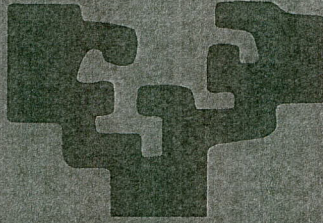


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THE POETICS OF TRANSLATION AND ALTERITY

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“La visée même de la traduction - ouvrir au niveau de l'écrit un certain rapport à l'Autre, féconder le Propre par la médiation de l'Etranger - heurte de front la structure ethnocentrique de toute culture, ou cette espèce de narcissisme qui fait que toute société voudrait être un Tout pur et non mélangé”.

Antoine Berman⁽¹⁾.

Translation has always been the subject-matter of analysis, practices, theories and has therefore called for the creation of a proper science. This is the case particularly in modern and postmodern times, in this metaphysical, humanistic and anthropological age which marks a limit, the end of the modern era, beyond which there is nothing but uncertainty. The science of translation is regarded as part of a dominating linguistic theory. According to the different schools, priority is given either to the language *source*, to the language *cible**, to the *prius* relation between the two or to the translator; yet, the question has not to be severed from the action of translating and from the linguistic concept of language, that is from metaphysics.

There is an indissoluble relationship between the method of translation and the reconstruction of the history of translation. Four main trends can be made out: the empiricism in translation that is the refusal, in a certain sense, of theorization (starting from St. Jerome); the phenomenology of translation (as in *After Babel* by G. Steiner); the linguistics of translation (in semiotics); the poetics of translation (from the earliest works of H. Meschonnic) which rests, so to say, on the following analogy: since there is the poetics of the work there must be the poetics of translation. This brings about the need to understand what makes a work in terms of the work. In other words the poetics acts as a criticism of the translation putting the translation itself at the centre of the discussion on language without presenting itself as a linguistic theory.

The word translation hides a multiplicity of elements taken from linguistics, philosophy, theology, sociopolitics, philology, semiotics and psychoanalysis. These inclusions are nothing but the various aspects of the inevitable couples which have always marked Western thought: form/content, soma/sema,

name/thing, Hebrew root/Greek root, individual/society, nominalism/realism, conscious/unconscious. All these paradigms work according to the dualism of the sign and their effect opposes the formal equivalence to the dynamic equivalence, the significance to the significant.

The sign has undoubtedly strength which comes from the coherence of its paradigms in the different fields, and weakness in that it conceals poetry to the thought. In a certain sense, the sign enables us to think and, at the same time, prevents us from thinking what it hides. The language is the thought of the language.

In the last thirty years, structuralism and semiotics have given absolute priority to the sign and literature has been dominated by a technical thought. Because of this trend which, however, has produced masterpieces (such as Jakobson's work), the very criteria of the aesthetic value of a poem cannot be thought. The beauty of a poem cannot be told. And that is the very essence of poetry. To deny it means to mystify the truth. In the hermeneutic tradition the sign produces a perverse effect since it is considered essential. What counts the most is the way to signify.

Attempts to go beyond are to be found in post-heideggerian hermeneutics which, straying from a logico-linguistic neopositivistic perspective and from an ontotheological vision, do not consider the language either as a system of signs or as an original idiom. Language is, of course, communication but this is not its main characteristic. The heideggerian philosophy finds that the hidden essence of languages is not the referent but the place where the essence reveals its presence by veiling itself. Though Heidegger had not studied the problem of translation in detail, he dealt with it several times and, as the philosopher himself suggests, both theoretically and practically, the question of translating is indissolubly linked to language, interpretation and tradition. The problem of translating remains an open question although the theories and practices are innumerable. It hides a movement towards something which is left to think.

Translating contains a many-sided notion which reflects an undefined range of behaviours and meets a series of motives. The translation is similar to the palimpsest: by removing the different layers we can find what the translator has unconsciously left on the paper: his theory of the text and of the language. The translation cannot therefore be separated from its historical context, from its relationship with a poetics, from the very action of translating.

By translating one translates oneself. Yet participation and congeniality are not enough to define the translation. A gap remains, a gap which is filled by love, love for the language.

Using this as a background, translating does not mean moving from one language to another but approaching the language seen as an event, as the place of origin where languages are melted. What shows up is translated in the different languages and thus in the two languages involved in the action of translating.

Each language belongs to itself and to the other languages. The translator is aware of what is beyond the language and of what is before the language: beyond the usual language, the language which coincides with itself, the "beyond" which cannot be identified either with a structural referent or with a referring referent and not even with what Derrida calls a "*différance*"⁽²⁾. It is clear that once we have passed through the referent we enter the difference which, according to Heidegger, is not an endless deferment but a differentiation of the way in which the language is conveyed.

The language does not speak with our words or with the words of the different languages; its silent message of the being is the echo of the silence which makes it possible to translate into words. To translate what is silent means translating what cannot be translated. The impossibility of translating is not to be confused with what originated the poetics of the ineffable. There is no allusion to any aesthetics or phenomenology of silence. The untranslatable is not what cannot be translated but what is continuously translated hinting at the original message which is at the basis of translating.

Therefore, translating is the translation of the silent message of the being starting from which the words translate: our words are given back their message. Translating is moving towards the language considered not as a reference but as a gift, "le don des langues"⁽³⁾ as Jean Paulhan would say. The translator is the receiver who recognizes the gift. Before comes the silent listening to what is given. It is, in fact, the very act of giving which enables him to listen as if it was a double way: the call of the language and the recognition of the call. The listening to what is said and receded at the same time and its essence made audible in human words.

The history of Western metaphysics is made of a series of successive and different translations; we could even say that the history of the nature of being is a history of translations in the ontological sense, not in the historicist sense. The translator translates what has already been translated. What do we translate? The nature of being, the essence which translates itself, not the essence translated by man. Then, what is human translation? It is the translation of the essence which translates itself. It is the translation which remembers and obeys. Otherwise, the translation based on the assumption that what is translated is not self-translated is tautological and represents the supreme coincidence of translator and translation, the self-formulation of the translation, in other words, the condition of mutual availability of man and technology. Everything can be translated following what can be called the technical pentecost, not because everything is already translated, but because everything is there to be translated, even if not from its self-translation, that is, from the language. The language undoubtedly translates itself into the different translations and these translations into the different and successive languages. There is nothing original, there are only commencements; the origin is hidden and its mysterious, emblematic nature is brought to

light every time. The text extends beyond itself, re-writes itself. The translator is constrained by the translation, already formulated in the language of origin, which becomes clear.

If the translation of the language is considered as the translation of the same into the different, the mutual translatableness of languages is due to the hidden presence of the language rather than to their capability of mutually translating themselves. This means that also the languages belong together to the "same" in that they are translations of the translation of the language. Otherwise, it would not be possible to escape the circle of the perfect translatableness and the absolute untranslatableness. The "same", once translated, is what is set aside and makes it possible to translate.

Language is considered in two ways: as a device of communication or as a conveyor of sense. The language, however, preserves something which is not said and that the metaphysical idea, from Plato onwards, has forgotten. It is precisely this forgetfulness that reminds us of what has not been thought.

In the Western tradition, the translation has always tended towards the naturalization of the foreign work, towards a reduction of its alterity in order to better integrate it into a culture other than its own culture. It has, therefore, tended to adapt the foreign work, subjecting it to social and cultural imperatives which privileged the receiver of the translated work. Each translation cannot be separated from the culture, the ideology, the literature of a given society in a precise historical context.

Besides its ethnocentric character, the Western translation has always been characterized by the typical metaphysical feature which separates the idea from the form, the sensible and the supersensible. Following heideggerian thought, translating means to set out for something which is more original. It means to put the question of language and therefore of translating in another perspective. This, however, does not involve founding another linguistic doctrine but going over the history of Western thought, that is of metaphysics, up to the origins.

The essence, in a metaphysical sense, is the rationality of the nature of the being: the *logos*, the reason of what is. The language has always been considered as an instrument of the thought, a sort of container to be filled with sense, a device; an instrument to signify used to represent concepts or a dual pragmatics. This is the reason why the translation cannot be seen only in its relationship with the concepts of the language. Translation can really work as a critique of linguistic theories, of their more prestigious and risky activity: a critique of the sign, of the opposition prose/poetry, written expression/oral expression.

Language is not a *tertium dialectum* between the idea and the thing; it reflects the structure of call and correspondence. The language does not represent a world which shows up; it represents, on the contrary, something which proceeds from itself, not from man or from a superior being. We could even say

that the world is an expressing display and a displaying expression at the same time. The translator returns to the world its inhuman expression in human words.

Considering the interference of the other in the language, translators have opposing attitudes which can be identified following two poles completely apart, which Starobinski refers to as, on the one hand, "translation-naturalization" and, on the other hand, "translation-alienation". According to the first attitude the main purpose is the communicability to which tend the translating practices Berman defines as ethnocentric: "Ethnocentrique signifiera ici: qui ramène tout à sa propre culture, à ses normes et valeurs, et considère ce qui est situé en dehors de celle-ci - L'Étranger - comme négatif ou tout juste bon à être annexé, adapté, pour accroître la richesse de cette culture"⁽⁴⁾. According to the second attitude translation privileges the maintenance of the inexorable otherness of the work. A classic example is the *King James Version* of the Bible (1611) that Julien Green comments on as follows: "Les traducteurs de la Bible anglaise, quand ils furent confrontés avec de telles expressions, firent de leur mieux pour les rendre en anglais aussi littéralement que possible. Ils étaient si imprégnés de la couleur de chaque mot des Écritures à s'habiller à l'anglaise, de peur que l'anglais ne trahisse l'esprit de l'originel. Peut-être pourrais-je mieux me faire comprendre en attirant l'attention sur ce qui s'est passé avec la Bible française du XVII^e siècle. Cette traduction était d'une approche différente. Pour le traducteur français, il s'agissait de transformer un livre de l'Orient en livre français afin que les Français pussent le comprendre. Ce principe semblait assez juste à cette époque, et pour n'importe quel livre autre que la Bible c'eût été bien. Le résultat fut que là où la Bible anglaise employait le bon vieux mot "ventre", la Bible française traduisait par "coeur", parce que ça faisait plus convenable!"⁽⁵⁾.

A lot of famous examples can be found: from Chateaubriand, translator of Milton, to Mallarmé and contemporary poets. Here the translation looks like a re-writing in which the original language undergoes a "shock" caused by the aggression of the foreign language. Yet this shock turns out to be a decisive factor, a factor which enriches and renews the translating languages. Quoting C. Rabin, Mechonnic writes: "La traduction révèle les possibilités cachées d'une langue"⁽⁶⁾. According to a purist logic, the influence the original language has on the translating language is often considered as a sort of contamination, a host of doubtful interferences between the language of the text *source* and the language of the text *cible*.

Translating leads to mutual recognition, following the rules of alterity and the structure of call and correspondence, in that the recognition of alterity, in its being other, requires mutual re-cognition. To a large extent the history of translation is marked by the prevalence of identity on alterity. With Walter Benjamin we come to a turning point. In modern translation, in this passage from colonization to decolonization, alterity is not simply something that is juxtaposed to identity. The translation falls within the order of the endless, not of the entirety.

Translation implies a certain risk, a bewildering experience which can be eluded by translating *in securitas*, sheltered in the shadow of the original language or abandoning oneself completely to the foreign language. The term trial evokes the *agon*, the exhausting struggle between the translator and the author, a rivalry between the languages, a fight between words, a trial of strength which takes place within the boundaries of one's own country and that of the foreigner. Here, on the contrary, the double trial to which - clearly alluding to the title of a famous work by Antoine Berman and going even beyond it - we will refer as the trial of the foreigner and of one's own implies the renunciation of any abuse of power, a less rigid idea of possession, a more open attitude.

This trial entails the radical experience of the groundlessness of possession. The trial of the foreigner, of the other, of the unfamiliar - to Hölderlin, translator of Sophocles, Greece. What is far cannot be thought as close to us, the foreigner cannot be suited to us, cannot be identified with us yet we cannot even suit to the other, renounce our identity which enables us to recognize the other. This requires a further, more difficult trial: the trial of what is one's own by experiencing the impossibility of suiting the other to us: the native does not belong to us.

To translate oneself in the other language in its being other does not mean that one has to translate, for instance, the Italian *sense* of French, but it means to translate oneself into French in French. The usual movement of translation is reversed and turns into an ethymological movement: the translation of Italian into French and the translation of French into Italian which is already translated into French. The dual movement does not follow a one way route, though priority is given to the call. What is the task of the translator? He has to answer the call which is not formulated in French as such, but in the real hidden essence of French that is the language. French is not privileged in that it contains the significance, but only because of its place in the initial hierarchy of the process.

Through the double trial, which is simultaneous, the translator approaches the language; he finds again his own country not because after exile we come back to what belongs to us, but because we go where we belong by virtue of the gift of the language and not by choice or imposition. We belong to our own country because we recognize its inviolability. Thus "what is our own" is not to be seen as something "possessed" but as "something which is given". In other words the native, to which refers the return of the translator, is the unity of one's own and the other and this unity is neither a language, nor a language of Eden and not even a cybernetic superlanguage. It is the language given back to itself from which the languages considered in their own identity and as a whole, in their unity, draw the common gift.

The translator can therefore be considered as similar to someone who feels his homeland in exile: neither settlement nor endless wandering. The translation will have to return to the translated work, its inmost as well as its farthest feature.

Between the world and the language there is harmony as well as tension, which together form the place of the expression: the abyss of the language, the un-comprehensible event that makes the words audible. The translation can lead us to the discovery of this place, to the impenetrability and deepness of its sense because the essence becomes event, maintaining its character of absence.

However, it is up to the translator to make the original voice echo in the language, in the space of re-writing or, according to Meschonnic, in the “écriture d’une lecture-écriture”⁽⁷⁾. This implies an hermeneutics of listening. Listening is not only an adaptation to the text, not even a conjecture of its content, but it is the ability to make it audible in his own language of translator, the silent message of the being which, with its rhythm, inevitably precedes it. The rhythm cannot be reduced to the sign, but on it depends the expression of the significance. Left apart a conception which, from Plato onwards, defines it as a metric or a scansion of strong and weak tempos, rhythm is the situation of the sense, the unity of the work or, according to Meschonnic, an “adaptation du continu empirique du langage au discontinu du signe”⁽⁸⁾.

It has been said that the interpreter listens to the echo of what is contained in the silent message of the being as a reserve. The endlessness of the written expression lasts in its silence, but it is the language made language that has to ensure its completeness.

The interpreter-translator (in the musical sense of performer) listens to the other, the speaking work. The idea of the language considered only as an instrument of significance of a referent conceals the distinction between saying and talking, where talking, the human faculty, is a way of corresponding to the silent message of being.

Since the language plays a central role, reality and thought cannot be expressed without it; in this age of philosophic change and of supremacy of the language, we have to find again the silence, not as an antithesis to rhetoric but as part of the same. We must not give the primacy to silence or, on the contrary, render it mute, but we have to give a different sense to the relationship silence-language in the experience of translation as a way of interpretation.

Marking the beginning and the end of the word, the silence indicates what is still to be said.

In the *epochè* of technology, a radical thought maintains that philosophy has died - exactly as Hegel said that art was no longer useful - or in the sense that it has become weaker, through a period of decadence. The end of the metaphysical thought, which has not ceased to end, may represent its accomplishment, therefore its conclusion, in technology. If this was the case an inexorable and decisive task would have to be carried out: to think the technology. Translation does not escape this “fate” which, moreover, puts the language at the centre of each *epistème*. It is a difficult task as it forces us to think the technology, to think the

question of translation not only in terms of technology or of science (a distinction between these two fields is almost impossible).

Translation and philosophy have grown together; in Greece from the beginning ("Greek, as Quasimodo said, is the memory of our words"⁽¹⁰⁾) the question on the essence has always been linked to the translation of the essence into *logos*, as the question of the foundation and of the values of things, men and the world.

Perhaps we are facing technology as the tragic faces the fate. We could be persuaded by hindsight, by irony: the border between the thinkable and the unthinkable, that understanding of the world, of technology, of pain. Technology, revealing its ambiguity - tragic perspective or great promise between the philosophic worlds - seems to be a sign of the dissolution of foundations, values, metaphysical justifications of the essence and, at the same time, acceptance of the unknown, opening of an unknowable horizon still uncertain and risky but which undoubtedly cannot be eluded. Translation, considered as experimental poetics, turns out to be also poetical critic forcing the translator to formulate again and to give a new significance to the very action of translating.

NOTES

* For the *ciblistes*, the crucial point is that the significance of the word or of the text of an author-source arrives at the language-cible; while the *sourciers* give priority to the significant of the language of the text-source. The theorization of the opposition between *sourciers* and *ciblistes* is widely dealt with in JEAN-RENE' LADMIRAL, *Sourciers et ciblistes* ("Revue d'esthétique" (1986), nouvelle série, n° 12, pp. 33-42). Ladmiral maintains that it is the language-cible, our native language, which produces, from its own native resources, the extraneousness peculiar to all literatures. "Dans cet esprit, l'étranger dans la langue, ce peut être l'étrange, l'insolite dans la littérature. Plus essentiellement, je serais tenté de dire que c'est la littérature elle-même qui apporte 'l'étranger dans la langue', en un (quatrième) sens où l'écrivain est un logothète qui donne 'un sens pur aux mots de la tribu' "(JEAN-RENE' LADMIRAL (1991), "La langue violée?" "Palimpsestes", n° 6, p. 25.) Another aspect of the opposition between *sourciers* and *ciblistes* is the distinction between "formal equivalence and "dynamic equivalence" in EUGENE NIDA (1965), *Science of Translating*, Leyde, E. Brill, p. 159.

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