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An Absolutely Patient Action: The Translator as a Figure of Ethical Communication

What does the translator do? Does she transcribe, performing an almost technical function? Or is she an inventor, an interpreter, a kind of singer of lost songs? This is the question Benjamin posed as the translator's task (Benjamin); here I explore the possibility that translation is liturgy. Translation as either a technical transcription or interpretive intervention neglects its core concern: ethics. Translation is dialogic, speaking from one language to another, yes, but also from a space between languages. The translator voices, though she does not author.[1] The translator's orientation is always towards respect for another voice – that of the source text. And the translator's task is always impossible, insofar as total respect (ciphered as total fidelity) gives way to what is inevitably "lost in translation." Whatever the translator does, she is oriented always towards managing this loss, towards the ethical stakes of this loss. Seen in this light, whether she transcribes or invents becomes a very different question.

I am taking the concept of "liturgy" from Emmanuel Levinas, whose dialogic recasting of ontology as ethics informs my rephrasing of the question of the translator's task. Levinas characterizes liturgy as "the work of the same as a movement without return of the same to the other" (349-350), meaning that it is what the self undertakes when it wants to address itself to something completely alien, that is, to an absent divinity.

Here I develop liturgy as the active, embodied work of the translator as she reads, writes, and rereads. One of the main reasons for the binary nature of writing about translation is the fact that it is more concretely something one does. To talk about it is to make a metaphor almost immediately (leaving aside the Derridean notion that to talk at all is to make metaphor, as in "White Mythology"). Liturgy helps bring the work of translation back to the body, back to the desk where one text is read in a source language and then rewritten and reread in a new one. Liturgy grounds translation in the body and consciousness of an "I" whose process happens only because she knows two (or more)

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languages, and is literate and thus able to render in one what she has read in another. Liturgy also develops the notion of the translator as someone in between a speaking self and a kind of ventriloquist, whose words are not her own. In this way, liturgy becomes active, embodied practice oriented towards another.

Levinas and liturgy help us orient translation studies towards an ethics of communication. Translation as embodied practice refocuses the discussion on the translator's orientation towards an-other. This is what characterizes her work, and this is what makes the stakes of the transcription/interpretation argument. In every case, the question is how to "do justice" to the source text, whether it's Dostoevsky or a trade document. If, as John Durham Peters has argued (Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication), communication is the central trope of our times, then the metaphors we undertake to characterize translation must be part of that discussion. The longing for fusion and the fear of alienation are both expressed in our thoughts about translation. Its social role touches upon all our hopes for overcoming the chaos Babel wrought. As Pinchevski has shown, Levinas' work is central to communication ethics (By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication).

Translation studies finds its way to this discussion via the notion of liturgy. Translation is a fundamental element in any conversation of communication ethics. As embodied practice, it constantly stages and restages an ethical stance and takes action. This action – what the translator "writes" – has consequences to which the theorist tries to attend. Herein lies translation's fundamental ethical orientation, which has, as described above, dominated the discussion in translation studies. As Venuti especially has shown (The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation), how we imagine the task of the translator has very real consequences for tenure and promotion, not to mention how we imagine the world around us, how we conceive of and encounter otherness. Translation studies has long understood its ethical stakes; its participation in a wider conversation of communication ethics enriches the latter even as it reformulates key questions for the former. In this sense, I suggest that the translator is the figure of communication ethics.

This essay begins with a discussion of Levinas and his role in communication ethics. It then moves to develop the concept of liturgy within the context of translation as an embodied, material practice. I end by suggesting that translation attends to what Levinas calls the "trace of the face," that is, the

appearance of the other to which the translator must respond ethically. This suggestion stages ethics as differences that "meet but do not touch," that is, that do not stage communication or translation as total assimilation of difference. In this I make my own claim about translation as practice and its ethics, and draw upon experiences from my own work translating Museo de la Novela de la Eterna (Museum of Eterna's Novel).

Levinas

Levinas' ethics is "first" philosophy, that is, its concerns are prior to the traditional philosophical inquiry into being, or ontology. For him, ontology implies a sovereign consciousness knowing only itself. Levinas opposes this "myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca" with the "story of Abraham, who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet-unknown land" (348). For Levinas, philosophy begins when I am confronted with another, with a Face, that I cannot wholly recognize or otherwise "return" to my stable, self-contained consciousness.

If I can know the Other, I have in some sense assimilated her, incorporated her, and her status as other is diminished. "To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity" (44). The Other is no longer other – she has been comprehended, reduced to the status of the known world, and thus no longer strange. The ethical moment happens in mystery, which is to say, in complete alterity, when I must confront my responsibility to a being that is utterly foreign to me.

This reconceptualization of existence as oriented towards the other rather than rooted in the self and the self-same also entails a rethinking of ethics. For Levinas the I is in fact "derivative" of this ethical relationship (Arnett, Arneson and Bell). Traditionally, ethics are understood as a series of codes or laws that are contingent upon the primary ontological question. After the "I" is established, what are the rules that might govern that subject's interaction with others? Not only does this mean that sociality is a kind of afterthought to the question of being but it also reduces ethics to an impersonal code derived from this middle term (such as reason). Hence formulations like Kant's categorical imperative, which seeks to define universal conditions for the ethical. Levinas' restaging of being as dialogic – that is, in communication with some other – also calls for an ethics oriented towards radical alterity.

For Levinas, the notion of the universality sought as equivalency or equality is fundamentally opposed to any radical understanding of the ethical. The relation with the Other is precisely not symmetrical because it is ethical. The Other proceeds me and exceeds me, and the demand she makes upon me is infinite and therefore impossible to satisfy. This is the crux of the ethical relation, for any attempt to seek equity entails the violence of assimilation: in seeking common ground, I am forced to eliminate the very uniqueness that makes the Other different from me. I reduce her difference to the same, and in so doing I fail in my responsibility to care for and respect her alterity as such.

Rather than understanding – so often a key word in popular pleas for a better, more ethical world – Levinas posits responsibility, that is, a kind of intending-towards otherness that makes no attempt to assimilate or grasp it. In this sense, the relation with the Other is fundamentally asymmetrical for Levinas. The ethical move is not to rectify that asymmetry by looking for universal constants like human nature or inalienable rights.

Indeed, I am called to responsibility precisely because of the radical alterity of the Face. In appearing to me as a face, the other asks me not to do the violence required to make it understandable to me. Nevertheless, Levinas does not imply that this violence is to be avoided, or even that it can be avoided. The problem is that in our encounters, in the call of the other, is a call to a responsibility I must ultimately fail. It is this knowledge of failure that underwrites my reception of the call.

This responsibility founds my being. I only am, insofar as I am called to responsibility by an Other whose difference from me cannot be reduced to equivalent terms. My responsibility founds my being precisely because there are no metaphors available to forge similarity, no bridges of understanding to be built. I am because I am called to responsibility. To be is to stand in this untenable relation, to confront always a chasm that both calls for me to bridge it and yawns wider than I can ever reach.

Levinas and Communication: The Face

As we have seen, Levinas' primary object of philosophical inquiry is not the singular self – ontology, or the question of being – but the plurality and sociability of responsibility. This call of the other – concretized in the face of the other – is the foundational moment of being, in all its messy, contingent, and embodied complexity. To be is to be responsible for an Other who exceeds me, and whose difference from me I shall never fully assimilate or understand.

In refounding the philosophical project in the relation and the ethical call of the Other, Levinas necessarily places great importance on language. It is within language that the asymmetrical relation is possible, for language – communication – reaches out towards the Other, engaging her in conversation. This communicative relation, because it is an exchange wherein the self extends beyond itself not to establish a border or a limit (limitrophe), but so as to create a space for sociability, does not seek to assimilate the Other to knowledge. It is dull to converse only with oneself: in sociability, we seek others precisely in their alterity, and so allow for this relation of asymmetry wherein the Other continues to baffle my attempts to comprehend her.

> *We shall try to show that the relation between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limitrophe within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an 'I,' as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself (Totality and Infinity 39).*

Levinas is very clear that the presentation of the Other to me is concrete: it takes the form of a face . The face comes to me from an unknown location, it comes to me from elsewhere, beyond my sphere of knowledge and understanding. And yet because it is a face, because it is a concrete manifestation of otherness that intrudes into my world yet takes the form of the utterly human, it calls me to responsibility. "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me… It expresses itself" (51).

There is no idea that corresponds to the face, for the face precedes ontology, precedes my being. In order for this ethical relation to work as asymmetrical and irreducible to intellectual notions of shared humanity or obligation, the call of the other to responsibility that founds my being must appear to me as a face, as something that is both utterly human and irretrievably different from me. Otherwise its call would not have the urgency and the strength to justify my entire existence. It must be real, tangible, and yet it must be powerful. The face is a "mode" that "expresses itself" – that is, it is active, and it is communicative. Its existence is not static, it calls – this is the mode – and this call is prior to any idea I might have of it. The call is expressive – not intellectual, not reasoned – and in implicating me, it brings me into an existence founded on a relationship, on language and communication. Levinas's formulation of communication, however, resists commonly held ideals about communication as transparency:

> *[I]f communication thus bears the sign of failure or inauthenticity [as the despair or pathos of solitude], it is because it is sought as fusion. One sets out from the idea that duality should be transformed into unity – that the social relation should end in communion. This is the last vestige of a conception identifying being and knowing – that is, the event by which the multiplicity of the real ends up referring to one sole being, and by which, through the miracle of clarity, everything I encounter exists as having come out of me…The failure of communication is the failure of knowledge. One does not see that the success of knowledge would in fact destroy the nearness, the proximity of the other. A proximity that, far from meaning something less than identification, opens up the horizons of social existence, brings out all the surplus of our experience of friendship and love, and brings to the definitiveness of our identical existence all the virtuality of the non-definitive (Proper Names 104).*

This "proximity" is the space wherein the face appears to me and calls me forth in my being as being-for-another. Communication understood as fusion owes too much to the ideal of knowledge, and knowledge destroys the rarified, charged air of this proximate space by collapsing distances into equivalences. Communication may be differently understood, however, as the grounding for a relation prior to the question of being: "This 'saying to the Other' – this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existant – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in

Being" (48). It is in the proximity of "saying to the other" – a nearness that is also distance – that the ethical relation takes place.

Liturgy

So what is Levinas' notion of liturgy, and how does it help us restate the question of translation? Levinas develops the term in his essay "The Trace of the Other," which, not incidentally for our purposes, was originally published in September 1963 as "La Trace de L'Autre," in the German language journal Tijdschrift voor Philosophie. The English version I have is excerpted from this (I do not know if the French was translated into German for the journal or if it appeared in French) and translated by A. Lingis as part of an edited collection on deconstruction's philosophical roots. Liturgy is one of the attitudes towards the other that Levinas identifies in his sketch of his relational ontology.

Liturgy is an "absolutely patient action." It is a "putting out of funds at a loss" (350). Patience is required for the long recitation of a liturgy, especially as the pious in the Jewish tradition pray several times a day. The Amidah, or "standing prayer," usually takes about ten minutes and involves chanting, reading, and ritually bowing at prescribed passages. The patience required to undertake this liturgy, this recitation of the same words in the same way several times a day, is for Levinas what underwrites liturgy as "ethics itself."

Now, Levinas is not particularly speaking of the Amidah or any other specific religious practice. Levinas' cultural background was Jewish and he is well known as a student of Martin Buber and thus of Jewish theology. In "The Trace of the Other," however, he makes it clear that he's not speaking of religion as such. "We must for the moment remove from this term every religious signification, even if a certain idea of God should become visible, as a trace, at the end of our analysis" (350).

Ethics "itself" is thus juxtaposed to ethics conceived as a self returning to the same, or as a "cult" (350) of good deeds and rules. Ethics itself is a kind of attitude towards the other that, like liturgy, "puts out funds at a loss." To use communication scholar Amit Pinchevski's formulation, "differences touch without merging" (126) between the reciter of the liturgy and the absent One to

whom it is addressed. Ethics as such must know how to encounter an "other absolutely and not with respect to some relative term" (347) – to undertake the relation with a radical conception, a "movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same (348). This is ethics as such, an ethics prior to selfhood, an ethics that constitutes the self as being.

In what I can term the "liturgical" relation, then, she who undertakes to pray undertakes "a relationship with the other who is reached without showing himself touched" (349). Here we see a fundamental asymmetry whose everyday undertaking is exemplified in the attitude of the pious. In its "absolutely patient action" (350), liturgy is an embodied recitation of words not 'one's own,' that is, which the speaker has not invented.[2] Nevertheless his recitation of these words, his bodying-forth of them, is deeply important in the relation he is forging. It is the very act of bringing these words forth, of offering them, which constitutes the meaningfulness of the act.

Levinas and Translation: Proximity

Should a successful translation actually seek to erase the traces of its foreign provenance? The pitfall of invisibility as a translator's ideal (Venuti) is that it may, at its limit point, actually suppress everything that makes the text unique and worth translating in the first place. Such concerns highlight the connection between translation and colonization, and the inevitable return of the repressed. What is lost in translation often ends up haunting the text, provoking retranslation. There are few translations, even of the Bible, that can be considered definitive. No translation is ever able to completely erase the trace of the other – the trace of the source text.

What our discussion of Levinas makes clear, however, is that such claims are part of an ongoing encounter with alterity that is still conceptualized in terms of the self-same, in terms of knowledge (the "truth" of a particular text), rather than recognizing the irreducible otherness of the translated text from its source, despite their undeniable relation. This paradoxical relationship – of a two texts that are at once irreducibly different and undeniably related – is best understood in terms of the Levinasian notion of proximity.

For Levinas, the Other is neither distant nor assimilated but proximate. As we have seen, he characterizes the relationship with the Other as "a distance which is also proximity" (Ethics and

Infinity 11). The Other does not just exist near me, she addresses me across the distance that separates us. She stands face to face with me, and this face is the manifestation of what, regarding me, has nothing to do with me (does not regard me). It is through the face that the Other signifies “thou shalt not kill”, or “responsibility for the unique one.” It is through language that this relation unfolds, within a proximate distance that may be imagined as the space between two interlocutors.

“Proximity” is the term that allows for differences to touch without merging into undifferentiated equanimity. “Truth arises where a being separated from the Other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him. Language, which does not touch the Other, even tangentially, reaches the Other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness of these relations” (Totality and Infinity 62). Conversation’s exchange only is possible in proximity – within a space that is neither impossibly distant nor homogenous and identical.

Translation brings texts into proximity: it moves a source text into the target language without reducing them to the same text. Translation produces a text that is different from its source text, yet always and inextricably in conversation with that text. One can no more divorce the translation from its original than one can claim that the original and the translation are identical. Translation exists in the “straightforwardness” of a relation between difference and identity, which is why translators like Venuti often critique the status of the translator as technician or craftsman. Yet it is this very straightforwardness that allows for proximity, since the space of calling or commanding or obeying is neither tangible nor theoretical. Just as translation occupies a space between theory and practice, so the Levinasian relation between one and another happens between two interlocutors who speak but importantly do not touch.

Translation stretches communication “to its limits, towards the Other” (Pinchevski 13). It highlights the ethical stakes of communication because, as Pinchevski notes, they are highest wherever “there is a risk of misunderstanding, lack, and refusal” (7). The fact of translation itself in its essence risks “misunderstanding, lack, and refusal.” A Levinasian perspective on translation recasts this risk as part of the space of proximity: to bring two texts into this space is to put them in relation, not to construe them in terms of what they’ve lost or gained in translation. In proximity, texts do not touch or merge, but they do relate. The both/and structure of the translation – as

independent text and a representation of a text in another language – loses its abstraction and becomes the practical yet deeply ethical work of making conversation. Translation is an image without resemblance: a representation that stands in asymmetrical relation to its referent.

Liturgy and Proximity: The Task of the Translator as Ethical Figure

I hope it's beginning to be clear why the translator might be the figure of a certain kind of Levinasian ethics. The translator herself also brings forth words that are not her own in the service of an absent other. And, like the liturgist, the translator's embodiment of those words – her reading them and then translating them – puts her in a relation of proximity to this other, which is never wholly grasped despite the work she had undertaken. Let us then turn to the translator as an ethical figure to develop this analogy.

If a translator's work is overlooked in a review, says the Italian translator William Weaver, she should consider it a compliment, for invisibility is the mark of a successful translation (cited in Venuti 3). "Invisibility" here might more precisely be described as fluency or transparency: translation should not call attention to itself by disrupting the flow of the source text, but should be as a window into the original, whose extra-textual meaning is implicitly defined as somehow detachable and communicable by the skilled hand of the technician/translator. This is why scholars, who are trained to be so attentive to text and who spend their lives reading, nevertheless often overlook the work of translation unless it is explicitly a part of their discipline (as, for example, in Comparative Literature).

Lawrence Venuti writes that the translator's invisibility – and the attendant concern for transparency in translation – results from fear of "the drift of language away from the conceptual signified, away from communication and self-expression" (4). Scholars and artists alike value their unique contributions, and do not like to think that their textual children may grow up and drift away, forming other chains of signification in other contexts, both historical and cultural. A successful translation is securely anchored to the original, a tethering that necessitates the invisibility of the translator, whose work would only remind us that the original and the translation cannot, by definition, be

identical. We value transparency in translation because to read in translation requires a certain leap of faith.

Indeed, the act itself of writing implies not only the need to communicate but also a faith in the possibility of communication. Even the most postmodern, obscure text reaches out to an Other; otherwise, it would not be a text, it would not signify. To put this observation into Levinasian terms, "if communication and community is to be achieved, a real response, a responsible answer must be given. This means that I must be ready to put my world into words, and to offer it to the other" (Totality and Infinity 14). The act of translation implies a belief in some extra-textual meaning that is portable and transferable – and by extension, a belief in the ultimate connectedness of all languages. Walter Benjamin wrote that translation points to "the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages" (75); Franz Rosenzweig similarly claimed that translation is possible "because in every language is contained the possibility of every other language" (171). Nevertheless, both writers also claim that this state of "pure language" is simultaneously the condition of possibility for translation and also its inevitable downfall. Just as in the history of the idea of communication (Peters), translation is conceived in terms of unity and isolation, as either seamless fusion or hopeless cacophony.

The challenge is therefore to preserve the richness of linguistic alterity while pursuing the common ground that translation posits. One way to think about this challenge is to remember that, in Amit Pinchevski's words, "every act of translation involves an approach from 'here' to 'there,' implying that saying is not only in a certain dialect but saying to another dialect, context, individual, community" (142). That is, translation is in its essence dynamic, embracing source language and target language in one practice. To theorize that practice is to look to a relation and a movement, rather than looking to static notions of identity and difference.

The etymological roots of the word translation support this notion, as the word literally means to move from one place to another, to trans-lare, or move across. A secondary meaning of the word translation thus involves this notion of physical, rather than linguistic transfer. Too often we focus on one side of this approach, either fretting about the fidelity of a translation (has it been thoroughly taken from "here"?) or deploring its readability "there," in the target language. Both concerns are legitimately applicable to the practice of translation, but theoretically speaking, it may be helpful to

find a way to keep in mind the notion of transfer that links them. Like the movement of metaphor, the structure of the relation that translation embraces is both/and, or is like/is not. It is both its own text and a derivative; it is like the source text, and it is not the source text. Understanding the relation of transfer rather than the poles it oscillates between allows us to see theorize an ethics of translation that neither reduces all differences nor discounts translation's important work towards mutual understanding.

Source Text as Face

If we then accept the figure of the translator as an ethical communicator, what now does her work look like? What is the task of this reconfigured translator? Her task is in the space of proximity of texts – the source text and the one she will produce – but also the reading she undertakes. This reading is something like the appearing of another in her world. The translator as ethical communicator understands that this reading is an encounter with another first and foremost. She understands that she – her text – only is able to exist insofar as this reading stages her responsibility towards the source text. Her text depends upon her reading of the source text. The translator as ethical communicator knows this and is oriented therefore towards loss and failure, in her deep recognition of an alterity that cannot be returned to the self same, that is, to understanding or mastery. The translator as ethical communicator does not seek to master the source text.

The translator thus undertakes her task in the context of responsibility towards the source text. Her reading of the source text places her in proximity to it, allows it to appear to her from a place beyond, a place inconceivable even as another world ("The Trace of the Other"). How does the translator work to construct this world, understand the text's proximity? She might read the author's biography; she might, as I did, travel to the places he inhabited and speak with members of his family. Some translators work closely with living authors and I think the argument here still holds – the text is still an appearing-from-elsewhere even when the author is there to talk to you about it.

Liturgy: The Task of the Translator

And then the translator takes up her task of writing. She takes up her pen and begins her liturgy. She recites what she has read – for translation is in some sense a recitation, a rehearsal of something that is already written. Yet at the same time she is composing, she is changing words and moving around clauses because she is listening, ever so carefully, to this trace of the other – to what the text spoke to her of, to what this text suggested to her about another. She will have to make hard decisions constantly, decisions that affect the so-called "domestication" of the text. Some of them she might even make against her better judgment, because an editor has asked for a clarification or deemed the original rendering too opaque. So she writes and rewrites, recites and recites again.

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[1] See Shane Weller's excellent "In Other Words: On the Ethics of Translation" for an examination of this problem with reference to Benjamin, Blanchot, and de Man. (Weller)

[2] This is another sense in which Levinas' Jewishness is pertinent. Many Protestants, for example, use "their own words" when addressing the divinity. The word "liturgy" makes clear that we are not referring to prayer in this sense but in the highly ritualized and repetitive sense.



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