

TO TRANSLATE, TO INTERPRET, TO WRITE

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*“La historia y la problemática de la traducción, en Europa, se han constituido muy pronto sobre el suelo – en realidad sobre el cuerpo mismo o el corpus– de la Sagrada Escritura”***

Jacques Derrida, in *El lenguaje y las instituciones filosóficas*

Why concern ourselves with translation simultaneously with the essay as defined by the hermeneutic tradition historically marked by religion? Why should it be relevant to pose the problems involved in translation, writing, and interpretation within Argentinean social sciences as the first theoretical problem of the essay?

Seen as a genre, a part of the Argentinean essay takes its place under a specular logic. Not only has it adopted a structure inspired by the European essay, but also inherited its problems. Both are intertwined in their historical evolution, and the course chosen by the Argentinean essay is a clear sign of ambition for insertion, circulation and, eventually, accumulation. It did not aim at refuting its origin in order to replace it by something else; neither did it aspire to abolish mother tongues so as to find others in a search for a Latin American essence that would grant it independence. Constructed from old orphan complexes, the specular function was pervaded by quasi utopian projects meant to conquer the virginity of the word. In a wider sense, what had begun as an individual crusade against -or a eulogy or a defense of- injustice coming from the metropolis had, in the tradition of the Latin American essay, shaped up an unrestrained project to fight enormity. Reality, transformed into an inexhaustible quarry, furthered epic excesses with demented nuances. As a translation of reality, there were –and still are- essays walking doubtful paths and burning up bodies as their fire lashes on. But these are a minority. The ones that stand out are the others, the ones engendered and thrown forth into circulation with the trope of the *speculum* and the spectacle. These point to something else and are signs of the translation of traditions.

Forced to translate or to read translations, the Argentinean essayist was penetrated by the conflicts arousing from translation and duplicated them inwards and outwards. On the outside, he intensified the dwindling reflections of the distant, ubiquitous metropolis, while in his inner self he operated a refraction - on the intellectual *jet set* - of the spectacular features belonging in the hermeneutic function into which the task of writing slowly underwent its metamorphosis. In the last few years, this state of affairs included a refinement of bureaucratic mechanisms within the academic-and-intellectual milieu, together with the corresponding obligation to publish. One effect of orchestrating writing under the essay format (the basic a, b, c of an intellectual's survival) was the loss of non-functional readers in direct proportion to the increase in functional circulation. The second effect was the crystallization of recurrent topics; the third was the displacement of the act of writing towards a mythical, remote hermeneutic and poetic function that seldom leaves traces in

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** “The history and the problems posed by translation in Europe soon emerged from the ground, or rather, from the very body or corpus of the Holy Scriptures. [TN]

prose: this third effect does not seem to be a paradox. Insofar as the essay tends to appear as a protracted paraphrasis, or the unavoidable quotations it contains run through the whole of its body – a body that sometimes is recognizable as a whole by just reading the deployment of quotations-the problem of writing an essay as a translation of one language into that very same language resurfaces. It affects the genre regardless of nationality, and threatens everything that has been written in the realm of human science.

On writing an essay

Reflections on the issue of translation originated in Europe, triggered by the problems stemming from hermeneutics in successive attempts at translating or explaining the Holy Scriptures. The fact that, from the Renaissance on, the Grecian-Roman monad abandoned its condition of differentiated, active language/s to evolve into a culture determines a central problem regarding translation in the West. The problem lies in a contradiction where Greece and Rome are assumed to be the same, but not the same *at once*. From the Renaissance standpoint, they are the same in that both Greek and Roman discourses are viewed as a culture to be retrieved; on the other hand, they are not the same, for ever since Hadrian's times there was a fight to eradicate bilingualism and to separate each language into different spheres. "The only variety of Greek destined to succeed and endure"¹ was only one language of culture; namely, medieval and modern Latin.

There is an overlap between the more general problem of hermeneutics, the durability of Greek and Latin as languages of culture in Modernity, and awareness of the length of time that the said durability entails. Until at least the late 18th Century, hermeneutics provided an interpretation of all kinds of signs, a fact which presupposes the basic principle of translatability². In the 16th Century, Montaigne introduced the essay, which took possession of the field as a new phase of the hermeneutic stage until our days, when it has come to be some sort of rhetoric³ –an interpretation of interpretation that brims over in its abundance. To Foucault, it is precisely in the 16th Century that hermeneutics and semiology blend, putting an end to the complex game of *ressemblance*. Here the essay gives way –or blossoms into- the full order of discourse which, during the two following centuries, will turn language into one more instance of representation among other representations; a new beginning of the mirror game no longer played between discourse and reality but between discourse and discourse. We are still heirs to this old gnoseologic problem.

There is a bond between hermeneutics and translation, and the essay is, *par excellence*, the way in which a new interdependence is built. Why so? Because, according to Adorno, the essay should be that which "rather than bring off a scientific production or an artistic creation [...] still reflects the idleness characteristic of a child, who feels no shame in feeling aroused by what others have already achieved, [...] voices whatever he fancies, and finishes when he himself feels he is done rather than continue to the point where nothing remains to be done; thus, he places himself among the 'di-versions', [...] his interpretations are not grounded on or measured by philology, but are, by definition, hyperinterpretations"⁴. The essay might be thought of as the defining cultural form of the 20th Century, since it seeks to translate into the very language it has been written and, therefore, seeks to interpret (hermeneutics). George Steiner points out: "I am interested in the 'interpretation' aspect, understood as that which brings language to life regardless of the place and the time when it was uttered or transcribed. The French word *interprète* gathers all the relevant values [...] Still, it is in keeping with the French term when it is projected in an equally essential

¹ Agustín García Calvo. "Apuntes para una historia de la traducción", in *Ensayos de estudios lingüísticos de la sociedad*. Siglo XXI Editores, Madrid, 1973.

² Maurizio Ferraris. *Historia de la hermenéutica*. Siglo XXI Editores, Madrid, 2002.

³ Geldsetzer, cited by por Maurizio Ferraris. *Op. cit.*

⁴ Theodor Adorno. "El ensayo como forma", in *Pensamiento de los Confines* Journal, #º 1. Second semester, 1998. Editorial Paidós, Buenos Aires.

sense: *interprète/interpréter* usually name the translator (...)”⁵. If translation is interpretation, if the essay seeks to interpret, for the notion of “giving one’s own opinion on an issue” has become an act of binding discourses together for the sake of interpretation, one might support the idea that the essay is a translation of one’s own language into one’s own language, with the inclusion, following Steiner’s observation, of the temporal dimension as the differentiating element of the intra-language translation. This enables me address the following problems: firstly, the fact that a large number of essays abound in commonplaces expressed in Greek, Latin, German, French, etc. These words and phrases are not translated, assuming a large quantity of untranslatable meanings that the reader is supposed to be familiar with from a knowledge of the original languages if he believes himself capable to tackle the text. Secondly, and as a natural consequence of the above, Greek and Latin, and sometimes also German and French, rise as supporting pillars in the framework of a condemned humanism, constituting a shared cultural capital whose meanings have been depleted amidst discursive formations of the sort that Jameson has called *pastiche*. Finally, it is not pointless to pose, once again, Adorno’s questions in “The Essay as Form”, which run parallel to what Steiner posits in *Real Presences* as metadiscourses, are certain forms of the essay approaching “the most leached cultural practice?” Is this a detachment from *the real presence*, from the essence of a work? Is hyperinterpretation a useless exercise, or does it serve as an excuse for gaining insertion in a cultural-and-academic milieu that grieves its inexorable weakening? And, going one step further, is this piece of writing a case in point?

TO TRANSLATE: TO INTERPRET

In ancient times, words such as *vertere*, *reddere* o *interpretari* organized the number of lexical items that named what we now call “to translate”. “In fact, the difference between translation and other social or literary activities such as the interpretation of obscure texts (*interpretatio*) or imitation (*imitatio*, *emulatio*) is not clearly seen⁶. The reason why texts written in foreign languages had not been translated into Greek lies in the fact that the very concept of translation did not exist. It was necessary to wait until the 3rd Century to watch the slow rise of a notion of interchange that would become realized in the Byzantine era’s concept of translation thanks to the policy of cultural integration accompanying the conquests of Alexander the Great. On the other hand, Latin literature, inaugurated by Livio Andronico’s translation of the *Odyssey*, aroused “the nascent prodigy of a literal correspondence between languages”⁷. Andronico’s work and the toil of the Seventy make translation possible in two ways. “And in the same way as Latin has become liable to translation, becoming a language of culture, it will endow culture with countless languages, all of which will naturally repeat the process hereby shown to have been the first. All these languages will end up being Greek through its latinized, translated, Western form, while at the same time they will, however, not be Greek itself”⁸. To be and not to be the same language; to reveal, veil, or permit the appearance of the structures of the source language: this is what the translator’s task is about. But if translating means interpreting, how are we to understand statements like Jakobson’s when he declares that “languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey rather than in what they *may* convey”⁹. Jakobson is thinking in terms of transmission of information: “The lack of some grammar device in the target language does not prevent the literal translation of the whole of the information contained in the original text”¹⁰. Conversely, Benjamin states that a bad translation is the one that offers “bad communication”, or the one that inaccurately

⁵ George Steiner. *Después de Babel*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1995, p. 49.

⁶ Agustín García Calvo. *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁷ Agustín García Calvo. *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁸ Agustín García Calvo. *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁹ Roman Jakobson. *Ensayo de lingüística general*. Editorial Planeta-Agostini, Barcelona, 1985, p.74.

¹⁰ Roman Jakobson. *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

conveys non-essential contents, as if there were an essence to be preserved; as if the summation of all the words within a language could yield a universal category of sense impossible to fragment in the same way when rendered in other languages, at the same time, as if the essence could not be reduced to mere information. Thus the translator's task becomes enveloped in a mystic aura that approaches it to that of enlightened exegesis. Therefore, every translator is a frustrated commentator regarding the holiness of his text, but not in the holiness of his task.

Every translation presents an insurmountable or inevitable feature in that as the target language evolves, the translation becomes archaic and even, in some cases, obsolete. To a certain extent, this implies acknowledging that if the text in the source language undergoes transformations through the successive interpretations it is subject to (for example, those operated in the essays written about it), it will still retain its value that justifies revisiting it –the *original* text- in order to make a valid interpretation of it in an *essay*. Rephrased in terms of academic logic, this amounts to mastering Greek if one is dealing with ancient philosophy, German if one is involved in modern philosophy, and so forth. Would this amount to acknowledging those languages –I mean, dead languages- as languages, depriving them of the status of culture with which they had been endowed in the Renaissance? Here lies one aspect of the first problem we posed: the endurance of certain words taken from their original contexts and reinserted in a present, basically interpretative discourse moving freely where freedom is not such, since it is as well aware of its rights as of its constraints. This is also the problem where the translation and the essay cross each other's path when, besides, the essay resorts to texts written in a language other than the essayist's mother tongue. However, the enduring value of the original also implies the initial acknowledgment of the essay's obsolescence as metadiscourse, as well as its impossibility to constitute a founding word. This ontological denial deprives the word of its actual presence, the one that delivers it to the tyranny of the here and now which it will only escape through a turn of phrase or some beautiful, sought for opacity. While it is a di-version –or an instrument, in its worst aspects- the essay might be –very seldom, though- an esthetic path aiming at a subtle alchemic blend of innovation and tradition, at attachment of leading discourses and at the brightness of language through an exploration of vocabulary, rhythm, plasticity, and shades. And if we think of the 20th Century Western essay, particularly the European and American sort, we shall find another feature that connects it to the problem of translation, though this time the connection is founded on opposition. According to Eugène Nida, “of course, it is assumed that the translator has purposes generally similar to, or at least compatible with, those of the original author(...)”^{11*}. The essay posits a reversed problem. The author seeks to achieve a scope of comprehension beyond the parameters established by the authors of the original discourses or even, when mistrust takes center stage, he may want his comprehension of the issue to stand in contradiction to what the first author believed to be his obvious purpose, or to bring to light period devices that were veiled in the source discourse.

If we restrict our premises to just two of them; namely, that all translation is interpretation and that every essay is interpretation, and additionally agree that both belong in hermeneutics, do we have the right to apply transitivity and hence aver that the essay is a translation? In order to do so, we need to abide by Adorno's definition of the essay, while wavering between regarding translation as transmission of information and viewing it as the enlightened word. For if it were only the latter, the essay would not be able to legitimize a certain kind of cultural, academic canon that establishes that the reading of numerous essays entitles us to talk about a set of works without ever having read the original writings, whether in translated versions or in the languages in which they were written. But, again, if it were only the former, we would be leaving out the dimension that brings the work closer to the mystery enwrapped in the beauty of the language, or we would

¹¹ Eugène Nida et al. “Principles of translating”, in *Towards a Science of Translating with Special References to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. Ed. J. Brill, Leiden, 1964, p. 127.

* In English in the original [TN]

dispense with the architectures that resort to the crystal of words so as to bestow transparency on the vocation of writing: that of saying *while* enunciating, and the way to do so.

TO INTERPRET: TO WRITE

In Steiner's view, translation entails a process of interpretative transformation, sometimes described as making sensible choices in terms of encoding and decoding discourse. Moreover, "the minute we read, hear about or come into contact with the past, we are already translating, whether the subject matter be Leviticus or last year's best selling book [...] This is the very same model that operates in the bosom of a single language, although the fact is rarely brought to attention. The difference lies in that the latter case time acts as the distance that separates the source language from the target language"¹². Hence, within the framework of a single language, and bearing in mind that the distance to be covered when tackling source discourses is the temporal dimension rather than the difference between languages, we are again confronting the problem of essay writing, the feature of interpretative transformation involved, and its relation to discourses in which, for the sake of simplification, the issue of the original language will not be considered.

Let me now make explicit a so -far hidden assumption in order to reflect upon the contemporary essay. The assumption is that writers build on other discourses; that they intend to create the word on such bases. We call this "secondary literature". To follow this line, it is necessary to agree with what Steiner posits in *Real Presences*. Still, at the beginning of his *Essays* ("Au lecteur"), Montaigne pointed out that "si c'eut été pour rechercher la faveur du monde, je me fusse mieux paré et me présenterais en une marche étudiée. Je veux qu'on m'y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice (...)"^{13*}. Nowadays the essay stands on the brink of a rather dangerous abyss: while its purpose changes from giving an opinion to saying *something meaningful* about something else –the 'something else' being mostly other discourses, discourses recurrently recovered, myths, tragic situations, and the like- to show without delay that, as myths, their validity has expired, but that they have survived as life situations, since their existence replaces the now lost direct access to discourses that the essay institutes as foundational pieces. The essay does not presume anything that may go further back than the object discourses with which it deals. Still, instead of moving away from them and clear the way for others to gain free access to them, it stands in the way and exercises a mediating function, attempting an interpretation to prevent naked access. It 'dresses' the source discourse in modern apparel, oblivious of the fact that its originality and permanence presuppose some principle of eternity linked to its being a work. The 'clothing' thrust upon it acts as a denial of its eternity by dating it through a concrete here and now. This essay attacks the very essence of what it recovers and, while boasting of its subjective opinion, takes on an omniscient tone that perfectly fits the montage function it carries out.

This is why the Greek-Latin monad regarded by García Calvo as a cultural conversion does not invalidate the fact that the dynamics of the essay requires quotations from Greek and from Latin, resorting to both dead languages as well as to living languages such as French, German, or English. This resort to other languages will be seldom found in fiction or poetry. If it is true that the essay is a translation of discourses - momentarily parted with the essay in question- from one's own language into one's language, then it is essential to abstain from translating concepts. If the essay becomes a montage of discourses, the said montage will be mediated by a number of words that are nothing but humanistic notions. These are the remains of humanism, whose artifice is not denied, but the essay conceals the fact that it is an opinion piece by disguising itself as a revelation, and seeking refuge in the quotation from the source text. It cannot very well appear as a double

¹² George Steiner. *Después de Babel. Op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

¹³ Michel de Montaigne. *Les Essais*. Arléa, Paris, 1992.

* In French in the original. [TN]

translation, for that would be actually blatant; it cannot translate words that are assumed to compose the contemporary intellectual common knowledge, for if it did, it would stand defenseless against accusations of vacuity.

#####ç, #####ç, *élan*, *weltanschauung*. There is no masterly translation of an original piece. Thus, leaving the type of word discussed above in their original languages is as useless as translating them in one way or other. Each of these terms –and this is clearly seen in the case of dead languages- would undergo severe losses of meaning under an attempt at translation into Spanish, French, English, etc. The point is that leaving them untranslated does not help understanding on the part of any reader, whether English, French, or Spanish-speaking, nor would it make more sense to a Greek of our times than it would to an ancient Greek. What inapprehensible concept could be offered to the reader of a language by presenting him with terms in languages that he probably does not know? What “wealth of meaning” could this reader be offered if he were to be ignorant of all the threads that were woven into the meaning of a given word? ¿Why have this oversized pact of pretence among experts?

Luther brought the hermeneutic problem to the limelight by referring believers back to the original text without any sort of mediation. Making the modern reader approach certain words in their original language would yield similar results: even if the words were obscure, interpretation would be clear within the large interpretation framework provided by the essay. There is no harm in pondering over the appearance of the words mentioned in the 20th Century, particularly during the rise of a nationalist trend that celebrated the specificity of otherness by “recognizing” it through these operations, in full agreement with a sector of the international community that shares a similar handling of certain cultural rules, with adaptations to local segmentations. It is comparable to returning to *harmonia linguarum* (let us quote from Latin, like Eco) within the framework of a national system of language. Something similar to what Vico posed, though he succeeded in transcending the linguistic ideology upheld by humanism by including it in the framework of a philosophy of history¹⁴.

TO TRANSFORM

Adorno states that “through passive interpretation, it is not possible to obtain something that has not simultaneously been introduced by means of active interpretation”¹⁵. The possibility of escaping montage lies in activity, even when all montages involve the intervention of some subjectivity. Since subjectivity does not guarantee anything, and belongs to each and every one of us, the contemporary essay cannot take refuge in it as Montaigne would have it in his *Essays*. In any case, if it were necessary to take refuge in it, it should be done in the name of the individual diversion, without turning the essay into a tool or a weapon to further intellectual and academic advancement. An essay should not even be started unless it is marked by inner activity which, subjective though it may be, does somehow require that the writer stand aside from his own discourse in the series of history so that he can produce discourse rather than gaze at others’. One should not write unless one can abstain from adding up effect and profit, for the essay will anyway rebel against the idea expressed in the phrase “founding word”; the essay will be related to error and to a new beginning whenever it comes close to a nucleus that it cannot reach but with which it toys in an endless act of seduction. Insofar as the original stands for a cultural rather than an ontological value, resorting to it through the technique of the essay blurs the intention to retrieve a primeval discourse, which is so rated only by reason of the successive interpretations it has undergone. Hence its bonds and its importance. The primeval text provides no more meaning than it was given by the successive civilizations that concerned themselves with it.

¹⁴ Maurizio Ferraris. *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno. *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

None of this will prevent the essay from being a translation, but it can adopt other ways. There is no denying that this piece of writing, with its references to other discourses and its use of foreign words could certainly serve as a tool in an academic milieu. Still, in defense of the essay in general as well as of all other genre, this essay acknowledges the existence of other essays that may retrieve a quality which differs from previous discourses, which may relate to what is vital, or which may move beyond the scope of their original purpose. It is in this sense that there is a point in translating, interpreting, and writing.

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Abstract:

Through a philosophical revision of concepts pertaining to the fields of hermeneutics and translation, this text brings to question the logic that rules the production of the contemporary essay. Its central hypothesis posits that in our days the hypostasis of the essay is a translation from one language into that same language, and is divided into two sections. The former establishes a connection between translation and interpretation, while the latter focuses on the relation between interpreting an essay and producing one. The third basal connection explored in this text deals with translating and writing in the same language and serves as metadiscourse on the other two. This threefold pattern hinges in two directions, for the current essay is questioned in its form and its background, under a specular dynamics in which whatever is said can be refuted by the very format of the essay; of this essay.

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