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Untranslatability and the ethics of pause

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ABSTRACT
Untranslatability has been seen as a problematic concept in Translation Studies, rooted in outdated views of translation as doomed to failure. In this paper, I argue against such a view of untranslatability to make two claims. The first is that at least a temporary untranslatability is the condition of translation, without it translation would be redundant. The second is that untranslatability offers us both an ethical and descriptive model for intersubjective relations such that it does not merely refer to a textual practice but also to ways in which we relate to each other as human beings. In the first part of the paper, I engage with two critics of untranslatability – Ricoeur and Venuti – to claim that in their rejection of the untranslatable, they lose something productive. Against a view of the untranslatable as something 'sacred', as described by Heidegger; I argue that we might think of the untranslatable as that which exceeds our understanding yet generates the desire to understand at all. Drawing on the work of Derrida, Levinas, and Cassin, I claim that the untranslatable offers us a way of thinking of translation and understanding in general as ethical when they are paused, suspended, or interrupted.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to argue that untranslatability offers both a descriptive and normative model for ethical intersubjective relations. Untranslatability is not therefore merely a feature of a linguistic practice, but also of how we can and indeed should relate to each other as human beings. In Translation Studies and the Philosophy of Translation, untranslatability is frequently rejected on the grounds that it demonstrates a failure to understand what translation really is. I begin by addressing two proponents of this view: Paul Ricoeur and Lawrence Venuti. Broadly speaking, both thinkers argue that untranslatability belies a commitment to a Platonic model of ideal meaning and by extension, a commitment to a reductive view of translation as something that unproblematically transfers this ideal meaning from one language to another. Against such a view, I claim that in fact untranslatability can be seen as that which first sets our desire to translate in motion.

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In part three of the paper, I turn to a different understanding of untranslatability as found in Martin Heidegger. Following in a tradition of German linguistic exceptionalism from thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Heidegger claims that there are more or less 'philosophical' languages, a claim that leads to what Jean-Pierre Lefebvere terms an 'ontological nationalism' (1990; see also 1992). A claim taken up and developed by Barbara Cassin (2014, p. xviii; see also 2010, p. 25). Here there is a sacralization of untranslatability, as something that not only does indeed occur, but further as something that reveals the 'Truth'. However, for Heidegger, this occurs only in very specific languages – namely, Greek and German (2002b, p. 36). I highlight the obvious ethical, social, and political problems with this approach to the untranslatable.

Having eschewed some problematic understandings of untranslatability, I turn to Cassin's account of the untranslatable as what 'we keep on (not) translating' (2014, p. 17). While this model has much to recommend it, this definition of the untranslatable as *only* that which we keep on translating or as that which we keep on not translating; only as that which provokes a kind of hermeneutic response to a text, offers too deflationary an account of the force of the untranslatable. As a result, in the final part of the article I turn to an account of temporality and alterity, drawn from the work of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, that allows us to think of untranslatability as a kind of pause. Untranslatability on this model is an interruption that disrupts our usual handling of the world – either the world of the text or the world of our everyday interactions. The encounter with the untranslatable causes us to stop and take a breath. My claim here is that this interruption is ethically essential in both our textual practices and in our intersubjective relations.

2. Arguments for rejecting the untranslatable

Untranslatability is often rejected on the basis that it reflects a failure to understand what translation really is. Here I present both Ricoeur and Venuti as examples of this argument and show how such arguments rest on a very particular understanding of untranslatability.

2.1 Paul Ricoeur and the ruinous alternatives of untranslatability

Translation figures frequently in Ricoeur's work, not just in those later essays translated by Eileen Brennan as *On Translation* (2006); but also in his commentary on Europe (1996), on justice (2007), and elsewhere. This may seem unsurprising in the work of a hermeneutic philosopher, but Ricoeur goes further in his treatment of the issue than, for example, Hans Georg Gadamer for whom translation is merely an 'extreme case of interpretation' (2004, p. 387). For Ricoeur, translation poses its own particular risks and challenges, while presenting itself as a paradigm or model for political integration (1996) and ethical intersubjective relations (2006).

One of his imperatives in approaching translation is to discard the untranslatable / translatable dichotomy, in favour of a faithfulness / betrayal model. And there are really good reasons why he argues this. He claims if we adhere to the faithfulness / betrayal model, we will end up with something that is a little more ethical because the

focus is on one's responsibility to the other. In contrast, the translatable / untranslatable model he claims, commits us to one of two ruinous and paralysing alternatives between possible and impossible (2006, p. 13). Committed to the untranslatable side of the opposition, one is committed to the idea that translation is impossible because language reflects different world views, such that everything is untranslatable because every language carves up the world so differently that there cannot be communication between languages at all. Such a view, inspired most notably by the ethnolinguistic Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, leads to the conclusion 'that misunderstanding is a right, that translation is theoretically impossible and that bilinguals have to be schizophrenics' (Ricoeur, trans. Brennan, 2006, p. 15). Using Donald Davidson's work against the idea of 'conceptual schemes' (Davidson, 1973), Ricoeur agrees that translation is 'theoretically difficult, practically easy' (2006, p. 14). Translation may seem impossible when thought about in the abstract, but in practice it happens all the time in a more or less straightforward manner. Ricoeur claims then, that understandings of translation that start from the untranslatable collapse as soon as they are put to any sort of pragmatic test.

The other option of this 'ruinous alternative' is to account for the 'fact' of translation through an idea of translatability founded in either a 'common fund', which might be a prelapsarian original language, or an a priori code. The original language model of translatability is manifest in that most idiosyncratic of translation myths – the Tower of Babel. This myth is most often read as a catastrophic punishment from God, the punishment of multilingualism. Such readings present a time when everyone spoke the same language and understanding was simple because translation was not necessary. Translation is thus viewed as part of a tragic fall from (divine) grace. This idea of a fall is problematic for Ricoeur, not least because it mobilises a nostalgia for a time when translation was redundant thereby promoting the possibility of a return to a 'perfect' past. The notion of a glorious and homogenous past plays out in very particular ways in discourses around ethnic nationalism (Kohn 1965, pp. 29–37; see also Derrida's reading of Fichte, 1992). Whenever such narratives of going back to an 'unsullied' past are at play, we can find ourselves in the region of politically and ethically dubious commitments. The rhetoric of the National Socialist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, for example, fostered the idea of trying to 'get back' to some pure Aryan language or some pure Aryan race. Anything that promises these kinds of returns to purity are to be eschewed at all costs. Babel is not the tale of some terrible event of scattering and confounding that displaced us from a prior unity, Ricoeur argues; but 'the non-judgemental acknowledgement of an original separation' (trans. Brennan, 2006, p. 18). Babel is merely a way of describing one of the facts of our existence; that people are diverse and speak many languages. Taking this point even further, Elad Lapidot argues that the Babel narrative as the tale of the Generation of Secession in the Bible, is actually the tale of God making his creation more like himself. Lapidot claims that far from being a punishment, the 'scattering' of humanity and the diversification of language that God imposes, is in fact a means through which humanity develops more creative power by gaining more linguistic power (Lapidot, 2012 pp. 89–105). The other option that Ricoeur presents as falling into the prelapsarian tongue is that of the a priori code system. The failure of this system of a common linguistic code has been demonstrated in numerous aspirational, yet ultimately abandoned projects, from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's 'lexicon of universal ideas' right the way up to Esperanto (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 16–17).

Thus, the disastrous framing of translation as a choice between translatable / untranslatable (or possible / impossible) must be abandoned altogether in favour of a view of translation as a balancing act of hospitality. Further on in this paper I will call into question this oppositional model that Ricoeur uses to reject untranslatability, but for now we will turn to the positive account of translation he proposes. Drawing on Friedrich Schleiermacher's idea of 'bringing the author to the reader and the reader to the author', Ricoeur presents the translator as a host between these two figures (2006, p. 23; see Schleiermacher, 1998). The choice is no longer between the 'speculative' translatable / untranslatable alternatives but between the – according to Ricoeur – far more 'practical' alternatives of faithfulness or betrayal. There is, Ricoeur argues, 'no absolute criterion for good translation' since there exists no 'third text between the source text and the target text. Hence the paradox, before the dilemma: a good translation can aim only at a supposed *equivalence* that is not founded on a demonstrable *identity* of meaning. An equivalence without identity' (Ricoeur, trans. Brennan, 2006, pp. 21–22). In other words, since a translation and what it translates cannot be fact-checked against an intermediary text; translation is always aiming towards some kind of equivalence or similarity that cannot be proven absolutely.

Ricoeur claims that the work of the translator then is to perform both a creative betrayal of the source text and a creative appropriation of the target language in the 'construction of the comparable' (2006, p.37). But what is meant exactly by this creative betrayal and faithfulness remains somewhat unclear. He comes closest to describing it in a discussion of Steiner's phrase 'to understand is to translate' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 24; see also Steiner, 1975, p. 28 *ff.*). Here, Ricoeur argues that the translator is faithful to the capacity language has to say what is not, to keep a secret, to say nothing (1975, p. 28). Our capacity for language as a capacity to understand in a certain way, to communicate, to abstract and think, is also the capacity to keep something secret or to communicate something that is not true (to lie or deceive). While not entirely clear, I would argue that Ricoeur's claim here (particularly given the references to Celan) is that in being faithful to both masters – the two languages – the translator must betray them both to maintain the secret in each. What is implied or hinted at in one language becomes explicated and explicit in its translation. In turn, a translation creates its own secret by covering over something that stood out in the source text. The translator betrays one to be faithful to the other.

Translation then becomes an ethical encounter between languages, whereby the translator is responsible for welcoming the foreign language into their home. Translation becomes work, in the Freudian sense of *Arbeit*, a labour of mourning where what is being mourned is the ideal or perfect translation (2006, p. 23). If we free ourselves in this Freudian sense of overcoming, we free ourselves from the ideal of the perfect translation and accept the fact that every translation is a kind of intermediary of possibles. Each translation could be different, and as such no translation can ever be taken to be final. In this way, Ricoeur argues we can move beyond the 'agonistics that make a drama of the translator's task' and find instead the 'happiness' of linguistic hospitality (2006, p. 10). As Richard Kearney surmises:

> The creative tension between the universal and the plural ensures that the task of translation is an endless one, a work of tireless memory and mourning, of appropriation and

> disappropriation, of taking up and letting go, of expressing oneself and welcoming others (2006, p. xx).

There is much to recommend this approach: viewing translation as a balancing act of hospitality places a certain ethical responsibility on the translator that is worth retaining. It is this ethical inflection that allows Ricoeur to use translation as a model for socio-political integration and intersubjective relations (1996). However, one of the dangers I think, is that in its pragmatic balancing it can make translation, and by extension intersubjective relations in general, sound comfortable. There is a sense in Ricoeur of doing the best that one can and being happy with that, but there are no checks here on what the 'best one can do' actually is or criteria for judging when one's best has in fact been done. It is important to realise that our relations between different languages and also between each other can be difficult and hard. We do not want to ease ourselves into this kind of comfortable 'well that's the best I can do' sort of attitude.

Equally, Ricoeur holds onto quite moralistic language. This idea of being faithful or betraying is very problematic, and we know that in Translation Studies there is a long history of engagement with those terms and how complicated and strange they make the act of translation, not least from feminist perspectives (for example: Arrojo, 1994; Chamberlain, 1988). And finally, the problem with Ricoeur's account is that, despite claims to the contrary, it is still actually committed to translation as a failure. The insistence on betrayal and the idea that the translator – the linguistic host to two guests – must betray one to be faithful to another. Once we posit translating as in any sense a betrayal, then I think we have gone too far.

2.2 Venuti and the untranslatable as symptomatic of the instrumental model

My second example of criticism of the untranslatable comes from Lawrence Venuti. He sees commitment to the untranslatable as a commitment to what he terms the 'instrumental model' (2019). Venuti argues that models of translation act in ways that are akin to Foucauldian epistemes, or we might also add something like a Kuhnian paradigm, where certain ways of practicing are available which also at the same time preclude other modes of practising. The dominant model at the moment and for some time according to Venuti is what he terms the instrumental model of translation. This model is characterised by a presumption of an invariant – something that must remain the same in both the original and the translation. This invariant can be semantic; a traditional Platonic idea of meaning as an abstract ideal that can be dressed in different ways depending on the language one uses.[1] However, it can also be stylistic, or the response of the reader – ultimately it occurs anytime the translator operates with the aim of trying to recreate something of the source text in the target text. As he phrases it in the opening of his recent polemic: '[the instrumental model] conceives of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant *form, meaning, or effect*' (2019, p. 1, my emphasis).

This is contrasted with a 'hermeneutic model' wherein translation is viewed as an interpretative and transformative act. This model is quite akin to Ricoeur and other hermeneutic phenomenologists. This hermeneutic model considers translation as an interpretative act that varies the source text according to intelligibilities and interests in the

receiving culture; what he calls elsewhere ‘interpretants’. The idea is that rather than trying to take some ‘thing’ (the invariant) from the source text and drag it across into the target text; with the hermeneutic model, the translator sets up a relationship between the two texts whereby they talk to each other. The translator either explicitly or implicitly decides on certain features (the interpretants) that they will be conscious of creating in the target text. Crucially, however, the translation thus created will be an independent text in its own right:

> […] a translator turns a source text into a translation by applying interpretants, factors that are formal […] and thematic […] The application of interpretants guarantees that a translation is relatively autonomous from its source text even while establishing a variety of interpretive relations to that text. (Venuti, 2019, p. 2)

For Venuti, the untranslatable is perhaps the most oft manifest symptom of instrumentalism. In his discussion of Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923), Venuti highlights a number of features that demonstrate an instrumentalism at play: Benjamin’s insistence on the untranslatable; his references to organic metaphors of fruit and skin for the original as opposed to cloak and king for a translation; and most notably, Benjamin’s reference to a revealed ‘truth’ of a ‘pure language’ (Venuti, 2019, pp. 25–26). In this vein, Venuti is even more critical of authors such as Emily Apter and Cassin. He accuses them of following an instrumental model because of their emphasis on the untranslatable. Here the target is very much the American academy, Departments of Translation Studies and/or Comparative Literature, and the field of World Literature (2019, pp. 27–39; 41–53). According to Venuti, Cassin and Apter’s work is committed to the idea of translation as failure, it is Eurocentric, and politically naïve (2019, p. 79). It is all of these things apparently because it adheres to the idea of the ‘untranslatable’ and hence to an instrumental model. It is not clear how a project that seeks to demonstrate the geographical, cultural, and historical contingencies of translation is ‘naïve’. Venuti at no point engages with the multiple translatory projects that Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables* has generated or with Apter’s more recent work on the dangers of Eurocentrism (see for example Apter, 2008, 2019). Cassin claims the untranslatable is ‘what one keeps on (not) translating’. That is, it is what causes new translations of old texts, it is what we want to fiddle and fix and modify in our translation practice. It is the start of translation itself – if we did not ponder over our translatory choices, what translatory work is being done at all? The idea from Cassin that translation is something that is open-ended and interpretative is very close to Venuti’s ‘hermeneutic model’. All of which makes his claim that Cassin’s account is ‘cryptic’ (2019, p. 54) seem strange, but I will return to Cassin a little further on.

Venuti goes on to talk about proverbs of untranslatability (2019, pp. 83–126) and how these reveal our commitment to translation as the uncreative reproduction of invariants. These proverbs include: *traduttore, traditore* [‘translator, traitor’], ‘poetry is what gets lost in translation’, ‘there is nothing translatable, there is nothing untranslatable’ and so on. These kinds of phrases, Venuti argues, reveal the fact that we think any translation that is different from the source text is a failure, that we see translation in general as a derivative, secondary activity. A text is ‘untranslatable’ in that any translation is a mere pale imitation of its original. In contrast, if we let go of the idea of translation as reproduction (of invariants in the source text) and think of it instead as a creative

hermeneutic practice, we are immediately freed from the ideas of failure and untranslatability. This epistemic shift requires a radical shift in institutional and linguistic practices (2019, pp. 173–177), a requirement Venuti has called for elsewhere (2018, pp. 265–277).

While Venuti's call for an understanding of translation as a creative practice is certainly to be commended, there are problems with his account. Firstly, he ends up being committed to the view that everybody who is translating and everybody who is talking about translation is part of the instrumental model. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, he operates with a version of the untranslatable that I do not find convincing. The untranslatable does not have to mean a commitment to an invariant. It is about something that draws us to a text or, if we are operating with an expanded notion of translation, it is what draws us to a person. [2] The untranslatable as that which cannot be appropriated or grasped because it is about the event of a text being read by a person, or a person encountering another person. I argue that recognising untranslatability is about recognising the importance of particularity within universality and that is what I discuss below in the section on Cassin. Before that, I want to briefly turn to Martin Heidegger's account of the untranslatable.

2.3 Martin Heidegger and sacralization of the untranslatable

Thus far, I have been arguing against the views of the untranslatable from Ricoeur and Venuti as something unproductive, archaic, naïve, and hence as something to be abandoned. Now I want to look at an account that claims the untranslatable is something we should hold on to and point out some problems with that version of the untranslatable. Translation was a feature of Heidegger's work from *Being and Time* onwards. This was not merely in a functional sense of translating particular philosophical terms, but as a way of actually doing philosophy. In *Being and Time* key moments were in how we translate the term 'phenomenology' (2009, pp. 49–63) and the misstep in the history of Being instigated by the translation of *aletheia* to *veritas* leading to a correspondence theory of truth (2009, pp. 257–258). In his later work translation continues to operate as a philosophical methodology in its own right. This is particularly evident in that work that charts his 'turn' or *Kehre* towards a new way of framing the question of Being, such as the lecture course on Parmenides (2002a), or the text that enacts an extended commentary on and translation of the Anaximander Fragment (1975). Translation for Heidegger was a way of transposing one's thinking somewhere else, and therefore of thinking something new (2002a, p. 12).

However, he also followed in the footsteps of many thinkers who argue in favour of the untranslatable because there are certain traits of particular languages that cannot be recreated in other languages. This is most notable in certain Romantic thinkers who subscribe to a type of German language exceptionalism; from Herder to Fichte and that reached its culmination in Heidegger. In its earlier incarnations, this line of thought described the German language as uniquely placed to welcome foreign languages without domesticating them, unlike French or English. As Van Wycke points out, the advantages of the German language were viewed in most explicit contrast to the practises of the French, epitomised by D'Ablancourt (Van Wyke, 2010, pp. 26–29; See also Venuti, 2021). Writing on German literature, Herder urged German authors and translators to bend their language to a foreign strain: 'What great advantages would not inevitably accrue to our language if it learned to

mold [*sic.*] itself to the Greek and Latin languages as far as possible and showed its flexibility to the public's eyes!' (Herder, trans. Forster, 2002, p. 38). Herder was followed by thinkers such as Schlegel, who sang the praises of German's linguistic malleability leading to a capacity to 'read the foreign on its own terms' (Van Wyke, 2010, p. 27). What is notable in these writings is the understanding of language as linked to national character: a way of thinking made even more explicit in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* which argued that the German language was that of a philosophy of life and peculiarly fitted to such a philosophy (Fichte, 1968; see also Cheah, 2003, pp. 115–178; Derrida, 1994). What began as a way of describing a kind of linguistic hospitality in Ricouer's terms, very quickly became a kind of linguistic (and indeed almost *Volkish*) exclusivity. This valorisation of one language over another as offering something unique in its expression leads to what Cassin, following Lefebvere, calls an 'ontological nationalism' (Cassin, 2014, p. xviii) where certain national languages are the only ones with access to the 'truth of Being'. In a lecture course from the 1930s in Freiburg, Heidegger claims:

> […] the fact that the *Greek language is philosophical,* i.e. not that Greek is loaded with philosophical terminology, but that it philosophizes in its basic structure and formation. The same applies to every genuine language, in different degrees to be sure. The extent to which this is so depends on the depth and power of the people and race who speak the language and exist within it. Only our German language has a deep and creative philosophical character to compare with the Greek. (Heidegger, trans. Sadler, 2002b, p. 36, emphasis in original)

That all languages present the world in unique ways that are philosophically diverse and enriching seems a reasonable claim. It is evidently problematic, however, to make that claim exclusive in the way that Heidegger does, so that *only* some languages are philosophically 'deep' and 'creative'. The contention here is that German and Greek are the most philosophical languages and that other languages – and the people who speak them – are inferior in their philosophical capacities. It is this linguistic chauvinism that is evident in Heidegger's claim that the translation of Greek philosophy into Latin was a loss that destined Being on a trajectory of oblivion. A claim that leads Gert-Jan Van Der Heiden to identify a translation hierarchy in Heidegger's thinking (2010, p. 191), with Greek as the most philosophical of languages to which all other languages must try to make themselves commensurate.

Heidegger's use of translation as a philosophical methodology in many of his works is to bring out what he describes as the 'unthought' of familiar terms or philosophical fragments (see for example Heidegger, 1975). However, in terms of the untranslatable, what we find is a truth that Heidegger discovers that is not really untranslatable at all but rather as yet untransla*ted*. The German language is so pure, and so philosophical, it will be able to take in this 'untranslatable' and in fact translate it. The claim here is very close to what Ricoeur described as the search for a prelapsarian language and, in this context in particular, it is clearly politically and ethically dubious.

3. In favour of the untranslatable

3.1 Barbara Cassin and what we 'keep on (not) translating'

I want to move on now to Barbara Cassin and the idea of the untranslatable as what we keep on (not) translating. Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* has now been translated

into so many different languages and has set in motion so many linguistic projects of what Ricoeur would call linguistic hospitality between multiple communities; that it almost proves Cassin's point. It focuses on the untranslatable as something that draws us to a text, we translate it, but then we have to go back and translate it again. One of the ways that Cassin understands this is that the untranslatable is what 'complicates the universal' and sets conceptual invention in motion. Here Cassin's work celebrates ambiguity or multiple meanings as what gives rise to a moment of reflection and ultimately a moment of creation.

At the heart of the project is the aim to show that a philosophical concept cannot be entirely cut off from the language of its word. There is an overall celebration of the multiplicity inherent and necessary to language; a multiplicity that takes three forms: Firstly, that there are many languages. Following both Humboldt and Derrida – Cassin argues that there is not such a thing as 'language' but only languages (2014, p. 19; 2018, p. 6). Each language acts like a net overlapping with other nets that capture the world, providing different perspectives on the same thing while simultaneously constituting the thing. We may speak of universal concepts only through particular languages, which invariably bring their own colour or shade to the concept in question – this colour of the particular on the universal is not inconsequential.

Secondly there is multiplicity within a single language. Meanings change over history and across contexts; the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* deals with meanings in particular texts at particular times providing both a diachronic history of concepts as they change in their various linguistic crossings, while also providing a synchronic account of the current philosophical landscape. As such, the *Dictionary* is not a finished work but an ongoing and interminable project. Thirdly and finally, there is multiplicity within a single word – double and triple meanings, homonyms and homophones, polysemic play and historical traces. As such concepts – necessarily entangled in a particular tongue – emerge as clusters of thoughts.

Here we do not have a linguistic relativism. Cassin is not arguing that every language carves up the world so differently that translators would have to be 'schizophrenics' as Ricoeur claims. Rather, what Cassin argues is that we all experience the same world, but we experience it in our particular and subjective ways. The universal world is expressed in particular languages and those particularities are irreducible. Our world is experienced from our particular perspective, at the particular time in which we live and through the particular language we speak. These particularities are not obstacles to be overcome in order to access a separate universal world – but are rather the very thing that constitute the world at all. Language operates, she claims, as a net that captures the world in a particular way with each net capturing different shades but ultimately it is still the same world. There are echoes here of the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in the idea that the universal nature of subjectivity is manifest in the particular manner in which each subject transcends their facticity.

The problem for Cassin with how the universal / particular divide has been addressed in the history of philosophy, has been the reduction of everything to an abstract and imposed universality instead of beginning with the particular and working our way out to a shared universality. Here we find again those echoes of the phenomenological method of beginning from lived experience and working towards a shared objectivity.

3.2. Supplementing Cassin with Levinas and Derrida

I want to keep a lot of what Cassin gives us: the untranslatable as what we keep on (not) translating; the untranslatable as what 'complicates the universal' by revealing the manner in which any universal is only experienced from the point of view of the particular; and the fact of multiplicity in any supposed unity. However, I want to take Cassin further by supplementing her account of the untranslatable with a double temporality that is both synchronous and non-synchronous at the same time. I borrow this double temporality from Levinas and Derrida.

Levinas describes the history of philosophy as 'the destruction of transcendence' (1998, p. 56): that philosophy has sought to eliminate the ambiguity of existence by confining subjectivity to a universal description assured and secure. While all subjects may well share universal traits or attributes, what distinguishes human subjectivity for Levinas is our very particular response to each other. In the encounter with the Other I am drawn out of and away from my own egotistic concerns – I transcend them – to *be for* the Other. It is this experience of reaching out to the other person to help or offer oneself that is the very source of signification for Levinas (1981, p. 68). Here in being for the Other, I occupy a position that is both host and hostage: I welcome and care for the Other, yet do so through an obligation I cannot refuse but only passively receive (1981, p. 11). In this moment, when I am wholly for the other person, confronted by their infinite alterity, I partake of a different kind of temporality that is diachronic and irrecuperable (1981). The temporality at play here is the experience of time that escapes us. We find its traces in the process of aging: on looking in the mirror we find ourselves older, but we could not say where or when this or that wrinkle emerged (1981, p. 52 *ff.*). The experiences of nausea or pain similarly testify to this other non-representable temporality; we may remember that we were nauseous or in pain, but the experience itself cannot be reproduced (Levinas, 2003).[3] In these examples there is a lapse or a loss of time that constitutes its passage.

Nonetheless, the subject is also concerned with themselves (for itself) operating in a chronological temporality. This temporality runs along the traditional lines of one thing happening after the other in a way that can be remembered and represented and woven into a narrative of personal identity. In this ordinary chronological time, my concern is with myself as a member of society amongst equals (rather than hostage to the Other). The encounter with the Other is what interrupts this ordinary time, this concern with the self, by rupturing the ego's totality (Levinas, 1979, pp. 35–40, *ff.*). When we really 'see' someone as another person and not merely as the role they are currently performing (teacher or shop assistant, doctor or neighbour and so on); when we see beyond what is visually presented, we find ourselves interrupted, our self-concern paused. The interruption happens through a confrontation with what cannot be explained – the other person as radically Other. Of course, we cannot stay in that moment of interruption, we cannot *be for* the other in an infinite and diachronic temporality, we must return to ordinary time and become once again a member of society (Levinas, 1981, p. 158). But it is this back and forth, this double modality of subjectivity, that leads Levinas to claim: 'the subject is in two times and is thus a transcendence' (1981, p. 85).

If in Levinas the subject alternates between being for the other and being for the self, in Derrida, the double temporality is complicated further by the addition of 'at the same time'. This is what mobilises Derrida's claim that everything is both untranslatable

and translatable (2001, p. 175). It is what drives Derrida's use of terms that land both between and beyond traditional oppositions: differance[4] as both differing and delaying (1973); *survie* ['survive']as both more than living and living on (2004); *Khōra* as a place and non-place (1994) and so on. Throughout Derrida's work the drive is towards thinking multiplicity simultaneously rather than deciding on one side or one grounding concept. This is not the same as thinking anything at all, or of blending everything together; but rather an exigency to think multiple discrete things *at once.*

The untranslatable in Derrida's explicit writings on interlingual translation concerns not the loss of meaning as such – it is not a concern for Venuti's invariant – but rather the loss of undecidability. In words where multiple meanings are at play – *pharmakon*, Babel, Blanchot's *Arrêt du mort* – translation forces a decision (2004). The word must be translated – *pharmakon* becomes either 'poison' or 'remedy'; *Babel* becomes either 'City of God' or 'Confusion'; *arrêt du mort* becomes either 'death sentence' or 'suspension of death' – so that what is lost is the ambiguity. Every time we translate one of these words, we come down on the side of one or the other, eliminating the play between multiplicities when it is this play that Derrida argues must be affirmed. Untranslatable for Derrida then, concerns the essential ambiguity of words, and it is this untranslatable ambiguity that philosophy as a tradition struggles to deal with or seeks to overcome (1985, p. 120). In this vein, Cassin follows Derrida on the issue of homonyms and homophones: 'the principle of non-contradiction is based on the requirement of strict univocity: one word, one meaning – or, in any case, no two meanings together, no two meanings *at the same time*' (Cassin, trans. Végsõ, 2012, p. 39, my emphasis). A text is translatable insofar as it is engaged with and understood, but untranslatable insofar as its particularities – its double meanings or playful associations – belong to its language alone:

> A text lives only if it lives *on* [*sur-vit*], and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable (always 'at once … and': *hama*, at the 'same' time). Totally translatable, it disappears as a text as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. (Derrida, trans. Hulbert, 2004, pp. 82–83)

The ambiguity of words is mirrored in the ambiguity of our individual subjectivities and our relations with each other. The Other is both translatable and untranslatable at the same time. The untranslatable in the Other triggers what Levinas terms our metaphysical desire. It is that which we cannot fully know in the other person, it is the thing about the other person that we respond to when we respond ethically, when we see the other person really as another person. It is, what is in the Other that is not available to own or possess or to use. It is what pauses our internal monologue, interrupts our concern for the self. Vitally, following Derrida, I argue that it *remains,* it is not something we overcome. We do not suddenly remove all the multiple ambiguities of a text or gain access to the uniqueness of the Other. We translate, we talk, but the untranslatable lingers on, drawing us back, demanding more.

4. Conclusion: untranslatability and the ethics of pause

Traditional notions of untranslatability see it as something 'in' the source text that cannot be 'transposed' to the target text. Critics of this understanding, such as Ricoeur and

Venuti, argue that it represents a failure to appreciate translation as a creative and productive practice in its own right. Nonetheless, these critics approach untranslatability as an either/or alternative. Yet it is possible to think of a text – or indeed a person – as both translatable and untranslatable at the same time. Of course, there is a practical way to think of translation: as something that happens all the time, as Ricoeur argues, but this does not mean giving up on the unique specificity of how any given text or language expresses something. Translation may happen, but how any given text expresses something remains unique. On another model, untranslatability is taken as a mark of specific languages that have an exclusive access to 'The Truth' such that what we are dealing with is not untranslatability but rather what is as yet untranslated. Such a model fails to account for the manner in which every particular language, while granting some access to the universal, does so along a specific path – and that specificity is not the privilege of only one or two languages.

Supplementing Cassin's dictum: 'the untranslatable is what we keep on (not) translating' with the double and ethical temporality of Levinas and Derrida; we can hold onto the untranslatable as an ongoing moment of pause. It generates those moments in translating a text where we find ourselves confronted with a word or phrase that is rich with semantic multiplicity or historical echoes or cultural resonances. Those moments of pause and often of wonder. Onwards we go, of course, finding a word and making a decision on which semantic route to take, but the text to be translated remains and with it its own untranslatable specificity. The fact of translation does not change the fact of untranslatability – the ambiguity, the multiplicity of the text is still there *at the same time* as it is translated. In our relations with each other, the untranslatable surfaces in those moments when we see someone beyond their physical manifestation or social role – Levinas describes the Other as 'invisible' (1979, p. 33, *ff*.). When we realise the most important thing about another person is not what they can do for us or how we can categorise them, but that they are their own person beyond our comprehension. This is the thing that draws us to a person, it is what we respond to when we do something *for* someone else and not for ourselves. Ethics is not a calculation or an economy, but a response to what remains irreducible. That moment of seeing someone beyond what is merely present, pauses our self-concern, and like the untranslatable in the text, it remains. We fall back into our own internal monologue, but the Other's alterity tremors beneath, disturbing the self's happy egoism. On this account then, the untranslatable is that which interrupts our general easy understanding of texts and people. Forcing a pause in which we recognise the in-appropriable specificity of every Other at the same time as charging us with the ethical imperative to respond ethically to their claim.

Notes

1. For more on this metaphor of body and clothes as meaning and language see Ben Van Wyke (2010). See also his references to the choice between faithfulness to the target readership or the source author (pp. 23–31) in light of the prior discussion of Ricoeur. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
2. I have written elsewhere on the untranslatable and the role of desire, specifically in relation to Venuti's work. See: Foran, L. (2020).

3. Levinas notes that these experiences of nausea, pain, or indeed insomnia; are further experienced as oppressive such that they inhibit the capacity to think of anything else. They bear down on us with the weight of what he terms anonymous existence or the *il y a* (2003).
4. Derrida's neologism in French is *différance* (as opposed to the usual *différence*). The term means both differing and delaying but crucially, when spoken, both terms in French (*différance* and *différence*) sound exactly the same, the difference between them is an orthographic one. Therefore, in order to make clear that they mean the Derridean *différance,* a French speaker must say: *différance avec un 'a'*. They must supplement their speech to make a written difference clear. Rather than leaving the term in French in an English text, which would elide the orthographic point Derrida is making, I prefer to follow David B. Allison and to translate it as 'differance' which allows the retention of the same homophonic play that Derrida is putting to work in the French. see Allison's footnote in *Speech and Phenomena* (Derrida, 1973, p. 82).

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