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# Translation Studies and Agamben's Theory of the Potential

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**Paolo Bartoloni,**
**"Translation Studies and Agamben's Theory of the Potential"**
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**Abstract:** In his article, "Translation Studies and Agamben's Theory of the Potential," Paolo Bartoloni discusses the interstitial space of translation by drawing on literary and philosophical preoccupations, especially Giorgio Agamben's notion of "potentiality." The first part of the article is devolved to defining and discussing "potentiality" and the significance that it has for a general re-thinking of translation theory. Bartoloni moves on to ask what would happen if the focus of translation shifts from the final product, or from the relation between the original and the translation, to the process of translating, that is the middle ground, the in-betweenness where two distinct languages and cultures meet without superimposing one's own values onto the other. This section is occupied by a dialogue with a series of postcolonial texts, especially Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* and Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. Bartoloni's main interest and purpose in this article is to point to a new hermeneutic and epistemological zone from which a new reflection on translation as well as literature and subjectivity can commence.

**Paolo Bartoloni**

## Translation Studies and Agamben's Theory of the Potential

Interpreting Aristotle's *Book Theta* of the *Metaphysics*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben remarks that "in its originary structure, dynamis, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own steresis, its own non-Being. This relation constitutes the essence of potentiality. To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness" (1999a, 182). Truth to untruth, we could add, originality and uniqueness to non-originality and translation. This understanding and articulation of "potentiality" has enabled Agamben to enter a sustained reappraisal of knowledge, selfhood, language, and narrative in books such as *Potentialities* (1999a), *The End of the Poem* (1999b), and *The Coming Community* (1993). Agamben has not written directly or specifically about translation, yet his philosophical discourse and his implicit and explicit dialogue with Aristotle, Benjamin, Blanchot, Deleuze, Heidegger, and Levinas, amongst others, is, as I see it, of particular importance for a review of translation theory at a time when the traditional juxtaposition of original and translation and its attendant comparative theoretical framework appear increasingly limiting and inadequate to explain current phenomena of cross-cultural encounters and exchange. Besides, I do not see the reason to cling to such clear and unproblematic opposition in the field of translation studies when just about everywhere else in the field of the humanities and social sciences the notions of original and originality have undergone such drastic and dramatic a reappraisal. As Umberto Eco (2001) and Tim Parks (1998) have shown, the comparative analysis still holds currency, especially in the domain of commercial publishing and practical translation. It would be pure naivete to argue that interlingual translation ought to move away from grammatical, syntactic, and stylistic considerations and embrace a free-for-all approach. The point is that these considerations might well be founded on other and different sets of methodological and theoretical frameworks to those revolving around the static, and for the original unchangeable, idea of finite and final products. This in turn means that a reconsideration, and perhaps a reformulation of translation theory along the axis of contemporary philosophical and cultural discourse should not limit itself to the domain of theory and academia, but ought to influence the thinking and culture of commercial publishing too.

The definition of potentiality as expounded by Agamben finds its origin in Aristotle but it is also connected to the Heideggerian notion of Dasein. Let us read Thomas Carl Wall's interpretation of Dasein: "We have learned from Heidegger that existence is possibility in general and therefore it is unrealizable in particular, or it is impossible in particular. Existence as the generality of the possible is precisely the impossible: the uncanny impossibility of Da-sein -- the being I myself am at my ownmost. That is to say, before I take on the particularity of a person, I am -- and am not -- an extreme possibility. To say it even better, I am a potential possibility: the null event of an inactuality" (1999, 2). Heidegger's own words on Dasein are thus: "Dasein is not something present-at-hand which possesses its competence for something by way of an extra; it is primarily Being-possible" (1973, 183). In other words, the essence of Dasein is only potential. Dasein cannot be seen and understood other than "Being" in that -- as an individual sign with its unshared language -- it does not make sense; it does not have a meaning. Its "Being" comes to fruition when Dasein chooses to enter the "game" of the community and to be part of a set of linguistic and cultural trajectories and vectors amongst which its own trajectory and vector become opaque. Agamben's merit, his important contribution to contemporary philosophical discourse, and transversally to translation is, as I understand it, to have emphasized the notion of potentiality as presence, livable experience. For Agamben potentiality is the zone of a presence which by necessity implicates its simultaneous absence. And the "hardest thing," writes Agamben, "is not the Nothing or its darkness, in which many

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nevertheless remain imprisoned; the hardest thing is being capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from nothing, be" (1999a, 253). Clearly, Heidegger's writing on Dasein is rather more problematic and complex than I make it appear through the convenient label of opaqueness. Starting from a close reading of Heidegger, Levinas, and Blanchot, for instance, recuperate the possible actuality of Dasein by writing it within the experience of dying and of a temporal experience which Levinas calls *l'entretemps*, the "meanwhile" (see especially 1989). Incidentally, the notion of the "meanwhile" is, as we shall see later, of primary importance in the understanding of the process of translation. Yet it is not in the possibility of dying, but of existing in-between actuality and inactuality, in the interstitial space between being and non-being that translation is naturally located.

Selfhood, subjectivity, language, and cultural values are indissolubly linked to the extent that, at least in Western culture, the notion of identity and belonging, of being at home, are strictly correlated with a homogeneity of linguistic and cultural values whose safety appears to be guaranteed by enclosing them, by sealing and protecting them from the influence of what lies outside. It is by constructing linguistic and cultural enclosures that the ideas of authenticity and inauthenticity, original and copy become possible, indeed accepted as natural and necessary. This framework has had a historical, political and social value, a necessity whose traits continue to persist and hold sway even at a time when they appear to be undermined if not altogether outmoded by the process of globalization and international mobility. And yet, regardless of the paradigm shift and the attendant discourse of cross-fertilization and hybridization we still cling to the imperative of authenticity and originality, of purity based on a set of implicitly or explicitly protected linguistic and cultural values. My argument here, mind you, is not in favor of globalize identity as opposed to national identity, both of which in their own particular way could be defined as authentic. Rather, it is interested in opening up a series of challenges in order for a further zone to emerge in-between authenticity and inauthenticity. What I am referring to is the process which perhaps, but not necessarily, gives rise to so-called authentic spaces. In other words, a process, a linguistic and cultural habitat, in which authenticity and inauthenticity are themselves negative and absent, only potential amidst an unqualified and unqualifiedly, apparently incomplete, landscape.

In *The Coming Community* Agamben proposes a new perspective on subjectivity which, although not having direct bearing on translation, can be helpful in the context of my discourse. He writes: "The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being such as it is. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather 'singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity.' In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) -- and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-such, for belonging itself. Thus being-such, which remains constantly hidden in the condition of belonging, and which is in no way a real predicate, comes to light itself" (1993, 1-2). Agamben's intention is clearly that of rearticulating singularity and subjectivity away from the traditional hermeneutic perspective and into a domain in which "suchness" acquires its own possible actuality; an actuality which is obviously incommensurable with the universalizing concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity. In another passage of *The Coming Community* Agamben speaks of ethics and the attendant discourse of good and false, authentic and inauthentic. He writes: "The meaning of ethics becomes clear only when one understands that the good is not, and cannot be, a good thing or possibility beside or above every bad thing or possibility, that the authentic and the true are not real predicates of an object perfectly analogous (even if opposed) to the false and the inauthentic. Ethics begins only when the good is revealed to consist in nothing other than a grasping of evil and when the authentic and the proper

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have no other content than the inauthentic and the improper" (1993, 12). What Agamben alludes to here is an experience of con-fusion, encounter, and mingling whose outcome is not chaos and madness but rather a clarity and brightness made of openness, what I am tempted to call "incompleteness" in the sense of something unstructured by universalizing values. "Suchness," according to Agamben, is that which "presents itself as such, that shows its singularity" (1993, 9). But exactly what is this singularity Agamben speaks of and how can it be reconnected with the experience of translation? The answer is to be found in language. As Agamben puts it: "The antinomy of the individual and the universal has its origin in language" (1993, 8). Agamben's work is intent on rewriting this antinomy and in the process he points to a further hermeneutic space and language which, to my view, casts startling insights into translation.

Any space is marked by a topography and the temporal and spatial dynamics correlating it with other spaces. For many years translation was not interpreted as a space or a zone and when it was, it was merely seen as a geography whose only importance and value lay in its resemblance and faithfulness to the geography of the original. If time and space were ever considered in relation to translation, they were interpreted as strange movements whose paradoxical outcome is a declaration of sameness and the obfuscation of its occurrence. It is this oxymoronic reading of movement, which in effect pretends to negate the occurrence of any movement, which is so staunchly and intrinsically opposed to a sense of passage and transition, both temporal and spatial, that has for so many years impeded theoreticians and translators from focusing on what happens in-between the original and the translation. In order for this interstitial zone to emerge one needs to reconceptualized the idea of movement by denucleating it from the tension towards something other than itself, from a movement interested in erasing and deleting itself as it proceeds towards a preconceived and authentic "home," from a subjectivity that denies itself from belonging to the community of language and culture. The very existence of the interstitial zone of translation, and its process of bringing together two cultures and languages away from the discourse of authenticity and inauthenticuty, is predicated upon a movement that does not go anywhere outside but that keeps on moving within the inherently dynamic borders of the interstices. It is from within the time of the "meanwhile" and the space of the "in-betweenness" that I believe a new theory of translation and cross-cultural encounters and exchange can commence. Paraphrasing Bartleby's experience, one could say that it is not that translation does not want to be the original or that it does not want to become it: it simply would prefer not to. This is also the shift from the must -- the will -- to the could -- the potential -- and from a literature of perfect tenses to a literature of the conditional.

"The movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis," writes Agamben in *The Coming Community*, "is the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking-place" (1993, 2). It is in this "own taking-place" that, according to Agamben, "humankind's original home" can be found. In the article "The Carcass of Time," Brian Dillon reads this "original home" not as "a process [genesis] or a movement [kinesis]" and he adds that this zone is not correlated with a measurable space of time: "The time of pleasurable plenitude which Agamben discovers in Aristotle is decidedly not, however, that extra-temporal realm which enables Augustine, in the *Confessions*, to step outside of the abstract flow of time: it is not, in other words, the eternal" (1997, 142). This time is rather the pure "now," the interim, the atemporal cairos Aristotle speaks of. It is ultimately pleasure. Pleasure, as Aristotle defines it in Book X of the *Ethics*, is not a process, "that is, it does not acquire meaning or value in terms of its completeness, but is a certain experience of the present: it is not dependent upon a projected future point at which it will become whole" (Dillon 1997, 142). Aristotle writes thus: "The act of seeing is regarded as complete at any moment of its duration, because it does not lack anything that, realized later, will perfect its specific quality. Now pleasure also seems to be of this nature, because it is a sort of whole, i.e., at no moment in time can one fasten upon a pleasure the prolongation of which will enable its specific quality to be perfected. For this reason pleasure is not a process because every process is in time, and has an end (e.g. the process of

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building), and is complete when it has accomplished its object. Thus it is complete either in the whole of the time that it takes or at the instant of reaching its end" (1976, 318). Is it possible for humankind to regain this unlinear and unchronological, uncalendrical time? In other words, is it possible to inhabit a space as if it were a place, a home, a habitus in which the notion of process is absent and where the movement is not towards something but simply in itself? More specifically, is it possible for translation to be the pure pleasure of in-betweeness, where its potentiality of not-being is celebrated, where "possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality," authenticity and inauthenticity, "become indistinguishable"? (Agamben 1993, 55). Literature, at least certain contemporary literature, has attempted to be precisely that. As Wall argues: "the Neuter is the space of literature (an imaginary space en delà du temps), which is interminable, incessant, and perpetually noncontemporary" (1999, 115).

This is the space of Blanchot's literature, but also of Pound's and many other twentieth-century authors amongst whom I would like to place the Italian Giorgio Caproni. They all inhabit the interim, the interzone of the "meanwhile" where action and process are rejected in favor of what I like to call the "waiting"; that is the interstitial time in which, and this is essential, the notion of what-one-is-waiting-for is all of a sudden unimportant and irrelevant. The "waiting" is that zone in-between concrete and tangible homes, in which literature investigates the meaning of an absence, of that which should have come, or should come or will come but is not here yet. "To write," states Blanchot, "is to surrender to the fascination of time's absence ... Time's absence is not a purely negative mode. It is the time when nothing begins, when initiative is not possible ... Rather than a purely negative mode, it is, on the contrary, a time without negation, without decision, when here is nowhere as well ... The time of time's absence has no present, no presence" (1982, 30). This time without time -- Blanchot calls it "dead time" -- is that space in-between actions where actual life is suspended and where temporality, but also spatiality, becomes supple, porous, ultimately open. This suspended zone does not pertain to a dimension beyond life. On the contrary, it coexists and intersects with actuality in an osmotic interchange. But the space of this interchange, the space in which "empty, dead time is a real time in which death is present -- in which death happens but doesn't stop happening" (Blanchot 1982, 31), has belonged hitherto to the space of literature in which the suspension of the waiting, its inherent interstitiality, is celebrated and fully experienced. A dimension devoid of a tension towards something ahead of itself and of a linear understanding of time in which the process towards the future is natural if not altogether expected and demanded, must have a different grammar and language. In his last unfinished novel, *Further Confessions of Zeno* (1969), Italo Svevo thought of a "mixed tense" and a different grammar to narrate a story that takes place in-between authenticity and inauthenticity, or, more conveniently, fiction and reality. But there are other examples of a language of the "waiting," perhaps even more pertinent to a piece on translation owing to its inherent in-betweennees, that is bilingualism.

In 1499 an anonymous incunabulum was printed in Venice with the title of *Hipnerotomachia Poliphili* (*Polifilo's Dream*). As Agamben remarks, "The effect of estrangement that its language produces so disorients the reader that he literally does not know what language he is reading, whether it is Latin, the vernacular, or a third idiom" (1999b, 44). Agamben explains further: "It is not simply a matter of the intrusion of purely Latin (and at times Greek) words into the vernacular lexicon, according to a process of growth that certainly characterized the history of the vernacular in the fifteenth century. Rather, here innumerable new linguistic formations are made through the separate transposition of Latin roots and suffixes, which lend life to words that are grammatically possible but that in reality never existed" (1999b, 45). This is an intriguing example of a meeting of two languages in the interzone of the "waiting" where there is no attempt to develop and unfold a process of linguistic and grammatical cleansing and polishing but where the "suchness" of the meeting is presented as such. Agamben goes further when he claims that "this dream, which is fully contemporary today, is in fact dreamt every time a text, restoring the bilingualism and discord implicit

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in every language, seeks to evoke the pure language that, while absent in every instrumental language, makes human speech possible" (1999b, 60). Is thus bilingualism as such and not as process, the simultaneous taking place of two languages and cultures in one language, the language of humankind's original home? Joyce in his *Finnegans Wake* was perhaps alluding to something similar and Pound's work with ideograms taken from the Chinese language and his working of metaphors influenced by Japanese haiku had a third language in mind. As Charles Taylor has commented interpreting Pound's writing, "these juxtapositions [were] just to see reality undistorted" (1989, 474). In Pounds own words: "[Art] means constatation of fact. It presents. It does not comment" (qtd. in Taylor 1989, 474). Is art here presenting the "such-as-it-is," and thus locating itself in the space of the interim? It appears so, especially if one compares Taylor's analysis of Pound's writing with my discourse on the interstices: "This is the nature of the Poundian epiphany; it happens not so much in the work as in a space that the work sets up; not in the words or images or objects evoked, but between them. Instead of an epiphany of being, we have something like an epiphany of interspaces" (1989, 476).

Modern and contemporary literature enters the space of the interstices to evoke something, perhaps an absence or a presence, the conflagration of the self or maybe its gradual recomposition in the uncanny space of medianity and possibility. Or perhaps even to celebrate its inadequacy or simply its status as mere copy, as petrified simulacrum which unsuccessfully searches for its own originality in the attempt to escape its nature as the shadow of reality. Here, I suppose, we have the great irony and paradox of art, that is the coexistence of the notions of originality and copy, the fusion and the embedding of an apparently unsolvable dichotomy. This living together of opposite principles is the body and the flesh of art, its fascination but also its irredeemable sin. Never was the hybridity and hermaphroditism of art so clearly stated and exposed, its supposed originality problematized as in modern and contemporary art. And yet we still think of translation as that which has to be faithful to the original when, in fact, translation could be used to reclaim the profound meaning of art's incompleteness and vagrancy through emphasizing, indeed, organizing and clarifying its epiphanic errancy, ultimately restoring art to the originality of its multilinguism and polyculturalism. This is translation as theory and not as practice, translation as the contemporary hermeneutic of language and culture. It is translation working its epistemological method and purpose through its inherent and tremendously relevant status as "halo," as the interim and interstitial par excellence in a world of believed originals which are there waiting and hoping to be deconstructed. And this is also translation as an ideological and existential home and habitus for those who, by choice or necessity, are physically living in-between and who for many years have thought and lived their interstitiality as a loss, of home, the self, their traditions. It is now perhaps time to see the "error" of being potential, of being "as such," as the locus of responsible criticism and the geography where in losing oneself one can eventually find oneself.

The shift in the theoretical perspective of the last twenty years and the general overhaul of the paradigmatic and ideological tools through which translation theory operates seem to go in the direction I have described so far. So much so that key methodological terms such as "equivalence," "faithfulness," and "transparency" have been teadily replaced by "difference" and "resistance." The original is no longer the incontrovertible point of reference, the solid and monolithic model to which the translation must reverentially tend. One could well argue that the sacred aura surrounding the original was torn up long time ago and that already in Goethe (1819) and Croce (1902 and 1942) -- to name only two theorists whose discourse on translation has been somehow seminal -- the best translations were identified as those which departed from the "foreignness" of the original and entered the comfortable zone of "home." That famous Crocian phrase equating translation to women by coining the very patriarchal and misogynist motto "beautiful and unfaithful" comes straight to mind. The approach seems here sympathetic to the notion of relevance interpreted as the need to render the text appetizing to a certain audience regardless of its technical and literary merit as a translation. It is

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certainly not "difference" that is valued in Croce but rather a gentle and captivating sameness, not to the original, but to the aesthetic values of the target audience. It is in this sense that one is also reminded of Horace's argument where the priority, for convenience sake, is firmly placed on the readability of the translation. Horace believed, and many commercial publishers of today appear to agree with him, that the essence of the original could be sacrificed to the altar of transparency, and therefore the translator was more than justified in changing and altering the text according to the cultural values and tastes of his/her audience (see Bassnett and Levefere 1998, 3-7). But disrespect for the original is here only apparent, and in fact it hides a solid belief in its sacrality and purity in that it implicitly mocks any attempt to copy it as useless and ugly. Why not then keep the essence of the original (would Croce have used "chastity"?) intact and write something else, inferior, no doubt, but at least palatable? And should the audience wish to rise to the perfection of the original, it is its duty to learn the other language.

The contemporary theoretical and critical shift from the "original" to the "translation" is not determined by an ecstatic contemplation of the original but rather by a reinterpretation of linguistic and cultural values along the lines of a fluid and equal relationship in which the encounter happens and is interpreted as a cross-cultural exchange. "Transparency" is therefore traded for "resistance," which discourages the tendency to assimilate the "other" -- an assimilation which will not only erase the novelty of another culture but also negate a critical confrontation with one?s own culture -- and "sameness" is exchanged for "difference," which stimulates critical awareness and suspicion of taken for granted certainties. And yet, I find this approach limiting as well. While I see the inherent value of changing the focus from one point to the other of the translating equation, I still find that the emphasis of the theoretical debate is disabling when it is placed so firmly on either the "original," the point of departure, or the "translation," the arrival. This prioritizing ends up reigniting an old juxtaposition which has held sway in translation theory for many years thanks to that justly useful but also dated opposition offered by Friedrich Schleiermacher, according to which "either the translator leaves the author as still as possible and moves the reader towards author, or the translator leaves the reader as still as possible and moves the author towards the reader" (qtd. in Lepschy 1983, 133; my translation; Schleiermacher's "Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens" was published in 1813). The privileging of finite products, the original and the printed translation, seems to go right against the very nature of translation which is intrinsically fluid, under way. I believe that the time is ripe to propose a further theoretical shift which rather than occupying itself with what is a the beginning or the end of the process of translation, investigates the area in-between the original and the translation, that zone in which two languages and two cultures come together and fuse in a kind of cross-fertilization where their distinctive traits are blurred and confused by the process of superimposition. It is the zone, which in the course of this article I have called "interstitial" and "potential," where the original is no longer itself, having experienced already the departure from its point of inception, and where the translation is not yet completed, being still in the process of reaching its "home." The "potential" zone is neutral and defies the clear definition of "home" as a given set of accepted cultural values and tastes. It lies in-between, in the mid-way and as such is characterized in equal measure by the memories of the origin and the expectations of the arrival, by the features of the known (the original) and those of the "becoming" (the translation). It is the zone in which source and target cultures melt and generate a culture under way which resembles, yet it is also markedly different from them.

The theoretical emphasis on the zone in-between is not new. One of the first theorists to enter this domain was Mary Louise Pratt who, in her book *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), coined the term "contact zone." By "contact zone" Pratt means "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Pratt's study is not on translation, but rather the

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investigation of the ways in which European travellers read, represented and culturally colonized or were influenced by exotic lands. And yet *Imperial Eyes* is of interest here for the strong emphasis which is placed on the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 4), and, if not primarily, for the etymological usage of the word "contact." Pratt employs "contact" in the meaning that it has in linguistics, that is referring to "languages that develop among speakers of different native language who need to communicate with each other consistently" (Pratt 6). As we shall see, the notion of creolization and hybridity, and its alleged qualifications as chaotic, barbaric and unstructured, will be of great importance to the present discussion.

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* was published two years after Imperial Eyes in 1994. In his book Bahbha introduces the notion of the "Third Space" whose meaning, as he remarks, is not "based on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of cultural hybridity" (38). One of the methods Bahbha employs to investigate the "Third Space" is translation. By borrowing Benjamin's notion of translation as liminal and irresolute, Bhabha stresses that his interest lies in the "foreign element that reveals the interstitial" and creates the "conditions through which 'newness comes into the world'" (227). As I understand it, he is not so much interested in reflecting on the relationship between the original and the translation as to study translations' modes of productivity whose "newness" or "foreignness" end up challenging the cultural values of the establishment: "The sign of translation continually tells, or 'tolls' the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices. The 'time' of translation consists of that movement of meaning, the principle and practice of communication that, in the words of de Man 'puts the original in motion to decanonize it, giving it the movement of fragmentation, a wandering of errancy, a kind of permanent exile" (Bhabha 228). Here Bhabha touches on a series of problems which are vital to this discussion on translation: "movement," "wandering," and "erring." These are concepts which invite a reflection on the basis of a fluidity whose outcome is found in the problematization of univocality and purity and the reappraisal of cultural encounters and fertilizations.

It was not long before translation theorists understood the importance of the "contact zone" or "Third Space" and seized it to enter an innovative exploration of translation and translating practice. The most recent discussion of translation through this perspective is by Sherry Simon who in the article "Translating and Interlingual Creation in the Contact Zone: Border Writing in Quebec" (1999), presents a stimulating account of three Canadian authors, Jacques Brault, Nicole Brossard, and Daniel Gagnon. The communality of these three authors is found in their hybrid idiom and a writing which is "self-consciously provocative, jarring traditional alignments, blurring boundaries of cultural identity, and writing against a cultural tradition which has been deeply suspicious of the work of translation" (Simon 1999, 61). Their "potentiality" is obviously located in their belonging to a borderline country par excellence, Quebec, but also in their lucid attempt to debunk the notion of originality. And they achieve this not only by following the referential and self-referential path of South American writing for which, in the words of Carlos Fuentes, "originality is a sickness" (1990, 70) -- a sickness that has to be contained by a continuous dialogue between works of different cultures and times -- but also by questioning the values inscribed in monolinguism and monoculturalism. As Simon argues, "It is not a question of simply overturning cultural influences, of reversing the tide of influences, but of creating a new idiom through the encounter of languages and traditions" (1999, 63). It is precisely here that Simon connects with Pratt's "contact zone" on the grounds of a third language comprising two or more idioms. The difference is that she takes the "contact zone" a step further by stressing the potential richness and novelty of this third language in opposition to the chaos and barbarism which were traditionally attached to it.

The interstitial," "potential" zone is clearly linked to postcolonial theory as evident in the work of Bhabha, Pratt, and Simon. Notions of hybridity, cultural pollinations and encounters, the destabilization of the monolithic and the colonizing cultures, and the surfacing of the periphery originates and are brought to the fore of cultural debate by postcolonial theory. But it is also

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inextricably part of the contemporary postmodern condition. There is no doubt that the fragmentation of the self and the attendant problematization of language, although experienced and to a certain extent narrativized in modern fiction as well, are paradigmatic to postmodern narratives, simultaneously propelling the narrative proper and the poetic and theoretical preoccupations of postmodern authors. As a result, notions such as time, space, landscape and its apperception, on which until last century some claims of transparency could be made, become increasingly blurred. Their reappraisal, together with that of the self and language, has determined a re-negotiation of a set of cultural and philosophical values that in turn has challenged our position of beings in the world. One of the results of this debate is to be found in the gradual disappearance of tangible points of arrival, be they master narratives or universally accepted truths. This has also allowed a vast zone, until recently unseen or unexplored, to emerge in-between those almost taken for granted truths. As the Australian critic and author Paul Carter has argued, our task today ought not to revolve around the question of "how to arrive" but on that of "how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events" (1992, 101). In other words, our role should be that of plunging ourselves into the "potential" zone and experience the interaction of cultures and languages as they fluidly intermingle, their dialogue still in progress and undamaged by the purposefulness of finality. It is in this sense that Simon's discussion of the "contact zone" could yield even more interesting results were it to be recontextualized and recaste not so much on the analysis of a set of finite products but on that of works in progress. It would be interesting to take a step back and try to follow the process which gave way to the cultural choices made by the three Canadian authors as they were negotiating distinct cultures and languages and ask how they arrived at certain decisions rather than others. Indeed, it might be instructive to study their first or second drafts -- those writings in motion -- rather than the published books. This course of action would also do justice to what Itamar Even-Zohar predicated for translation theory twenty years or so ago when he opened up a new perspective for the study of translation theory through addressing central and significant questions on the relation between literary translations and national cultures (1990 <http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/>, 1978; for the application of Even-Zohar's work as combined with the systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture and Anton Popovic's *Dictionary*, see Steven Totosy de Zepetnek's taxonomy for the study of translation, "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Translation" <http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/translationstudy.html>).

The Italian sociologist Giovanni Gasparini defines an interstice as "usually a narrow space separating two different bodies or two parts of the same body: therefore it refers primarily to the experience of being in-between two things or objects" (1998, 1; my translation). To the notion of not belonging, which strongly characterizes the "interstice," I would like to add, following Bhabha's suggestion, that of "wandering" for it powerfully expresses the "dynamism" and the constant flux of the interstitial zone. Here writing and speaking happens in a language in-between that moves in and out of national and cultural borders, resulting in a narrative which is the result of a combination rather than an exclusion. Thus, the notion of "wandering" could be also lived as a loss -- the loss of home, the loss of the direct route, the loss of the self -- especially when it is linked with the attendant notion of "erring." Yet I think that this sense of loss is a Western mystification wrought around a set of values of which the affinity between "erring" and "error." Western culture appears to insist on and stress the danger of straying from the path. Indeed, a traveler ought to be aware of his or her destination and the time necessary to reach it before embarking on a trip. This also means that by being focused on the place of arrival, our traveler will not (should not) be distracted or diverted by other routes encountered during the course of the journey. Any suggestions of diagonal, zig-zagging, forking, and branching paths acquire an eerie, uncanny feeling compared to the bright, familiar, direct linear course. Wandering is thus discouraged not only because it might take the traveler into unwelcoming and threatening territories, but also because it is a waste of time and an indication of indolence. In the Western tradition, the wanderer, the gipsy, is usually looked upon as a strange and peculiar type, an

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outcast who lacks the more basic social skills and ambitions, namely a home, a place and a structured context to return to: "Free from every secure dwelling," suggests Mark Taylor, "the unsettled, undomesticated wanderer is always unsettling and uncanny. Having forsaken the straight and narrow and given up all thought of return, the wanderer appears to be a vagrant, a renegade, a pervert -- an outcast who is an irredeemable outlaw" (1984, 150). But it might be that, paraphrasing Robert Dessaix, to enrich our humanity one needs to venture into "the grubby lane" rather than hug the "better-lit, better-paved way" (1996, 15). And it might be that in losing oneself one might even find oneself. Finally, it might well be that a helpful and innovative way of discussing and approaching translation could be found in the exploration and articulation of the experience of the "potential," giving it credence not only at theoretical and academic level but also at the level of commercial publishing.

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