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TRANSLATION AND MUTUAL TRANSCENDENCE

Abstract: Persistent and futile are the theories of translation. But so are as those of the fantastic or the acts of public piety. From the posturing of a judgmental above or an insidious aside, little of substance has been said about the swarming, sharp work of translation. As if there were a general of translation, not having to whom to delegate the work of difference across the clouds, the sun gets bored upon seeing that everything underneath is the same. To be sure, there is no interesting theory of translation as long as ‘theory’ and ‘translation’ keep within the dominating sphere of sameness (the orders of being, telos, and deduction).

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Persistent and futile are the theories of translation. But so are as those of the fantastic or the acts of public piety. From the posturing of a judgmental above or an insidious aside, little of substance has been said about the swarming, sharp work of translation. As if there were a general of translation, not having to whom to delegate the work of difference across the clouds, the sun gets bored upon seeing that everything underneath is the same. To be sure, there is no interesting theory of translation as long as ‘theory’ and ‘translation’ keep within the dominating sphere of sameness (the orders of being, telos, and deduction). Had Immanuel Kant descended upon translation as a topic of reflection, he would have probably concluded that the impossibility of forming specific concepts for this or that translation relegates translation to the realm of art: universal, yet lacking a concept. Yet Kant was relentless in his sculptural attempt to polish language until only concepts were left of it.

Translation occurs as eventful practice; this means that the semantic losses it incurs on the road from “source” to target” may be recuperated or mimicked pragmatically:

“Mother is *mère* est Mutter ist cara madre es mamma. Mater,
 если
 you are *aceeași* partout, Ich auch werde *ceea ce* seré sein, que
 quasi lo dit dieu en hébreu.”

Even if a chasm separates *mère* from *Mutter* and *Brot* from *pain*, even if the Rhine River is wider than both North- and South Atlantic, simple translation will attempt to bridge the gaps regardless of their breadth. Simple translation works on a pattern that is not foreign to that of common definition, by seeking to point to *mère* and *Mutter*’s mutual representability across sense, chasms and their echoes. This is the stuff of analogy, and contemporary imaging techniques showing where things happen in the brain stem from the same anxiety of difference, which they call “the not yet known.” Under the conditions of representational military appeal of simple translation, the subject will retain the means of orientation towards its own sameness, as both source and target, while commuting between the two. This proleptic subject is an appropriated mechanism meant and oiled for capturing unmanageable difference, holding its prey tight and trading it off for other proleptic subject’s use, joy and abuse.

Such a repetition in advance, superimposed on unreflected Platonising reminiscences, has the structure of superstition: the subjection to the stuff of religion, magic and everything else that requires, for its own self-preserving functioning, an operative transcendental, which comes in handy for magi, priests, bankers, lobbyists and lesser middlemen to juggle with. Call this trite translation. Benjamin named it bad translation, as it focused on pimping information and creating both rapacious and apathetic infomaniacs. Trite translation empowers the middleman to take home a percentage, accumulate power and capital, and thus gnaw at the world from the middle of traffic. As the middleman rules the day, it makes it mediocre enough for it to need to be spiced up with superlative stars: Super-, Bat- and Spidermen. A punch

at the middleman may wake us up a bit to see what extreme translation could do to our unpoetic world.

Richard Feynman used to explain everything physical with the aid of three objects only: a pair of glasses, a pencil and a rubber band. But we need only two objects to explain the whole of theory – I call it so as to include both philosophy and erosophy. These objects are a hand and a pile of mud.

The hand grabs some mud and squeezes it. What stays inside the squeezing fist is the impressed; what slips through the fingers is the expressed. The movement of impression is, at first, mythical: it gives form to the formless. The remainder is detritus, dirt, chaos, *hyle* (“stuff”) – though the hand might insist to recycle it – with gestures that qualify an obsessive compulsive order or another). Adam is impressed. Like everything else, he was shaped by the forming hand, whose itch was variously attributed to the *primum movens*, to the sculptor meant to free the being cast in matter, or to the legislator. The logic of exclusionary power eliminates the expressed – Plato’s poets exhaled out of the Republic, Ovid – of Rome, the unrecyclable sinners’ souls flushed into this or that Hell, scapegoats pushed beyond the horizon, genocide as good housekeeping – on and on. On its way to purity, the logic of impression squeezes out tautologies and contradictions, inductions and abductions, madmen and geniuses, women and kids, demons, beasts and mud. The conclusion of this act of separation is the spectacle of the impressed: the fist opens to show the sphere of mud, a demonstrative gesture, which doesn’t allow for any distinction between the thing and its representation. The sphere of mud is the thing and the thing is its own representation. For what is exhibited is what is left after the remainder has already been expressed, let go, excised, thrown away with the other goats, ignored, sent to enjoy freedom or be killed otherwise. The open hand offers the result of its impression in the various shapes and follies: perfect societies or bodies, proofs and conclusions, triumphs and all the instances of “I told you so,” porn and porn and Medusa’s head.

The coalescence of the representing and the represented has arrived at a point of ecstatic confusion in contemporary technics: here nothing is to escape through the digital fingers, but what's left inside is the spectre that emerges as the correlative of everything. By excluding exclusion, the digital came to figure the contemporary accomplishment of Faust's clownish fate.

The relentless effort that eventually saved Goethe's Faust is that of the fist grabbing all the mud around: the work of the concept that grabs the mud's sameness at the expense of the difference between the mud inside, now shaped, and the formless mud that slipped through the fingers. Under contract, Faust needs not to stop to cherish the beauty of the moment, thus keep production reproducing ad infinitum. What he gets instead is the self-referential specter of everything, from wisdom to Helen of Troy. Self-reference is the making of the self: expression finds its 'self' in impression, thus alienates itself from its non-self. So Faust, the first digital hero, whose mastery of the concept obtained at the price of its material expression. The concept, whose ruse has been crafted from Socrates on, is, at the end of days, the mythical capture of the subject by a drive to power and possession that matches the fear of being expressed, that is, non-recognized. To become a conceptual god, the subject had to relinquish language, thus disentangle itself from the marshes and maelstroms, from the instability and the abysses of the languages that we call "natural." That conceptual god would be called "philosopher," for lack of a worse word.

Philosophy's resistance to literature can be variously explained, but Plato's fear of poets and Aristotle's logical evisceration of the literary language set the rules of the games in the West: language must be purified of its subversive potential. While language has, for its post-preSocratic course, been 'framed' by secondary systems – such as numbers, music, prayer and others – so as to become a stable tool, it was philosophy which, until recently offered the iron fist to squeeze language out of itself. Only Stoic thought avoided the squeeze, opting instead for the continuity of becoming between grammar and logic and ontology and ethics. But the Stoic sternly fluid peace has little to do with common, organized peace, which is predicated on the rejection of poetry: whatever is not translatable by a securing interface cannot claim the right to

existence. The value of anything is seen in its reproducibility – and whatever is represented, must exist.

Our peace is being refashioned as the wavelength that marshals the territory between the war we won and the one we'll lose: between explosions and implosions; it manages the risk that will come upon mankind like oftentimes the danger of the Furies. Now they are feared as explosions of terror and implosions of the system. Peace is laying between them, peace – the manageable; peace – the globalized oasis whose sphincter is open 24/7 to spill, over garbage, laurels and future, its message – mediocre, colorfully tacky. The peace behind the rich's global blast doors closed shut for the swarming poor not to intrude? We call it globalization, but shouldn't we say that it is here to nationalize debt, to privatize pleasure, and to outsource pain? That this does translate flawlessly into a language even monkeys know?

As Descartes' cogito, the doubt manager, the unbreakable ground of knowledge – or *subiectum inconcussum* –, broken English comes to cover the world in the sheets of its mapping. At the time when English comes to imperially figure the *telos* of all languages, it turns into unbreakable English, or the shrinking limits of linguistic difference and imagination. Today's lingua franca is *angla inconcussa*, an English unbreakable because it originates in the broken contract with its own “naturalness.” It is in this language that the funny difference between Continental and analytic philosophy was crafted, so that the annihilation of language's powers by the “continentals” may appear as child's play when contrasted to the analytics' massacre. Here the *subiectum* (the subject as a lawmaker and power dealer, the corporate self) is called upon to govern over the the daily tribulations of the *subiectus* (subject to the impositions of the outside) in each of its agents and everywhere else. All this must be said in English, the least muddy of them all, for the most demuddified. The problem one faces under the digital siege is that translation has become as transparent as the language it is supposed to reflect: *mother is Mutter is mère is mamma...* Poetry's currency is at an all-time low today; or, if we were sentimental and wanted to adopt Heidegger's slipshod ending of his “Question Concerning Technology” – that the essence of technics is *poiesis* – we should say that

the naturalness of poetry has been squeezed out the world by technics, that only a god can save us, etc. But why get weepy?

Avoid the work of tears! Say, with Nietzsche,¹ that natural language is essentially metaphorical and that the digital impositions of transparent, business-as-usual translation are castrated metaphors. That language should be understood otherwise to withstand its slaughter and turn the guillotine on its head.

To recommence: language is many things at once – it is Aristotle’s pharmacy and Stalin’s wooden tongue, Shakespeare’s waterfalls and Akhmatova’s moans, Pascal’s diamonds of fire and Mallarmé’s Book, Dan Brown’s redneck occult and Danielle Steel deflating adverbs, the Vienna Circle curfew imposed on the logos, Madame Murasaki’s petals, García Márquez’s Patriarch lazying around on two-page sentences, the Somali cabbie’s “thank you good night,” Bakhtin’s vowel movement – anthem, rather than anathema to the regions below the waistline, the deadlines of the accountant and the footnotes of the academic text, the absolute (lack of footnotes) of the Adamic tongue, and Benjamin’s languages of much and the echoes of language as such, the yes’s of Molly Bloom, the twenty-word lexicon of the drill sergeant... and so and so-so on. All of them, in bazaars as in boudoirs, fathom language as a battlefield. In a proper sense, translation happens in the crossfire.

To enter the crossfire, the distinction should be drawn between interstices and *superstices*, corresponding, but not entirely, to the distinction between the immanent and the transcendental. The interstice is that in-between that Deleuze called *l’entre*, wherefrom everything emerges (*on entre par l’entre*), where the virtual is never tricked into the real. Paul de Man once instructed Wolfgang Iser that reading is not a fill-in-the-blanks commotion: that reading doesn’t happen between the lines but between the ever expanding limits of each word, of each word of Proust, for one. This is the interstice, formed inside the elastic word as long as reading goes on. Picking on this, Stanley Corngold argued that comparative literature lies in that interstice, that every reading is trans-lingual, but that translation was the natural enemy of comparative literature. He was hinting to the (then not yet existing) Google translator, or if you will, to the KGB agent who was translating what the Soviet victims were saying into what they were supposed to say. But he was, maybe,

¹And Benjamin, Borges and de Man.

intimating that translation has a bad name because it has pushed readers away from reading fakes in the original language, and into preferring an imitated virtue over the original sin.

The *superstices*, on the other hand, are the buffer zones (Babel being the most celebrated and deplored) between natural languages and the transcendental powers – Gods, the specialist Holy Ghost, etc. – that are believed to have made language in their own image, likeness and disaster. Only half ironic, Benjamin had this to say at the close of his “The Task of the Translator. An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*”²:

“Where – like in the Holy Writ – a text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be “the true language” in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable. In such case translations are called for only because of the plurality of languages. Just as, in the original, language and revelation are one without any tension, so the translation must be one with the original in the form of the interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united. For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings.

The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation.” (TT 82)

Benjamin was a devotee of the ruined transcendental. To him, a translation that does not pursue the jagged line between the language of man and the language as such, relinquished from the fetters of weak messianism and vowed to prophecy up to the last gasp of the full citation on the Youngest Day, would let the translator fall prey to the madness of language:

²“Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (1923), translated by Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. New York: Schocken, 1968: 69-82. *Aufgabe*, which gets commonly translated as “task,” may also mean “problem” or “surrender”. The task of the translator is to solve the problem of surrendering, why not?

“Hölderlin’s translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence. Hölderlin’s translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.” (TT 81-82)

But so was *Phaedra* to Racine, where the heroine enters the scene in an already-post-mortem procession followed, like a comet by its tail, by the exhaustingly perfect language of the play’s five acts. To take this as a last will and testament makes no sense, unless legislation is to be stuck between life and death to gag the gaping echo chamber. However, extreme translation, like Hölderlin’s, comes with a danger to which he was most attentive.

Danger links temptation to redemption, the possible to the real, the feared and the hoped – dangerously. *Wo aber Gefahr ist, das rettende auch*, writes Hölderlin: “where danger lies, salvation (rescue...) lies, too.” After translating Sophocles, Hölderlin went on to live in an asylum; *Phaedra*’s intensity sent Racine to live on writing the king’s official biography. In acts of extreme translation, the superstices succumb to the interstices, for God’s transcendental stand is crushed in the immanence of the crossfire. The anagogy of reading turns into its own carnival, God converts to man’s word, and art’s violence reigns supreme, but only for a short while. This was Nietzsche’s youthful message when he announced that the coming two centuries will be aesthetic, “because only in aesthetic terms will everything be justified.” Extreme translation is as aesthetic as poetic creation, at least in their illuminated hopelessness – their only recourse is language: pure, playful, deadly language, to which all judgment is foreign and literal – the epitaph.

Freed from external acts of impression – and also from Derrida’s passive “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” – language as a battlefield is an image of thought in need of a further distinction: that between the classical ceaseless movement (of Trotsky’s revolution; of Peirce’s semiosis; of Augustine’s conversion), and the non-classical movements (Nietzsche’s eternal return, Bakhtin’s carnival, Benjamin’s language as

such, and Deleuze's fold). Classical continuity finds harmony in inertia, godliness in obsession, otherness in focus. Stuck to the sacredness of a mechanically conceived eternity, Augustine, the man of one language and two cities, adapted the theology of reading to the reading of theology to the point that *conversio*, or *distensio animi* could occur not once, but with every proper – or anagogic – tautological reading of the Holy Writ. On his own, Trotsky tried to impose to his 1917 cronies his view of the permanent (Bolshevik) revolution, as a movement of becoming whose closure was to never come. This tyranny of the dynamic, Faustic as it was, did not rhyme with the omnipotence of the Czar killed in 1918 or of the one emerging from the mid-20s on. This becoming devoid of competition led to catastrophe – again and again. The third case invoked here, is that of Peirce's unlimited semiosis, by whose rule signs accomplish themselves in other signs, and so on, without ever leaving the realm of the semiotic system. In all three cases, translation is undecided because the difference between the literal and the non-literal is erased there at the first sign thrown by a transcendental Same. Like any spoken-for universal, the classical ceaseless machines foreshadow their own end in farcical muteness.

The non-classical moves, on the other itchy hand, open a different realm for radical translation. Bakhtin's carnival, an incarnational figure of reversal, which could not be spelled out during the rough times he lived in, brought materiality back into cultural critique. Matter is resistance incarnate: not squeezing it out, but rather making room for its periodical returns, was Bakhtin's main theological point. The carnival was, then, not only the ritual return of matter, not only the renewal of the performing community, but also the rupturing of the inertia of rigid impression and violent expression characteristic of the established institutions of power, whether royal, churchly or mental. Translation occurs on the border between the carnival and its paler, sturdier environment.

Nietzsche's eternal return, whether taken as the return of nothingness to itself, or the generative machine of differences, or the essence of experience proper, takes tautology as destiny. The space of immanence thus created repels the rapacious moves of the transcendental with unparalleled force, and without appeal to memorial

retention: the eternal is the present as the *unzeitgemässig* essence of time. Translation here is prophecy – an intimation that will not be alien to Walter Benjamin. Prophecy is, though, a destined question of taste, as damned as my attraction to play

Deleuze's fold is, however, the more stimulating image when it comes to the image of translation in the crossfire. In his book on Leibniz, Deleuze puts the monads, along with the baroque villa, to the same test, as their inside and the outside do not communicate physically with each other. To dispense with the eventually futile opposition between inside and outside, Deleuze uses the fold as a figure of thought able to translate one into the other – mutually, and to find that discontinuities are continuous not like in a Mobius strip, but via a diagrammatic way of linking them. In the fold, translation is continuously interrupted, and is as necessary as wisdom is to blindness.

Let's return to Kant for a fated moment: Kant's distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental has been a bone of contention for the dogs of revolution and for their masters. With all his terminological contradictions, Kant distinguishes between the transcendent and the transcendental. Transcendent is the term used to describe those principles which 'profess to pass beyond' the limits of experience, as opposed to immanent principles 'whose application is confined entirely within the limits of possible experience' (*Pure Reason* A 296/B 352).³ Transcendent principles, 'which recognize no limits,' are to be distinguished from the transcendental employment of immanent principles beyond their proper limits. Such principles include the psychological, cosmological and theological ideas discussed in the 'Transcendental Dialectic.' Kant also described the 'objective employment of the pure concepts of reason' as 'transcendent', confusingly describing them as '*transcendental ideas*' (id. A 327/B 383). In *CJ* Kant distinguishes between aesthetic and rational ideas, with the former referred to intuition according to a 'merely subjective principle of the harmony of the cognitive faculties' and the latter referred according to an objective principle which is 'incapable of ever furnishing a cognition

³Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Trans. by Martin Kemp Smith (1929). With a new introduction by Howard Caygill. Houndmills & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

of the object' (CJ §57).⁴ The latter is transcendent, as opposed to the subjective principle of the aesthetic idea, and the immanent concept of the understanding. As in CPR, the rational ideas are produced by the reason and may be used regulatively in the search for the systematic unity of the understanding, or in a transcendent manner 'once reason advances beyond the pursuit of understanding' (*Critique of Judgment* §76); (see Caygill 399-400).⁵

To translate, impression is effected transcendently, while expression, its materiality, coarseness, bodiliness, freedom and abandonment, is transcendent. This equivalency needs more discussion, to be left for another occasion. "The mud that goes through the fingers" is the expressed, or the transcendent overcoming of the experience of impression. Unlike Bataille's generalization of Hegel's restricted economy, this take on the Kantian transcendent is not meant to complete, but to fold back the transcendent, so that its excesses will not be quenched by transcendental impositions. Otherwise put, the mutuality of the impressed and the expressed, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the product and the detritus resulting from its production. Such a return of the transcendent not as a transcendental force administered by middlemen – is radical translation. Radical translation is mutual transcendence. It is becoming other after having transcended the belief in the other.

Belief is self-grounding. It's grounded in my()self, as *subiectus* to it. It not only makes me believe that I have a self, but also that that self is essential to the existence of belief. Nietzsche was the right dog when it came to devouring belief. But then, beside his bet on life, there is belief. What I believe in, what's above me, grants me the sacrificial position that, in its self-justification, justifies my()self. Once justified, my()self needn't survive anymore: *c'est le moi sans l'être*. This self-securing neutrality is the anti-technics, the ground of both *subiectus* (subject to the law, the King, etc.) and *subiectum* (Descartes' unbreakable subject of knowledge or Robespierre's law-maker). This subsub, as blind to "itself" as the Goethean *Urmütter*, engenders subjects that drift across rhizomes and maps. That drift, that sliding move

⁴Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Trans by Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

⁵Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell (1995), 2000.

as unstoppable as Kant's aesthetic judgment, is called *translatio*. The *translatio* between *subiectus* and *subiectum*, between the subject to and the subject of language, is the ceaseless exercise that constitutes radical translation. *Translatio* represents the poetic foreignization of languages as historically established. As Rudolf Pannwitz, reverently quoted by Benjamin, put it:

“Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.” (Pannwitz in TT 80-81)

Extreme translation Hinduizes German, only to transcend the product into a German that never was, or maybe just passed unnoticed.

There are three kinds of responses to the foreignization such translations produce:

One:

“In the German tradition [potently marked by the reflexes acquired during the Romantic period], foreignizing strategies are intensely nationalistic, a fortification of the language against such forces as French cultural domination during the Napoleonic wars. Vossler recognizes that imperialism might be the dark underside of translation driven by a vernacular nationalism.” (Venuti 13)

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However, the Hebraicizing German attempted by the likes of Buber and Rosenzweig, and the “Ghetto rotting” of High German championed in Kafka's late

⁶Lawrence Venuti's Preface to *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti. London & New York: Routledge, 2000: 13.

writings play to a tune that has turned its origin upside down. Benjamin's calling for German's *Verfremdung* (though Brecht would become an essential influence on Benjamin well after the 1923 essay had been finished) hints at a complex imposition: that German translations must de-domesticate their rhetorically exoticizing Romantic notion of language alienation. And that through barbarous novelty.

Two: radical translations have the effect of transforming the "target" language into a minor one, like certain literary texts, which are heterogeneous in that they submit the major language to constant variation, delegitimization, and alienation. Such (translated) texts make up a minor literature, whose "authors are foreigners in their own tongue." (Deleuze&Guattari 105) ⁷

Three: radical translations are too easy to submit theoretically, yet too hard to exercise practically. When the 'too easy' becomes the ideological horizon that lightens the burden of practical translation, the superstice subjugates the interstice, the latter becoming the subiectus to the subiectum position in which the former installs itself. In this all too common instance, the poetic character of language and of extreme translation is ex-pressed as marginal, residual, even chaotic. It is in this sense that contemporary melticultural globalism is counter-poetic.

Extreme translation – the crossfire of mutual transcendence of subiectus and subiectum, of 'target' and 'source', and of interstices and superstices – does not partake of this globe submissive to technics and to its general equivalents.

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⁷Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987: 105.

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