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With an introduction by
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On
Translation

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You will allow me to express my gratitude to the DVA Foundation¹ in Stuttgart for inviting me to be one of the contributors at the presentation of the 1996 Franco-German Translation Prize. You agreed that I give the title ‘Translation as challenge and source of happiness’ to these few remarks.

Indeed, I would like to place my remarks, dedicated to translation’s great difficulties and small delights, under the aegis of the title *The Test of the Foreign*,² which the late lamented Antoine Berman gave to his remarkable essay subtitled *Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*.

First and at greater length, I will speak about the difficulties linked to translation as a wager, easier said than done and occasionally impossible to take up. These difficulties are accurately summarized in the term ‘test’ [épreuve], in the double sense of ‘ordeal’ [peine endurée] and ‘probation’: testing period, as we say, of a plan, of a desire or perhaps even of an urge, the urge to translate.

To throw light on this test, I suggest comparing the ‘translator’s task’, which Walter Benjamin speaks about, with ‘work’ in the double sense that Freud gives to that word when, in one essay, he speaks of the ‘work of remembering’ and, in another essay, he speaks of the ‘work of mourning’. In translation too, work is advanced with some salvaging and some acceptance of loss.

Salvaging of what? Loss of what? That is the question that the term 'foreign' poses in Berman's title. In reality, two partners are connected through the act of translating, the foreign – a term that covers the work, the author, his language – and the reader, recipient of the translated work. And, between the two, the translator who passes on the whole message, who has it go from one idiom to another. It is in this uncomfortable position of mediator that the test in question lies. Franz Rosenzweig gave this test the form of a paradox. To translate, he says, is to serve two masters: the foreigner with his work, the reader with his desire for appropriation, foreign author, reader dwelling in the same language as the translator. Indeed, this paradox falls within the domain of an unparalleled problematic, doubly sanctioned by a vow of faithfulness and a suspicion of betrayal. Schleiermacher, whom one of our prize-winners honours this evening, broke the paradox up into two phrases: 'bringing the reader to the author', 'bringing the author to the reader'.

It is in this exchange, in this chiasmus that the equivalent of what we have already called the work of remembering, the work of mourning, lies. The work of remembering first: this work, which one can also liken to a parturition, is concerned with the two poles of translation. In one way, it attacks the view that the mother tongue is sacred, the mother tongue's nervousness around its identity.

This resistance on the side of the reader must not be underestimated. The pretensions to self-sufficiency, the refusal to allow the foreign mediate, have secretly nourished numerous linguistic ethnocentrism, and more seriously, numerous pretensions to the same cultural hegemony that we have been able to observe in relation to Latin, from late antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages and even beyond the Renaissance, in

relation to French in the classical era, and in relation to English today. I have used the psychoanalytic term 'resistance' to convey the sense of this deceitful refusal to have the language of reception subjected to the test of the foreign.

But the resistance to the work of translation, as an equivalent of the work of remembering, is not weaker on the side of the foreign language. The translator meets with this resistance at numerous stages of his enterprise. He encounters it, at a very early stage, as the presumption of non-translatability, which inhibits him even before he tackles the work. Everything transpires as though in the initial fright, in what is sometimes the anguish of beginning, the foreign text towers up like a lifeless block of resistance to translation. To some extent, this initial presumption is only a fantasy nourished by the banal admission that the original will not be duplicated by another original; an admission that I call banal, because it resembles that of every collector facing the best reproduction of a work of art. He knows about the most serious flaw, i.e. not being the original. But a fantasy of perfect translation takes over from this banal dream of the duplicated original. It reaches a peak in the fear that, being translation, the translation will only be bad translation, by definition as it were.

But the resistance to translation takes on a less fantastical form once the work of translation begins. The segments of untranslatability are scattered through the text, making the translation a drama, and the wish for a good translation a wager. In this respect, the translation of poetic works is the one which has exercised minds the most, to be precise, in the age of German Romanticism, from Herder to Goethe, from Schiller to Novalis, then later still in von Humboldt and Schleiermacher, and up to today, in Benjamin and Rosenzweig.

Indeed, poetry presented the serious difficulty of the inseparable combination of sense and sonority, of the signified and the signifier. But the translation of philosophical works, which is of greater concern to us today, reveals difficulties of a different and, in a sense, also inflexible nature, insofar as it springs up at the actual level of the carving up of semantic fields, which turn out to be not strictly superimposable on one another. And the difficulty is at its height with the primary words, the *Grundwörter*, which the translator sometimes wrongly makes it a rule to translate word for word, the same word receiving a fixed equivalent in the target language. But this legitimate constraint has its limits, insofar as these great primary words, *Vorstellung*, *Aufhebung*, *Dasein*, *Ereignis*, are themselves summaries of long textuality where whole contexts are mirrored, to say nothing of the phenomena of intertextuality concealed in the actual stamp [*la frappe*] of the word. Intertextuality which is sometimes equivalent to revival, transformation, refutation of earlier uses by authors who fall within the same tradition of thought or opposing traditions.

Not only are the semantic fields not superimposed on one another, but the syntaxes are not equivalent, the turns of phrase do not serve as a vehicle for the same cultural legacies; and what is to be said about the half-silent connotations, which alter the best-defined denotations of the original vocabulary, and which drift, as it were, between the signs, the sentences, the sequences whether short or long. It is to this heterogeneity that the foreign text owes its resistance to translation and, in this sense, its intermittent untranslatability.

As regards philosophical texts, furnished with a rigorous semantics, the paradox of translation is exposed. Thus, the logician Quine, in the field of English language's analytic philosophy, considers a non-adequate correspondence

between two texts to be an absurd idea. The dilemma is the following: in a good translation, the two texts, source and target, must be matched with one another through a third non-existent text. Indeed, the problem is saying the same thing or claiming to say the same thing in two different ways. But this same thing, this identical meaning is not given anywhere in the manner of a third text, whose status would be that of the third man in Plato's *Parmenides*, a third party between the idea of man and the human examples that are thought to participate in the real and true idea. In the absence of this third text, where the actual meaning would lie, the semantic original, there is only one recourse, i.e. the critical reading of a few, if not polyglot then at least bilingual, specialists, critical reading equivalent to a private retranslation, where our capable reader redoes the work of translation, for his own purposes, taking on, in turn, the test of translation and meeting with the same paradox of an equivalence without adequacy.

I will now open parentheses. Talking about retranslation by the reader, I am broaching the more general problem of the ceaseless retranslation of the main works, the great classics of global culture, the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Molière. It should perhaps even be said that it is in retranslation that we most clearly observe the urge to translate, stimulated by the dissatisfaction with regard to existing translations. I am closing these parentheses again.

We have followed the translator ever since the anguish that kept him from beginning, through his struggle with the text, which has characterized the whole of his work; we leave him where the finished work leaves him, i.e. in a dissatisfied state.

Antoine Berman, much of whose work I have thus reread on this occasion, uses a happy turn of phrase to summarize

the two forms of resistance: that of the text to be translated and that of the translation's language of reception. I quote: 'On the psychological level', he says, 'the translator is ambivalent. He wants to force the two sides, force his language so that it is filled with incongruity, force the other language so that it is interned [*se dé-porter*] in his mother tongue.'

Our comparison with the work of remembering, mentioned by Freud, has thus found its proper equivalent in the work of translation, work won on the two fronts of a two-part resistance. Well, at this stage of the dramatization it happens that the work of mourning finds its equivalent in translation studies and puts its harsh but invaluable corrective into it. I will summarize it in one line: give up the ideal of the perfect translation. This renunciation alone makes it possible to live, as agreed deficiency, the impossibility, articulated a short while ago, of serving two masters: the author and the reader. This mourning also makes it possible to take on the two supposedly conflicting tasks of 'bringing the author to the reader' and 'bringing the reader to the author'. In brief, the courage to take on the well-known problem of faithfulness and betrayal: vow/suspicion. But with which perfect translation is this renunciation, this work of mourning, concerned? Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy provided a really good account of it in the German Romantics under the heading, 'the literary absolute'.

This absolute governs an approximation enterprise, which has taken different names, 'regeneration' of the target language in Goethe, 'potentiating' the source language in Novalis, convergence of the two-part process of *Bildung* with work on both sides in von Humboldt.

Now this dream has not been entirely misleading insofar as it has encouraged the ambition of revealing the hidden

face of the source language of the work to be translated and, vice versa, the ambition of de-provincialising the mother tongue, which is invited to think of itself as one language amongst others, ultimately to see itself as foreign. But this desire for perfect translation has taken on other forms. I will cite only two of them: first the cosmo-political design in the wake of the *Aufklärung*, the dream of building up the complete library, which would be, by accumulation, the Book, the infinitely ramified network of the translations of all the works in all the languages, crystallizing into a sort of universal library from which the untranslatabilities would all have been erased. According to this dream, which would also be that of a rationality fully released from cultural constraints and community restrictions, this dream of omnitranslation would try to fill the interlinguistic space of communication and make good the lack of universal language. The other aspiration of perfect translation was embodied in messianic expectation, which Walter Benjamin revived at the level of language in that magnificent text, *The Translator's Task*. What would then be aspired to would be the pure language, as Benjamin puts it, that every translation carries within itself as its messianic echo. In all these forms, the dream of the perfect translation amounts to the wish that translation would gain, gain without losing. It is this very same gain without loss that we must mourn until we reach an acceptance of the impassable difference of the peculiar and the foreign. Recaptured universality would try to abolish the memory of the foreign and maybe the love of one's own language, hating the mother tongue's provincialism. Erasing its own history, the same universality would turn all who are foreign to it into language's stateless persons, exiles who would have given up the search for the

asylum afforded by a language of reception. In brief, errant nomads.

And it is this mourning for the absolute translation that produces the happiness associated with translating. The happiness associated with translating is a gain when, tied to the loss of the linguistic absolute, it acknowledges the difference between adequacy and equivalence, equivalence without adequacy. There is its happiness. When the translator acknowledges and assumes the irreducibility of the pair, the peculiar and the foreign, he finds his reward in the recognition of the impassable status of the dialogicality of the act of translating as the reasonable horizon of the desire to translate. In spite of the agonistics that make a drama of the translator's task, he can find his happiness in what I would like to call *linguistic hospitality*.

So its scheme is definitely that of a correspondence without adequacy. Fragile condition which accepts, in place of verification, only that work of retranslation, which I mentioned a short while ago, understood as a sort of exercise in doubling the work of the translator through minimum bilingualism: retranslate after the translator. I took these two models, more or less comparable to the psychoanalysis of the work of memory and of the work of mourning, as my starting point, but I did so in order to say that, just as in the act of telling a story, we can translate differently, without hope of filling the gap between equivalence and total adequacy. Linguistic hospitality, then, where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house.