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# The Parapraxis of Translation

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# The Parapraxis of Translation

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WHAT HAPPENS TO THE THEORY OF TRANSLATION IN AN AGE WHEN philosophy no longer considers language to be the ultimate horizon of being, yet reality constantly confronts us with situations that prove on a daily basis the urgency of translation? Whereas the former tendency might disorient our thinking with relation to translation, the second relentlessly reminds us of its inescapable necessity. It is this state of affairs that has led many of us to believe that translation has finally and irrevocably entered the domain of global politics.<sup>1</sup> But in its subtle yet decisive move away from a certain conception of language, philosophy did not simply abandon us. If we are willing to learn from current philosophical inquiries into the meaning of the political, eventually we might have to consider the hypothesis that translation is not merely the infinite production of meaning between languages but a practice oriented by truth. In fact, one of the most important provocations offered by contemporary philosophy for the theory of translation is precisely its revaluation of the category of truth.<sup>2</sup> These are the questions, then, that

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we need to consider in some detail here: Is it possible to speak about translation in terms other than those of “meaning”? Or, more importantly, is it really possible to speak about translation today in terms of “truth” without falling into the trap of the most banal forms of reactionary essentialism?

Since psychoanalysis is one of the most prominent theoretical discourses that have always insisted on the difference between truth and knowledge, we will start here by evoking a well-known moment of its history involving a significant act of translation. My argument is the following: James Strachey’s invention of the term “parapraxis” sometime around 1916 constitutes an event of translation. For us, the ultimate significance of this event lies in the fact that it allows us to define translation itself as a form of parapraxis. Through this event, an excessive act of translation—that goes beyond the original as well as the intentions of the translator—gave us a new name for translation itself. It was once again the very practice of translation that contained in itself the conditions of its own theorization. It is up to us now to complete this theoretical task belatedly.<sup>3</sup>

This discussion of the parapraxis of translation, however, must first be prefaced by a brief look at the historical act of translation. Strachey explained himself in the introduction to Alan Tyson’s translation of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in the following terms: “In German *Fehlleistung*, ‘faulty function.’ It is a curious fact that before Freud wrote this book the general concept seems not to have existed in psychology, and in English a new word had to be invented to cover it” (1960, 5 n. 3). Strachey’s explanation suggests that his translation is intended to render the novelty of a conceptual innovation visible in translation. His translation, therefore, proceeds through two steps. First, one could say that he invents an invention. He has to make an argument that a specific form of conceptual innovation took place without precedent in the original. Second, he himself invents a new word to designate the new concept. The question has long been whether this second step was actually necessary or not.

The point, however, is that Strachey’s invention cannot be derived from any of the available elements of the situation. On the one hand, it is not clear why the German original would demand an innovation on the lexical level in English. On the other hand, it is not clear why this innovation has

to assume the specific form of a Greek rather than an English neologism. So Strachey's reinvention of a Freudian invention cannot be logically derived either from the source nor the target language. It is in this sense that the term "parapraxis" remains a "pure" invention.

In his famous attack on the *Standard Edition*, Bruno Bettelheim has criticized Freud's English translators for their consistent and politically motivated efforts to inscribe psychoanalysis in contemporary medical discourse, when in reality, so Bettelheim argued, the late Freud was essentially using the language of the humanities and not that of the sciences. Of course, we all understand Bettelheim's point that translation shows us its uglier face when the simple German word for the "I" (*das Ich*) is translated into English by way of the Latin equivalent and becomes "the ego." But to make sense of what is happening in the *Standard Edition*, let us take two further examples from Bettelheim's book, *Freud and Man's Soul* (1983): parapraxis and the drive.

Bettelheim's spirited invective against Freud's translators reaches one of its cruel climaxes when he picks up the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1960 [1901]). This is the moment when "parapraxis" enters the stage. We must note that Bettelheim is sensitive to the self-reflexive ironies of a mistranslation that concerns a concept that happens to name a failed performance: "The very topic of the book, one would think, ought to have alerted them to their own propensity to mistranslate out of subconscious motives" (1983, 82). Not surprisingly, it is precisely the failure of this translation that proves the truth of the Freudian text—the failure of the translation is the result of the nefarious intervention of the unconscious into the act of translation itself. Bettelheim does not waste his time in pointing out that the very translation of *Fehlleistung* turned out to be a rather unfortunate kind of *Fehlleistung*. Presumably, then, the problem with "parapraxis" is that it is a mistranslation "out of subconscious motives" that hides the very truth it embodies.

But the path struck by this metaphor cannot be followed too long, as the point is precisely that the mistranslation not only fails on the formal level, but that it cannot reproduce the content of the original concept either: "The translation is wrong also because it gives the impression that an action was intended but clumsily executed, when often no action whatsoever was intended" (Bettelheim 1983, 86). Bettelheim's criticism, however, is not

to be underestimated, and we should indeed listen to him when he adds: “What happens in *Fehlleistung* is simultaneously—albeit on different levels of consciousness—a real achievement and a howling mistake” (86). “A real achievement and a howling mistake”—this should indeed convince us that we are now talking about translation.

Close to the end of the book, Bettelheim takes up another similar term: *der Trieb*. When Strachey tried to defend his decision to translate *der Trieb* as “instinct,” he argued that “drive” was not a noun but a verb in English. Needless to say, this apology merely provides Bettelheim with another reason to relish the irony of the situation: “The notion that ‘drive’ is not an English noun is not very convincing, coming from translators who have created such terms as ‘parapraxis’ and ‘scopophilia.’ Its obvious merit can be seen in the fact that in recent years it has become standard American usage. According to *Webster’s*, ‘drive’ is both a noun and a verb” (1983, 104). Of course, it is useless to fight irony with irony, but let us point out immediately that the word “parapraxis” itself is now included in the most respectable dictionaries of the English language.

Thus, we have in front of us two complementary examples. When Strachey mistranslates “drive” as “instinct,” he follows the standards of an imaginary linguistic conservatism (“there is no such noun in English!”), and fails to recognize the conceptual innovation inherent in Freud’s argument. He domesticates psychoanalytic thought—but the history of the English language proves him wrong as it itself embraces the unwanted innovation. This we shall not consider an event of translation. On the other hand, in the case of “parapraxis,” we encounter the exact opposite. When Strachey mistranslates *Fehlleistung* as “parapraxis,” he intervenes in the target language in a way that itself will be canonized by linguistic usage. But what counts for us is not Strachey’s intention—but the excessive effects of his parapraxis.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE PARADOXA OF TRANSLATION

Although Strachey had a translated word but did not apply it to the theory of translation, in the shadow of this event another argument has been hiding on the margins of the standard canons of modernist translation theory. Two

decades after the invention of the term “parapraxis,” José Ortega y Gasset defined translation in terms that seem to lack nothing but the actual name “parapraxis.” So whereas Strachey had a word without a corresponding theory of translation, Ortega y Gasset had a conceptual framework without an appropriate name. The difference between the two authors shows us that “parapraxis” is an absent center of modernist theories of translation.

In his 1937 essay, which bears the eloquent title “The Misery and the Splendor of Translation,” Ortega y Gasset puts on his banner the revolutionary motto: “Translation is dead! Long live translation!” (1992, 97) He puts forth the argument that human praxis is constitutively impossible and, therefore, utopian: “Isn’t the act of translating necessarily a utopian task? The truth is, I’ve become more and more convinced that everything Man does is utopian” (93). And “the utopianism of translation” (96) is sustained by two contradictory forces: on the one hand, translation must change language; at the same time, it must remain intelligible. So translation is an impossible utopian human praxis precisely because it is always in excess of human intentions. This is why it is a parapraxis—a praxis without identity that will only gain any semblance of identity retroactively from the perspective of its own excessive effects.

In fact, Ortega y Gasset makes it absolutely clear that parapraxis is the foundation of the historicity of the human being:

World history compels us to recognize Man’s continuous, inexhaustible capacity to invent unrealizable projects. In the effort to realize them, he achieves many things, he creates innumerable realities that so-called Nature is incapable of producing for itself. The only thing that Man does not achieve is, precisely, what he proposes to—let it be said to his credit. This wedding of reality with the demon of what is impossible supplies the universe with the only growth it is capable of. For that reason, it is very important to emphasize that everything—that is, everything worthwhile, everything truly human—is difficult, very difficult; so much so, that it is impossible. (1992, 99)

This impossible production of history is, then, the real task of parapraxis. The human being invents essentially unrealizable projects. In the course of the

practical realization of these projects, however, what is achieved is always something other than what was intended. This excess of the unintended effect over the practical intention is history itself as the result of parapraxis. The conclusion is clear: if there were only praxis without parapraxis, history would cease to exist.

Although Ortega y Gasset does not have the word at his disposal, he explicitly comes to the brink of defining translation as “parapraxis.” As we have seen, the conceptual apparatus that he employs already suggests such a nomination, but lacking the invented word in his original Spanish, he retreats to the safety of an already available option. In a crucial passage of the text, he defines translation as “para-doxa” instead of “para-praxis”: “Doesn’t it seem more likely that the intellectual [in this case, also the translator] exists in order to oppose public opinion, the *doxa*, by revealing and maintaining a front against the commonplace with true opinion, the *paradoxa*?” (1992, 101). These passages devoted to the paradox of translation remove translation from the field of *doxa* (mere opinion). The new location of translation, however, is not simply a metaphysical conception of “truth” but the mere interruption of the popular discourse of *doxa* by a “true opinion.” The apparently oxymoronic expression, “true opinion,” also speaks of a reluctance to simply oppose truth to opinion and offers us a way out of their barren oppositions. But this description clearly follows the general structure of the Freudian parapraxis: intellectual praxis produces *paradoxa*. On the one hand, for Ortega y Gasset, translation is an impossible utopian praxis without a predetermined identity, which produces unintended results. On the other hand, translation as *paradoxa* is a truth event that interrupts the regular flow of discourse without claiming for itself the status of a transcendental truth.

As a result, classical figures for understanding the process of translation no longer suffice. Most importantly, for Ortega y Gasset, translation is not an act of interpretation that simply aims at repeating the original in a new language. In place of repetition and transfer, he offers us the metaphor of *division*. Since “a repetition of the work is impossible,” translation divides the original work: “For that reason, it will be necessary to divide the work and make divergent translations of the same work according to the facets of it that we may wish to translate with precision” (1992, 110). The original work,

in this sense, becomes a surface of differences, which invites the translator's intervention to establish new constellations between unfixed elements in dynamic relations with each other.

But this division is more than just a metaphor for translation. In fact, with the figure of division, we have entered the domain we might call "the metaphysics of the subject":

The fact is that the world surrounding Man has never been definable in unequivocal articulations. Or said more clearly, the world, such as we find it, is not composed of "things" definitively separated and frankly different. We find in it infinite differences, but these differences are not absolute. Strictly speaking, everything is different from everything else, but also everything looks somewhat like everything else. Reality is a limitless continuum of diversity. In order not to get lost in it, we have to slice it, portion it out, and separate the parts; in short, we have to allocate an absolute character to differentiations that actually are only relative. For that reason Goethe said that things are differences that we establish. The first action that Man has taken in his intellectual confrontation with the world is to classify the phenomena, to divide what he finds before him into classes. To each one of these classes is attributed a signifier for his voice, and this is language. But the world offers us innumerable classifications, and does not impose any on us. That being the case, each people must carve up the volatile part of the world in a different way, must make a different incision, and for that reason there are such diverse languages with different grammars and vocabularies and semantics. That original classification is the first supposition to have been made about what the truth of the world is; it was, therefore, the first knowledge. Here is the reason why, as a principle, speaking was knowing. (Ortega y Gasset 1992, 107)

The world itself is composed of infinite differences. But to make sense of these differences, we need to introduce yet another layer of differences. Division, therefore, is the primary praxis that accounts for the very emergence of the subject through its first historical act. We could even say that it is the praxis that functions as the very condition of all practical engagement of the world, a proto-praxis that in itself remains unaccounted for in Ortega y Gasset's



text. But since division is the ur-praxis that precedes any other praxis, the birth of language itself is explained here as a division introduced into a world of infinite differences. And if division accounts for the very constitution of language, it is also responsible for translation. Division is the primary act of translation that once turned ontological difference into language. As such, the mundane work of translation now appears as the repetition of the foundational act of the speaking subject on a different level, as a redistribution of the divisions of language.

Still following the inherent direction of Ortega y Gasset's arguments, then, we could argue that division, as the paradoxical practical origin of praxis in general, divides praxis itself. No praxis can ever possess a full identity, since it always necessarily relies on this earlier praxis (that he does not account for in his work). And this is how we could define "parapraxis": it is divided praxis, and as such, it is a self-dividing division of the other (the world of infinite differences).

But a crucial metaphysical limitation of Ortega y Gasset's argument surfaces here in that he clearly posits an original authentic relation to language that was corrupted by history. Today, as he reminds us, language is "a mere joke" (1992, 106). The historical destiny of man was such that we forgot the original divisions instituted by language, and therefore we no longer mean what we say. The discovery of this historical alienation from the original division of the world by language leads Ortega y Gasset to the conclusion that "our languages are anachronisms" (108). The problem of this authenticity, however, leaves us with a new question: is it possible to conceive of translation in such a way that we avoid the trap of a certain kind of relativism (according to which every translation would be equally valid) without reference to an authentic origin?

Let us, then, consider the following historical constellation: Freud, Strachey, and Ortega y Gasset. Freud invents a concept; Ortega y Gasset invents a theory of translation; and Strachey invents a name. The connections between the concept, the theory, and the name are only visible from the point of view of posterity. This is why we are dealing with an event of translation: in the immanence of the situation called "modernist translation theory," the connections between the three were impossible to establish in the terms I

have outlined here. Strictly speaking, the value of Strachey's mistranslation remains undecidable in the situation.

#### THE PRAGMATICS OF TRANSLATION

To explain what the concept of parapraxis can add to our understanding of translation, let me break down the proposed meaning of the term in three steps. First, it is clear that the choice of the word “parapraxis” allows us to answer the difficult question “What is translation?” in a straightforward manner: translation is what translators *do*. To the degree that translation is a parapraxis, it is primarily a form of *praxis*. In other words, the emphasis falls on what is being performed in the act of translation. Second, however, the prefix indicates that this praxis is not quite praxis: it is located “beside” praxis. As a dislocated form of praxis, it happens to be “beside itself,” a praxis without a unified identity. Third, this inherent lack of identity does not mean that it never has any identity whatsoever. Rather, the point is that translation is a form of doing that is best understood as the practical interruption of a praxis by the unpredictable emergence of an unconscious truth. It is the very act of translation that must perform the identity that it possesses.

So what does it mean *to do* translation? In his *Translation and the Nature Philosophy*, Andrew Benjamin has provided us a compelling answer to this question. From our perspective, the unquestionable significance of Benjamin's argument is that it allows us to describe translation as a praxis without an essence: “What is translation? It is both a plurality of activities and has a plurality of significations. The word ‘translation’ names this plurality and hence the word itself can have no content other than this potentially conflicting plurality. Any specific answer to the question—what is it that translation is?—must involve a determination of this original difference occasioned by the necessity of the pragmatic (which would be, for example, the need to make a specific translation)” (1989, 35–36).

We encounter here a number of crucial points that are indispensable for any contemporary discussion of translation. First, it must be noted that for Benjamin translation itself is not an already given activity but a plurality of activities that will gain an ostensible unified identity only when the moment

of pragmatic realization arrives. Until we perform an act of translation, we do not know what translation *is*. Yet, even in the moment of its actualization (when one particular activity is realized from this original plurality), the meaning of the act remains to be determined. Second, we can also see then that this practice simultaneously produces the conditions of its own conceptualization in the form of a plurality of possible meanings. In other words, the praxis of translation theory itself is anchored in the same differential plurality that constitutes translation. Thus, the irreducible pluralities of what translation *does* and what it *means* both have their foundations in the same ontological determinations. Finally, this complication allows us to redescribe the lack of inherent identity of translation in terms of a split between the particularity of translation (the pragmatic realization of one single practice in a specific translation) and the universality of translation (the answer to the question “what is translation?”). In other words, every single act of translation possesses a split identity in that it is a particular act that at the same time produces the universal definition of what translation means.

The task ahead of us, then, appears to be to think the possibility of a pragmatics that does not fully coincide with itself (what we could also call a “para-pragmatics”). At least, this is the direction Benjamin’s arguments take when he distinguishes the actual act of translation (what he calls *pragma*) from the primordial inhering of what can never be fully actualized in such an act. For translation theory, the most important consequence of this distinction is that the sacrosanct status of the “original” is fully undermined. It is not a mere accident that in Benjamin’s book it is a reading of Freud that prepares the ground for the argument that the original itself is devoid of a fully constituted identity (1989, 172). To put it differently, since the original is never fully self-identical, it becomes a surface of investments and reworkings (165). As a result, translation is never a mere reproduction of the original. Rather, the point is that translation is constitutive of the object of translation (the original). At the same time, the very identity of the pragmatic act of translation that constitutes its own object is equally undermined by the inhering of what is present but not actualized in the act. As an act of presentation, *pragma* also always presents something other than what is actualized in the act.

Although this point remains underdeveloped in Benjamin's book, we should not underestimate the importance of the fact that he calls this *pragma* (the moment of decision and realization in translation) an "event" (1989, 148). What takes place in this event? If we follow Benjamin's argument, we can easily recognize here the logic of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* in that Benjamin posits the "retrospective production of the preconditions of translation" (146). On the one hand, a concrete act of translation is realized from among the plurality of possibilities. But as we have seen, this realization is simultaneously an attempt to define the universality of translation as well. At the same time, this universality can only come about if the original is redefined as the valid condition of the given translation. Yet when all is said and done, the pragmatic self-realization of translation cannot fully erase the traces of the excluded possibilities. As such, translation is always haunted by an element of alterity. So the following elements have to congeal in the single moment of the event: the constitution of the original as the precondition of translation, the realization of a concrete translation (the particular), the definition of the field of translation (the universal), and the presentation of what remains unactualized in the act.

What remains to be done, however, is a more consistent elaboration of the relation of these elements. To make the necessary connections, we need to return to the parapraxis of translation as a form of fundamental division. What is at stake here, then, is the production of the identity of translation itself. Therefore, the fundamental division that concerns us is that between the translatable and the untranslatable. In the event of translation, therefore, this division receives a concrete form, for every act of translation announces the simple fact that translation is possible. This possibility, however, needs to find its concrete conditions in the original, and at the same time, the particular translation has to stand in for the universality of translatability. But since every act of translation is based on a series of exclusions, the constitutive division of translation itself bears witness to an inalienable dimension of alterity.

This redefinition of the primary pragmatic problem of translation as the very institution of the identity of translation by way of a decision concerning the division of the translatable and untranslatable also shows us that today

we need to avoid two temptations. We could call the first one “the modernist temptation,” the second “the postmodernist temptation.” The first believes in a universal language. The most strident examples of this tendency are the invention of Esperanto and the early phase of analytic philosophy, which at one point in its history, set out on a quest for an “ideal language.” Although in a completely different form, we can detect the same tendencies even in the works of the most important modernist theoreticians of translation: the idea of a universal language animates Ezra Pound’s fascination with Chinese ideograms as well as the historical invention of Esperanto. The “postmodernist temptation,” on the other hand, in its rejection of universal languages, leads us to what we could call the “fetishization of the untranslatable.” If translation follows the dogmas of this temptation, it can very easily find itself in the midst of an insufferable tautology: it is reduced to the identical repetition of what it declares to be the untranslatable.

So when we ask the question if there is anything beyond the opposition of a universal language and the fetishization of the untranslatable, we are asking for the reconsideration of the relation between what is and what is not translatable. Let us borrow something from both of these temptations. On the one hand, let us accept the fact that untranslatability is an ontologically primary fact. On the other hand, however, let us borrow the fiction of the universal language—at least in the sense that we declare that translation is still possible. In other words, even on a terrain of ontological inconsistency (what we could call the primacy of untranslatability), acts of translation are possible. This is what the phenomenology of translation teaches us. But as a primary determination on the level of undecidability, this originary untranslatability lacks a true identity.

The field of translation (as the field of translatability) comes about as a result of a primary exclusion. The untranslatable has to be excluded from the field of translation to establish what is translatable. But the excluded element does not disappear without a trace: the untranslatable constantly threatens the normal operation of translation. As the excluded element, the lack of its position remains visible in the field from which it has been excluded. Therefore, the very dividing line (the agent of exclusion) between the translatable and the untranslatable becomes unstable (since the untranslatable can show

up on either side because of its ontological primacy). The conclusion is the following: the dividing line itself lacks a substantial identity. But if the very separation of what is and what is not translatable has no essential identity, this very division becomes a question of practice: the very division between the two has to be produced by an act of translation.

In other words, the *actual* separation of the translatable from the untranslatable does not precede the act of translation: it is a retroactive construction that coincides with the act of translation. What precedes the act is the mere ontological primacy of untranslatability, the mere fact that there is something of the untranslatable. But this structural position has no inherent positive content. Beyond its mere existence, there is nothing we can say about it. The separation of the two has no other positive identity than what is performed in the very act of translation. This tells us that every act of translation has a split identity: it is a particular translation, and at the same time, it is the very production of the universality of translation (by way of a separation of the translatable and the untranslatable). Every act must reenact the division of the translatable and the untranslatable. This is why no “original” possesses the quality of untranslatability in an essential or absolute fashion.<sup>5</sup>

This inherent decision concerning the untranslatable, however, proves that translation is not interpretation. No doubt, once the field of translatability is instituted, the praxis of translation will appear to us as a form of interpretation or as a series of acts of deliberation. The image is a familiar one: the translator, deeply absorbed in his or her art, weighs a number of options, progressively discarding the inadequate solutions until the only acceptable solution emerges. This triumphant narrative, however, collapses when it becomes clear that there are not always logical criteria to derive one single correct translation. These are the moments when the translator needs to choose from several more or less synonymous, more or less equivalent options. The crucial moment of translation, then, arrives when logical deliberation fails: it becomes clear that translation cannot be defined as a mere search for equivalents, as it has to assume the burden of a singular intervention. These are the moments when the translator is called upon to act in the form of a decision that cannot be fully grounded in logical criteria.

In fact, this is how we can define “translation theory” as well. Translation is a praxis and not a theory. But as a para-praxis, its impossible identity will always have to be mediated by another form of praxis that remains external to it. This is the praxis of translation theory. At the moment when translation reaches the limits of interpretation, it finds itself up against the necessity of a decision that cannot always be the result of logical deliberation. The location of translation theory is precisely this gap between deliberation and the act. Translation theory is the practice whose goal is to formalize the irreducible gap between interpretation and decision, deliberation and the act. Every act of translation, to the degree that it makes the leap from deliberation to the act, inherently performs its own identity retroactively, and thereby opens up the possibility of the retroactive realization of its own theory. In other words, translation produces the conditions of its own theorization.

#### THE TRUTH OF TRANSLATION

So what kind of a truth can be produced by translation as parapraxis? The psychoanalytic model seems to dictate an already familiar scheme: as a praxis, translation produces meaning, which is then interrupted by the eruption of an unconscious truth through parapraxis. However, the usefulness of this approach is obviously quite limited if we allow it to reduce the theory of translation to the psychology of the translator. A more generous interpretation shifts the focus from the translator’s psyche to the “political unconscious” of textual production. In this sense, what counts is the contextual determination of the translator’s practice by social and cultural forces beyond his or her conscious control. Accordingly, the truth of translation would be a symptom of the historical situation in which translation takes place. But even if the act of translation is overdetermined, we need to be able to formulate here an affirmative theory of the truth of translation, which goes beyond the mere passive suffering of external determinations.

This is why we need to emphasize that when we speak about the “truth” of translation, we use “truth” as a political category. In other words, what we could call “the politics of translation” consists of the fact that every act of translation institutes a partially fixed identity on a terrain of undecidability

(since “translation as such” lacks an inherent identity). The politics of translation corresponds to the original division that produces the truth of translation as the precarious political universality of translatability. It is simultaneously the insistence of the particular act on its own accuracy and the concomitant provisional suturing of the very meaning of “translation” as such. Thus, the politics of translation is not simply the determination of the translator’s act by historical forces, but also the way translation creates its own history out of these already given conditions.

We could then say that “truth” is a necessary dimension of every act of translation for two reasons. On the one hand, the particular act of translation cannot be simply logically derived from the original. In the process of translation, the translator faces moments of decision that are no longer simply questions of direct logical equivalence. These moments of decision (and division) assume the form of a leap of faith (even if they can be rationalized by more or less consistent explanations). On this level, the truth of translation is the interpretive institution of the very identity of the original. On the other hand, the tragic flaw of even the most modest act of translation is that it cannot exist without suggesting that it has discovered something of the truth of the original. As we have seen, the inherent truth-claim of every translation is also based on the fact that there is an inalienable gap between an inherent lack of identity and the irreducible singularity of the act of translation. The retroactive construction of the truth of the original through a series of decisions cannot be separated from the anticipatory assertion of the universality of translatability as the truth of translation in general. The important point, however, is that these two levels cannot be separated from each other.

Translation, therefore, knots together a number of different elements: the ambiguous identity of the original, a praxis without identity, and the divisive decision that institutes the truth of translation. This is why we should understand translation as the groundless production of a relation between two objects. First, it must be acknowledged that translation is the production of an object: the translation. At the same time, it is the production of an object in relation to another already existing object: the original. But translation does more than merely create a new isolated object. We can speak of the knot of praxis precisely because translation should be seen as the simultaneous



production of the new object, the relation between the new and the old objects, as well as the meaning of this relation.

Of course, the difficulty consists of seeing in what sense the original itself is also produced by this act. The original did not have a material or ideological reality prior to the act, which means that the “survival” of the original constitutes its identity. We like to think of translation as a form of “reproduction,” but this term can be quite misleading. It assumes an already finished object that has an identity that can be transposed onto another object. But translation is a “reproduction” of the original only in the sense that the original remains one of the necessary poles of the relation produced by translation. A crucial conflict becomes visible here: the hypothetical pure objectivity of the original clashes with the testimony of the translation that even the original cannot be absolutely pure objectivity. This is the meaning of the proposition that translation is a “praxis without identity.” As a material praxis, translation is a contingent assemblage of diverse bodily and textual movements, a loose collection of apparatuses, a constellation. This praxis, however, also contains the conditions of its own conceptualizations. Thus, the *role* of the subject is to freeze this endless production for a passing yet eternal moment in order to attribute meaning and a concrete identity to this groundless production: the *task* of the subject of translation is to declare in a particular situation that a relation of production between two objects is in fact called “translation.” It is in this sense that translation “happens.”

Needless to say, acts of translation do not occur in a vacuum. If the “politics of translation” names the institution of the double truth of translation, what we could call the “event of translation” forces a break with the *doxa* of the situation. The truth of translation (as the intertwined truth of the original and the universality of translatability) is always contested by other similar truth-claims. At any given moment, a certain set of these claims make up the contemporary situation of translation: what is imagined to be possible and necessary under the name of “translation” in a concrete historical situation. Acts of translation break with the rules of this *doxa* at the risk of being exiled from this world for their abominable monstrosities. Yet, it is this risk that constitutes a true event, for it demands a new kind of fidelity.

Borrowing a few terms from Alain Badiou without going beyond a mere formal imitation of his system, we can now condense the theory of translation as parapraxis into the following four theses:

1. The event of translation is *undecidable*.
2. The event of translation gives rise to the *subject of translation*.
3. The event of translation falls within the register of *truth* and not that of meaning.
4. The truth of translation points toward something *unnamable*.<sup>6</sup>

First, the event of translation remains strictly speaking undecidable. When the emergence of a truth event interrupts the praxis of a particular *doxa*, it must remain undecidable whether the event belongs to the situation or not. Whatever measure we use to decide the value of a translation (whether it is “good” or “bad,” “correct” or “incorrect,” and so forth), there is an inherent break that separates the praxis of deliberation and interpretation from the event of the actual *pragma* that institutes one particular translation. It is this gap in the very structure of translation that accounts for its undecidability: whatever belongs to the situation in such a way that it can be deduced logically from existing conditions can also be gathered up in the process of deliberation. But the event of translation will be in excess of this praxis.

Second, the event of translation induces the emergence of the *subject of translation* that confronts the implacable necessity of a pure choice between indiscernible terms. In other words, translation is not interpretation—or never wholly interpretation (if by the latter we mean a rational calculation of available options). The subject of translation is therefore opened up to a much broader set of identifications. This subject is not merely the “translator” who is the agent of the decision. Rather, translation initiates an open-ended process of historical identifications that includes the original (for the claim of the translation is that the very truth of the original is only visible to us through the truth of translation), the translator, and the reader of the translation as well. All three are offered a chance here to participate in the same process. In an even more abstract sense, we could argue that the

subject of translation is comprised of all the finite moments that participate in the infinite truth of translation.

Third, translation falls within the register of truth and not that of meaning. This truth, however, is not the adequation of meaning between the original and the translation, but a truthful fidelity to an event. This is why we can also redefine the meaning of “fidelity.” This term no longer designates the accurate representation of an original text in a target language. Rather, it refers to the constitution of the subject of translation as it persists in its devotion to an undecidable event.

We can also identify here a necessary shift of perspective in the temporality of translation. What is the meaning of “infinity” for translation? On the one hand, translation consists of a retroactive constitution of an original event; on the other hand, it means the active opening up of a history, an infinite future of a truth procedure. The infinity of translation, therefore, can have two points of reference: the untranslatable and translation itself. The old definition, without wholly losing its validity, merely posits the infinite possibility of new translations. Because of the inherent presence of the untranslatable, every translation has only a partial identity and is suspect to an infinite series of retranslations. On the other hand, however, we also need to conceive of the other infinity of a fully achieved translation. We need to articulate the opposition between the infinity of untranslatability and the infinity of translation. The latter puts an end to the synchronic infinity of the first by opening up the diachronic infinity of a truth procedure.

Finally, although translation’s infinite truth demands fidelity, the truth process points toward something *unnamable*. This is the ethical dimension of translation. On the one hand, the politics of translation demands that we declare and persist in a fidelity to an undecidable event and anticipate the completion of this truth in a fully achieved translation. This is what Badiou calls “forcing”: “A forcing is the powerful fiction of a completed truth” (2003, 65). On the other hand, the ethical dimension of translation demands that, even in the compulsive nomination that constitutes translation, we remain “militants of restrained action” (58) and refrain from forcing the unnamable, what we could call “the real of translation.” Thus, the powerful fiction of the

fully achieved truth of translation orients the subject of translation in its infinite process of faithful verification.

The metaphysics of translation reaches here a turning point in its melancholy history. We must remember that what was metaphysical in classic translation theory was not that it believed in the possibility of translation, but that it founded the translatable on an essentialized concept of the untranslatable. The traces of this theology of the untranslatable (the *noli me tangere* of the original) survive even in the contemporary fetishization of the untranslatable. Rather, as translators have known for a while now, it was the very separation of the untranslatable and the translatable that had to be liberated from its metaphysical ballast.<sup>7</sup>

This is why today the critique of the metaphysics of translation must proceed once again by way of the affirmation of the possibility of translation. The event of translation, however, will always insist not only on the mere possibility of translation, but also on the fact that we encounter singular successful acts of translation all around us. Relying on an old philosophical topos, we could compare this rare moment of truth to a constellation. These acts of translation inhabit our lives the way the seemingly immobile stars of the evening sky suddenly brighten up for a moment in fleeting constellations before they disappear from the human eye, leaving behind nothing but the promise of their own infinity.



#### NOTES

1. As Edwin Gentzler has observed, since the 1990s, we have witnessed a veritable “boom in translation theory” (2001, 187). As a result, it is impossible to name here all of the important figures of this development, but for representative titles of this political turn in translation studies, see Apter (2005), Bassnett and Lefevere (1990; 1998), Berman and Wood (2005), Burrell and Kelly (1995), Cheyfitz (1997), Cronin (2003; 2006), Niranjana (1992), Spivak (2008), Tymoczko (1999), Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002), and Venuti (1992).
2. The most important contemporary representative of this philosophy is Alain Badiou. For his discussions of truth, see his *Being and Event* (2005), *Ethics* (2001), and the chapter “Philosophy and Truth” in *Infinite Thought* (2003).

3. For another attempt to connect the idea of parapraxis to translation, see Dennis Porter's "Psychoanalysis and the Task of the Translator" (1991, 159). Porter's Lacanian reading, however, does not exploit the possibilities of this insight in sufficient detail.
4. More recent readers of Freud, however, tended to be less critical of Strachey's translations. Lawrence Venuti, for example, in *The Translator's Invisibility*, spoke up on behalf of the *Standard Edition* in more dialectical terms. Venuti proposes a "symptomatic reading" of the translation which is based on the assumption that "[n] either the foreign writer nor the translator is conceived as the transcendental origin of the text" (2008, 24). Since Venuti defines translation in terms of the unavoidable interplay of "foreignization" and "domestication," he claims, "It can be argued, therefore, that the inconsistent diction in the English translations does not really deserve to be judged erroneous; on the contrary, it discloses interpretive choices determined by a wide range of social institutions and cultural movements, some (like the specific institutionalization of psychoanalysis) calculated by the translators, others (like the dominance of positivism and the discontinuities in Freud's texts) remaining dimly perceived or entirely unconscious during the translation process" (28).
5. In other words, "translatability" and "untranslatability" are relational terms designating subjective or collective judgments concerning the relationship of two specific objects: the original and the translation. We could take as an example the question of the untranslatability of the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*. For the sake of the argument, let us accept the fact that Derrida's French translation of *Aufhebung* with the verb *relever* was a "relevant" translation to the degree that it went against the philosophical *doxa* of the times according to which the Hegelian original was strictly speaking untranslatable (Derrida 2004, 441). Thus, Derrida's act of translation asserted the "translatability" of the original by establishing a new set of relations between the original and the translation: its intervention consisted of instituting a new relation between *Aufhebung* and *relever*. At the same time, the common concern that the English "sublation" is at best a "ridiculous" translation of *Aufhebung* (Weber 1994, 13) also calls attention to another problem: namely, that "untranslatability" is not necessarily the prerogative of the original, and that the original might be translatable into one target language but not another. Thus, the fundamentally relational nature of (un)translatability shows that neither the original nor the target language is the true location of this dubious determination.
6. The point here is not at all to produce a "Badiouian" theory of translation. Rather, the task is to trace within the field of translation theory the potential effects and echoes of a general transformation that is taking place within the field of philosophy. To put it differently, our task is to investigate what it would mean for a theory of translation to be a contemporary of Badiou's philosophy. We do not need to apply Badiou's theory of truth to translation. We must examine the history of translation theory from the perspective of its own theories of truth. This examination, however, can be conceived as a contemporaneous response to something that happened outside the field of translation.

7. For a brief yet useful overview of the history of the untranslatable, see Hugo Friedrich's essay "On The Art of Translation" (1992).

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