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Translation and Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

What is the Relation between Translation and Philosophy?

This collection of essays was borne of a conference of the same name held in Dublin at Newman House in March 2010. Working on a doctorate in philosophy which focuses on Jacques Derrida, translation and the Other; and having worked as a practising translator, I had for some time been questioning the nature of the relation between these two fields.

It seemed to me that these two disciplines had been involved in a constant dialogue with one another, but on the surface at least, a dialogue that had in some senses been silenced, in any case and especially in the English speaking world. Coming from an English speaking academic background my own first experience of philosophy was through translation and though I was made familiar with non-English terms, the nuances of these terms were explored in English; a language usually other than the original. It struck me as strange that so little space in philosophy was given to explaining what takes place in any translation. At a time when English is becoming more and more the *lingua franca* of any international dialogue, it seemed that more attention needed to be paid to what it means to speak *in* translation. The paradox of the universality of English in our era is that on the one hand it permits more dialogue and communication; on the other hand, we must ask: what are the dangers of a homogenisation of a dialogue into one language alone? From yet another perspective, one might ask why it is that English has not yet been wholeheartedly embraced by philosophy, in the way that it has been, for example, in science. Translation studies, a field still coming to terms with its own boundaries since its foundation in the 1970s, is now more and more concerned with the practicalities of translation. Many translation studies courses focus on technological advancements made in the area, and educators are being forced more and more to push the philosophy of translation to one side, as they struggle to meet the demands of an ever competitive jobs market.

This is by no means of course to suggest that there were *no* conversations taking place about translation and philosophy. Andrew Benjamin, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Marc Crépon, Lawrence Venuti, Joseph Graham, Kathleen Davies, to name but a few, have published extensively on this very issue and their work is responsible for a heightening awareness of these issues.

The incredible response to the call for papers revealed that these are issues that occupy many people, of many disciplines and of course, of many languages. The practice of translation leads invariably to deeply philosophical questions. How is one to say precisely what a given word/sentence/phrase *means*? What indeed is the nature of meaning? To what extent does the surplus of any one word's meanings delimit and define in one language what it should say in another? In choosing one word over another how ethical is the choice of the translator? How much does a translator speak 'in the name of' the author? To what extent does a text *require* translation? Is something truly lost in this transformative process or is something only truly lost when it is *no longer* given over to the process of transformation? With philosophy, perhaps more than any other genre, translation is pushed to its limits in an effort to carry across terms that are not existent in the target language – words like *différance*, *Geist*, *Dasein*, to name but a few, are common currency in the English speaking philosophical world, how does this impact on English as a language in general? Could philosophy be said to be a type of translation? Given that so many philosophical works are read in translation, to what extent is philosophy dependent on it? To what extent has translation modified and re-invented the work of philosophers? From Descartes to Quine philosophy has often strived to provide a 'theory of translation', what impact, if any, do these theories have on translation in practice?

These questions are not only of concern to the translator but also to any discipline that seeks to explain, or at least describe, the experience of being in the world; a world in many senses constituted and constructed from our linguistic engagement. These questions are also those which guide this collection. Questions which may not have straightforward answers but then perhaps the most fruitful questions are precisely those that provoke more questioning; more wonder at the world in which we find ourselves.

We begin the collection with the playfully entitled paper ‘The Awful German Language, or, Is “*Die Geistige Entwicklung*” “The Mental Development”?’ by Theo Harden. The title of the piece is taken in part from Wilhelm von Humboldt and in part from Mark Twain. Harden argues that although translation studies has engaged in a lively debate on issues surrounding literary translation, its response to the very particular issues surrounding the translation of philosophical texts has been somewhat muted. Many of these issues are rooted in the inherently ambiguous nature of philosophy itself, an ambiguity that often forces the translator to explicate a text; rather than embracing what can be a fruitful and intentional opacity. The essay centres on the problem of translating the German noun *Geist* and its derived adjective *geistig*. Tracing the problematic through the framework of formal and dynamic equivalence, Harden notes that while the translation of *Geist* into the English noun ‘Spirit’ may serve the translator; employing the English adjective ‘spiritual’ for its supposed German equivalent *geistig*, proves deeply problematic. Drawing on Jonathon Rée’s claim that philosophy is always already a type of translation, Harden notes that ‘Philosophical texts do not have a “home”, they are polyglot by their very nature and they are obscure’; which is precisely why they are so intriguing. Harden ends his paper with a new and innovative translation of *Geist* – the surprise of which I will not spoil here!

Geist and the ambiguity of philosophical texts take centre stage in the essay by David Charlston entitled ‘Translating Hegel’s Ambiguity: A Culture of *Humor* and *Witz*’. The paper is an almost direct response to one of the questions raised above, namely: ‘To what extent has translation modified and re-invented the work of philosophers?’ Examining three different translations of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Charlston highlights the (often neglected) fact that every translator operates from a particular historical context and is motivated by specific social, cultural, and ideological concerns. How these concerns impact on the translations they produce is perhaps most evident in the strategies adopted when translators are confronted with an ambiguous text. Re-asserting the importance of historical context not only for Hegel’s translators but also for Hegel himself;

Charlston notes the extent to which ambiguity was an integral part of Hegel's cultural milieu. A reaction to the perceived 'dogmatism' of some pre-Kantian philosophers such as Christian Wolff, and a prevalent literary style; ambiguity, Charlston argues, was deliberately employed by Hegel as 'a fundamental starting point for speculative philosophy'. An examination of a particularly important yet opaque sentence from the *Phänomenologie*, deftly illustrates not only Hegel's deliberate use of ambiguity but also the ideological drives of his translators. From the British Idealism motivating Baillie's Christian rendering (1910/31), to the anti-Marxism behind Miller's 'right-Hegelian' translation (1977), right up to the 'Communitarianism' of Pinkard's version (2008): Charlston illustrates that not only is every translation a personal yet philosophical interpretation; but that every new translation can lead to a 'new' Hegel.

'Reading Oneself in Quotation Marks: At the Crossing of Disciplines' by Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, weaves philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis together in an effort to understand what she terms 'the dynamics of self-translation'. She begins by noting the tension between *Heimlich* and *unheimlich* that operates in both translation as 'transference of meaning' from a home language to an other language; and the psychoanalytical concept of 'transference'. Erdinast-Vulcan traces the uncanniness of translation through the experience of self-translation in émigré authors. She highlights Eva Hoffman's encounter with the 'radical disjoining of word and thing' that takes place under self-translation and the ontological consequences of this process. The translated self, Erdinast-Vulcan points out, is one that is not at home in its own skin. Polish born Joseph Conrad is, of course, the example par excellence of the émigré author; writing not in his second but his third language. While it may seem that Conrad, unlike the authors he is often cited with like Beckett or Kundera, did not express in his work a nostalgia or wish to return 'home'; Erdinast-Vulcan takes us deeper into his opus. She notes that while his works may not be autobiographical they are what she terms 'heterobiographical'. That is, whereas autobiography engages in a type of delimitation of the self; heterobiography reveals the manner in which those limits or borders remain, to some extent, porous. Conrad's work, she argues, continually returns to the strangeness within the self – a strangeness he was all too familiar with through his own self-

translation. She alludes to the fact that these émigré authors are in a certain sense only exemplary, that, as Derrida and Freud have noted (albeit in slightly different ways); we all engage in a process of self-translation. Language constitutes the self and yet is always other to the self; it is always both *from* and *for* the Other.

‘Moonless Moons and a Pretty Girl: Translating Ikkyū Sōjun’ by Andrew Whitehead, enquires into the nature of philosophical translation, both in terms of the translation of philosophical texts, but also in terms of the necessity of philosophical engagement in the act of translation. Whitehead draws on the work of James Heisig in order to come close to an understanding of how philosophical translation should take place. Examining a poem by the Zen thinker Ikkyū and a number of existing translations; Whitehead highlights the extent to which ‘meaning’ is constituted, not just by the text, but also by the translator’s approach to the text. Through an investigation of four existing translations of the poem he notes that in each case the translator imposes too much of their own interpretation without fully engaging with the philosophical drives behind the work. As a result of this lack of philosophical engagement, in this case with the tenets of Zen thinking, the translations produced are unfaithful to philosophy itself. Appreciating the subtleties of thinkers such as Nāgārjuna and Linji, particularly in terms of negation, affirmation and emptiness; Whitehead manages to achieve a balance between entering the world of the poet and providing a personal interpretation in his own original translation. Worth noting, however, is that this balanced philosophical engagement not only produces a translation closer to the original ‘meaning’; but also one that is closer to the original form and rhythm in the poem. Indicating thus, that a philosophical engagement produces a translation that is not only more faithful to philosophy itself but also to the multiple layers of meaning – meaning expressed in words, but also in rhythm, structure, etc. – that take place in any one text. Therefore, translation, in the strictest sense of a ‘carrying over’, can really only take place at all when it is philosophically informed.

‘Translation and Justice in Paul Ricoeur’ by Angelo Bottone, examines the manner in which these two themes not only relate, but in a sense provide each other’s frameworks in the later writings of Ricoeur. Bottone notes that Ricoeur spent much of his later years focusing on the problem