The *Vita Activa* of Translation

Towards a Transnational and Transsubjective Research and Pedagogy

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1. A SUBJECTIVE START: PRAXIS

Stressing the situatedness of my epistemological point of view will allow me to begin *in medias res*: my concrete experience is what led me to the theoretical issues that may open onto a possible way of figuring translation studies as a pattern for a politically and ethically grounded comparative literature, seen as part of a "vita activa" in the sense described by Hannah Arendt (1956). I am considering literary language as belonging to the domain of translation itself: as a 'multifocal', plurilingual human space, in a sense not far from what Pier Paolo Pasolini (1995: 105) has said about Dante.

I speak from my experience of translation as a praxis – I am a translator as well as an academic scholar – but in my case the most decisive experiences have been the teaching and the research projects developed in the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. Programs in Comparative Literature at "l'Orientale" University in Naples. I was faced with a wide range of interests shared by the students attending the courses. We planned these programs in a way that was meant to be neither Eurocentric, as is the case with most Comparative Literature programs in Europe, nor 'Oriento-centric', as had been the case in the past due to the Orientalist tradition of that specific institution. The students and young scholars attending the programs were required to study two different languages and cultures, one from the Euro-American –

let's say, the hegemonic – area, the other from a Slavic, Far Eastern, Middle Eastern or African country. The challenge in this global playground was how to reach out to such a mixed group of people and let them inter-play: in a word, how to stage their differences in a productive way. The answer came with praxis, and was precisely this: literally putting those differences on stage during the lesson. The means and the space in which this could happen were the literary translations of texts that were first experienced in performance: first in the source language in which they had been written, and then through collective efforts to translate them on different levels and in different ways. Thanks to the concrete interaction in the classroom, everybody was able to experience what it meant to be exposed to the unintelligible, or rather, to an unpredictable discourse that is 'intelligible' in some other way.[1] The actual experience of the phrase 'being exposed to difference'. The text was read out loud without the students being able to see it. They could only hear it, and everyone was exposed to the foreign rhythms and sounds. Then came the video-projection of the text; next words and tropes and structures were explained. Then we listened again without seeing the written text. And finally, the class was divided into groups that tried out various translations and ways of rewriting. In the case of contemporary literature, we also tried to get in touch with the authors whose texts we had dealt with, inviting them to lectures that looked like translation happenings. The author read with his or her body and voice, and the public actively compared the experience of the written authorial word and then of the author's body and voice – sometimes this changed the tone of the translations as well, or the way they read them aloud. In terms of research, I had the opportunity to supervise a series of very productive studies, M.A. theses but also Ph.D. dissertations and research projects, in which many skills were

1 An epistemological basis could be found in Derrida (1987) and in the experiments of plurilingualism in contemporary literature, for example, in the German-speaking area, Peter Waterhouse (2006: 242), speaking about "Translating as missing the goal", or Tawada Yoko's recurring "gaps" in the understanding and in the sense of poems, producing meanings and associations anew (see Ivanovic 2009). In the philosophical tradition, we may resort to the Deleuzian notion of de-territorialisation, applying it to words and translation (Cassin 2004: XVII) and to the notion of misunderstanding and freedom in Jankélévitch (1980: vol. III 11-46).

involved: there was almost no one who, individually, had all the skills needed to fulfill the task alone. Such is the case for a joint project with Japanese colleagues on the Japanese translations of Paul Celan's poetry. Or the research in which I am still involved, along with Iranist colleagues, on the way Hafez's Persian *Diwan* traveled from Shiraz to Vienna and then to Goethe's work, crossing space and time thanks to the mediation of Ottoman translations. Or the work of another Ph.D. student who is studying the way the European canon was imported to the early Israeli 'Homeland' by the poet and translator Shaul Tchernichovsky, or another study of the way haiku (as both form and poetics) traveled from Japan to Canada. This is – briefly sketched – the experimental soil out of which my methodological observations were able to grow.

2. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM PRAXIS

a. Closeness to or distance from the text

All the studies mentioned above try to understand large scale phenomena – and thus we could say: literature seen from a distance, as proposed by Franco Moretti (2005). Nevertheless, their research tool is close reading, an auscultation of both the word and language as a breathing and transpiring body. Breathing in its own rhythm, and transpiring in the way it modifies the field in which it is performed, the way in which it is read, translated, and rewritten. Two different activities must be considered as related to this question:

- something we could call primary translation, i.e. the actual, real time translation of a text into our language.
- another form of activity that I would like to call secondary translation: the observation of a literary translation, belonging therefore to the field of the history of translation.

These activities respond to the questions raised by Emily Apter (2005) about Moretti's stereographic literature and recall her inspiring chapter on Leo Spitzer's activity in Istanbul. I really share her idea of a comparative literature grounded on philology and on what she calls "transnational/trans-

lational humanism": we can maintain the global reach of our horizon without losing touch with the text, keeping our hands right in it, as it were, listening to its breath. I say its, but it should be their, texts being plural.

b. Translatio studiorum

The theme of the *tranlsatio studii* is a benchmark of the medieval thought in its efforts to show how knowledge travelled from Greece to Rome, and then to the Christian World. The most interesting aspect of this de-placement, well described by Barbara Cassin (2004: 1315) in her *Vocabulaire européen des Philosophies,* is the fact that since the twelfth century, the discourse about *translatio studii* came under the hegemony of the University of Paris:

> L'Université de Paris se voit ainsi legitimée comme point d'arrivée d'un long voyage du savoir, depuis la Grèce et Rome, puis comme composante essentielle "de l'identité du Royaume de France".[2] (ibid.)

The transfer of worldly as well as sacred knowledge very soon emerged as a political issue of hegemony in a transnational cultural contest. The theological/teleological battle of the translated books is also carried out on other levels, for example in discussions about the role of Latin as a legitimate, primary language in the transfer of the Holy Word but not in the *translatio* of scientific knowledge, as only Greek and Arab were recognized as primary languages in which worldly knowledge was formulated. This position was sustained as late as 1267 by Roger Bacon (quoted in Cassin 2004: 1315), thus we can argue that for almost a millennium the concept of transfer and translation of knowledge was not only Eurocentric, but also teleological, implying a homogeneous conception of the cultural field.

Nowadays, in a global transnational system, we are able to experience that there are neither 'original' sources of knowledge, nor a unique direction that knowledge takes. Translation studies can work as a field of renegotiation of the hegemonic maps and routes of knowledge and power. We can try to contaminate the methods and the heuristic tools. Given this con-

2 "The University of Paris thus legitimized itself as a culmination of a long journey of knowledge from Greece and Rome, and then as an essential component "of the identity of the Kingdom of France" [transl. C. M.].

text, the East-West clash of methods takes on a new twist: what happens when Oriental subject matter, for instance the medieval Persian poetry, is questioned using the hermeneutic tools of Romance philology? It turns out that the Western scholar/translator of the East becomes able to detect the (hidden) textual evidence of a fourteenth century female Persian poet who sometimes wore the lyrical, textual mask of a man, sometimes the mask of a woman.[3] And what gains are made – on the level of a more complex translation and interpretation of text – when we apply the criteria of visual studies to the translation strategies of the Japanese haikus of the eighteenth century? In this case, surprising new spaces are created for the un-translated residual elements not in the para-text (footnotes or introduction), but – as Derrida taught us – on the margins.[4] Or: what happens when we read twentieth century Western poetry with Japanese, Kanji-trained eyes, as the Japanese, german-writing Yoko Tawada does with the works of Paul Celan and Heinrich von Kleist? (Tawada 1996: 121-134). Translation on the West-East borders also requires and provokes an innovative, non-centered, heterotopical *translatio studiorum.*

c. The loss of the subjective center

What happens when, as scholars and students, we are exposed to languages that we do not know? This leads us to re-interpret and enlarge on what Henri Meschonnic (2007) means when he asks: "what do translations do to language"?

> Ainsi le passage de l'annexion au décentrement, poétiquement, ne peux plus être pensé en termes de langues, mais de ce que traduire dans ce rapport à l'alterité fait à la langue d'arrivée.[5] (Meschonnic 2007: 30)

3 I refer here to the rare translation and interpretation of the verses of Jahan Malek Khatun (Iran, about 1324 – about 1382) by Ingenito (2010: 40-60).

4 I refer here to Piranio's proposal of "visual translation" of female Japanese poet Chiyo-jo (1703–1775) (Piranio 2010: 83-92).

5 Thus the passage from the annexation to the shift, poetically, cannot be conceived in terms of languages, but in terms of what has been translated, mantaining its otherness, does to the target language [transl. C. M.].

In this respect, one may go a step further, seeking for a space beyond the Spitzerian pattern. It might be called the end of Romantic ethics and aesthetics, perhaps the end of the scholar's self-understanding as 'Genius' – in the German sense (see Bontempelli 2004: 79-89). Being exposed to languages we do not understand changes our perception of language itself. We can also experience language in another way than simply asking for 'the meaning'. As Meschonnic would say, we thus experience the continuum of discourse, which is also made up of rhythm and sound, of a performance where we need the Other. The Other is the language perceived but not fully understood, but also the colleague, scholar or student who possesses the key to the 'sense' (by which I mean the rhetoric and semantics of the other language) and who shares them with us on the common ground of research. There is no subject and no single author but rather a space of negotiation in which different subjects meet and interact, sharing a knowledge but also maintaining a difference. The subject becomes a plural subject.

d. Why literature and translation?

I really share, and I also practice, the idea of translation as transformative activity in a cultural field (in the sense given to the term by Bourdieu (1993)) and as a metaphor. But I would like to stress the urgent topicality of the work carried out in literary discourse. Or better, philology must step into the *vita activa*, coming out of the melancholy situation of the *otium*, daring to take part in the *negotium*. In this sense I believe that the work to be done in translation studies runs alongside the margins of Hannah Arendt's theory of action. The point is to rethink translation and translation studies as "action" in Arendt's sense.

3. THE *VITA ACTIVA* OF TRANSLATION

The sense of Arendt's "praxis" distinguishes itself from *poiesis*, i.e. fabrication. Arendt assumes a necessary link between freedom and the public sphere of plurality, speech in a wide sense and memory. Her interrogation of meaning as set in a public playground of praxis can very well be adapted to our purposes in seeking for a translational turn in the ethics of literature. Arendt considers action as a mode of human togetherness, and her concep-

tion of participatory politics and ethics represents a striking contrast to bureaucratic elitism. Arendt says that,

> poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps the most human and least wordly of the arts. […] The durability of a poem is produced through condensation, so that it is as though language spoken in utmost density and concentration, were poetic in itself. Here, remembrance, *Mnemosyne*, the mother of the muses, is directly transformed into memory […]. Of all things of thought, poetry is closest to thought, and a poem is less a thing than any work of art. (Arendt 1956: 169-170)

Poems remain, among the things of thought and art, the nearest to thought itself; they are also the least thing-like things among the things of the world. But no matter when it was pronounced, the word has to be 'made', i.e. written and transformed into a tangible thing among other things, because memory and the faculty of remembrance, from which the desire for immortality stems, need tangible things that recall them into life and avoid perishability. So why literature, and why literary translation? In Hannah Arendt's quote from *The Human Condition*, memory, art works, poetry and the future are all deeply interconnected. The critical and political exploration of the Human has to do with poetic language. Interacting in public spaces, transforming condensed memories into new units of human action is a characteristic trait of translation. Translations open words and discourses, disentangle them from territories and let them be born anew elsewhere in unpredictable ways. By freedom Arendt means the ability to start something new and unexpected. Each birth represents a new beginning, and it cannot be realized in isolation from others. In this respect I see the pursuit of freedom and plurality as a condition and task not only for the translator, but also for translation studies intended as forms of translational, transnational pedagogy. Arendt's conception provides a crucial starting point for addressing the question of the constitution of 'collective identity' that can mark a territory for an ethics and politics of translation studies and praxis. To translate means to pay attention to a concrete work (a declension of the *vita activa*), which puts different, condensed human memories in diachronic contact and makes them react, giving rise to something new and unpredictable. "The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end" (Arendt 1956: 233). This is because action

though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every action becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes […] the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation. (Arendt 1956: 190)

In this sense we may re-interpret the famous Goethian scene in which Faust (lines 1224-1237) tries to translate "en arché en ò logos", the beginning of St. John's Gospel. The movement of the meaning from 'word' (*Wort*) to 'sense' (*Sinn*), then to 'energy' (*Kraft*: power), and finally to 'action' (*Tat*: deed) occurs during a translational process that generates the dramatic action of Faust: in the very moment in which Faust finds his own 'word' transforming 'logos' into 'action', he realizes the presence of Mephistopheles, his counterpart in the experience of the world. This marks the situation as typically modern. What needs to be added now is the capacity to open out this individual 'action' to the public sphere, to step out of the logic of the logos-word and its singular materialization towards the 'Tat', the action of a single 'genius', and to conceive of the action as a collective, shared, connected one. In the word lies a power, and in translation this power becomes a dynamic force, an *energeia* very well described by Barbara Cassin (2004: XVII-XVIII):

L'intraduisible, c'est […] qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire; c'est un indice de la maniére dont, d'une langue à l'autre, tant les mots que les réseaux conceptuels ne sont pas superposables – avec *mind*, entend-on la même chose qu'avec *Geist* ou qu'avec *esprit*, *Pravda*, est-ce justice ou *vérité*, et que se passé-t-il quand on rend *mimesis* par *représentation* au lieu *d'imitation*? Chaque entrée part ainsi d'un noeud d'intraductibilité et procède à la comparaison de réseaux terminologiques, dont la distorsion fait l'histoire et la géographie des langues et des cultures.[6] (Cassin 2004: XVII-XVIII)

6 "The untranslatable, it's [...] what does not stop (not) translating; this is an indication of how, from one language to another, the words and the networks of concepts are never identical - with *mind*, does one hear the same thing as with *spirit* or *Geist*? *Pravda*, is it *justice* or *truth*, and what happens when *mimesis* is rendered rather by *representation* instead of *imitation*? Each term starts from a node of untranslatability and proceeds to the comparison of terminological net-

The cultural zone of literature and of translation is the least amenable to scientific formalization, and yet academic tradition has made great efforts to tame the 'unpredictability' of the poetic-translational activity. Speaking out against the disciplinary and disciplining system that keeps trying to deactivate the libertarian potential of literature (and of literary translation) need not mean having to lose out on scientific control. It means finding a basis for scientific work which the 'hard sciences' have long recognized as their only possibility of survival: collective work carried out on a shared terrain in which differences are preserved.

Let us go back to Arendt. Her pattern is a model of *negotium*: a public activity. We perform it within universities, we perform it through discussion, teaching and publication: translations need to be published accompanied by critical, self-questioning introductions, they need to be discussed, they need to be given a framework in the publishing system or support on the Web; this method needs to be accepted in a disciplinary, or rather, transdisciplinary space that needs to be recognized as such. This is a real thorn in the flesh of current academic politics in Italy, and the issue is so serious that we cannot limit ourselves to discussing it in general terms; we must expose our condition as transnational scholars bound to the national situation of the political and ethical crisis we are now going through. This situation in turn is reflected in the academic system. For instance, the Italian university reform bill has reasserted the preeminence of disciplinary areas and Comparative Literature is now associated with national philology, i.e. with Italian Studies and no longer, as it had been for a time, with foreign literary studies.

My point is to find a 'translation zone' as a possible basis for a new comparative literature that finds its core in translation practice and pedagogy, theory and history, philology and politics. If the current manipulation of language is asserting new values and powers and trying to extinguish the critical awareness of the public sphere (see Zagrebelsky 2010), all the actors on the literary, philosophical, philological, but most of all translational scene have the possibility and perhaps the duty to step into a translation zone that also operates and acts as a resistance zone.

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works, whose distortion is the history and geography of languages and cultures" [transl. C. M.].

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