

EMILY APTER

From: *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature* (2006)
Princeton: Princeton University Press.

“I have real reservations about pushing translation studies in the direction of linguistic ecology even if this new direction offers potentially rich possibilities for interdisciplinary work between comparative literature and area studies. More worries are grounded in the concern that a translation studies overly indebted to linguistic ecology risks fetishizing heritage language as it devotes itself to curatorial salvage: exoticizing burrs, calques and idiomatic expressions as so many ornaments of linguistic local color, reinforcing linguistic cultural essentialism, and subjecting the natural flux and variation of dialect to a standard language model of grammatical fixity. I am personally more inclined toward a critical model of language politics that would continue to emphasize aesthetic and theoretical questions, while invigorating the investigation of linguistic nominalism, or what a language name really names when it refers to grammatical practices in linguistic territories.

Language wars have also remained a central theme in my conceptualization of translation zones. In fastening on the term ‘zone’ as a theoretical mainstay, the intention has been to imagine a broad intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation, nor an amorphous condition associated with postnationalism, but rather a zone of critical engagement that connects the ‘l’ and the ‘n’ of transLation and transNation. The common root ‘trans’ operates as a connecting port of translational transnationalism (a term I use to emphasize translation among small nations or minority language communities), as well as the point of debarkation to cultural caesura—a trans—ation—where transmission failure is marked. (p. 5)

[...]

The zone, in my ascription, has designated sites that are ‘in-translation’, that is to say, belonging to no single, discrete language or single medium of communication. Broadly conceived in these terms, the translation zone applies to diasporic language communities, print and media public spheres, institutions of governmentality and language policy-making, theaters of war, and literary theories with particular relevance to the history and future of comparative literature. The translation zone defines the epistemological interstices of politics, poetics, logic, cybernetics, linguistics, genetics, media, and environment; its locomotion characterizes both psychic transference and the technology of information transfer. (p. 6)

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From: *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993) London – New York: Routledge.**Translation as reading**

How does the translator attend to the specificity of the language she translates? There is a way in which the rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systematicity. If we emphasize the logical at the expense of these rhetorical interferences, we remain safe. “Safety” is the appropriate term here, because we are talking of risks, of violence to the translating medium.

I felt that I was taking those risks when I recently translated some eighteenth-century Bengali poetry. I quote a bit from my “Translator’s Preface”:

I must overcome what I was taught in school: the highest mark for the most accurate collection of synonyms, strung together in the most proximate syntax. I must resist both the solemnity of chaste Victorian poetic prose and the forced simplicity of “plain English”, that have imposed themselves as the norm ... Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate. These songs, sung day after day in family chorus before clear memory began, have a peculiar intimacy for me. Reading and surrendering take on new meanings in such a case. The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other—before memory—in the closest places of the self.

Yet language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric of figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a dissemination cannot be under our control. Yet in transla-

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tion, where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages, we get perilously close to it. By juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvages of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations. Although every act of reading or communication is a bit of this risky fraying which scrambles together somehow, our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum except in the communication and reading of and in love. (What is the place of “love” in the ethical? [...] Irigaray has struggled with this question.) The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. The politics of translation from a non-European woman’s text too often suppresses this possibility because the translator cannot engage with, or cares insufficiently for, the rhetoricity of the original.

The simple possibility that something might not be meaningful is contained by the rhetorical system as the always possible menace of a space outside language. This is most eerily staged (and challenged) in the effort to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space. (Absolute alterity or otherness is thus differed-deffered into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate). But a more homely staging of it occurs across two earthly languages. The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny.

Let us now think that, in that other language, rhetoric may be disrupting logic in the matter of the production of an agent, and indicating the founding violence of the silence at work within rhetoric. Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much. The jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing, is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world. Unless one can at least construct a model of this for the other language, there is no real translation. (pp. 180-181)

