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Retranslation and Interpellation

ANDREW Z. BROOKS

During the 2020 Living in Languages colloquium, while speaking on my experience translating Althusser and the lack of “hailing” [*hélér*] in the original French, a professor brought Warren Montag’s 2017 essay, — “Althusser’s Empty Signifier: What is the Meaning of the Word ‘Interpellation’?” — on the Brewster’s translation of “interpellation” as “or hailing,” to my attention.

In the essay, Montag asks what I hope is an ironic question, in the form of a necessity statement:

We must therefore ask the simple question of whether ‘hail’ adequately translates ‘interpeller’ in general, and in the ISA essay in particular. (Montag)

What. A. Question! Though nothing is simple about it; this is *the question* of translation practically and theoretically. This is a question of translation that reaches back to Jerome’s very accusations/crimes...sense-for-sense or word-for-word, and the complex entanglement, the mystification, which occurs when “adequacy” is demanded by an institutional validity that supports only that which reproduces its-own grammars and apparatuses.¹ Does “hail” adequately translate “interpeller” generally and in-particularly, and who decides?² And yet, the heft of Althusser’s “interpellation,” as concept and word, adds a dimension to the translator’s choice that reveals mystification as such and in-particular. In his hopefully ironic use of “simple” Montag is possibly implying a weightier question, more in-line with Althusser’s project. To re-paraphrase Montag’s almost question into my own grammar and concerns:

What are the implications and results of “hail” being the English translation for “interpeller” in general, and for ISAs in-particular? What is disrupted and what is maintained? And how does this reproduce or disrupt one’s own positionality?

That being said, I agree with the majority of Montag’s essay—his reading of Althusser, the empty-signifier nature of “I’interpellation,” the reading of the allegory, its relation to violence against the Black peoples in America,—and at the core I am working through Althusser’s belief and Montag’s words that: “At stake in this struggle between words, between translations of untranslatable terms is the very concept of ideology” (Montag). Where we seem to be in a tension is on the question of what to do about this struggle. Specifically, I question his view of the benefit of “or hailing” and his call at the end of the essay to “substitute one image [of

¹ Quick detour to stand as an example of the complexity and possible historical root of the relationship between ISA/RSAs and interpellation in translation: According to Venuti, Paraphrastic translation i.e., translation as cultural adaptation, which was typical of the Romans, was taken up by the Christians (*Reader* 15)—this involved a standard of accuracy for a translation, not based on the relation to source text, but on institutional judgment of validity. The complexity of this is felt when the text is the holy bible in the beginnings of the catholic church. The bible translated paraphrastically *must* correspond with the in-particular Authoritative-governance’s grammars or apparatuses, (with the threat of heresy towards the translator). And yet the translation must still be perceived of as transparent, i.e., adequate. But “transparent” is defined by the Authoritative-governance’s grammars and apparatuses, not the source text. Hence, the mystification between “transparency” (clear and distinct) i.e., some authentic-correspondence, and what is actually a paraphrastic-adaptation, maintains power-relations through grammars or apparatuses that define and internalize “transparent” to uphold institutionally valid.

² Within the inescapability of ideology—maybe not even Althusser should decide.

interpellation] for another,” (Montag); unless that substituting process can become perpetual, a “and yet also...” rhetorical form, instead of a doublement. For, though I agree that “interpellation” absolutely signifies police brutality against Black peoples—I believe that if the image of Eric Garner becomes the new “allegorical expression”³ of “interpellation,” which is what Montag states, this is possibly a problematic reduction that maintains specific privileges, while simultaneously also being a contemporary and politically relevant rendering of Althusser, with potentially real political effect against policing.⁴

For, “interpellation” must also signify acts of translating, reading, and critiquing and the developing of new “allegorical expressions” itself—with violently rippling effects. The question for me turns to academia and the substitutions that privilege one image for another and thus what is veiled. Hence, the image should be Eric Garner...and yet also...professors teaching about Althusser...and yet also...graduate students presenting at colloquiums...and yet also.... red-lining...and yet also...Instagram...and yet also...etc. This “and yet also” is not signifying a focus on one over the other, but an attempting to think the complexity of ISA/RSA and interpellation more fully and thus read symptomatically with the hopes of questioning one’s own complicity and resistance.

For translation, critique, teaching, etc., all of these are also forms of interpellation.

As Lawrence Venuti argues:

Translation also enlists the foreign text in the maintenance or revision of dominate conceptual paradigms, research methodologies and cultural practices that inform disciplines and professions in the receiving culture...It is these social affiliations and effects—written into the materiality of the translated text, into its discursive strategy and

³ Montag’s use of a privileged “allegorical expression” seems nearly not allegorical, but rather closer to a symbol. As I hope will be apparent, I am not arguing that police brutality against the Black community is not a form of interpellation or is unimportant. This questioning of the *use* of Eric Garner’s murder comes from thinking about the use of “black bodies” by academics and theory in general. As Frank Wilderson writes in *Afropessimism* discussing a historical academic use: “Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures... Blacks do not function as political subjects; instead, our flesh and energies are instrumentalized for postcolonial, immigrant, feminist, LGBTQ, transgender, and workers’ agendas. These so-called allies are never authorized by Black agendas predicated on Black ethical dilemmas” (14). The strategic lens of afropessimism raises a questioning of the *use* of Eric Garner as the new “allegorical expression:” who does such a *use* benefit, and how? I argue that, the thinking about police brutality in America through Althusser’s lens of interpellation is extremely beneficial, in that as a lens it seeks out meta-aporias in its transcendental-yet-speculative movement; which can, when left out of a mystifying (under the guise of clarity) analogy, i.e., “or hailing,” lead to a questioning of one’s own positionality and complicity therein. This is a demystifying through illuminating the inevitable mystifying, compelling a closer symptomatic reading. Such a position could lead to an anti-racist coalition; as Fred Moten states in the *Undercommons*: “The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?” (140-141).

⁴ A response might be the use of documentary retranslation form with commentary. The form of retranslation is a critical encounter between an original, previous historical translation, and anew translation; the means of commentary is to demarcate one’s own positionality and ideological distortions, in a manner that hopes to compel the reader to likewise take on the role of critically reading not just the “anew translations” for its own ideological distortions, but likewise a critical reading of the reader’s own ideological distortions.

its range of allusiveness for the translating-language reader, but also into the very choice to translate it and the ways it is published, reviewed, and taught—all these conditions permit translation to be called a cultural political practice, constructing or critiquing ideology-stamped identities for foreign cultures, affirming or transgressing discursive values and institutional limits in the receiving culture. (15)

I should note the form/mode of re-translation is of course also an interpellative act; but in highlighting the continuous reengagement with a text, through the translator (with their own complex positionality), with the its possibilities across time and space, retranslation form attempts to illuminate the complex ways meaning is made and preserved, while revealing (and disrupting) its own complex position in power-relations.

Montag uses a word that seems to indicate the very process Venuti is describing:

Althusser will substitute for interpellator other verbs which have English cognates, such as ‘constitute’ and ‘recruit’ (neither of which, however, are exactly synonyms of interpellation), it is ‘hail’ that emerges as the definition of interpellation in the English version...up to the present serves [as the] allegorical expression. (Montag, my emphasis)

This “emerges” alludes to the greater text *On Ideology* and, I am making it allude to Venuti’s description of translation’s relationship to the processes of interpellation and ideology. i.e., “emerges” marks the canonization that has occurred, and the translation/reading/teaching practices that have enforced and disseminated “or hailing” not just as a single “doublement” but as a near-definitive meaning of “interpellation”; this near definitiveness, I argue, possibly maintains the neo-liberal university and ISAs/RSAs in general, in not-compelling a questioning of “interpellation” as say critiquing, reading, translating within the neo-liberal institutions.⁵

I imagine this will be *too much*...too much is contained in “emerges,” I have over-determined it, compelling it to imply—just under its “surface”—all the events that have occurred from 1971 to today, those that disrupted and maintained: translation, publication, citations, excerpts, canonizations—and I have under-represented any event in-particular. But in doing so maybe this *too much* permits a certain alluding to—“what art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘*seeing*,’ ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’, (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*” (Althusser 1480). I imagine I am being *too much* in implying that a purposeful, excessive, over-determining and under-representing in language, not just poetic, but in a performative aspect of critical theory may also be indicated in Althusser’s reply to André Daspre. And yet, this seeing/feeling/perceiving is marked in Althusser’s later work on the material encounter. But I am compelled to *too much* once again, in wondering how to translate “interpelle” if not as “or hailing.”

⁵ Scholars like Sara Ahmed come to mind, or even Walter Benjamin, though he tried. Or as George Steiner wrote many years ago: “tenure in the academy today, the approval of one’s professional peers, the assistance and laurels in their giving, and not infrequent symptoms of opportunism and mediocre conventionality” (Steiner ix). All of this is to state, maybe critical work that will disrupt its own privilege and hence the ISA/RSAs more directly, cannot be done within the walls or with the support of said ISAs apparatuses, i.e., universities today. Though I hope such work can be done, we are compelled by “interpeller” to ask, and face the possibility it cannot.

With this question in mind, and alluding to Althusser's later work, if one must translate "interpellation" with a doublement—which one, dare I necessitate, need not—then maybe it should be "interpellation or the event of the swerve [...and yet also...]."

In the 'nothing' of the swerve, there occurs an encounter between one atom and another, and this event [événement] becomes advent [avènement] on condition of the parallelism of the atoms, for it is this parallelism which, violated on just one occasion, induces the gigantic pile-up and collision-interlocking [accrochage] of an infinite number of atoms, from which a world is born (one world or another: hence the plurality of possible worlds, and the fact that the concept of possibility can be rooted in the concept of original disorder). (*Philosophy of the Encounter* 191)

The interpolation of "or hailing" was a swerve of canonical proportions. Colliding and building until it emerged out as "the allegorical expression" of interpellation—⁶which is all the more striking when one remembers that Althusser ended the section on ideology with his own allegory of ideology and interpellation! I highlight this passage as well for its imagistic quality, alluding to ideology and interpellation, maybe offering an uncertainty breaching with potentiality to recognize Althusser and his work.

Now, of course, it is inevitable that Brewster's "or hailing" while critiquing any ideological processes (policing) is also maintaining specific ideological privileges. For to quote Venuti:

the translator's consultation of these materials inevitably reduces and supplements it, even when source-language cultural materials are also consulted. Their sheer heterogeneity leads to discontinuities—between the source-language text and the translation and within the translation itself—that are symptomatic of its ethnocentric violence. (Venuti 24)

We are always-already born into and work from an ideology. The question turns, not to a reified notion of pure-indexical-translation or even adequacy, but to: how does one, or is it even possible to read and translate in a manner that critiques one's own ideological position, of one's own interpellative acts of translation? And *ideally* are there inappropriable forms/modes of translation?

I argue for the form and mode of documentary re-translation, as potentially opening onto a material encounter for the reader and translator: one form (of shifting historic multiplicities) of which includes a respecting of the use of empty-signifiers, near-neologisms, words that attempt to bring to a tension a monadic density that the reader encounters in a manner that compels a symptomatic reading.⁷ Brewster's "or hailing" and the subsequent "emerging," the "piling-up,"

⁶ Maybe best exemplified in the location many students first experience an excerpt of the essay, such as the Norton Anthology: "For Althusser ideology works through our tactic recognition of being hailed, as when we turn around to answer the call, "Hey, you there!" (Norton Anthology, 2001, p. 1478).

⁷ The empty signifiers allude in a manner that relates to Althusser's notion of art.

covers over a possible encounter of the aleatory materialism entailed in interpellation as a process and “interpeller” as an “empty-signifier.”⁸ As Althusser writes:

finally, we shall say that the materialism of the encounter is the materialism, not of a subject (be it God or the proletariat), but of a process, a process that has no subject, yet imposes on the Subjects (individuals or others) which it dominates the order of its development, with no assignable end. (190)

The translator should attempt to mark this process in a manner that does not conceal interpellation as one, or two, but opens to multiplicity, or at least attempts to *not* conceal the potentiality of an empty signifier. Hence, Montag’s argument that “or hailing” “move[s] beyond the emptiness of tautological definition by inserting a second term” (Montag) misses the radical potentiality of “interpeller” as an empty-signifier and/or in its near-neologism status in English, marking a materialism of the encounter—“a process that has no subject yet imposes on the subjects” (Althusser 190)...i.e., an encounter of interpellation.⁹ *In not doubling “interpellation,” potentially one encounters the perpetually relative determination of context and thus the possible necessity of reading symptomatically....and yet also, in not doubling, one potentially covers over a strategic radical relevance to contemporary events and real violence.*

And so, ideally both could occur simultaneously [zugleich]. This would be an experimental interlinear re-translation form, which includes Althusser’s original, past and contemporary translations, translator’s notes, and critical commentaries, etc., in a form that is visibly translation, and uncertain of meaning. Re-translation in this form would possibly compel an allusive encounter with ideology, as textual possibility represented unfolding in historic forms, and with strategically real heft and affirmative political potentiality, and thus compel one to read symptomatically the text, one’s own positionality, and the specific here-now applicability.

⁸ It covers-over not in its individual use, but in the interpolation of “or hailing” within every occurrence of “interpellation” in the text—even those possibly signifying other verbs and contexts. Thus, arguably, negating a necessity of contextual reading.

⁹ The power of an empty signifier, which hinges on a near tautological definition, is likewise emphasized in a letter from Benjamin to Scholem from 23/12/1917. In which, Benjamin postulates one’s ability to determine the identity-relation that transcends the identity of the thought, i.e., one’s ability to represent the truth of thinking-thinking or thinking un-thinking. He decides this would have to be an absolute tautology, and states: “Die Wahrheit ist „denkicht“ (ich muß mir dies Wort bilden weil mir keines zur Verfügung steht).” In a moment of trying to mark a correspondence between thinking and truth in language—Benjamin is compelled to create a neologism, for there is no available language to state such a truth. Jakobson translates the word as “thinkish” and Fenves as “thi(n)ck.” A Dichtung thinking. Yet, Benjamin is seemingly against neologism. But something is marked and compelled when a word is unknown immediately. When the reader is brought to a halt and compelled to ask, “what does that mean?” A momentary destabilization of *assuming* one knows what something means—“interpeller” should compel us to question in what ways are we interpellated and in the context of academics, to ask: in what ways am I interpellating? To fight against police brutality, white-supremacy and anti-blackness is a must; but to do so should not take the form of a monolithic approach where contexts are generalized. Rather, academics, and white American academics especially should ask in what ways am I complicit in the death and terrorization of black bodies, of black peoples, of Eric Garner? What can I do today in my position to resist and dismantle white-supremacy in academia and in the street, in myself and in this world?

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