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Translation theory for the new millennium (1).

Abstract I: This essay focuses on the relationship between language and translation by discussing Walter Benjamin's famous essay "*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*"(1923). I believe that this enigmatic essay has not been fully conceptualised, especially in relation to a review of translation as epistemological category. What is the relationship between language and translation? Have the significant philosophical implications of this relation been fully articulated and investigated? These are precisely the preoccupations - which are also the preoccupations founding Western ontology - that Benjamin interrogated in that important essay. He did not complete his analysis, bequeathing the task to continue it to the future philosophy - today's philosophy.

Abstract II: Questo saggio è una riflessione sul rapporto tra linguaggio e traduzione. Lo spunto viene offerto dalla discussione del famoso saggio di Walter Benjamin "*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*"(1923) - saggio estremamente enigmatico e ancora non del tutto pensato, soprattutto in funzione di una ridefinizione in senso epistemologico del tradurre. Qual è il rapporto tra linguaggio e traduzione? Si è in effetti andati in profondità, dissotterrando le enormi implicazioni filosofiche di questo rapporto? La sfida che si poneva Benjamin nel lontano 1923 riguardava appunto questa problematica, che è anche il nodo centrale dell'ontologia occidentale. Benjamin non venne a capo di questa sfida, lasciando in eredità al pensiero del futuro - quello di oggi - il compito di riprenderla.

The fundamental misconception underlying the general and common view of translation is that translation is derivative, secondary. This is not only the fate of translation, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, the fate of language.

Indeed, it is because language has been considered secondary that translation has *subito (*"suffered") a similar and not less disabling destiny. The statement that language and translation are inextricably linked might sound platitudinous, banal, even trivial. And it is. But it is also true. Does the coexistence of triviality and truth say something? On a certain level and at some point triviality and truth might well coincide. Triviality is the banalization of truth and its passage from the plane of reflection and thinking - from the plane of philosophy - to the level of common, ordinary parlance; that automated mode of discourse that springs forward unchecked, appearing disingenuous and naïve. And yet truth is triviality's origin, its lost and invisible home. It is the reconfiguration of triviality within a process of production that can enable the articulation of a discourse of relation which might cast new light on what really is the object of our thinking. In our case - the case of translation - the first course of action is to dig deep, and to go beyond facile and obvious approximations of translation with language.

Translation and language share a much more interesting and complex history and ontology than what may meet the eye; a history and ontology whose implications have not yet been fully conceptualised.
One of the first to dig deep - "not cheating [himself] of the richest prize" (1978: 26) - was Walter Benjamin, whose "The Task of the Translator" ("*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*", 1923. English translation, 1973) remains one of the most innovative and relevant essays on translation, and language(2). The central thesis of Benjamin's essay is that all historical languages - what he also calls "unsupplemented languages" (*den unergänzten Sprachen)* - demand to be translated. This quintessential necessity is not only their destiny but also their very reason d'etre. According to Benjamin this necessity - which is a mixture of natural predisposition but also deliberate desire - is based upon the principle that all historical languages derive, or even better, descend from a "pure language" *(die reine Sprache).* It follows that translation is possible, indeed inevitable, because of this common origin: "translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages." (Benjamin, 1973: 73).

One could also be tempted to extrapolate from Benjamin's article that historical languages desire to reunite with their origin through translation. Translation would thus become a kind of temporal rewinding of historical languages, the final result being the emergence of pure language. In translating, historical languages will annul themselves to reunite, and ultimately reconstitute their origin. Read in this way translation is the going backwards from history to the Edenic state and from existence to essence. It is not only a going "home", but it is also, and paradoxically, an act of self sacrifice and annihilation in that both historical languages and translation will cease to be, will cease to exist as soon as "pure language" is regained. Going home, then, equates with an act of self-annulment and disappearance into the fold of purity, which also means into the fold of a mode without memory, historicity and desire. It is in this sense that purity, the unadulterated origin, is also the end of the production of life. This is, in

the word of Italian philosopher Carlo Sini, the arrival in the zone of "the thinking of all the forms, their first and ultimate "cause": a complete thinking which has nothing outside itself (which is totally act and in actuality); which has no further potentiality to fulfil and no further matter to translate into form; which is the thinking of thinking." (1993: 13) The latency of this locus and habitus of being is at the base of Western metaphysics and its "onto-theo-logical" underpinnings. It is also at the base of the more elemental conception of and justification for translation which squarely relates - and opposes - the mode of production of historical languages, of which translation is the more obvious example, with the mode of action of pure language. It is in this sense that one can understand better the notion of production as becoming, being underway, dynamic and that of action as static and crystallized.

The paradox and the philosophical conundrum, indeed the great contradiction of this principle, is that "pure language" - the original home of language - ignores translation, and yet translation would not exist without it. To exist translation requires an origin; an origin to which it must relate. Translation is not substantial but relational. Clearly, the novelty and the relevance of Benjamin's essay do not rest only on this characterization of translation. Its originality lies also, if not more importantly, in the claim that the origin, too, needs translation in order to be itself again, in order to reappear. The origin, too, is relational and always dependent on the existence of translation. It must be stressed that for Benjamin "purity", the origin, be it of language or subjectivity, is also relational. In a letter he wrote to Ernst Schoen in January 1919, Benjamin stressed unambiguously his definition of purity by saying that it is a mistake to think that purity exists independently and that it must be preserved. "The purity of being", Benjamin said, " is never absolute, it is always subordinated to a condition." (1966: 205 ff.) Purity, the origin, is always in relation to its impurity and its erasure and this relation is narrated by the production of the processes that give forms and shapes, physiognomy, to this very relation. The task of the coming philosophy, according to Benjamin, is not then to think the essence or existence but to think and produce acts of mediation and to study how mediation can alter both essence and existence. All of a sudden issues of dependency and subalternity are turned inside out and back to front in an intriguing state of indeterminacy.

To recapitulate: translation exists to serve historical languages in their journey home and therefore translation is the quintessential linguistic means toward an end. All unsupplemented languages are derivative and translation is the prime cipher of this derivation but also its leveller. At the other end of the journey lies "purity", the invisible and lost, yet ever present origin that owes its very existence - at least in metaphysical sense - to its relation with impurity and translation. The utopian can only be because of the dystopian and vice-versa. But this is only one side of the story.

Is Benjamin interested in nostalgic philosophising about a lost paradise and intent on taking us back to the time before the Fall? In other words, is the task of the translator that of reconnecting with the origin through translation? Where does the emphasis in this article fall; is it on the origin or is it on translation, or is it on something completely different? The stress is definitely not on faithfulness, difference, equivalence, literal as opposed to liberal translations, all those issues and parameters that have marked and characterized translation theory over the years. Is "The Task of the Translator" actually an article on translation? The "Task of the Translator" was the preface and introduction to Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Tableoux Parisienne*. And yet there is no single explicit reference to Benjamin's techniques, choices, approaches to translating Baudelaire. There is no single comparison of the French original and Benjamin's German translation. What is Benjamin writing about then?

Benjamin writes about language and his philosophical views on language. "The Task of the Translator" is the continuation of a long reflection on language that starts to manifest itself as early as 1916 in a letter that Benjamin wrote to Buber (1994: 81) and in that all important article titled "On Language as such and on the Language of Man" (1978). In fact, "The Task of the Translator" cannot be completely understood and perhaps not even read separately from that article seven years its junior. The novelty resides in the fact that in 1923 Benjamin realized that translation and translating could offer him the key to unpack his philosophical and ontological investigation of language. It is here that translation and translating acquire an epistemological significance for the study of language and subjectivity, ontology and ethics; a significance that was never accorded to them before and had never been accorded to them since. Benjamin himself did not pursue it - or perhaps he did, and it may well be that a future scholar of Benjamin will recognize the face of translation in the complex puzzle of Benjamin's work. And his "nemesis", Heidegger, only touched on it fleetingly in a few scattered, but significant reflections on translation in Anaximander's Saying (2002) and *Heraclitus Seminar* (1993)(3). It is perhaps now, in this new and vulnerable millennium, that the time has come to take up again the task of bringing translation and translating to bear on fundamental ontological issues.

In Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" there could be no mention of "faithfulness", "difference", "equivalence" and so on, simply because the original, "pure language", is no longer available. Further, it is unsayable, invisible and unknown. Its existence is predicated upon the existence of disparate languages which are nonetheless continuously transmigrating from one to another. There is no sense talking about "faithfulness", "difference" and "equivalence" when the original is absent, out of sight. What is left to talk about are the processes through which what exists, historical languages, produce a relation to an assumed state of origin and purity through their combination. The production of this combination is translation. (Although I will not have the time here to relate the significance that this articulation has for a review of literary

translation, I am sure that the implications that this study has in relation to categories such as original, authorship, interpretation and so on can be easily perceived.) As a result, Benjamin is not so much interested in focusing his study on "pure language" or on "unsupplemented languages" as in detailing the process of production of a language in becoming in which the relation between essence and existence is philosophically evident and sayable. Translating is the locus of potentiality, the zone in which language experiences its very exposure as it undoes itself in order to reconstitute itself more profoundly and more completely(4). If we believe Heidegger, to be exposed (herausgelegt) means to be open to a dialogue (Zwiesprache) with the other. This exposure is replenishing because it is in the other that one can find the hidden parts of oneself. It is in this sense that the going "home" is also and always a going outside itself. The same can be said for language. Our language is also always hidden in another language and vice-versa. To possess our language fully means to open it to a dialogue with another language, to let it go out of itself in order to find itself. Let's remember here, although en passant, that in Hegel the "life of spirit" "wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, ... finds itself." (Sini, 1993: 32) It is in this sense that one can understand what Heidegger meant when he said that translating is not about substituting a foreign word, in his case a Greek word. It is rather about transferring our language to the other, and letting it merge, even disappear into the other. Yet this disappearing brings about a process of reconstitution through which our language attains a previously unknown wholeness and vividness.

But the goal, and the challenge of the coming theory of translation, is not really about going home, to the essence of a mythical state. It is rather that of turning the process from a means to an end and from a momentary, although necessary passage, to an ontological mode of existence. Translating, potentiality, interstitiality, become, thus, the focus of philosophical and theoretical production, and the sites of linguistic as well as ethical thinking.
The challenge of the coming theory of translation, as I see it (5), is to propose a theoretical shift which rather than occupying itself with what is at the beginning or end of the process of translation, investigates the area in-between the original and the translation, that zone in which two languages and two cultures come together and fuse in a kind of cross-fertilization where their distinctive traits are blurred and confused by the process of superimposition. It is the zone where the original is no longer itself, having experienced already the departure from its point of inception, and where the translation is not yet completed, being still in the process of reaching its "home". The "interstitial" zone is neutral and defies the clear definition of "home" as a given set of accepted cultural values and tastes. It lies in-between, in the mid-way and as such is characterized in equal measure by the memories of the origin and the expectations of the arrival, by the features of the known (the original) and those of the "becoming" (the translation). It is the zone in which source and target cultures melt and generate a culture under way which resembles, yet it is also markedly different from them.

NOTE:

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association) Conference in Hong Kong, August 8-15, 2004.
2. For an extensive analysis of Benjamin's essay see Andrew Benjamin's Philosophy's Literature (2001), especially pp. 105-122; and my article "The Paradox of Translation via Benjamin and Agamben" (2004).
3. On of the most comprehensive study to date of Heidegger's reflection on translation is Gino Giometti's book Martin Heidegger: Filosofia della traduzione (1995).
4. For a discussion of translation and potentiality see my article "Translation Studies and Agamben's Theory of the Potential" (2003).
5. On this issue see my article "Translating from the Interstices" (2003).

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