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From Threshold to Threshold: Translation as a Liminal Activity

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the spatiotemporal notion of liminality and the way it can be mapped onto translation processes and the role of the translator. The concept of liminality can be traced back to Arnold van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage and their re-elaboration by Victor Turner (1967 and 1974). It has recently been theorized within the social sciences as a central concept that allows a redefinition of the relationship of structure and agency (Thomassen 2014; Szakolczai 2015). In postcolonial studies (Bhabha 2006) and translation studies, it has been frequently used as a synonym of the notions of in-betweenness and third space (Aammari 2017; Bery 2007; Inghilleri 2017; Johnston 2007). However, despite some common traits, liminality offers a more comprehensive and dynamic approach. The notion of liminality is, furthermore, connected to the spatial metaphors of the door (Simmel 1957), the threshold, the arcade (Benjamin 2002 and 2004) and the gate (Tawada 2003; Sakai 2011), which do not conceive of languages as isolated self-contained units but focus on a possible opening between systems whose character is otherwise left unspecified.

Keywords

threshold, gate, liminality, in-betweenness, third space

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> Boundaries, like horizons, are forever in translation, always receding from our efforts to transgress them. We can only pass into boundaries… (James A. Tuedio, 2006, 61)

1. Introduction

To set the tone I would like to begin with a programmatic quote from Naoki Sakai's introduction to his seminal work *Translation & Subjectivity.* Sakai laments the theoretical constraints following from the notions of national language and interlingual translation that posit the existence of languages as separate self-contained units, and calls for the need to think in new categories. These notions, which are connected to the metaphor of transference (Guldin 2016, 51–58), the trope and of the bridge, show us how difficult it still is "to comprehend what we perform in translation outside the discourse of the modern nation-state, and…how massively we are confined within the discourse regulated by the idea of the national language." We have to "develop a set of tropes that allow [us] to understand what [we] perform in translation without resorting to the schema of interlingual translation" (Sakai 1999, 3). In this sense, I would like to discuss the metaphorical and epistemological potential of the spatiotemporal notion of liminality in view of a possible redefinition of translation processes. Liminality, as any kind of passage, is both a space of temporary permanence and a specific practice. These two inseparable aspects and their relationship have called for a series of metaphors that focus on the spatial and processual dimension or on their interrelation.

As a first approach to the subject, I will focus on the metaphors of the stairwell and the staircase, which can both be considered liminal spaces. I will then briefly sketch the history of the notion of liminality—which was originally an anthropological concept—and discuss possible ways of mapping the term onto translation processes. Subsequently, I will test its theoretical relevance and innovative potential with regard to the concepts of in-betweenness and third space, which already play an important role within translation studies. Finally, I would like to explore possible affinities and divergences between the notion of liminality and a series of related spatial metaphors: Georg Simmel's conceptual pair of the bridge and the door, Walter Benjamin's concept of the threshold and the arcade as a series of thresholds, and Yoko Tawada's metaphor of the gate and its

interpretation by Naoki Sakai. In tune with the title of this essay, these subsequent steps should be understood as a series of thresholds. In the end, we will not have crossed an argumentative bridge and safely landed on new solid ground, but will find ourselves waiting at still another gate, on yet another epistemological threshold.

2. Stairwell, Staircase

In the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha uses an architectural installation of the Afro-American artist Renée Green to introduce and illustrate one of the main theoretical notions of the book. In her exhibition, "Sites of Genealogy," in the museum building of The Institute of Contemporary Art in Long Island City in 1991, Green used the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell in between, to question binary divisions between higher and lower, heaven and hell, whiteness and blackness. "The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity," writes Bhabha, "becomes [a] process of symbolic interaction….The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities." The "interstitial passage" (Bhabha 2006, 5) of the stairwell questions simple linear transition across an intermediate space and calls for a contradictory set of movements. It is a two-way passage, a distance to be covered within a certain time-span. But let me focus on another liminal space that will bring us closer to the spatial implications of the notion of liminality.

The Strudlhofstiege in Vienna is an outdoor staircase located in the Alsergrund district and named after a former art school run by the painter Peter Strudel, who lived in the late seventeenth century. The staircase, which was opened to the public in November 1910, connects the Boltzmanngasse with the Liechtensteinstraße, through the Pasteurgasse, which is at its lower end, and the Strudlhofgasse, which is at the higher end. With the help of three separate ramps and fifty-eight steps, a height difference of about eleven meters is overcome. The Strudlhofstiege is decorated with two small pools. At the lower end, between two curved staircases that lead to the second upper portal, there is a gargoyle on the staircase wall. The second pool on the first level of the staircase is a waterspout in the form of a fish head flanked on the left by the introductory poem to Heimito von Doderer's novel, named after the

stairway. The staircase continues from the first level zigzagging twice, left and right, until the top where it reaches a third level and subdivides again into two separate stairs, left and right, with four steps each.

In Doderer's novel *Die Strudlhofstiege oder Melzer und die Tiefe der Jahre* (The Strudlhof steps or Melzer and the depth of the years) (2014), first published in 1951, the stairway plays an essential role. It is a symbol of life and the topographic nodal point of the plot. As the Chinese German philologist Jin Xiuli points out in her essay on spatial metaphorics of Doderer's novel, the staircase operates on several levels, organizing the structure of the book and determining the position of the different characters and their relation to each other. The staircase—with its sinuous form and its many possibilities of ascent and descent—symbolizes the different stages of life. In Doderer's view, human existence is not a linear path leading from birth to death but an oscillating, hesitating passage based on multiple detours and returns (Jin 2015).

Figure 1. Strudlhofstiege, Vienna. (© Rainer Guldin)

The Strudlhofstiege adds further spatial complexity to the notion of liminality projecting a series of contradictory or complementary paths and possible positions or a combination of the two. It is not a simple threshold to cross like a bridge built between two river banks, but an expanded, both vertical and horizontal threshold made up of two additional internal thresholds (see also Teyssot 2005). One can move from the top to the bottom or from the bottom to the top. After entering the threshold, one can choose the right or the left staircase, but one can also wait at one of the two entrances or simply linger in between at one of the intermediate thresholds. The Strudlhofstiege is an articulate threshold you can cross by means of a series of subsequent stages or passages (de la Soudière 2000) or you can simply move into it. In both cases, you have to move from threshold to threshold. In view of translation processes, the staircase highlights above all the different contradictory reversible paths that a translator can choose to follow, the places he wants to stop and the time he wants to spend in-between at each new threshold. Passing through the threshold is a matter of agency but also of structure as the staircase, despite its inner complexity, allows only for a limited number of possibilities and choices. This specific relationship between structure and agency also plays a central role in liminality and translation.

3. Liminality and Translation

In his highly influential *The Rites of Passage* first published in 1909, the ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1960) attempted a meaningful classification for all existing rites. He distinguished between rites marking a passage of an individual or a community from one status to another (puberty, birth, marriage or death) from rites marking transition in the passage of time (New Year or harvest) (Thomassen 2015, 42). Rites of passage represent a special category composed of three different phases: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of aggregation or incorporation. Van Gennep termed the middle stage in rites of passage a liminal period .(from the Latin *limen* [threshold]), called transition rites liminal rites, and rites of incorporation post liminal rites. This tripartite structure can also be detected in the transitional period itself: the phase of separation is followed by liminality proper and a phase of incorporation.

The British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner rediscovered the importance of liminality, reinterpreting it from a processual point of view. In "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" published in 1967, he focused on the middle stage. Turner distinguishes between ceremonies and rituals. Ceremonies are confirmatory and rituals transformative. The liminal period is a transition between two states, that is, between two relatively fixed, stable conditions. In this sense, liminal rites are processes of becoming and transformation that also affect the personal identity and social position of the initiands who occupy the in-between space. The emphasis "tends to be laid on the transition itself, rather than on the particular states between which it is taking place" (Turner 1967, 96).

The liminal persona is a transitional being and because of this structurally indefinable and invisible during the liminal period. The liminal subject is profoundly ambivalent. He is no longer classifiable and has not yet entered the new structural order. Because of this, metaphors of decomposition, dissolution and death are used along with metaphors of gestation, parturition and birth. The liminal persona is neither dead nor alive. Transitional beings are a threat to order, and "particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere…, and are at the very least betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification" (Turner 1967, 97). The dual nature of the liminal beings affects also their gender and sexual orientation. "Neophytes are sometimes treated or symbolically represented as being neither male nor female. Alternatively, they may be symbolically assigned characteristics of both sexes, irrespective of their biological sex" (ibid., 98). Sometimes they are also seen as "either sexless or bisexual" (ibid.).

Liminality is paradoxically both, an empty space and a space of symbolic overdetermination, "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner 1967, 97). Turner speaks of a "coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation," which "characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (ibid., 99). Liminality is both "unstructure" and the point of departure for the birth of new forms of social and cultural life.

Turner allows for an interpretation of liminality that transcends its anthropological and ethnographic dimension. "[R]ites de passage are not

confined to culturally defined life-crisis but may accompany any change from one state to another" (Turner 1967, 94–95). The liminal may also "be partly described as a stage of reflection" (ibid., 105), during which a cultural system lives through a dissociation into its constituent parts followed by a subsequent recombination. Liminality breaks "the cake of custom" (ibid., 106). In this particular sense, liminality is the realm of primitive speculation. "But this liberty has fairly narrow limits" (ibid.). As translation, liminality is a space of possibility determined by a series of constraints.

Because of the structural untidiness of liminal situations, the equality within the liminal group—the comity of comrades—is complemented by strict obedience to tradition, mostly in the form of a master of ceremonies. Despite the rigorously prescribed sequence of liminal rites, these are not always fully scripted, allowing for innovation and creativity. Liminal rites take place at the limit where certainties are removed and moments of intense emotion become possible. The limit plays the role of a formative force. The success of liminal rites is not only guaranteed by a completion of certain obligations but also requires that the identity of the initiands be changed.

The Hungarian sociologist Arpad Szakolczai points to the "materiality of the limit," an aspect that is of particular importance in the overall narrative of this essay. In liminality, practice and place are always closely connected. The limit is a "separating device" that is indissociable "from the idea of actually going through the limit—implying the experience of being at the limit" (Szakolczai 2015, 22). The Latin *limen* originally referred to a stone at the threshold of a door that had to be mounted physically in order to cross from one space into another, and the Greek *herma* referred to a stone on a borderline to mark the limit. The Greek god Hermes was associated with ambivalence and liminal situations. He was a translator and messenger, but also a liar, the god of commerce; but also a thief, he guided souls, but also misled them. This recalls the ambivalent role of translators, their double allegiance to diverging cultural and linguistic systems. Translators are "duplicitous, playing the part of a double agent in a game of foreign intrigue" (Cheyfitz 1991, 93).

In "Thinking with Liminality," the Danish anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen outlines ways in which the liminal can throw new light on processes of change. In the contingent world of liminal processes, there is "no certainty concerning the outcome," as ideas and events can "be

carried in different directions." The relationship "between structure and agency is not easily resolved" and the very distinction between the two moments "ceases to make meaning" (Thomassen 2015, 42). Thomassen distinguishes between three dimensions that can function together in various combinations: the subject experiencing liminality, the temporal, and spatial dimension (ibid., 48–49). These criteria are also relevant for an analysis of translation processes, the role of the translator and the status of the translated text.

The anthropological notion of liminality developed by van Gennep and Turner, and its re-elaboration by recent work in cultural anthropology and sociology, shares a series of traits with translation. Both revolve around a spatiotemporal experience of in-betweenness affecting the identity of the liminal persona. Both involve crisis and confrontation, drama and danger, formation and transformation, structure and agency, creativity and constraints. Both the liminal persona and the translator are ambivalent figures in many respects. Speaking two or more languages and constantly moving between them, the translator belongs to neither of the two and at the same time to both of them. As Thomassen points out, liminal experiences can be induced or simply happen, as in rituals. Single "individuals can consciously seek out a liminal position outside normality. One could argue that this is exactly what some artists or writers…" (2015, 50)—and, I would add, translators—do. The liminal persona moves through the in-between and ultimately overcomes it, leaving it behind. However, this is not the end of it, as more liminal experiences are awaiting him or her in the future. In the same way, translators move in and out of the liminal, whenever they begin and end a new translation. Each time, their identity as a person and as a translator will have slightly shifted. One could even suggest that translators live in a kind of permanent liminality (ibid., 54–56). I would like to add one essential aspect of translation as a cultural practice that plays a central role in the next section. Victor Turner's view of liminality, especially his later notion of the "liminoid" (1974), as a creative practice in modern art and leisure activities, does not sufficiently address the importance of the political and of power structures in general. His work, writes Thomassen, "remained largely apolitical in character, at least in an explicit sense" (ibid., 47).

4. Liminality, In-Betweenness, Third Space

The concept of liminality has appeared within recent work in translation and interpreting studies and related disciplines either on its own or in conjunction with the notions of in-betweenness, hybridity and third space. "Translation like all liminal activities," writes Ashok Bery in her book on postcolonial poetry, "is hedged round with danger, because it is a movement away" from the structures of everyday life (2007, 113). Rebecca Tipton speaks of the "seemingly incommensurable position of interpreting as a radically liminal activity that takes place in zones of uncertainty" (Tipton 2017, 41). In *Translation and Migration*, Moira Inghilleri speaks of "liminal moments of transition and transformation between departure and arrival" (2017, 57). "Liminality," she argues, "can accurately and effectively be used to affect a state of transition from one condition to another, but it is misapplied…when understood as a permanent state from which to build relationships with others" (ibid., 22). Sherry Simon defines the translational as a hybrid space and a liminary terrain that stands in between the certainties of national cultures (1996, 153). Finally, in an essay about cultural translation in the work of the American writer Paul Bowles, Lahoucine Aammari (2017) uses in-betweenness, the third space and hybridity as synonyms of liminality.

In all these cases, only selected aspects of the notions of liminality and liminal activity have been addressed: the danger inherent in liminal activities, their threat to well-established structures, liminality as a zone of uncertainty, a moment of transition and transformation, a space within society from which hybridity can arise and a third space in-between certainties. However, as we have seen, the notion of liminality covers a broader and more ambivalent theoretical field encompassing structure and agency, insurrection and submission, creativity and discipline.

An example of how the notion of liminality has been adapted in translation studies is David Johnston's "Mapping the Geographies of Translation." Johnston focuses on the transgressive and transformative side of translation and opens up the intermediate space of the threshold to a plurality of possible spaces. However, he eschews the limitations and ritualizations of liminality and conflates the notions of the third space and in-betweenness with that of the limen and the threshold.

The "act of translation is fundamentally de-centred and de-centring" (Johnston 2007, 255), and as such translation has an inclination towards the interval. It "inhabits the spaces betwixt and between self and other…

product and process, and, most crucially, between facts and contexts." It has become "virtually commonplace to name the space that translated texts are deemed to inhabit as the third' space. Much of this has to do with reception. But we rarely examine the implications that this occupation of the so-called third space has for translators, nor for the intellectual and cultural space that they as writers inhabit or journey through" (ibid., 255–256). The limen is a site of confrontation and crisis, an arena where transgression and transformation become possible. This holds also true for translation, especially literary translation, which because of its endeavor to move into and across the threshold might rightly be described as a liminal activity, that is, an activity that follows rules and laws unique to itself.

> Translation is an activity that develops along the margin plotted by choices about location and dislocation, inclusion and exclusion, about what can be translated and what has to be, or is best, modified and re-created....These are the default activities...together they form the threshold, the threshold between work and translated text, between languages, between cultures, between self and the other, not as a territory of final residence, but as a place through which we travel to gain access to the new territory. (ibid., 257)

As a liminal activity, literary translation should not avoid crisis or keep aloof but actively force a crisis of language, and engage with the dangers that go with this. The threshold area becomes the "translator's desert home," a territory of liminality and contingency, a contact area between any two systems. "It is the act of translation that constitutes the genuine borderland" (ibid.).

Johnston uses the metaphor of liminality for the intermediate position of the translator, the site of translation processes and the translated text itself. The threshold is both a liminal space in-between and an intersection of multiple spaces. In this sense, the notion of a third space "is unnecessarily limited, because a translated text occupies many spaces simultaneously" (Johnston 2007, 258). Translated texts "potentially occupy the spaces where negotiation and change may be effected. The text is not an inert site where events happen to take place, but a threshold where translators influence and create the process of transaction"; because of this, one should not "adhere too single-mindedly to the inevitably spatial metaphors that the notion of threshold gives rise to" but be aware

that the way one works with a text "may open up fruitful territories, dynamic and provocative spaces-in-between" (ibid., 263). I agree with Johnston's critique of the limiting capacity of spatial metaphors; however, as I will try to show in the last section, there is much more to be discovered in the metaphors of the threshold and the gate than meets the eye.

Thomassen criticizes the unilateral adaptation of the notion of liminality within postmodern theory:

> To write from the interstices, from the in-between...turned into an analytical strategy in postmodern and postcolonial literature. For Homi Bhabha...liminality was quite simply a positive expression of cultural hybridity. This position has been adopted within cultural studies and anthropology alike: liminality has come to stand for a cultural hybridity that entertains *difference* without an assumed or imposed hierarchy... Liminality, with one stroke of magic, undoes all that, dissolving any fixity of position, dissolving the modern into permanent hybridity. In recent years, this notion of liminality as creative hybridity has entered the wider vocabularies of the political sciences. (2014, 8)

Thomassen's appraisal of the unilateral interpretation of liminality as a place of freedom from which originates novelty and change is correct in itself but does not do full justice to Bhabha's use of the term, which is also linked to the notions of in-betweenness and the third space (see Batchelor 2008 and Maitland 2016).

In *The Location of Culture*, liminality is explicitly associated with the discourse of power and the contradictory formation of cultural identities. Bhabha speaks of the liminal edge of identity, of liminal moments of identification, and of liminal, ambivalent boundaries. Liminality is a fundamentally marginal state internal to society and the nation, marked by the discourse of minorities and migrants. From these interstitial spaces may emerge an insurgent discourse. The space of liminality represents an uncertain state characterized by doubling and splitting. Cultural translation is never a "smooth transition, a consensual continuity, but the configuration of disjunctive rewriting of" transcultural experience (Bhabha 2006, 324). Bhabha connects liminal transition to processes of translation, taking place in social and cultural interstices and redefines liminality in terms of resistance to cultural and political power.

> [The] liminality of the migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one…living in the interstices…caught in-between…the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem that Walter Benjamin has described as the irresolution, or liminality, of translation', the *element of resistance* in the process of transformation, that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation'. This space of the translation of cultural difference *at the interstices* is infused with the temporality of the present…The migrant culture of the in-between', the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability…the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity… (ibid., 321).

Contrary to Victor Turner, who stresses the temporariness of liminal states, Bhabha conceives of liminality as a permanent conflictual condition of uncertainty, in which migrants and exiles are caught without any chance of complete reintegration.

Bhabha's notion of in-betweenness, hybridity and third space share some attributes with the anthropological notion of liminality. The notion of in-betweenness, when used on its own, appears in similar contexts as the notion of liminality. However, contrary to the notion of the third space, it is to be understood more as cultural space—both real and imaginary, both spatially and temporally interruptive and eccentric. The third space, on the other hand, is a conceptual, over-determined space, unrepresentable in itself, the other space of symbolic representation and enunciation closed to the paranoid position of power. The third space is a precondition for the articulation of cultural difference. It constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meaning of symbols of a specific culture, and contrary to the anthropological understanding of liminality, a place of negotiation but not reconciliation.

In "Ideology and the Position of the Translator: In What Sense is a Translator 'In Between'?", Maria Tymoczko described the metaphor of in-betweenness as the very heart of the ideology of translation. The notion that translators are positioned in-between cultures and languages, belonging neither to one, nor to the other, means that they do not have any political or cultural allegiances and suggests an objectivity of sorts. The translator does not fall into an abyss between two languages and can never escape the system of language altogether, but inhabits a system that encompasses both. This critique of the notion of in-betweenness comes close to Turner's concept of liminality, but does not take into

account the full ambivalence of the term, which incorporates both absence and presence, emptiness and overabundance. Tymoczko suggests an alternative spatial metaphor: the junction or intersection of two linguistic systems that can be represented as the space shared by two overlapping circles (2003, 196–197). As she rightly points out, however, such a representation is ultimately inadequate because languages are open rather than closed systems. As we shall see in the next and the last section, the spatial metaphors of the threshold and the gate have the advantage that they do not picture languages as self-contained wholes, but merely focus on a possible opening between two systems whose character is otherwise left unspecified.

As we have seen, liminal and liminality are used interchangeably with the related notions of in-betweenness, third space, hybridity and marginality, but mostly in a secondary subordinate sense. However, liminality is not just a synonym of these notions, even if it shares some salient traits with each of them. The notions of in-betweenness, hybridity and third space emphasize the spatial dimension, the positionality of translators and their hybrid, ambivalent character, as well as the symbolic dimension. Liminality implies all of these dimensions and more. First, it possesses much larger existential and historical implications that would go hand in hand with the renewed vocation of translation as a metaphor for cultural and discursive processes of transformation. Secondly, the liminal persona cumulates contradictory attributes and at the same time lingers in a symbolical limbo, a sort of white space of possibility. Finally—as I will show in the concluding section—because of the strong conceptual link of liminality with practice and place, there already exist in translation studies and beyond a group of spatial metaphors that avoid the binary dualism of the bridge and the crossing of the river allied to the metaphor of transference and the conduit metaphor.

It seems to me that liminality is the richer and better-equipped term to express the profound challenges and ambivalences of a processual view of translation because of its inclusive overarching nature. This is one of its main terminological and epistemological advantages. However, the anthropological notion of liminality would also profit from notions that already have a history within translation studies. Above all the dimension of political and cultural power that has been elaborated recently in different ways in translation studies—for instance, in the work of Mona Baker (2006), Maria Tymoczko (2003) or Emily Apter (2005)—could

complement and enrich the metaphor of liminality. Conversely, the insistence on the creative freedom of the translator, which goes against a highly questionable and longstanding tradition of subservience, could be reconsidered in the light of the importance that constraints play in liminal situations.

5. Door, Threshold, Gate

In his essay, "Brücke und Tür" (Bridge and door) first published in 1909, the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1957) contraposes the spatial metaphor of the bridge to that of the door. Bridges are the expression of a will to overcome an obstacle and to connect two separate entities. From this point of view, the shores of a river are not only apart, but also disconnected. Bridges make a given physical separation and its conciliatory overcoming intuitively accessible. They bring the correlation of separateness and connection to a standstill, emphasizing the primacy of connection over separation. The physical distance between the two bridge piers makes the intermediate gap measurable and surmountable. Before building a bridge, one has to conceive of the two points it brings together as fundamentally separate. Applied to processes of translation, this would mean that in order to translate from one language to another one has to posit their existence as separate entities first. This corresponds to Naoki Sakai's notion of the representation of translation. The regime of translation that goes with the spatial representation of translation, "*articulates* languages so that we may postulate the two unities of the translating and translated languages as if they were autonomous and closed entities" (Sakai 1999, 2). This figure defines translation "as a somewhat tritely heroic and exceptional act of some arbitrator bridging two separate communities…" (ibid., 3). The same way the bridge is called to overcome a separation without which it would be useless, translation is called to reunite that which was previously posited as fundamentally diverse and spatially separated. However, as the metaphor of the door shows, to separate and to connect are only the two sides of the same process. In this sense, doors are articulations that override the severance between inside and outside. The door is a richer and livelier metaphor than the bridge because it offers the possibility of continuous exchanges. From doors, life gushes forth and fans out in all possible directions. Doors are akin to thresholds and gates.

In Walter Benjamin's work, particularly in *The Arcades Project* (2002), the notion of threshold plays a prominent role. Thresholds are sacred boundaries associated with contradictory feelings and shrouded in a magic of their own, which Benjamin calls *Schwellenzauber* (threshold magic) (Menninghaus 1986, 26–58). Thresholds are both spaces *and* sites of ritualized activities. They are assimilated to gateways and passages and often used as entrances to arcades. Benjamin explicitly links the notion of threshold to the anthropological concept of rites of passage, but does not mention the work of van Gennep.

> Rites de passage—this is the designation in folklore for the ceremonies that attach to death and birth, to marriage, puberty, and so forth. In modern life, these transitions are becoming ever more unrecognizable and impossible to experience. We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us. (But together with this, there is also waking up.) (Benjamin 2002)

Thresholds are not boundaries that separate two distinct realities like the borderlines between two different nation-states or languages. They articulate a notion of spatiotemporal passage that recalls the stairwell and the door. Thresholds are not borderlines but transition zones: "The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* (threshold) is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen* (to swell)…" (Benjamin 2002). To recognize that boundaries connect the inside to the outside means to transform them into thresholds. In this sense, translation is a not a crossing over borderlines but an experience of the threshold.

There are several metaphorical links between Walter Benjamin's translation theory and the notions of threshold and arcade. In "The Task of the Translator," a literal rendering of the original, privileging words over sentences is associated with the image of the arcade and opposed to that of the wall. "For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade" (Benjamin 2004, 21). In "On Language as Such," translation is described as a "removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity" (Benjamin 1997, 70). In this sense, the figure of the arcade with its succession of thresholds opens up before the language of the

original like the dense language forest into which translation calls the original. Translation is positioned at the margin of the forest and does not cross into it. "Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest (*Bergwald*) 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" (Benjamin 2004, 20). Benjamin's acoustic metaphor positions translation on the threshold to the original, inverting the spatial set-up of the transference metaphor of translation, which places the translation after the original.

This significant change of direction that places the original and its translation one in front of the other can also be found in Yoko Tawada's essay, "Das Tor des Übersetzers oder Celan liest Japanisch" (The gate of the translator or Celan reads Japanese), which is dedicated to the gate and the arcade as metaphors of translation. In the spatial representation of translation, the original is positioned behind the translation, because it belongs to the past, as it was written before any translation was possible. This changes when we use the metaphors of the gate and the threshold. Here the original is not only in front of the translation but also comes into being together with it. It is not clear, writes Tawada, "when the writing process begins and when it is completed. Perhaps this process lasts as long as the poem has been translated into the last language" (author's translation) (Tawada 2003, 133). The meeting between the original and its translation takes place when the text comes into being and not after is has been finished. Original and translation meet face to face at the gate. To understand this, one has to get away from a linear understanding of the relationship between original and translation. The origin of the text is not a specific point in time on an arrow-like line advancing into the future but "[ein] Zwischenraum auf einer Schwelle," a space in-between on a threshold. This in-between space is not a closed room but the space under a gate, "der Raum unter einem Tor" (ibid., 129–130). To translate is, therefore, not to cross a border, but to wander from one border to another, "von einer Grenze zur anderen" (ibid., 124).

Tawada begins her essay on Japanese translations of Paul Celan's poetry with the remark that she always had a feeling that these poems, which were pronounced to be untranslatable, actually allowed the reader to look into the Japanese language as if through a gate. In Mitsuo Iiyoshi's Japanese translation of Celan's book of poetry *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (From threshold to threshold), there is a surprisingly high frequency of the

Kangxi radical of "the gate" 門. For Tawada, the radical of the gate is the embodiment of the translatability of Celan's poems. The gate is a graphic figure that can be combined with other units to construct characters that contain the grapheme of the gate. Tawada lists seven distinct characters in the Japanese translation of Celan's poems that all contain the radical "gate," relate to each other and to the process of translation: threshold or limit, in-betweenness, darkness, shining, to hear, opening up. The gate allows for both a visual and an acoustic experience of the other language. The character "to hear" shows an ear that stands underneath a gate. To hear means, therefore, to stand at the threshold like an ear. Similarly, the translator stands at the threshold without entering but harking to the words gushing forth from it. Implicitly, this inverts the relationship of translation and original imagined by Benjamin: it is not a calling into the forest but an expectant waiting for the voice of the other language. Tawada connects her vision of translation and the relationship between languages it implies directly to the work of Benjamin: "An arcade…is composed of many gates that stand behind one another. If each of Celan's words forms a gate then the whole poem can look like an arcade" (author's translation) (Tawada 2003, 131).

Naoki Sakai has taken up Tawada's metaphor of the gate, emphasizing its importance as an attempt to redefine the practice of translation beyond binary notions of interlinguality focusing on the visual rather than the acoustic dimension of the metaphor.

> According to Tawada, a translator is somebody who looks into the other side from this side…what creates the primordial demarcation of this side from that side is best summarized by a gate, a construct that marks an opening rather than a divide or border. What is decisive in Tawada's discussion of translation is that the gate should be a figure operating as the leading trope in translation…The gate is more of a perspective, a passage of light rather than an entrance or a divide. It suggests transitory movement rather than indexing stationary location. (Sakai 2011, 2)

The gate is like a prism, "a system of refraction through which light traverses" (ibid.). The metaphor of the gate shatters the alleged coherence of single languages staging the essential intermingling of national literatures with one another. The grapheme of the gate "invokes an optic because the trope of looking into' provides an opportunity of seeing beyond an *optical* illusion or the dominant optic of the national language,

the optical illusion of a language forming a spatial enclosure" (Sakai 2011, 5–6).

As the example of the Strudlhofstiege mentioned in the beginning shows, thresholds are zones made up of other internal thresholds. In this sense, a translation process could be described as two thresholds forming a single one. In translation, one has to remain on the threshold and at the same time move from threshold to threshold and do this "in a bilateral way" so "that a language is *on the* threshold and simultaneously *the* threshold of another" (author's translation) (Nuselovici 2014, 89).

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