Translation *après coup*: on why Translation Studies has a specific object

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She had to pray urgently. The sun was going down. As we drove south along the inland of Catalonia, my visiting scholar had calculated the lee-ways allowed to the traveling Muslim and informed me, as I drove, that she had to pray before sundown. But where? And did we have enough water for the necessary ablution? And which way was Mecca anyway? (It must be toward the sinking sun, she offered, since that is how it was in Malaysia, so I tried to describe geography as I drove, heightening risk levels.) No roadside clearing seemed adequate to the act, so we eventually pulled into a service station, since she needed prayer, I needed petrol, and there would be water available. But where do you pray in a service station? Over there, where they washed cars, a few barriers seemed to offer privacy and protection from the wind of the open plain. So she went, enshrouded herself in black robe, and prayed where others wash cars, as the sun set on the hazy ranges down the back of Catalonia; she prayed in a language she did not understand but which had far more to do with these lands than anything I might have spoken.

There is no translation in the story. Surprisingly, no doubt, since virtually every other corner of life has been used as a metaphor of translation; our object is increasingly seen everywhere. What seems of interest in the story is not so much any crossing of languages (which here remain private, hence separate), but the discourse that seemed to find no place in that public sphere, and which nevertheless imposed its presence, possibly because it is in some way anterior to separate languages. Our interest lies in precisely that possibility of non-translation, of a space that cannot be integrated into our postindustrial quotidian. Prayer was certainly inserted into the story by the rules of a culture not mine, yet it was also felt as an inner necessity, as need for communication beyond the normal play of persons.

For Buber (1923), prayer was the place where one learned and developed the "primary word" *Ich-Du*, binding the first person with the intimate second person, necessary for ethical relations with all future persons. The kind of first person produced in *Ich-Du* was considered different from the one developed in the relations *Ich-Es*, where the first person was bound to a thing, or to a "she" or a "he" considered as things: "For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*" (2000: 19).

We might choose to ignore the mysticism of dialogue with the divine. We might struggle to see, initially, what any of this has to do with translation. However, most of us would sense a substantial difference between communicating with an intimate "you" (a close friend, a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a daughter or son) and communicating with a "he" or a "she" (or a Ms. or a Mr.), people relegated to the status of third-person things. Prayer would be the purist of intimate discourses. That is a basic and profound lesson, albeit perhaps no more than a theologian's take on the Kantian ethical

distinction between people as means (not good) and people as ends in themselves (good). Buber insists that our identity is formed by both sides operating together, but his ethical preference is clear: the relation with the most intimate second person, in prayer, is what prepares us to be most human.

One might take or leave the lesson. For Arnaud Laygues (2001, 2006, 2007), from whom I have already borrowed too much on the question (see Pym 2007a, 2007b), Buber would be teaching us that we translate people, not texts. Or rather, that the act of translation, in its most ethical dimension, should be a relation with an intimate second person, a relation of understanding and exchange, in the tradition of what has become known as the philosophy of dialogue. That lesson is so valuable that I teach it (citing Laygues, and sometimes Buber) at the beginning of every translation course I give. And I teach it all the more when the course is on technical translation, localization, technology and the like. Wherever our work processes and perceptions seem most caught up in networks of things, one must make at least the pedagogical effort to insist on the people.

Why the intimate second person, rather than the text or the thing? Because we can invest ourselves in them, see something of ourselves in them, take time to take care of them, to build bonds of belonging with them, to assure some degree of mutual protection based on affective understanding, beyond calculated relationships. On the other hand, we can also become frustrated with them, censure them, coerce them, manipulate them so they sound like us (or ourselves so we sound like them), and otherwise irritate the potential apertures detected by the philosophy of dialogue. There is no need to idealize human relations, or to proclaim multilateral loyalty (see Nord 1997) as if it were some kind of panacea. There are indeed many reasons, both good and bad, why we communicate with people. But there are also some quite good reasons why such communication is not always prayer; that is, why Buber's intimate second person is not the one we translate. Let's see:

- The differences between languages need not affect the *Ich-Du* (which is quite simply why that relationship is not translational). We can accept, as most do, that we become subjects through language, and that our subjectivity, both conscious and unconscious, comes into being only through linguistic exchanges. So much for everything from the unconscious of Lacan to the humanist ethics of Habermas—we see no problem there. However, since all "natural" languages have the first and second persons (or so we read in Benveniste 1966: 261), there is no strong reason why different languages should operate differently in this regard. The *langue* chosen for prayer does not alter the discourse of prayer; just as the communication of fear is not especially linguistic; the confrontation with individual mortality is not a mere structure in a language system; in extreme situations, people with different languages believe they understand each other on a far more fundamental level. We choose these illustrations with some care, since we do not want to suggest there is a realm of perfect understanding to be found in the paradise prior to languages. Our claim is negative: there is no strong reason why different languages should be different in this regard. It might also be affective: people need, at different moments and in different ways, to believe in the possibility of a discourse that does not depend on the differences between languages. To pray, for example.

- The philosophy of dialogue, variously built on the tradition of Buber, constructs communication as if it were based on mutual presence. We find this, for example,

when Ricoeur (1990) conceptualizes the identity of selfhood (*identité ipse*) as being continually constructed in dialogue with the other, retrospectively discernable in the duality of the *Ich* in Buber. For Laygues, that too would be a message for translators: translation is a dialogue with the other, through which we form our own identity. Most importantly, it is an identity constructed over time, through multiple translation decisions, and indeed through multiple translations. That must indeed be what happens; that is of course how individual and even whole cultures form their identities, through identifying and marking off differences from others. Very well. But the frame of the dialogue, the metaphor so common that it no longer seems metaphorical, is one of mutual presence: two talking heads that can see each other and breathe the same air. Unfortunately that is only exceptionally the case. Most translational communication is mediated by differences of space and time, especially time. Even in cases where communication is not mediated through an objectified text, even in the presence of an author, translation starts where non-translation stops, even if the break is for a moment. *Anuvad*, in Sanskrit (says Trivedi), is to say again, to say later, to say what has been said but at a later time, to translate. Dialogue? Perhaps, since many conversational procedures are indeed based on repeating the other's words, with minor modifications to present our subject position. Then again, in the translational situation, how often does the author, the ostensibly non-translational producer, respond to what has been done in the other language? It certainly can happen, as an exception rather than a rule. Mostly translators are left dialoguing with an other who only responds through the written text, fixed well before this particular dialogue began. This is rather in the way some would have God speak to them through the Bible, and translators would have authors reveal truths as they, the translators, scrutinize the complex text. No doubt. But that is surely not the dialogue of prayer, of faith, of solace, of what happens in non-translational space, prior to the differences between languages? Surely there we have tried to define translation in terms of a space that is effectively non-translational? When you pray, it seems, you are not reading. Nor are you translating.

- Let me stay with the point: The idealization of presence, of prayer as an immediate presence of the other, is a willful suppression of multiple mediations. Berman (1999), in keeping with the philosophers of dialogue, imagined translation as *l'auberge du lointain*, the "inn of the distant". The metaphor is suggestive—the foreign authors have travelled far, and translators have the task of making them welcome in the translators' land, in the space of the inn, the place for travellers, rather than in the free expanses of the receiving culture as such. (Do foreigners need to be kept from the inner sanctum of French culture?) It is as if they were face-to-face in the inn, in conversational dialogue. But in the same breath, Berman breaks from this eminently ethical discourse where the other is a person, and he insists on the *lettre*, on the other as a complex text that is and must remain other. The inn, welcoming people, thus doubles as the metaphor that justifies foreignizing strategies—let their complexity as texts keep them forever in the halfway house of the perpetual doorstep welcome. In this doubling of the metaphor, the image of dialogue with the person covers over the multiple mediations of textuality, thus also covering the hermeneutic needs to interpret, to compare, to scrutinize, to look elsewhere, to translate and retranslate the text.

- The mediation of the other, in translation, is firstly that of languages, different languages, by some definitions. Secondly, however, it is also that of all the technologies that transport textual artefacts. This text has reached you thanks to a complex sequence of material movements, as the words were copied, edited, selected, rethought, rewritten, and re-construed. The technologies of papyrus, parchment, paper, print, and electronic communication all have massive consequences for the nature of cross-cultural (long-distance) communication; they represent the most powerful modes of mediation; they embody the distributions of power in communication. To pretend that translation is intimate dialogue with an immediate other is to overlook all of that, to our peril. An ethics of presence can take up few ethical positions in wider history.

- Completion, finally, is a textual quality that precludes active dialogue. If the text I am translating is finished, closed, before I begin my work, any dialogue in that direction is necessarily going to be with an object rather than with a person. To be sure, much translating does engage with texts that are not yet complete: in interpreting of all kinds, in localization projects of most kinds, and in literary acts that make amusing anecdotes. Yet the assumption of textual completion is not at all banal (Kermode's "sense of an ending" was eschatological premonition); it became part of Western book aesthetics; it cannot allow translation to be seen as on-going dialogue, since one side of the exchange is not on-going.

This certainly does not exhaust the reasons why prayer is not translation, yet we have gone far enough. The justification of the exercise should be clear: in separating the two, we locate phenomenal aspects that might construct a regional (non-universal) sense of translation. Here we have thus located: the assumption of different languages, the use of human and technological mediation, the corresponding problematic of distance as non-presence, and the acceptable completion of anterior text (in some modes of translation). That list of features can be extended or retracted, to identify and address specific research problems, and it can be tested on as many borderline cases as you like (Pym 2007c tries this with three itemized definitions of "translation"). But that is not where we want to go now. To proceed from this point, all we have to accept is that prayer can involve a belief structure that is not translation. So not all communication need be considered translation.

Why should we insist on this?

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There is a dynamic and growing tendency to use the term "translation" in its widest possible sense, as a non-idealist way of approaching all communication. Features of the argument can be found in morsels of Modernist pre-history, as for example in all the literary asides where "the writer translates thought into language", or the Heideggerian reply that thought is in turn a translation from language. That sort of thing is now common and fine. Its postmodern expression might take a lead from Julia Kristeva (1998), who sees a multicultural Europe of immigrations as a frame where identity is profoundly "foreign to itself" (we are *étrangers à nous-mêmes*, or so goes the slogan), constantly engaged in redefinition of the self, and thus in ongoing translation. Such a view suggests not only that communication can be seen as translation, but that the discursive constitution of the subject is also translational. At that point, surely,

translation has occupied the entire available space, leaving nothing to something as resolutely archaic as prayer.

This extended use of the term "translation" brings together many causes with which we have much sympathy. It questions the essential nationalism found in some common models of the way subjects are constituted, not only through the banalities of cultural labeling ("the Japanese can't say no") but also in the very critique of identity-formation. Remember that Althusser (1970) saw "ideological state apparatuses" (the discursive formations of the nation-state) as calling subjects into social being. We are clearly no longer there. The problem is no longer one of trying to understand how (French) citizens are created, but of understanding and managing the far more fragmented social groupings of a postmodern age. When the social object itself does not give clear categories of belonging, we cannot keep referring to "source culture/language" and "target culture/language" as the binary basis of all translations. That view of the world has broken down; its more pernicious moralities ("my country right or wrong") have also, hopefully, broken down. At that point, it makes some sense to pursue the piece-by-piece sociology of Actor Network Theory as a *sociologie de la traduction* (as in Akrich et al. 2006), where "translation" broadly becomes the ways in which network links are formed and transformed. It also makes some sense to see translation as the form by which social groups in a fragmented society might communicate with each other without renouncing their difference (as in Renn et al. 2002, Renn 2006). It even makes sense to use the term "translation" to describe a wide-ranging hybridization of the world, where all pure categories are called into question (such might be a kind summary of Apter 2006). And from there a small step takes us to the multiple good causes of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (eipcp 2008), one of whose multi-year projects, called "translate", investigates "cultural translation in artistic practices as well as in political social movements" (in anything but the boring old sense of binary translation, one suspects, although their website is a superb piece of multilateral interlingual translation).

These are recent citations. This is a current phenomenon, an attractive and dynamic *actualité*, bringing together various European sociologists, American literary scholars and sundry perennial activists, all prepared to see translation working well beyond the texts others know as translations.

We agree with those vague causes; we too seek the wider conceptual space; we rejoice in the passing of the national categories that blinded us to the complexities of cultures; we would want all that, and more, to be studied and proclaimed within a broad Intercultural Studies. And yet we suspect, unfashionably, that translation is not all communication, not even all cross-cultural communication, and not all communication is translation, and that Translation Studies, despite the trends, can and should retain a specific object, albeit within Intercultural Studies.

This is not a strong stand, nor am I alone in facing the dilemma. In the volume *Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies* (2008), Lieven D'hulst and Dirk Delabastita also ask themselves what mainstream European Translation Studies should do with the rise of a loose and expansive "cultural translation" (such is the most frequent of loose terms for the phenomenon we are dealing with). D'hulst concludes that we can patiently do the historiography of what is happening, simply by applying with rigor Toury's notion of "assumed translation" (2008: 231)—if they say everything is now translational, then it is, for them, apparently(?). Delabastita, on the other hand, ultimately welcomes a "broad church of a model of discourse which is much larger than Translation Studies but not without making cross-linguistic and cross-cultural contact

and communication into one of its central parameters" (2008: 246)—a vision for which he seems prepared to sacrifice the term "translation"(?).

Our own response is slightly different: the term "translation" should be used in functional and variable opposition to some kind of non-translation. Here are some reasons why:

- An honest but surely ignoble motivation would be the preservation of Translation Studies as a European-Canadian academic discipline that has been hard won. That discipline has developed in close contact with the institutions in which translators are trained, and thus within societies that actively depend on translation as part of their communication policies. Those institutions and political bases are not to be relinquished lightly, nor are they to be shared too freely.

- An associated reason would then be that comparativists, artists, cultural scholars and the rest all too frequently ignore the existence of that discipline, or at least betray their ignorance by belittling it, for example as a defense of *"adequatio"* and nothing else (Apter 2006: 5). That is not an intended insult, one feels, but a lack of rigor by hasty intellectuals ready to leap to facile conclusions.

- More worryingly, once translation can be studied without reference to different languages (since the term "translation" loses the interlingual element of its definition), everything can be studied within the major languages, often just within English (or French, or German). The result is a paradoxical eclipse of alterity, as seen by Harish Trivedi: "Rather than help us encounter and experience other cultures, translation would have been assimilated in just one monolingual global culture" (2005: 259). True, the same thing is happening within mainstream Translation Studies, where the use of "comparable corpora" means that translation can apparently be discerned by looking at English alone (with some occasionally horrible epistemological consequences, cf. Pym 2008).

- Once one dissolves the restrictive sense of translation, it becomes hard to discern the massive changes that are indeed occurring in cross-cultural communication. The term "localization" now names a huge and dynamic technology-based communications industry, in which "translation" is often even more restricted than it ever was in the bad old days of the equivalence paradigm (translation is the "replacement of user-visible natural-language strings", to be done according to set rules and respecting the furnished glossary). At the same time, extensive immigration is behind increasing recourse to many alternative modes of cross-cultural communication, including lingua francas, code-switching, code-mixing, creolization, decreolization, multilingual conversations, and much else that is allowed by varying degrees of language learning. Mediated cross-cultural communication (one possible sense of "translation") is comparatively rare and expensive, and perhaps ultimately less engaging than the alternatives.

- To enter the realm of heresy: In many of these areas, the term "translation" is being used because it is seen as solving problems: "a great many of the problems that the Comparative Literature people could not solve were being solved by those working in Translation Studies" (Bassnett 1991: 18). (One suspects that the only real problem being referred to is the capacity to attract students, but let

us put a nobler face on it.) When you are trying to think in a non-essentialist and non-binary way (because essentialism and binarism are no longer acceptable modes of thought), then the model of a primary translation, like the metaphors of "emergence" and "ghost", does indeed appear to offer a way out: communication and transformation at the same time, and at the very origins of meaning. Seen in that way, translation must indeed be a good thing, a viable solution, a productive metaphor. The problem, however, is that much of the world is still using the term "translation" in the bad old sense of "cross-lingual communication", and in ways that do quite the opposite of what a primary cultural translation would suggest. That traditional, restrictive use of translation need not assume fixed semantic identity, nor any kind of meaning transfer, but it does still name the communicative points at which languages mark out their boundaries, both in time and in space, in what is perhaps the primary constitution of binary essences. To enact a translation, in this sense, means to position one side (language, culture, communication partner) against the other. Translations thus separate sides; they assume and promulgate alterity, far more than do the alternative modes of cross-cultural communication. In a word, translations can be seen as doing precisely the opposite of what many cultural theorists would want them to do. If the term "translation" is used in a loose, globalizing way, this profound practical negativity cannot be seen.

-   Even more worrying: Many of the moves by which translation is placed in primary space of self-formation are based on a backward-looking epistemology. This is as true of Kristeva's Europe of immigrants, marking differential identity by where they have come from, as it is of applied "philosophy of dialogue", from Ricoeur to Berman, where the translator's main concern is with establishing an ethical relation with the anterior other, the author. Check the texts. The same thing resurfaces in all those perennial reworkings of Walter Benjamin, looking back to the mysticism of *Ursprache*, to the illusion of primariness, the most distant of authorships. The relation between translation and author is indeed part of what translating is about. But it is only part. The rest concerns communicating with the future. Such is the message of the target-side focus in Translation Studies since the 1980s, as a founding principle of both Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies and Vermeer's brand of *Skopostheorie*. It is worth taking on board, if and when cultures are for the future as well as the past.

Those, then, would be our reasons for preferring a specific sense of "translation": the institutional and intellectual *acquis* of Translation Studies, the insistence on cultural and linguistic alterity, the need to account for the full range of cross-cultural communication, the awareness that translations mark out the boundaries between languages and cultures (and thus act against any presumed ontological hybridism), and the need to see translation as a future-oriented activity, not restricted to relations with authorship in the past. None of those reasons is particularly overwhelming if taken alone. Together, they might act as no more than a set of doubts, a multiple warning, or justification for a personal preference. We continue to pursue the nature of translations, good and bad, in order to formulate and solve problems, as if in an act of prayer to our academic calling.

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Is the explosion of translation a necessarily postmodern illusion? Perhaps not. In other work (Pym 2007b) we argue that the narrow equivalence-based conceptualization of translation is closely related to print culture, to the age of the book, and to the corresponding standardization of national languages. Pre-print translation practices are generally far less concerned with servitude to a source; they are more extensive in their range of renditions; they are closer to what is happening now, in the electronic age of localization.

The postmodern has far more to do with the juxtaposition of cultural frames, as in the black-robed Muslim woman praying by a service station. In our story, there was no translation. The scene was described, but the space of the other was respected; there was no attempt to deny its authenticity, as if we knew. Such spaces exist, we believe. They moreover pre-configure the most problematic cultural relations of our age. But they are not necessarily translational. They are rather the spaces that allow translation to enter *après coup*, after the setting and solace of selves, in the forward dimension of cross-cultural communication, which might yet help create a future.

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