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RECLAIMING RADICAL TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION: THE TRANSLATOR'S CHARITY

Abstract: The present essay addresses the ideas of *radical translation* and *radical interpretation* advanced by celebrated analytic philosophers such as W. V. O. Quine and D. Davidson, attempting to show their relevance for translation theory and, more broadly, for the corpus of literary theory. I aim to reassess the debate over the translatability or untranslatability of a literary or cultural text, taking it beyond the politics of translation and multicultural studies and placing it within the framework of hermeneutic theory. Here, one should take into account the specifier "radical" associated with "interpretation," which challenges the too rigid *interpretable/uninterpretable* dichotomy. The comparative reenactment of notions such as "untranslatability," "radical translation" and "radical interpretation" may lead to a mutual critique of their interpretative power and limits. I also reconsider the concept of "charity" in connection to the *translator as an interpreter*, in the context of Davidson's arguments on "radical interpretation." The rather dry rationale underlying a theory of truth and interpretation, as upheld by analytic philosophers, can gain in conceptual liveliness and even in literary relevance if one privileges an ethical/anthropological approach to the translator's "charity" towards his/her reader, as well as towards the delegated authority of the author.

Keywords: radical translation, radical interpretation, truth-for-the-alien, charity, apparatus, W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson

The Role of Conceptual Personae: James Joyce and the Radical Interpreter

In a highly acclaimed essay, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," philosopher Donald Davidson proves more inclined to write in an almost aestheticized, quasi-fictional manner than in the rather ascetic analytic tradition of logic-based theories of language and meaning-making. He adopts a fascinating rhetorical style that involves the use of person deixis (*we*, *us*), as if he were less interested to prove the truthfulness of his statements than eager to stir *our* empathy and *our* emotional and rational participation. Referring to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Davidson contends that the text reveals to us, its bewildered readers, the very origins of communication, as if our identity were hereby built anew, from scratch: "He [Joyce] puts us in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture, to assume the perspective of someone who is an alien or exile" (Davidson 1991, 11). The posture that Davidson confers to Joyce and, finally, the condition it claims *for us*, both his and Joyce's listeners/readers, is an unexpectedly distanced position, that of being mere *outcasts*:

> "As we, his listeners or readers, become familiar with the devices he has made us master, we find ourselves removed a certain distance from our own language, our usual selves, and our society. We join Joyce as outcasts, temporarily freed, or so it seems, from the nets of our language and our culture" (Davidson 1991, 11).

We are supposed, then, to "join" the novelist in this linguistic and anthropological type of adventure, as *radical translators* (to use Quine's notion, which inspired Davidson) and *radical interpreters*, by plunging into a totally *other* language and by facing our somewhat alien selves in the process. We are, thus, made to assume Joyce's linguistic *chaosmos*,[1] as Eco famously described it, as exiles or *outcasts*. Moreover, we are challenged to interpret *Finnegans Wake*'s linguistic and fictional alterity, whereby we can actually translate ourselves into an entirely new language and into a radically different worldview. This whole argumentative narrative about

[1] See, in this respect, Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, translated from the Italian by Ellen Esrock, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. For Eco, the possible worlds of Joyce's novels comprise their own poetics, and *Finnegans Wake* actually performs and accomplishes a "continuous poetics of itself." (p. 62).

how we are "temporarily freed" needs further analysis, which I will resume a little later.

If one were to reassess the consequences of Donald Davidson's analytic philosophy of language for both literary theory and translation studies, one might assume the ironical stance of dwelling on the innumerable footnotes in other interpreters' glosses over the topic rather than commit to a fully argumentative text of their own. However, a few decades ago, the theses of American analytic philosophers, with their propensity for logic and scientific grounds, had only fragile echoes in the field of literary studies. Thus, up until the late 1980s, Austin and Wittgenstein had been quoted within the field of literary theory, but mainly with their less "technical" philosophical approaches. In his turn, Richard Rorty was usually praised for his contention that philosophy is to be seen more "as a kind of writing" (to quote the title of his essay on Derrida from 1978) than as a consistently logical search for truth.

The core of contemporary literary studies is still, to a certain extent, obviously influenced by Continental thinking and especially by Derridean deconstruction. In this context, the relevance of such accurately analytic philosophers as Davidson and Quine for literary discourse is difficult to reassess, since their applicability within the field might seems rather limited. Richard Rorty, whose own philosophical discourse deploys a narrative and rhetorical mode of writing, as well as an ironist's vocabulary, has revealed how Davidson's ideas on language and meaning accommodated some of the challenges posed by literary interpretation. An entire volume has been dedicated to the wave of *Literary Theory after Davidson* (edited by Reed Way Dasenbrock 1993), in which literary theorists explore the dense web of Donald Davidson's philosophical propositions so as to forge hermeneutical keys for their own critical approaches and aesthetic standpoints. On the other hand, according to Kalle Puolakka, another subtle commentator of Davidson's philosophy, over the past few years

> "there has been a growing interest in investigating the ways in which some fundamental elements of Davidson's philosophical views overlap with those that are at the heart of hermeneutics, particularly Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics." (Puolakka 2011, 8).

However, Gadamerian hermeneutics is only one of the Continental theories and philosophical methodologies that can be associated with Davidson's theses, as the divide between analytic and Continental traditions of thought has indeed started to be bridged.

Several concepts advanced by Davidson, such as his celebrated formula "radical interpretation," echoing W. V. Quine's equally powerful notion of "radical translation,"[2] the complementary syntagm "jungle linguist," and his "principle of charity," could rightly be seen as theoretical landmarks in the process of translating or interpreting the words and the nonverbal performance of the cultural and linguistic *Other*. *Translation qua interpretation* seems to imply not only a linguistic, but also a cultural and an anthropological transgression. Davidson's assertions on meaning and interpretation can actually be "translated" into a type of vocabulary familiar to the Continental body of philosophy and cultural theory, in such a way as to maintain their accurately analytic inflexions and argumentative power. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari's *conceptual personae* could be considered a sufficiently generous notion to accommodate both the process of radical interpretation and its agents, the radical translators or interpreters, since

> "for their part, conceptual personae are philosophical sensibilia, the perceptions and affections of fragmentary concepts themselves: through them concepts are not only thought but perceived and felt" (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 131).

[2] The following excerpt is relevant for Quine's theory of "radical translation," based on the notion of the indeterminacy of translation (and also the inscrutability of reference): "We saw in our consideration of radical translation that an alien language may well fail to share, by any universal standard, the object-positing pattern of our own; and now our supposititious opponent is simply standing, however legalistically, on his alien rights. We remain free as always to project analytical hypotheses and translate his sentences into canonical notation as seems most reasonable; but he is no more bound by our conclusions than the native by the field linguist's." See Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word & Object* (1960), new edition, foreword by Patricia Smith Churchland, preface to the new edition by Dagfinn Føllesdal, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013, p. 224.

If we are to give in to the temptation to deterritorialize and to reterritorialize some of the concepts of analytic philosophy, so as to have them mirrored by a few notions of Continental theory, then several terms deserve being invoked, as far as Davidson's theory of interpretation is concerned. Besides Deleuze and Guattari's *conceptual personae*, I also resort to their term *deterritorialization*, from *L'anti-Oedipe/Anti-Oedipus* (1972), which can be called upon as a rather loose method of comparing, displacing, negotiating meanings and of reappropriating diverse entities, *topoi* and conceptual nuances within the heterogeneous fabric of today's cultural analysis. Another term that could reflect and explain some of Davidson's sentences on the literary discourse of Joyce is a commonplace obsession of anthropology, *otherness* and *alterity*, and, last but not least, the interdisciplinary, all-pervasive notion of *performativity* – understood here as the action of performing linguistic and anthropological interpretation/translation. But the possible equivalent "translations" of Davidson's theory on "truth" in interpretation are not limited to these notions, since others also symptomatically come to mind in this context: let us reconsider the term "dispositif," or "apparatus," as used by Foucault and revalued by Giorgio Agamben. According to Agamben's interpretation of "un dispositivo," language itself is "perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses." (Agamben 2009, 14).

The apparatus of language, for instance, like any type of "dispositif", produces its own "processes of subjectivation," if we follow Agamben's argument. Thus, in trying to read and "translate" Davidson's own statement about radical interpretation through the subjectivation of the interpreter, the specifier "radical" is all the more powerful, since it alludes to an almost irreducible gap in communication and translation, as well as to a sort of de-subjectivation. At this point, in order to name the rupture between self-identity and the position of interpreting radical otherness (as it is to be found in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*), Davidson introduces, in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, "the alien," as yet another key character, or as a *conceptual persona* of sorts:

> "What he must do is find out, however he can, what sentences the alien holds true in his own tongue (or better, to what degree he holds them true). The linguist then will attempt to construct a characterization of *truth-for-the-alien* which yields, so far as possible, a mapping of sentences held true (or false) by the alien on to sentences held true (or false) by the linguist. Supposing no perfect fit is found, the residue of sentences held true translated by sentences held false (and vice versa) is the margin for error (foreign or domestic)." (Davidson 2001, 26)

There are at least two threads of his rich argument about the "truth-for-the-alien"[3] that deserve a deeper exploration. One is the apparent presence of the interpreter and of the speaker in the same time and place, the *presentness* and immediacy of their flux of shared experience. Once we accept, beginning with the turning point of "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," that Joyce "takes us back to the foundations and origins of communication," this privileged and somehow strange situation we are driven into becomes a particular experience in between, say, *Joyce and us*, evincing a back-and-forth dynamics or a feedback loop of mutual exile and self-distancing. Hence, this is first and foremost an experience lived by *us*, one that belongs to us, the readers and interpreters of his literary and linguistic alterity and of our own remote position towards our old, "usual selves." A whole narrative about this adventure gains shape, based on the anthropological experience of becoming another self, almost an alien one, which might be called a *self-for-the-other*. It is an act of interpreting the other and oneself altogether, a process that is pervaded by a certain degree of verbal and nonverbal performativity. On the other hand, the already mentioned conceptual construction that Davidson calls "truth-for-the-alien" is to be reached, as he contends, due to a "principle of charity." This notion implies such a dense knot of

[3] The alien character of the linguist was also highlighted by Quine. It is to be understood in connection with his theory on the indeterminacy of translation and with his notion of ontological relativity. As Roger F. Gibson points out, Quine's thesis "is not that successful translation is impossible, but that it is multiply possible. The philosophical moral of indeterminacy of translation is that propositions, thought of as objectively valid translation relations between sentences, are simply non-existent." See Roger F. Gibson. "Chapter 29: Quine," in Robert L. Arrington, ed. *The World's Great Philosophers*, Malden & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 258.

conceptual nuances that it cannot be easily grasped by analytic and semantic approaches alone.

Introducing Charity. Translation beyond Meaning and Belief

The idea that radical translation and radical interpretation require the acceptance of a "principle of charity" is actually what makes Davidson's arguments go beyond a truth-semantics, as well as beyond a philosophy of language. Once the interpreter is seemingly endowed with "charity," radical interpretation comes to be associated with different other theoretical stances: a hermeneutic theory, an ethical theory, and an anthropological approach on the intelligibility of the other, on his/her more than linguistic, I would say, otherness. Such an otherness encompasses the web of alien, estranged beliefs and meanings, be they individual or communal. All of these are nevertheless embedded into an aesthetic, perceptual perspective on the speech of the other. Both the speaker and the interpreter perform linguistic statements and have reversible authority positions in relation to one another. In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," for instance, an essay from 1986, the posture of the speaker and his/her expectations from the part of the interpreter are as important as the capacity of the hearer to "translate" his/her utterances. A speaker, then, is supposed to "have the interpreter in mind," since "there is no such thing as how we expect, in the abstract, to be interpreted" (Davidson 1986, 170). Moreover, in his book *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, the philosopher argues for a specific "requirement of learnability [of a language], interpretability" (Davidson 2001, 28), which conveys the social factor of the encounter, on the basis of a shared intelligible agreement. Such a requirement is what enables the interpreter to avoid "Humpty Dumpty" meanings, e.g. those utterances that, as in the case of Lewis Carroll's character Humpty Dumpty from *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, mean, whatever he intends them to, without taking into account Alice's own intentions to "read" his mind. Humpty symptomatically pretends that "glory" would

mean "a nice knockdown argument," and no wonder that his extravagant verdict leaves Alice quite bewildered.

Still, interpretability is intrinsic to the principle of charity, which "prompts the interpreter to maximize the intelligibility of the speaker, not sameness of belief" (Davidson 2001, XIX) and opens up the hermeneutic stance towards an ethical theory. The interpreter comes to acknowledge, in the proximity of the translatable text or speech, the set of values and beliefs of the other. To perform charity towards the meanings and the *self-consistency* of the other can be a paradoxical task for the radical *translator as interpreter*:

> "Charity in interpreting the words and thoughts of others is unavoidable in another direction as well: just as we must maximize agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about, so we must maximize the self-consistency we attribute to him, on pain of not understanding *him*" (Davidson 2011, 26).

In fact, the act of charity has a clearly performative nature, as it is continuously related to the conditions of speech, to an act of speech *in praesentia*, happening between the interpreter and the speaker. In other words, charity demands, in order to be activated, the performance of speech and its interpretation, the *presentness* of an act of interpretation and translation, say, from one's own *idiolect* to another's singular, apparently irreducible mode of speaking a language.[4] In fact, charitable

[4] Literary theorist Gerald L. Bruns has taken on the task of demonstrating that Davidson's philosophy of language is convergent with Continental thinking and with the literary turn in philosophical discourse. He discusses the conditions which allow two languages to displace each other, so the principles of radical interpretation and of charity are necessarily invoked: "It might seem an open question as to whether any two natural human ('earthly') languages meet the standard of mutual alienation that the word 'radical' is meant to suggest, but Davidson thinks that because we speakers of the same language each have our own unique way of speaking it (each our own idiolect, each evidently his or her rich repertoire of such things), we are sufficiently alien to one another for the principles of radical interpretation (e. g., the principle of charity) still to apply." See Gerald L. Bruns, "Donald Davidson among the Outcasts," in *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy. Language, Literature, and Ethical Theory*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999, p. 42.

interpretation could be considered to presuppose an acknowledgement of the other's access to a certain level of belief and meaning altogether, which goes beyond our ability to understand and translate this level of *otherness* for ourselves. Commenting on Quine's notion of radical translation, Davidson concludes that we are actually not able to know what the speaker means unless we know what he believes, and vice versa: we have to know what someone believes in order to we know what he means. And he immediately adds a statement about the benefices of charity being embedded in *radical interpretation*:

> "In radical interpretation we are able to break into this circle, if only incompletely, because we can sometimes tell that a person accedes to a sentence we do not understand." (Davidson 2001, 26)

This position might involve a sort of hermeneutic self-restraint upon ourselves as interpreters, since we are willing to accept that "a person accedes to a sentence we do not understand..." It is as if we, the interpreters, remain within the boundaries of an under-interpretation, instead of running the risk of over-interpreting otherness. Then, our *charity* is expected to reveal the borders of what is apparently *untranslatable*, mostly in the sense of *uninterpretable*, or rather of what cannot be exposed to us in view of being interpreted. In other words, it brings forth a knot of meaning and belief which is not to be grasped by cognition, but merely acknowledged by a certain understanding of the relativity of truth conditions. Performing charity in interpretation calls for the duality *truth-for-the-alien*/ *truth-for-oneself*. And maybe this paradoxically charitable and radical interpretation also calls for an implied third party and for an educated openness to translation, due to the conscience of being on a linguistic and cultural threshold.

Being on the threshold between two different meanings and truths and having to accept their mutual alienation and their mutual act of charity means "break[ing] the circle" and emphasizing the "self-consistency" of the other, while accepting

his/her access to sentences and contents that are not always transparent for us. Reading the other from the liminal position of outcasts, as made exemplary by Joyce's language, entails following him into a "world of verbal exile."[5]

Beyond the dual assessment of what is translatable and interpretable, on the one hand, and what otherwise seems untranslatable or alien to us, the role of the translator as interpreter undergoes a certain relativization, as it is not based on a claim of power and authority, but grounded in the very principle of charity. The term "radical" itself is set under critical scrutiny and somehow relativized through "charity." To abide by a principle of charity is to always question, from the point of view of the interpreter/reader/listener, the conditions of translatability of cultural identities, ideas and discourses. Translation seen as performance of charity probably contains a key to how one could engage in a hermeneutic experience, as well as in an anthropological rite of passage. To act charitably towards the inhabitant of a distanced cultural community means realizing that his or her presumably untranslatable words and notions – in fact, those "truths-of-the-alien" – operate beyond their discursive status and that they pertain to the communal traditional beliefs, as well as to the web of aesthetic energies which pervade them.

A "Dispositif" for the Translator/Interpreter: the "Passing Theory"

The reader of Davidson's text on interpretation can promptly associate his idea of charity with some of the claims of European moral philosophy, namely with the ethics of responsibility towards alterity, formulated by Emmanuel Lévinas. Still, I prefer to invoke another concept derived from the Continental body of thinking, in order to pass as through a more familiar filter Davidson's theories: "le dispositif" (Michel Foucault), or apparatus, which I have briefly mentioned in the beginning of this essay, a concept that I would adopt, albeit in light of its reinterpretation by Giorgio Agamben. Thus, it is not so much disciplinary or power-oriented "dispositifs",

[5] The verbal exile that Joyce provokes, through the displacement of familiar languages, is once again a metonymy for the process defined by Davidson as radical interpretation: "...Joyce provokes the reader into involuntary collaboration, and enlists him as a member of his private linguistic community. Coopted into Joyce's world of verbal exile, we are forced to share in the annihilation of old meanings and the creation – not really *ex nihilo*, but on the basis of our stock of common lore – of a new language". See "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," in *Philosophy and the Arts*, p. 11.

as understood by Foucault, which would be of interest here, as a certain instance that Agamben[6] metaphorically defines as follows: "At the root of each apparatus lies an all-too-human desire for happiness. The capture and subjectification of this desire in a separate sphere constitutes the specific power of the apparatus" (Agamben 2009, 17). Representing a strategic device, an institution, a power system, the whole canvas of social discourses, or the network of language of culture, the "dispositif" is seen in its capacity to capture "all-too-human" desires and, therefore, to provoke processes of either subjectification or "desubjectification."[7]

However skeptical and critical Agamben might seem towards "dispositifs", when he states that emancipated subjects result from the fight between living beings and apparatuses, one could argue that his own conceptual scheme qualifies as just another philosophical apparatus. In Davidson's analytic philosophy of language, there is one particular syntagm, i.e. the "passing theory," which comprises a set of very intriguing arguments about cultural and linguistic translation and interpretation, understood as a non-obstructive and even emancipatory type of apparatus. As compared to the interpreter's "prior theory," which refers to his expectations about what a certain speaker means by his/her utterances, a "passing theory," by contrast, "is not a theory of what anyone (except perhaps a philosopher) would call an actual natural language" (Davidson 1986, 169). He adds a few more

[6] Here is a significant part of Agamben's all-encompassing definition of apparatus: "...I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and--why not--language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses-one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face." See Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?," in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 14.

[7] Agamben refers here to a disciplinary society, as conceived by Foucault, in which the apparently "free" identity belongs to subjects caught up "in the very process of their desubjectification." See Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?" p. 20.

clarifying sentences about the processual, performative, practice-based and non-conventional nature of the *passing theory*:

> "'Mastery' of such a language would be useless, since knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion. Nor could such a language, if we want to call it that, be said to have been learned, or to be governed by conventions" (Davidson 1986, 169).

Davidson's surprising option for the free practice of speech and for the continuous revision of prior theories and linguistic regulations, for acknowledging the particularities and the context of every singular utterance, creates a sort of flexible "dispositif" of interpretation. Understanding and communication between a speaker and an interpreter or hearer should not be based solely on linguistic conventions and rules: they should also rely on the clues given by speakers to interpreters, on the convergence between their intelligible ways of uttering true sentences, and on the plausible "passing theory" improvised by the receiver. The passing theory is therefore situated beyond power positions and it is clearly open to the "principle of charity." Literary theorist Gerald L. Bruns argues that, "instead of multiplying languages, Babel-like, Davidson buries the idea of language in the everyday, second-to-second practice of constructing passing theories." (Bruns 1999, 51).

The question of translatability and that of mutual interpretability are linked, for Donald Davison, with an adaptable, performative apparatus for everyday speech, which conveys "the ability to converge on passing theories from utterance to utterance." (Davidson 1986, 172-173). His dynamic – philosophical and communicational – "passing" "dispositif" exposes several *conceptual personae*, such as the radical interpreter or Joyce himself, who is regarded as a metonymical master figure that makes us feel estranged, for a while, from our own language and from "our usual selves." And this is exactly "the perspective of someone who is an alien or exile," a paradoxically charitable posture. Since we have no other choice but to "join Joyce as

outcasts," this means both a hermeneutic and an ethical stance, which he acts out in front of *us* and for *us*.

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