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Translatability and Cultural Difference: Toward an Ethics of "Real" Translation

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Abstract

In recent years, translation, in the metaphoric sense of understanding (and accepting) alterity through some representational transport, has become a common reference point in critical discourse, usually used to accentuate the practice of cosmopolitan tolerance and respect for cultural difference. This paper begins with a questioning of this trend, proposing that there is an implicit globalizing valuation of the cosmopolitan stance that has to be analyzed and critiqued through a return to the ethical dimension of translation. To establish the relevance of ethics, it invokes Derrida's account of "relevant" translation, taking it perhaps beyond Derrida's purpose, to advocate an ethical translation in terms of which translational judgement is both relativized and given constraint by a sense of direction and terminality. Walter Benjamin's insistence on the "linguistic being" of all objects and Homi Bhabha's spatializing conceptualization of multilingual competence are discussed. An ethics of the real is then proposed, which, following Lacan's reading of Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology" in his seventh Seminar, should remind us that to signify is not only a right but a drive, a call to return to the silenced in the traumatic emergence of subjectivity from matter.

Keywords:

Translatability, Cultural Translation, Cultural Difference, Ethics, The Real

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The West, it seems, could translate everything. Through the spread of scientific method, texts, buildings, and even life itself were opened to the West's gaze. The tower of Gustave Eiffel became its Babel and the new universal message was that science could conquer all and would make the world whole and wholly intelligible.

Dutton 2002: 501

The ontology underlying Paul's preaching valorizes nonbeings against beings, or rather, it establishes that, for the subject of a truth, what exists is generally held by established discourses to be nonexistent, while the beings validated by these discourses are, for the subject, nonexistent.

Badiou 2003: 98

In recent years, translation, in the metaphoric and largely undertheorized sense of understanding (and accepting) alterity through some representational transport, has become a common reference point in critical discourse, usually used to accentuate the practice of cosmopolitan tolerance grounded on the respect for cultural difference. To use the words of a leading figure of translation studies, a "translation turn" is now in the air (Bassnett 1998). Translation, as a "central metaphor" of our times, "points to how different languages, different cultures, different political contexts, can be put into contact in such a way as to provide for mutual intelligibility, without having to sacrifice difference in the interest of blind assimilation." It would not be too far away from truth now to say that unconcern with translation forms "one possible definition for hegemonic globalisation" (Ribeiro 2004).

It is true that there has been no lack of divergence within recently published scholarly opinion on cultural translation. There has also been various attempts to provide theoretical elaborations. The general trend, however, is clear. Among works informed largely by postcolonial perspectives, for example, a reviewer observes two distinct positions: Eric Cheyfitz, Tejaswini Niranjana, and much less unequivocally Vincente L. Rafael practice a kind of "textual determinism," regarding translation as

the reliable if not transparent representation of the world of colonial domination; Lydia H. Liu, Naoki Sakai and Frederic C. Schaffer, on the other hand, pursue a more fruitful engagement with history by tarrying with the variability of agents and actions in actual historical situations of translation (Howland 2003). The accuracy of this estimate may be debatable, but the fact seems to be that, if the map is drawn this way, the second position has apparently become paradigmatic in most discussions of cultural translation today. The pragmatic devaluation of an "essentializing" adherence to the original text and the accentuation of translation as the "practice" of mediation is not only compatible with the ancient fascination with liminality and marginality associated with the god Hermes (Palmer 2001),[1] but has close ties to the recent turn of research in translation studies proper to the patient scrutiny of motivations and power maneuvers accompanying translation as a contingent act performed in the spirit of free negotiation. Such ties, furthermore, are resonant with the current high imaginary of globalization for which translation readily serves as a happy "central metaphor" for a world of "travelling" cultures.

My intention here is not to revive the optimistic textualism of earlier postcolonial theorizing, certainly not to defend Niranjana's view that to "translate" history is to "disturb or displace" it, merely because one has to take a politically correct stand against "origin and telos" (Niranjana 1992: 38), but to point out that to preclude speculative "textualizing" categorically as irrelevant immediately raises the suspicion that an entire contact zone (between, say, textualizing and historicizing) may have escaped the attention of those who value precisely the liminality of such contact zones. My purpose here is to provide an untimely but perhaps still needed theoretical account of the ethics of translation firmly grounded on a certain kind of closed circuit fidelity between source and target texts, such that questions bearing on terminality may once again be raised, not to displace liminality but to complement it, even translate it in the sense of subjecting it to a "shifting out,"[2] a crossing of the limits of its frame of reference, not to diasporize into an infinite regress of further limits and further crossings but to terminate where there are, in Michael Dutton's phrasing, "latent meanings and heterogeneous forms," where the "mere domain of application and observation" would "give voice to the murmurs of other cosmologies" (2002: 527).

We may begin with a (perhaps crude but hopefully justified) reformulation of the typical concerns of the postcolonialists which may or may not lead to textualism. The multiculturalist sophistication of the propounders of liminality implies a globalizing valuation of the cosmopolitan stance, in the sense that translation may become a pretext to elevate (and as a consequence professionalize) multilingual or multicultural competence, epitomized by the often forgotten ("invisible") but insistently bilingual translator because of whom equality may now be posited where there was an "inequality of languages" (Asad 1986: 156ff). The assumptions associated with such competence, moreover, facilitate the rise of a universal target language, namely English, at the expense of local source languages which now need not be used in global communication except in translation. The question here may very well turn out to be not "Can the subaltern speak?" but "Is the other available in translation?" or "Has someone translated the other?" Translatability, performed and produced by "hybridized," cosmopolitan competence, is posited as the sunny side of untranslatability, which is and should be left in muteness in the name of respect for difference. Such bipolar division of translatability into positive and negative sides is spatial in nature, and is usually observable in the deployment of an in-between, interstitial, "third" space, a contact zone inhabited by resident hybridity and marked by high degrees of translatability. While personal motives and the vagaries of historical contingency are recognized, the question whether such privileging of translatability replicates what some think of as an earlier "desire of colonial discourse to translate in order to contain" (Niranjana 1992: 34) is rarely considered apposite enough to be raised.

A return to such postcolonialist concerns does not necessarily mean that we have to recuperate the ludic textualism of some earlier formulations. Indeed, the cogency of the more recent insistence on practice and agency has been and will continue to be confirmed by studies in the actual historical experience of subaltern cultures trapped in the unequal exchange of colonial translation (see, e.g., Levy 2003: 127n). We need not, however, limit our choices to either accepting the normativity of hypothesized equivalence in the spirit of a "wager" on negotiated translatability (Liu 1999: 34), or relinquishing any claim to equivalence in favor of the view that translation is a "practice producing difference out of incommensurability (rather than equivalence out of difference)" (Morris 1997: xiii).

There is certainly some sense in thinking that such dichotomization of discursive possibilities should lead one to ask whether the two contradictory terms point to the place of an excluded middle, or rather an excluded axis which should have crossed them to form a Greimasian semiotic square. If translatability and untranslatability stand in contradiction to each other, one should perhaps also think of some other terms forming relations of opposition or complementarity with them: for example, knowable and unknowable, or revealed and concealed.

This is by no means an empty exercise in argumentation. In the following, I will use quantity (the sheer presence and absence of the "body" of translation, but also the relative "inertia" of textual length as its "body-image") to define one of the possible ways to provide this missing Greimasian axis, which will enable a reconsideration of the translatability axis from the perspective of an ethics of translation. Admittedly, such a foregrounding of quantity returns us to the crudest, most lowly, most servile aspect of translation, its function as a slavish vehicle of transmission.[3] Invoking the high language of poststructuralism, John Johnston dismisses this "vehicular aspect" of language:

> A translation aiming at fidelity and accuracy, one that renders the original 'faithfully' into a second language, but in so doing only reconstitutes this target language in its vehicular aspect, reterritorializing the changes that occur in the process through reference to the already written, to previously established cultural codings, is a simulacrum, but in the negative or Platonic sense: it is merely a bad copy, and the target language remains the same. (1992: 54)

This is, of course, a Deleuzian reformulation of Walter Benjamin's dismissal of "bad translations" in "The Task of the Translator" (1996b: 253), but it must be noted that for Benjamin, "bad" translations are arguably still translations, different only in the degree of conformance to one particular version of ethical relevance, whereas in Johnston, the distinction has reified into one between "bad copies" and translation proper. Benjamin's move is a significant step toward this reification, but at least retains some possibility of "translating" between different schemes of ethicality (different senses of "bad" translation) in the hope of finding connections or common grounds between them. Without the maintaining of such openness, theorizing risks becoming farcical by charging with weighty Platonic sins unsuspecting colonized receptors of translation who, in all likelihood knowing nothing about European philosophy, desire only fairness and accuracy from their translators.

The point is, of course, that translation can never be exhausted by one-sided views from the high window of theory. If colonialism is a site of deceit and manipulation, is not willful mistranslation or the absence of needed translation, as much as translation and unaffected by the problematic of translatability, the daily fare of life in a colonized world? In Taiwan, for example, the early legend of Wu Fong developed out of a translational situation but, before having a chance to participate in the renewing cycles of language use or the dissonance of untranslatability, has been mistranslated into ideological fabrications which are worse than "bad copies" in any ethics. As an historical figure, Wu Feng (1699-1769) was an interpreter appointed by the authorities of the Chinese empire to help govern the aborigines of its newly acquired Taiwan, purportedly by minimizing alterity when the governing and the governed needed to understand each other. There is an ongoing debate as to how ethical Wu was professionally, but few would dispute the fact that the main interests of the typical Han holders of Wu's job at the time consisted in using the capacity to take advantage of the aborigines for personal aggrandizement (Nakada 1912: 56; Sanpo 1930: 98-101). If Wu was an exception to this rule, he failed to amend the structural antagonism, for his career ended with a revolt in which he lost his life. Later on he was glorified by first Japanese and then nationalist Chinese authorities as a magnanimous, peace-loving negotiator who settled disputes, won the love of those he governed, and at a critical moment of cultural incommensurability, succeeded to "educate" the savages out of senseless killing by sacrificing his life and inducing remorse and reflection in the tribe (Wong 1986; Jhang 1990; Komagome 1991; Ching 2000: 804-08).[4]

Despite the deeply ingrained effectiveness of this myth up until today (through a long history of indoctrination through school books), the treacherous translator has continued to be part of Taiwan's popular imagination. Later fiction in Taiwan gave two interesting twists to this old model: the interested exploiter and the bilingual intellectual trapped in absurdity. A variation of the translator with an axe to grind can be found in the patriotic business escort in Huang Chunming's short story, "Sayonara, Good Bye," who used his capacity as an interpreter to give Japanese tourists a lesson about respect for their former colony. A good example of the trapped intellectual is the English teacher in Wang Jhenhe's fiction, who is constantly fighting with comic situations which reveal the excess of his cultural

competence over his strength. Both types are present in Wu Nianjhen's recent film *Buddha Bless America* (1996).

At first sight, such negative representation of the translator reveals a profound distrust of translatability. In fact, the situation is quite obviously different. Since failure in translation here is caused not by inhering impossibility but by selfishness of the individual or by systematic injustice, in a word by the sheer absence of translation, the underlying belief still seems to be that, once the pathology is removed, "ideal" translation will become possible ("ideal" in the lowly sense, the only sense available to the colonized, of the mere materializing of translation into presence). The spatial allocation of translatability to two contradictory poles, by presuming translation to be already in place, will not be helpful in accounting for this need of the colonized or elaborating an ethics from it. Quantity, on the other hand, would allow us to shift focus to a view defined by presence and absence as two limits between which both translatability and untranslatability are relativized in a continuum of values representing degrees to which the (perhaps servile) need of translation is fulfilled. In this sense, the first step on the way to ending the colonizer's view without abandoning the theoretical project altogether seems to be to return to Benjamin's gesture at the relevance of ethics in the dismissal of "bad translations," not to further its forgetting of the servile side of translation, but to reinstate a quantitative continuum, an ethical scale of values which would not only destabilize the polarization of translatability and untranslatability, but would replace such polarization with an economy of forces firmly grounded in the coming-into-being of quantitative presence. Here the lack, the treacherous taking away of translation, is not forgotten but is presupposed as the cause of the economy itself. It may be said that such an economy is unfolded as a "process of temporalisation," a process in which the untranslated or the "imperfectly translated [...] *endlessly* demands a translation"(Laplanche 1992a: 174, original emphasis).

Here the presence or absence of translation is conceived as a matter of quantity not only to indicate that presence can be tested through quantification in terms of values relative to a threshold and that such values begin with localized ("word for word") actualization (an original text can be accurately translated in certain places but covered, withdrawn or diverted at crucial points), but to propose

quantity as the site of the beginning of human ethics. For this point I follow Jacques Lacan who invokes Sigmund Freud's early "neurological" explanation of the psyche in *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1966) as particularly revealing of an important ethical dimension of his entire career and of a contribution "unmatched in significance, something that has changed the problems of the ethical perspective for us to a degree that we are not yet aware of" (Lacan 1992: 36). This contribution, we recall, begins with the introduction of quantity, not in terms of a calculus of interests but in terms of the neurological basis of psychic processes: "to examine what shape the theory of mental functioning takes if one introduces quantitative considerations, a sort of economics of nerve forces" (Freud, letter to Wilhelm Fliess, May 25, 1895, in Masson 1985: 129).

Let us also not forget that according to Jacques Derrida in the 1998 lecture, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" quantity is precisely the hallmark of an "economy of in-betweenness" found in translation (2001: 179). Derrida gives two imaginary "hyperboles" to establish that a translator cannot violate certain quantitative bounds even when such violation is a way to achieve total translatability:

> To make legitimate use of the word *translation* (*traduction*, *Übersetzung*, *traducción*, *translaciôn*, and so forth), in the rigorous sense conferred on it over several centuries by a long and complex history in a given cultural situation (more precisely, more narrowly, in Abrahamic and post-Lutheran Europe), the translation must be *quantitatively* equivalent to the original, apart from any paraphrase, explication, analysis, and the like. (179; original emphasis)

Thus for translation in the "strict, traditional, and dominant sense of the term," verbal quantity is respected "as a quantity of words, each of which is an irreducible body"; failure to respect such quantity not only amounts to a confession of incompetence but would problematize "the concept, the definition, and the very axiomatics, the idea of translation" (181).

This brief discussion of quantity in Derrida's lecture on translation may easily be overlooked, shadowed as it is by a powerful exposition on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* which comprises the main body of the lecture. The break between this discussion of quantity and the main body which is to commence shortly after, however, is an crucial moment. Derrida stops here, acknowledging that

he has "gotten ahead of myself, formalized too quickly, proceeded to an unintelligible economy" and that he will "slow down, then, and start over" (181). Arguably, what has taken place is intended to be a "formalization" which for some reason must yield to a more accessible self-translation but in the best of circumstances should have been the conclusion, the highest point of the entire discourse.

In any case the comments on quantity conclude the "theoretical" part of the lecture, which essentially proposes to explain the axiom that "nothing is translatable and, by the same token, that nothing is untranslatable" by referring to an "economy" governed by two "laws": property (more in the sense of appropriateness than that of possession) and quantity (178f). An easy reading is provided by Kathleen Davis, who explains that property and quantity are "double and contradictory" (2001: 99). As the two "hyperboles" given by Derrida (2001: 179f) show, too much favoring of property requires extra explanatory text and defies the law of quantity. Conversely, Davis proposes, ignoring "nuances of the source text" betters readability (which is somehow linked to quantity) at the expense of property. Thus there is a "self-contradiction" in translation, and a translator has to *decide* in a responsible way whether to give preference to property or quantity (2001: 100). Presumably, on this reading, total translatability and total untranslatability are opposed to each other because they are segregated in a decisionist space: when property is infinitely favored, everything is translatable, when quantity is infinitely favored, everything is untranslatable.

This reading is rather neat in its own terms, but fails to explain why the economy of translation "relates the translatable to the untranslatable, not as the same to the other, but as same to same or other to other" (Derrida 2001: 178). The implication of "same to same or other to other" can only be that translatability and untranslatability (and, by the same token though perhaps with a shifting of axis, property and quantity) are mutually constitutive, bound up with each other. Translation, in this sense, is not a matter of achieving mutual intelligibility on one front, and preserving difference on the other, because there cannot be mutual intelligibility without the difference, and real intelligibility must be sustained in the place where it counts most, that is, the place of difference. Thus a relevant translation "is a translation whose economy, *in these two senses*, is the best possible,

the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible" (179; emphasis added). In order for this to work, property and quantity should be both relevant to translational relevance though in different ways. In fact, Derrida's "hyperboles" themselves show quite well that both are involved in establishing relevance: property is the pole of variability, quality and judgment, giving freedom to the translator to improvise, while quantity is the pole of constraint and inertia, providing the stability of a broad but relatively determinable range of variation for property. Benjamin compares a translation and its original to a tangent and a circle: the former "touches" the latter "lightly" at one "infinitely small point" (the "sense" of the original), and this point will establish "the laws of fidelity," setting limit on the course pursued by the tangent "in the freedom of linguistic flux" (Benjamin 1996b: 261). Perhaps Derrida's principle of quantity is related to that of property in a similar way.

The "relevance" of Benjamin, indeed, is attested to by the fact that Derrida's discussion of quantity harks back to the conclusion of Benjamin's "Translator" essay, where the most lowly task of copying the quantitative body of the text *becomes one* with the most holy sanctity of the Word in the "interlinear version of the Scriptures" which is "the prototype or ideal of all translation" (1996b: 263). At the same time, Derrida also recalls comments of his own given some thirty years earlier in a lecture on Freud:[5]

> The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry. (1978: 210)

It is obvious here that materiality (the acoustic and visual aspects of signifiers) and quantity (their abstraction into calculable numbers) are different though related. In Freud's *Project* and probably in Derrida's later lecture, quantity should be read as an abstraction of materiality which allows its meaning to be transported elsewhere, but an abstraction which, in the manner of relevance (*relève*) as *Aufhebung*, preserves some residual materiality. In the lecture, quantity is not a figure of Shylock but a figure of the way (unrealized in Shakespeare's play) to "relate" Portia to Shylock, or "the translatable to the untranslatable."

Property in the sense of appropriateness, of course, is another such figure. As freedom within constraint, it pertains to the domain of ethical judgment.

Although deconstructionists working in and out of translation studies usually dismiss "traditional" values associated with translation, most emphatically those based on fidelity and equivalence, Derrida makes more sense when he *constructs* such values with an economy of relativized equivalence, which would confirm

> the experience that I suppose is so common to us as to be beyond any possible dispute, namely, that any given translation, whether the best or the worst, actually stands between the two, between absolute relevance, the most appropriate, adequate, univocal transparency, and the most aberrant and opaque irrelevance. (2001: 179)

Such in-betweenness is already a quantification of the proper, and should be distinguished from the spatial conception of compartmentalized translatability. First of all, it presumes an aim, a perfect (un)translatability in the source text against which the "relevance" of all translations are measured, thus returning us to Walter Benjamin's thesis of the textual call for translation: "Translatability is an essential quality of certain works [. . .] a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability" (1996b: 254). Secondly, the implicit directionality, if not intentionality, gives in-betweenness a dynamic aspect, a sense of destination, and reintroduces subjectivity through flows of meaning which intimate the possibility of ethical judgment. Paradoxically, only by acknowledging the objective matrix of the symbolic, the arbitrary, unmotivated constraint of quantity, what Paul de Man calls the "inhuman" of language (1986: 196), can a clearing be secured in which the ethical dimension, a relative scale of judgements of the good, may appear.

For de Man, the inhuman comprises "linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language   independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have" (196). Again, such an understanding is based on the spatial separation of the translatable (human, natural) and the untranslatable (inhuman, unnatural), deprived of the dynamic sense of one state striving to become another, of the in-between striving to find a home, of language striving to be rid of deception and manipulation. Derrida, by contrast, places language itself under the sign of translation and thereby opens it up to a shifting out which is an "entering into time," into the "movement of detranslation-retranslation" (Laplanche 1992a: 176). Thus when Derrida explicates the discourse of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* in terms

of *relève* or *Aufhebung*, the implication is clearly that the latter must be understood as grounded in the translational economy discussed earlier in the lecture, and therefore temporalized. To sum up Derrida's allegorical reading of this part of the play, the discourse of mercy turns to "the impossible that is *more than impossible and therefore possible*" (2001: 193; original emphasis) . Presumably, such a discourse also points to the possibility of superseding/preserving untranslatability (and therefore living it in time) by finding within the untranslatable itself something "more than" untranslatable, that is, by positing the possibility of the "shifting out" of the untranslatable into the translatable. One way to develop this recursivity is to point out that thinking of property as the pole of freedom and quantity as the pole of impossibility is already an obscuring of the fact that both emerge as the result of the *Aufhebung* of impossible drives. That is, quantity as the abstraction of materiality (and by implication, singularity) becomes translatable, and property as the fixating of abstract quantity (the singularization of presence as the other of absence) becomes determinable. More important, because of the very open-endedness of the in-between of relative "relevance," these figures are bound to enter into repetition ("detranslation-retranslation") in which they logically entail a series of possible shiftings leading from the most untranslatable to the most common practice of translation where everything is (more or less) translatable. In other words, if *Aufhebung* is accepted at all as an act of translation *par excellence*, the assumption has to be that translation cannot simply be the neutral transfer of meaning, but is driven by *aufhebende* forces each emanating from some terminal point upstream and imparting form, effectivity, and ethical significance to every gradation of translatability.

Derrida does speak of mercy as "an interiorization that passes from the visible to the invisible by becoming a thing of the heart" (193), but he stops at the ethical undecidability of the liminal economy of translation, adopting a stance of distanciation *vis-à-vis* the ethical possibilities opened up by his discussion: [6]

> In expressing all the evil that can be thought of the Christian ruse as a discourse of mercy, I am not about to praise Shylock when he raises a hue and cry for his pound of flesh and insists on the literalness of the *bond*. I analyze only the historical and allegorical cards that have been dealt in this situation and all the discursive, logical, theological, political, and economic resources of the concept of mercy, the legacy (our legacy) of

this semantics of mercy—precisely inasmuch as it is indissociable from a certain European interpretation of translation. (198; original emphasis)

Presumably, ethical depravity on either side of the "Christian ruse" is not sufficient to nullify the Christian ethical framework as a whole, so it may be said that Derrida is explicating this singularized "European interpretation" without negating it. Nonetheless this emphatic distancing from singularity, this refusal, as it were, to "go anywhere," is already a turning away from responsibility in the translational situation at hand: One is tempted to ask, for example, if there can be other, possibly better "interpretations of translation" that will translate the dispute in a more proper, more "relevant" way. The important point here is that Derrida ultimately fails to face the terminality implied in his reading of translation. At the same time, since refusal to decide is always already a decision, Derrida's refusal here has not really exceeded the parameters of the decisionist ethical stance pinpointed by Kathleen Davis, one based on the freely assumed responsibility of the self for the other, the human for the inhuman, the same for the different.[7] In principle, such thinking can only conceive terminality as *imposed* on a liminality of indeterminacy and precluding the possibility that new forms of being, driven by forces beyond self and other, may emerge from their coming together, that such new forms may activate new ethical economies whereby both self and other will be transformed. It can indeed be argued that a Derridean ethical response to alterity cannot reduce "what is 'other' to the 'same' by interpreting it according to the structures and assumptions supporting one's own identity, rule, law, community, etc." (Davis 2001: 92). But this is not sufficient reason to decide that all cognition and comprehension based on relative articulations of "relevance" should be abandoned or left to the choice (or the choice of no choice) of the translator. For Davis, when all general rules are taken to be "imposed," a translation can take up responsibility on two fronts; it answers "*both* to the general laws guiding and safeguarding interpretation of the text *and* to that which is singularly other within it" (93; original emphasis). Such divided responsibility, too, leaves the other in the unhappy limbo of untranslatable "singularity," permanently separated from participation in the "general laws."

In this context it is essential to recall and reconsider Benjamin's well known metaphor in which the translation and the original are thought of as fragments of a great vessel. The translation, "instead of imitating the sense of the original, must

lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning" (Benjamin 1996b: 260). Here the imitation of "sense" is dismissed not because the foreignness in the "sense" of the other should be simply left untranslated, but because the real foreignness, the untranslatable that is the proper object of translation, lies deeper than the generalization of the "sense," in the "singularity" of experience which grounds and is expressed, however inadequately, in this very "sense." For Benjamin, such singularity is not to remain inscrutably singular, to be taken up, even with utmost responsibility, in segregation from its "sense," but is always already part of the evolving "greater language," to be reconstructed out of a very real kinship of languages, not in metaphorical disembodiment but as languages in actual use, for "languages are not strangers to one another" (255).

It is unfortunate that this side of Benjamin's account of translation is often left "untranslated," forgotten as an eccentric "singularity" bound up with his quaint insistence on messianic thought and therefore torn from the necessity of "general laws." Homi Bhabha concludes his early essay on "DissemiNation" with Benjamin's broken vessel metaphor, using it to show that translation turns cultural differences into "a kind of solidarity" (Bhabha 1990: 320). He takes care to add a footnote which cites de Man to emphasize that singularities should remain singular within "solidarity":

> [Benjamin] is not saying that the fragments constitute a totality, he says that fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially fragmentary. They follow each other metonymically, and they never constitute a totality. (322n, qtd from De Man 1986: 91)

Bhabha develops this distinction more fully in a later essay in which he proposes to shift the focus from "the 'metonymy' of translation" to "the 'foreignness' of cultural translation" (1997: 227). He traces Fredric Jameson's account of postmodern globality and by and large accepts its helpfulness in pointing to the need for a "transnational, 'migrant' knowledge of the world" (214). Where Jameson observes decentered, fragmentary subjectivity confronting the overwhelming complexity of the global age, Bhabha confirms the rise of "translational experience," of a world of interstitial "hybrid hyphenations" characterized by irresolution and liminality (219, 224). Obviously, however, Bhabha does not intend his own act as translational, for the citation of Jameson promptly leads to a non-liminal opposition. Whereas Jameson insists on the continued need for "cognitive mapping" in quest of a global

analysis of postmodern culture within an "international space," Bhabha dismisses such Marxist aspirations as totalizing, narcissistic, and autotelic, proposing instead to heed the "performative nature of differential identities" working within spaces which are "continually, *contingently,* 'opening out', remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference" (219; original emphasis).

For Bhabha, solidarity can be imagined only when it is based on Partha Chatterjee's idea of a community articulating "a cultural temporality of contingency and indeterminacy at the heart of the discourse of civil society" (230). As shown above, such insistence on indeterminacy inevitably affirms an unbridgeable gap between the possible and the impossible, the determinate and the indeterminate, thereby removing both sides from mutual translatability. Again, here Bhabha is apparently not seeking any solidarity with *other* critical positions or exemplifying with his own act any discursive translation which might lead to some newness. His thoughts are *mapped* onto a global arrangement, progressing from Jameson to Rushdi to Walcott. The three sections do "follow each other metonymically," remaining "essentially fragmentary," but they are by no means an "opening out" to new positions.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Bhabha's text can still be taken to be translational, not in his own terms but in the broader sense of exemplifying translation as the "central metaphor" of our times, not as analysis but as general observation. It is precisely situations like this which would call upon us to foreground that other side of Benjamin's contribution, to place emphasis on the idea that "languages are not strangers to one another." To see this turn to language not only as a universal human faculty but as common to all semiotic activity in nature, one has to situate Benjamin's "Translator" essay somewhat "globally," in relation to his other writings on language, especially the essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" (1996a). There we see Benjamin explaining the distinction between "sense" and the "way of meaning" as one between "verbal contents" and "linguistic being":

> For precisely because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely

constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its frontier. (64)

This returns us to Derrida's refusal to separate translatability and untranslatability. In terms of what is communicated *in* language, it is the untranslatability of the "incommensurable" infinity of linguistic being which, by establishing a common ground under the perpetual differentiality of post-Babelian "verbal contents," would ensure translatability at the locus where it matters most, the "frontier" of language. "This is why translation is always translation of the untranslatable: what one translates   what is translated each time   is language itself, and not a meaning guarded jealously by language and released only to the initiated" (Düttmann 1994: 35). Such is the "magic" of immediacy: since language is always already a medium which "communicates itself *in* itself," mediation is necessarily presupposed by "the immediacy of all mental communication" (Benjamin 1996a: 64). That is, the equivalence between muteness and muteness (mediation as a quantitative comparison between zero and zero) would form the primary ground of immediacy, a zero degree of translatability, upon which it becomes possible to develop all subsequent, mediated, equivalences, including those of "verbal contents."

Thus Bhabha's text is translational precisely in the sense that it is first and foremost a self-translation, an explication of the zero degree of mediation growing out of the incommensurable singularities of (hybridized) voices, each of which exists first and foremost as quantity, as one against zero, presence against absence, voice against muteness. However "minoritizing" Bhabha's text tries to be, it is still built upon a common ground of discourse, appealing to a quasi-universal "right to signify" (Bhabha 1997: 233). Without such (un)translatability, it would not be, or would not have been, possible to not only go beyond, *relever*, the blind determinations of "contingencies" and "indeterminacies," preserving the blindness with the equally blind drive of quantity, but also proceed from the simple affirmation of migration and diaspora to that of the domain of the ethical, where one makes judgements about the relative "relevance" of different translations and self-translations.

Naoki Sakai, generally following a view of translation as practice or "performativity" within the liminal (1997: 4f, 120f), nevertheless associates this practice with a *shutai* agency which encounters cultural difference not in an act of

deciding the undecidable but as it is "given to 'us' in its immediacy," that is, "as 'feeling' or *jô* according to a certain Confucian terminology, 'that which moves,' something like the Lacanian *réel*, which cannot be arrested in the *li*, in the synchronicity of signification" (121). May we not say that "that which moves" moves to "relinquish materiality" (of the signifier) which for Derrida, we recall, is precisely the driving force of translation?[8]

If to signify is a right, therefore, it must also be a drive, a drive which signifies more than signification, in the sense that it must also escape the "synchronicity of signification," not to revel in endless differential play but to allow signification to "move" beyond materiality, that is into translatability, so that the untranslatable, that which "cannot be arrested" in signification, may enter human language. For in materiality "the languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb," whereas in human language it can be noted that "its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental" (Benjamin 1996a: 67). The community of matter "is immediate and infinite," but its muteness, doubled by the curse of "God's word" after the Fall, deepens into profound sadness: "Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature" (72). Thus, for Benjamin, a need is formed in nature to lament this state (72f), and to respond to that need becomes the highest call of translation, the call upon human language to translate "the language of things into that of man" (69). Languages, in this sense, cannot be encompassed by a fixed totality, but neither do they merely "follow each other metonymically." For Benjamin, "All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language" (74).

This is an almost ecological conception of the ethics of language, and it is not as mystic as it appears to be. By invoking "languages issuing from matter" (73), Benjamin grounds his theory firmly on the actuality of the physical world, where there is no place for anthropocentric arrogance, and communication is never an exclusively human activity. At the same time, the drive toward translation forms the basis of both the emergence of human languages from matter and their mutual translatability. Benjamin's move echoes Freud's early attempt to introduce an "economics of nerve forces" to the study of mind, and pinpoints the speechless communication among things as the source of the movement of quantities with

which Freud's work begins: "What distinguishes activity from rest is to be regarded as Q, subject to the general laws of motion" (1966: 295). From the very beginning, too, Freud presumes translatability between neurones or "material particles" and psychic phenomena: the quantitative conception "is derived directly from pathological clinical observation especially where excessively intense ideas were concerned—in hysteria and obsessions [. . .]" (295).

What is of interest here is how the economy of the psychic real is determined by material processes accompanying, and left over from, the emergence of the animate out of the inanimate. Freud speculates painstakingly on the details of this economy, and describes how memories which are the fundamental units of signification are formed out of neuronal connections rooted in accumulated experience. Lacan, in his seventh Seminar (1992), uses this theoretical framework to present an account of the ethical as viewed from the perspective of the real. For Freud, the emergence of language and "thought-processes" makes necessary the "dissecting" of the object of perception (a "perceptual complex") into two components, one stable, like the "nucleus of the ego," and the other inconstant, like the predicate in a sentence (1966: 328). When this object is a "fellow human being" (*Nebenmensch*), it too "falls apart into two components, of which one makes an impression by its constant structure and stays together as a *thing*, while the other can be *understood* by the activity of memory—that is, can be traced back to information from [the subject's] own body" (331; original emphasis and brackets). For Freud, the first component, the "thing," is the prototype of incommensurability, an "unassimilable component" (366). Detached from the materiality of direct neuronal representation, this "thing" is to become the locus of muteness, of a zero degree of translation which looks forward to the formation of what Laplanche calls the "designified-signifier" (Laplanche 1999: 92). Lacan quotes Freud's *Nebenmensch* passage and in his translation stresses that the *Ding* (thing) is an "unchanging apparatus" (unchanging because mute); it is "the element that is initially isolated by the subject in his experience of the *Nebenmensch* as being by its very nature alien, *Fremde*" (1992: 51f). Furthermore, this "dumb reality which is *das Ding*" is also "the reality that commands and regulates" (55). In Benjamin, the muteness of things calls, in the name of the ultimate transparency of the Word, upon the strong of languages to translate the weak. In Lacan, too, the "dumb reality which is *das Ding*"

becomes the source of "alien" driving forces ("that which moves" in Sakai's Confucian terminology) which would create ruptures in the symbolic, but which eventually, in a way which should perhaps remind us of how untranslatability goes beyond itself by returning to translatability, would be shifted back in, sedimented into a new "reality that commands and regulates":

> In the end, it is conceivable that it is as a pure signifying system, as a universal maxim, as that which is the most lacking in a relationship to the individual, that the feature of *das Ding* must be presented. It is here that, along with Kant, we must see the focal point, aim and convergence, according to which an action that we will qualify as moral will present itself. And which, moreover, we will see present itself paradoxically as the rule of a certain *Gut* or good. (1992: 55)

Eventually, this ethical turn toward the "inhuman" of the signifying system has to be justified by its inheriting of structures of neuronal conversions and inscriptions which have persisted after crossing layers upon layers of translational material organization en route to human language.

This journey of language through materiality is not only inextricably bound up with the emergence of human subjectivity but is at the same time determinant of its ethical being. On the one hand, the development of networks of neuronal representations, which eventually would develop into human language, is accompanied by the development of self-consciousness: the *Real-Ich* "presupposes" a *Lust-Ich* in which "one finds the first sketches of the psychic organization" and which is "dominated by the function of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen*" (101f).[9] On the other hand, the very distinction between good and bad is from the beginning determined, under the pleasure principle which regulates neuronal excitation, by the quantitative representation of quality which takes place in what Freud postulates as the ω system of neurones, the bedrock of consciousness (1966: 307-12); such a quantitative account implies that ethical sense "already belongs to the order of the *Vorstellung*" (Lacan 1992: 63). The constitution of human language, therefore, is not only a movement from the untranslatable to the translatable, but one from the jouissance of ethical impossibility to the "synchronicity" of moral conventions. This is how speechlessness becomes an ethical call: "the Thing is that which in the real, the primordial real, [. . .] suffers from the signifier" (118).

The drive of the real, therefore, is "inherently traumatic" (Verhaeghe 1999: 163): it is both a drive to "relinquish materiality" in the precarious preservation of life as defined by the quantitative economy of the pleasure principle, *and* the need for subjectivity to anchor its being in its traumatic separation from matter. Unconstrained by secondary human decision, this biological necessity to return to the traumatic beginning constitutes *jouissance* for the subject and thereby determines the subject's being in the realm which lies beyond pleasure. The *Ding*, in other words, is the untranslatable traumatic beginning of the life of the thinking subject, and enters translatability only as quantity, as translated forces harking back to the earliest motion of Q which separated activity from rest, life from death, and eventually one from zero, presence from absence, identity from indifference. As Paul Verhaeghe points out apropos of the moment of the *Nebenmensch*:

> From a structural point of view, this is a very important moment, because it concerns the moment of division in which something is lost, precisely the original situation of jouissance before division, and in which something is achieved, namely the possibility of a separate identity. (1995: 43)

This creation of identity *ex nihilo* is ethical in the sense of "pre-ethical," in the same sense in which Oedipus' act of "precipitate identification" in solving the riddle of Sphinx is said to be pre-ethical: "it renders the advent of ethics possible" (Zupančič 2000: 205).

For Lacan, the Thing, forever lost and forever to be refound, will become the center of the subject's world, the real of its being: "posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget," it is "something strange to me," but at the same time it is "at the heart of me" (1992: 52, 71). In Lacan's explication, Antigone's tragic act becomes the quintessential ethical act precisely because this act, by returning to solitary incommunicability in the "inhuman indifference" of the silence of the real (Shepherdson 1999: 70), reaches beyond the pleasure principle toward absolute translatability (translatability beyond translatability, in the real), which is recognized by public ethos as the manifestation of the roots of their ethical being, henceforth to be represented by sublime art, given speech in "a process of *transmission or translation*" (69; original emphasis).

Thus the moral law, as ethics which is hardened into the "synchronicity of signification," would still be "articulated with relation to the real as such, to the real

insofar as it can be the guarantee of the Thing" (Lacan 1992: 76). Here the relation between the "reality" of moral agency and the "real" by which the subject lives, a relation characterized by "the reverse and the same combined" (55), reminds us of Benjamin's elusive distinction between "sense" and the "way of meaning," or language and "language as such."[10] The possibility for the subject to become a "separate identity," of course, is also the possibility of language, here taken by Lacan to be bound up with the possibility of entering the ethical, of making judgments about the good, the "relevant." Such are the consequences when language is accepted as the fundamental feature of human existence. Benjamin is profoundly aware of this whole problematic: "For in reality there exists a fundamental identity between the word that, after the promise of the snake, knows good and evil, and the externally communicating word" (1996a: 71).

Without this grounding of human language in at least an awareness of the need to refind its Thing, lost in the "communication of matter in magic communion" (70), it would not be possible to speak of responsibility for the other other than as the indeterminate, undecidable externalization of the demands of the object. For the colonized, linguistic experience, fundamentally the experience of translation, seems to start with a traumatic denial of transparency in communication. But, as Paul Verhaeghe points out, every subject is affected by an inherent, structurally determined trauma, so that externally inflicted trauma does not enter a neutral ground but finds itself interacting with structural trauma in diverse ways (2001: 52-58). Trauma as structure and trauma as event, therefore, are also "the reverse and the same combined," that is, joined in the movement of quantity. The main contribution of Benjamin's theorizing of translation lies in reminding us that the universal and the contingent, or translatability and untranslatability, are not simply opposed in abstract counterposition, cut away from the "magic communion" of mutual translatability. Any "relevant" theory of translation must begin with his advice to return to the real, to the necessary universals of translation determined by the biological underpinnings of language and structured around the "unchanging apparatus," around the zero degree of translation and of identity. Such universals would confirm, once more, that "languages are not strangers to one another." For translation is first and foremost "translation of the language of things into that of man":

> It is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally. (69)

Perhaps this is also a form of "cognitive mapping," not in the sense of the totalizing of transnational complexities, but formed by a willingness to question every practical judgement in translation as to its ethical implications in providing reference points for the kinship of languages and of cultures.

Notes

[1] Richard E. Palmer (2001) associates the term "liminality" with the anthropologist Victor Turner, who is "interested in a certain state experienced by persons as they pass over the threshold from one stage of life to another." This state occurs for instance in rites of passage and is marked by marginality and indeterminacy. Palmer then refers to Paul Friedrich and others to establish that marginality is "the realm of Hermes."

[2] "Shifting out" is Bruno Latour's rendering of "*débrayage*," a term from Greimasian narrative semiotics. In Latour's explication, "When the reader [of a narrative] is sent from one plane of reference to another, it is called shifting out" (1999: 310). In a different but more "translational" context, Jean Laplanche refers to the "tangential departure," which means pretty much the same thing (1992b: 203).

[3] As Michael Dutton points out, it is through a long process of historical association with this function of language that Asian studies has been reduced to "little more than a 'content provider'" (Dutton 2002: 523, 526). What should be faulted, however, is not the "applied" side of language itself, but the one-sided attribution of the role of the intermediary.

[4] Interestingly, some versions of the legend provide a contractual situation similar to that of *The Merchant of Venice*, Jacques Derrida's paradigmatic text of translation (1978; to be discussed below): by force of a previous agreement with Wu's predecessor, the aborigines demand yearly human sacrifices from the Han settlers, but Wu "translates" them into empty promises, leftover heads from a previous rebellion, and cows (Jhang 1990, 34-39). Also, in later elaborations, there is usually a rock which serves to render human heads permanently after Wu is killed (35, 37, 39). It should be noted that although it is true that Wu is accused of fraudulent practices only in recent accounts, to conclude (as Jhang 1990: 40 does) that they are simply outweighed by the majority of older written accounts amounts to ethnocentric privileging of established Han written culture at the expense of the suppressed oral tradition of the aborigines.

[5] The lecture deals with a series of Freud's works, starting with nothing less than the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* itself. In the passage quoted here, Derrida is discussing the Freudian practice of dream interpretation in later texts, specifically the untranslatability of dreams and dream languages. For a study of this lecture as a significant rereading of Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, see Wilson 1998: 145-54.

[6] In the terminology of the Kyoto school of philosophy, this is a *shukan-teki* stance, a stance of distanced observation. *Shukan*, Naoki Sakai explains, is the "epistemic subject," distinguished from (though possibly overlapping with) *shutai*, the "practical agent": "Whereas the epistemic subject emerges in the spatiality of synchronicity, *shutai* always flees such spatiality and can never be present to itself either" (Sakai 1997: 124, see also 24f, 198fn, 215fn).

[7] As Davis explains, decision necessarily implies ethical responsibility. "Only when faced with an impossible decision   one for which a preexisting 'right' choice is not 'presented'   do we decide" (2001: 51). The radical divide between translatability and untranslatability is obvious. There is always a danger that this divorce from the possible might allow agency to veer toward irrationalism. In a different context, Geoff Boucher describes decisionism in this way: "In ethical decisionism, a sovereign subject that precedes all socialization determines, thanks to the unity of the sovereign will, a fresh course, without reference to established norms or protocols of legitimacy. Advocates of ethical decisionism (the legions of postmarxian admirers of the semi-nazi legal theorist, Carl Schmidt, for instance) tend to present the moment of decision as a 'leap into madness,' a 'Pascalian wager,' an *ex nihilo* determination of the exception that creates the rule" (2003).

[8] In a note, Sakai explains that "feeling" and "signification" are irreconcilable only in some versions of (Japanese) neo-Confucianism in which the ontological priority of human nature, and with it the possibility of grounding "feeling" in intersubjectivity, is denied. By associating "feeling" in this sense with intensity as opposed to extensity as in Gilles Deleuze's account of difference, Sakai gives primacy to quantity rather than quality in thinking "that which moves" (see 1997: 214n).

[9] "A signifying organization dominates the psychic apparatus as it is revealed to us in the examination of a patient. Whereupon we can say in a negative way that there is nothing between the organization in the signifying network, in the network of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen*, and the constitution in the real of the space or central place in which the field of the Thing as such presents itself to us" (Lacan 1992: 118).

[10] To say that, for Benjamin, the task of translation is "to purify the original of meaning" (Jocobs 1999: 79), therefore, misses the "translatability" between "sense" and "way of meaning," without which translation would lose much of its relevance as the informing principle of the "magical community" of all languages, human or inhuman.

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