

Texts on translation*

Henri Meschonnic

The Université de Paris VIII, France

Henri Meschonnic was born in Paris in 1932. *Agrégé* in Classics, he is Professor of Linguistics in charge of doctoral courses at the Université de Paris VIII. He has published some ten books of poetry, as well as numerous volumes on various aspects of language and poetics. Several of his translations of Biblical passages have been set to music and performed on stage.

Meschonnic's programmatic "propositions for a poetics of translation" were published in 1973. They present an eminently interdisciplinary project, marked by the intellectual discourses of the day. One might find an almost Althusserian interest in theory as a practice, a strangely Lacanian subject working in discourse, a post-Jakobsonian problematic of literariness, an emphasis on the *system* of discourse, which perhaps owed more to Benveniste than to any English-language theories of speech acts. There is also what we would now call deconstructionist insistence on translation as a decentring. More than a little of Meschonnic's critique would be picked up by Antoine Berman. Yet Meschonnic's legacy seems not to have worn as well as Berman's. This may be because of a certain intransigence and even belligerence with regard to rival approaches (this is certainly a feature of his discourse), or because his theoretical references appear locked in time (which is really the point requiring some explanation).

Many of the propositions Meschonnic formulated in 1973 remained valid in his *Poétique du traduire* of 1999. They had obviously stood the test of time. Then again, they had quite possibly faced few serious challenges during that intervening period. There is certainly an implicit debate underscoring the first of the fragments translated below ("Initial principles"), where Meschonnic criticizes the binary separation of "sourciers" (translators and translation scholars who privilege the source text) and "targeters" (those who privilege the target text). Those terms (actually *sourciers* and *ciblistes*) had loudly and repeatedly been claimed by Jean-René Ladmiral (cf. Ladmiral 1986). Meschonnic carries out his critique without naming the source of his concerns, nor the

target of his attacks. Similarly unnamed is Danica Seleskovitch and the entire *théorie du sens* (theory of sense) that has reigned supreme at the ESIT in Paris, yet that is precisely the institutionalized theory hit hardest by Meschonnic's insistence that form cannot be separated from meaning. That much, at least, might be considered implicit background context.

There are strangely few other opponents in sight. In his 1999 book Meschonnic does make a few very fleeting references to texts published in the 25 or so years since his first main work in the field. The references for that quarter of a century are limited to Steiner (1975), Holmes, Lambert and Van den Broeck (1978), de Beaugrande (1978), Kelly (1979), Ladmiral (1979), Derrida (1986, 1990), Barnstone (1993), Berman (1995), Budick and Iser (1996). Then there are a few paragraphs (p. 31) on "recent works", which turn out to be Laplace (1994), Cordonnier (1995), Ballard (1998) and Forges and Braun (1998), all of them French. Had Meschonnic's view of translation really developed in such a sparse intellectual context? It could be that the several hundred other works published in that period were simply considered unworthy of mention. However, even in Meschonnic's implicit debates, there is very little recognition of Translation Studies having developed as an academic discipline, and no discussion of its growing body of empirical research. Here we enter a strangely Francophone intellectual landscape, where *la traductologie* remains split between a (linguistic) *théorie du sens* and a (literary-philosophical) poetics of noble principles. The result might unfairly be seen as a time warp.

In his defence, Meschonnic was only ever in search of a *poetics* of translation, a set of explanatory principles that could be developed in practice. He thus has little need for models requiring completion or confirmation in empirical research. In this, his project is surely as justified as those of a Berman or Venuti. Like those writers, Meschonnic has consistently maintained a dynamic link between theorization and practice, and that link is surely to be appreciated.

The fact that Meschonnic's texts have not, to our knowledge, been rendered into English before now might also explain a certain reluctance on the part of English-language scholars to discuss his work, thus further contributing to the sense of intellectual isolation. Whatever the case, many of the propositions that have excited English-language Translation Studies since the early 1990s were already at work in Meschonnic in the early 1970s. Perhaps the more profound time warp is in English.

The following translations have been revised by Henri Meschonnic, to whom our sincere thanks. Our occasional comments and bridging summaries are inserted between square brackets.

Initial principles

From “En commençant par les principes”. introduction to *Poétique du traduire*, 1999, pp. 22–23.

The problem is to react against the conception, as fallacious as it is widespread, that would oppose ‘sourciers’ to ‘targeters’, the sourciers squinting toward the source language, trying to copy it closely, the targeters looking straight ahead, as realists, toward the target language, thinking only of preserving the essential, the *meaning*. Whereas the sourciers would care for the *form*. Inessential. [23]

It is immediately obvious that this partition is none other than the division of the *sign*, classically described as the alliance of a sounded or written signifier and a signified, the meaning. That which conventional wisdom, and common sense, regard as the only reasonable attitude thus becomes conceptual stasis, and literary disaster. And conceptual disaster as well. From which philosophical texts are not spared.

To translate under the government of the sign induces a schizophrenia of translating. A pseudo-realism demands that the meaning alone be translated — although the meaning is never alone. It demands the illusion of the natural — self-effacing translation. It confines poetry and indeed the entire literary act to a notion of form as residue of what one believes meaning to be, generally taking the word as the unit.

The reply of poetics is that the unit of language is not the word, and can thus not be word meaning. Targeters are looking at the wrong target. Because they only know the sign. But the unit is discourse. The system of discourse.

The unit, for poetics, is something continuous — rhythm, prosody —; it is no longer of the discontinuous order, where the very distinction between source language and target language meets up with the opposition between signifier and signified. The targeter forgets that a way of thinking [*une pensée*] does something to language, and what it does is what is to be translated. And there, the opposition between *source* and *target* is no longer pertinent. Only the result counts.

Poetics is a nominalism of works, of discourses, and not of words. The smallest of poems, the simplest childhood chant, eludes the gross trap of these oppositions, which have been used too much for too long, and wherein translators have been ensnared.

Whatever the languages concerned, there is only one *source*, which is what a text does; there is only one *target*, to do in another language what that text does.

That is what realism is. What the targeter mistakes for realism is semiotism. A bad sign.

Propositions for a poetics of translation

“Propositions pour une poétique de la traduction”. *Pour la poétique II*, 1973, pp. 305–316.

The following interconnected propositions are not arbitrary postulates but instead constitute the systematic principles of a theorizing practice of translation. ...

1. A theory of the translation of texts is necessary, not as a speculative activity, but as a theoretical practice, for historical knowledge of the social process of textualization, as a translinguistics. Each unit makes its signification within the larger unit that includes it: a theory of the translation of texts is included within poetics, which is [306] the theory of the value and signification of texts.
2. Empiricism cannot theorize the experience of the textualization, or non-textualization, of the translations that function as works [*œuvres*], of the operators of cultural shifting [*glissement*], such as the Vulgate or the King James Version.
3. Translating a text is a translinguistic activity, as is the very writing of a text. It can be theorized neither by the linguistics of the uttered [*énoncé*], nor by the formal poetics of Jakobson.
4. Because of the theory of texts that it implies, the poetics of translation cannot be a branch of applied linguistics. As a theoretical practice, it is an experimental poetics.
5. Its epistemological importance consists in its contribution to the theorization of a social practice that has yet to be theorized, to the critique of the ideological elements of linguistics, to the critique of the theory and sociology of literature.
6. A theory of language-use implies a theory of literature. A theory of literature implies a theory of language-use. A theory of language-use includes a theory of literature not as a limit or exception, but as a specific practice among other social practices, neither sacralized culturally, nor mistaken in its specificity.
7. A theoretical practice of the translation of texts imposes an analysis of the opposition [307] between art and science, on its domain, as a result of a

- non-theorized transportation of the notion of science beyond its specificity. ... The theory of the translation of texts is situated in the work, fundamental for epistemology, on the relations between empirical practice and theoretical practice, writing and ideology, science and ideology.
8. The translating of a text is situated in the practice and theory of texts, just as the practice and theory of texts are situated within a translinguistic theory of uttering [*énonciation*].
 9. A translinguistic theory of uttering consists in the interaction between a linguistics of uttering (not enclosed in an immanence structural to discourse) and a theory of ideology. It is worked at by the theoretical practice of texts, the theoretical practice of the poetics of translation.
 10. If the translation of a text is structured as a text, it functions as text, it is the writing of a reading-writing, historical adventure of a subject. It is not transparency with regard to the original.
 11. The notion of transparency — with its moralized corollary, the ‘modesty’ of the self-effacing translator — belongs to the [realm of] opinion, as it does to the theoretical ignorance and misunderstanding typical of an ideology that does not know itself. To it we may oppose a view of translation as a [308] re-uttering specific to a historical subject, interaction of two poetics, *decentring*, the inside-out of a language and its textualities.
 12. *Decentring* is a textual relation between two texts in two language-cultures, [it extends] right to the linguistic structure of the language-system, this linguistic structure becoming value within the system of the text. *Annexation* [*annexion*] is the effacing of this relation, an illusion of the natural, the as-if, as if the source-language text were written in the target language, overlooking the differences in culture, in period and in linguistic structure. A text is at a distance: one shows it, or one hides it. Neither import nor export.
 13. The common saying that a translation *should not read like a translation* has two senses. In the first, one suffers the illusion of transparency, of passive ideological writing and cultural translation, accompanied by its own misrecognition. In the second, one produces an original text in the target language, a homologue of the source-language text. There is a general confusion between these two senses, so that, pointing out the second, one practices the first. The first is dominant, since it transposes the so-called dominant ideology into a practice of *annexation*.
 14. The illusion of transparency belongs to an ideological system characterized by a series of interconnected notions: the heterogeneity between thought and language, the genius of a language, the mystery of art — notions

founded on a linguistics of the word and not of system, on [the idea of] languages [309] as particular realizations of a transcendental signified (philosophical projection of a primacy that is Eurocentric, logocentric, colonialist in Western thought). These notions lead one to oppose text and translation, through a sacralization of literature. This sacralization is compensatory in relation to its political neutralization. This sacralization and this compensation define the social role of the aesthetic. From play in the ideological opposition between text and translation there ensues a metaphysical notion, non-historicized, of the untranslatable.

15. For a given work in a given interlinguistic-intercultural relation, the interaction of poetics and historical re-utterance may not yet have occurred, might not happen. The untranslatable as text is thus the cultural effect resulting from these historical reasons. The untranslatable is social and historical, not metaphysical (the incommunicable, the ineffable, mystery, genius). For as long as the moment of the translation-text has not arrived, the translinguistic effect is an effect of transcendence and the untranslatable appears to be natural, an absolute. [310]
16. The current sociological status of literature, founded on this metaphysics and on the opposition between text and translation, writing and translating, privileges the text and the activity of writing. Even the linguistic theory of translation, thanks to its dualism, fails to theorize work on a language as being the same thing in the case of a [source] text as it is in a translation. Thus, within a linguistic-cultural dominance of subordinated clauses, a text may set up a counter-dominance of paratactic clauses (Hemingway), whereas a translation-translation may not and will not dare to do so. The translation-translation is the application of an ideological template. Its non-prestige is the result of its non-labour. Prestige and labour are in a circular relationship.
17. A cultural imperialism tends to forget its history, and thus tends to misrecognize the historical role that translations and borrowings have played in its culture. This forgetting is the corollary of the sacralization of its literature.
18. Each cultural domain, each culture-language, has its historicity, without (total) contemporaneity with the others. The Russians do not translate French in the same way as the French translate Russian.
19. Polysemy is inseparably language and culture. This proposition means that one can no longer separate denotation from connotation, value from signification. It means that a translation that pretends to be no more than linguistic is [311] a cultural translation that misrecognizes itself as such. It

- means privileging, for theoretical and historical reasons, and against the dominant opinion, decentring.
20. The historicity of a translation relation between two linguistic-cultural domains produces in the target language a semantic and syntactic material that is first limited to translations, then becomes a factor in the development of certain properties of the language. Such, for example, was the role of the Vulgate in Latin, or of fourteenth-fifteenth century French translations from Latin. The moment of translation counts for as much the linguistic-cultural specificity of the relation at stake. Translation, this setting up of a new relation, can only be modernity, neology, whereas a dualist conception sees the translation of a text as form and archaism. The poetics of translation historicizes the contradictions of translating between source language and target language, period and period, culture and culture, subjectal relation and 'reproduction'.
 21. In a theory of texts the dualist opposition between form (or expression) and sense (or content) is displaced as the translinguistic structuration and trans-narcissistic inscription of a generalized subject. The opposition between form and sense has been used and is still used to privilege an ideological content. It is presented as nature, even though it is a historical cultural product. It introduces the logical notion of truth into the theory of language, hence the Platonic position, which is continued in Marxism. This position implies the aesthetic. [312] It is theological, not structural, not dialectic.
 22. The notion of form thus designates a more difficult and added-on mode of decodability if an identical meaning is to be sought. If things were really so, the 'artistic' mode of communication, having become semiotically useless, would have disappeared long ago. Lotman, in *The Structure of the artistic text*, has demonstrated the theoretical non-pertinence of the notion of form.
 23. The behaviourist notion of meaning as response participates in the ideology of the natural. It presupposes the response of the source receiver. It privileges exegesis and hermeneutics over epistemology. Its pragmatic notion of the performative designates its aims as ideological and not scientific, behind its scientific appearance, which itself becomes an instrument in the service of an ideology. It is founded on the opposition between form and sense, which opposition it in turn justifies. It reduces polysemy to monosemy. It reduces culture to language.
 24. Dualist opinion treats the text, in a contradictory fashion, both as vehicular language (in that it constructs only a linguistics of the uttered and of translation which misrecognizes its specificity) and as distortion, violation, exception, a surplus to be opposed to vehicular language taken as norm.

25. To translate a text is not to translate from a language-system or a piece of a language-system, but to translate a text in its language, which is text thanks to its language, just as the language itself exists thanks to the text. [313]
26. To translate from only a language-system is to pass from one structure to another. Since a text may turn a structure of its language into a value for itself, to translate a text as a text means, with respect to the probabilities and frequencies of the target language, remaining in the contradiction between two linguistic structures, through and in a text.
27. 'Poetry' is not more 'difficult' to translate than 'prose'. The notion of the difficulty of poetry, nowadays presented as if it had always been valid, is dated. It includes a confusion between verse and poetry. It is connected with the notion of poetry as violation of language norms. The practical and theoretical specificity of translation varies according to the specificity of the language practice to be translated. The place of practice and of theory, for the translation of any text, is the place of its practice.
28. In the historicity of translating, a translation is a translation-introduction before the moment of a translation-text arrives, if indeed it ever arrives.
29. The definitions of the text as a formal combinatorial [system] do not theorize the reading relationship that is translinguistic, transnarcissistic and which imposes a theory of the subject.
30. Translation is no longer defined as the transport of the source text into the target literature or, inversely, the transport of the target reader into the source text (double movement, which reposes on the dualism of sense and form, which empirically characterizes most translations), but as work [314] on the language, *decentring*, interpoetic relation between value and signification, structuration of a subject and history (which formal postulates had separated), and no longer as meaning. This proposition postulates that the text works the language as an epistemology applying [*en acte de*] a knowledge-skill [*savoir*] inseparable from this practice and which, beyond this practice, is no longer this *savoir* but a signified.
31. A translation is only homogeneous to a text if it produces a system of language, work in the chains of the signifier (in and by the text-system, the chains that make system, from the small to the large unit) as a practice of the contradiction between foreign text and re-utterance, logic of the signifier and logic of the sign, one language-culture-history and another language-culture-history.
32. One can construct a *prosodic relation* between the structures of the signifier, from a source text to its translation-text, there where opinion, opposing

- two phonologies on the level of language-system, and term to term, concluded in the untranslatable. Indeed, one does not translate a phonology. But nor does one translate a piece of language-system, in a text. One constructs and theorizes a relation from text to text, not from one language to another. The interlinguistic relation comes via the intertextual relation; the intertextual does not come via the interlinguistic.
33. The traditional distinction between the text and the translation (positive social evaluation of the text, outdatedness and inferior status of the translation) thus appears pertinent only for [315] the practice, common enough, which is the sticking of an abstract and non-theorized practice onto a concrete human practice which has always included *its* theorization. This distinction (theoretical, social) is no longer pertinent for the translation-text of a text. This is shown empirically by the workings of certain translations.
 34. The poetic relation between text and translation implies concrete ideological work against the aestheticizing domination (literary 'elegance') that is characterized by a subjective practice of suppressions (of repetitions, for example), additions, compensations, transformations, in accordance with a ready-made idea of a language and of literature — which characterizes translators' production as ideological production, whereas textual production is always at least partly anti-ideological. 'Poetization' (or literarization), choice of decorative elements in accordance with the collective writing of a given society in a given time, is one of the most common practices of this aestheticizing domination. Similarly for *re-writing*: first a translation 'word for word' by someone who knows the source language but does not speak text, then the adding of some 'poetry' by someone who speaks text but not the language. Such is the materialization of dualism. All Bible committees have stylists.
 35. The poetic relation between a text and a translation implies the construction of a non-composite rigour, characterized by its own concordance (concordance limited by the syntactic character of the lexicon) and by the relation of the marked for the marked, the [316] non-marked for the non-marked, figure for figure, and non-figure for non-figure. This theorized correspondence replaces the subjective notion, variable and extensible, of 'fidelity', characteristic of the aestheticizing ideology that we just defined. Everything that is not this correspondence falls variously into poeticization and participates in this aestheticizing ideology.
 36. Criteria for translatability and a typology of translations may be sought not in accordance with isolated solutions to philological problems, but by taking each

practice and bringing out its non-theorized theory (of language and of literature), which is involved in the practice's misrecognition of itself.

On Nida

“Une linguistique de la traduction”. *Pour la poétique II*, 1973, pp. 328–349.

Eugene Nida's books *Toward a science of translating* (1964) and, with Charles Taber, *The theory and practice of translating* (1969) constitute the most prominent contribution that has been made to the theory and practice of translation in recent years. They bring together the experience of English-language Bible scholars working with hundreds of languages. They theorize a behaviourist and Bloomfieldian notion of meaning as response. From all the implications of this initial postulate, Nida draws a 'new concept of translating' that uses the analytical techniques of transformational linguistics and structural semantics. He would have us believe he has thus established a 'science of translation'. ... [329]

The question is not to defend or illustrate translation as an art, as a formalist tension to forms, but rather to show that Nida's fundamental opposition between form and response is inoperative in literature, that it has been transported from elsewhere, that it fails to grasp the specificity of literature and the problems of translating literature. The point is to show that Nida's theory is not scientific, that it is a travesty of the transformational grammar that it uses, that it proceeds from an ideological distortion of the Bible, that it is made to provide surety for all ideological distortions, that it is nothing more than the fine-tuning, with modern instruments, of the oldest ideology of translation. One has to dialectize the elements that, in Nida, form a sterile opposition.

The opposition between science and art, or science and ideology, may thus crumble away. This *extra* that the notion of art is supposed to have (“translation is much more than a science”, admits Nida), this *extra* is the whole of traditional rhetoric. One has only to situate translating within a different theoretical system to see this *extra* transformed, and to see that Nida's phrase makes no sense. This *extra* is not in the *nature* of translation, but in an ideology of translation ... [330]

Nida places his modernity in the displacement of the question: instead of asking 'Is the translation correct?', we should now ask 'For whom?'. This is a step toward a historical positioning of translating. For Nida, the psychology of behaviour has as its aim only to convert, to obtain a somatic response, a mode

of behaving. His whole space, right from the initial ‘For whom?’, is oriented toward one final phrase, this desired response: “I never knew before that God spoke my language”. But Nida’s technical modernization, on the pragmatic level, relies on [331] a postulate that is a definition of meaning: restrictive enough for the language-system, that definition cannot account for what a text is, nor for what the translation of a text is.

Nida opposes ‘form’ to ‘response’. [*He sees form is shown as an optional extra, secondary to the biblical meaning. Form is thus assimilated to a notion of poetry as exceptional language, as something secondary to meaning. In Nida’s use of examples, it is assimilated to the notion of archaism, thanks to use of the King James Version as the text to which the more recent translations of the Bible are compared. And since the King James Version is always cited in isolated sentences, form is ideologically misrepresented as that which is difficult to understand. Meschonnic also notes the entire absence of reference to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament:*] [336] In Nida, the explicit point of departure is always the King James Version ...

The notion of *response* is directed at the target language. It would prefer, in seeking the *natural*, a version that translated “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:6) — the source text in English! — as “give one another [337] a hearty handshake all around” (Nida 1964: 160). This translation, more intralinguistic than interlinguistic, has a logic that would eclipse all historical distance and would require one to translate Shakespeare into contemporary English and Rabelais into contemporary French. If such attempts have been made, they have not won the day. Such is the force of the text over a theorization insufficient in its pragmatism. A text is a point of departure, not a point of arrival. It is a text because it is, on the translinguistic level, that which a I-here-now is on the linguistic level, namely a shifter, indefinitely metaphorizable, indefinitely bearer of the relation with a reader who is always new, despite the aging of the language. ...

[341] The use of a scientific technique can be non-scientific. Nida uses transformational grammar and then structural semantics. But Chomsky’s theories are parodied more than they are used. Kernels are presented as if they were universals for all languages, which dispenses rather cheaply with ethno-linguistics. English kernel-sentences and their transformations appear to realize both intralinguistic and interlinguistic equivalence. Constant postulate: if you minimize the form, you will have one universal thought for all languages: “one can say the same thing in many ways” (Nida and Taber 1969: 49). The identification (1) and explicitation (2) of the elements involved, then their reduction

to kernels (3), the determination of the relations between the kernels (4), and a reformulation on a near-kernel level (5), there we have a five-stage procedure providing the normalization and amplification necessary for a *response* foreseen in advance. Which provides cultural translation. Which allows the text to be explained, made banal, equated. Which allows any English-speaker or near English-speaker to believe they can, working from English, retranslate the Bible into a third language. And all this is provided by the solely intralinguistic relation between the King James Version and some more recent versions. Meaning is thus situated at a universal level, letting escape the differences, which are not only [341] 'stylistic' but also inseparably signification and value. ...

[347] *Empiricism* is finally the territory, without outlet to science, wherein this 'theory' is developed, where it organizes translation committees, Bible Societies on a global scale. Scientific apparatus providing vast illusion for the naïve. [348] Success (namely the acquisition and maintenance of a clientele for the church), especially with regard to underdeveloped countries, is measured in terms of reactions: "this is something like market research" (Nida and Taber 1969: 163). ... A testing technique is proposed to check the decodability of the translation, which is thus never considered as a text but only as a linguistic utterance bearing information. And information is all a survey can provide. Criterion: the 'natural'. What is 'natural', when and *for whom*? The validity of a statistical criterion is here reduced to its mechanistic application. For example, the relative frequency, in two languages, of the passive. If we translate the marked by the marked, and the non-marked by the non-marked, we would necessarily have to change the proportions of the passive in the text [*since the language with the most frequent passives would have fewer marked instances for the text*]. However, in the [*source*] text, there may be a 'poetry of grammar' in which the passive becomes a *value*, a form-sense. In *Esther*, the passive is a feature of Nebuchadnezzar's speech, just as the active belongs to Mordecai: if each passive does not remain a passive, we distort the literary character, which is none other than the language of the character. Nida's whole categorization, which opposes formal to [349] dynamic equivalence, is based on an empirical and ideological notion of 'form' and 'meaning'. It leads to an inescapable misunderstanding of literature. Neither in theory nor in practice can it help one to translate it.

The Bible in French

“La Bible en français: Actualité du traduire”. *Pour la poésie II*, 1973, p. 417.

France has recently taken to the Bible: commercialized currency of the Dead Sea scrolls, political current affairs; Catholic need to catch up with Protestant cultures; religious exploitation of apocalyptic neuroses (hippies, leftists), the *mal de siècle* of the French middle-class who having returned from ‘materialism’ now regress to the maternal womb of religion. One translation is a commentary on photographs of Israel. A comic-strip Bible has appeared in *France-Soir*. It has become a weekly serial: *En ce temps-là, la Bible* promises a ‘new French version... giving the beauty of the text in a simple and uncomplicated style, without risk of causing the reader consternation’. It has been translated from the Vulgate, which is presented as a guarantee of fidelity and elegance (‘Saint Jerome, as faithful a translator as he was an elegant Latinist’). But the value of the Vulgate (which *exists* as such in French literature, in Claudel for example) is intrinsically Latin. Here we are thus offered no more than a translation of a translation. Few would claim such undertakings to be of any interest, except when direct access to the original is impossible. If you do not know Hebrew, translate something else.

To translate is to re-translate

“Traduire, c’est retraduire: la Bible”. *Poétique du traduire*, 1999, pp. 436–437.

To translate, even that which has not yet been translated, is always to retranslate. Because translating is preceded by the history of translating. ...

To translate the Bible is necessarily to enact a theory of language, and since all the French translations of the complete Bible have been clapped in the irons of Greek dualism [*opposing meaning and form, spirit and letter*], we must be aware that the way the Bible makes meaning is fundamentally out of kilter with the notion of meaning that has so far been applied to it. That notion of meaning seemed to be a nature. It is only a cultural grid. Worn out, inefficient, injurious. To be demonstrated. To be ruined. While constating its ruin. It is also a politics of meaning. One must recognize what has always been visible and audible in the Bible, and what this grid has long hidden from us — its rhythmic system. Then, necessarily, translation is different.

Translation is no longer literalist [*as in a Jewish tradition*]. Literalism is

language put into the word, and even into the etymology of the word. Literalism knows only *la langue*. But to privilege, and to follow exactly, the rhythmic (which includes the entire organization of the consonants, of the vowels, whose network makes the relation not of sound but of meaning), is to work on the unit of the group, of the discourse itself. This shows the fundamental connection between the place of rhythm in the Bible and the renewing of its translation, between this place of rhythm and the role of the Bible in translation theory, and in the theory of language. I know of no other case where the meaning is made so much by the rhythm, and the rhythm makes the meaning.

The transformation of discourse by rhythm

“La transformation du discours par le rythme”. *Poétique du traduire*, 1999, pp. 110–111.

An example, intentionally ticklish, of the way discourse constantly provokes languages, oral to written, and how the creation of language provokes the established authorities of grammar. The example is extremely simple. In which it reaches the limits of how one might attempt to apply conventional wisdom. In *Hamlet* (I.i.14), the watchman says, as he hears the arrival of “the rivals of my watch”, “I think I hear them”. Problem for beginners. Everyone knows the *that* here can be omitted in English. Thus, a problem of the *language system* [*la langue*]. For ‘comparative stylistics’. Of the kind *he swam across the river*, ‘il traversa la rivière à la nage’. And François-Victor Hugo translates: “Je crois que [*that*] je les entends.” Correctly. Yves Bonnefoy adds a little something: “Je crois bien que je les entends.” But Raymond Lepoutre, for the version performed at the Théâtre de Chaillot, directed by Antoine Vitez in 1983, translated this as “Je crois, je les entends.” He replaced the *that* with a comma, syntax with rhythm — a pause, suspense. This is no longer a question of a language. It is discourse. The translator has created a new problem. And note, before condemning this as incorrect written French, that this syntax is of the theatre, of orality: the syntax is there, but in a different form. Oral. The more any negative judgement stands squarely on its writ, the more it oversteps the spoken. Of course, everyone has their taste. But is the historicity of discourses a question of taste? Is it not rather that which indefinitely displaces taste, the passive past of the acquired?

To those who are hard of hearing and remain dogmatic dualists, to those who keep bringing the problems of translation back to a notion of meaning

whose theoretical poverty is constantly shown by questions of significance, it is necessary to oppose the notion that [111] Saussurean *valeur* only finds course within discourse thanks to rhythm. Rhythm shows that the outdated primate of meaning, of *sens*, is to be replaced by a notion more powerful and more subtle, since it can be realized in the imperceptible, through the effects of listening and the effects of translation: the mode of signifying. In this, the adventure of translation and the adventure of rhythm answer for each other.

The history of Europe as history and non-history of translating

“L’Europe des traductions est d’abord l’Europe de l’effacement des traductions”. *Poétique du traduire*, 1999, pp. 32–34.

Europe was born of translation and in translation.

Europe founded itself on nothing but translations. And it constituted itself on nothing but the effacement of that entirely traductive origin. This concerns its foundational texts, those of its two pillars, Greek for its science and its philosophy, Hebraic for the Bible, both the Old and the New Alliances. The concealment of this concealment is the concealing of Hebraism, throughout Western theologico-political history. Which is the history of Christian philological anti-Judaism. ...

[33] Unlike medieval Europe [where the Septuagint was often regarded as an inspired original, forgetting the Hebrew] and unlike the Europe where the vernaculars fought against Latin from the sixteenth century, where the translation of the Bible determined a sacralization of the language, in German, in Polish, in Russian — all effacements of the original —, the cultures of India, and of China, and of Japan are cultures in lingual continuity with their foundational texts. Except for the texts of Buddhism, which travelled in translation, from Sanskrit to Old Chinese and to Japanese. But Confucius created a foundational text in Chinese for the Chinese. And the *Kojiki*, the *Nihongi* are foundational in Japanese for Japan. As for Arabic culture, its sacred text travels throughout Islam in Arabic, as far as Indonesia. Not in translation.

Only Europe is a continent of translation, in the sense that the great foundational texts are translations, and are such only in translation, and the great translations are firstly those of the sacred texts. The New Testament — Alliance — in Greek is a translation. Whose substratum, long supposed to be Aramaic, itself concealed the Hebrew of which it was made, as is shown in its word-games.

Unlike the Koran, which compels recognition throughout Islam in its language, the Bible has only been known and practised in the Christian world in its translations, which have been second originals: the Septuagint, the Vulgate (declared 'authentic' text by the Council of Trent in 1546), and in Protestant lands, Luther's translation and the King James Version, 'authorized' in 1611. This effect, so huge that it passes unnoticed, becomes even more serious in Catholic countries, particularly in France, where there is not [34] even any second original, no great translation of the Bible, whose text is thus doubly effaced. One of the two origins (Greek and Hebraic) of this world, as it were, is thus the object of a multiple effacement.

Unlike other cultures centred on themselves, Europe is of a multicultural origin, originally, constantly translating, from its Mediterranean beginnings to Hellenizing Rome, to the Middle Ages where Aristotle went from Syriac to Arabic before being read in Latin, to the sixteenth century where Ambrosio Calepino wrote a dictionary whose final edition was in eleven languages. Ever since its beginnings and throughout its intermittences, Europe has never stopped translating, from the sacred to the profane, from Latin to the vernaculars, then between the vernaculars. Just as Europe invented exclusion, through the Inquisition, it invented, through the great explorations and ethnology, the relation to the other.

Note

* Introduction and translations by Anthony Pym.

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Author's address

Henri Meschonnic
 90, quai Auguste Prévost
 77500 CHELLES
 France
 e-mail: hmeschonnic@free.fr

Translator's address

Anthony Pym
 Filologia Anglogermànica
 Universitat Rovira i Virgili
 Plaça Imperial Tàrraco, 1
 E-43005 TARRAGONA
 Spain
 e-mail: ap@fl.urv.es