The Hyphenate Writer
and
The Legacy of Exile

edited by

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2010

BORDIGHERA PRESS

Problems of Interpreting Across Cultural Boundaries

Let me begin with an anecdote. In 1973, having graduated from City College in New York, I set out to study for a year at the University of Bologna. It was a momentous decision, made all the more intriguing by the fact, which I should introduce for the anecdote to make sense, that I was born in the province of Cosenza and arrived in the US in 1963. For all intents and purposes, though, in 1973 I considered myself an American from the Bronx who spoke a strange dialect at home, but did those things that proletarians and working class youths typically do, from holding all sorts of part-time jobs to planning various career possibilities when finishing college. I recall that often, whether in jest or during more tense encounters, someone would tell me: go back to where you came from, which irritated me to no end, since I took the newly learned myth of a country founded by pilgrims and immigrants and bent on liberty and self-affirmation to be the ultimate grounding truth of my society, and one which validated my identification with America. I managed to get through those highly volatile years in a society torn by student, labor and political unrest, focusing on a career in the sciences. Having in mind the cutting edge research conducted by NASA, one doable path meant enrolling in the US Air Force at the Manhattan College ROTC. But then one day, walking proud in my uniform, a student threw a rolled up piece of paper at me in disgust, accusing me of representing the nether side of America, siding with the angels of death that visited thousands in North Viet-Nam. After the initial dumbfoundedness, I did begin a process of re-evaluating exactly where I was going to position myself in life. I transferred to CCNY and there the Army ROTC was already burned to the ground and student protests took on a new meaning. Midway through college, I changed my major to literature. Upon graduating, I went to study in Italy, at the famous University of Bologna.

The Italy I was to experience was radically different from the distant Italy of my humble birth. I was in a vibrant, very politicized and bourgeois city with a

different dialect, rich historical traditions and a highly literate culture. I remember the first week in September looking for an apartment, and being turned down repeatedly. For some reason, I would identify myself as a student from Calabria, figuring I would have an advantage over fellow students from both the US and many other Mediterranean countries. Then one day, well into my second week there, as I was showing a landlady my papers, she saw my passport: "Ma lei è Americano?" she said. Well, yes, I responded. Then no problem, I have a beautiful room you can share with someone else, for $ 40 a month.

Capital had won, ethnicity had lost. But national identity became suspect from that point on, and the politics of self and social representation entered the arenas of my mind for the next twenty years. The show continued, for in Bologna every other week there was a major rally by this or that political party. I was often accused by my new fellow students of being an "imperialist pig" simply because I came from America and so was associated with the Vietnam War, the oil embargo and support for Israel, and was called a "racist," because it was well known that in America they hated and mistreated the blacks. Oh, the ironies of history. The fact that I was also amidst the last emigrants out of the underdeveloped South to seek work and an education in a foreign country did not interest anyone, though people have repeatedly asked me ever since whether I consider myself an Italian, or an American, and most recently an Italian American, and in what language I think, or even dream?[1] The fact that I had worked through high school and college was not a story they wanted to hear. On the one hand, I started studying the canonical masters of Italian letters and culture, on the other, I was experiencing first hand, and in my supposedly native country, the stigma of otherness, difference, distrust, xenophobia and rejection, which in some ways was "logical" or "predictable" in the first new country I had arrived in, but literally blew my mind upon this "return."

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Interpreting across cultures does not refer exclusively to interpreting very far off and exotic texts and artifacts or, even more importantly, the sense of the ac-

[1] "Knowing the identity of one's country cannot be reduced to a mere matter of residence as 'insiderliness'," writes R. Radhakristnan in his *Diasporic Meditations, Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) xxvi. Someone once asked Chinua Achebe in which language he had an orgasm!

tions of other peoples. For it can also refer to the problem of interpreting between and across texts and people from cultures not too different from our very own, and yes, even within our own. For if we only stop and think that America itself is an "invention," outside of a set of imposed institutions, laws and grammars, there might very well be little in common between third generations families from, say, San Diego, Hartford, CT, and New Orleans. And much the same can be said about people who for generations have lived mainly in locales like Udine, Livorno or Matera. Looked against the magnitude of the relative diachronic axis, I would say if being an American is a complex fate, being an Italian is closer to a nightmare.

Interpreting across cultures means literally *crossing*, and therefore *interacting with*, in varying degrees, class boundaries, epistemological axioms, ontological fields, normative grammars, stylistic preferences, language games, mythographic sequences, and conscious and unconscious ideologies–in short, dangerous territories and perilous seas, all of which compel the critic (the reader, the traveler) to make adjustments to his/her cognitive and expressive *apparati*, and attempt to understand his/her role in the post-post epoch we entered in 2001.

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This paper is a first sketch of a general introduction to a collection of writings on hyphenated poetry, migrant texts, and translation I plan on publishing as a book, to follow an earlier collection titled *Prefaces to the Diaphora*.[2] I begin by delving into the interconnections between anthropology, literature (in a very broad sense, to include all genres) and hermeneutics as they emerge when texts and other cultural artifacts highlight the very issue of *how* we talk *about* them, how we *attribute* meaning, how they "fit" somehow with our pre-conceptual understanding or whatever we unfailingly bring to the interpretive process. Above all, how both writer and critic represent the encounter of two worlds, and how meanings are generated in the exchange.

Specifically, it will look at, and juxtapose in a chiastic fashion, some recent contributions in ethnography and post-colonial studies, revise some hermeneutic tenets debated with in Continental Philosophy circles, compare/contrast how

[2] Peter Carravetta, *Prefaces to the Diaphora. Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991).

each field has broken epistemological ground in order to better comprehend the other, and highlight the common problems, the topics upon which they converge, co-exist (not necessarily in harmony) and spin and stitch figuras for a postmodern critique. One central argument is the understanding of the *rhetorical act*, which I argue must readmit to theorizing about language its *existential component* in order to assay how discursive forces jostle for efficacious positioning in a concrete dynamic spectrum that extends from immanent localism to transcendent globalism, cutting across disciplines and time frames. The dynamics of the rhetorical will shed light on a conception of language which saves, discloses, or permits the unspoken, the untranslatable, or the "residual" to be yet available for fruition and interpretation ... even in the age of the endless, frenetic criss-crossing of virtual messages, the age of Hermes.

Should the reader be listening for my underlying ontology or politics, let me state at the outset that I am aiming at rehabilitating the academic or the intellectual at large as a key player in the future of our society, one who must of course cherish no *a priori* ever suspicious universally "true" statements about the human condition, yet still believe in the possibility that there are given circumscribed areas in the social continuum wherein s/he can effect a constructive difference. I will argue between the lines for a para-sitic engagement at the locus of the borders or the interstices themselves, "involving the dense web of relations between coercion, negotiation, complicity, refusal, dissembling, mimicry, compromise, affiliation and revolt."[3] And I will speak against the notion of opposition and resistance in modernist and even some postmodernist versions insofar as these strategies, predicated upon a dualistic logic of opposites and contradiction, only reverse the order of the pre-emptying, strong logocentrism of the Western ethos, of power, imperialism and, to be precise, of colonization. I will argue, as I did in my 1991 book, that a primary component of the critical enterprise is to take chances, to risk, to step into the *agora* (even the virtual one) in order to effect a crossing which, if nothing else, compels the interlocutors to think, to re-consider, to re-enter the temporality of historical consciousness.

This requires that we reach outside the tepid precincts of our specializations, and intervene in public and political arenas: if war is too important to be left solely

[3] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 15.

to the generals, education is definitely too important to be left nowadays in the hands of misinformed and possibly poorly educated politicians and career administrators. The ongoing discussion on whether we ought to teach creationism next to evolutionism should serve as a reminder that knowledge is ever and always politically marked and prone to misuse and abuse. In teaching at the freshmen level we inevitably find ourselves linking up with the "outside" world, and we find ourselves teaching stuff we can hardly claim to know as experts. The difference between what constitutes Knowledge and what goes under the label of Critical Thinking will constitute another background preoccupation to these remarks.

This outside world is extremely unpredictable and heterogeneous. The main concern here is how to interpret across cultures that are no longer distant in terms of either time or space, but whose actors, agents and representatives travel, mingle, contaminate and transform one another constantly, and how this may bear on education and politics. "Over determined as it is by multiple histories, the postcolonial location feels like an intersection, fraught with multiple adjacencies" (Radhakrishnan, xxvii).

Thus we hone in on hyphenated authors, border crossers, marginals, hybrid subjectivities and silenced socio-historical actors: women, prisoners, children, and all sorts of "aliens," from immigrants to expatriates, from refugees to silently disempowered individuals and groups. For another major problem is that of how to translate, how to re-create the discourse of these ... others (as opposed to the Other of our Western metaphysics). Here the suggestion is made that it is in the nature of the active, living–i.e.: rhetorical–utterance *both* to speak *about* something (which we can reformulate within an epistemologically fluid hermeneutics, such as we glean in ethnography and new Historicist criticism), *and* to conceal something else which cannot be even put into language but which nevertheless plays a role in shaping and nuancing active discourse (which includes here speech, song, writing, dialectic).

To explore fruitfully this second possibility–that of the residue, or noise, or *je ne sais quoi* of communication, and which deconstruction has unsuccessfully attempted to articulate, going as far as pointing out in given that there was a differance, but unable to do anything with it–we should assume that, as I argued in *Prefaces to the Diaphora*, perhaps language *tout court* is an allegorical process, one

which embodies the epistemological *and* the ontological, the private *and* the public. Language is not simply or only a system of tropes more or less identifiable and describable (*speaking-of-others*, which is fine and contributes to the specific history of my themes and creation myths, and so on, relying on a time tested hypothesis about the allegory-symbol relation),[4] but also and more pointedly as an *other(s)-speaking* whose symbolic and semiotic network is either precluded to us (as is often the case with ancient non-European texts and artifacts, for instance, the *Gilgamesh* epic, already mired in textual problems), or is mysterious and elusive (which happens with many of our very contemporary third-world and post-colonial, post-modern artists and/or communities whose cultural identities, artifacts, concretions, and other non-homogenous, non-isochronic systems are to our eyes necessarily partial, distorted, biased and/or incomplete). The really complex point here is the following: if the utterance coming from the *other* is allegorical at a subterranean level, it means we must take a chance and risk interpreting it in view of *our own world, time and society* (not just the one in which the utterance first made its appearance, which historical exegesis and translation can more or less reliably reconstruct). This explains the many references in my work to the thought of Giambattista Vico, for whom allegory, in the form of myth and the fable, is a *vera narratio*,[5] a true (to the people who believe it and speak accordingly) description/ explanation, and enframing, of the world and its possible meanings. Vico, in fact, called allegory *diversiloquium*. (ib.)

This allegorical dimension is of course present in interpretive discourse as well–just think of the historical origins of criticism, of exegesis–and it would benefit both anthropology and hermeneutics if reflection is turned to the allegorical as the primal, originary, founding ability of language, as being context-bound and culture-specific. In this light, the critic becomes a story-teller, one who spins tales and is aware of the variety of reactions s/he may engender, whether political or sentimental, whether scientific or conversational.

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We must acknowledge that any approach to the outside world is effected

[4] This whether we follow Cassirer and the structuralists or side with the Dilthey-Gadamer tradition.

[5] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) § 401, 403.

initially through our pre-conceptions and pre-judgments, those learned and habitual collective unconscious typologies that order somehow our existence. No need to summon Heidegger, Gadamer or cognitive psychologists on this fact. The point is not to stop there, but–and loosening a shaft for a recovery of phenomenology, in any of its developments–to allow this otherness, this not-readily understandable other-speech, to have its say, to be heard, to tell its story, and be considered *as such*. Again, this requires extended critical parsing of given frames of time in given places, spurring an on-going exchange *as if* between subjects (and not on the basis of a subject-object dichotomy), in an effort to describe successive levels of integration and relation, eventually attempt to formulate an evaluation and finally communicate it (we'll deal with this specific problem in a moment).

Two interpretive topics emerge at this juncture. At the metaphysical level, it means accepting a weak notion of ontology, for if we learned anything at all from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Vattimo, Margolis, and Rorty, we must accept the notion of a *groundless being*, which is to say, that there is no grounding to existence other than what we ourselves construct and place there, and there is no supratemporal *arché* or divinity that stands as the ultimate axiom, other than the god(s) we invent in order to have some sort of frame of reference. But we should not panic. A thinking being is forever in motion, and although a *GeStell*, an enframing, is part and parcel of what language allows us to do (or is the only way in which it can come into existence), we also know, following Freud and the Existentialists, that what is needed is an *Entstellung*, a displacement, a dislocation of discourse, placing our very assumptions under alternative epistemological grids, that is, those *of* the others, the other members of the collectivity, exposing them to foreign eyes, so to speak. This is also consistent with Gianni Vattimo's elaboration of the notion of *Verwindung*,[6] which characterized all interpretation as intrinsically marked by *distortion*, as, at best, inevitable paraphrase and therefore possessing an added-sense, a variation, in short, a response (this I will claim is one of my ways of replacing the politics of resistance). Under the sway of technology, having abandoned all pretense to totality or utopia, we should be more humble and ethically sensitive and, once again, accept full responsibility for the fact that during the

[6] Gianni Vattimo, "*Verwindung*: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy," *SubStance* 16.2 No. 53 (1987): 7-17. See also his *Le avventure della differenza* (Milano: Garzanti, 1980).

critical intervention, and especially when there is no common ground or shared code of values (as is the case when trying to make sense of experiences and texts from different sides of the boundary or separation line), there must exist a *spirit* of communication, a *concern* for the other (as not-me), and a *commitment* to seek a common ground for the exchange, even while we know that nothing is permanent.

At the critical level, it means that the methods we typically employ in sorting out what something new or alien or different means–whether through structuralist, marxist, post-colonialist, semiotic, or historicist approaches–should be considered as mere *propedeutic* procedure, as flexible and topical models, aimed not so much at finding the coherence of the *epistema*, of logical sense, as to just establish some background irrefutable *facts*, i.e.: uncontestable givens, such as: Napoleon died in 1821, he could not have participated in the Paris Commune, and so on too often the post-colonial critics are lacking in actual colonial history.

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A consequence of the above, at the rhetorical level, is that we must review carefully what takes place during a transaction between two individuals from radically different cultural backgrounds. First of all, does this guarantee us an "authentic," "true" interpretation? Not at all. In fact, it never does, as I just argued. Truth in interpretation is another overblown myth, for one could easily ask, and should ask, whose truth? The truth according to whom? Which forces and what laws and taboos are there in a given society which permit one articulation of discourse to be accepted as the truth, and another as heretical or subversive, or just plain unacceptable? Here, Michel Foucault is indispensable reading. The real concern in interpretation, as thus far elaborated, is *validity*, and with that *coherence with one's premises, rhetorical timeliness, ethical objectives*. I believe that, if the above requirements obtain, we are drawn somewhat "closer" to the *sense* of what we see (or hear). After all, who is the "real" American here amongst you? Identity politics is as ideological as its counterpart, difference and resistance politics. Can we not individually see how there are entire sectors of our being, which can be appropriated and manipulated by dominant forms of discourse in our own absolute present? It is not banal to recall, if we believe in literature, or claim to believe in literature, that we wear different masks and each audience recognizes

only one or two among many to slip neatly in its own pre-established classificatory system. And it gets more complicated when this situation is retro-jected back in time, for if you only think of your grandparents' parents, then you have already 16 diverse provenances each of which, of course, has experienced the same multiple-mask effect, being catalogued in entirely and possibly contra-dictory realms of discourse, social classes, symbolic universes. Who was the "real" Italian I encountered in 1973 in Bologna: the bourgeois landlady who preferred renting to an American instead of a Calabrian? the student who called me an American imperialist pig? or the professor who taught about the great writers of the second half of the XIX century in Marxist terms but never even once men-tioned that soon after the new nation state come into existence nearly five million people left that country,–representing the greatest peacetime exodus in modern European history!–because there was no place for the great migration in the ideo-logical and party driven agendas Marxists had in the late sixties/early seventies Italy?

All along, I have been making a case for the necessity of beginning with describing specific *place* and *situation;* for the need to take in as many lived aspects in as many given environments as possible *before* proceeding to rigorous analysis with clearly stated theories and methods. Moreover, in a frame of becoming, in a field of continuity, action can be preceded by meditation, by reflective considera-tion. The rhetorical act therefore must be understood as comprising several ele-ments at once, or, better said, several *co-enabling vectors.* A speech is structured, it speaks of something outside of itself, it employs symbols and examples, and it is *directed at someone in a somewhere.* In this second phase of the rhetorical circuit, the interpreter may have to push the envelope of his/her recognizable sign- and symbol-systems, and try something else (which is more than just identifying and confirming), something other, in short, and create a sense, literally invent a meaning, attribute a value, tentatively, of course, but in the spirit of–and here is the crux!–a friendly encounter.

Even a brief exchange between two strangers requires some effort, capacity for risk, and a willingness to listen. I must now introduce other elements that go into the attempts at understanding. This includes at first the necessity of establish-ing, and relying on for any subsequent discourse, a *temporary yet co-validating*

social frame, even when, indeed especially when, a concrete factual referntial situation is lacking. Consider it a hermeneutical suspended terrain of sorts. This is an in-between locus for the encounter, which has its own structure and can be called the horizon of comprehension. More than that, and coming back down to the world of *empiria,* to actual trans-national exchanges, whenever we meet the ethnographic text, the exile's discourse, or just plain foreign speech, meaning is obviously not readily available, is not said explicitly, or according to the grammars we know. It is therefore inevitably *transfigured.* Thus the exchange requires some imagination. It requires we appreciate historically denounced and disembodied rhetorical strategies as still enabling discursive patterns, as figures of thought, which have simultaneously a cognitive and ethical/political component.

At this level of analysis, the act of communication, the dialogue (whether critical or friendly and spontaneous) already manifests a cognitive element, it inscribes a knowledge no less valid than what we assume transpires in scientific exchanges. This is so because *rhetoric is actually the flip side of what we know as scientific method,* a structured moving machine that permitted the historic con-quest and cataloguing of the cosmos.[7] Method and Theory are inextricably con-nected. Historically, Method won over Rhetoric, the seeds being already planted by Plato and the harvest cut and baled by Aristotle. But especially since Early Modern Times, valid knowledge could only be obtained through a codified and empowering methodology, the rhetorical progressively losing social credibility and political clout, not to mention intellectual respect. Yet what the ancient and medieval rhetoricians already knew, and what thinkers like Vico, Humboldt, Nietzsche, Kenneth Burke, and a few others developed, is the idea that *there is no such thing as unrhetorical speech.* In fact, besides their specialized knowledge, these theorists knew that any linguistic exchange is always enwrapped in some form of ideological power play. Hence the complexity of dealing with a foreign text or an alien interlocutor, where in an effort to decode, domesticate and catalogue, we often neglect that there is a power component at the source, and a power moment in the interpretation, in the appropriation and finally attribution of meaning to the

[7] See my two works on the relation between method and rhetoric, *Il fantasma di Hermes. Metodo, retorica, interpretare* (Lecce: Milella, 1996), and its augmented and rewritten version, *The Elusive Hermes. Method, Discourse, and the Critique of Interpretation* (Aurora, CO: The Davis Group Publishing, 2011).

original. And it contains also an ethical/political component because the articulation, now re-grounded upon what hermeneuticists call the *Lebenswelt*, the life-world, must needs a consciousness of the world-with-others. Notice that I have now introduced the next piece in the ontology of the rhetorical: language and thought are linked primordially, at the precategorical level. Language is the ether of co-existence, thinking is primarily a thinking *of the Other*, in metaphysical terms, and a thinking *of the others* in a postcolonial enframing. It should be manifest that in order to achieve this level of analysis I have had to recover the critical consciousness, and make recourse to a phenomenological method, as already hinted earlier.

Contrary to what a great part of twentieth-century linguistics has taught us–so wrapped up in showing how scientific, behavioristic, or logical it could be–the rhetorical exchange phenomenologically understood is the starting point for any philosophy, for any theory of knowledge, and is especially crucial in examining and evaluating ethnographic and migrant discourse.

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Abstraction and Materiality in Post-Holocaust Art
Colette Brunschwig's Collage Series *White Pebble for Paul Celan*

the Jew and nature are two different things,
still, even today, here too (Paul Celan).

Paul Celan (1920-1970)–originally Paul Ancel–was raised in Czernowitz, Rumania, in a German-language Jewish community. During World War II, he experienced forced ghettoization, suffered in a forced labor camp from 1942 to 1944, and lost his parents to deportations and death at the hands of the Nazis. From 1948 on, he lived in Paris, writing some nine volumes of poetry, translating from a wide variety of languages, and teaching German at the École normale supérieure. By the time he committed suicide in the Seine in 1970, having produced an œuvre widely recognized as the most important of any German language Jewish poet since World War II, Celan had become an important figure for a significant segment of the Parisian intellectual world, especially for its (sometimes only faintly still) Jewish artists, poets, and philosophers.[1]

Colette Brunschwig is a French Jewish "abstract" painter who currently lives and works in Paris. Born in Le Havre in 1927, but rooted further back in an Alsatian family–thus one on the linguistic-cultural border between Germany and France–she spent the last years of World War II in hiding, having fled after being betrayed to the Nazi occupiers by a classmate in the school she was attending in the South of France. After the War, she immersed herself in ancient and medieval Hebrew and Aramaic texts, and became a long-time friend of Emmanuel Lévinas (1905-1995), the Russian-French Jewish philosopher, whose thought she absorbed intensively although she took her distance,

[1] One index of this importance would be Emmanuel Levinas's essay, "Paul Celan/De l'être à l'autre," from 1972 (republished in Levinas 1976), but further indices are provided in the books on Celan by Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and others.