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Introduction to Living in Languages: Volume 2

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A brief note from the editors

Here at the end of 2022, we are excited to publish our second volume of *Living in Languages Journal*. This year we have had the pleasure of working with academics in the early parts of their careers from around the world. In some ways the “strange familiarity” from our first publication is maintained. The submissions stand “betwixt and between” two questions grappling with the limitations and delimitations of ideology: the possibility of an ethical-aesthetics, and the production of anew community and experience. The questions have long been entangled in translation studies.

The translator who faithfully follows the original text will have to sacrifice, to a greater or lesser degree, the distinctiveness of his own tradition. And so a tertium quid arises—a new item of such a kind that, to develop a taste for it, most people will need to educate themselves. (Goethe 280)

Choice or compulsion of form and mode (aesthetics) simultaneously produce anew experience and potential community. Yet, removed from Goethe’s 19th century world-literature museum, the ethics of the 21st century—responding to the horrors of colonization, the spread of globalization, and the rise of neoliberalism—compel a quest for aesthetic forms that reimagine conceptions of community, through inclusion of historical living differences, which speculate the possibility of a strange coming community. Any lingering reduction of aesthetics and ideology as separate is dissolving; with a Benjaminian conception of the transcendental and speculative held in dialectical tension—to varying degrees—the essays collected herein attempt to produce anew forms of criticism and translation, and/or explicate literary texts that have attempted the same. Such forms and explications illuminate the betwixt and between of aesthetic-ideology and the use of bounded strategic ethical forms in the production of anew coalitions and communities.

With a focus on form, Andrew Brooks’ article on Althusser is an exploration of the intersection of the ethical, aesthetic, and ideological, which specifically asks: how, or if it is possible, to engage in the task of translation by way of critiquing one’s own ideologies or, more pointedly, one’s own interpellative act in the attempt to “move” a text across the gulf of languages? Brooks proposes documentary retranslation as a form that attempts to illuminate the striving betwixt and between, and effects of ideology. Likewise, in an engaging case study by Lisu Wang, on the vernacular language movement in early 20th century China as manifest in the translations of Elizabeth Gaskell’s works, Wang explores Kwang Kien Woo’s form of “translation cum criticism.” The “translation cum criticism that Wang advocates,” similar to Brooks’ documentary retranslation, can be categorized as an ethical-aesthetic approach, making visible difference and marking out the limitations of translation through the use of paratext *within* the text.

The question of an ethical aesthetics is approached most directly in a ground clearing essay by Emanuela Maltese, which begins by tracing the entanglement of ethics and aesthetics in the European tradition, before turning to postcolonial theories of translation. Of course, this urgency of distinguishing and entangling the ethical and the aesthetical is not new. Several critics – Bassnet, Venuti, Chesterman, Bhabha, Godard, crowd this landscape. But Maltese makes room

for an intervention in postcolonial translation: an “aesth-ethical” turn brought about through the lens of black aesthetics, reminiscent of research by John Keene and Brent Hayes Edwards.

In a similar vein, but with a focus on the community, “betwixt and between,” the question of the entanglement of aesthetics and ethics is raised in an engaging piece of literary criticism by Rumi Collier-Takahashi on Zora Neale Hurston’s stories set in Harlem and the use of “Harlemses.” In the essay, Collier-Takahashi explicates the modes in which “vibrant linguistic culture” manifests in defiance to “assumed collectivity of” the community. The essay is a study of “distancing,” which she quotes from Kaplan’s “betwixt and between.” In Collier-Takahashi’s reading, that betwixt and between becomes, in a complex reading of illustrations in relations to the text, an act of reading that puts pressure on the boundary between languages and communities, and that, ultimately, and most importantly, make “belonging” to a community not a given but an elusive prospect to which she gives the name of “dissonant relationality.” In contrast to such dissonances, Nerisha de Nil Padilla Cruz offers a case study exploring the phenomenon of codeswitching in popular music. Padilla Cruz explicates how such code-switching music not only produces and benefits from perceived “foreignness,” but also plays with the audiences’ expectation for a domestication there of. Her article suggests that musical production that creates multilingual content contains the potential to “promote linguistic and cultural diversity.”

In a more covertly political mode, Yolande Schutter’s introduction to Claire Gacioch’s translations of Chase Twichell, and Nicole Cosentino’s essay on Proust, share an elegiac register that raises a question of an origin-al, always inaccessible, always wishing to be remembered—and containing a transformative potential to experience, to see differently. Such an Ursprung compels an imaginative leap towards a speculative other:

Precisely this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it thinks to assure itself most fully of what is debased, abruptly change into allegories, and that these allegories fulfill and revoke the nothingness in which they present themselves, just as the intention finally does not faithfully abide in sight of bones but faithlessly leaps across to resurrection. (Benjamin 254-255)

In a elegiac mode, Twichell and Schutter’s “roadkill,” Cosentino’s return to the disappointing mother in a time of future mourning, Collier-Takashi’s dissonance, and even Brooks’ empty signifier, all immerse themselves in remainders—attempting to compel a resurrecting leap—opening up the possibility of “other” meaning, “other” experience, and potentially compelling an allegorical vision of a radical “other”: the life of things, and the historical and dynamic nature of what is. For Cosentino the elegiac mode allows Proust as narrator to construct a series of alter personalities to deploy his varying genres, his various displacements: a plural of selves that amounts to no self. Echoed in poetic parlance, as Schutter suggests while reading Twichell’s poetry betwixt and between the English original and Gacioch’s French translation, such elegiac contemplation attempts “to see things as they are / without me.”

Betwixt and between “foreignness” that possibly produces inclusive diversity and/or dissonant relationality, and entangled in a quest/ion for/of an ethical-aesthetic that illuminates ideology, we offer these seven articles and translations to the reader.

Works Cited

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