Translator's Preface

The Reconfiguration of Meaning

GABRIEL ROCKHILL

Translation is often deplored, with a sense of self-satisfied disillusionment, as an impossible project. Since there are no objective criteria for evaluating the relationship between the source language and the target language, it is claimed that the latter remains fundamentally undetermined by the former. This situation has given birth to a myriad of possible responses: the cynical condemnation of all translation, the enthusiastic acceptance of the archipelago of independent language games, the valorization of translation as a unique form of writing with its own properly literary forms, the celebration of the abyss separating languages as an aesthetico-ethical opportunity to introduce a Proustian *langue étrangère dans la langue...*

These various reactions are at least correct in one respect: they reject the purportedly universal criteria of translation argued for by their adversaries (the deep structure of all discourse or the pure language whose echo can be heard in the interstices between individual languages). Nonetheless, this very polarization between universal translatability and the utter impossibility of a faithful rendering of the original – not to mention the middle ground cunningly occupied by those who declare translation to be at once possible and impossible – is in fact dependent on concrete criteria that provide an overall framework for thinking about translation.

The first of these criteria is, broadly speaking, historical. The conceptual network defining the basic elements and modalities of what is generally understood as translation is necessarily dependent on a historical situation. The very distinction between translation and adaptation, for example, has by no means remained a historical

constant, and the same could be said of the relationship between original prose and plagiarism, transcription and revision, fidelity and infidelity.[1] In fact, these categories can only operate within a general logic of signification that confers meaning on them by situating them in a relational network. This explains why they are not even necessarily distributed according to the oppositions they appear to fall within and do not simply exist as empty categories whose content is provided by each new epoch. To put this point rather succinctly, the very meaning of 'translation' – and all of its corresponding parts – cannot be separated from the historical situation within which it functions.

The second major criterion is social. In order for a translation to be recognized as such and considered worthy of the name, it has to abide by the broad parameters operative in a particular community. These parameters need not necessarily impose a single model or method of translation, but they define the general coordinates within which translation can be distinguished from other discursive procedures. Each community establishes a logic of signification that presupposes a specific understanding of what meaning is, how it operates, the normative principles it should abide by, its function in social discourse, etc. Communities do, of course, come into conflict – both with themselves and with other communities –, but the basic point remains unchanged: just as the translator never works in a historical vacuum, translation is never an isolated soliloquy uninformed by a community. In short, translation is neither based on universal criteria nor is it condemned to a solitary encounter with the intractable original. It is a historical practice that always takes place – implicitly or explicitly – within a social framework.

This means that translation, as I propose to understand it under the current circumstances, is not simply a form of mediation between two distinct languages. It is a relational reconfiguration of meaning via a logic of signification that is rendered possible by a socio-historical situation. This process can, in fact, take place within a single language, which does not however mean that understanding itself is an act of translation or that we are condemned to endlessly paraphrasing our original ideas. An alternate logic of signification can actually use the exact same words to mean something entirely different because it determines the very structure of meaning, the horizons of what is

qualified as language, the *modi operandi* of words and sentences, the entire network that defines the process of signification. Thus, when translation does occur between two languages, the overall logic of signification is often more important than the differences between the languages themselves because it determines the very limits between these two languages, how meaning operates in each of them, the semantic relationships that need to be preserved and those that can be discarded, etc.

Prior to being a choice about certain words, the act of translation is a choice concerning the logic of signification in which these words function. In the case of the present translation, I have chosen to distance myself from one of the dominant methods of translation for rendering contemporary French intellectuals in English, which is historically the heir to a logic of signification based on the inviolable sacred status of the original text. This method has led to the use of every possible typographical and etymological artifice to prove – with indisputable success in some cases – that it is impossible to translate between different languages. The end result has often been a sacred jargon of authenticity that is cunningly appropriated by the high priests of the unknown in order to reconstruct the original syntax behind the translation and unveil the unsaid in the said. Thus, in spite of its obsessive preoccupation with the impossibility of grasping the original text, this method of translation is paradoxically based on establishing the greatest possible typographic proximity to the sacred original. In fact, the ultimate telos of this method can only be described in terms of an asymptote where the vertical axis would be the verbatim identity between the translation and the original work (whose ultimate consequences were deduced by Borges' Pierre Menard).[2]

Rather than aiming at asymptotically transcribing Jacques Rancière's work into an idiom for the initiated, the following translation was made within the coordinates of an entirely different logic of signification. The primary unit of translation was not taken to be the typography of an individual word or the uniformity of a particular concept, but the entire relational system of signification at work. Strictly speaking, there is no basic unit of translation since there are only relations within and between systems of signification. This has meant abandoning the supposed autarchy of the individual text and

the mantra-like motto 'sola scriptura' in order to analyse the relational network within which Rancière's work has emerged. More specifically, it has required studying, in both French and English, Rancière's entire corpus, his standard historical references (from Plato and the New Testament to Balzac and Rossellini), and the work of his contemporary interlocutors. The objective of the current translation might therefore best be described in terms of a relational reconfiguration of meaning that recasts Rancière's work in an alternate system of signification. This reconfiguration inevitably masks certain aspects of his work in French, but hopefully only insofar as it simultaneously opens up the possibility that other aspects thereby become visible.

Only part of the current publication is a translation of Jacques Rancière's *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique–éditions, 2000). In addition to a brief introduction to Rancière's work and an afterword by Slavoj Žižek, the reader will also find an interview conducted for the English edition, a glossary of technical terms, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

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Translator's Introduction

Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception[3]

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As Alain Badiou has aptly pointed out, Jacques Rancière's work does not belong to any particular academic community but rather inhabits unknown intervals 'between history and philosophy, between philosophy and politics, and between documentary and fiction' (1998: 122). His unique methodology, eclectic research habits, and voracious propensity for assimilating European intellectual and cultural history are comparable perhaps only to the unclassifiable work of Michel Foucault, an author with whom he himself acknowledges certain affinities. If his voice has yet to be heard in full force in the English-speaking world due to a lack of translations and sufficient secondary literature, it is perhaps attributable to what Rancière himself has called the distribution of the sensible, or the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime.

Although closely affiliated with the group of neo-Marxists working around Althusser in the 1960s, Rancière's virulent criticisms of the latter as of 1968 served to distance him from the author with whom he had shared the common project *Lire le Capital* in 1965. As Rancière explained in the Preface to *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1974), the theoretical and political distance separating his work from Althusserian Marxism was partially a result of the events of 1968 and the realization that Althusser's school was a 'philosophy of order' whose very principles anaesthetized the revolt against the bourgeoisie. Uninspired by the political options proposed by thinkers such as Deleuze and Lyotard, Rancière saw in the politics of difference the risk of reversing Marx's statement in the *Thesis on Feuerbach*: 'We tried to transform the world