

## Translation's Blindspot

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An original text draws the reader to itself and its own essence; only in translation does it take on the role of signpost, both repelling the reader in its imperfection and gesturing beyond itself to language as such. This role of the original text as signpost, along with the role of translation as its catalyst, is obscured by a blindspot in the process of translation that overlooks the point at which language as such is discernible as 'pure language'<sup>2</sup>, fleetingly and contingently. The root cause of this blindspot is a singular emphasis on translation as a tool of communication between languages, as a necessary tool in overcoming linguistic diversity. Questioning the singularity of this emphasis removes the blindspot and reveals an underlying role of translation, one of catalyst to the original's underlying role as signpost within language as such.

### I

The interrelation of opposites, in particular of different languages in the context of translation, both highlights and reveals a kinship; and this kinship in turn points to the existence of a common source or origin. While the interrelation of particulars in opposition, or 'face-to-face', reveals a kinship that highlights the existence of a common source or origin, this source or origin is neither to be found in either particular, nor at any point of overlap or synthesis of the two. While both contain the 'seal of origin' in their essence, the origin itself is not to be found there; looking to reconcile or synthesise opposites in search of the source of their essence is pointless. In fact, once the kinship of opposites is revealed in their interrelation, (in turn pointing to the existence of a common origin or source) the interrelation of opposition is no longer important in terms of this origin or source; instead, it is the relationship of source to the particular that will highlight, reveal, reflect or point to this source. In other words, the role of the face-to-face opposition is to bring attention to the fact of the existence of a common source or origin;

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, W., *Illuminations*, Intro by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp 70-82.

the common source or origin itself is reflected, pointed to or hinted at by a different interrelation, that of source to particular.

This dynamic in terms of language is illustrated in translation: it is the diversity of languages that highlights their kinship or the fact of the existence of their common origin or source; this ‘highlighting’ occurs in their interrelation, and it is in translation that this interrelation occurs. It is not until translation from one language to another is initiated that the fact of their kinship becomes apparent. So, without any initial evident motivation to initiate translation for reasons of kinship and what it may in turn point to, linguistic diversity steps in to provide an evident motivation, an *overlying* reason to translate and one that is immediately obvious before translation is initiated: that reason being, to overcome this linguistic diversity for the purpose of communication between languages. Translation, and with it the interrelation of languages, is initiated, thus pointing to the fact of kinship of languages, which in turn points to the existence of a common origin or source, the revelation of which is the *underlying* role of translation.

A problem arises, however, when the focus remains purely on this initial overlying and immediately obvious motivation to translate. Such a motivation, overcoming linguistic diversity for reasons of communication, necessarily sees such diversity problematically and so perceives it purely from the point of view of how to overcome it. With the focus necessarily on the end goal of meaning reproduced in the target-language through translation, the process of translation itself and the ‘neighbourhood’ within which it occurs is seen only through the lens of how efficiently the process can be carried out, how immediately the ‘neighbourhood’ can be bridged; the ‘neighbourhood’ itself, if not also the fact of its existence, is ignored. If kinship of languages is noted, it is from the point of view of how it can make this bridging process more effective, languages and their kinship being considered in terms of any *similarities* that exist in their particularity rather than what *unites them in their difference*: their common source or origin.

This is a key point that merits emphasis. What presents itself as ‘natural’ can be merely the familiarity of a long-established norm, a norm which has forgotten, not just the unfamiliarity from which it arose, but also the particular set of circumstances within which it arose. This is the case with translation being considered *purely* as facilitator or tool in the overcoming of linguistic diversity. Since Cicero, and the beginning of translation theory, translation has been considered as a way to overcome the perceived ‘problem’ of linguistic diversity. However, if we question what ‘presents itself as natural’ in this case, a number of

what-ifs arise. For example: what if we were to suspend the automatic assumption of linguistic diversity as something that needs overcoming; what if the reason for translation were not *only* to solve the ‘perceived’ problem of linguistic diversity; what if linguistic diversity were not *only* a problem; what if it were in fact linguistic diversity that enabled translation: then we would have to consider an underlying role of and reason to translate, and it is precisely the existence of such a role and reason that we must continue to allow for, not so much for the sake of this reason itself, but for the attitude that arises with such an allowing, an attitude that perceives what the process of translation can reveal, momentarily, contingently and peripherally. When we allow for an underlying role of translation and reason to translate, which inverts the initial or overlying role of translation, making it translation that is facilitated rather than facilitator, we bring a different attitude to the process of translation. We notice the fact of the existence of kinship between different languages, that in turn points to the existence of a common origin or source, and that the existence of this common origin or source is highlighted precisely through the interrelation of languages, an interrelation that would be impossible without their difference. Our singular preconception of linguistic diversity as problematic is thus challenged and the way is clear to consider what Walter Benjamin refers to as ‘a theory that looks for other things in a translation than reproduction of meaning’<sup>3</sup>

These ‘other things than reproduction of meaning’ are perceivable momentarily and peripherally at an essential moment in the process of translation. However, this moment is overlooked in the goal oriented translation that exists purely as a tool in overcoming linguistic diversity; in fact it is precisely such a singular focus in terms of reason to translate that leads to the blindspot in the process of translation. Henri Bergson offers a useful context within which to understand how this happens and how this blindspot in turn leads to the first step in the process of translation being taken blindly.

## II

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* Bergson points out that: ‘philosophers agree in making a deep distinction between two ways of knowing a thing’<sup>4</sup>, ways that can be understood in terms of external and internal: ‘the first implies going all around it, the second entering into

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78

<sup>4</sup> Bergson, H, *The Creative Mind. An Introduction to Metaphysics*. trans. by Mabelle L. Andison, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) p. 187

it<sup>5</sup>; the first with perspective, the second without. He equates the first with analysis and the second with intuition, in turn equating analysis with translation. Of analysis Bergson remarks that ‘in its eternally unsatisfied desire to embrace the object around which it is condemned to turn, analysis multiplies endlessly the points of view in order to complete the ever incomplete representation, varies interminably the symbols with the hope of perfecting the always imperfect translation. It is ‘analysis ad infinitum’<sup>6</sup>. In this way, using translation analogously, Bergson describes what he sees to be the limitation of both analysis and translation, pointing out that ‘all translations of a poem in all possible languages may well add nuance to nuance and, by a kind of mutual retouching, in correcting one another, give an increasingly faithful picture of the poem they are translating, yet they will never render the inner meaning of the original’.<sup>7</sup>

This is true of all translations which have the singular aim of overcoming linguistic diversity; in terms of method, all translations that strive for equivalence, whose aim is the transferral of ‘the meaning of’ the original into the translating language, rather than the pointing to the original itself. Translations with such a focus make the essential nature of the original secondary to the words that hold/veil it, and paradoxically do this through a lack of attention to these very words. A sense-for-sense translation, one that pays attention to units of meaning rather than individual words, confuses a translator’s subjective ‘sense’ of the original with the es(sense) of the original, and in by-passing the individual words of the original in an attempt to re-create this sense in the target-language, distances itself from the original and its essence.

Although Bergson’s view of translation clearly overlooks the essential moment we are talking about here, he is not alone; and his description of the process of translation highlights for us the fact that it *is* overlooked, and the fact that this is typical of translation both in theory and practice. In terms of the practice of translation, Bergson takes us through his view of the process, highlighting further the view of translation theory in general. He writes about making a ‘translation of the line’ in a way that implies such a step to be automatic and preliminary to any attempts at making the original accessible through translation. He begins with the ‘translation of the line, then [he] will comment on [his] translation, then [he] will develop [his] commentary, and from explication to explication [he] will draw closer and closer to that which [he] wishes to express; but [he] will never

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190/191

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189

quite get there'.<sup>8</sup> There are three important things revealed in this statement. Firstly, the bridge from original to translation is crossed blindly in a 'translation of the line' without paying attention to what happens in the process of that 'translation'. Any attention to refining the meaning, or accessing 'the inner meaning of the original' comes after this initial step has been taken, and occurs exclusively on the other side of the bridge, within the confines and the structure of the target-language. What may lie in-between, contain both languages, be the source or origin of both languages, is both ignored and overlooked. Secondly, in referring to a 'translation of the *line*', Bergson reveals that his attention is not on the individual words, the smallest intelligible units of text, but instead on the unit of 'meaning' contained in a line of text. There is no allusion to this fact, suggesting not just subjectivity on behalf of the translator, but unconscious subjectivity: to translate based on a sentence rather than individual words necessarily involves subjective interpretation by the translator, and to ignore this fact makes such subjectivity unconscious. Thirdly, Bergson's 'explication after explication' bring him ever closer, but without ever reaching, what *he*, the translator, wishes to express. The process described here does not just involve unconscious subjectivity on the part of the translator in the process of representing the original in the target-language, it actually involves the translator replacing the original as the source of meaning. The aim is to represent 'what [*he*] wishes to express', *he* being the translator, not the original author, and certainly not the original itself.

It is unlikely that Bergson would disagree, as the point he is making is that translation is akin to analysis, analysis considered within the duality of intuition and analysis, intuition being an effort of imagination giving rise to the '*sympathy* through which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible'.<sup>9</sup> We have already agreed with him on this point, but only in terms of translation that is bound by the assumption of a singular function, that of the transferral of meaning from one language to another. By ignoring what occurs in the process of the initial 'translation of the line', and by focussing on the sentence rather than the word (arguably focussing on the sense rather than the word, but the translator's own subjective sense rather than the es(sense) of the original), and by making the goal the representation of what the translator is trying to express, Bergson only considers translation within this function. Again, he is not alone in this relegation of translation to the position of translators' tool in the transferral of meaning between languages, however, the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190

fact remains that within the confines of this relegation, the essence of the original remains inaccessible outside of the language of the original, and the potential of the translated text as roadmap of the original, and in turn the original as 'pathmark' within language and pointing to language as such, is obscured.

What do we mean by a translation that acts as a road map of the original? What does or would such a translation look like? This can be understood in terms of opposing methods: whether a translation transfers the meaning of the original into the translating language, or whether it points back to the original itself. A translation that acts as a roadmap, has words in the target language that act as signposts within language that point to the original, and so leaves itself *open* to infinite interpretation; one that interprets the meaning of the original and re-defines and embeds it in the target-language on the other hand, attempts to emulate the original and accord itself the status of a text in its own right and so a new original. This can be explicated in terms of the city, and Bergson is again helpful. The way into or access to the essence of a city is as elusive as the way into an original text for a reader in the target language. It is not necessarily through the obvious points of access: airports, train stations. These lead to the outer wall that surrounds the city like a metaphorical medieval city wall, but one that fits over the individual details of the city like a transparent glove. Circling this wall on the outside the city can be seen, analysed closely in its individual details even, but not essentially. This comes elusively and randomly. Bergson shows how no amount of images in any amount of juxtapositions can create the circumstances for having an intuition of the place, in this case Paris, unless an intuition had already been had. He also makes the comparison with translation. While he is right about the images in relation to their beholder, he again makes typical limiting assumptions about translation. Translation is a different category, a unique category that, by its nature, juxtaposes opposition (different languages), creating the context, not just for a view of the essence of the original through a different language or medium, but also for the peripheral glimpse of source or origin as 'pure language' through the original being accessed in and through the process of translation.

Bergson in fact argues something similar as a way to gain essential experience of the city. He writes that 'many different images, taken from very different orders of things, will be able, through the convergence of their action, to direct the consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized upon'<sup>10</sup>. He is equating images to

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195

signposts rather than copies or imposters in this context, and in order to avoid images being taken as originals he suggests that: ‘in choosing images as disparate as possible, it will prevent any one of them from usurping the place of the intuition it is charged with calling forth, since it would then be driven out immediately by its rivals’<sup>11</sup>. Images must point to the thing, and not emulate it, just as a translation must point back to the original, and not emulate it; that is, if an intuition of, or perception of the essence is to be attained.

Bergson illustrates a model within philosophy that reflects the model in translation that is being suggested here. An opposition is set up between empiricism and rationalism that reveals the thing in itself through philosophical intuition, just as Benjamin’s ‘pure language of translation’ is revealed through the expression of kinship of languages that occurs in the interrelation of different languages that occurs in the process of translation, originating of course with the opposition that exists between two different languages, and two different approaches to the translation of meaning from one language and into another. Bergson’s analogy of the city is useful. Just as any picture, or group of pictures (or indeed representations) however perfect, will not provide an intuition of the city itself, nor will any translation, or indeed group of translations/drafts, or indeed even a perfect translation, give ‘the inner meaning of the original’; that is to say, translations that aim to transfer meaning from one language to another. A literal translation without this singular aim is different. Instead of attempting to re-create the original in a different language and pretending to be the original, it acts as a roadmap of the original itself, and brings the reader in the target language, not to the source-text author, which is as far as Schleiermacher would go with his theory of alienation and naturalisation, but to the source-text itself.

To go back to the analogy of the city and attempts to represent or point to it, a literal translation acts in terms of details of how to find the city’s landmarks, rather than as pictures of them. To take a picture, sketch a landmark is also an interpretation, however, the intention behind the description changes its quality. If, for example, the description is for the purpose of showing how to find the landmark, it is less likely to contain value judgements. The cathedral is large and stands on the left bank of the river are both representational and relativistic statements. They do not say *how* large it is, nor do they describe the location of the cathedral itself, only where it may be found in relation to the river. The river itself is not described; just the fact of its existence is stated. The statement

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

points to the ‘original’ in question here, the cathedral; it points to the place where the ‘intuition can be seized upon’. A photographic image, on the other hand, does not point to the original, to the place where an intuition thereof can be seized. Instead it hides the original in pretending to be the original. Similarly, a perfect translation can only be one that points to the original itself, acts as a roadmap of the original; and not one that attempts to imitate it, replace it, to ‘block its light’.

### III

It may seem that we are arguing that a translation that can allow access to the essence of the original is akin to one that allows for an intuition of the original. This is not the case. Intuition of the original would involve reading the text in its original language, while analysis would be exactly as Bergson describes translation to be. A translation that allows access to the essence of the original does involve reading the text in the original language, but crucially, this reading occurs in and through the process of translation.

In the case of intuition, reading the text in the original and intuiting its essence does not draw attention to the fact that the text itself is also a signpost within language that points to something deeper, infinite, absolute. The essence (or promise of the essence) of the original may be what draws attention to the original and inspires its translation, but translation that is typically akin to analysis; while within the bounds of the language of the original, reading the text in the original offers the possibility of an intuition of the text, including the perception of its essence. Benjamin’s translation however, that is, translation allowing access to the original in process, goes a step further and places the reader/translator in relation to the original text in such a way that they perceive the essence of the text in its ultimate role, as ‘pathmark’ within language pointing to language as such. An original text draws the reader to itself and its own essence; only in translation does it take on the role of signpost, both repelling the reader in its imperfection and gesturing beyond itself to language as such.

With this in mind, let’s look at Bergson’s equating of translation with analysis again. He suggests that ‘analysing then consists in expressing a thing in terms of what is not it’<sup>12</sup>, and while this is true of analysis, he goes straight on to say that ‘all analysis is thus a translation, a development into symbols’<sup>13</sup>. Again this automatic and unquestioned assumption about translation: that it is akin to analysis. In terms of methods of translation

<sup>12</sup> Bergson, H., *The Creative Mind*, p. 190

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



it is clear how a sense-for-sense approach would immediately fall into the category of analysis. With attention on the 'sense' rather than the individual words, the process of translation begins with stepping outside of the circle of the original, including its essence and role as 'pathmark' within language. After this initial first step it can do no more 'in its eternally unsatisfied desire to embrace the object around which it is condemned to turn, analysis multiplies without end the points of view in order to complete the continually incomplete representation, varies relentlessly the symbols in order to perfect the ever imperfect translation'<sup>14</sup>.

There is still hope for a word-for-word translation however, paying attention to the smallest intelligible unit of text. But, that attention must be *before* the initial step in translation is taken, and not after; in other words, it must take account of the word in the *original*. Bergson makes reference to positive science, pointing out how it has 'analysis as its habitual function'<sup>15</sup> in how it reduces 'the more complex to the more simple'<sup>16</sup>, fragmenting and fragmenting. It is clear to see how this can be compared with a traditional understanding of a word-for-word approach to translation, however, with analysis, and within this scientific model, the reduction and fragmentation occur after an initial step in the process of translation, within the translating language and with a firm focus on the word of the translating language. This is also what often occurs in the process of a traditionally word-for-word translation, and these two facts generally lead to all translation occurring anywhere on the spectrum between extreme word-for-word and extreme sense-for-sense, being considered to belong to analysis and to be incapable of allowing an intuition of the original, not to mind what its ultimate and underlying role is, that of 'pathmark' within language.

Benjamin's approach to translation involves a word-for-word technique, but not for the sake of word-for-word at the expense of sense-for-sense within the dichotomy of methods of translation, and nor as a way to reproduce the original perfectly in the target-language as the 'perfect translation' in terms of one that is identical to the original, including its essence, in the target-language; instead, the focus is on the individual words of the original text in the original language, and the aim is to allow the reader in the target-language to momentarily break through the wall surrounding the inner circle of the original, to glance off the original while being pointed onwards: 'just as a tangent touches a circle

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV

While Bergson helps us to clarify the essential moment in the process of translation that is overlooked due to a blindspot, Heidegger offers the context for a deeper exploration of this ‘essential moment’, the potential suspension in the ‘neighbourhood’ of languages, the neighbourhood of the relationship of source or origin to the particular. In ‘The Nature of Language’<sup>18</sup> the ideas of duality and kinship are explicated, but in relation to the particular ways of ‘Saying’ of poetry and thought, and the blind first step of translation is also addressed in terms of the way to experiencing ‘language as language’. Heidegger does not stop at noticing that such a blind step is taken, he directly addresses precisely what it overlooks, ignores; and he does this in detail in terms of ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘nearest nearness’. He writes: ‘fore – into that nearest nearness which we constantly rush ahead of and which strikes us as strange each time anew when we catch sight of it’<sup>19</sup>, the ‘rushing ahead of’ referring to the blind step we take, the ‘nearest nearness’ to the ‘neighbourhood’, (of poetry and thought in particular, and of particulars in opposition in general, including different languages face-to-face in translation), and the ‘striking us as strange each time anew when we catch sight of it’ to the peripheral glimpse of the source or origin of particulars, which is undefinable, ineffable, imperceptible directly, and so always surprising to glimpse.

Both Heidegger and Benjamin refer to a ‘nearest nearness’ and a danger with regard to language: Benjamin’s ‘On Language as such and on the Language of Man’ talks of ‘immediacy’ and an ‘abyss into which linguistic theory threatens to fall’<sup>20</sup>, while Heidegger talks of this ‘nearest nearness’ we ‘constantly rush ahead of’. It is a different danger that Benjamin warns of: his danger is in falling into this ‘nearest nearness’ (abyss in his own terms), while Heidegger’s is in overlooking this ‘nearest nearness’, rushing ahead of it and

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, W., *Illuminations*, p. 81

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, M., *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz, (New York: Harper Collins, 1971) pp. 57-110

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, W., *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by E. Jephcott, ed. with an intro. by P. Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 315

ending up in the ‘wilderness’ beyond, back in definition, re-embedded in the target-language in terms of translation. In terms of an abyss Benjamin warns that: ‘the view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall’<sup>21</sup>. This abyss is Heidegger’s ‘nearest nearness’, which can no more be perceived (wholly) from within (intuition), than it can from a point of definition on either side of the abyss (analysis) and Heidegger’s wilderness, a point of identification with either opposition in the dynamic interrelation of opposites, a point of embeddedness in either language of a language pair in the case of translation. Instead, the aim of both Heidegger and Benjamin is to ‘survive precisely suspended over this abyss’<sup>22</sup>, as such avoiding both falling into the abyss, pure intuition, and the wilderness beyond, pure analysis.

A translation that takes the first step in the process blindly, misunderstands the nature of language and thus overlooks the neighbourhood described by Heidegger; it is precisely this first step that acts as an arcade to the perception of his ‘nearest nearness’, and to the ‘immediacy of all mental communication’<sup>23</sup> or ‘magic’ in Benjamin. Overlooking the underlying reason for diversity of languages and misunderstanding the nature of this neighbourhood leads to this blind first step which overlooks this very neighbourhood in which the relationship of source to the particular is discernible, the observation of which can reveal a peripheral glimpse of source or origin, as ‘pure language’ in the case of translation.

If instead of taking the initial step of the ‘translation of the line’ blindly, as does analysis; or of attaining the original directly through the language of the original which would potentially give an intuition, we pay attention to that moment where meaning is released from one language (un-named), and we remain suspended momentarily in the neighbourhood of languages, the neighbourhood in which arises the relationship between the source or origin of all languages and particular manifestations of language, we are at that point at which the relationship between source and particular is discernible; and while source or origin itself may be indiscernible directly, it is perceivable as ‘pure language’: contingently, peripherally, and fleetingly in consideration of this relationship and what happens in the process of becoming.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316

This remaining suspended requires the momentary inhibition of the completion of the process of translation, the re-naming in the target-language. The importance of this inhibition is twofold: firstly, it allows for the view of the neighbourhood of languages within which the relationship of language as such to the language in particular may be observed, and pure language perceived peripherally; and secondly, it brings awareness to the ultimate goal of translation, the remembrance of ‘man as man’ in the act of re-naming in the target language. In the process of translation the ‘intended object’ is un-named, or ‘released’ from the original language, and then re-named, or re-embedded in the translating language. The potential or importance of this process of re-naming is overlooked in the end product focus that a singular function of transferral necessitates. Heidegger talks about the assigning of the naming word as constituting ‘finding’; and according to Benjamin, the wordless language of things beckons to us to complete them in their naming<sup>24</sup>: the giving of a name thus completes creation. To re-assign the naming word in translation is what constitutes the re-finding and re-creation of the original as such. Through translation there is potential, not just to see to the essence of the original and beyond to its ultimate role as signpost within language as such, but also to re-member the role of ‘man as man’ through re-finding and ultimately re-completing creation through re-naming.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*