Ortega y Gasset, José

THE MISERY AND THE SPLENDOR OF TRANSLATION[1]
TRANSLATED BY ELIZABETH GAMBLE MILLER

1. The Misery

During a colloquium attended by professors and students from the Collège de France and other academic circles, someone spoke of the impossibility of translating certain German philosophers. Carrying the proposition further, he proposed a study that would determine the philosophers who could and those who could not be translated.

"This would be to suppose, with excessive conviction," I suggested, "that there are philosophers and, more generally speaking, writers who can, in fact, be translated. Isn't that an illusion? Isn't the act of translating necessarily a utopian task? The truth is, I've become more and more convinced that everything Man does is utopian. Although he is principally involved in trying to know, he never fully succeeds in knowing anything. When deciding what is fair, he inevitably falls into cunning. He thinks he loves and then discovers he only promised to. Don't misunderstand my words to be a satire on morals, as if I would criticize my colleagues because they don't do what they propose. My intention is, precisely, the opposite; rather than blame them for their failure, I would suggest that none of these things can be done, for they are impossible in their very essence, and they will always remain mere intention, vain aspiration, an invalid posture. Nature bas simply endowed each creature with a specific program of actions he can execute satisfactorily. That's why, it's so unusual for an animal to be sad. Only occasionally may something akin to sadness be observed in a few higher species—the dog or the horse—and that's when they seem closest to us, seem most human. Perhaps Nature, in the mysterious depths of the jungle, offers its most surprising spectacle—surprising because of its equivocal aspect—the melancholic orangutan. Animals are normally happy. We have been endowed with an opposite nature. Always melancholic, frantic, manic, men are ill-nurtured by all those illnesses Hippocrates called divine. And

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the reason for this is that human tasks are unrecognisable. The destiny of Man—his privilege and honor—is never to achieve what he proposes, and to remain merely an intention, a living utopia. He is always marching toward failure, and even before entering the fray he already carries a wound in his temple.

"This is what occurs whenever we engage in that modest occupation called translating. Among intellectual undertakings, there is no humbler one. Nevertheless, it is an excessively demanding task.

"To write well is to make continual incursions into grammar, into established usage, and into accepted linguistic norms. It is an act of permanent rebellion against the social environs, a subversion. To write well is to employ a certain radical courage. Fine, but the translator is usually a shy character. Because of his humility, he has chosen such an insignificant occupation. He finds himself facing an enormous controlling apparatus, composed of grammar and common usage. What will he do with the rebellious text? Isn't it too much to ask that he also be rebellious, particularly since the text is someone else's? He will be ruled by cowardice, so instead of resisting grammatical restraints he will do just the opposite: he will place the translated author in the prison of normal expression; that is, he will betray him. *Traduttore, traditore*."

"And, nevertheless, books on the exact and natural sciences can be translated" my colleague responded.

"I don't deny that the difficulty is less, but I do deny that it doesn't exist. The branch of mathematics most in vogue in the last quarter century was Set Theory. Fine, but its creator, Cantor, baptized it with a term that has no possibility of being translated into our language. What we have had to call 'set' he called 'quantity' (*Menge*), a word whose meaning is not encompassed in 'set.' So, let's not exaggerate the translatability of the mathematical and physical sciences. But, with that proviso, I am disposed to recognize that a version of them may be more precise than one from another discipline."

"Do you, then, recognize that there are two classes of writings: those that can be translated and those that cannot?"

"Speaking *grosso modo*, we must accept that distinction, but when we do so we close the door on the real problem every translation presents. For if we ask ourselves the reason certain scientific books are easier to translate, we will soon realize that in these the author himself has begun by translating from the authentic tongue in which he 'lives, moves and has his being' into a pseudolanguage formed by technical terms, linguistically

artificial words which he himself must define in his book. In short, he translates himself from a language into a terminology."

"But a terminology is a language like any other! Furthermore, according to our Condillac, the best language, the language that is 'well constructed', is science."

"Pardon me for differing radically from you and from the good father. A language is a system of verbal signs through which individuals may understand each other without a previous accord, while a terminology is only intelligible if the one who is writing or speaking and the one who is reading or listening have previously and *individually* come to an agreement as to the meaning of the signs. For this reason, I call it pseudolanguage, and I say that the scientist has to begin by translating his own thoughts into it. It Is a *Volapuk*, an Esperanto established by a deliberate convention between those who cultivate that discipline. That is why these books are easier to translate from one language to another. Actually, in every country these are written almost entirely in the same language. That being the case, men who speak the authentic language in which they are apparently written often find these books to be hermetic, unintelligible, or at least very difficult to understand."

"In all fairness, I must admit you are right and also tell you I am beginning to perceive certain mysteries in the verbal relationships between individuals that I had not previously noticed."

"And I, in turn, perceive you to be the sole survivor of a vanished species, like the last of the Abencerrajes, since when faced with another's belief you are capable of thinking him, rather than you, to be right. It is a fact that the discussion of translation, to whatever extent we may pursue it, will carry us into the most recondite secrets of that marvelous phenomenon that we call speech.

Just examining question that our topic obviously presents will be sufficient for now. In my comments up to this point, I have based the utopianism of translation on the fact that an author of a book—not of mathematics, physics, or even biology—is a writer in a positive sense of the word. This is to imply that he has used his native tongue with prodigious skill, achieving two things that seem impossible to reconcile: simply, to be intelligible and, at the same time, to modify the ordinary usage of language. This dual operation is more difficult to achieve than walking a tightrope. How can we demand it of the average translators? Moreover, beyond this first dilemma that personal style presents to the translator, we perceive new layers of difficulties. An author's personal style, for

example, is produced by his slight deviation from the habitual meaning of the word. The author forces it to an extraordinary usage so that the circle of objects it designates will not coincide exactly with the circle of objects which that same word customarily means in its habitual use. The general trend of these deviations in a writer is what we call his style. But, in fact, each language compared to any other also has its own linguistic style, what von Humboldt called its 'internal form.' Therefore, it is utopian to believe that two words belonging to different languages, and which the dictionary gives us as translations of each other, refer to exactly the same objects. Since languages are formed in different landscapes, through different experiences, their incongruity is natural. It is false, for example, to suppose that the thing the Spaniard calls a *bosque* [forest] the German calls a *Wald*, yet the dictionary tells us that *Wald* means *bosque*. If the mood were appropriate this would be an excellent time to interpolate an *aria di bravura* describing the forest in Germany in contrast to the Spanish forest. I am jesting about the singing, but I proclaim the result to be intuitively clear, that is, that an enormous difference exists between the two realities. It is so great that not only are they exceedingly incongruous, but almost all their resonances, both emotive and intellectual, are equally so.

"The shapes of the meanings of the two fail to coincide as do those of a person in a double-exposed photograph. This being the case, our perception shifts and wavers without actually identifying with either shape or forming a third; imagine the distressing vagueness we experience when reading thousands of words affected in this manner. These are the same causes, then, that produce the phenomenon of *flou* [blur, haziness] in a visual image and in linguistic expression. Translation is the permanent literary *flou*, and since what we usually call nonsense is, on the other hand, but the *flou* of thoughts, we shouldn't be surprised that a translated author always seems somewhat foolish to us."

2. The Two Utopianisms

"When conversation is not merely an exchange of verbal mechanisms, wherein men act like gramophones, but rather consists of a true interchange, a curious phenomenon is produced. As the conversation evolves, the personality of each speaker becomes progressively divided: one part listens agreeably to what is being said, while the other, fascinated by the subject itself, like a bird with a snake, will increasingly withdraw and begin thinking about the matter. When we converse, we live within a society; when we

think, we remain alone. But in this case, in this kind of conversation, we do both at once, and as the discussion continues we do them with growing intensity: we pay attention to what is being said with almost melodramatic emotion and at the same time we become more and more immersed in the solitary well of our meditation. This increasing disassociation cannot be sustained in a permanent balance. For this reason, such conversations characteristically reach a point when they suffer a paralysis and lapse into a heavy silence. Each speaker is self-absorbed. Simply as a result of thinking, he isn't able to talk. Dialogue has given birth to silence, and the initial social contact has fallen into states of solitude.

"This happened at our conference—after my last statement. Why then? The answer is clear: this sudden tide of silence wells up over dialogue at that point when the topic has been developed to its extreme in one direction and the conversation must turn around and set the prow toward another quadrant."

"This silence that has risen among us," someone said, "has a funereal character. You have murdered translation, and we are sullenly following along for the burial."

"Oh, no!" I replied. "Not at all! It was most important that I emphasize the miseries of translating; it was especially important that I define its difficulty, its improbability, but not so as to remain there. On the contrary, it was important so that this might act as a ballistic spring to impel us toward the possible splendor of the art of translation. This is the opportunity to cry out: 'Translation is dead! Long live translation!' Now we must advocate the opposite position and, as Socrates said on similar occasions, recant."

"I fear that will be rather difficult for you," said Mr. X. "For we haven't forgotten your initial statement to us setting forth the task of translating as a utopian operation and an impossible proposition."

"In fact, I said that and a little more: all specific tasks that Man undertakes are of similar character. Don't fear that I now intend to tell you why I think so. I know that in a French conversation one must always avoid the principal point and it's preferable to remain in the temperate zone of intermediate questions. You've been more than amiable in tolerating me, and even in forcing this disguised monologue upon me, despite the fact that the monologue is, perhaps, the most grievous crime one can commit in Paris. For that reason I am somewhat inhibited and conscience-stricken by the impression I have now of committing something like a rape. The only thing that comforts me is the

conviction that my French stumbles along and would never allow the contredanse of dialogue. But let's return to our subject, the essentially utopian condition of everything human. Instead of confirming this belief by truly solid reasoning, I will simply invite you, for the pure pleasure of an intellectual experiment, to accept it as a basic principle and in that light to contemplate the endeavors of Man."

"Nevertheless," said my dear friend Jean Baruzi, "your quarrel with utopianism frequently appears in your work."

"Frequently and substantially! There is a false utopianism that is the exact inverse of the one I am now describing, a utopianism consistent in its belief that what man desires, projects and proposes is, obviously, possible. Nothing is more repugnant to me, for I see this false utopianism as the major cause of all the misfortunes taking place now on this planet. In this humble matter in which we are now engaged, we can appreciate the opposing meanings of the two utopianisms. Both the bad and the good utopians consider it desirable to correct the natural reality that places men within the confines of diverse languages and impedes communication between them. The bad utopian thinks that because it is *desirable*, it is possible. Believing it to be easy is just moving one step further. With such an attitude, he won't give much thought to the question of how one must translate, and without further ado he will begin the task. This is the reason why almost all translations done until now are bad ones. The good utopian, on the other hand, thinks that *because* it would be desirable to free men from the divisions imposed by languages, there is little probability that it can be attained; therefore, it can only be achieved to an approximate measure. But this approximation can be greater or lesser, to an infinite degree, and the efforts at execution are not limited, for there always exists the possibility of bettering, refining, perfecting: 'progress,' in short. All human existence consists of activities of this type. Imagine the opposite: that you should be condemned to doing only those activities deemed possible of achievement, possible in themselves. What profound anguish! You would feel as if your life were emptied of all substance. Precisely because your activity had attained what it was supposed to, you would feel as if you had done nothing. Man's existence has a sporting character, with pleasure residing in the effort itself, and not in the results. World history compels us to recognize Man's continuous, inexhaustible capacity to invent unrealizable projects. In the effort to realize them, he achieves many things, he creates innumerable realities that so-called Nature is incapable of producing for itself. The only thing that Man does not achieve is, precisely,

what he proposes to—let it be said to his credit. This wedding of reality with the demon of what is impossible supplies the universe with the only growth it is capable of. For that reason, it is very important to emphasize that everything—that is, everything worthwhile, everything truly human—is difficult, very difficult; so much so, that it is impossible.

"As you see, to declare its impossibility, is not an argument against the possible splendor of the translator's task. On the contrary, this characterization admits it to the highest rank and lets us infer that it is meaningful."

An art historian interrupted, "Accordingly, you would tend to think, as I do, that Man's true mission, what gives meaning to his undertakings, is to oppose Nature."

"In fact, I am very close to such an opinion, as long as we don't forget the previous distinction between the two utopianisms—the good and the bad—which, for me, is fundamental. I say this because the essential character of the good utopian in radically opposing Nature is to be aware of its presence and not to be deluded. The good utopian promises himself to be, primarily, an inexorable realist. Only when he is certain of not having acceded to the least illusion, thus having gained the total view of a reality stripped stark naked, may he, fully arrayed, turn against that reality and strive to reform it, yet acknowledging the impossibility of the task, which is the only sensible approach.

"The inverse attitude, which is the traditional one, consists of believing that what is desirable is already there, as a spontaneous fruit of reality. This has blinded us *a limine* in our understanding of human affairs. Everyone, for example, wants Man to be good, but your Rousseau, who has caused the rest of us to suffer, thought the desire had long since been realized, that Man was good in himself by nature. This idea ruined a century and a half of European history which might have been magnificent. We have required infinite anguish, enormous catastrophes—even those yet to come in order to rediscover the simple truth, known throughout almost all previous centuries, that Man, in himself, is nothing but an evil beast.

"Or, to return definitively to our subject: to emphasize its impossibility is very far from depriving the occupation of translating of meaning, for no one would even think of considering it absurd for us to speak to each other in our mother tongue yet, nevertheless, that is also a utopian exercise."

This statement produced, in turn, a sharpening of opposition and protests. "That is an exaggeration or, rather, what grammarians call 'an abuse,' said a philologist, previously silent. "There is too much supposition and paradox in that," exclaimed a

sociologist. "I see that my little ship of audacious doctrine rims the risk of running aground in this sudden storm. I understand that for French cars, even your so benevolent ones, it is hard to hear the statement that talking is a utopian exercise. But what am I to do if such is undeniable the truth?"

3. About Talking and Keeping Silent

Once the storm my last remarks had elicited subsided, I continued: "I well understand your indignation. The statement that talking is an illusory activity and a utopian action has all the air of a paradox, and a paradox is always irritating. It is especially so for the French. Perhaps the course of this conversation takes us to a point where we need to clarify, why the French spirit is such an enemy of paradox. But you probably recognize that it is not always within our power to avoid it. When we try to rectify a fundamental opinion that seems quite erroneous to us, there is little probability that our words will be free of a certain paradoxical insolence. Who is to say whether the intellectual, who has been inexorably prescribed to be one even against his desire or will, has not been commissioned in this world to declare paradox! If someone had bothered to clarify, for us in depth and once and for all why the intellectual exists, why, he has been here since the time that he has, and if someone would put before us some simple data of how the oldest ones perceived their mission—for example, the ancient thinkers of Greece, the first prophets of Israel, etc.—perhaps my suspicions would turn out to be obvious and trivial. After all, *doxa* means public opinion, and it doesn't seem justifiable for there to be a class of men whose particular office consists of giving an opinion if their opinion is to coincide with that of the public. Is this not redundancy or, as is said in our Spanish language, which is more the product of muleteers than lord chamberlains, a packsaddle over a packsaddle? Doesn't it seem more likely that the intellectual exists in order to oppose public opinion, the *doxa*, by revealing and maintaining a front against the commonplace with true opinion, the *paradoxa*? More than likely, the intellectual's mission is essentially an unpopular one.

"Consider these suggestions simply, as my defense before your irritation, but let it be said in passing that with them I believe I am touching matters of primary, importance, although they are still scandalously, untouched. Let it be evident, furthermore, that this new digression is your responsibility, for having incited me.

"And the fact is that my statement, despite its paradoxical physiognomy is rather obvious and simple. We usually, understand by the term *speech* the exercise of an activity through which we succeed in making our thinking known to our fellowman. Speech is, of course, many other things besides this, but all of them suppose or imply this to be a primary function of speech. For example, through speech we try to persuade another, to influence him, at times to deceive him. A lie is speech which hides our authentic thought. But it is evident that a lie would be impossible if normal speech were not primarily sincere. Counterfeit money circulates sustained by sound money. In the end, deceit turns out to be a humble parasite of innocence.

"Let us say, then, that Man, when he begins to speak, does so *because* he thinks that he is going to be able to say what he thinks. Well, this is illusory. Language doesn't offer that much. It says, a little more or less, a portion of what we think, while it sets an insurmountable obstacle in place, blocking a transmission of the rest. It is rather useful for mathematical statements and proofs, but the language of physics is already beginning to be equivocal or 102 insufficient. As soon as conversation begins to revolve around themes that are more important, more human, more 'real' than the latter, its imprecision, its awkwardness and its convolutedness increase. Infected by the entrenched prejudice that through speech we understand each other, we make our remarks and listen in such good faith that we inevitably misunderstand each other much more than if we had remained silent and had guessed. Furthermore, since our thought is in great measure attributable to the tongue—although I cannot help but doubt that the attribution is absolute, as it is usually purported to be—it turns out that thinking is talking to oneself and, consequently, misunderstanding oneself and running a great risk of becoming completely muddled."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" scoffed Mr. Z.

"Perhaps, perhaps... but in any case it would be a question of a medicinal, compensatory exaggeration. In 1922 there was a session at the Philosophical Society of Paris dedicated to discussing the question of progress in language. In addition to the philosophers of the Seine, those participating were the great teachers of the French Linguistics School, which, at least as a school, is certainly the most illustrious in the world. Well, while reading the summary of the discussion, I ran across some phrases from Meillet that left me dumbfounded—from Melliet, consummate master of contemporary linguistics—'Every language,' he said, 'expresses whatever is necessary

for the society of which it is an organ.... With any phonetics, any grammar, one can express anything.' Don't you think, with all due respect to the memory of Meillet, that there is also evidence of exaggeration in those words? How has Meillet become informed about the truth of such an absolute assertion? It can't be as a linguist. As a linguist he only knows the languages of peoples, not their thoughts, and his dogma supposes the measurement of the latter to coincide with the former. Even so it would not be sufficient to say that every language can formulate every thought, but to say that all can do it with the same facility and immediacy. The Basque language may be however perfect Meillet wishes, but the fact is that it forgot to include in its vocabulary, a term to designate God and it was necessary, to pick a phrase that meant 'lord over the heights'—*Jaungoikua*. Since centuries ago lordly authority, disappeared, *Jaungoikua* today means God directly, but we must place ourselves in the time when one was obliged to think of God as a political, worldly authority, to think of God as a civil governor or the like. To be exact, this case reveals to us that lacking a name for God made it very difficult for the Basques to think about God. For that reason they were very slow in being converted to Christianity; the word *Jaungoikua* also indicates that police intervention was necessary in order to put the mere idea of the divinity, in their heads. So language not only makes the expression of certain thoughts difficult, but it also impedes their reception by others; it paralyses our intelligence in certain directions.

We are not going to discuss now the truly basic questions—and the most provocative ones!—that this extraordinary phenomenon, language, elicits. In my judgment, we haven't even had an inkling of those questions, precisely because we were blinded to them by the persistent ambiguity hidden in the idea that the function of speech is to manifest our thoughts."

"What ambiguity are you referring to? I don't really understand" questioned the art historian.

"That phrase can mean two radically different things: that ideas or inner states but only when we speak we try to express our ideas or inner states but *only partially* succeed in doing so, or, on the other hand, that speech attains this intention *fully*. As you see, the two utopianisms we stumbled upon before, in our involvement with translation, reappear here. And in the same way they will appear in every human act, according to the general thesis that I invited you to apply: 'eveything that Man does is utopian.' This principle alone will open our eyes to the basic questions of language. Because if, in fact, we are

cured of believing that speech succeeds in expressing *all* that we think, we will recognize what, in fact, is obviously constantly happening to us: that when speaking or writing we refrain constantly from saying many things because language doesn't allow them to be said. The effectiveness of speech does not simply lie in speaking, in making statements, but, at the same time and of necessity, in a relinquishing of speech, a keeping quiet, a being silent! The phenomenon could not be more frequent or unquestionable. Remember what happens to you when you have to speak in a foreign language. Very distressing! It's what I am feeling now when I speak in French: the distress of having to quiet four-fifths of what occurs to me, because those four-fifths of my Spanish thoughts in can't be said well in French, in spite of the fact that the two languages are so closely related. Well, don't believe that it is not the same, of course to a lesser extent, when we think in our own language; only our contrary preconception prevents our noticing it. With this declaration I find myself in the terrible situation of provoking a second storm much more serious than the first. In fact, everything said is necessarily summed up in a formula that frankly displays the insolent biceps of paradox. The fact is that the stupendous reality, which is language, will not be understood at its root if one doesn't begin by noticing that speech is composed above all of silences. A person incapable of quieting many things would not be capable of talking. And each language is a different equation of statements and silences. All peoples silence some things in order to be able to say others. Otherwise, everything would be unsayable. From this we deduce the enormous difficulty of translation: in it one tries to say in a language precisely what that language tends to silence. But, at the same time, one glimpses a possible marvellous aspect of the enterprise of translating: the revelation of the mutual secrets that peoples and epochs keep to themselves and which contribute so much to their separation and hostility; in short—an audacious integration of Humanity. Because, as Goethe said: 'Only between all men can that which is human be lived fully."

4. We Don't Speak Seriously

My prediction didn't transpire. The tempest that I had expected did not materialize. The paradoxical statement penetrated my listeners' minds without provoking quakes or tremors, like a hypodermic injection that, fortunately, falls to hit a nerve. So it was an excellent occasion to execute a retreat.

"While I had been expecting the fiercest rebellion on your part, I find myself engulfed in tranquillity. You will probably not be surprised if I take this opportunity to cede to another the floor I've been unwillingly monopolizing. Almost all of you are better acquainted with these matters than I. There is one especially great scholar of linguistics who belongs to the new generation, and it would be very interesting for us all to hear his thoughts on the subjects we've been discussing."

"A great scholar I am not," the linguist began; "I am only enthusiastic about my profession, which I think is reaching its first period of maturation, a time of maximum harvest. And it pleases me to assert that, in general, what you have said, and even further what I intuit and sense behind what is being expressed, rather coincides with my thinking and with what, in my judgment, is going to dominate the immediate future of the science of language. Of course, I would have avoided the example of the Basque word for designating God because it's a very controversial question. But, in general, I agree with you. Let us look carefully at what the primary operation of any language is.

"Modern man is too proud of the sciences he has created. Certainly through them the world takes on a new shape. But, relatively speaking, this innovation is not very profound. Its substance is a delicate film stretched over other shapes developed in other ages of humanity, which we protect as our innovation. We draw from this gigantic wealth at every opportunity, but we don't realize it, because we haven't produced it; rather we have inherited it. Like most good heirs, we are usually rather stupid. The telephone, internal combustion engine and drilling rig are prodigious discoveries, but they would have been impossible if twenty thousand years ago human genius had not invented the way to make fire, the ax, the hammer, and the wheel. In a similar manner, the scientific interpretation of the world has been supported and nurtured by other precedents, especially by the oldest, the original one, which is language. Present-day science would be impossible without language, not because of the cliché that to produce science is to speak, but, on the contrary, because language is the original science. Precisely because this is a fact, modern science lives in a perpetual dispute with language.

"Would this make any sense if language were not a science in itself, a knowledge we try to improve because it seems insufficient to us? We don't clearly see this that is evident because for a long, long time humanity, at least Western humanity, has not spoken seriously. I don't understand why linguists have not duly paused before this surprising phenomenon. Today, when we speak, we don't say what the language in

which we speak says, but instead, by conventionally using, as if joking, what our words say for themselves, we say, in the manner of our language, what we want to say. My paragraph has become a stupendous tongue twister, hasn't it? I will explain: if I say that *el sol* [the sun, masculine] *sale* [comes out or rises] *por Oriente* [in the East], what my words, and as such the language in which I express myself, are actually saying is that an entity of the masculine sex, capable of spontaneous actions—the so-called sun—executes the action of 'coming out' that is, being born, and that he does so in a place from among other places that is the one where births occur—the East. Well now, I don't seriously want to say any of that; I don't believe that the sun is a young man nor a subject capable of spontaneous activities, nor that the action, its 'coming out,' is something it does by itself, nor that births happen especially, in that part of space. When I use such an expression in my mother tongue, I am behaving ironically; I discredit what I am saying I and I take it as a joke. Language is today a mere joke. But it is clear that there was a time in which Indo-European man thought, in fact, that the sun was a male, that natural phenomena were spontaneous actions of willful entitles, and that the beneficent star was born and reborn every morning in a region of space. Because he believed it, he searched for symbols to say it, and he created language. To speak was then, in such an epoch, a very different thing from what it is today: it was to speak seriously. The words, the morphology, the syntax, enjoyed full meaning. The expressions were saving what seemed to be the truth about the world, were announcing new knowledge, learning. They were the exact opposite of jokes. In fact, both in the ancient language from which Sanskrit evolved and also in Greek the words for 'word' and 'say' —*brahman*, *logos*— have sacred value.

"The structure of the Indo-European phrase transcribes an interpretation of reality in which events in the world are always the actions of an agent having a specific sex. Thus the structure necessarily, consists of a masculine or feminine subject and an active verb. But there are other languages in which the structure of the phrase differs and which supposes interpretations of what is real that are very different from the Indo-European.

"The fact is that the world surrounding Man has never been definable in unequivocal articulations. Or said more clearly, the world, such as we find it, is not composed of 'things' definitively separated and frankly different. We find in it infinite differences, but these differences are not absolute. Strictly speaking, everything is different from everything else, but also everything looks somewhat like everything else.

Reality is a limitless continuum of diversity. In order not to get lost in it, we have to slice it, portion it out, and separate the parts; in short, we have to allocate an absolute character to differentiations that actually are only relative. For that reason Goethe said that things are differences that we establish. The first action that Man has taken in his intellectual confrontation with the world is to classify the phenomena, to divide what he finds before him into classes. To each one of these classes is attributed a signifier for his voice, and this is language. But the world offers us innumerable classifications, and does not impose any on us. That being the case, each people must carve up the volatile part of the world in a different way, must make a different incision, and for that reason there are such diverse languages with different grammars and vocabularies and semantics. That original classification is the first supposition to have been made about what the truth of the world is; it was, therefore, the first knowledge. Here is the reason why, as a principle, speaking was knowing.

"The Indo-European believed that the most important difference between 'things' was sex, and he gave every object, a bit indecently, a sexual classification. The other great division that he imposed on the world was based on the supposition that everything that existed was either an action—therefore, the verb—or an agent—therefore, the noun.

"Compared to our paltry classification of nouns—into masculine, feminine and neuter—African peoples who speak the Bantu languages offer much greater enrichment. In some of these languages there are twenty-four classifying signifiers—that is, compared to our three genders, no less than a dozen. The things that move, for example, are differentiated from the inert ones, the vegetable from the animal, etc. While one language scarcely establishes distinctions, another pours out exuberant differentiation. In Eise there are thirty-three words for expressing that many different forms of human movement, of 'going.' In Arabic there are 5,714 names for the camel. Evidently, it's not easy for a nomad of the Arabian desert and a manufacturer from Glasgow, to come to an agreement about the humpbacked animal. Languages separate us and discommunicate, not simply because they are different languages, but because they proceed from different mental pictures, from disparate intellectual systems—in the last instance, from divergent philosophies. Not only do we speak, but we also think in a specific language, and intellectually slide along preestablished rails prescribed by our verbal destiny."

The linguist stopped talking and stood with his sharply pointed nose tilted up to a vague quadrant in the heavens. In the corners of his mouth was the hint of a possible

smile. I immediately understood that this perspicacious mind was one that took the dialectic path, striking a blow on one side and then the other. As I am of the same breed, I took pleasure in revealing the enigma that his discourse presented to us.

"Surreptitiously and with astute tactics," I said, "you have carried us to the precipice of a contradiction, doubtless in order to make us acutely sensitive to it. You, in fact, have sustained two opposing theses: one, that each language imposes a circumscribed table of categories, of mental routes; another, that the original tables devised by each language no longer have validity that we use them conventionally and jokingly, that no longer is our speech appropriately saving what think but is only a manner of speaking. As both theses are convincing, their confrontation leads us to set forth a problem that until now has not been studied by the linguist: what is alive in our language and what is dead; which grammatical categories continue informing our thought and which ones have lost their validity. Because, out of all you have told us, what is most evident is this scandalous proposition that would make Meillet's and Vendryes's hair stand on end: our languages are anachronisms."

"Exactly," exclaimed the linguist. "That is the proposition I wished to suggest, and that is my thinking. Our languages are anachronistic instruments. When we speak, we are humble hostages to the past."

5. The Splendor

"Time is moving along," I said to the great linguist, "and this meeting must be concluded. But I would not like to leave without knowing what you think about the task of translating."

"I think as you do," he replied; "I think it's very difficult, it's unlikely, but, for the same reasons, it's very meaningful. Furthermore, I think that for the first time we will be able to try it in depth and on a broad scale. One should note, in any case, that what is essential concerning the matter has been said more than a century ago by the dear theologian Schleiermacher in his essay 'On the Different Methods of Translating.' According to him, a translation can move in either of two directions: either the author is brought to the language of the reader, or the reader is carried to the language of the author. In the first case, we do not translate, in the proper sense of the word; we, in fact, do an imitation, or a paraphrase of the original text. It is only when we force the reader

from his linguistic habits and oblige him to move within those of the author that there is actually translation. Until now there has been almost nothing but pseudotranslations.

"Proceeding from there, I would dare formulate certain principles that would define the new enterprise of translating. Later, if there is time, I will state the reasons why we must dedicate ourselves more than ever to this task.

"We must begin by correcting at the outset the idea of what a translation can and ought to be. Should we understand it as a magic manipulation through which the work written in one language suddenly emerges in another language? If so, we are lost, because this transubstantiation is impossible. Translation is not a duplicate of the original text; it is not—it shouldn't try to be—the work itself with a different vocabulary. I would say translation doesn't even belong to the same literary genre as the text that was translated. It would be appropriate to reiterate this and affirm that translation is a literary genre apart, different from the rest, with its own norms and own ends. The simple fact is that the translation is not the work, but a path toward the work. If this is a poetic work, the translation is no more than an apparatus, a technical device that brings us closer to the work without ever trying to repeat or replace it.

"In an attempt to avoid confusion, let's consider what in my judgment is most urgent, the kind of translation that would be most important to us: that of the Greeks and Romans. For us these have lost the character of models. Perhaps one of the strangest and most serious symptoms of our time is that we live without models, that our faculty to perceive something as a model has atrophied. In the case of the Greeks and Romans, perhaps our present irreverence will become fruitful, because when they die as norms and guides they are reborn for us as the only case of civilizations radically different from ours into which—thanks to the number of works that have been preserved—we can delve. The only definitive voyage into time that we can make is to Greece and Rome. And today this type of excursion is the most important that can be undertaken for the education of Western man. The effects of two centuries of pedagogy in mathematics, physics and biology, have demonstrated that these disciplines are not sufficient to humanize man. We must integrate our education in mathematics and physics through an authentic education in history, which does not consist of knowing lists of kings and descriptions of battles or statistics of prices and daily wages in this or the other century, but requires a voyage to the foreign, to the absolutely foreign, which another very remote time and another very different civilization comprise.

"In order to confront the natural sciences today, the humanities must be reborn, although under a different sign than the one before. We need to approach the Greek and the Roman again, but not as models—on the contrary, as exemplary errors. Because Man is a historical entity and like every historical reality—not definitively, but for the time being—he is an error. To acquire a historical consciousness of oneself and to learn to see oneself as an error are the same thing. And since—for the time being and relatively, speaking—always being an error is the truth of Man, only a historical consciousness can place him into his truth and rescue him. But it is useless to hope that present Man by simply looking at himself will discover himself as an error. One can only educate his optics for human truth, for authentic humanism, by making him look closely and well at the error that others were and, especially, at the error that the best ones were. That is why I have been obsessed, for many years, with the idea that it is necessary to make all Greco-Roman antiquity available for reading—and for that purpose a gigantic task of new translation is absolutely necessary. Because now it would not be a question of emptying into today's languages only literary pieces that were valued as models of their genres, but rather all works, without distinction. We are interested in them, they are important to us, I repeat, as errors, not as examples. We don't need to learn from Greeks and Romans because of what they said, thought, sang, but simply because they were, because they existed, because, like us, they were poor men who swam desperately as we do against the tides in the perennial disaster of living.

"With that in mind, it's important to provide orientation for the translation of the classics along those lines. Since I said before that a repetition of a work is impossible and that the translation is only an apparatus that carries us to it, it stands to reason that diverse translations are fitting for the same text. It is, at least it almost always is, impossible to approximate all the dimensions of the original text at the same time. If we want to give an idea of its aesthetic qualities, we will have to relinquish almost all the substance of the text in order to carry over its formal graces. For that reason, it will be necessary to divide the work and make divergent translations of the same work according to the facets of it that we may wish to translate with precision. But, in general, the interest in those texts is so predominantly concerned with their significance in regard to ancient life that rye can dispense with their other qualities without serious loss.

"Whenever a translation of Plato, even the most recent translation, is compared with the text, it will be surprising and irritating, not because the voluptuousness of the

Platonic style has vanished on being translated but because of the loss of three-fourths of those very things in the philosopher's phrases that are compelling, that he has stumbled upon in his vigorous thinking, that he has in the back of his mind and insinuates along the way. For that reason – not, as is customary believed, because of the amputation of its beauty – does it interest today's reader so little. How can it be interesting when the text has been emptied beforehand and all that remains is a thin profile without density or excitement? And let it be stated that what I am saying is not mere supposition. It is a notoriously well-known fact that only one translation of Plato has been really fruitful. This translation is, to be sure, Schleiermacher's, and it is so precisely because, with deliberate design, he refused to do a beautiful translation and tried, as a primary approach, to do what I have been saying. This famous version has been of great service even for philologists. It is false to believe that this kind of work serves only those who are ignorant of Greek and Latin.

"I imagine, then, a form of translation that is ugly, as science has always been; that does not intend to wear literary garb; that is not easy to read but is very clear indeed (although this clarity may demand copious footnotes). The reader must know beforehand that when reading a translation he will not be reading a literarily beautiful book but will be using an annoying apparatus. However, it will truly help him transmigrate within poor Plato, who twenty-four centuries ago, in his way, made an effort to stay afloat on the surface of life.

"Men of other times had need of the ancients in a pragmatic sense. They needed to learn many things from the ancients in order to apply those things to daily life. So it was understandable for translation to try to modernize the ancient text, to accommodate it to the present. But it is advisable for us to do otherwise. We need the ancients precisely to the degree they are dissimilar to us, and translation should emphasize their exotic, distant character, making it intelligible as such.

"I don't understand how any philologist can fall to consider himself obliged to leave some ancient work translated in this form. In general, no writer should denigrate the occupation of translating, and he should complement his own work with some version of an ancient, medieval, or contemporary text. It is necessary to restore the prestige of this labor and value it as an intellectual work of the first order. Doing this would convert translating into a discipline sui generis which, cultivated with continuity, would devise its own techniques that would augment our network of intellectual approaches considerably.

And if I have paid special attention to the translations of Greek and Latin, it has only been because the general question is most obvious in their case. But in one way or another, the conclusions to be drawn are the same regarding other epoch or people. What is imperative is that, in translating we try to leave our language and go to the other – and not the reverse, which is what is usually done. Sometimes, especially I treating contemporary authors, it will be possible for the version to have, besides its virtues as translation, a certain aesthetic value. That will be icing on the cake or, as you Spaniards say, honey top of *hojuelas* – probably without having an idea of what *hojuelas* are."

"I've been listening with considerable pleasure," I said, to bring the discussion to a conclusion. "It is clear that a country's reading public do not appreciate a translation made in the style of the own language. For this they have more than enough native authors. What is appreciated is the inverse: carrying the possibilities of their language to the extreme of the intelligible so that the way of speaking appropriate to the translated author seem to cross in theirs. The German versions of my books are a good example this. In just a few years, there have been more than fifteen editions. This would be inconceivable if one did not attribute four-fifths of the credit to the success of the translation. And it is successful because my translator has forced the grammatical tolerance of the German language to its limits in order to carry over precisely what is not German in my way of speaking. In this way, the reader effortlessly makes mental turns that are Spanish. He relaxes a bit for a while is amused at being another.

"But this is very difficult to do in the French language. I regret that my last words at this meeting are involuntarily abrasive, but the subject of our talk forces them to be said. They are these: of the European languages, the one that least facilitates the task translating is French."

Source: Schulte, Rainer et John Biguenet, *Theories of translation, An Anthology of essays from Dryden to Derrida*, Chicago, Londres, University of Chicago Press, pp 93-112.