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WHAT IS QUEER TRANSLATION?¹

NIR KEDEM

In 1990, the editors of *Translation, History, and Culture* suggested that the new emerging trends in the theory and practice of translation attest to a “cultural turn” in translation studies (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990). Like many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences influenced by the critical theories and practices of cultural studies, translation studies saw a shift in the very understanding of its own terminology, scope, and concerns, which were now challenged most notably by feminist and postcolonial theories that drew critical attention to the intricacies of power, ideology, and ethics involved in the work of translation, as well as to the translator’s agency.² Bassnett later concluded that “the development of Translation Studies in the 1990s can best be seen as the establishment of a series of new alliances that brought together research into the history, practice and philosophy of translation with other intellectual trends” (2002, 10).

Queer theory came late to the party, despite that it made itself known in academia in the very same years as the cultural turn in translation studies. Recently, two edited volumes have been attempting to fill this gap by bringing queer theory and translation studies into dialogue through the notion of queer translation. It seems surprising, however, that a “notoriously slippery term” such as queer (Epstein and Gillett 2017, 1) – the proclaimed marker of non-binary difference, famous for its in principle strangeness, indeterminacy, and malleability – ends up looking pretty familiar once it is paired up with translation in the concept “queer translation”; so much so, that it will hardly baffle anyone to learn that new concepts of translation made possible by

¹Some of the arguments in this essay were first presented at the *Gender and Genre in Translation* international colloquium held at McGill University in April 2017. I thank Asaf Angermann for his helpful comments on the early draft of this essay, and for clarifying the intricacies of Benjamin’s use of German. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this essay for their valuable comments and suggestions.

²Sherry Simon’s *Gender in Translation* and Luise von Flotow’s *Translation and Gender* are prime examples of feminist interventions in translation studies. André Lefevere’s *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* introduced the question of ideological motivation of translators to translation studies, and is considered a key work of the cultural turn. Among the most influential interventions in translation studies by postcolonial theorists are Kwame Appiah’s “Thick Translation” and Gayatri Spivak’s “The Politics of Translation.”

the cultural turn “mark it out as always already queer and as an appropriate metaphor for the exploration of queerness itself” (1). Gesturing in the so-called critical, tiredly rehearsed deconstructionist strategy that has been dominating queer theory, the editors of *Queer in Translation* consider it “the first multi-focus in-depth study on translating queer, queering translation, queer as translation and translation as queer” (7). Conversely, the editors of *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer* are more interested in how “queer theory can support an interrogation of the dominant models of the theory and practice of translation” (Baer and Kaindl 2018a, 2) than in the common ground between queer theory and translation studies. While it is resemblance and analogy, rather than difference, that grounds the concept of queer translation in Epstein and Gillett’s volume, here the theorization of queer translation (discussed primarily in the essays of the first section) begins with the other conspicuous sense of queer, namely, non-heterosexual identities and “any nonnormative experience or expression of sexual desire” (2). Relying on the sexual sense of queer in this regard, for example, one of the essays suggests that a “queer turn” in translation studies may facilitate a critique of sexuality and translation as categories (Santaemilia 2018, 13), which are interrogated through the dual process of translating sexuality and the sexualization of translation. The political potential of queer theory as reflexive critical practice is clearly drawn on by both volumes. But has queer theory, plural and open-ended as it may claim to be, subjected itself to such a critique?

As many queer theorists insisted in the past, for queer theory to be an effective critical mode of thinking it must constantly cultivate a self-critical dimension, that is, an instance that will secure its elasticity as a political practice, guarantee its dynamic and plural form, and can thus also provide the means to counter its critics (Butler 1993, 227). Since Kant’s monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*, critique has indicated a reflexive procedure that investigates the conditions of knowledge and, at the same time, delimits the scope of reason itself by deducing immanent criteria for its legitimate use. For Kant, critique is to be autonomous—a critique of reason by reason itself—and, according to Gilles Deleuze, critique’s autonomy thus attests to it being an immanent critique (Deleuze 1985, 3). The immanence of critique means that legitimate criteria are not dependent on some authoritative transcendent values and methods of investigation, which lie safely beyond the reach of critique. Critique therefore must also be total, or all-enveloping. In practical terms, this means, on the one hand, that no presupposition can be left unchecked by critique, especially not its own, and that critique therefore cannot begin its course on some stable ground, for it is to operate as a destabilizing force to any existing ground. On the other hand, critique should not be regarded completely negatively, for critique has a positive, constructive side, or, what amounts to the same thing, it is inseparable from creation: the constitution of the criticized object in thought in a new way, which may have been unthinkable so long as previous notions and presuppositions constrain

our ways of thinking about it. Deleuze argued that Nietzsche had made it possible to realize Kant's critical project, after Kant himself failed to adhere to the criteria of immanent critique he himself had set, thereby setting the stage for another compromised form of critique to follow, namely, the dialectic (Deleuze 1983, 88). Conversely, with the notions of perspectivism and the will to power, Nietzsche discovered "the only possible principle of total critique" (90), which will also enable its immanent (91) and positive (92-94) realization.

Given these considerations, I approach the issue of queer translation as an object of immanent critique that challenges pre-established notions of both the concept of queer and that of translation, in order to think the concepts and their relation anew. The critical method employed here may be dubbed "Deleuzian" inasmuch as its "cardinal points" are constituted as pragmatic, problematic, and genetic. By *pragmatic* I do not mean prescriptive; rather, my approach is interested with the practical uses and effects of certain concepts on our way of thinking, and with how thinking with such concepts relates to the social and political contexts in which they are used. Critique is *Problematic* in the sense that it proceeds by problematizing existing concepts, that is, by constructing (or "extracting") the problems that condition these concepts as solutions.³ A problem for Deleuze marks thought's impotence and necessity: that which thought cannot yet *must* think; an impossibility that pushes thought to its limit and disrupts habitual ways of thinking, thereby compelling thought to produce new and different meanings, concepts, and ways of thinking and living (Deleuze 1994, 199). Problematization necessarily involves the evaluation of the criticized problems and their concepts (as solutions), both of which are themselves effects of preceding determinations of value and sense incarnated in existing concepts or states of affairs. Concisely, critique here begins with an existing concept of queer translation, and actively constructs it as a problem. In so doing, critique traces the concept back to its conditions of thinkability, namely, the problem to which it serves as a solution, in order to evaluate both the problem and its solution—for the sense and value of the concept of queer translation are engendered by the determination of its problem.⁴

³For Deleuze, solutions are forever contingent and temporary, and they very much depend on the problem that conditions them. Philosophical or theoretical concepts are solutions in this sense: "a solution has no meaning independently of a problem to be determined in its conditions and unknowns; but these conditions and unknowns have no meaning independently of solutions determinable as concepts" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 81). However, just as problems must be constructed, so do concepts or solutions must be created anew: "critique implies new concepts (of the things criticized) just as much as the most positive creation.... Nothing positive is done, nothing at all, in the domains of either critique or history, when we are content to brandish ready-made old concepts like skeletons intended to intimidate any creation" (83; translation modified). On Deleuze's own approach to critique, see also Deleuze (2004, 138-39).

⁴On critique as inseparable from the construction of problems, and problematization as an act of evaluation, see Wasser (2017, 60-4), Zourabichvili (2012, 58-64), and Voss (2012, 55-61).