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SPECIAL ISSUE:
**AMERICAN STUDIES
AND THE DILEMMAS
OF MULTILINGUALISM**



READING EMILY APTER IN VIEW OF INTER-AMERICAN STUDIES

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Translation scholars and literary comparatists will, I trust, have observed with interest the rapid expansion of the new series 'Translation/transnation', edited by Emily Apter and published by Princeton University Press. In the twelfth volume, the editor makes her own series debut with *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006), a book with an inviting title. The 'translation zone' is the author's 'theoretical mainstay' (Apter: 5), derived from a translation of one of Walter Benjamin's profound *aperçus*, and the 'new comparative literature' is traced to a development from 'German-based philology', which Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach brought with them to Istanbul University where they and other refugees helped to implement Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's policy of modernization in the 1930s and 1940s. In Apter's view, the teaching of literature based on Christian or Greco-Roman premises or both to a non-Christian audience outside the tradition of classical antiquity resulted in a secular humanist pursuit to which Edward Said responded with enthusiasm. There is, therefore, Apter argues, a specific tradition of secular humanism which inspires both postcolonial studies and her own new comparative literature.

My original plan was to read the book in view of what can be learned for Inter-American Studies. This is still my objective. But I feel now that I should first state my reservations, which arose when I came across philological and historical flaws in areas where I have first-hand reading knowledge: problems which often affect the very argument. In all modesty: students of literature and culture, as of other fields, have a vested interest in the solidity of scholarship and the validity of argumentation—the credibility of their chosen field depends on it.

(1) The new, expanded scope of translation studies which Apter recommends—ranging from real blood, sweat, and tears matters via the 'literary appropriation of pidgins and creoles, multilingual experimentalism', and 'translation across media' all the way to 'linguistic ecology'—looks so extensive in part because the author ascribes so narrow a range to translation studies as hitherto practiced: '[T]ranslation studies habitually concerned itself with questions of *adaequatio*; that is to say, the mea-

surement of semantic and stylistic infidelity [no misprint] to the original literary text' (5). Much depends on what precisely is meant by 'habitually'. I have known a fair number of translation scholars in Europe and Israel these last twenty-five years who have long kicked this habit. Indeed, Apter's book bears hardly a trace of the extensive work on translation and literature that is in print in easily accessible languages.

(2) One of the rare links with extant translation theory is a quotation from E. Jephcott's translation of one of W. Benjamin's essays, which includes the definition: 'Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations' (7). According to Apter, 'Benjamin effects an important shift in translation theory ... toward a transcoding model, in which everything is translatable and in a perpetual state of in-translation'. Reading this, I was surprised that Benjamin should have said so trite a thing. What he really said is quite different: 'Die Übersetzung ist die Überführung der einen Sprache in die andere durch ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen'—'Translation is the transformation of one language into another through a continuum of (almost magical) changes' (Benjamin, 1977: 151, my translation). Indeed, hardly anything is more alien to Benjamin's philosophy of language than the misleading pragmatic notion of language as a code in which we encode messages that can be transcoded. In the same essay, he noted the following, and I translate directly: A given language, 'German, for instance, is by no means the expression for everything we *believe* we can express *through* it; it is, rather, the immediate expression of what communicates *itself* in this language' (141). What the published translator and the reader missed can be found, in a nutshell, on the concluding pages of S. Weber's paper on Benjamin, included in volume 8 of Apter's series, beginning with Benjamin's explication of *translatability*, and particularly, in Weber's paraphrase: Languages 'relate not to human needs, which is to say, to meanings or messages, but to what Benjamin calls "pure language"' (Weber, 2005: 74). The foundation for the 'state of in-translation', then, is not in Benjamin but, at best, in Jephcott. Apter's views can, of course, be tested regardless. The 'translation zone' results from linking her notion of 'in-translation' with Guillaume Apollinaire's poem of 1912, 'Zone', not inappropriately characterized as a 'psychogeographical territory identified with the Paris periphery where bohemia, migrants, and marginals converged' (5).

(3) In a later chapter—the precise context is not important here—Apter's argument takes its point of departure from Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951). 'Though Adorno's life world', the author explains, 'shattered as it was by his conviction that Hitler had wrought the death of culture, was of course distinctly different from that of a postcolonial critic ... I would argue nonetheless that the mix of Marxism and diasporic consciousness filtering both critical tendencies abuts in a keen sense of the "damage" to the human caused by capitalism' (149). The point about the damage caused by capitalism is one thing; but I think it would have been better, for the sake of clarity, if Apter, when reflecting on Adorno's sense of the death of culture, had also considered the remark which I find in my thumbed copy of *Minima Moralia* on p. 67: 'Die Behauptung, daß Hitler die deutsche Kultur zerstört habe, ist



nichts als ein Reklametrick derer, die sie von ihren Telefentischen aus wieder aufbauen wollen'. Here, Adorno, in no uncertain terms, identified the claim that Hitler destroyed German culture as nothing but a promotional ploy. Dialectical thought has quite a distinctive movement of its own.

(4) Still on to the same subject, Apter offers a perfect summary of one of Adorno's observations: 'In a section of *Minima Moralia* called "Not half hungry" (a British expression meaning "starving", that correlates to the German *kohldampf*—"steamed cabbage", or "poor man's food"), Adorno interprets workers' dialect as the bitter taste of class hatred' (150–51). True, except that Adorno's title of the section, *Kohldampf*, which looks as though it might translate as 'cabbage steam', is unrelated to the vegetable. A standard dictionary, *Duden: Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1978), identifies the word as soldier's slang linking two words which, in *Rotwelsch* (thieves' Latin), both mean 'hunger': *Koller* or *Kohler* (a fit), and *Dampf*. The duplication suggests—no: insists on—extreme, long lasting hunger pains. It was a very popular feeling in Europe in the 1940s.

(5) In the same context, Apter, guided by D. Lloyd, refers to G. Deleuze and F. Guattari's book on Kafka. The focus in one of the chapters is said to be on 'Kafka's German as a pastiche of the "vehicular" tongue—meaning in this case the impoverished bureaucratese, the hollow state language imposed on Czechoslovakia by the Prussian state' (155). Yet this is but one of the points made there. And while a reader conversant with Kafka can, I think, appreciate the remark about the pastiche of bureaucratese as applicable in places, Apter curiously draws on an English translation again, this time to substantiate her view that Kafka's is a 'very differently textured use of the German language'. Now if her statement, 'the original is always and inevitably lost in translation' (226) is more than a quip, there is a problem here. Even if one holds that a moderate position is more true to the facts of translation, e.g. 'something of the source text is always salvaged in the target text', it is none the less true, as studies of prose translations show, that texture is only very rarely among the things that come across. Apter's version of history is also remarkable. Czechoslovakia rose from the wreckage of World War I. At that time, Prussia, an integral part of the defeated *Deutsches Reich*, was incapable of imposing anything. The truth of the matter is that German was the administrative language of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, in use, as such, in Bohemia etc. till 1918. Since no such reference is in the French of Deleuze/Guattari's chapter, and since I have no access to the English translation, I cannot say who invented Prussia's astounding influence.

(6) One of the most far-reaching claims in the entire book is that it 'may be no great exaggeration to say that the entire Franco-Prussian war [of 1870–71] was hinged on [a] single term' in the so-called 'Ems Dispatch' (20). By retaining the false friend «adjutant» (a non-commissioned officer and always a commoner) for German 'Adjutant' (an aide and at the time, always a nobleman on a monarch's staff), the French translation, according to Apter, suggested an 'outrageous breach [read: breach] of protocol' on the part of King Wilhelm I of Prussia because he apparently sent a message to the French ambassador through the hands of a commoner; the 'level of insult was profound' and contributed to a 'momentum for war' that was 'impossible to curb' (20). If a mistranslation indeed had such a momentous consequence, we should all

rush to request the reapportioning of substantial funds from defense to the humanities. Upon second thought, it seems a good idea first to ask how Apter substantiates her claim.

In order to do so one must make it plausible that, in the particular crisis, the Ems Dispatch made war unavoidable. The issue was the succession to the Spanish throne, after Queen Isabella II had been deposed in 1868 and had taken refuge in Paris. Napoléon III wanted to reinstall the House of Bourbon in the person of Isabella's son Alfonso. After three other candidacies had failed due, in a large measure, to massive French intervention (Kolb, 1970: 44–45; Wetzel, 2001: 39–44, 46–56), the Spanish interim government secretly invited Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a relative of King Wilhelm I of Prussia, and, after long hesitation, Leopold accepted on June 19. Shortly after the news had spread in Madrid and the French ambassador had been officially notified of the new development, Napoléon III and his cabinet again initiated counter-measures. The three-to-four-week period which precipitated the crisis leading to the French declaration of war on 19 July 1870 is one of the best-researched months in European history. Apter (254) gives credit for her version to 'multiple Internet sources', M. Howard's history of the war (1961), and J.F. McMillan's biography of Napoléon III (1991). The most comprehensive and detailed account in English, though, is D. Wetzel's recent examination of the crisis in terms of the personalities involved (2001). There are some infelicities of presentation but it is a meticulously documented book, and its findings coincide with those of H. Kolb's equally thorough study of 1970, unsurpassed for its analysis in terms of the prevailing diplomatic customs—expectations, conventions, norms—though the different focus makes for different emphases. Hurried readers may wish to consult the first 27 pages of G.A. Craig's eminent, and eminently readable, history, *Germany, 1866–1914* (1978), where they will find the main points which Apter's authorities missed. Undoubtedly, an extremely compressed account of a complex historical episode requires some drastic foreshortening.

But it is crucial—and not impossible—to keep the proportions in balance. As for Apter's account, it is in at least one important place at variance with the established sequence of events. It is also misleading because of the omission of whole sequences of pertinent actions. There is just no space here to argue the case in detail. It is, however, important to note that the French reactions to the publication of the Ems Dispatch, which Apter recounts and evaluates as the irresistible momentum to war, all occurred on July 15 or later. But by this time the road to war was clear. The French government had already decided to call up the reserves—a decision which was 'as good as a declaration of war' (Wetzel, 2001: 168). When the decision was made in the afternoon of the fourteenth, the transactions between Wilhelm and the French ambassador at Bad Ems were as yet unknown in Paris (Wetzel, 2001: 160). The Ems affair just could not have elicited public responses at that point. According to Wetzel's move-by-move account, the government had, at the time, a German newspaper article at hand, and in the evening, when it confirmed the decision to mobilize, two pertinent diplomatic cables. In his estimate, the 'Ems telegram ... was of negligible impact and thus of no significant influence on the deliberations of the French ministers' (Wetzel, 2001: 159–60; also see 172). I do not wish to imply



that Wetzel's interpretation, though supported by massive evidence, is necessarily the last word in this matter. But an opinion to the contrary is not persuasive unless it has taken the facts and arguments on his side fully into account—not forgetting Kolb's and Craig's. In view of these philological and historical bumbles, I hesitate to give an account of chapters covering areas where I do not have a reading knowledge. I cannot guarantee that my report will not be inadvertently misleading. Perhaps I can minimize the danger by proceeding selectively, focusing on areas which may be of interest to scholars in Inter-American Studies.

The Translation Zone is formally divided into four parts. If I deal with the Introduction and Part I ('Translating Humanism') together, I do so because they provide basic information on Apter's approach without getting overly abstract. The chapters of the other three parts, 'The Politics of Untranslatability', 'Language Wars', and 'Technologies of Translation', are more in the nature of case studies. Each combines micro-critical with macro-critical moves. Sometimes, the author asks her readers to take a patient look at passages of texts, and then dares them to follow on leaps across chasms of languages, modes of writing and, on occasion, times. The first Chapter, 'Translating after 9/11: Mistranslating the art of war', is another plea to recognize the importance of foreign language training, one in an alarmist mode. The author feels that the 'psychic and political danger posed by the Anglocentrism of coalition forces was never sufficiently confronted' (12) and offers a long list of news items on security problems occasioned by a lack of language competence, among them the massive backlog of potentially security-sensitive materials awaiting translation and the failure to identify persons due to a translator's confusion of pronouns. At points such as these, the argument strikes me as preoccupied with adequacy in Apter's sense of the word and, hence, as rooted in 'old' translation studies: For the issues are an inadequate rendering of pronouns and a lack of capable translators and interpreters.

What I find interesting, from an Americanist point of view, is much of Apter's discussion, in Part I, of a central project of Atatürk's modernization policy by offering Western European scholars—most of them Jewish refugees from Hitler's Germany—leading positions at the University of Istanbul in the 1930s and 1940s, so that the country would be transformed by an infusion of European ideas and values as well as by German scholarship and advanced teaching. If one takes into account that the old *Dar-ül-Fünun* was legally closed one day in 1933, so that the Turkish faculty lost their jobs, and a new university was founded on the next, where some of them became assistants to the foreign professors—many of whom 'settled into a rather privileged and comfortable existence on the hills of Bebek' (Seyhan, 2005: 280)—the whole project looks as though it had more than a touch of self-colonization. But I am, at this point, less interested in this aspect than in Apter's characterization of Istanbul as having a 'tradition of a cultural crossroads' and as possessing 'established Jewish and German enclaves' (51–52). They were, in fact, two different kinds of enclave. One was, at the same time, an exclave flung out from the cultural, political, linguistic, and geographical center, Germany, whereas the Jewish enclave, at the time, had no

homeland, only a mental center, which, depending on individual attitudes, may also have been part of a spiritual identity. The cosmopolitan university of Istanbul was itself an enclave more in the nature of the Jewish one.

The American colonies and their successor countries, I submit, are cultural crossroads writ large; their cultural life as a whole, including its English-speaking part, requires for an adequate description the concept of a complex culture of cooperation, counteroperation, and uneasy, mutually ignorant coexistence of major and minor enclaves/exclaves. The 'American experience', too, was a project of modernization, led, in part, by an immigrant elite which, however, had not been invited in; in part, it worked as a grassroots movement, spontaneously guided like a shoal of fish, as in John Steinbeck's *Sea of Cortez*.

But to return to Apter and to Istanbul: In her chapter on Leo Spitzer, the leading scholar at the university at the time, she notes a tension between his willingness to immerse himself in the Turkish language and in Turkish culture on the one hand and, on the other, his penchant for ethnically insensitive remarks (29–31); she opines that the philological search for the root («racine») of a word—actually a minor philological pursuit in the German tradition of classical philology—amounts to the 'racing' of philology (28), and commits herself to the astounding claim that a 'buried problem with race lies at the heart of the philological tradition' (36). I am not quite sure whether this tradition is supposed to be the line that runs from Spitzer and, primarily, Auerbach to Said, a connection which can also be subsumed under the heading of 'elaboration of ... *Welt*-humanism' (69). Given her own alignment with this tradition, it is, I think, important to take a closer look at Apter's definition of humanism. Linked with Said's, its ingredients are 'individual freedom, universal human rights, anti-imperialism, release from economic dependency, and self-determination for disenfranchised people' (66). But what *exactly* is meant by freedom, imperialism, and other key terms? One person's freedom is, after all, another person's libertinage, one person's imperialism, another's protection of legitimate rights, etc. And remembering the truly memorable historical debates, one recognizes the need of complementary considerations.

To take up a single point: How humanistic is it to insist on universal rights but to ignore universal responsibilities? Responsibilities for the mutual welfare of family members, for the quality of the work one does and for the workmen one employs, etc. If something should go wrong: is there a place for justice tempered by mercy? Let us not forget reverence in the face of creation. And to remember a great American humanist of the twentieth century, Kenneth Burke: What about his emphasis on action in the full sense of the word as a *humanum*, as against mere motion?

In Part II, Chapter 5, entitled 'Nothing is translatable', focuses on Alain Badiou's *Petit Manuel d'Inesthétique* (1998) and his claim that, in Apter's rephrasing, '[u]ltimately it is a text's singularity that confers universal value and truth' (86). In my reading, the singularity or individuality—not necessarily of any text but—of each literary work of art, which is recognizable even, and perhaps, particularly, in terms of intertextuality, has been disregarded in much recent scholarship, with sometimes unfortunate institutional consequences. This 'singular universalism' does not, however, preclude Badiou's recognition, across 'chasms and gulfs of untranslatability', of similarities be-



tween Labîd ben Rabi'â, a pre-Islamic Arabic writer, and Mallarmé (88–89). I have made a note to read Badiou in the light of Manfred Frank's discussion of the 'individual universal' in *Das individuelle Allgemeine: Textstrukturierung und –interpretation nach Schleiermacher* (1977).

Chapter 7, 'Plurilingual Dogma: Translation by Number' should be of special interest to internationally minded Americanists. One of the writers Apter examines in some detail is Eugène Jolas, best known, perhaps, as the editor of the 'little magazine' *transition*. The posthumous publication of his autobiography *Man from Babel* (1998) seems to have stirred an interest in his other pursuits, including, in Germany, his contributions to the 'denazification' of the language when he served as American press officer in the aftermath of World War II.

More centrally, he published verse in the three standard languages he was fluent in, French, German, and English. Apter is most interested in his serious macaronic verse, which combines the three languages in single texts, and, in particular, in his more adventurous language experiments, most of them unpublished, of compounding words, taken from additional languages, in an effort to help bring about an '*Atlantic, or Crucible Language*', rudiments of which his ear caught as a delivery boy and, later, as a reporter in the United States (113). Apter, it is true, drags him and his likes in by the ears when she argues that his work is a translation 'reduc[ed by the Quinean position on untranslatability] to the play of semiotic substitutions within a univocal language world' (112). For the samples of Jolas' macaronics I have seen suggest that their structural principle is plurilingualism rather than even a reduced form of translation. Apart from this point, I go along with Apter's argument. I also submit that his position on the fringe of American literature makes his work an ideal 'triangulation point' for identifying if not reassessing the 'mainstream' of American poetry not only *entre deux guerres*.

There is one later chapter which I should like to recommend in particular, 'Condé's *Créolité* in Literary History'. I do so not so much for the checklist of two handfuls or so of 'models of literary history' selected from the 'myriad . . . still in use', where H. Taine's triad appears with ingredients—'*milieu*, genre, and social class' (178)—that differ from the ones in my edition (if I use the same), and where no mention is made of the arguments of critics who find that literary history is impossible (e.g. D. Perkins) or that verbalization as such amounts to distortion (e.g. H. White). The strength of this chapter is, in my reading, where Apter stops casting about for 'cognitive metaphors' or 'organizing concepts' (180, 181) and settles down to reading Maryse Condé's *La migration des coeurs* as a 'Caribbean Gothic' rewriting of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (178), in analogy to Jean Rhys's Caribbean-based rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (182). Apter concludes that *Créolité* is not a peaceful coexistence in 'narrative hybridity' but rather an adversary strategy, a 'transhistorical denomination referring to the way in which Creole fiction reveals literature "happening" as a narrative event or plot dimension. Literacy as a shaping force of character *Bildung*, the passage of common or marginalized speech into the domains of *lisibilité* and *littérarité*, and the transcoding of language politics into narrative structure—these aspects of the novel [*La migration des coeurs*] hold out the promise of a creolized world-historical turn' (190). This is not my way of putting things, and I am always

ill at ease in the face of claims that are global in both the English and the French senses of the word. But I submit that *Créolité* is but a special case of an interliterary situation where writers who feel an allegiance to an 'emerging' literature write themselves away from the predominant literatures, as was the case with American literatures. At the same time, the identification of attitude-charged connections between 'source' and 'target texts' not in translation but in rewriting relations, somewhat along Ezra Pound's principle of 'criticism in new composition' (Pound, 1954: 75), is about as close to literary historiography one can get after having taken the searching and devastating critique of all conventional methods into account (for a sustained argument please see Frank/Mueller-Vollmer, 2000: 21–67).

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