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The Post-Babel Condition: Paul Ricoeur's translator's task

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The post-Babel condition: Paul Ricoeur's translator's task

Paul Ricoeur's ethics of translation has recently inspired a number of authors in Translation Studies. In this article, I argue that the entire scope and potential impact of Ricoeur's thought on translation theory and practice can only be fully grasped when considering his critical dialogue with previous traditions of thought. This dialogue manifests itself in two rereadings that Ricoeur performs throughout *On Translation*: Firstly, of the myth of Babel and secondly, of Walter Benjamin's essay 'The translator's task.' In the first part of this article, I retrace how Ricoeur rejects the traditional idea of Babel as a catastrophic event and instead argues for an understanding of multiplicity as a gift, the 'human condition' as it ought to be. In the second part, I explore how Ricoeur, based on this rereading of the Babel narrative, engages with Walter Benjamin's essay. I argue that it is essentially through a reinterpretation of Antoine Berman's reading of Benjamin that Ricoeur rearticulates the translator's task in ethical terms. While this particular constellation between Benjamin and Berman has received little attention, my claim is that it is actually essential for Ricoeur's idea of translation as 'linguistic hospitality' and its potential relevance for Translation Studies.

Keywords: Ethics of translation; Paul Ricoeur; Walter Benjamin, Antoine Berman, linguistic hospitality, Babel

Introduction

In *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Umberto Eco[1] confesses that his 'only regret is that George Steiner had already copyrighted the most appropriate title for this book – *After Babel*' (1997, p. 5). Eco's regret illustrates the lasting impact of the narrative about the destruction of the Tower of Babel and the consequent confusion of language. Genesis 11 has not only been a recurrent topos in translation theory but has also structured much philosophical thought on the existence and origin of multiple tongues, linguistic diversity, as well as linguistic difference.

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[1] Most of the texts that I discuss and quote in this article are referred to in translation. While I will not be able to discuss the translations themselves, I will refer to the translators on several occasions to underline that I am quoting from their translations of these seminal texts.

Indeed, to borrow Jacques Derrida's words, here in Joseph F. Graham's translation, this 'myth' 'does not constitute just one figure among others' (1985, p. 165).

In this sense, it is unsurprising that the Tower of Babel narrative should assume an important role in Paul Ricoeur's *Sur la Traduction* (2004), the book in which the three essays the philosopher devoted exclusively to the issue of translation are collected and which Eileen Brennan translated into English as *On Translation* (2006). Ricoeur (and I will quote from Brennan's translation from now on) is obviously conscious of the weight of 'the myth of Babel' (p. 18). Indeed, he explicitly embraces it. To put his reflection 'on the right track' (p. 18), he goes back to the singularity of the figure, the weight of its interpretation. For Ricoeur, to think about translation essentially means to think about the 'scattering and the confounding of languages' (p. 18), this 'post-Babel' condition we find ourselves in. However, Ricoeur's return to the myth of Babel that shall put him on the right track is not merely a reading, but a *re*reading. What he suggests in these essays is not only an interpretation, but a *different* interpretation that is explicitly articulated against a tradition in which Babel is read as 'an irremediable linguistic catastrophe' (p. 12). That this catastrophic reading has indeed been the dominant understanding of Babel seems quite consensual. As George Steiner (1998) underscores, Babel usually stands for the idea that 'man's language condition, the incommunicados that so absurdly divide him are a punishment' (p. 59). 'Tradition,' as Eco (1997) puts it, has read Genesis 11 as 'a story in which the existence of a plurality of tongues was understood as the tragic consequence of the confusion after Babel and the result of a divine mistake' (p. 9).

What is particularly remarkable about Ricoeur's three essays is not merely his critique of this 'tradition' of the formative myth about linguistic fragmentation, but that he articulates this *re*reading in conjunction with another *re*reading, the *re*reading of Walter Benjamin's 'magnificent text, *The Translator's Task*' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 9). While the link between Babel and Benjamin is most explicit in Ricoeur's second essay, 'The paradigm of translation,' the

critique of Benjamin's 'pure language' (*reine Sprache*) (1991, p. 13) and the constellation between the multiplicity of language and the translator's task figure in all three essays and are central to Ricoeur's ethical argument. Similarly to the case of Babel, Ricoeur's response to Benjamin addresses not only Benjamin's essay as such, but actually enters into a dialogue with a specific tradition of philosophical thought on translation and particularly with Antoine Berman, for whom Benjamin was a central reference.[2]

The aim of this article is therefore to explore Ricoeur's ethics of translation and his peculiar formulation of translation as 'linguistic hospitality' through the relationship between his rereadings of Babel and the translator's task. My claim is that Ricoeur's dialogue with tradition is not only essential to understand his ethics, but also to think about the potential implications for the theorization or discourse on translation as well as its practice. Indeed, Ricoeur's reinterpretation aims to challenge some basic assumptions that structure much translation in theory and practice, although it must be acknowledged that his engagement is circumscribed to a tradition of translational thought influenced by hermeneutics and German Romanticism. In what follows, I therefore propose to track two movements that characterize the rereadings that Ricoeur performs in *On Translation*. Since the three essays were written for different purposes and can be read independently, the movements I refer to and that I will explore do not flow sequentially from chapter one to three, but characterize, to a certain degree, all of the three essays, despite their slightly different approaches to the discussion of translation.

Intrinsic to my line of inquiry is the assumption that Ricoeur's reflections about translation need to be understood as 'paradigmatic,' insofar as they are concerned with a

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[2] Berman (2018) considers Benjamin's text to be 'the twentieth-century text on translation' (p. 26). According to Berman, '[i]t may well be that each century produces but a single text of this calibre: an unsurpassable text; a text that becomes the point of departure for all further meditation on translation, even for those who disagree' (p. 27).

'paradigm,' as he puts it, of the post-Babel condition, a philosophical accounting of linguistic (and, one might add, anthropological) difference and diversity, in which translation is understood as a moment where the relationship between 'self' and 'other' is negotiated. As Alison Scott-Baumann (2010) emphasizes, Ricoeur approaches translation not merely as 'a subject matter for translation studies' but as 'a paradigm for philosophy' (p. 70), an understanding that aligns very well with ongoing debates about the link between translation and philosophy (see Leal & Wilson, 2023). In this context it is certainly not circumstantial that Ricoeur articulates his ethics as a rereading of the foundational myth about linguistic fragmentation and as a response to Walter Benjamin. Ricoeur's essays retrace philosophical traditions in order to position translation at the center of his philosophical inquiry about selfhood and the relationship to otherness.

The scope of Ricoeur's thought on translation also explains why it has recently become an important point of reference for a number of authors in Translation Studies (see for instance, Maitland, 2017; Pokorn & Koskinen, 2021; Foran, 2023). Resonating 'with some current burning societal issues' (Pokorn & Koskinen, 2021, p. 93), Ricoeur's reading of linguistic fragmentation may provide important insights for contemporary reflections about difference, diversity, otherness, and hospitality, as well as present aspirations towards a 'universal language.' My article aims to engage in these contemporary debates by emphasizing the importance of Ricoeur's critical dialogue with Benjamin and Berman to understand his particular contribution to the theory and practice of translation as 'linguistic hospitality.' Thus, while translation indeed proves important to Ricoeur's approach to hermeneutics, meaning, and human experience in general, I will focus on the ethical argument and how it relates to questions of linguistic diversity.

The gift of linguistic multiplicity

At the beginning of essay 'Two', Ricoeur (2006) emphasizes that he envisages two possible 'access routes to the problem posed by the act of translating' (p. 11):

> *either* take the term 'translation' in the strict sense of the transfer of a spoken message from one language to another *or* take it in the broad sense as synonymous with the interpretation of any meaningful whole within the same speech community. (p. 11)

These 'access routes' resemble Roman Jakobson's (1959) 'interlinguistic' and 'intralinguistic translation' and it is not by chance that Ricoeur decides to start with the first option. The desire to translate begins after Babel. It is because of the diversity of languages, because, as he puts it, 'men speak different languages that there is translation' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 11). At an initial stage, translation is therefore defined as an act that connects two partners: the foreign (meaning the work, the author, the language) and the reader of the translation. Between them stands the translator, who passes on the message 'from one idiom to another' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 1).

What Ricoeur then proceeds to explore, setting them against each other, are two polarities that one encounters frequently in discourses on translation: the pairs of translatability versus untranslatability and fidelity versus betrayal. On the one hand, in its mediating quality, translation is always condemned to, as Ricoeur (2006) argues, quoting Franz Rosenzweig, 'serve two masters' (p. 4): the foreign author with his demand for faithfulness to his work, and the domestic reader with his demand for faithfulness to his sacred (self-sufficient) 'mother tongue.' Rather than providing a solution to this paradox, Ricoeur recognizes that the translator is caught up in an unsolvable ambivalence, forcing him or her to choose between what Friedrich Schleiermacher (2012) termed the two methods of translating: to either move the reader towards the author, which entails the potential betrayal

of the sacred mother tongue of the reader, or to move the author towards the reader, to the detriment of being faithful to the author's original creation.

However, the pitfall of betrayal and fidelity is not the only one the translator has to face. As Ricoeur argues, the translator also encounters another form of resistance, that of untranslatability: on the one hand, within the receiving language, in the form of its claim to untainted self-sufficiency and, on the other, within the source text, in the form of the recognition that the original cannot be duplicated. If languages are truly distinct from each other, then ultimately translation is indeed impossible. No true correspondence exists: what has been said in one language cannot be said in another. And this, Ricoeur argues, is the true paradox of untranslatability: correspondence as identity is never to be attained, and yet translation does not cease to exist. Not only have translators always existed, but every speaker also has the ability to speak more than one language, to be a polyglot and to translate.

The interesting aspect within this constellation of paradoxes is that Ricoeur now returns to the myth of Babel and 'the origin of the scattering-confounding' of language, to use his (translated) words (p. 12). As I have emphasized above, Ricoeur argues that the destruction of the Tower and the linguistic fragmentation that accompanies it is usually 'perceived as an irremediable linguistic catastrophe' (p. 12) – an understanding that Ricoeur vigorously rejects. According to Ricoeur, Babel should not be read as a story of linguistic diversity as divine punishment which condemns humanity to plurality, dispersal, and difference. On the contrary, he claims that linguistic fragmentation and proliferation of meaning are not to be interpreted as a plight in need of redemption, but as the human condition as it ought to be: Babel not as a narrative of the terrible loss of pre-Babel monolingualism, but as 'merely a way of describing one of the facts of our existence; that people are diverse and speak many languages' (Foran, 2023, p. 46).

To support this argument, Ricoeur draws on Eco (1997), who points out the 'explosive potential' of two biblical verses in Genesis 10 that acknowledge linguistic diversity prior to

Babel (p. 10). In contrast to the myth of the Tower, in the preceding verses linguistic plurality is not associated with divine punishment but appears 'simply as a result of a natural process' (Eco, 1997, 19). As Eco (1997), here in James Fentress' translation, maintains,

> speaking of the diffusion of the sons of Noah after the Flood, the text states of the sons of Japheth that, 'By these [sons] were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations' (10:5). This idea is repeated in similar words for the sons of Ham (10:20) and of Shem (10:31). (p. 9)

Ricoeur follows this line of thought, emphasizing that the verses immediately preceding the narrative of Babel take a form similar to a census (2006, p. 19). For Ricoeur, the account of 'the sons of Noah […] after the flood' (Genesis, 10:31) and 'their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations' (Genesis, 10:32)[3] seem to take linguistic plurality as 'a merely factual datum' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 19), implying not only a critique of the notion of linguistic plurality as a fall from divine grace, but also a refusal of the idea of pre-Babel monolingualism.

The rereading of Babel thus holds indeed 'explosive potential.' What Ricoeur proposes is no less than a reversal of what should be taken as the 'original' human language condition. As Ricoeur points out, the myth of Babel may be read 'as the non-judgmental acknowledgment of an *original separation*' (p. 18, emphasis added). This implies not only a refusal of the notion of divine punishment, but actually positions the idea of the (re)construction of an original, universal language as a 'fantasy' resulting from a 'desperate refusal of the real human condition, which is that of multiplicity at all levels of existence' (p. 33). In Ricoeur's reading of Babel, 'there is no recrimination, no lamentation, no accusation' (p. 20). Rather than a linguistic catastrophe, Ricoeur contends, we are faced with a gift: 'the

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[3] In French, Ricoeur quotes from Chouraki's French translation of the Hebrew Bible. Eileen Brennan uses the King James version, while I quote from the Standard English version.

scattering and the confounding of languages, announced by the myth of Babel, are going to *crown* [the] history of the separation' (19, emphasis added).

Here it becomes apparent that Ricoeur actually aligns his rereading of Babel with a broader interpretation of Genesis ranging from the 'separation of cosmic elements' (p. 18), to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, to Cain's fratricide, up to the narrative of the destruction of the Tower. The ultimate confusion of tongues announced by the myth of Babel is thus read as the culmination of an acknowledgment and narrative explanation of 'how we are' and 'how we exist, scattered and confounded' (p. 19). Multiplicity, linguistic as well as anthropological, is thus not to be understood as a fall from a 'pure' origin, but a defining trait of the human condition. Ricoeur may not go so far as Elad Lapidot (2012) in suggesting that Babel is one knot in a tale in which God made his creation ever more like Him, but he certainly concurs that the development depicted in Genesis announces multiplicity as the source of humanity's creative power and ethical responsibility: Babel crowns 'the history of the separation' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 19), which allowed 'an order to emerge from chaos,' the 'entry into responsible adulthood,' and fraternity to become 'an ethical project and not a simple fact of nature' (p. 18).

This has important implications for translation. Rather than a necessary means to overcome an unwanted evil and deviation from a 'pure' origin, translation comes to be understood as a vital aspect of the 'human condition.' Faced with multiplicity and dispersion, Ricoeur claims, we are 'called […] to translation' (p. 19). It is, as he emphasizes, 'the thing to be done so that human action can simply continue' (p. 19): scattered and confounded as we are, we are defined by the 'translator's task.'

The translator's task as an ethics of translation

At the end of his *re*reading of Babel as the culmination of the 'history of separation,' Ricoeur thus arrives at 'the task of translating' (2006, p. 20). The echo of Benjamin's title is by no

means incidental. Indeed, Ricoeur not only speaks of the 'task of translating' but also, and on several occasions, explicitly uses Benjamin's title 'the translator's task.' However, on all these occasions it is also quite clear that Ricoeur intends to perform another '*re*reading': after the myth of Babel and the acknowledgement of multiplicity as the 'real human condition,' Ricoeur is left with the yet unsolved task of the translator. And similarly to the myth of Babel, Ricoeur approaches the task of the translator by reading against the grain of tradition, this time of the German-French 'lineage' of thought on translation that is manifest in the work of Antoine Berman.

To understand this suggestion, we need to go back to Ricoeur's first essay, which he begins by asserting that he 'would like to place [his] remarks […] under the aegis of the title *The Test of the Foreign*' [*L'épreuve de l'étranger*] (p. 3)[4]. This reference to the title of Berman's (1992/1995) study of *Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* is the beginning of the second movement that I set out to explore in this paper and that characterizes Ricoeur's *re*reading of the translator's task. By placing this explicit reference at the beginning of his essay, Ricoeur signals one of his central concerns regarding translation: the ethical dimension of translation and its materialization in its relation to the foreign, the other. However, it is important to point out that Ricoeur also signals an acknowledgment of the weight that Berman's thought carries within his own reflections. Berman reappears in all three essays throughout the book, and it is with references to Berman that the book begins and ends.

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[4] The title of Berman's *L'épreuve de l'étranger* (1995 [1984]) was translated into English by S. Heyvaert as *The Experience of the Foreign* (1992). However, the translator of Ricoeur's essays, Eileen Brennan, decided to render the title as *The Test of the Foreign* 'for reasons to do with Ricoeur's subsequent reflections on the meaning of the word *épreuve,*' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 41). Berman's title was itself a translation of a phrase employed by Martin Heidegger used when writing about Hölderlin. This reference to Heidegger and its implications for Berman's as well as Ricoeur's thought lie beyond the scope of this article.

On Translation in effect stands under the aegis of Berman's *traductologie*, this 'savoir propre' of which translation is simultaneously subject and object (Berman, 1999, p. 16).

That the link between 'the translator's task' and the 'test of the foreign' is essential, is not only my contention, but is actually stated by Ricoeur. At the beginning of essay 'One,' he clarifies that '[t]o throw light on this test [of the foreign], I suggest comparing the "translator's task" […] with […] "the 'work of remembering" and […] "the work of mourning"' (p. 3). The first important aspect here is that Berman's study on *Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* is, among other things, a powerful argument for the need to think about translation in ethical terms. According to Berman (1992), '[t]ranslation is a "putting in touch with," or it is nothing' (p. 4). This also implies that Berman vigorously opposes any definition of translation in merely communicational terms. While he admits that transmission plays a role in translation, he also argues that its 'true sense' lies in its 'ethical aim' (Berman, 1992, p. 5).

This point is essential for Berman (1992), since he argues that the fixation on defining translation in terms of an assumed transmissibility of messages between languages is what lies at the core of ethnocentric and thus '*bad translation*' (p. 5). As a consequence, Berman in his *L'épreuve de l'étranger* distances himself from Benjamin insofar as he underlines that Benjamin is not concerned with the ethical but the metaphysical aim of translation. Whereas translation is part of Benjamin's metaphysics of language, Berman's aim is to develop an ethics of translation. What Ricoeur does by linking 'the test of the foreign' to 'the translator's task' is therefore to announce his intention to rearticulate the task of the translator in ethical terms, but also that, in order to do so, the metaphysics of translation needs to be revisited as well. And it is here that Ricoeur parts from Berman, whose non-ethnocentric translation and insistence on translating by the *letter* (not the word) draws heavily on Benjamin's metaphysics of language.

In order to follow Ricoeur's rereading of the translator's task, it is therefore necessary to revisit Benjamin's metaphysics and Berman's appropriation of it. One of the central aspects of Benjamin's essay on the translator's task is his refusal to define translation in terms of reception. Translation, so he begins his argument, is not 'intended' for the reader who is not able to read the original. One need only recall Schleiermacher to understand that this is a radical reformulation of the purposes of translation, but one that is less puzzling when considered within the context of Benjamin's understanding of language and poetry. As Benjamin emphasizes, anyone who understands poetry knows that it does not simply state something and, as a consequence, a translation that seeks to convey the meaning of a poem fails the poem's nature or purpose. Rather than seeking to reconstitute the meaning of the original, the translator's task is therefore concerned with working on 'language as a whole,' 'its totality' (Benjamin, 2012, p. 80):

> translation, instead of making itself resemble the sense of the original, must fashion in its own language, carefully and in detail, a counterpart to the original's mode of meaning, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language. For that very reason translation must, in large measure, turn its attention away from trying to communicate something, away from the sense; the original is essential to translation only insofar as it has already relieved the translator and his work of the burden and organization of what is communicated. (p. 81)

Benjamin, here in Steven Rendall's translation, thus separates the work of a poet from the work of a translator by distinguishing between empirical languages and '*the* language,' his famous notion of 'pure language.' While the poet works within the realm of an empirical language, the translator's work, if it is to be meaningful, moves within the sphere of 'pure language.' As Benjamin (2012) argues, 'starting out from a single work of art' 'the translation's intention is […] directed toward […] language as a whole' and aspires to 'integrat[e] the plurality of languages into a single true language' (p. 80).

What is particularly important in Ricoeur's estimation is that Benjamin reads Babel along the grain of tradition in the sense that he understands multiplicity as a consequence of humanity's fall from paradise and from Adamic language, i.e., the original, unmediated, universal language before the Fall. As a consequence, empirical languages are seen as fallen languages, fragments, which translation aims to make whole by bringing out a harmony pertaining to the greater, 'true' or 'pure language.'

What becomes apparent here is that Benjamin's interest in translation is strongly influenced by his engagement with the Jewish mystical tradition and, as Berman contends, needs to be understood in the context of 'his speculative reflection on language and art' (2018, p. 36). However, at the same time, and this is one of the aspects which Ricoeur does not consider, Benjamin's view of translation and language also evades any glorifying conception of national languages that is associated with German Romanticism and authors such as Schleiermacher. In Benjamin, translation is not circumscribed to the idea of distinct languages as expressions or manifestations of a specific 'nation' or 'a people,' nor to the organically linked, monolingual (bourgeois) subject, whether it be the author, reader or translator.

Indeed, Benjamin's idea of 'pure language' must be understood in the context of his critique of translation as communication and the understanding of language that such a conceptualization of translation presupposes. As Berman (2018) in his extensive commentary on Benjamin's essay, here translated by Chantal Wright, argues:

> *Reine Sprache* is not an abstract category; it is not the *langage* present in all *langues*. It is a language in its own right […]. It is not an additional natural language, but the *langue* that each language wants to express but does not. It is not the *logos* underlying all languages and constituting their logical order, but both the *langue* that was lost (that existed prior to the confusion of languages and their becoming multiple) and the *langue* which is coming. It is a language that people will speak: they will not speak it the way we speak at the moment, but they will speak it. (pp. 128-129)

What Berman hints at in this passage is that Benjamin's 'pure language' exceeds the modern linguistic conception of language (*langue*) with its arbitrary relation between signifier and signified.[5] However, it does not refer to *langage* either. Rather, Benjamin's 'pure language' is related to a different language (*langue*), the one that was and that is to come.

It is important to note that, in Benjamin's sense, language is not exclusive to humans, but inherent to the entire world created by God. In contrast to human language, the language of things is mute. As Benjamin underlines in 'On Language as such and on the Language of Man' (1997), Adamic language is that language that translates the mute language of things into the oral, sounding (*lauthaft*) language of man (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 76-77). This translation requires a capacity to listen to the mute language of things and is therefore closely linked to Benjamin's idea of mimesis. In a 'world endowed with spiritual meaning' (Stern, 2019, p. 5), Adamic language, according to Benjamin, does not refer to an extra-linguistic world, but rather becomes a mimetic medium in which the language immanent in Nature is experienced. Adamic language thus refers to an embodied process of mimesis which does not rely on signification, but on a mimetic faculty which allows humans to recognize and produce similarities. As Stern puts it, according to Benjamin, '[l]anguage begins as an immanent, mimetic attempt to give voice to the meaning communicated by nature and not as a way of referring to objects' (2019, p. 57).

In other words, Adamic language, rather than referring to the world, recognizes the world by translating the mute language of things into sounding words: the mute language of things becomes flesh in the *letter*. This is also why Benjamin (2002) speaks of *Namensprache* [name language] (p. 72) to describe the original language that was abandoned when man ate

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[5] One could even argue that Benjamin's pure language constitutes an explicit critique of such a conceptualization of language grounded in a 'suspicion of the Enlightenment's rationalist impulse toward systematization and purification' (Stern, 2019, p.7). For further discussion see, for instance, Stern (2019) and Wolfarth (2017).

from the tree of knowledge: with the knowledge of good and evil, man fell from Paradise and also from Adamic language. Language, consequently, became referential, a means (*Mittel*) to communicate meaning other than the name.

The confusion of language after Babel in this narrative, as presented in 'On Language as such and on the Language of Man,' is thus understood as a consequence and intensification of a process of linguistic estrangement initiated by the loss of Adamic language and the simultaneous decrease of the mimetic faculty (see also Wohlfarth, 2001; Waldow, 2006). While empirical languages still contain a grain of 'pure language,' a sort of trace of the initial expressive function based on the mimetic faculty, for the most part they conceal it. Reduced to a *means* (*Mittel*) to transmit meaning, languages have become 'chatter,' a 'system of signs with no essence' (Berman, 2018, p. 31).

This is why Benjamin insists that the translator needs to refrain from the transmission of meaning and instead aim to let 'pure language' shine through. Translation is associated with an act of resistance against the symbolic order that enables a momentary recognition of the 'intended object, taken absolutely' (Benjamin, 2012, p. 78).[6] As Berman (2018) observes, 'pure language,' is 'empty, non-transitive,' it is 'language which is not the bearer of content, language which rests within itself, language which is not a means' (p. 129). And it is here that translation and poetry meet in Benjamin: in both poetry and translation the residue of 'pure language' may be vitalized precisely at the point of *Unverständlichkeit* [unintelligibility], when they cease to communicate, to be a mere *means* and become a non-instrumental *medium* of experience. As Berman emphasizes, 'pure language' is poetic 'to the extent that poetry

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[6] Translation is thus associated with Benjamin's concept of 'non-sensuous similarity.' While humans have lost their ability to sensuously perceive and produce similarities, empirical languages still contain a trace of the name that merely reflected the language of things by preproducing it in the letter. However, this trace only flashes up in translation, when the different 'modes of meaning' (Benjamin, 2012, 78) complement each other.

becomes language – is pure language, language which is "pure song"', intransitive, 'contentless and with no aim outside itself' (2018, p. 129).

Interestingly, as Waldow (2006, p. 84) notes, in *Les Mots et les Choses* (1998) Michel Foucault describes a historical process between the 16th and 17th centuries that resembles Benjamin's narrative of alienation, albeit certainly formulated in a considerably different style and without focusing on translation. Waldow's observation proves particularly helpful to contextualize Benjamin's metaphysics, since Foucault also associates Adamic language to a 'principle of experience of the world, which is grounded on a concept of similarities [and] precedes any subject-object-dualism' (Waldow, 2006, p.84, translation mine).[7] The important point, still in Waldow's reading of Foucault, is that after the Renaissance this principle of experience of the world that assumes a sensuous mimetic continuum of knowledge undergoes a rift and language is no longer perceived as a natural system in which the objects themselves are kept. As a consequence, language ceases to be perceived as non-arbitrarily related to the world and becomes understood as a merely representative means in which signified and signifier are arbitrarily linked. Benjamin is not alone in espousing this change of language perception in a critique of Enlightenment rationality. Indeed, Stern (2019) aligns Benjamin in a tradition of an 'expressivist approach' to language that 'owes its biggest debt to [Johann Georg] Hamann' (p. 11), but has influenced the work of a wide range of philosophers, including the late Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Ricoeur does not address the implication of such a historical contextualization, however, and limits himself to use Benjamin as an explicit contrast for his own renouncement of any idea of an original or messianic 'pure language.' For Ricoeur (2006), not only is there no 'third text,' no identical meaning that could be said in another way or be passed on from

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[7] In German it reads: 'Prinzip der Welterfahrung, welches sich auf das Konzept der Ähnlichkeit begründet, ist vor jeder Subjekt-Objekt-Dualität angesiedelt.'

one text to another, as Benjamin and Berman would concur, but also no translation without loss, no translation that could compensate the absence of a universal language, or the provincialism of our own. Translation cannot overcome the 'impassable difference between the peculiar and the foreign' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 9), it cannot, according to Ricoeur, make good for 'the *gap* between the universal and empirical languages, between what is *a priori* and what is historical,' 'between the sign and the thing,' 'between language and the world' (p. 17), even in an idealized messianic form as imagined by Benjamin.

Before I return to the implications of Ricoeur's refusal of 'pure language,' it must be noted that, although the argument put forward by Ricoeur is compellingly consequent, it does Benjamin's text injustice. Even if one admits that Ricoeur is right in emphasizing Benjamin's desire for 'equivalence between […] language and the world' (p. 17), to describe this desire as 'nostalgia, remodelled as an eschatological waiting' (p. 16) is a somewhat misleading or at least one-sided rendering of the messianic and revolutionary moment in Benjamin's text. The important point here is that Benjamin is neither truly 'Hölderlin's heir,' as Ricoeur suggests (p. 21), nor does he simply 'gather together' 'the entire German experience of translation' (Berman, 2018, p. 27), as Berman would have it. Neither Ricoeur nor Berman actually account for the implications of Benjamin's idea of the 'fallen' empirical languages as 'chatter.' While Ricoeur simply abstains from commenting on this aspect, Berman fails to explore all of its implications when it comes to its relationship to Benjamin's critique of capitalist modernity and bourgeois culture. Even if 'The Task of the Translator' remains within the realm of mystical language, it must be acknowledged that the messianic force that Benjamin ascribes to translation already contains the seeds of the messianic force of the historical materialism that he develops in his later writings.[8]

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[8] See Bielsa (2022) for a recent discussion of how Benjamin's essay on translation resonates with his later, more materialist approach.

In contrast to Hölderlin and the authors of the German tradition that Berman traces in his *L'épreuve de l'étranger,* Benjamin's translator's task neither pertains to a 'secret Germany' nor to an idea of *Bildung.* The aim of translation in Benjamin is neither a detour via a foreign language to return to one's enriched (national) 'mother tongue,' nor 'the constitution of the self by the experience [épreuve] of the non-self' (Bermann, 1992, p. 39). On the contrary, language's messianic end of history implies the dissolution of empirical (national) languages. The translator's task consists in cultivating the seed of 'pure language' within the translating language so that it may point, 'at least, in a wonderfully penetrating manner, toward the predetermined, inaccessible domain where languages are reconciled and fulfilled' (Benjamin, 2012, p. 79). And while Ricoeur reads this messianic end as a mere reformulation of a nostalgia for unity and a refusal to accept human multiplicity, it may also be understood as a critique of standardized, bourgeois (national) languages with all its political implications, including associated notions of subjectivity and of the self/other dichotomy.[9]

Berman's program is categorically different, however, and Ricoeur answers more adequately to Benjamin's essay within its constellation with Berman than to Benjamin's essay in isolation. I have already mentioned that Berman draws on Benjamin to undermine his critique of ethnocentric translation. Translation, according to Berman, needs to be practiced and experienced without relying on an instrumental model of language. Bad translation, as we have seen above, aims to reproduce the meaning of the source text in the translating language and in doing so ignores the *letter,* which he defines as the bearer of 'the strangeness of the foreign work' (Berman, 1992, p. 5).

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[9] Berman (2018), in contrast, recognizes that although Benjamin reads with tradition in his understanding of Babel as a negative condition to be overcome by history, the fragmentary character of empirical languages constitutes an important reinterpretation of multiplicity that does not frame it as entirely negative (see Berman, 2018, p. 138).

Within the realm of his ethics of translation, Berman thus follows Benjamin's thought, but rearticulates the theoretical consequences of the non-utilitarian, 'un-communicative, even un-signifying,' (Berman, 2018, p. 59) aspects of literary and poetic language. The outcome is a defense of 'literalizing translation' (*traduction littéralisante*) (Berman, 1999, p. 15) in which it is through the estranging effect of translation by the letter that translation's true aim is approached: 'de faire de la langue traduisante "l'auberge du lointain"' [to turn the translating language into the 'Shelter of the Distant'] (Berman, 1999, p. 15). In essence, Berman's ethical imperative envisions an encounter with the 'Foreign as Foreign,' a mode of translating that respects the alterity of the other without appropriating it:

> The issue is to defend language and the relations among languages against the increasing homogenization of communication systems – because they endanger the entire realm of belonging and difference. Annihilation of dialects and local speech; trivialization of national languages; leveling of the differences among them for the benefit of a model of non-language for which English served as guinea pig (and as victim), a model by which automatic translation would become thinkable, cancerous proliferation of specialized languages at the bosom of the common language—this is a process that thoroughly attacks language and the natural relation of human beings to language. (Berman, 1992, p. 181)

Berman's ethics of translation thus explicitly leaves Benjamin's metaphysical realm, in which fragmented idioms are to be dissolved by complementing each other and instead articulates an idea of 'linguistic hospitality' as a way 'to inhabit and defend Babel' (Berman, 1992, p. 181). Translation ought to accommodate 'a certain relationship to the Other,' that 'fertilize[s] what is one's Own through the mediation of what is Foreign' (Berman, 1992, p. 4). In the end, Berman uses Benjamin to substantiate his literalism, but actually inverts Benjamin's translator's task. It is not the dissolution and 'harmonization' of languages that are established as translation's ethical goals, but the maintenance of their supposed specificity and the differences between them.

The formulation of translation as 'linguistic hospitality' brings us back to Ricoeur and his movement towards the translator's task as an ethics of translation. There are apparent affinities between Ricoeur's and Berman's concerns, but Ricoeur (2006) significantly decides to lead them in a different direction. Taking 'the second route of entry into the problem of translation' (p. 29) Ricoeur links the translator's task and the ethical implications associated with it to a reflection about 'translation *within* the same speech community' (p. 24). The crucial point in Ricoeur's argument, at least for my purposes here, is that the impassable difference between peculiar and foreign language is not explained by the absolute border between the two, but through the internal heterogeneity within both of them, their 'indefinite diversity' (p. 24).

It is through the recognition of this internal diversity that Ricoeur draws a bridge from translation between languages to translation within languages, or from interlingual translation to intralingual translation, to employ Jakobson's terminology once more. As Ricoeur argues, in our unfulfillable urge to explain ourselves by saying '*the same thing in another way,*' 'we rediscover within our linguistic community the same enigma of the same, of meaning itself, the identical meaning which cannot be found, and which is supposed to make the two versions of the same intention equivalent' (p. 25). Ricoeur thus associates the impossibility of finding the same meaning in other words, even within the same language, with the 'otherness of the addressee' (Sakai, 1999, p. 9).[10] As he emphasizes, even within one linguistic community 'understanding requires at least two interlocutors,' who are not necessarily 'foreigners […], but nevertheless others, however close their relation' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 25). Hence, ultimately, as Ricoeur (2006) concludes, quoting George Steiner, after Babel 'to understand is

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[10] It should be emphasized that I am not suggesting any parallelism between Ricoeur and Sakai. In contrast to Ricoeur, Sakai's approach to translation is explicitly non-hermeneutic. Sakai criticizes the idea of translation as an encounter of a prefigured self/other opposition aligned with linguistic communities.

to translate' (p. 28) and all that has been said, all the problems discussed until now in relation to interlingual translation actually find 'their origin in language's reflection on itself' (pp. 27-28).

It is important not to misread Ricoeur's turn to understanding as a return to translation as communication-transmission. Ricoeur remains committed to a non-instrumental definition of translation. As he emphasizes, what we discover by turning our attention to translation as understanding is 'language's propensity for the enigma, for artifice, for abstruseness, for the secret, in fact for non-communication' (2006, p. 28). Instead of meaning to be discovered and transmitted, Ricoeur alludes to 'the final untranslatability revealed, and even produced, by translation' (p. 34).

Interestingly, this claim comes very close to Benjamin's as well as Berman's notions that to work with and make untranslatability tangible is actually a central aspect of the task of the translator. However, rather than resorting to the fragmentary character of empirical languages or to the impassable difference between them as manifested in the letter, Ricoeur approaches the 'untranslatable' through the internal incommensurability of language. Translation, Ricoeur argues, deals with 'two incommensurable masters' and it is only through the 'translation-construction' that they are 'rendered commensurable' (p. 38). The 'masters' thus emerge, in Wittgensteinian fashion, as the outcome of translational practice.

In other words, Ricoeur insists that translation creates correspondences without being able to fully bridge the gap between equivalence and identity, equivalence and adequacy. And it is precisely in this 'recognition of the impassable status of the dialogality of the act of translating' that the translator finds his or her 'reasonable horizon for the desire to translate' (p. 10): Linguistic hospitality, 'where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home' (p. 10). However, since the problems and, we should now add, the pleasures of translating actually have 'their origin in language's reflection on itself' (pp. 27-28), linguistic hospitality also involves the recognition

that even within what is supposed to be 'our own' idiom '[i]t is as several people that we define, that we reformulate, that we explain, that we try to say *the same thing in another way*' (p. 25).

Ricoeur thus arrives at a translator's task that is significantly different from what Benjamin and Berman had envisioned. Translation as the construction of a comparable is also translation as 'a work of memory' and 'a work of mourning', as we have seen above. It contains the trace of the foreign, of the impassable difference within and between languages, which is only enjoyable and joyful if paired with the acceptance of loss of the linguistic absolute. And this is why Ricoeur closes his third essay with a critique of Berman's literalism. The linguistic absolute, for Ricoeur, is neither to be found at the level of the 'meaning' nor of the 'letter.' 'Meaning,' as he points out, 'is extracted from the unity it shares with the flesh of words, that flesh which we call the "letter"' (p. 38). As Ricoeur (2006) emphasizes, even if Berman bases his literalism on translations of 'disquieting success' such as Hölderlin's renderings of Greek into German, in the end Berman has merely 'moved the construction of the comparable a stage further to the level of the letter' (p. 39). There still remains the unsolvable tension of the gap that cannot be overcome.

After moving through the rereading of Babel, we proceeded through the rereading of the translator's task, but I still owe an explanation regarding my claim that these two movements would lead us to an ethically rearticulated translator's task. As Berman (2018) suggests, the ethics of translation 'consists of defining what "fidelity" is' (p. 5). Accordingly, Ricoeur's ethics of translation can be found in one of the initial polarized pairs in which translators find themselves caught up: the question of fidelity or betrayal, of having to serve two masters, having to choose between two methods. After reformulating the problem of untranslatability by renouncing the perfect translation, by adapting one's horizon to the sole 'reasonable horizon for the desire to translate,' the challenge of fidelity appears in a different light. If translation creates correspondences, equivalences without identity and thereby allows

us to ‘dwell in the other’s language at home’ without abolishing the ‘impassable difference’ between self and other, then what can fidelity mean? As Ricoeur puts it, to whom or what can the translator be faithful? And the answer is as simple as it is surprising: to translation itself. And this is also why Ricoeur’s vision of translation is so consequently positive. After Babel, we are left with the translator’s task, with translating ourselves and others, ourselves as others, constructing and reconstructing ‘a comparable.’

Conclusion

What follows from Ricoeur’s ethics of translation is that translation is neither able to close the gap in language between us and the other, between peculiar and foreign, nor to elevate singular languages towards any pure, universal, or original language. Instead, it allows for the joy of plurality, the joy of encountering the other between and within our languages and ourselves. Rather than choosing between two masters and two methods, between bringing reader to author or author to reader, the translator necessarily moves both of them. Translation thus becomes a reciprocal approximation that creates correspondences and leaves neither author nor reader untouched, untransformed. Translation as linguistic hospitality implies understanding without absorption and consequently without closure. A faithful translation is then one that is faithful to language’s diversity, to its multiplicity and infinitude, to the idea that proliferation is not a curse in need of redemption, but how the ‘human condition’ (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 33) ought to be. And this is then the redefinition of the translator’s task in ethical terms: to enable the pleasure of understanding by generating impure correspondences *ad infinitum*. Linguistic multiplicity is thus read as a gift, the gift of being able to welcome and be welcomed, to give and receive hospitality.

While Ricoeur’s work on translation was certainly motivated by his philosophical interests, it is important to be aware of the broader implications of his thought. Ricoeur did not envision his linguistic hospitality as a sphere removed from translational practices – it is

not articulated as a discourse about translation that has no bearing on its practice. While one must admit, as Berman did for his ethics, that no translational method in the strict sense will ever emerge from Ricoeur's essays, they nevertheless prove relevant. Rather than expecting translation guidelines to be extracted from these texts, they may inspire us to accept and enjoy the unfinished business that is translation. This acceptance in turn also implies the recognition that perfect translation as well as universal language may ease communication to the same extent that they endanger our pleasure in translating and thus in understanding others as well as ourselves. And here we might arrive at a point where we can think about a fruitful future dialogue between Ricoeur and Benjamin and an ethics of translation that, by parting from a critique of the instrumentalized, self-enclosed 'chatter' of standardized idioms, thinks about, not 'pure language,' but possible 'messianic,' political forces of modes of speaking and writing that are not in conformity with instrumentalized communicational practices.

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