

## Translating – Around the Bend

First, let me begin by thanking Cintia and Jason for inviting me to participate in this roundtable on translation, celebrating the publication of their translation of “The Bankruptcy,” an extraordinary novel that they have now made available to people like me, who would have a difficult time reading this novel in the original Portuguese. It is a pleasure and an honor to be part of this event and to have the occasion to reflect once again on the many significant aspects of the translation process. I think this is all the more necessary today for a number of reasons, of which I will single out only two. First, the enormous progress in computer-based translations, which here as in so many other areas are increasingly encroaching into what was previously reserved for direct human intervention. This intervention does not disappear of course, but it is being supplemented and to a certain extent supplanted by the machine-executed algorithms that inform computer-translations. As with the game of chess and other games, the combinatorial power of computers is producing results that only a few years ago many would have thought impossible to attain. And the limit is nowhere in sight. The second factor, related to the first, has to do with the complex process of globalization, which at least ever since the end of the Cold War has been accompanied by a process of homogenization in many areas, not the least of which involves linguistic and cultural differences. There is a marked tendency to downgrade the importance of such differences, which in turn is producing a backlash that tries to absolutize them. In the United States, a recent and ominous manifestation of this tendency is the decision taken by the President of the University of West Virginia – the so-called “flagship” university of that

state -- to eliminate entirely its teaching of foreign languages.<sup>1</sup> It seems that for their students it will be sufficient to rely on Google translations to comprehend whatever texts are not in their native language.

For many purposes this may be sufficient. As long as language is understood as a means of communicating meanings that are truly universal, which is to say, the same everywhere and at all times, it may not be necessary to have the experience of linguistic differences. But if there are significations – which as the product of *signifying* I distinguish from *meanings* – that are not simply self-identical, the same for everyone everywhere, this may lead to an impoverishment of perspectives that can have dangerous and self-destructive consequences.

Translation, as a process perhaps even more than as a product, can entail precisely the affirmation of linguistic difference as cultural difference. It clearly does not absolutize such differences but presents them as an irreducible relationship: a relationship of incommensurability. There is perhaps no common measure that would entirely abolish the differences between the languages involved in a translation. And yet at the same time there is communication of a sort – communication that preserves and articulates incommensurables. Just how this might work I will try briefly to suggest by rereading a few lines from the “Translators’ Preface” to “The Bankruptcy.”

Cintia and Jason begin their Preface to by offering the following striking analogy: “The writer is to the translator as the arranger is to the composer.” This assertion is striking not just because it dares to explain a literary relationship by invoking a musical one. It is striking because it does so in a very singular way, one which if read carefully allows and encourages

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<sup>1</sup> Reference recent letter of protest of the AACL...

the reader to reflect on the very notion of parallelism itself. After all, in a simple parallelism we would expect the sequence to be the same on both sides of the equation: the writer is to the translator as ... the composer is to the arranger. This seems to reflect what I am calling the *meaning* of the phrase. But instead, something strange takes place: the sequence is reversed: the writer is said to relate to the translator as the arranger does to the composer. This reversal of sequence, which disrupts the parallelism, is known in rhetoric as a “chiasmus” – from the Greek word *Khiasmos*, which in turn meant “marked with the Greek letter khi, X. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on in English the word took on the meaning of “crossing,” and since this was based originally on the form of the letter *Khi*, we could sum up the process of chiasmus by using a somewhat outmoded English expression, namely: “X marks the spot.”

But is X marks the spot, what kind of a spot does it mark? Of a crossing. But although originally this meaning goes back to the form or shape of the Greek letter, *khi* (X), as a rhetorical figure it is transformed. For it no longer designates simply a static shape or form, but rather a *dynamic process*, a sequence unfolding in time and space.

So much for the chiasmus as such. But to return to the Translator’s Preface, we are dealing here with a singular instance of chiasmus and in particular one that transforms or translates it. This seems related to what Cintia and Jason call “translation’s power [...] to bend a language into new shapes.” This is precisely what their chiasmus does. It does this however not in relating one language to another but within a single language, namely English. This suggests that the process of translation may already be going on within individual languages and not just between languages. If so, the word that describes this transformation – namely, “bend” -- is particularly significant, since it describes an intralinguistic process that may be constitutive of language as such. “Bend” here not only *designates* the kind of cross or

crossing of one language with another but rather *performs it* in the use of what is considered to be a single language. In the process it reveals that the singularity of language is never simply that of a self-identical closed system. The chiasmus here *bends* our expectation of a simple parallelism supporting an analogy, allowing new significance to emerge. To be sure, this significance is anything but clear or unambiguous. This lack of clarity and ambiguity is not however a deficiency to be corrected. It is an invitation to reflect on the possibility that the distinction being drawn, that between “writer” and “translator,” may not be as clear-cut as one might expect. For after all, is not a translator also a writer? And is not a writer perhaps also a translator? Surely not in the same way, and the difference between the two must not be ignored -- indeed it is *crucial*. But the *crux* of that difference must perhaps be understood in terms of coexistence rather than as in those of mutual exclusivity. Perhaps what the writer and translator have in common is that they are *both* composers *and* arrangers, albeit in different ways. The writer *composes* with and against the traditions of the language used, *rearranging* them in ways that produce something new. The translator also com-poses, quite literally, with the text being trans-lated, rearranging its sequences, bending and “stretching its grammar and syntax into strange and novel forms.” (Preface, vii) But this bending and stretching can also be understood as a kind of *com-position*, literally a placing together, not in order to absorb the differences between the old and new text, but to demonstrate how those differences work to produce significances beyond the explicit meaning of the individual words and sentences.

In his essay on “The Task of the Translator,” a title that is alluded to at the start of the second paragraph of Translator’s Preface, Walter Benjamin provides an unforgettable if largely ignored formulation of what he takes to be the primary “task of the translator” – and since his words apply uncannily to the chiasmic performance of the Translator’s Preface, I will cite

them here in lieu of a conclusion: Translation, he asserted, should strive for that transparency that derives from achieving “Wörtlichkeit in der Übertragung der Syntax,” – “literalness in the transmission of syntax.”<sup>2</sup> Syntax here is precisely not what is associated with grammar. Grammatical meaning is disrupted if not destroyed by such verbatim transmission of syntax. But this is precisely what the translators’ chiasmic analogy also does: like certain jokes, it incites and interrupts our expectation of *meaning*, thus opening the possibility that something truly *significant* might emerge.

Samuel Weber

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<sup>2</sup> This is my translation. The published English translation reads: “A literal rendering of the syntax, which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator.” W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol I, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996, p. 262.