

Ten Theses on the Philosophy of Psychoanalytic Translation

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I

The opposite of the eternal is not the ephemeral but the forgotten.
(John Berger, 2013, p. 189)

Psychoanalysis is concerned with the desire for an impossible return – a return to a place before time began. This place offers a temporary reprieve from the pain of the world, a pain that is closely linked to the marks that time leaves on one's body. To be human, however, involves leaving this place behind and becoming aware of past and future. Yet, the memory of this place persists and generates the Greek '*nostos*', the unviable and irresoluble journey back home. Arresting past and future is a way of momentarily entering this place of timelessness and eternal peace.

II

One of the primary tasks of psychoanalysis is the temporary arrest of time and its translation into space. In psychoanalysis, everything one recalls in one's past is suggestive of the present and predictive of the future, because the work of memory suspends time and turns the flow of events into an *imago*. Chronology is thus grasped and analysed in a spatial metaphor. Realising that historical time is nothing but a process of incessant repetitions, psychoanalysis seeks to momentarily detranslate time through the effects of the timelessness of the unconscious and retranslate it into space.

III

The linearity of time is rather constraining and restrictive. It does not give one much freedom to move back and forth. But space can be wide-ranging, teeming with possibilities: one can move up and down, left and right, forwards and backwards, reach a dead end and then make a U-turn. Space introduces one to the possibility of openness, play and creativity.

IV

Psychoanalytic theories are, typically, means of spatialising our psychic world. To comprehend oneself, one needs to know the psyche's topography, to know how to navigate it by creating a map out of it. And then one needs to learn how to get lost in it.

In psychoanalysis one learns how to become competent map reader who knows how to go astray. One needs the freedom to lose one's way, to lose oneself in one's thoughts and speech. And this is not easy. In order to do this, one must enter a labyrinthine process, in which each significant psychic object and relationship figures as an entrance to the maze and as a means of finding one's way out of it.

V

Psychoanalytic translations are attempts at preserving psychic objects by scaling them down into tiny pieces which thus lose their heaviness and grandiosity but maintain their autonomy and totality. This renders them both meaningless and extremely meaningful, useless and incredibly useful, portable amulets that one could carry inside the maze.

Due to this function, the propensity of psychoanalysis is to set itself against interpretation/translation whenever it is obvious. This is because it recognises the importance of either the process whereby one removes symbolism out of some psychic objects and attaches it to others, where nobody can detect its existence (*displacement*), or the process whereby one uses multiple symbolisms for a single object or a single symbolism for multiple objects (*condensation*).

VI

Internal and external destructive energies often attempt to annihilate one's psychic objects which therefore demand to be preserved by psychoanalytic translation. When the past contains mostly death and destruction and the present produces instant heirlooms, psychoanalysts are invited to become custodians of one's psychic objects by performing the task of the translator.

For psychoanalysts as translators, the amount of meaning is in exact proportion to the presence of destruction of one's psychic objects. This is what makes it possible to find meaning in the objects of one's past that are reduced into ruins and fragments which, if not for the agency of psychoanalyst's translation, would be perverted and crushed by the weight of so much levelling.

Something like this is described more explicitly in Walter Benjamin's (1923) essay 'The Task of the Translator', whose aim is to collect:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way, a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are a part of a vessel (p. 260).

The image of the empty vessel is employed here in order to signify that the translator's labour forges a whole which is empty. The same could be said about the task of the psychoanalyst who reconstructs/glues together our historical vessel/container from an amalgamation of past memory fragments. Yet, reconstructing the past is to construct an empty thing, and yet only then may the emptiness be filled, but not by the psychoanalyst, but from oneself who is *yet-to-come*. The psychoanalyst reconstructs one's history out of memories of the past in order to create space for the construction of one's memories of the future.

VII

[L]anguage is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests ...

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 155)

Psychoanalytic translations retain some of the prelapsarian quality of language – they attempt to disclose language as a response to a

gesturing, sounding, speaking world, a world where language is nothing more than the *name* given to the sound of the wind, the uproar of the thunderstorm and the song of the nightingale. They accomplish this by engaging more with the form than the content of language. They are infused not with intentionality but with free-floating attention which captures the ‘music of what happens’ (Ogden, 1999) at any moment during the therapeutic interaction. The psychoanalyst keeps an ear open for what is not directly said but is implicitly communicated in an intersubjective ‘sonic’ landscape consisting of beats, rhythms, paces, silences, cacophonies and noises that have the potential to interrupt and cause a range of emotions, from amusement to embarrassment to violent ruptures of traumatic anxiety.

VIII

Psychoanalysis engages in the process of translating what is familiar into something strange in order to disclose that which is already closed, known, or accepted in one’s language. This is because it does not only retain some of the elements of Adamic language but also recognises the effects of the *Fall* on human language and the collapse of the *Tower of Babel* – for psychoanalysis, language is not only the ‘house’ of *Being* but it is also its ‘prison-house’. By making words sound foreign again, psychoanalysis demonstrates that language can imprison, that as a medium of its own, it can fail.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the recent use of psychoanalytic neologisms, native language expressions invented to translate foreign words for the sake of the illusory idea of fidelity to the original, for example, replacing the French ‘après-coup’ with the English ‘afterwardsness’ or the Latin ‘Ego’ and ‘Id’ with the English ‘I’ and ‘It’. The problem with these translations is that they always sound more foreign and more forced than the foreign words themselves. In comparison with the latter, they take on a deceitful quality, a claim to a correspondence between word and the original object/process. The original foreign words are closer to the aims of psychoanalysis as they confront the English words that try to pass themselves off as faithful to the original German ones with

their mediation, their moment of being subjectively and historically constructed.

This powerful psychoanalytic perspective of intentional estrangement can also be found in the work of modernist writers such as Joyce and Beckett. As their linguistic heritage was colonised by the British, they wrote first in French and then translated their texts into English, resisting through this double estrangement the effects of British colonisation by choosing to write first in a language that the British could not colonise. However, when they translated their texts into English, this was not an attempt to claim back their language, but to exhibit how language itself partakes in this form of dispossession. Bereft of a stable, continuous cultural and linguistic tradition, these colonised writers were forced to make it up as they went along; and it is this effect of political and linguistic dispossession that would be put to subversive use (e.g. in the modernist style of writing) and, of course, would find its regular ‘home’ in psychoanalytic theory and practice.

IX

Psychoanalysis attends to the suffering mind-body by exploring how mental conflicts are translated into bodily symptoms and how the body makes demands to the mind to translate its suffering. To give form to suffering remains one of the primary tasks of psychoanalysis.

I often find myself having a physical reaction to the direct or indirect violence of my environment. Clenching my fists when I hear one of our programme administrators announcing enthusiastically that a student has been ‘terminated’, feeling a pain in my lower back when I hear students complaining that I have not used PowerPoint for my presentation, experiencing a knot in the pit of my stomach when I hear that immigrants are treated as illegal aliens, having acid reflux when I see people flaunting their privilege without any consideration for its effects on their fellow human beings, and losing my breath when I cannot find the space to translate and give form to this suffering which, as a consequence, becomes fleeting and transitory. One of the fundamental aims of psychoanalysis is to arrest this transitoriness and

translate one's suffering so that one cannot escape or ignore it any more.

X

There are only two services which [one] can offer the afflicted. One is to find the story which expresses the truth of their affliction. The second is to find the words which can give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: 'Why am I being hurt?'

(Simone Weil in Berger, 2013, p. 173)

Psychoanalysis attempts to translate the truth of affliction by giving voice to those who have been excluded and dispossessed. The impulse behind this psychoanalytic translation is the opposite of philanthropy. It is deeper than kindness. It involves recognising and witnessing the other's suffering, of being able to ask 'what is your plague' and feeling that no one is exempt from it, that no one excepts the worst is going to happen ... until it does.

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