Verso—the publisher of so many thinkers, often in translation, who put theory in the service of emancipatory projects, such as Theodor Adorno and Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams and Sheila Rowbotham, Edward Said and Ellen Meiksins Wood—have published this book?