# Introduction – Translation as Interpretation

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Plato and Aristotle are not concerned with the problem of translation. When it is assumed that by nature the essence of things is immutable (Plato, *Cratylus* 438e-439e), that the meanings of things are the same for all human beings (Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 16a), and that the Greek language is but the mutable image of this ontological logos, the question of translation cannot even arise. Even the foreigner of Elea, protagonist of the *Sophist*, which establishes the method of philosophical science is, is a guest who speaks and thinks in a Greek way; indeed, he does so in a more Greek and, therefore, truer way with respect to the Athenian one. In such a context, posing the problem of translating the Hellenic language into some barbaric idiom could only have meant to wish not to be Greek and move many degrees away from the only natural truth coinciding with the Greek logos. For translation to become an issue, indeed a necessity, human beings are to experience the distance of truth and its manifestation through a forest of words to be interpreted and signs to be deciphered. Human beings are to be impacted by the opacity, heterogeneity and historicity of speech acts that bring with them disagreements and misunderstandings, as well as illuminating openings. It is therefore necessary to experience the *Faktum* that idioms are not aseptic verbal instruments to convey a single truth to be meant in the same way by everyone. Rather, idioms are language and therefore human ways of being-in-the-world; they are practical, culturally

determined behaviours within the life-world, that dialogically clash and translate each other until they encounter the boundaries of the shareable. They are, therefore, different human ways of being interpreters of the truth, the latter being divided and mutable like the languages in which it manifests itself. Translating is not an occasional task, a simple technical remedy for the accidental failure of some speakers to master a certain foreign language. Translating is a necessity, whenever the *epoché* (suspension, interruption) of the familiar meaningfulness of an idiom reveals that we experience a language and then another world, and that a specific surrounding world (the *Umwelt*, as Heidegger's *Being and Time* would have it) is but a world, indeed *the* world. Therefore, translation turns out to be a necessity as we find ourselves exposed to the estranging experience – not an exceptional but a daily one – that the language we hear, speak or read is unique, and yet permeated by the plural, definitely not an idiom closed in its own identity (Nardelli 2021, 81, 114, 117), and that the surrounding world (*Umwelt*) that is familiar to us is actually the world, and therefore something to be interpreted in different ways, incommensurable and translatable at the same time. Translatability, as Benjamin points out, is not an accidental addition to texts, on the contrary, it is inherent in them in a constitutive way: "Translatability is an essential quality of certain works" (Benjamin 1968, 71). It is "the very life of language and its works" that opens up translatability. It is because they are alive – 'alive' in the historical and not merely natural sense – that works ask for being translated, for unfolding themselves in renewed forms, and being transformed into their translations (Benjamin 1968, 71-3). Moreover, even the experience of the untranslatability of texts does not rule out their translatability, but, rather, calls for and demands the latter (Di Martino 2007, 69-70).

It is on the biblical side, above all Jewish, that the human experience of the Babel confusion of human languages emerges, but this condition – as Voltaire already underlines in the entry "Babel" of his *Dictionnaire philosophique* – is proper to the 'city of God'. Indeed "Babel means God's city (la ville de Dieu), the holy city" and therefore linguistic confusion is not only an obstacle to be remedied by mastering several languages, but also what opens up future, fruitful ways of relating to divine truth, *by translating it through our translating each other*. Should we ever – let's put this as a mere limit concept – understand the speeches coming from the Other in a totally transparent and definitive way, all our interest, commitment, care, freedom would disappear, and with the obviousness of the evidence apathy and indifference towards the others and towards ourselves would also make their appearance. In other terms, the practice of translating is not an imperfect remedy used to cope with imperfection, but, rather, a finite response to our finitude. The phenomenon of translation, moreover, shows its existential, ethical, political, religious im-

portance, whenever writing, speaking, dialoguing is not reduced to a mere exchange of information. Besides, as Ricoeur points out, the concrete "linguistic experience" of us speakers *in the flesh* reveals the irreducibility of language to "a closed universe of signs" (Ricoeur 1974, 85) and the necessity not to assimilate equivocalness "through overabundance of meaning" "to the equivocalness through the confusion of meanings" (Ricoeur 1974, 19).

As it can be seen from the preceding rapid remarks, the section of this issue of *JoLMA* dedicated to 'translation as interpretation' is significantly influenced by the reflections coming from the hermeneutic-philosophical area of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Canullo points out in her essay (*infra*), one of the guiding questions sounds: what can hermeneutics explain or offer when translation is the issue at stake? However, attention is not devoted only to hermeneutic-philosophical thinkers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, or Derrida, but also to authors closer to the Anglophone logical-analytical tradition like Saul Kripke – whose use of translation as a test on the ambiguity of the original is investigated by Ervas –, and like Quine and his 'radical translation' (Canullo, Simonotti). Not surprisingly, attention to Walter Benjamin's reflections on translation figures substantially, especially in the essays by Costa and De Villa. Precisely the latter highlights Benjamin's explicit filiations towards the German 'Romantic idea of translation' and in particular his debt to Schlegel. Also significant are Benjamin's references to authors such as Hamann and Herder who already in the second half of the eighteenth century rejected as illusory the Kantian purification of reason from linguisticity and historicity (Paltrinieri 2009, 47-60, 83-90). It is a provenance (*Herkunft*) from the German reflection between the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries also shared in common by Heidegger and Gadamer. Besides, Schleiermacher already emphasizes the exemplary nature of the practice of translation, seen as a universal human dialogue capable of bringing together strangers to each other, in a historical-cultural sense, while preserving the distance of what is being translated (Camera 2017, 435-6). Schleiermacher's negative criticism of any translating method that only aims at adapting and assimilating 'the source text' so as to "'leave the reader as much as possible in peace'", in favour of a method in which translating is an "estranging and decentring strategy" (Camera 2017, 439, 444), maintains a fundamental import on twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics, too.

However, it should be remembered that the hermeneutic-philosophical movement is not a homogeneous block and even the essays presented here testify to how different the 'hermeneutic-philosophical' ways of interpreting 'translation as interpretation' may be. If for Heidegger "the purpose of translation by no means is that of bringing what has been said closer" (Heidegger 1991, 96), if for him dis-

tance, otherness and heterogeneity are something original, which translation is called upon to manifest, rather than unify and fill, if, as Cavazza underlines, "for Heidegger the beginning is not a condition of perfection before a decay", Gadamer's neo-Hegelian hermeneutics and Ricoeur's neo-Cartesian one move according to a different orientation. As it can be seen from the contributions of Laverdure and Simonotti, for Gadamer translating is a phronetic art aimed at transforming "something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity" (Gadamer 2004, 156) – the task of a translator being therefore "the overcoming of the strangeness that obscures the understanding of a text" (Laverdure) –, and, similarly, for Ricoeur "the translator builds a bridge to connect two poles", to mediate and reconcile, in a pluralistic sense, foreign languages and cultures (Simonotti). On the other hand Heidegger and Derrida are more interested in distinguishing unity from unification and therefore in preserving the irreducibility of translation to any form of assimilative appropriation. Still, an important underlying ground is shared in common: the practice of translating always involves an interpretation, i.e. the understanding of someone who can never be a technician *ex nihilo*, but who is always an interpreter factically 'situated in the middle', bound and opened by multiple linguistic, historical, cultural, experiential relationships to what is extraneous. The interpreter in the hermeneutical sense, therefore, always finds herself/himself in a condition of affinity, not similarity, with the text she/he is called upon to translate, which is also in fact 'situated in the midst of the foreign'.

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