

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

From: **“Thick Translation”** (2000)L. Venuti (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader*, London – New York: Routledge. Previously published in *Callaloo* 16:4 (1993).

“Utterances are the products of actions, which like all actions, are undertaken for reasons. Understanding the reasons characteristic of other cultures and (as an instance of this) other times is part of what our teaching is about: this is especially important because in the easy atmosphere of relativism—in the world of ‘that’s just your opinion’ that pervades the high schools that produce our students—one thing that can get entirely lost is the rich differences of human life in culture. One thing that needs to be challenged by our teaching is the confusion of relativism and tolerance so scandalously perpetuated by Allan Bloom, in his, the latest in a long succession of American jeremiad. And that, of course, is a task for my sort of teaching—philosophical teaching—and it is one I am happy to accept. But there is a role here for literary teaching also, in challenging this easy tolerance, which amounts not to a celebration of human variousness but to a refusal to attend to how various other people really are or were. A thick description of the context of literary production, a translation that draws on and creates that sort of understanding, meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others. Until we face up to difference, we cannot see what price tolerance is demanding of us.

In the American academy, therefore, the translation of African texts seems to me to need to be directed at least by such purposes as these: the urge to continue the repudiation of racism (and, at the same time, through explorations of feminist issues and women’s writing, of sexism); the need to extend the American imagination—an imagination that regulates much of the world system economically and politically—beyond the narrow scope of the United States; the desire to develop views of the world elsewhere that respect more

Kwame Anthony Appiah

is a philosopher, cultural theorist, and novelist whose interests include political and moral theory, the philosophy of language and mind, and African intellectual history. He is currently the Laurance S. Rockefeller University Professor of Philosophy at the Princeton University. Appiah was raised in Ashanti Region, Ghana, and educated at Bryanston School and Clare College, Cambridge, where he earned a PhD in philosophy. Appiah is the author of several books including *The Ethics of Identity*, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, *Experiment in Ethics*, and *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. Appiah has also written three novels.



deeply the autonomy of the Other, views that are not generated solely by the legitimate but local political needs of America's multiple diasporas.

To stress such purposes in translation is to argue that, from the standpoint of analysis of the current cultural situation—an analysis that is frankly political—certain purposes are productively served by the literary, the text-teaching, institutions of the academy. To offer our proverbs to American students is to invite them, by showing how sayings can be used within an oral culture to communicate in ways that are complex and subtle, to a deeper respect for the people of pre-industrial societies. (pp. 427-428)

ROSEMARY ARROJO

From: **“Translation and Improprity: A Reading of Claude Bleton’s *Les Nègres du Traducteur*”** (2006) *Translation and Interpretation Studies*, vol. I, No. 2, Fall.

Translation has been frequently associated with different forms of improprity—betrayal, infidelity, theft, indecency, seduction, invasion of property, etc.—that may be directly related to the translator’s necessarily close and often ambivalent relationship with the original and/or its author. In fact, translation entails a very close contact with somebody else’s text, not simply as “the most intimate act of reading” (Spivak 2004: 397), but also as a form of rewriting that claims to replace the original in another language and context. It is not surprising, then, that the ethical implications of this complex relationship have been one of the main concerns of Western translation theories, which, at least since Cicero, have focused on devising strategies to help translators behave properly.

The apparently dangerous relationship that translation is perceived to establish between the original and the translated text, and between the author and the translator, has been associated, for instance, with the disappointments involved in parasitic, unreliable friendships. The Earl of Roscommon’s *An Essay on Translated Verse*, written in 1684, gives us an insightful illustration of the basic issues at stake in these relationships. According to Roscommon, the translator, after becoming aware of his own preferences and inclinations, should find an author or a poet with whom he is compatible, and with whom he could establish a strong connection: “Examine how your humour is inclined,/ And which the ruling passion of your mind;/ Then seek a poet who your way does bend,/ And choose an author as you choose a friend” (Robinson 176). However, the pursuit of intimacy with the author and his original, which is supposedly part and parcel of the groundwork for successful translations, is also basically improper and, of course, highly risky for the author since the translator is told to insidiously take advantage of his closeness with the latter in order to take his place: “United by this sympathetic bond,/ You grow familiar, intimate, and fond;/ Your thoughts, your words, your styles, your souls agree,/ No longer his interpreter, but he” (176). Moreover, to the extent that in this plot both the translator and the author are represented as males while the text itself is

identified as a fickle young muse who must be both conquered and protected, the triangular relationship in which they find themselves is inextricably tinted with sexual overtones, suggesting that the translator is indeed a double-faced character, a *traduttore-traditore* who befriends the author in order to take possession of his precious text and muse.

Most of the traditional statements about translation, whether found in formal theories or in the usual prejudices disseminated by what one might call common sense, will reveal that the translator's activity often seems to be caught up in descriptions and conceptions that are generally haunted by fears of betrayal and disrespect, which are compatible with an underlying anxiety about the fact that texts are indeed always at risk of falling prey to spurious interpretations. Therefore, one is tempted to speculate that there might be a close connection between the supposed danger of unreliable collaborations and the persistent ideal of translation as an activity that should be performed 'invisibly'. In other words, according to the idealized terms conceived by our patriarchal, essentialist tradition, translators are expected to do their work without leaving any traces of their interference, that is, without actually taking on an authorial role that might threaten the author's position or the alleged integrity of the original.

This deeply embedded distrust in the activity that is expected to make it possible for meaning to safely travel between languages and cultures also emerges in several works of fiction, which explore some of the age-old prejudices associated with translators, their task, and their relationships with originals and authors. In these texts one can find representations of translators in close connection with an array of ambivalent feelings triggered by the ethical dilemmas that constitute their craft. It has been my belief that the examination of these pieces by several authors from different traditions will help us further understand the conflicts that seem to motivate, at least on some level, the ways in which Western culture tends to respond, perhaps even unconsciously, to the role of translators and their 'dangerously' intimate association with originals and their authors. In recent years I have examined stories and novels whose revealing plots have allowed me to reflect on the power struggles and the emotional investments that are usually at stake both in the writing and in the reception of translations and originals, and which are not made quite so explicit in formal, theoretical statements. (pp. 92-94)

Rosemary Arrojo

is Professor of Comparative Literature at Binghamton University. She joined the Department of



Comparative Literature in January of 2003 and directed the Translation Research and Instruction Program until June of 2007. Before that, from 1984 to 2002, she taught English and Translation Studies at the State University of Campinas (Brazil), and also worked as a free-lance translator. Her main publications in Portuguese include the following books: *Oficina de Tradução: A Teoria na Prática*, first published in 1986 and currently in its 5th edition; *O Signo Desconstruído: Implicações para a Tradução, a Leitura e o Ensino* (1992), as the editor and main contributor; and *Tradução, Desconstrução e Psicanálise* (1993). Her publications in English include chapters in several book collections, essays in all the main journals specializing in translation studies, as well as book reviews. She is currently preparing two books on representations of translation in fiction, which will include pieces on Borges, Kafka, Poe, Saramago, Guimarães Rosa, Calvino, Kosztolányi, among others. Samples of her work have been translated into German, Spanish, Catalan, Turkish, and Hungarian.

HOMI K. BHABHA

From: “**DissemiNation**” in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration* (1990)
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The signs of cultural difference cannot [...] be unitary or individual forms of identity because their continual implication in other symbolic systems always leaves them ‘incomplete’ or open to cultural translation. (p. 313)

In keeping with its subaltern, substitutive,—rather than synchronic—temporality, the subject of cultural difference is neither pluralistic nor relativistic. The frontiers of cultural difference are always belated or secondary in the sense that their hybridity is never simply a question of admixture of pre-given identities, or essences. Hybridity is the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life; it is an instance of iteration, in the minority discourse, of the time, of the arbitrary sign—‘the minus in the origin’—through which all forms of cultural meaning are open to translation because their enunciation resists totalization. (p. 314)

[...]

Cultural difference emerges from the borderline moments of translation that Benjamin describes as the ‘foreignness’ of languages. Translation represents only an extreme instance of the figurative fate of writing that repeatedly generates a movement of equivalence between representation and reference but never gets beyond the equivocation of the sign. The ‘foreignness’ of language is the nucleus of untranslatable that goes beyond the transparency of subject matter. The transfer of meaning can never be total between differential systems of meaning, or within them, for ‘the language of translation envelopes its content like a royal robe with ample folds. ... [it] signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering an alien.’ It is too often slippage of the signification that is celebrated at the expense of this disturbing alienation, or powering of content. The erasure of content in the invisible but insistent structure of linguistic difference does not lead us to some general, formal acknowledgement of the function of the sign. The ill fitting robe of a language alienates content in the sense that it deprives it of an immediate access to a stable or holistic reference ‘outside’ itself—in society. It suggests that social conditions are themselves being reinscribed or reconstituted in the very act of enunciation, revealing the instability of any division of meaning into an inside and outside. Content becomes the alien *mise en scène* that reveals the signifying structure of linguistic difference which is never seen for itself, but only glimpsed in the gap or the gapping of the garment. Benjamin’s argument can be elaborated for theory of cultural difference it is only by engaging which what he calls the ‘purer linguistic air’—the anteriority of the sign—that the reality-effect of content can be overpowered which then makes all cultural languages ‘foreign’ to themselves. And it is from this foreign perspective that it becomes possible to inscribe the specific locality of cultural systems—their incommensu-

rable difference—and through that apprehension of difference to perform the act a cultural translation. In the act of translation the ‘given’ content becomes alien and estranged; and that, in its turn, leaves the language of translation *Aufgabe*, always confronted by its double, the untranslatable—alien and foreign. (pp. 314-315)

BELLA BRODZKI

From: *Can These Bones Live? Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory* (2007) Stanford: Stanford University Press.

The principal concern of this book is not the comical underside of translation, but rather its underlying gravity. It would be difficult to overstate the role of translation in shaping history, culture, and memory. It is imperative, I believe, especially given the current international political climate, in which relations with the Other are so volatile, that concentrated interest and material resources be directed toward recognizing the crucial role of translation in culture, of translation as culture. This is more than an academic matter. At the same time, however, it is one thing to make rhetorical claims about the (over)determinacy of translation in our lives and in the lives of future generations, and another to show how and why being more attentive to the fundamental, though intricate and often elusive, workings of translation can crucially benefit interpreters of the humanities. My aim is the latter, but I doubt whether the demonstration can be effective without the assertion. We are utterly dependent on translation, but that does not mean that we respect the enterprise or want to think too much about how it gets done. It bears repeating, I believe, that there is translation because there are different languages, and that this multilingualism is a gift, rather than a necessary (or natural) evil best defended with reductive instrumentalism and resignation. Because translation is a shared commodity whose value is not equally distributed, its labor must be recognized to ensure both quality and fairness; it cannot be consigned only to bureaucrats, ‘experts,’ or custodial others.

Bella Brodzki is

Professor of Comparative Literature at Sarah Lawrence College. She teaches courses in autobiography; modern and contemporary fiction; literary and cultural theory; and translation studies and holds the Alice Stone Ilchman Chair in Comparative Studies. Her articles and essays on the critical intersections with and impact of translation on other fields and disciplines have appeared in a range of publications, most recently in the collection *Translating Women* edited by Luise von Flotow (2011). She is the coeditor of *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1989) and author of *Can These Bones Live?: Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory* (2007). Her current project is coediting a special volume of Comparative Literature Studies entitled *Trials of Trauma*.



Difference

As subjects in a multicultural, polyglot, transnational, and intertextual universe, all of us 'live in translation', but we also occupy that space differently, depending on our linguistic capital and the status of our language(s) in rapidly changing historical, political, and geographic contexts. We also occupy that space more or less self-consciously, and are more or less deluded by what passes as transparency in our communicative encounters around the globe. The specific asymmetric relations that currently incorporate translation into globalization (call it 'linguistic outsourcing') mean that non-native speakers of English are expected to fulfill most of the translating demands in the world. The refusal to translate that both literally and figuratively characterizes most Anglophones' cultural comportment bespeaks a sense of power and privilege and has devastating consequences for everyone. As the study of foreign languages declines in the United States and English increasingly becomes the dominant global language, despite having fewer native speakers than Chinese, Hindi, and Spanish, we ignore the impact of unidirectional translation and mistranslation in international relations, mass tourism, science, and technology at incalculable cost. Although I do not address these concerns directly here, I conceive of this critical project as being wedded to them. We need to encourage, simultaneously, on two fronts, both the study of foreign languages and the study of translation, because—of course—they are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing. (pp. 11-12)

