

## CONTENTS

Introduction: Alone, Each in Our Own Language	1
1 Translation and Democratic Consensus	10
2 The Antagonisms of Translation	20
3 Agonistic Translation	35
4 Double Violence	48
5 Translation in Camps	75
6 Rendering Justice Through Translation	89
7 A Zone of Unforeseeability	107
8 Translation and Community	123
9 Translation and Procreation	141
10 A Sensitive Turn	152
Conclusion: Translating, Writing	162
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	167
<i>Notes</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	191

# Introduction

## ALONE, EACH IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE

IN THE very near future we will travel alone, each in our own language. There will no longer be any need to learn foreign languages in order to engage with others. We may still debate the relative merits of human versus machine translation, but the latter will have overtaken the former. At a time when books entirely translated by software are being published—in October 2018, the first machine-translated scientific work of over 800 pages was released in French, generated by DeepL (a machine-translation program based on deep learning)—the question is already being raised.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, the content of these books is technical, but the advances in artificial intelligence applied to this field are such that this software, and other similar programs, even if not entirely based on the same learning models, are translating literary texts with a certain degree of success. In 2018, *ATLAS, L'Association pour la promotion de la traduction littéraire en France* [The Association for the Promotion of Literary Translation in France], launched a ten-year experiment

comparing various translation tools (including Google Translate and DeepL) and their evolution when applied to a selection of classic texts, from Dostoevsky to Salinger.<sup>2</sup> We will thus be able to measure, year by year, the improvements in these machines and their different learning systems.

There are, in fact, two ways to make machines intelligent. The first, used until 2016 and commonly referred to in French as “traduction automatique” [automatic translation], involves “feeding” the system all the grammatical rules of languages and dictionaries and training it to translate short segments while flagging errors. This is “Phrase-Based Machine Translation,” which relies on a statistical model. The second, now favored by most computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, involves “neural networks”; it inputs a vast amount of texts and translations into the system and allows the machine to train itself, make mistakes, and self-correct. At first, errors are flagged during the practical training phase; then it learns to make its own choices and adjustments. The algorithm gradually determines for itself the translation rules it will use.

The shift brought about by the increasing efficiency of these algorithms is economic and cognitive. It multiplies by thousands the number of translations produced worldwide each day, accentuating inequalities in linguistic representation and accelerating the disappearance of the most vulnerable languages. It transforms the work of the translator, shifting it toward correction and verification rather than suggestion or creative invention. It compels the translator, if she does not wish to become a mere subordinate of the machine, to train in artificial intelligence at least as much as in the languages and cultures to be translated. It makes translation the central operation of communication but less to protect each language’s singularities than to impose a new “Globish,” which is no longer English but machine-assisted, or

automatic, translation. It lays claim to equivalence, transparency, and substitution. Accordingly, machine translators favor widely used languages and, unsurprisingly, are more effective and more numerous in English than in Italian, in Mandarin than in Uyghur, in Bengali than in Kannada. How, then, can deep learning be taught for certain language pairs for which the corpora of translated texts are extremely limited? Are there enough exchanges between Farsi and Icelandic, between Swahili and Korean, to train machines to translate them effectively? When one considers that there are approximately six thousand language pairs to be translated worldwide, the stakes become clear. This problem entails the use of relay languages, a return to certain historical practices of human translation, which reinforce the dominant position of one or of a few languages and increase the risk of error.<sup>3</sup>

In the not-too-distant future, more and more travelers will crisscross the planet equipped with an earpiece capable of translating their interlocutors' words into their own language, regardless of their mother tongue. Currently, this type of device—which, let us not forget, the characters in *Star Trek* already have—is commercially available for about fifteen languages. It performs a kind of consecutive translation, in which speech and its translation are not perfectly simultaneous but instead are separated by the few seconds necessary for the machine to capture the voice, send it to the cloud, transcribe it, and translate it. For the 2020 Olympic Games in Japan, Sourcnext produced a device, the Pocketalk, capable of translating over seventy-five languages for the tourism market (hotel staff and taxi drivers). The revolutions in machines and algorithms are so rapid that any data is already on the way to obsolescence. This reflection leads us into a world where predictions are realized faster than forecasted rain falls.

In order to think the transformation of relations that this development in computer-assisted translation implies, we must stop thinking translation as an exclusively positive operation of welcoming the foreign or of learning about others through their language. We must stop praising it or seeing it merely as a space of encounter between cultures and different ways of thinking. Translation can also become the primary instrument in a drive toward an isolated world, where each person approaches the other only through the narrow end of an earpiece. Transparency is violence. While taking care not to view these changes through a lens of dread or anxiety, it nevertheless seems important to think the whole of communication processes differently; and for this reason, as well, to understand translation as an ambiguous and complex operation, capable of both the best and the worst. We must recall the power of appropriation and the reduction of alterity that it has demonstrated throughout the history of cultural encounters, encounters that are also histories of domination.

The contemporary generalization of a positive discourse on translation—as a factor of plurality and openness, of ethical relation to the other, which now makes it, more often than not, the antithesis of war or conflict—deprives it of a significant part of its thought-provoking force. Beyond the fact that translation sometimes plays a decisive role (and hardly to its credit!) in the processes of war, as Emily Apter demonstrated in the case of the war in Iraq, Mona Baker for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Alain Ricard in the context of apartheid, translation is also the irreducible space of confrontation.<sup>4</sup> Of all of the objects of thought, few are so insoluble in dialectics, few remain so obstinately bound to the two, to difference and opposition. Placing the language of translation within the vocabulary of democratic consensus is therefore not without paradox, nor without

difficulty: It implies reducing, weakening, or even entirely negating all the conflicts inscribed within it. This ethical turn in translation, which reflects a broader shift in general political discourse heading in this direction (striving for a pacified society, without conflict, living in a world without enemies . . .) imposes itself at the cost of diminishing the difference between the one (or the self) and the other, of a confidence that is likely spurious with regard to reciprocity and empathy. It is these paradoxes and difficulties that I would like, in part, to unpack in the following chapters, in order to restore to translation its potential for active negativity.

Negativity does not stem solely from the supposed loss that occurs in the passage from one language to another. As a space of relation, translation is also a site of conflict that must be regulated in order to preserve a form of pluralism. “Agonic translation” could be the name for this tamed antagonism. Its potential is theoretical insofar as it seeks to overturn the dialectic by refusing synthesis. It is also political: how to think difference that is irreducible, conflict that is irresolvable? Finally, it is practical. Many translators are quite well acquainted with the performative aspects of this conflictual confrontation with the other (the other language, the other author, the other text . . .), a relation in which they struggle, in which their own language is weakened, and which often leaves them feeling powerless or incomplete—failing. Identifying the ways in which translation is now engaged in the discourse of consensus also reveals how these pathways mark a discursive shift both from earlier discourses and within the long history of discourses on translation. In certain places, translation continues to incite conflict: There is a polemic of translating and a polemic in translating. Recalling this aspect of reflection, analyzing the force of the negative in translation thought—this is one of the aims of this

book. The point is not simply to invert a positive discourse into a negative one but rather to institute a dimension of conflict that allows one to perceive the contradictions that arise within the practice: forces of domination or of vulnerability among languages, new relations stemming from the interaction between humans and machines, which reconfigure communities and the links established between them.

For many years now, I have chosen to teach the movements through which literature circulates and is transmitted, rather than literature itself. The reason is probably because I recognized that the experience of literature is something “for oneself,” which cannot be taught. Rather than the scholarly path offered through literary history, I preferred to take a detour through the atlas, by way of the travels of texts and languages, where works are in perpetual transformation and never truly resemble themselves, where we encounter so many stories of returns, discoveries, injustices, and forgettings. Another reason is that my academic discipline, comparative literature, has been profoundly transformed by its opening to world literature. World literature should not be regarded as a unified whole, graspable through knowledge or intellect; rather, it must be seen as a set of relations, one that can be systematized (as Pascale Casanova demonstrates in *The World Republic of Letters*) but that can also be approached more flexibly, by bringing to light certain specific relations whose features reappear in other instances (according to variables identifiable across space and time). Above all, one can develop a translating thought that best accompanies the decentering brought about by a global perspective, one that is neither Franco-centric nor exclusively Euro-centric (as was long the case with comparative literature).

This is the task I set for myself with the students I mentor over the course of their master's or doctoral program. With Claude Mouchard at Paris 8 University we founded a student journal entitled *Translations*, for which we invited the many foreign students in our courses to introduce us to their literature by way of translation. We have published everything from Georgian to Korean poets, from short contemporary Icelandic prose to old Creole folktales, from Bambara proverbs to Palestinian poetry. The collaboration of students whose native language was French was crucial for giving the translations stability, giving them sense and rhythm. Translation is a collective art; it allows us to reflect on forms of literary collectivization on several levels: because there are always at least two people involved, and there can also be more (and it's no surprise that Oulipo's experiments placed translation at the forefront), but also because the work itself is conceived as plural or composed of the entirety of its states—written, oral, past, present, and still to come. This is Borges's thesis on Homer, as well as Léon Robel's and Jacques Roubaud's on poetry.<sup>5</sup> For a time, I presented this idea of a plurality of the work and the relative disappearance of the original as paradoxical. I now see it as self-evident. The text has no true existence except between its different versions. No single version is granted primary authority; nor do we even mark the substitution of authority through which translation is sometimes conceived. Instead, we put this question back into play, notably by abandoning the issue of "faithfulness." This perspective reengages, in contrast to the long-assumed stability of writing, modes of transmission that are closer to orality. In this way, this line of thinking contributes to a renewed conception of the literary text, one that may perhaps reconcile orality and writing or, at the very least, refuse to treat them as two completely separate modalities of the literary.

The practice of translation is essential for thinking it; many theoreticians have emphasized this. It is through translation that one experiences both the resistances of translating and the powers of conflict inherent to them. Alongside Michel Deguy, Claude Mouchard (still), and Martin Rueff, we have made this the guiding principle of the academic journal *Poésie*. Poetic reason or unreason are also translative reason or unreason. In the effort to translate poets, it is not transparency that is violence, as with machine-assisted translation, but rather the hand-to-hand encounter with the language [*langue*] forged by the poem beyond its limit. Meaning is no more definitively enclosed in the poem than sounds or words. They can take flight. Starlings give shape to their flight, enigmatic for us, but astonishing and beautiful. And yet they fly and move, transporting their form elsewhere according to a rhythm that traces their space and their time. The poem puts us on trial [*à l'épreuve*], challenging our quotidian and social uses of language and the misunderstandings they provoke. By translating it, we liberate the relation between speech and truth.

Translating to remain face to face  
In silence  
In the mirror of language  
Translating to rejoin myself  
There, where I no longer am  
And to rejoin them  
Where they can no longer be.  
Translating to repatriate myself  
Syllable after syllable  
Word after word  
Phrase after phrase.

Translating like closing my eyelids

—suture points.

Translating against the ashes

Translating against the ashes

Translating against the ashes.<sup>6</sup>

Violence lies first in the language that separates before it unites. The plurality of meaning is a source of conflict before it is a source of richness. Translation must also contend with this kind of violence, to repatriate the dead and all that has been silenced. “Translating against the ashes”—against the violence of destruction, translating against inevitable disappearance. By directly confronting the conflict inherent in every encounter, translation also takes on the violences of life in common and of the world.

## INDEX

- Adorno, Theodor W., 43  
Amrouche, Fadhma Aïth Mansour,  
25–26  
Amyot, Jacques, 63  
Andrić, Ivo, 50  
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 46, 164  
Apter, Emily, 48, 49, 136  
Artaud, Antonin, 59–60, 61, 174n16,  
174n20  
Atlan, Henri, 145  
Audi, Paul, 143  
Augustin, Saint, 143  
  
Bâ, Amadou Hampâté, 27  
Baker, Mona, 4, 135–36  
Baldrige, Wilson, 97  
Balibar, Étienne, 30, 34, 98  
Barthes, Roland, 44, 171n28  
Bary, Nicole, 13–14  
Bataille, Georges, 38  
Barère, Bertrand, 18  
Baudelaire, Charles, 37, 39, 46, 54, 109,  
155, 163  
Baum, Batia, 150  
Bayard, Pierre, 132  
Beauvoir, Simone de, 144  
Becker, Alton L., 140  
Beckett, Samuel, 32, 35, 133, 165  
Bellomo, Paolo, 153  
  
Benjamin, Walter, 10, 44, 81, 82, 86,  
146, 147–48, 156  
Bennis, Mohammed, 104, 163  
Berman, Antoine, 10, 14, 15, 19, 34, 36,  
52, 58, 63, 112, 120, 126, 127, 128, 131,  
148  
Bermann, Sandra, 16, 169n13  
Billeter, Jean François, 156  
Blake, William, 149  
Bonnetoy, Yves, 108, 109, 149–50,  
163–64  
Borgès, Jorge Luis, 7  
Breton, André, 46  
Butler, Judith, 134, 145, 183n13  
  
Canetti, Elias, 157  
Canfora, Luciano, 70  
Capriolo, Ettore, 175n30  
Caproni, Giorgio, 164  
Carroll, Lewis, 60, 61  
Casanova, Pascale, 6  
Cassin, Barbara, 10, 12, 16–17  
Castillo, Bernal Díaz del, 22  
Celan, Paul, 44, 46, 47, 62, 163, 164,  
182n1  
Céline, Louis-Ferdinand, 95  
Cervantes, Miguel de, 95  
Céry, Loïc, 112  
Chamberlain, Lori, 142

- Chamoiseau, Patrick, 107  
Chateaubriand, François-René de, 36, 58  
Chouraqui, André, 66–67  
Cixous, Hélène, 141, 182n1  
Claro, Christophe, 61  
Coetzee, John Maxwell, 123–24  
Comenius, Jan Ámos, 159  
Cordonnier, Jean-Louis, 20, 21  
Cortés, Hernán, 22  
  
Dante (Durante degli Alighieri), 62, 63, 75–76, 84, 95  
Darbelnet, Jean, 94  
Deguy, Michel, 8, 97, 98, 134  
Delay, Florence, 181–82n14  
Deleuze, Gilles, 144–45  
Deloria, Vine, 121  
Delpech-Hellsten, Cathy, 112  
de Man, Paul, 146, 147  
Demarcq, Jacques, 158  
De Michelis, Euralio, 164  
Derradji, Yacine, 28  
Derrida, Jacques, 25, 33–34, 52, 62, 63–64, 72, 89, 100, 101, 102–3, 106, 118–22, 182n1, 183n11  
Dickinson, Emily, 46  
Dolet, Étienne, 64, 174n29  
Dombrovsky, Yury, 68  
Donne, John, 46  
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 2, 55, 95  
Dumett, Rafael, 23  
Dupin, Jacques, 46  
  
Eco, Umberto, 12, 16, 154  
El Hakmaoui, Jalal, 29, 30  
Esposito, Roberto, 123  
  
Fanon, Franz, 30  
Felstiner, John, 44, 47  
  
Feltrinelli, Giangiacomo, 68  
Ferdière, Gaston, 60, 61  
Flotow, Luise von, 66, 67  
Fontenay, Élisabeth de, 157  
Foucault, Michel, 87  
Freud, Sigmund, 95  
Fusero, Clemente, 164  
  
Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 10  
Gandillac, Maurice de, 146  
Gass, William, 61  
Genette, Gérard, 180n25  
Glissant, Édouard, 107, 108–12, 114, 118–22  
Godard, Barbara, 128  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 41  
Goldschmidt, Georges-Arthur, 52–53  
Gradowski, Zalmen, 86, 150–51  
Grégoire, Abbé, 18  
Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, 147  
Grinberg, Anouk, 163  
Grossman, Évelyne, 153  
Guidère, Mathieu, 129  
  
Haraway, Donna, 172n16  
Harjo, Joy, 121  
Hatzfeld, Jean, 74  
Heller-Roazen, Daniel, 20  
Heraclitus, 98  
Hersent, Jean-François, 169n14  
Hoëpfner, Bernard, 104  
Hölderlin, Friedrich, 58  
Homer, 7  
Horvilleur, Delphine, 67  
Hugo, François-Victor, 101, 155  
Huysen, Andreas, 43  
  
Igarashi, Hitoshi, 175n30  
Ionesco, Eugène, 10

- Joyce, James, 163  
Judet de La Combe, Pierre, 95  
Jurgenson, Luba, 68–70
- Kadaré, Ismail, 49–50  
Kafka, Franz, 53, 54–55, 56, 76, 173n11  
Kanafani, Ghassan, 175n30  
Kant, Emmanuel, 88  
Keats, John, 155  
Khlebnikov, Velimir, 46  
Kirsanov, Semion, 41  
Klossowski, Pierre, 58, 155  
Kohn, Eduardo, 160–61  
Kravchenko, Victor, 69  
Krog, Antjie, 53, 71  
Kundera, Milan, 54
- Lachmann, Karl, 70  
La Fontaine, Jean de, 157  
Laroui, Fouad, 30  
Leceracle, Jean-Jacques, 96  
Lefebvre, Jean-Pierre, 173n11  
Le Lionnais, François, 155  
Levi, Primo, 55, 75–76, 77–78, 79,  
81–85, 88, 103–4, 146  
Levinas, Emmanuel, 126  
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 76  
Lewis, Matthew Gregory, 59, 60  
Leyris, Pierre, 149  
Lombardi, Marco, 164  
Lotbinière-Harwood, Suzanne de, 67  
Lu Xun, 163  
Luther, Martin, 64  
Lyotard, Jean-François, 34
- Macé, Marielle, 157  
Malabou, Catherine, 145  
Mallarmé, Stéphane, 37, 104–5,  
109, 155  
Mammeri, Mouloud, 27  
Mandela, Nelson, 53, 71–72
- Mandelstam, Ossip, 84  
Manganelli, Giorgio, 84  
Mann, Thomas, 37  
Marcowicz, André, 95  
Marmier, Xavier, 41  
Mbembe, Achille, 30  
Meschonnic, Henri, 31–32, 35, 53–54,  
66–67, 92, 118, 128–29, 164–65  
Mesnard, Philippe, 76  
Meunier, Mikaël, 11  
Michaux, Henri, 62  
Miller, John, 65, 66  
Milner, Jean-Claude, 44  
Milton, John, 36, 58  
Mouchard, Claude, 7, 8, 75  
Mouffe, Chantal, 40  
Murakami, Harouki, 163
- Nerval, Gérard de, 46  
Nesin, Aziz, 175n30  
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 144, 153, 183n11  
North, Xavier, 12  
Nous, Alexis, 24, 25, 147  
Novalis (George Philipp Friedrich  
von Hardenberg), 154, 184n4  
Nyssen, François, 12, 13
- Ortega y Gasset, Jose, 142  
Ost, François, 13, 14  
Oustinoff, Michaël, 13, 15
- Papusza (Bronisława Wajs), 69  
Pasi, Mauro, 164  
Pasquier, Marie-Claire, 158  
Pasternak, Boris, 67–68  
Paulhan, Jean, 59  
Paz, Octavio, 23  
Perec, Georges, 57  
Perrot d’Ablancourt, Nicolas, 154  
Pessoa, Fernando, 46  
Pézar, André, 62, 63, 95

- Plato, 64  
Plutarch, 63  
Poe, Edgar Allan, 109, 155  
Popa, Ioana, 67  
Proust, Marcel, 37, 114–18  
Pushkin, Alexander, 55–56  
Pym, Anthony, 14, 128  
Pynchon, Thomas, 61  
  
Quignard, Pascal, 152  
  
Ramos, Graciliano, 163  
Rawls, John, 90, 94  
Régis, Guy, Jr., 114–15  
Rey, Alain, 183n7  
Ricard, Alain, 4, 70–71  
Ricoeur, Paul, 10, 13, 14–15, 90, 120  
Riedt, Heinz, 77, 103–4  
Rimbaud, Arthur, 46  
Risset, Jacqueline, 95  
Robel, Léon, 7  
Robert-Foley, Lily, 133  
Robin, Armand, 155  
Roubaud, Jacques, 7, 42, 155, 156  
Rudel, Jauféré, 15  
Rueff, Martin, 8  
Rushdie, Salman, 27, 64  
  
Said, Edward, 27, 30  
Salinger, Jerome David, 2  
Sapiro, Gisèle, 16, 99  
Sarraute, Nathalie, 37  
Saussy, Haun, 39  
Schiller, Friedrich von, 41  
Schulman, Aline, 95  
Shakespeare, William, 46  
Smith, Julie, 65–67  
Socrates, 174n29  
Spiegelman, Art, 43  
  
Spiessens, Anneleen, 73  
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 130–32, 139  
Stahuljak, Zrinka, 24  
Steiner, George, 96–97, 142  
Stevenson, Robert Louis, 70  
  
Tindall, Gilian, 104  
Tocqueville, Alexis de, 25  
Todorov, Tzvetan, 20  
Turin, Yvonne, 27  
Tutu, Desmond, 72, 102  
  
Ungaretti, Giuseppe, 46  
  
Valéry, Paul, 46, 149, 184n18  
Vaucluse, François, 48  
Venuti, Lawrence, 14, 16, 51, 102, 127  
Vialatte, Alexandre, 53  
Vinaver, Michel, 136–40  
Vinay, Jean-Paul, 94  
Virgil, 184n18  
Vitez, Antoine, 41  
Volodine, Antoine, 163  
Volponi, Paolo, 84  
  
Wailly, Léon de, 59  
Whitman, Walt, 143  
Wood, Michael, 16  
  
Xu, Jun, 24  
  
Yacine, Kateb, 27  
Yan Fu, 165  
Yeats, William Butler, 149  
Yoda, Lalbila Aristide, 169  
  
Zohn, Harry, 146–47