

## The Historical Milieu of Academic Translation

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In this short piece, I want to share some thoughts on the historical milieu of academic translation in light of Georges Canguilhem's understanding of the notion of milieu. This is inspired by my recent proofreading of a Chinese translation of Canguilhem's "The Living and Its Milieu," originally a talk given in 1947 at Jean Wahl's Collège Philosophique in Paris and later included in his *Connaissance de la vie* (*Knowledge of Life*) (Geroulanos and Ginsburg 155n1). In "The Living," Canguilhem traces various origins and employments of milieu as both a concept and a technical term, including mechanical, biological, mathematical, anthropogeographical, cosmological, and literary ones. I argue that historical time is also part of the milieu in which the translation of an academic work, such as Canguilhem's "The Living," is involved and to which it must respond. Put another way, the 2008 rendition of the work (when Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg's translation of *Knowledge* was published) or now (i.e., 2023) will and can not be the same as one from 1952 (if there had been one) or 2001 (the year John Savage's translation of "The Living" was issued).

In "The Living," Canguilhem reviews various uses and conceptions of milieu by key scientists and philosophers from the eighteenth century to 1947, including Issac Newton, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, and Blaise Pascal. Considering the different "historical stages in the formation of this concept" and "the various forms of its utilization," Canguilhem, as a philosopher, intends to "take the initiative in synoptically investigating the meaning and value" of the term and thereby "to bring to

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light their common point of departure” (“The Living” 98).<sup>1</sup> Intriguingly, he ends up with two (rather than one) common but contradictory “theories” of milieu, which amount to “two theories of space”: one is understood as “*mi-lieu*,” as “a middle” or “a center,” which usually points to an individual living being or organism that structures its own environment rather than just adapting or reacting to the environment; the other is grasped as “*mi-lieu*,” as “an intermediary field” or “a decentered, homogenous space,” into whose “anonymity” the individual organism is dissolved (117, 103). This distinction is for the most part grounded in the opposition between “the ancient cosmological vision,” “which makes the world a finite totality connected to its center” (such as the Earth, humanity, or God), and “the new scientific conception,” “which makes the universe an indefinite and undifferentiated milieu” that has no center or has it everywhere (117). Canguilhem’s conception of the living and its relationship with its own milieu gestures toward neither. Although at the very end of “The Living” he asserts the irreducibility of a center and hence of a living being to its environment, he does not really intend to revert to the theological foundation of the notion of milieu—a problem he attributes to Newton’s physics, which pivots on centers of forces that act on one another through the mediation of milieu (120, 100). Instead, he tends to secularize the rhetoric of the center, in which a living being strategically responds to and organizes what comes from its milieu, be this taken as stimuli or action, and thereby makes itself a subject, in whatever sense this term means.

What captures my attention is a methodological discussion Canguilhem conducts in “The Living.” He asks whether it is necessary to “interpret the fact that two or more guiding ideas combine at a certain moment to form a single theory as a sign that . . . they have a common origin, whose meaning and very existence we forget when we consider separately their disjointed parts” (101). Canguilhem’s own answer, given at the end of the essay, reads that “the birth, becoming, and progress of science must be understood as a sort of enterprise as adventurous as life” (119). With this understanding of the relationship between the living and milieu in mind, Canguilhem should then be seen as suggesting that these “disjointed parts” or “guiding ideas” are linked as if they “have a common origin” inasmuch as the discipline in concern collects and associates these disparate parts or ideas as if they were derived from the same source. That is, the “common origin” or “common point of departure” is not pre-given; it is somewhat retroactively produced. What I intend to discuss here is the extent to which this applies to the translation

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Canguilhem’s “The Living” are from Geroulanos and Ginsburg’s 2008 translation. The French original of the piece, entitled “Le Vivant et son milieu,” will be referred to and paginated only when words used by Canguilhem himself are brought to the fore.

of an academic text such as Canguilhem's "The Living." At issue is whether what comes after the essay is taken into consideration when translating this piece, as if the language employed and ideas referred to in the target text "have a common origin" or "point of departure," namely, the source text.

A case in point is the translation of the term *power* into French. Two words could be employed: *pouvoir* or *puissance*. For a reader versed in the works of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, both to some degree influenced by Canguilhem, the contrast between the two designations could not be more obvious. As Foucault maintains, *pouvoir* comes from "force relations" in which bodies act on one another (*History of Sexuality* 93), while these relations may be, as Brian Massumi clarifies, "instituted" and reified (xvii), as a result turned into what Foucault calls "relations of domination," in which living forces are produced and regulated in institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons (*"Society Must Be Defended"* 27-28). On the other hand, *puissance*, as Massumi also clarifies, has more to do with "a capacity to affect or be affected," "a scale of intensity," "potential," virtuality (xvii), and in a sense, forcefulness. In the writings of Deleuze (and Félix Guattari), *puissance* then expresses what counters the processes of actualization or territorialization that channel living forces and carries a similar meaning as terms like "becoming," "deterritorialization," or "affect."

An awareness of the difference between *pouvoir* and *puissance* may lead one to think over how to translate Canguilhem's comment on the influence of milieu over individual living beings made right after he criticizes John B. Watson's perception of consciousness as "useless" and even "illusory" and as a concomitant reduction of the living to responses to milieu as excitations (Canguilhem, "The Living" 108). Canguilhem's French original reads: "Le milieu se trouve investi de tous *pouvoirs* à l'égard des individus; sa *puissance* domine et même abolit celle de l'hérédité et de la constitution génétique" ("Le Vivant" 179-80; emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that whereas Canguilhem adopts both *pouvoir* and *puissance* in describing the impact of milieu over individual organisms, Geroulanos and Ginsburg not only render both French terms as "power" but also add "[*puissance*]" the second time they do so ("The Living" 108). This addition merits attention insofar as Savage does not do this in his translation (see Savage 16). The difference reflects not so much the latter's possible ignorance of the distinction between the two French words as Geroulanos and Ginsburg's focus on their irreducibility to each other. If Canguilhem's above-quoted sentence recalls Foucault's delineation of power as

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<sup>2</sup> The passage can be translated as follows: "The milieu finds itself invested with all powers with regard to individuals; its power dominates and even cancels that of the heredity and of the generic constitution" (my translation).

force relations in which bodies act on one another, Geroulanos and Ginsburg's spotlight, however slight, on *puissance* suggests that they may have had Deleuze in mind when translating the article. For them, the power of the milieu is less one of channeling and controlling the hereditary and genetic forces inherent in individuals than a forcefulness that resists and counters them. This way, Canguilhem's passage seems to bear a Deleuzian note that it is impossible for Canguilhem to furnish it with; after all, "The Living" was published long before Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. The seeming anachronism, if any, can be understood in two different ways. Either Deleuze and Guattari, in developing their idea of *puissance*, are implicitly influenced by Canguilhem, as supported by the fact that they quote him twice in *A Thousand Plateaus*, though mainly for explaining the notions of milieu and the anomalous (48, 244). Or, one could recognize where Foucault's articulation of *pouvoir* and Deleuze and Guattari's of *puissance* start and stop in Canguilhem's essay. That is, their works resonate with or are at least anticipated by Canguilhem's conception of the dynamic relationship of the living and its milieu. The second reading is closer to what I mean by the historical milieu of academic translation.

Another example is the translation of both the French *humanité* and *homme* ("humanity" and "human" or "man" in English, respectively) by *renlei* (literally, "the human species") rather than by *ren* (just "human" or "man"), in response to the now prevailing studies on the Anthropocene, called *renlei shi* in Chinese. As Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts, politics in the twenty-first century has to take into account humanity understood as a collective geological force that changes the Earth as a whole, which accounts for the shift of his attention from the postcolonial or the imperial to the planetary (31, 1-2). That said, the recognition of humans as a collectivity, though not yet as a geological one, is nothing new, as demonstrated by Canguilhem's survey of several thinkers' delineation of the relationship of the human species and its milieu in "The Living." For instance, as Canguilhem puts it, for Auguste Comte, "by the intermediary of collective action, humanity [*humanité*] modifies its milieu" ("The Living" 102; "Le Vivant" 170). It is noteworthy that to express the idea of human beings as an entirety, Canguilhem here resorts to the term *humanité*. By contrast, when describing humans' physiological and mechanical responses to external stimuli, Canguilhem speaks of *l'homme*, a term that denotes humans in general but not necessarily as a collectivity ("The Living" 100; "Le Vivant" 167). In translating "The Living," one may hold on to his wordings and the distinction, whether contrived consciously by Canguilhem or not, of human beings perceived as a collective and a generic being by translating *humanité* and *homme* as *renlei* and *ren* in Chinese. However, the prevalence of Anthropocene

studies and of their reference to humankind as a collective force, especially a geological one, may make one wonder whether it is reasonable or perhaps necessary to render both French words as *renlei* as long as the context allows. Thus, for Canguilhem's phrase "the collective man" (*"l'homme collectif"*), which is employed to designate humans as those who have multiple strategies for dealing with problems or challenges posed by the environment and hence constitute "a geographical factor" or "the creator of a geographical configuration" ("The Living" 109; "Le Vivant" 181), *renlei* serves as a better translation than *ren*. Even though the collectivity of human beings and their actions is already conveyed by the adjective "collective" or *jiti de* in Chinese, *jiti de renlei* still works better than *jiti de ren* to emphasize their existence and activity as a collectivity and thereby makes Canguilhem's text and Anthropocene studies mutually relevant.<sup>3</sup>

This recourse to *renlei* in place of *ren* is meant, unlike with *pouvoir* and *puissance*, not so much to apply the key concept of Anthropocene studies retroactively into "The Living." The difference between Canguilhem's article and works on the Anthropocene, as illustrated by the former's accent on human beings as a geographical force and the latter's stress on them as a geological one, is far from being negligible. Yet, the rendition of both *humanité* and *homme* as *renlei* is still preferable as it helps to highlight what the field of humanities cares about at the present time and to include Canguilhem as an important (re)source for considering humans' impact on the world or their milieu as a collectivity, geologically or geographically speaking. If this idea is accepted and acted upon, then the translation of Canguilhem's essay has to be viewed as occurring in a historical milieu, not one in which the source text unilaterally and in advance decides how the target text should be understood and rendered, but as the very site where the ideas, concepts, and terminologies of two historical periods coincide and confront with each other.

More importantly, *milieu* in itself is worth the same consideration. As mentioned above, Canguilhem sees the term as both a middle which commands and organizes its environment and as this environment in which different forces and actions by different bodies circulate and which these forces and actions simultaneously create.

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly, not every scholar articulating the Anthropocene takes the collectivity of human beings positively. For example, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz regard the "totalization of the entirety of human actions into a single 'human activity' generating a single 'human footprint' on the Earth" as one of the several "grand narratives" of the Anthropocene that overshadows "social asymmetries and inequalities" among various human beings and downplays "the diversity of [their] cultures, which are so many experiments in ways of worthily inhabiting the Earth" (69-70, 72). However, this does not diminish the significance of addressing the collective dimension of human existence and action; instead, the reference to this issue, be it given in the form of criticism or celebration, makes it a point of comparison and contrast between the thought of Canguilhem and writings on the Anthropocene, leading them to be more pertinent to each other.

In other words, the diverse definitions of milieu as given by Canguilhem in “The Living” amount to an early discussion of the significance of medium, another buzzword in the humanities nowadays. Canguilhem’s two conceptions of milieu embody the two distinct treatments of medium: one in which an organism mediates—selects and interprets—what comes from outside; the other in which an entity, living or not, constitutes “a crossroads of influences” (120), namely, an open intersection or assemblage of forces and interactions with and from other beings. The importance of milieu treated as medium is clearly captured by Foucault. In *Security, Territory, Population*, he recasts his idea of biopolitics, viewing it no more as a sub-category of biopower as he did in “*Society Must Be Defended*” (243-53), but as a new mode of power in which milieu, along with security and population, acts as an essential element of biopolitics. It is remarkable that Foucault does so by resorting to Canguilhem’s review of Lamarck and Newton in *Knowledge* as the source text from which is developed a political notion of milieu, one furnished with and demarcated by the relations of “circulation and causality” between bodies (*Security* 27n36-38, 21). Although Foucault does not clarify which meaning of medium grounds his use of milieu, his reference to Canguilhem still justifies the association of milieu and medium in practices of translation. In other words, translators of “The Living” should think about how to emphasize this link, either by simply adding a translator’s note or, when necessary or appropriate, by rendering milieu as “milieu-medium” or “medium-milieu.” Either way, what is underscored is the same: in translating an academic piece, one has to bear in mind and take into account ideas and concepts that matter in certain fields or discourses at the time. A translation of an academic work in 1952 and that in 2023 therefore should not be regarded as the same action performed twice. They are on the contrary different renditions contingent on the historical milieus where they are situated and to which they must respond.

In summation, translation, paralleling what Canguilhem speaks of science, has its own “birth, becoming, and progress,” which “must be understood as a sort of enterprise as adventurous as life.” Translating a piece, in particular an academic one, should not be looked upon simply as interpreting or transposing what has been said in one language into another. In contrast, it has to consider its historical milieu, the notions and terms that have been influential and have become predominant in academic discourses. By this I do not intend to ask translators to be trendy in their translations. Instead, my accent is laid on the necessity and significance of bearing in mind the historical milieu of the target text. If a translation is to be seen as a living being, then it cannot be, as Canguilhem suggests in “The Living,” properly formulated without considering what is antecedent to

and/or contemporaneous with it. In this regard, the historical milieu I address here perhaps echoes what has constituted a key word and idea in humanities after 1960s: the notion of historical a priori that Foucault speaks of in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (127) and which, according to Friedrich A. Kittler, “[e]very theory” and by extension, translation “has” (16). After all, to give Canguilhem’s “The Living” and its 2023 translation the justice they deserve requires the spotlight to be on what they should be related to, namely, the academic discourses that have circulated and are currently circulating. Certainly, “The Living” was first published more than seventy years ago. Yet, for a translation, such as the one published in Chinese this year, to be meaningful it depends on attention on how the essay is in conversation with other texts, especially with the ideas and terms currently at stake in the humanities.

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