



Translation

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translation and/as community

“Translation is as old as nature and nurture. [...] Translation seen as conversation – for conversation assumes equality among the speakers – is clearly the language of languages, the language that all languages should speak.” (wa Thiong’o, 2007: 136)

Arguing that translation and community are closely related concepts is easy and challenging in equal measure. Easy for those who pay attention to the world around them, without the pressure of the age-old nostalgia for origin(al)ity – in an eschewed sense, this nostalgia is the mother of all current (and probably fatal) obsessions with innovation and singularity. Challenging, because most of us have fallen prey to both the myth of creation as radical originality and the fixation with newness.

What I am proposing here is that we take a fresh look at the world, not as a collection of singularities, but rather as a creative cross-pollination of stories that incessantly translate who we are at a given point in time and how we perceive the world around us – as such, any idea of community would be built on a manifold translatedness of encounters in language and experience.

From the onset, translation as a hermeneutic activity is – in the narrowest as well as the broadest and more metaphorical senses – a way to make sense of the world, of others and, as Friedrich Schleiermacher already anticipated in 1813, of ourselves. As such, translation premises all communication and produces community. We need only think about the manifold tasks that involve translation: speaking (what I mean is...), communicating (let me make myself clear to you...), making sense of different artistic forms (what does this mean?), psychotherapy (what

do my experiences, my feelings, my dreams say of me), teaching, writing (a journal, a book, a newspaper article), producing and interpreting the Law, among many others. The languages of community presuppose numerous acts of translation, negotiation, and consensus.

To a considerable extent, human beings are capable of living together precisely because they have the faculty to translate themselves and others into ways that produce commonality through language and experience. Thus, arguably, every human experience results from and in acts of translatedness that are ultimately rooted in a shared sense of a common destiny. Seen in this light, translation is a sign of both humanity and humaneness.

in the beginning was (also) translation? translation as love.

In the beginning was the verb. In the Judeo-Christian narrative tradition, the word as a performative act in itself includes translation. According to the King James's version, after creating "the heaven and the earth (...), God said, Let there be light: and there was light. || And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night." (Genesis, 1: 3-5). And just as God created the firmament, gathered the waters, created the stars, animals, and human beings and, so the narrative goes, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis, 1: 31). I would suggest that this narrative invites us to witness how God created the world by translating His word into the material world.

While the idea may sound unorthodox and/or perhaps too preposterous, the question remains: what would change if we were to look at the Judeo-Christian God as a master translator, as He engages in multiple acts of translation throughout the biblical narratives? Not only does He create the world via the word, but He also translates Himself into various forms across time – the ultimate example being His translation into human form in the person of Christ. A God who lovingly translates Himself into human language(s) and understanding – what bigger proof of a boundless love and mercy?

In this sense, and to go back to wa Thiong'o's claim, translation is indeed the language of languages, in terms of language both as a (divine) way of 'worldmaking' and as a system of representation that symbolically entails consecutive acts of loving translation. Similarly to God's original

translation, human beings translate themselves into communities of affection and togetherness.

The argument I am putting forward results from an impulse to symbolically read the world *otherwise*. What if we disposed of notions of “singularity”, “originality” and “creation ex-nihilo”, and instead reimagined the world as a web – a set of relations; a horizontal, never-ending exchange of perceptions, stories, knowledge forms; what Ngugi wa Thiong’o calls, affectionately, a “globalectic world”, i.e., a network without an actual centre (2023: 54) or an ever-changing one? What would be gained if we changed lenses, and accepted looking around us, and at us, not from the perspective and expectation of originality and innovation, but from the assumption that creativity results from accretion and translation, i.e., from the assemblage of plural views stemming from similar and yet different arrays of experience. After all, “[m]eaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death” (Rushdie, 1997: 12).

As a meaning-making activity, nothing human is foreign to translation. A human being, one might argue, is a converging locus of an ongoing series of translational trajectories, gestures, and experiences – the result of everything and everyone s/he has met: “Everything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross” (Ondaatje, 2007: 17). So much for pure, radical originality, then.

Furthermore, translation can also be seen as a method of sorts, a way of apprehending and relating to the other, since it commands full attention to the other – a kind of unconditional hospitality, not perhaps in the Derridean sense, but to the extent that one is committed to listening to the other. In our present-day world, this is no small feat. Aware that we are translated and translating beings, we may perhaps be more inclined to welcome others into the fold as equals, as we anticipate the possibility of some kind of prismatic recognition of ourselves in them – after all, we can only discern ourselves in the face of the Other/others, to heterodoxically echo Levinas.

The promises of self-help books notwithstanding, human beings are far from monolithic or singular. They are arguably inhabited by an

incessant translatedness: “We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. (...) We are communal histories, communal books” (Ondaatje, 1992: 261). Almásy, the protagonist of *The English Patient* (1992), translates humanity into an assemblage of encounters, a geography of commonality – crisscrossing translations of people met, ideas and experiences shared, of community-building. This results in a uniqueness of sorts, but one that draws on polyphony, metamorphosis, and translation rather than a radical originality that builds on an impossible obsession with origins.

As Paul Éluard phrased it in 1963, “Nous vivons dans l’oubli de nos métamorphoses” (We live in the oblivion of our metamorphoses). However, we would do well to *remember* (in the dual sense of recollecting and reassembling) our metamorphoses, as they signal the incompleteness that points both to the vulnerability and the beauty of being human. To conclude, without translation, and the willingness to translate ourselves, others, and the world, there is no community.

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