



Tomislav Longinovic Balkan in Translation

Tomislav Longinovic extends the concept of translation of texts to the translation of political contexts: The politics and history of the Balkans, he argues, represent the "untranslatable" and "foreign" that can not be compared under any circumstances to the politics of the "western world". And yet, as Longinovic argues, similarities between American and Serbian behaviour against the perceived Islamic threat after September 11 and during the Kosovo war respectively, exist. These unacknowledged and "untranslated" similarities between politically unequal partners demonstrate the need for the translation of cultures and political contexts that open up spaces between cultures whilst keeping in mind the alterity of the foreign in translation.

Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.
Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*

To move between languages, to translate, even within restrictions of totality, is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom.
George Steiner, *After Babel*

In order to move towards the ethical bias of freedom in rendering meanings across the boundary of cultures, Steiner performs an escape from identity at a discursive level bounded by a single national language. This freedom envisions a horizon of translation which refuses to engage the cultural "other" in the pure mimesis of one's own proper identity performed through linguistic taming and domestication. Pursuing this horizon of freedom, the translator of cultures goes beyond the pure dictionary translation, to make the effect of estrangement visible and extend the alterity of the foreign into the network of possible futures.

The role of transforming the raw matter of other cultures into a familiar form with its own value is performed as part of projecting a temporality that is yet to come, for Europe and other global locations. This kind of performance demands that the translator identifies with the role of the medieval alchemist, surrounded by increasingly fundamentalist narratives which command the global political scene. Pursuing the "gold" of freedom, this new alchemy mobilizes local forms of identity to increase the value of that which has been rendered peripheral, backward or marginal through the process of cultural

domination. The knowledge gained in the passage from the dominant cultural idiom into a foreign territory, defined by the linguistic and ethnic difference is by necessity a transitional phenomenon, yet the one that may seek to destabilize the original power of the monolingual by relying on the call to freedom, true to Steiner's notion of the "human spirit". A translator of cultures improvises his moves to imagine these new forms of knowledge born in contact between different forms of otherness which are being constantly altered through the ongoing struggle for political domination between the United States and the few regional powers who dare challenge its military supremacy.

The secret formula of that movement in-between performs a different version of globalization, located in the difference which is not easily appropriated by the profit-oriented narratives of the current version of civilizational universalism. The movement from one culture to another often incarnates this desire for freedom evoked by translation, although the result is most often the political game of domination and submission; the unequal power of monolingual contexts placed in a cultural dialogue is responsible for this kind of translation in the service of power. The colonial and neocolonial projects of ancient and modern empires, rooted in the spirit of mission and conquest, appropriate the value generated by translation to further its power by maintaining the distance between the imperial self and the colonized other. The augmentation in the value of the original becomes the effect of that power faced with various modes of resistance and untranslatability. The mutations of the colonizing identity into its local articulation requires the collaboration of increasingly larger teams of military linguists, specialists in cross-cultural communication and international public relations wizards whose job requires the taming of local differences. The selling of the cultural value of "our own" dominant identity through its multiple reproduction in various forms of translation is utilized not only by the advertising industry, but also by the political and military administrators of the latest imperial drive.

From Balkan to the Balkans

The translation of the original "Balkan" into English yields an uncanny plural, "The Balkans", which is paradoxically closer to the true cultural multiplicity of that region. The hybridity evoked by the Balkans in translation is both the reality and the horizon towards which the complex identities of the peninsula move after the wars to end Yugoslavia. Most local languages render the regional designation as a singular Balkan, the word of Ottoman Turkish origin which has become the ambiguous self-designation for its inhabitants. Simultaneously the symbolic origin of Europe with its Ancient Greek legacy and due to abject periphery and perceived endemic backwardness and violence of the "Orient", the Balkans have been translated as a plural in the majority of European languages (Italian: Gli Balcani; Spanish: Los Balcanes; French: Les Balcanes, etc).

This plural is symptomatic of Europe's and its transatlantic extensions' inability to symbolize its own imaginary south-eastern region as a sovereign territory in a singular substantive form. The chaos and disorder imagined in the symbolic domain of this symbolic territory prevents the imaginary vision of the Balkans as a discursive formation sprouting from a single imaginary origin. The horizon opened up by the translation of a singular Balkan could also reflect the European uneasiness about the heterogeneous "ethnic mix" of the territory imagined as prone to multiplication into ever smaller units of meaning and identity—the already proverbial process of "balkanization" as a negative. The

epitome of underdevelopment, backwardness and disunity, the Balkans are imagined as multiple ever since the process of historical crumbling and ruination, can give birth only to the specters of blood and horror. This gothic vision haunts the western imagination ever since the vampires, werewolves and witches became emblematic of the region's ethnic violence in literature and film. This propensity to violence is the dominant code in the politics of translation, rendering the Balkans as the continent's storage of ancient memories, spread over multiple languages, religions and cultures. If a singular Balkan articulates the monomania of a particular national(ist) project, the translation opens up the already present plurality of possible lived worlds within the symbolic geography of the "blood and gore" peninsula.

The multiple movement of hybrid identities is the unpredictable byproduct of unequal rates of exchange between the powerful and the weak in the global zones of the current cultural encounter. These embodied performances whose cultural and linguistic passing across the binaries of domination/submission axis deconstruct the logic of totality complicit with different forms of local practices in the Balkans pose the challenge both to nationalists and the globalists. In cultural translation, the new entity produced by the encounter between meanings opens up a space of the national in-between, where portable cultures sprout amidst the current realities marked by global economic disparity, ethnic warfare and terrorism. The nostalgic desire for return to the universe of national harmony in some pre-Babelic imaginary is countered by the reality of displacement and movement across boundaries as the fragmentation of monolingual contexts create the potential for alliances among the uprooted identities.

The potential for cultural encounters that subvert the national sense of belonging requires articulations of identity beyond the strictures of the global/local binary. The hybrid performance of cultural translators, those who continually cross the cultural divide and revel in the freedom of the "in-between" provides that horizon for the practice of becoming an other across languages and cultures. As the mobile universe of new meanings emerges between the interacting cultures in the fallout of the current destructive economic globalization, the ethics of cultural translation challenges the dominant Huntingtonian vision of the inevitable global confrontation between civilizational adversaries. The activity of cultural translators is therefore not limited to the emergent field of academic study devoted to the cultural "in-between," but always involves a performative dimension of everyday life for the displaced identities located in "foreign" linguistic communities.

During the 90s, the Former Yugoslavia incarnated the specter of the civilizational clash announced by Huntington, provided for by the effect of translation and the global media in search of the properly simplified political narrative. This dominant translation reduced the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Balkan original to the imploding Yugoslavia, to the heated passions and irrational violence between ethnic groups which were divided by acculturated religious differences. The name of Yugoslavia became emblematic for the entire Balkan region, as the global media gaze obscured the complexities by foregrounding the stories of tribal hatred and urging military action to bring the most militant ones to heel. This translation became so dominant in the global vision of the Balkans that it somehow omitted the plurality of the region it was supposedly working to restore. I would like to invoke the horizon of a different translation, presenting the multiplicity of Balkan identities as an effect of unceasing foreign interference to reward or

punish the long historical procession of a complex tapestry of ethnic subjects engaged in their own local struggles. This horizon, screened out by the mediated gaze in search of new forms of local violence yields an uncanny shift: from the politics of translation to the translation of politics.

Kosovo 9/11

To translate political events into each other requires a look at the asymmetries of representation and the relative value assigned to their meanings in the dictionary enforced by the global media. The attempt to translate the Serbian loss of Kosovo in 1389 by invoking the 2001 American trauma over the Twin Towers involves two vastly diverging temporal and spatial discourses, whose relationship defamiliarizes the political reality of both locations and bars the common logic that is underlying cultural traumas. These kind of events force the cultural translator to perform, and refuse to give in to a definite strategic horizon of a particular collectivity. Instead, it evokes the horizon of infinite responsibility which does not stand outside political realities, but foregrounds the fantasy at the core of the political itself. This fundamental fantasy constitutes the reality that we live as a series of events mediated by the politically hegemonic forces and their vision of the global universe. The reality is normalized by the media story of history, national subjects trained to accept yet another level of insecurity in the name of security, to tolerate military invasions in the name of human rights and watch with joy the national interests of the United States enforced. This phantasm of a tolerable universe is at the core of hegemonic narratives, countered by the ethic of cultural translation, which strives to represent that which is intolerable in one or more cultures in contact. The utopian horizon of peaceful global coexistence which seemed within reach after the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall is now further removed than ever. The wall came tumbling down eastward, leaving behind a gigantic pile of post-industrial rubble, with the inevitable proliferation of local mafias and other predatory or parasitic forms of social existence. In the west, this was perceived as a sign of victory, as the strategic vision of clashing cultural forces of pseudo-religious origin that naturalized differences in order to replace the old narrative about the evil Soviet Empire. Needless to say, Huntington's vision places the US-led west at the center of political domination.

The untold narrative of this identity shrouded by a veil of globalization positions its multiple cultural others as objects of either cultural assimilation or exclusion. The Balkans played the same ambiguous role during the wars of the 1990s. The post-communist universe of the Western part of the Balkan peninsula featured a similar return to the natural law, as acculturated religious differences became "nationalized" to struggle against Yugoslavism. As a particular ethnicity or religion gained the upper hand, national stories remained uncomplicated by the myriad identities which continue to emerge through postnational encounters and perform a less combative version of cultural encounter. The painful creation of national identities has plagued most national elites ever since the presence of various Empires began to fade in the Balkans during the course of the nineteenth century. The Balkan nations were forced to reinvent their cultural heritage in order to gain a sense of national identity and overcome the trauma of dependence and underdevelopment. This supposedly raised their morale in fighting the liberation wars against various types of domination, but at the same time laid a foundation for many of the nationalist appropriations of traumas whose gruesome repetitions were selected by the global media as emblematic to the region. The Kosovo narrative of the Serbs is one of the most prominent reinventions of the past greatness and sacrifice in the name of the future revenge and liberation from Ottoman slavery.

The heroic discourse formulated during the 19th century around the Kosovo entity has haunted the Serbs in the past and will continue to haunt them in the future for different reasons: in the years ahead, The Hague war crimes tribunal will decide what the real extent of revenge against the Kosovar Albanians was. Refracted through the medieval prism of the Kosovo covenant, the 1999 war with NATO was yet another Serbian defeat that confirms the "heavenly" phantasm of a national triumph expressed by Milosevic instead of Milos: "We have won!" The nationalist translation of the event activates the messianic horizon, as the connection between death and resurrection of the people (heavenly Kosovo) and the actuality of lives lived on the territory (earthly Kosovo) becomes that of identity, radically joining the discursive formation and the political performance. Heaven emerges as an imaginary site where death guarantees the continuity of the nation and durability of its memory. The collapse of the actual into the virtual Kosovo creates a phantasmagoric space where all kinds of narrative manipulations by the political leaders easily reopen this perpetually festering wound of injured masculinity. The nationalist ideology of the Serbs plays with the fact that every male member of the imagined community is stillborn to Mother Serbia, especially in terms of imagining outcomes outside this symbolic space constructed before the birth of actual living subjects. Slobodan Milosevic was committing political suicide when he confronted NATO, reenacting the legendary performance of Milos Obilic who murdered Sultan Murad in a suicide mission. This context was untranslatable for the Western media in search of the yet more bloody narratives in the Balkans, by posing as the protector of endangered minorities and their human rights and inventing such loaded concepts as "ethnic cleansing" to describe the Balkans they were out to save.

The existence of untranslatable knots between the politically unequal cultural partners creates subaltern communities which strive to hide and run from any thirst for knowledge, especially if it is based on the desire for absolute national security. What is own and proper to the particular nation, like the American wound of 9/11, shrouds the pain of the new imperial identity confronted with violent forms of untranslatability. The silence and secrecy of every collective trauma is shared by the national subjects across cultures, as Ground Zero and Kosovo become territorialized as a sacrificial location for the American and Serbian community of mourners. The equivalencies between these chronotopes of pain for the two completely incongruous nations are symptomatic of a common European heritage based on the principle of justice based on revenge. The silences performed in those traumatic times and spaces of the nation under attack witness the breakdown of attempts to translate the "other" as "other", but function as a screen for projecting media phantasms of evil. The events which are not easily translatable from the enemy culture are marked as lacking in both reason and meaning, since any form of aggression against the US is constructed as *a priori* irrational.

The new American nationalism, born out of the loss of security after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and the continuing Islamic terrorism, has resulted in a new global war against multiple targets aligned along the "axis of evil." Similar to the Serbian elites, American ones have activated the codes of heroic masculinity to dominate those who pose a threat to the hegemony over locations tied to the symbolic core of national identity. The dominant Serbian nationalist discourse on Kosovo translates the trauma caused by the loss of sovereignty to Islamic invaders in 1389 as the starting point of civilizational revenge in pursuit of freedom and justice embodied both in the Orthodox faith and the idea of Europe. The American trauma of 9/11 and the Serbian trauma of six centuries ago feature the diffuse "Orientalized other" who threatens the

order and security of life itself. The discontinuity between modern and medieval notions of temporality and of the two sacred locations of the two traumatic events reinforces the phantasm of the "Orientalized" other of Islam.

The dark identity provided by this other and its substitutes invokes the original perpetrator of the trauma, an entity which hides the aggressive core of the culture best left untranslated. The hegemonic cultural code shared by the dominant American and peripheral Serbian political discourses of nationalism are both rooted in the Eurocentric notion of collective identity as a result of an originary victimization of the people destined for glory. The elimination of those who are set on getting us before we get them, fixes the representation of the original perpetrator of violence as either an Islamic suicide pilot/bomber for the Americans or an Albanian terrorist for the Serbs. This original core of untranslatability, fantasized as the omnipresent hatred and irrationality of the enemy, constructs the imaginary boundary of the Occident for both of these divergent linguistic and cultural traditions.

These similarities at the core of the traumatized identities after Kosovo and 9/11 places Americans and Serbs into a position of a strange asymmetry of power, with Americans performing their version of global military domination in its war against the spectral other of terror, while previously punishing the Serbs for their excessive passions when confronted with the loss of territory and identity in Kosovo. The imperial desire to leave one's own territory and morph into other identities through invasions and colonizations of the foreign, results in the assimilation that exposes the other to a loss of identity and ultimate annihilation. After the 1999 NATO campaign against the remnants of Yugoslavia, the narcissistic recognition of "my own" desire in the conquered "other" denies similar pleasures to the other, as it relegates its less translatable complexities to the position of the mirror or screen in which the subject of power contemplates its self-reflection.

This process of cultural assimilation has been appropriated for colonial projects in which the other is locked in the embrace that transforms its otherness into a projection of one's own power. The untranslatable core of difference is left to the work of aggression, rejection and scorn, whilst the dominant power starts to resemble the one that it is dominating. As a consequence of this, the cultural translation between Serbia and America yields at least one intolerable political equivalence: Slobodan Milosevic's fantasy of countering the Islamic threat in Bosnia and Kosovo is currently being acted out on the global scale by George W. Bush through the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Performing the Balkans

Walter Benjamin imagines a special mission for translation as a discursive discipline which encounters the divide between languages and cultures to complete the mosaic which yields the chimera of *Reinesprache*, the pure language which moves towards the totality of the pre-Babelic universe of meaning. Cultural translation teases out this movement toward the totality imagined as a messianic horizon of what is yet to come for the Balkans, neither as a territory of ancient ethnic animosities, nor the protectorate of the global community. The search for an equivalence between cultural terms presupposes a form of identity that each particular context excludes in order to distill the adequate understanding of "otherness". The act of translation disrupts both the original and the foreign in order to enact the special mission of creating new spaces in-between cultures. The particularity of national cultural idioms

disturbed by this crossing of the domestic/foreign divide often does not yield a word for word translation, but employs a mechanism similar to the metaphoric displacement available within the semiotic range of a single language to account for the impossibility of complete equivalence. In the impossible yet necessary search for the totality invoked by Steiner as freedom and by Benjamin as a "special mission of translation", a flight from the singularity into the multiple across languages is required. The difficulty of this performance depends on the level of proficiency achieved by the translator as a subject who embodies the contradictions of the encounter between two or more cultures. New semiotic connections require a flight from the common and the obvious and a betrayal of the demand for the absolute identity between mutually foreign linguistic signs. The truth of translation is born from this demand to escape the monolingual contexts which generate imaginary identity cores.

The hybrid nature of bicultural or multicultural situations never even poses the question of equivalence, since what appears to be the translation's imperfection is built into the very identity of bridging cultures from the start. The impossibility of an absolute identity in translation opens up a horizon for a new performance of cultural identity as a process of dynamic exchange between semiotic registers motivated by the non-hierarchical openness and movements of meaning and identity. The vision of the wild European identity discovered in the Balkans by the increasingly omnipresent media eye of the West was there to entice and enact the new military form of civilizing bloodthirsty natives, a strategy historically assimilated by Europe through its internal and external forms of colonization. The current inheritors of the Former Yugoslavia range from Slovenia, which becomes a EU member in 2004, to Macedonia which is still not allowed to use its proper name. The political translation of the Balkans yields this multiplicity of performances which undermine the hopeless nostalgia for the imaginary harmony that never existed in the first place. The opening of this horizon through the translation of the Balkans as a location of discourses are aimed at reformulating Europe as its very idea. If the foreignness of the "other" is indeed located within the heart of Europe as well as in its transatlantic extensions, the Balkans becomes emblematic of that strangeness which constitutes identity in the modern period.

This pain and anxiety over the constant failure of translation between the Balkans and a utopian vision of Europe originates in the desire for the plenitude of cultural coupling, the unreachable full integration of a multitude of "Europes". Various theories of untranslatability exist between these two horizons; one is based on the imaginary core identity proper to the discourse of nationalism, and the other centers around an ever shifting western border encoded in the horizon of a fully integrated Europe. The imaginary core identities project a vision of culture which resists forms of translation imposed from the outside to protect the local and the native from intrusion by various secretive manoeuvres. These symptomatic postures erect and internalize the boundaries by performing a desperate form of political nationalism of invisibility and further implosion. Yet the thirst for knowledge about the Balkans does not need to end in the discovery of equivalencies which are disguised by local cultures through the performance of secret rites around the imaginary identity cores. These multiple forms of identity-in-difference produced by the bridging act of translation will continue to challenge the imaginary core of a particular linguistic, artistic, cultural, and ultimately national form of belonging found in translation between the Balkans and its European extensions.

*This text is an extended and revised edition of a talk held at the 16th Meeting of Cultural Journals in Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro entitled *Europe and the Balkans: Politics of Translation* 24–27 October 2003.*

Published 2004-01-16
Original in English
© Tomislav Z. Longinovic
© Eurozine