

Editor's Note: Transnational Cultural Flows

Hanping Chiu

With the rise of globalization, what used to be circulating within the boundary of a nation-state is now “forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders” (Appadurai 41). The encounter of the released components, such as personnel, capital, products, and images, at an unprecedented scale, may bring with it unheard-of possibilities in new combinations. Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation as the convergence of two languages brought to match each other provides an apt interpretation of the new phenomena at the age of globalization. “Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together,” as Benjamin asserts in his classic essay “The Task of the Translator,” “must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another” (260). The significance of this passage can be detected from the great care with which fragments are pieced together. Why the matching-up has to proceed so cautiously that even the smallest details can be taken into account? A possible answer to this question may be found in the need to reconcile their possible differences and the transformation arising out of this. We may read fragments to be glued together as nodal points approaching one another. At the vanishing point of one nodal point and the start of another is a zone of transformation. That’s the site where the potentials of creating new possibilities lie.

But why does it occur so distinctively in a transnational context? There are innumerable encounters within the territory between fragments released from various parts of a nation-state but the potentials of creating new possibilities are not as striking. We may once again turn to translation for possible explanations. Near the start of “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin argues that “[t]ranslation is a form” (254). In the same essay, translation is also regarded as situated “not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the

wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (258–59). Here translation is seen as lying “outside facing the wooded ridge,” precisely at the vanishing point of one nodal point. But how does this outside position relate to the idea of form? In his doctoral dissertation, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” Benjamin borrows from the early German Romantics, mainly Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, the concept of criticism within which the shift between content and form is viewed as designating “self-activity and knowing” (144) respectively. In other words, content is associated with self-activity while form with knowing. In the endless shift between content and form, “the two basic moments of all reflection” (144), i.e. self-activity and knowing, also alternate with each other, displaying consecutively either a mere thinking or “[t]hinking that reflects on itself in self-consciousness” (120). While engaged in self-activity, one is analogously situated “in the center of the language forest” (258). But transition into knowing comes when “on the outside facing the wooded ridge” (258). By analogy, we can say that a transnational context helps bring about illumination, which in turn triggers up new possibilities.

Gilles Deleuze introduces the term “becoming” into discussions of the encounter between components released from different nation-states. In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, he sees the potentials of becoming in “the common limit of the relation between two quantities that are vanishing” (17). This view about becoming may sound a bit too vague. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, becoming receives a much clearer delineation. Deleuze links becoming to what he thinks should be the function of literature:

[L]iterature . . . exists only when it discovers beneath apparent persons the power of an impersonal—which is not a generality but a singularity at the highest point: a man, a beast, a stomach, a child . . . [L]iterature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say “I” (Blanchot’s “neuter”). Of course, literary characters are perfectly individuated, and are

neither vague nor general; but all their individual traits elevate them to a vision that carries them off in an indefinite, like a becoming that is too powerful to them: Ahab and the vision of Moby-Dick. (3)

Becoming as Deleuze conceives here points to “a vision that carries them off in an indefinite,” that is, an elevation of “individual traits” to “a singularity at the highest point.” In this view we find an echo of Benjamin’s “self-activity and knowing.” To be sure, this perspective will open up to transnational cultural flows an array of new horizons.

This special issue on transnational cultural flows originates from an integrated research project supported by the National Science Council of Taiwan. Three of the seven papers published in this special issue were first read in a conference I organized for our research team. Held on 28 May 2005 at National Taiwan Normal University, the Conference on Transnational Cultural Flows had Aihwa Ong giving the keynote speech and ten other scholars reading their papers. As some have been too busy to revise and polish their papers, they couldn’t contribute to this issue of *Tamkang Review*. I am grateful to three scholars from outside our team to contribute to this special issue at my invitation. Their papers also have passed a grueling review process to get accepted. I also want to use this occasion to express my heart-felt thanks to many people, some directly involved in the task of preparing this issue for publication, while others giving me help in one way or another.

WORKS CITED

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism.” *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol. 1. 1913–1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard UP, 1996. 116–200.

- _____. "The Task of the Translator." *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol. 1. 1913–1926*. 253–63.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith & Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.
- _____. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. Tom Conley. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Hanping Chiu is professor of English at Tamkang University. He has been the coordinator of an integrated research project on transnational cultural flows, funded by the National Science Council of Taiwan. In the past few years, his research interests have been focused mainly on translation studies and globalization studies.