

Translation as a Pharmakon:

The Impossibility of Equality and Authenticity in Translation

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Introduction: The Bible and Translation

“1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. 3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." 5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. 6 The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." 8 So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel-- because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

- Genesis 11:1-9 The Tower of Babel¹

If there is one text that is foundational and revered within a majority of the world's civilizations, that fundamental text is the Bible. For better or for worse and whether its words are true or confused fallacy, civilizations have been erected and societies formed based on a common system of beliefs that it perpetuates. Argument over the Bible's origins, its accuracy, and its importance have been ongoing for centuries but what the inhabitants of today's modern world so often forget to ask is not whether the

¹ “The Tower of Babel.” *Genesis 11: New International Version*.

Bible holds truth or meaning, but how this text that is so valued was created in the first place and how people all over the world are now able to understand it. Many agonize over this text's meaning and its history but give very little thought to the actual words that they are reading, why they were chosen, and why they are understood to mean what they do. The words on the Bible's pages may seem static, but they are forever changing through the context of the world around it and how their reader understands them. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew², yet today, it is available to be read in likely any and every language that is spoken throughout the world. But like the novels, poetry, historical texts, and even the works of the critical theorists covered in class, the Bible was translated, thus bringing the inescapable and endlessly important reality of translation back to its very beginning.³ No text, regardless of importance, can have any value if it cannot be understood and comprehended in the language it is written in. The value of a text is not inherent but instead inherited, passed down through the years, based on cultural context, historical significance, and the individual reader, who must attempt to translate the text's meaning to his or herself. The Bible is thus, ironically, the perfect example of the importance and the possible dangers of translation; this text that is sacred to many of the world's societies was, in its original form, first transcribed from spoken word to a written language and subsequently translated over and over again, from tongue to tongue as the world grew more diverse. The Bible in its original form was widely unreadable and thus rendered useless—an empty shell of meaningless words—to anyone who could not decipher its language. But where did this multiplicity of languages come from, and who could possibly bring them together?

² Schniedewind, William M. "Origins of the Written Bible." *NOVA: PBS.org*. 18 November 2008. 1 December 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/origins-written-bible.html>

³ Schniedewind, William M. "Origins of the Written Bible."

If it is possible to imagine a reality in which all of the world's people spoke the same language and communicated effectively without the dangerous necessity of translation, it is within the text itself. The Bible story "The Tower of Babel," though taken as no more than a literary work in this paper's context, provides a perfect example of the difficulties that the misunderstandings caused by multiple languages produces.⁴ In "The Tower of Babel," all of the people of the world work together to build a tower that is able to reach higher than God himself, until he subsequently brings it down, delivering with it the tainted "gift" of multiple tongues. This passage epitomizes the feelings of strangeness and differences that are created by different languages, which separate rather than unite. While one group of people may feel a shared connection through a mother tongue, its existence also emphasizes their respective otherness compared to those outside of their language. "Babel," the word in this unknown language, signifies confusion in a double sense: the confusion of tongues as well as the confusion of the world's ancient people whose tower had begun to tumble toward the Earth, according to Derrida⁵. "God, the God, would have marked with his patronym a communal space, that city where understanding is no longer possible," thus creating the "multiplicity of idioms, of what in other words are usually called mother tongues" that would forever produce so many problems of understanding.⁶ In the tongue in which Babel was created, it was also destroyed, and thus the proper name "Babel" came to have meaning by God's usage, and could be translated to confusion. The word Babel in and of itself does not translate to

⁴ "The Tower of Babel." *Genesis 11: New International Version*.

⁵ Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." *Psyche*. Stanford, California: Standord University Press. Print. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/burt/deconstructionandnewmediatheory/destourdebabel.pdf>.

⁶ Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." 191.

confusion: in Oriental languages, “ba” means father and “bel” means God.⁷ This is the origin of confused language.. Not only did God All people of the world, if they were ever to communicate as effectively and without conflict as they did when they built the sweeping tower, could hope for only one thing to even begin to bridge the gap between words and their unknowable meanings: translation. In “Des Tours de Babel,” Jacques Derrida points out the necessity of this translation that God created in the story: “He subjects them to the law of a translation both necessary and impossible... he delivers universal reason... but he simultaneously limits its very universality; forbidden transparency, impossible univocity.”⁸ But although God created these languages, a human being—someone with thoughts, emotions, subconscious actions and a voice all their own—would, in all future occurrences, have to be responsible for transforming texts into something readable and understandable. He or she would have to carefully, or possibly not carefully at all, sift through the language’s meaning and the words used to express it in its original language and create a product that would speak to other societies, in diverse areas, and with different connections to the original. This is the significance of The Tower of Babel today, of its inherent confusion and the necessity of translation that exists in our modern world. The story is important not for its religious implications or for its truth, but because it is an example of two things at once: translation’s necessity and its universal implications to society. But the idea of translation in “The Tower of Babel” also proposes another question: that of inequality and fidelity. If all of the world’s people spoke the same tongue, they would be united in a way that our modern society cannot

⁷ Derrida, Jacques. “Des Tours de Babel.” 192.

⁸ Derrida, Jacques. “Des Tours de Babel.” 199.

even comprehend.⁹ There would be no more miscommunications, misunderstandings, or cultural differences that couldn't be explained by the use of a shared understanding of words. Inequality would, at the very least, be lessened, as no one language would become dominant over another, and therefore able to take its culture and its people with it.

Fidelity to the true meaning of words, at least as one person has come to understand them through idiom, would cease to matter, as those words could remain in their original context and language for all to understand. Translation, as examined here through language and literature, and the unanswerable and ever-present questions of fidelity and equality that surround it, brings into question whether one ultimate, meaningful language could even exist and how, on the most personal level, we must translate our thoughts to ourselves through the language that we speak. Regardless of the possibility of one ultimate language, however, what "The Tower of Babel" allows us to understand is the authenticity with which we express our own thoughts to ourselves as well as how those thoughts are accepted, or rejected, by those around us that we speak them to. Especially in today's globalized world, translation is a *pharmakon*—a poison as well as a cure that is more important and also more dangerous than ever—as it has the power to attempt to fill the role of an equalizer and retain an ultimate fidelity between our elusive thoughts and the unstable words we use to express them. What we must ask ourselves, however, is whether ultimate fidelity and equality, or ultimate meaning, is something we should and can ask of any language in the first place.

⁹ "The Tower of Babel." *Genesis 11: New International Version*.

Language and Identity:

“I have only one language; it is not mine.”¹⁰ This paradox wove in and out of our critical theory classes, connecting the threads of other authors and at the same time making me question what it ever meant to have a “mother tongue” at all.¹¹ As a monolingual, native English speaker, I had never considered my identity in a context that did not involve English words, American cultural norms, and my own steady, unquestioned speech that I direct at those who share my language. I had never considered an alternative to expressing my sometimes elusive thoughts as English was, though flawed, the only answer that I knew. For me, being an English-speaking American was simultaneously something I never considered as part of my identity, as I knew nothing else, and something that it was inherently dependent on. Every relationship that I had, everything I’d ever learned, and every thought I’d ever attempted to share were, though I don’t like to admit it, dependent on language - one that I do not own and took years to fully master. I speak English, and it will always be my first language, but the words that flow from my lips and my pen are borrowed and sometimes a poor fit for my incomprehensible thoughts. “The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable... There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia.”¹² This, to me, is how my interactions with English have taken place throughout my life—as necessary realities, but never quite complete or exactly what I meant my words to be. The words of the English language are something that I borrow and use, which brings into question whether or not a true “mother tongue” exists, and if

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. 1.

¹¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*.pg number?

¹² Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*. 14

so, what value it truly has in respect to my personal identity. Just because a person is born into a certain culture and grows up speaking English, does this necessarily mean that the English language is the best home for the meaning of their thoughts? Would it not be possible that Spanish, French, Arabic, or one of the many others of the world's tongues would fit them better? I speak English because it is what I have been presented with and what I have understood since childhood, but this does not mean that English interacts in any natural manner with my thoughts and feelings. English, therefore, is no more a part of my identity than anything else that I interact with in the world around me—it is nothing more than an accident that I speak it. “What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multi-culturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging?”¹³ Identity and my language, Derrida points out are not inherently linked, but simply expressed in terms of each other; I am American and I speak English, but there is no cause and effect.

As Saussure wrote, within the language or languages that one speaks, the way that one relates to language is in the context of differences and exchanges between the signs that we have arbitrarily assigned to certain objects and their meanings: “language is a form and not a substance.”¹⁴ In my search to share my thoughts, I rely on this difference to express myself—to explain a feeling of unease, I search along its trace of synonyms and replacements, using words like “discomfort,” “worry,” or “restlessness” to replace what I attempt to define. Words in language, therefore, do not have inherent meanings,

¹³ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*. 14

¹⁴ Saussure, Ferdinand De. "Static and Evolutionary Linguistics." Course in General Linguistics. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw-Hill. Book, 1966. Print. 122.

but rather the association with their signs and their relation to other similar words in a language. For all that I know as a monolingual speaker, these are the best words that exist to express the sentiments that I attempt to describe. But could other words, “inquietude”¹⁵ in Spanish or “malaise” in French, not express the true feelings that I have and the context in which I feel them more appropriately? These words and their associations are held together by custom, not by reason or inherent meaning, as their only meaning is assigned through habit and our consistent use of them. This is how language functions: as a system of exchanges of values and as a constant search for significance between words. In order to truly give a word meaning, one must put it in the appropriate context and surround it by other words that, by contrast and difference, bring it to life. In language, Saussure said, “there are only differences without positive terms.”¹⁶ In translation as well, this idea is extremely important, not just for the translator but for the original writer and the reader too. Through the exchange that differences in language allows, words and sentences gain meaning. There are many things that must be communicated and retained through translation, especially depending on the type of material that’s being translated, whether it’s poetry, fiction, or a historical or philosophical text. A translator must address the historical context of a work, the voice of the author, the tone of the text, the way the words interact on the physical page with the reader’s eyes, but what is always essential and sometimes difficult to retain in a translated work is the meaning. Though, as Saussure says, the exchange of these values is the source of meaning, the exchange never comes to an end, thus meaning is never certain or absolute.¹⁷ Through this endless exchange,

¹⁵ WordReference.com (<http://www.wordreference.com/enfr/unique>) used for this translation, as well as all other single-word translations between French, Spanish, and English throughout the paper.

¹⁶ Saussure, Ferdinand De. "Static and Evolutionary Linguistics." 119.

¹⁷ Saussure, Ferdinand De. "Static and Evolutionary Linguistics."

differance in Derridian terms, the meaning that arises is conditional; it is impossible for one to settle on a meaning that is inherent in the language of the words. In terms of language, this endless exchange of words that produces differed meaning brings about one thing: differences of understanding. In the context of translation, this poses an obvious problem, in that the translator must always be aware of the possibility of misunderstanding while transferring meaning from one language to another and that, in all likelihood, the translator will have a slightly different, nuanced understanding of some word than the author. A translation must follow the trace, that which is left behind of all the differences that enter into an exchange, in order to attempt to withdraw the true meaning of words as they were written and convey it in an equally arbitrary, but entirely different, mix of signifiers.

But what occurs when a person fluently speaks and expresses his or her thoughts in more language than one, when there are multiple mixtures of signifiers and signifieds in a person's mind? Can the difference that defines a language, the trace of meaning left behind from everything that a word is not, transcend the idea of monolingualism? In the case of a true bilingual— one who speaks two languages fluently—does the concept of language as difference still apply? A person who speaks more than one language, when seeing the signified that in English relates to the word “tree,” might also think “arbre” in French, or “árbol” in Spanish just as easily. The idea of bilingualism brings up, once again, the question of identity and language that Derrida addressed with his famous paradox, and that many others, like George Steiner, have asked as well: “In what language am I, suis-je, bin Ich, when I am inmost? What is the tone of self?”¹⁸ The question of how we relate to our language, of who we are to ourselves when we speak it,

¹⁸ Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford University Press, 1975. 120.

is not only a central theme of Derrida's work but also one that we as individuals are trying to pin to a self that is constantly changing. Identity is not a concept that is fixed, Susan Bassnett points out in her edited *Reflections on Translation*, but for her, as an always-multilingual speaker, one that was tied to languages that exist in her head "like skin of an onion peeling off," constantly changing as she is.¹⁹ As she learned various languages throughout her life, while she herself changed and grew as a person, some languages replaced others, even her "mother tongue," and she found that at certain periods of her life, she was better able to express herself in one language than another. In a state of constant flux, she attempted to close the space between the languages in her mind and find the best way to express herself. "For each new language acquired in childhood pushed out the previous one, with the exception of English that stayed constant in the home."²⁰ Thus, for Bassnett, her mother tongue was important not for some inherent control it had over her abilities of language or her identity, but because it was an ever-present force in her life and the world around her at home.²¹ But if she had stopped speaking English in favor of another language that replaced it, could she have lost her mother tongue? Would she have lost her identity? A recent *New Republic* article titled "Multilinguals Have Multiple Personalities" addresses the question of how, for those who fluently speak multiple languages, the language in which one expresses themselves affects who they seem to be as people, or who they feel they are.²² While the title is a bit hyperbolic, the sentiment is clear, and backed up by research: "people who are actually

¹⁹ Bassnet, Susan. *Reflections on Translation*. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2011. Print.

²⁰ Bassnet, Susan. *Reflections on Translation*. 2.

²¹ Bassnet, Susan. *Reflections on Translation*.

²² Robb, Alice. "Multilinguals Have Multiple Personalities." *New Republic*. *New Republic Magazine*, 23 April 2014. Web. 1 December 2014. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117485/multilinguals-have-multiple-personalities>

fluent in two languages also feel their personality shifting as they switch between languages.”²³ In a 1964 study, Susan Ervin examined the personality differences between adults who were fluent in both French and English, and found that the same stories the participants told in each language featured genuine topical differences as well as altered tone.²⁴ Similar studies have since been conducted, most with similar results, leaving the question of how much personal and cultural factors affect this outcome, and how much is the impact of the language itself. Identity and language, whether monolingual or bilingual, are confusingly intertwined, yet not wholly necessarily dependent on each other. For Bassnett, it is a “liquid metaphor: languages flow like currents, linguistic tides have come in and gone out of me, my languages are in constant motion... but what has always been central to my thinking about languages is that languages articulate the culture in which they are used...”²⁵ Perhaps the importance of language to identity is not the way in which language articulates who one really is, but in how it connects, or separates, that person to those around them.

Regardless of the language one speaks, Derrida points out that language is a promise: “it is the monolanguage *of* the other... language is for the other, coming from the other, the coming of the other.”²⁶ Language therefore, is always for the benefit of the other, as it is the expression of internal thoughts in a manner that the other and the world around us can understand. In this way, language is a type of conformity, something that cannot be owned or captured by the speaker. Thus the multilingual speaker, who has the ability to shift between languages, possibly doesn’t have all of the power to choose after

²³ Robb, Alice. “Multilinguals Have Multiple Personalities.”

²⁴ Ervin, Susan. “Language and TAT content in bilinguals. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. Vol. 68(5), May 1964, 500-507. <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/1965-05198-001>

²⁵ Bassnet, Susan. *Reflections on Translation*.3.

²⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*. 65.

all. In all likelihood, or at least in many situations, a bilingual individual must choose his or her language based on surroundings, culture, and ultimately, the other. Quite possibly, the bilingual's speech is not always expressed in the words that best fit his or her thoughts, but those that will be best understood by the other. Benjamin points out in *The Task of the Translator*, "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience."²⁷ Shifting between languages in translation, however, is different. Its creation is also not for the purpose of the reader, but while a writer can simply follow his thoughts when creating the original, a translator must track them down and trace the meanings back to their origin. Through translation, the traces of words and their elusive meanings converge, and what the reader may or may not understand, or what may be lost in a translation, is always kept in mind. In this way, as language is intended for the other, the receiver of the spoken word or the reader of a text, translation follows suite. "No such thing as *a* language exists," yet in the process of translation, we attempt, step by step, to reach this impossible goal of some ultimate meaning that is understood through the convergence of imperfect languages.²⁸ Translation seeks to create something understandable out of meanings that shift by the second and we, as readers, attempt to make sense of them through our own misconceived identities that we've attached with such importance to our mother tongues. By attempting to change the product of a language to make it more accessible and easily understood, we attempt to unite all languages again, as they were in the story of Babel, while we simultaneously continue to tear them apart through the confusion and misunderstanding that results.

²⁷ Ingram, Susan. "'The Task of the Translator': Walter Benjamin's Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht." *Erudit.org*. Vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, p. 207-233. 20 November 2014.
<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/1997/v10/n2/037305ar.pdf>. 253.

²⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*. 65.

Translation and the Other

For all the solutions that translation attempts to provide, allowing for communication between those of vastly different cultures and languages, it creates many problems. Written language in any language is a pharmakon, both a treatment and a poison. The fear of the written word can be traced back to Plato, who worried of the writing's lack of life and ability to correct itself. Writing acts as a supplement to dialogue, a way to remember what we are afraid we may forget, and a tool to share the things we might say to one other with many. But what happens when this "dead" writing, thoughts and language posing as a finished product when they never really can be, is subjected to translation? How does the translator bring the dead text to life and then set it in writing again, using different words that will be read by those who speak a different tongue? Translation in itself is not a static act. "Translation is movement. Translation is motion. This association is already established in the Latin word 'transfere,' to carry across."²⁹ Because in its constant motion translation cannot be pinned down, it is open to endless interpretations and perspectives not only on what should be considered important in a translation, but what each and every translator believes translation should incorporate. In the past few decades, translation theory as a discipline has developed a noticeable split between those who seek to apply a scientific methodology to translation, and others who prioritize the purpose fulfilled by a translated work itself rather than the attempt to create something inherently equal to the original. In this way, translation theory today brings the question back to those inherent in translation and language itself: equality and authenticity. What does it mean for a translated work to equal its original?

²⁹ Kaindl, Klaus, and Spitzl, Karlheinz. *Transfiction: Research into the realities of translation fiction*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing, 2014. Print. 1.

The entire notion of equality is inseparable from its binary opposite, inequality, which creates hierarchy, and in an attempt to equalize versions of a text, admits to the fact that one language could be superior to another. In the modern world, this is at least in part true. Though few may say that English is inherently superior to other languages, the stream of translation is unequal and the usage shifted in English's favor. As an English speaker, I can read my favorite author's works, originally penned in Japanese, months after they're published in their original language. It would be difficult for me to find any well-known text not translated to my language, but this certainly does not hold true for every language spoken around the world. And with this common, if accidental, inequality, there exists the danger of inequality in the translations themselves. There is also the possibility that if one believes his or her identity is inherently tied to a mother tongue, he or she may begin to believe that they themselves are superior to the other. While by Derrida's logic, language, and thus translation, are intended for the other, this approach allows the possibility that in translation, some of the "otherness" is lost in the effort to make the translated work more suitable for the reader³⁰. According to Lawrence Venuti in his book *Scandals of Translation*, "Translation can never simply be communication between equals because it is fundamentally ethnocentric."³¹ While this is to some extent true, a translation is not simply the task of changing from one language to another, but creating a wholly different product in the process. A translator translating a work from Spanish to English should aim neither to retain every miniscule aspect of the Spanish language, as that would be impossible, nor to eradicate the intricacies of meaning and context that might be difficult for an English-speaking reader to understand. "A

³⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy: Translated, with Additional Notes, by Alan Bass*.

³¹ Venuti, Lawrence. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print. 11.

translation issues from the original- not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original... their translations mark a stage of continued life.”³² It is, therefore, impossible to consider a translation a true equal, as its meaning is contingent upon the trace of the author’s original in the moment that it was written. A translation is something entirely different, something that comes later, not as an afterthought, but as an altered, not inferior but entirely separate, reproduction. “...Instead of imitating the sense of the original, [a translation] must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.”³³ A translation and an original together make a whole work and come one step closer to finding the impossible “one language” that, in Derrida’s work, he insists does not exist.³⁴

Whether or not every work is translatable, however, is another question, and one whose answer should be applied differently to each case; depending on the works historical and cultural context, as well as its actual form—poetry, prose, nonfiction, etc.—the answer may never be the same. According to Benjamin, the nature of some works lend themselves to translation more than others, and often the question is whether or not an appropriate translator can be found at all: “if translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of certain works.”³⁵ Though the question of translatability is certainly a relevant one, there are works that, despite many aspects that may present

³² Ingram, Susan. “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht.” 254.

³³ Ingram, Susan. “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht.” 220

³⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other*. 65.

³⁵ Ingram, Susan. “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht.” 254.

difficulty, are translated nonetheless. Perhaps one of the most relevant examples of an unexpected translation is that of the work of E.E. Cummings, who played not only with the meaning of words in his poetry but also with their physical form on a page.

Cummings' work has been translated to French, among other languages, but the question of its authenticity or equality in those translations is more difficult to answer, and can be addressed only by a look at the texts themselves:

English:	French:
l(a	l(v
e	ol
af	e fe
fa	ui
ll	ll
s)	e)
one	a s
l	ol
iness	itude
e.e.cummings	(Trad. Jacques Demarcq)

Though Demarcq³⁶, the translator, did an excellent job retaining the visual impact of Cummings' work³⁷, which is an essential and unique part of his poetry, there are some noticeable, and surely unavoidable, differences in the works. The color coordination between the translated words shows one aspect of the poetic work—how the chosen words in French and English correspond with each other, though this is certainly not the

³⁶ During her visit, Isabelle Alfandary provided us with this version of the translation. I spoke with Caitlyn about getting the proper citation information and am awaiting a reply from Isabelle.

³⁷ Cummings, E.E. "l(a" *95 Poems*. Liveright: 2002. Print.

only aspect of Cummings' work that needed translation, as Demarcq also had to address the visual aspect of the poem as well as the hidden wordplay within it. Though the words mostly correspond—"feuille" in French means leaf, "solitude" means loneliness, and "la" is the appropriate article to the English a—the verb chosen to take the place of falls, "vole," does not really carry the same meaning or connotation. The closest translation of the French verb "voler" to English is not "to fall," but "to fly." In the sense that a bird or a plane navigates the sky, the leaf in Cummings' poem's French translation leaves its branch to fly to the ground. While there is no such thing as a perfect translation, and Demarcq's rendition of Cummings' poetry is certainly close to the original, when I read the English next to the French, there's a certain sentiment that is changed, or missing. In the original version, the loneliness of the single vertical line, symbolizing the letter "I," the last line that can be read as "i-ness," and the image it conjures of a solitary falling leaf all provide an inescapable tone of separateness, singularity, and a little bit of sadness. Though the French poem retains many of these elements, even the double "l" in the middle that helps give the poem its shape, the change from falling to flying changes the mood. The leaf may not be dead, discolored, and dropping to the ground in the mind of the reader, but instead could be freed from the prison of its tree, alive and green and soaring toward a better place, all due to the change of one verb. If I, rather than Demarcq, had been given the task of attempting Cummings' translation, my attempt would have been to first retain the meaning and emotions of the poem, and to second worry about the physical shape and aesthetics. My attempt is as follows, with just one changed words, as

with only four total, there were not a lot of changes to make:

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a s
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While in my translation³⁸ I replaced a verb that I feel better carries the meaning of “to fall,” it also extended the shape of the poem and changed the central block of letters, making it longer and changing the pairings, which is less bothersome to me as a reader. Of course, all analysis is in the mind of the individual reader, but my own understanding of the poems’ difference brings about the question of how one talks about translation from a monolingual perspective. In my reading of the two poems, I was looking for the exact same sentiments in the latter that I had found in the former—a sense of authenticity that may, in fact, not need to exist in a translation at all. The trace in my mind, left behind by the unsatisfactory exchange I found between the verbs “to fall” and “to fly,” may not exist in the mind of another, especially not in the mind of a French reader who may not associate the same cultural or personal feelings with the verb “to fly” at all. The trace left behind by falling in English may be similar to that left by flying in French, though it seems impossible to compare two languages’ words in such a manner. Additionally,

³⁸ The above poem is Demarcq’s original translation with my proposed changes if I had been the one translating Cummings’ work; the only word changed is “vole” replaced with “tombe.”

while I focused on the meaning of the words of the poem, another reader might find the shape on the page or the use of punctuation, which Cummings is famous for, more important, which again brings up what is most important in translation: an unanswerable question. The way that one talks about translation, however, the authenticity that may have been retained or the equality that may have been lost, is certainly essential to how we read translations.

Another example of translation's importance and difficulty in poetry is Pablo Neruda's "Clenched Soul," or "Poema 10" in Spanish. The length of this poem, in comparison with Cummings' four-word piece, allows for more analysis of the role that language itself plays in translation:

"Poema 10"

Pablo Neruda

Hemos perdido aun este crepúsculo.
Nadie nos vio esta tarde con las manos unidas
mientras la noche azul caía sobre el mundo.

He visto desde mi ventana
la fiesta del poniente en los cerros lejanos.

A veces como una moneda
se encendía un pedazo de sol entre mis manos.

Yo te recordaba con el alma apretada
de esa tristeza que tú me conoces.

Entonces, dónde estabas?
Entre qué gentes?
Diciendo qué palabras?
Por qué se me vendrá todo el amor de golpe
cuando me siento triste, y te siento lejana?

Cayó el libro que siempre se toma en el crepúsculo,
y como un perro herido rodó a mis pies mi capa.

Siempre, siempre te alejas en las tardes
hacia donde el crepúsculo corre borrando estatuas.

"Clenched Soul"

Pablo Neruda

We have lost even this twilight.
No one saw us this evening hand in hand
while the blue night dropped on the world.

I have seen from my window
the fiesta of sunset in the distant mountain tops.

Sometimes a piece of sun
burned like a coin in my hand.

I remembered you with my soul clenched
in that sadness of mine that you know.

Where were you then?
Who else was there?
Saying what?
Why will the whole of love come on me suddenly
when I am sad and feel you are far away?

The book fell that always closed at twilight
and my blue sweater rolled like a hurt dog at my feet.

Always, always you recede through the evenings
toward the twilight erasing statues.

translated from the Spanish by W.S. Merwin

Because of the length of Neruda's poetry³⁹, the differences in language structure between Spanish and English⁴⁰ are apparent, and though they don't affect the meaning of the particular verses in any way, it's an interesting distinction in how a language is read, and how the reader interacts with the poetry. The third verse, for example, reads in Spanish almost opposite as it does in English, beginning with "sometimes like a coin" and ending in "is set on fire a piece of the sun in my hand." While this is a simple grammatical difference between Spanish and English and how sentences are often constructed, it's certainly worth pointing out as evidence that the translator's job is never a simple word-to-word switch with the best replacement. There are also subtle differences in word choice; in the poem's second line, Neruda's original "with our hands united,"⁴¹ the literal translation into English, was supplemented with the colloquial phrase "hand in hand," which is a clear example of making a text more readable for the other, but also retaining the colloquial tone that may have been present in Spanish as well. In addition, keeping the word "fiesta" in the second stanza was an interesting choice by the translator. Why was this single word kept in Spanish while the rest was translated to English? An easy explanation would be that most English-speaking readers know the Spanish word for "party"⁴² off the tops of their heads, but does leaving this single word in Spanish serve as a tribute to the original language, or rather a nod to the English readers that this is now somewhat of an Anglicized part of their vocabularies? In addition to these more straightforward changes, the translator chose to use the phrase "clenched soul" for

³⁹ Neruda, Pablo. "Clenched Soul." *Selected Poems: Pablo Neruda (English and Spanish Edition)*. Grove Press: 1994. Print.

⁴⁰ Neruda, Pablo. Translator: Ben Elliot. "Clenched Soul." *Selected Poems: Pablo Neruda (English and Spanish Edition)*. Grove Press: 1994. Print.

⁴¹ Translated myself, without a dictionary, based on knowledge of Spanish.

⁴² Translated myself, without a dictionary, based on knowledge of Spanish.

the Spanish “alma apretada,” which as an English speaking reader, I can assume was for the purpose of retaining the connotation and mood associated with those words, as the most direct translation of “alma” into English could be heart, spirit, or soul, while “apretada” most closely means cramped or tight. Lastly, presumably as an aid to grammatical structure, the second and third questions in the fourth stanza certainly read differently in English than they do in Spanish. The Spanish “entre qué gentes?”⁴³ would be literally translated to English as “amongst which people,” rather than “who else was there?” And similarly, “diciendo qué palabras?” would literally mean “saying what words?” rather than “saying what?” In this case, the translations that stray further from literal meaning certainly aid in the tone of the words being said, making the questions in English sound more abrupt and directed at an individual than the direct translations.

In poetry, as examined here due to its brevity and the multiplicity of meaning that allows for different ways of examining translation, as well as all other types of writing, translation proves to be just as much of a pharmakon as written language in general. Though translation allows us to bring back to life the “dead” language that exists forever on a page and produce a new product in a different language that retains the spirit of the original, there will always be the question of authenticity and equality inherent in translation. For every piece of knowledge that is shared through translation, there will simultaneously be another question: is this work authentic to the original, is it its equal, even though it is a completely separate and new work of art? In this way, translation will forever be deferring between the original and the new work, forever searching for a stability of meaning that will set the two in equilibrium, even though this stability does

⁴³ Translated myself, without a dictionary, based on knowledge of Spanish.

not and cannot exist. Thus Derrida's difference applies to translation as clearly as it does to any one language.

Translating the Self

In most situations, when one thinks of translation, it's in the context of separation: a translator, a totally different individual than the writer, translates a work, often long after it was written and sometimes without any input from the author. That degree of separation, while allowing for time for study and retrospective analysis of the work, will always be missing one thing: the original voice of the author and the context in which the work was written, as nothing can mimic his exact thoughts and feelings. By the theory of solipsistic thought, it would be impossible for the translator, no matter how skilled or knowledgeable, to understand the author's words and feelings in the same way that they existed within his mind. This is the way in which a translation is a separate and finished product than the original, how the questions of authenticity and equality cease to matter in the context of a translated work, as it can never truly be either. But what happens when something more is translated, when the author him or herself is brought into the equation, and when the work is more than just text on a page but a piece of popular culture and history? What happens when the author translates his or her own words into another tongue that he or she fluently speaks, thus bringing the question of translation back to the realm of the bilingual, and taking it out of the hands of another individual? In that case alone, could a truly authentic and equal product exist, or is there something inherently different in all of the world's imperfect languages that allows the works to speak differently to the reader and to retain the instability of meaning that seems inherent?

First, the question of translating more than a work's words inevitably involves the author himself as an essential part of the work he creates, not as a separate figure. In this way, the reader is able to cross the invisible lines of culture, history, and difference that likely separate them and begin to comprehend the author in the context of his work. At the same time, however, this presents another question of authenticity: can an author be truly understood along with his work when translated to another language? One such example is that of Franz Kafka, a writer who has become an icon in many countries around the world, including the United States. I read Kafka's work, first in my high school English classes, and later on my own time as a type of exploration. Beyond the fact that it is so often overlooked that many of the books we read in "English class" are translations, and not originally in English themselves, the translations of Kafka's work, like many other non-American writers, need to be considered in context. Not only are Kafka's own surroundings and culture important—that of early 20th century Bohemia—as well as his own personal history, but the context in which Kafka is read in the United States cannot be overlooked:

“We read Kafka in translation. Not only as we might imagine, in a linguistic form of translation, but also in a network of translation: a translation of the man, Franz Kafka, into an icon, a critical translation of his works into various schools of theory, a commercial translation of the man and his work, and popular- screen translations- of his work and himself. All of these function, to some extent, together, and help form

our sense of Kafka and his work even before we might have read any Kafka.”⁴⁴

Before I ever cracked open one of Kafka’s books, I had an idea in my mind of who Kafka was, what I thought his work might be like, and why it was important. In my mind, I held the trace of everything that Kafka was not, and thus everything that I thought I could compare him to. This is an inherent consequence of translation of an already-famous figure and confuses even more the subsequent translations that are created, let alone those who will read them. Kafka has been translated and re-translated to English many times over the years in an attempt to capture the essence of his work, “the ambiguity and strangeness of the language and the subsequent humor of it.”⁴⁵ In his essay on Kafka translations, Milan Kundera points out, and Woods reiterates, “that the stylistic elements of the text can be the most translatable element...” rather than the words themselves, as one might expect.⁴⁶ Michael Hoffman, another Kafka translator, states “he was interested in what language *does* – in translating what it does, the possibility is left open to read and reread what it may mean.”⁴⁷

These questions do not end, however, with the idea of a figure being translated along with his work into the minds of the readers, but also with the idea of an author translating his own work and what that means for his identity. For Milan Kundera, who dealt with problems of translation in his own works as well as others’, translation was a necessary evil that seemed without a solution. According to Kundera, “The writer who determines to supervise the translations of his books finds himself chasing after hordes of

⁴⁴ Woods, Michelle. *Kafka Translated: How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Print. 2.

⁴⁵ Woods, Michelle. *Kafka Translated: How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka*. 3.

⁴⁶ Woods, Michelle. *Kafka Translated: How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka*. 5.

⁴⁷ Woods, Michelle. *Kafka Translated: How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka*. 5.

words like a shepherd after a flock of wild sheep—a sorry figure to himself, a laughable one to others.”⁴⁸ In this New York Times article, Kundera details the differences between his translators, noting that the French translation was based on ornamenting his style, the English cut chapters, and the Argentinian was translated not from the original Czech, but from his own French rewrite.⁴⁹ The case of Kundera’s translation is an especially interesting one because of the history of his work: when his books were banned and his citizenship revoked from his native Czech Republic, Kundera continued writing in Czech for an additional ten years, knowing all along that the most widely read versions of his books would not be in that language, as most of his Czech readership no longer had access to his work.⁵⁰ In the 1980s, Kundera, who is bilingual, began to write in French instead, and subsequently revised the previous French translations of his older books, declaring these the truly authentic versions of his novels.⁵¹ In the case of Kundera, the strange circumstance of an author’s very active involvement in translation and authenticity stands out, and brings the question of translation back to bilingualism and identity. When Kundera actively decided to revise his French translations and declare them authentic, what did this mean for his identity in relation to his languages, and for the meaning of the books themselves? Many of Kundera’s works are heavy in European, but especially Czech, history, which presents the question of whether reading about the Prague Spring in the French language is in any way inherently different than reading about it in Czech. In essence, is the Kundera who writes in Czech different than the

⁴⁸ Kundera, Milan. “Key Words, Problem Words, Words I Love.” *The New York Times*. 6 March 1988: Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7, Page 1, Column 1.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-words.html>

⁴⁹ Woods, Michelle. *Translating Milan Kundera*. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2006. Print. 3.

⁵⁰ Woods, Michelle. *Translating Milan Kundera*. 4.

⁵¹ Woods, Michelle. *Translating Milan Kundera*. 4.

Kundera who writes in French, and if so, is it possible that one language is able to bring to reality what is in his mind more clearly in the other? In the case of Kundera, the issue of translation is once again brought out of the simple context of the meaning of words and instead is focused on the way that it permeated his work, not just as a necessity, but also as a mode of reading, writing, and interacting with text. For Kundera and other writers and translators as well, translation is a never-ending question of focus: what should a translator emphasize, and is one part of a work more important than another? Whether it is possible to do justice to the stylistic composition, linguistic style, and meaning of a work is a question that translators are still striving to answer. It may seem that translators are asked to do a lot—to consider all the parts of a work and to somehow create a new and separate product that mimics the original, but what is really being asked a lot of is language itself. As in the Enlightenment crisis of the West, in which it became clear that language could not do what was being asked of it, it cannot today either. In an effort to master singularity and the categories of meaning, today's society fails to understand that language cannot answer all of its questions.

In the West, historically and today, language tends to be viewed differently than in other parts of the world, especially during the crises of the 20th century in Europe. Language is inherently ambiguous, yet the Western world expects it to bring the world to presence in the mind, which is not only not possible, but not what should be asked of something so ever changing and abstruse as language. Translation, in some ways, only increases this expectation: not only is language expected to bring the world to presence in the mind, but also to somehow share that ultimate knowledge to completely different languages and cultures. In contrast to the fictional and poetic texts I've discussed up to

this point, philosophical text, including all of those that we've read in class, are also subject to translation. Texts that are meant to promote critical thought, to somehow make sense of the outside world as well as promote internal examination, must also be translated in order for others around the world to attempt to understand them. But even if linguistically the translations retain the works' meaning, this brings about an entirely different question of translation: whether or not the cultural "other" will be able to understand the content and concepts discussed. Heidegger, for example, spent much of his books discussing the concepts of Dasein and being toward death.⁵² While to an English speaker, these ideas make sense, given context and a little explanation, it is questionable whether or not they would even be comprehensible to someone from a culture much further removed from the Western perspective from which Heidegger wrote. To a Chinese or Indian reader, who may believe in or at least have been brought up surrounded by the ideas of Buddhism or Hinduism, the concept of "being toward death," even translated into the appropriate words, would not logically mean the same thing as they do to a Western reader. In cultures that generally believe in reincarnation, cyclical lives, and do not place any value on the concept of the individual, believing instead that every life source is a part of a greater reality, the concept of anxiety toward death and the need to face it would likely not even be intelligible. As Samuel Weber pointed out in his lecture, there are other words and concepts that seem to escape translation, or at least must be changed in the process. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger used the word "deconstruction," but in German, a similar word does not exist, and thus no word expresses exactly the same sentiment. In his lecture, Weber pointed out that "the more closely you look at a word, the more remotely it looks back—the more you

⁵² Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper, 1962. Print.

scrutinize it the more its apparent transparency and unity of meaning tends to dissolve into multiple options.”⁵³ In his work, Derrida searches for an unambiguous meaning, a sense that for something to be recognized as unique and understood as having meaning, it has to be repeatable and that if we didn’t have memory, we couldn’t say that anything was unique.⁵⁴ Because we have the ability to remember and differentiate between words, we are able to, in a way, carve out a meaning for them. While this approach to language and its interrelatedness may apply to Western cultures and more easily allow for the transfer of meaning and ideas, it is certainly worth considering how these ideas may not carry over to all of the languages of the world—those that use different alphabets and symbols, and may even inherently speak and interact differently due to the languages that are spoken. In this context, the ideas of fidelity and equality in translation are once again proven to be unnecessary and inappropriate, as this is, in the end, too much to ask of both language and its translation.

Conclusion: A Return to Babel

In understanding the inherent difficulties that are created by the necessity of translation in the modern world, as well as the ancient one, translation is proven to be just as much of a pharmakon as language itself. In the Tower of Babel, by creating the necessity of translation through the creation of different languages, God confused the world, thus naming himself and the tower in the name of confusion. By creating the proper noun “Babel” in this unintelligible and unknown language, God was essentially naming himself confusion as well, and passing down this confusion to a world that would

⁵³ Samuel Weber lecture; 6 November 2014.

forever struggle to find inherent meaning and equality between the words that are spoken by different tongues. “And understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names.”⁵⁵ This paradox, created by God in a story held in a book that brings about the ultimate and most tangible question of translation in our modern world, illustrates the necessity of the pharmakon that is translation, as society continues to poison itself in an attempt to heal the misunderstandings created by different languages and the instability of meaning. “Translation becomes law, duty, and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge. Such insolvency is found marked in the very name of Babel: which at once translates and does not translate itself, belonging without belonging to a language and indebts itself to itself for an insolvent debt, to itself as if other.”⁵⁶ In tracing translation back to the beginning of its supposed origins, it is now possible to understand that our lives are a problem of translation, not communication. By speaking and writing, we are already attempting the impossible, and by attempting to communicate our unstable words in a multiplicity of languages, we are going even further in an attempt to create a stable meaning, which does not exist. Because the signified concept is never present in and of itself, we are unable to tie down its meaning in one language alone, and thus the difficulty of doing so in more than one becomes even more overwhelming. Despite all of the difficulties and the differences between languages, which makes it all the more difficult for us to defer between words and attempt to tie down a meaning, as Derrida points out in *The Monolingualism of the Other*, there is no “one” language, no way of expressing

⁵⁵ Derrida, Jacques. “Des Tours de Babel.” 220.

⁵⁶ Derrida, Jacques. “Des Tours de Babel.” 226.

oneself that will truly capture the solipsism that exists within our own minds.⁵⁷ “This special kinship holds because languages are not strangers to one another, but are a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.”⁵⁸ Benjamin points out that while all languages are inherently different and the word within them can never fully supplement each other, “the languages supplement one another in their intentions... we must draw a distinction, in the concept of ‘intention,’ between what is meant and the way of meaning it.”⁵⁹ This instability of meaning, and thus the many different ways that meaning itself can be interpreted, is essential to understanding why translation is at the same time necessary and impossible to perfect. But with all of its imperfections and the hopelessness of reaching a true authenticity and equality with an original work, translation offers something different, something more. In a way, translation gives the world something additional to the original work, not an equal nor a copy, but a separate and new piece of literature that can be enjoyed and pass on a meaning of its own: “thus, ironically, translation transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering.”⁶⁰ Though translation is still a phramakon and an imperfect science, in removing the translation from a context in which it should even attempt to replicate or be compared to the original, the new work can attempt to escape comparison and exist all on its own. Attempting to solidify meaning and transplant intentions from an original to its translation is once again asking too much, of the translator, of the translation, and of

⁵⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. 65.

⁵⁸ Ingram, Susan. “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht.” 255.

⁵⁹ Ingram, Susan. “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht.” 256.

⁶⁰ Ingram, Susan. “‘The Task of the Translator’: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a Forschungsbericht.” 258.

language itself. The beauty of translation is in its ability to enhance the instability of meaning, not stabilize it; to appreciate the fact that your own reading of a work is unique in your own understanding and that the text that you read is to embrace the reality of your own solipsism. As a reader, you will never know an author's true intentions or the reality of an original work in a language you do not speak. In fact, you may not even ever truly understand a work in a language that you acquire, or be able to appreciate it in the context that it was written. What is certain is that you will never understand with certainty what was intended, but will always be sure only of what exists in solipsism within your own mind. The instability of meaning is too great and we ourselves are too separated in our own minds to ever fully understand another's meaning, even in our own language. But through translation, we at least attempt to bridge the gap between meaning and language and establish, if at least for a second, the closest reality we can to a true meaning.

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