

Arnau Pons

Filler words

L'une des merveilles du monde —et peut-être la merveille des merveilles—, c'est la faculté des hommes de dire ce qu'ils n'entendent pas, comme s'ils l'entendaient, de croire qu'ils le pensent cependant qu'ils ne font que se le dire.

PAUL VALÉRY, *Cahiers* I, pp. 452-453

In the jargon of translation —understood in a certain way— the “filler” is something added to the poem as it is being translated, in the sense of its consisting of words without reference or equivalent in the original, in order to resolve some break in the rhyme or gap in the metrics. The intention, then, if not ironic or cynical, is to alter as little as possible the meaning of the text with an injection that, whatever the case, does affect its materiality. I now turn to this resort to designate another kind of filling that does not directly pad out texts being translated, but that is used instead to pump up the discourse about the problems of translation with philosophical, theological or extra-literary concern. The operation would not be disturbing if it did not obdurately oust authors from their works and if it did not set the content of texts a long way from the singular conditions in which they were conceived and constructed.

After the stunning success of the notion of *otherness* and the figure of the *Other*, especially after the 1980s and 1990s, interest in translation—in view of everything it poses and everything it arouses— has been growing considerably by virtue of its being the place *par excellence*, in the domain of language, in which the reception of this so-called otherness is put to the test. Even though it is fundamentally defined by a foreign language,

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the kind of language that this selfsame otherness is able to create, as a subject, tends to slip out of sight within the language that identifies it in the first place. In other words, often lost sight of, when people are talking about translation, it is not only the historicity of the work that a specific otherness is holding out to us, but also the sovereignty and particularity of the author, which is all otherness when organised in language and frequently counterposed against a range of different languages (not necessarily foreign

ones but, certainly and perforce, strange). The question I should like to raise here is to what point is recognition of the hand of the artist who critically intervenes in the production of a work a matter of interest. Everything changes when one considers the stance taken or the point of view of a subject who is writing in the face of the ideologies of his times.

To offer examples of what I mean, I shall focus on two short books that were translated into Catalan quite recently and that are quite significant in the different ways in which they approach the need for translation. The first is *La llengua nòmada* (The Nomad Text) by Norman Manea, which was published by Arcàdia and translated by Coral Romà i García from the Italian translation, as the author stipulated. The other work, *Sobre la traducció*¹, brings together three lectures given by Paul Ricoeur and was published by Publicacions de la Universitat de València in the translation of Guillem Calaforra, who has also written an introduction.

EXILES WOUNDED AND TRANSFERRED

Norman Manea was deported at the age of five. Like most of Bucovina's Jews, he was held in Trans-Dniester concentration camp during the Second World War. He was there for four years, from 1941 to 1945, until being liberated by the Red Army. Although his mother tongue is Romanian, this experience and the fact of being born in Bucovina links him —and it is Manea himself who expresses this throughout his book— to the figure of Paul Celan, whose parents died in Trans-Dniester as a result of the same deportation. Manea's reflections in *La llengua nòmada* on his relationship with Romanian in his writer's exile and the sensibility with which he does so reveal, however, everything that separates him from Celan. Suffice it to read one of the paragraphs devoted to him.

After the flight to the West, Paul Celan renounced the free market of the versatile values of post-war cultural consumption to find the discredited, obscure language of the inexpressible, the language that trauma had turned intransitive. He dwelled in the wound of perplexity that would never heal, emitting only lonely, discontinuous signals in a deaf-mute code

■ ¹ Published in English, in the translation of Eileen Brennan, as *On Translation* by Routledge, 2006. Any quotes in English that follow in this text are from this edition [translator].

of suffering. This rejection of rhetoric and rationality (and hence of “rationalisation”, of resolution as well) was, in fact, the silenced language of cataclysm, which shortly afterwards was to be labelled in the contest² of the commemorations, as the Holocaust. [pp. 20-21]

If anything defines Celan’s poetic endeavour at the outset, it is precisely his firm resolve to confront the event through a virtuous struggle against the inexpressible and the unspeakable and through a compulsion of writing that achieves exactness and appropriateness through a language of art that is not in the least discreditable since it make it possible to analyse everything, including the kinds of discourse that haunt the ineffable.

As a reader and translator of Paul Celan, I find, then, that the above-cited words of Manea raise a whole string of questions, while I am also assailed by the fundamental question of whether it is possible, today, to take up any kind of position before the declarations and texts of the camp survivors, in view of the treatment they are given in the intellectual domain. Indeed, this question can be strung out still more since it also pertains to the relationship between poetry and extermination. As for Celan and what Manea has said about him, we might wonder to what extent it is possible to disclose the sense of such a horrifying poem as “Einem, der vor der Tür stand” (To one who stood before the door), from *Die Niemandrose* (To no-one’s rose)³.

The fact that Norman Manea hugely values Celan’s autonomy and critical conscience encourages me to express my thoughts with the utmost frankness. So, shouldn’t the poet Celan legitimately be situated along the lines of a Heine and thus be considered as an heir of the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment),

against the gloomy Germanic darkness and mists and always in favour of the emancipation and critical spirit of the artist? To what end, then, is he presented as an enemy of “rationality”? Throughout his work, muteness, rather than a pathological effect, becomes expressive power —and hence writeable: language is

emitted here and is adapted, because this mutism is contributed by those who no longer have a voice— read, for example the poem “Unten” (Below) in *Sprachgitter* (Speech-Grille).

Again, is not all his writing perfectly interwoven within the pages of one single work, like Mallarmé’s unfinished project? Why, then, does Manea define his poems as “lonely, discontinuous signals in a deaf-mute code of suffering”? Is not poetry that determination that is expressed in continuity? And is not the caesura at the service of this selfsame continuity?

There is no code in Celan that cannot be deciphered and read, just as there is no syllable that he does not have vibrating in audible tonality. The sobriety and nakedness of his language are poles apart from the pathographic, autistic and unintelligible literary project

When talking about translation, people tends to lost sight of the historicity of the work and the particularity of the author

■ ² Pons has added “[sic]” in his citing of the text, which reads, “[...] en la lliça [sic] de les commemoracions [...]” – translator.

³ See *Poesía contra poesía. Celan y la literatura*, Jean Bollack (Trotta, Madrid 2005). The original title is *Poésie contre poésie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2001) [translator].

that Manea describes. It would have been much more just to situate that German tongue of Bucovina in its historical and social reality at the outset. Is it that the Jews who used it did not consequently defend a colossal cultural legacy that was viewed with hostility and animadversion by Romanian nationalism? Did not this same Germanic legacy endorse nihilisation? It is therefore more the a-critical basis of many of these texts than the language of the executioners that Celan relentlessly challenges. And this thoroughly affects his poetry and even that of his contemporaries⁴. In this regard, there can be no doubt that Manea shares with Celan the courage of denunciation and the firmness of dissidence, which are no longer merely political, or perhaps they are so much so that they have become an essential part of the writer's engagement. A good example of this is Manea's text "Felix Culpa" on the anti-Semitic fascism of Mircea Eliade, along with his critique of the Ceausescu's communist regime in *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist* (1994; published in Spanish in 2006), a book that the reader would do well to contrast with the essay by Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: l'oubli du fascisme* (2002). All in all, the way in which Manea speaks of Celan's poetry clearly reveals a rejection of the effort of reading that, in some way, shifts him closer to the position of a John Felstiner or a George Steiner (like them he signals trauma and suffering as cause of a deterioration of a poetry that is characterised by impotence and pointlessness, by utter isolation, instead of pondering the reflective and critical aspect of highly-elaborated art), or even an Imre Kertész (with a very similar treatment of the essay and of literature, and with his experience of communism and his training under this regime, so I can't help seeing a certain connection between Kertész's declarations on Jean Améry in his brief essays which were published in Spanish as *Un instante de silencio en el paredón. El Holocausto como cultura*⁵ and Manea's comments concerning Celan).

The reader of Celan's work is thus obliged to wonder if such judgements do not perhaps respond to a feeling of unease before the "Celan effect" —as Henri Meschonnic calls it— in the milieu of contemporary Western letters. The international resonance of his poetry and the extraordinary veneration it awakens —long after his death— should be counterposed with the spurning of a true reading, from which one might suppose that access to his work is hampered, and the guilty party is a "deaf-mute code" through which he expresses, in spite of everything, its rending apart. (In other words: the fathomless versus art.) This might also justify the option Manea takes as a writer: his publishing of a brief essay concerned with the Romanian language in the context of his exile in the United States and using all the resorts of public confession, with which he solicits the complicity of the reader through feelings (a little like Kertész) when faced with the need for literary recognition in the host country (Manea lives in Manhattan and teaches at Bard College). In such a situation, translation would be experienced as the path that leads to legitimization and, at once, to uncertainty:

With translation, the writer can better legitimate himself in linguistic terms than in everyday conversations; possibilities of deeper communication, even if indirect and

■ ⁴ Celan's relations with Enzensberger and Group 47 have been analysed by Werner Wögerbauer in his article "L'engagement de Celan" (2000), which may be consulted on-line in Spanish at: http://www.revue-texto.net/1996-2007/Lettre/Wogerbauer_Celan-es.html, and also in French: <http://www.revue-texto.net/1996-2007/Lettre/Wogerbauer>

Celan.html. One may also consult the chapter "Nelly Sachs" in Jean Bollack's *Poesía contra poesía*, op. cit. f.n. 3.

⁵ This work was published in Hungarian as, *A gondolatnyi csend, amíg a kivégzőosztag újratölt* (1998, Moments of Silence while the Execution Squad Reloads) [translator].

⁶ "The Exiled Language / *Limba exilata*".

imperfect, with new fellow citizens but also, and above all, with potential writing colleagues, are opened up to him. / Nonetheless, the sense of “virtuality” continues to prevail. To be a writer in translation who writes, in exile, in his mother tongue? This is a frustrating hypothesis, one that increases uncertainty. [pp. 34-35]

The author of *La llengua nòmada* seems reluctantly to be conjuring up the threat posed by the “reductionist criteria of evaluation that are in vogue today, when reading time has been drastically reduced and the ‘excrescences’ of other literary traditions are rejected in favour of a perfectly articulated, simplified and accessible product, like any other product that is offered in the market, one that would be sold and consumed without great difficulties” (p. 42). Like *La llengua nòmada*. Why, if not, this imperative need suddenly to write with the translator in mind?

Sometimes I have sought an antidote to this threat by trying to write, not for a virtual writer (who has become still more virtual and vague in exile) as I used to do, or for myself, as I had always done, but for... the translator. [pp. 42-43]

Even though I don’t know about the private matters of Norman Manea’s life —or about the snags and pitfalls in the milieu of Romanian literature— I wonder, on the basis of the paragraph I have just cited, if nowadays a Romanian writer, survivor of the camps, critical of the old communist regime and living as a university teacher in the United States, has any difficulties in publishing in Romania a text about his particular relationship with the Romanian language. Does he perhaps lose readers as a result of living outside the country and being well known and the recipient of international prizes? Is Manea today a rather undesirable, and maybe suspect writer, or one that is surreptitiously avoided in Romania so that he is obliged to

write *La llengua nòmada* in Romanian (*Limba nomada*) and bring out the text in German with a different title (*Anmerkungen zur exilierten Sprache*), a text that has, however, been translated into a number of European languages (Catalan, Italian, German)? Does *La llengua nòmada* coincide with a lecture (“La lengua exiliada / Limba exilata”)⁶, given by Manea in

April 2007 and jointly organised by the Cervantes Institute in Madrid and the Romanian Cultural Institute of Madrid? What is the difference between a nomad language and an exiled language? These are insidious, impertinent questions that I cannot help but ask if I decide to think consistently about everything that Manea conveys in this book. There can be no doubt that a writer’s beatings around the bush can frequently transmit tension, dissent or unease. Who, then, is the virtual reader that Manea would most like to have: the German, the English or the Romanian person? Or would it be any of the three or all at once? What sort of poetry would Celan have written if he’d had in his head the translator who would have to translate him? Where does the fact of Manea’s sharing with

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Celan some biographical origins and persecution under “Nazi-Fascism” lead us if not to a demonstration of some irreducible artistic singularities, since everything starts out from the orientation the writer has decided to take with his work? Doesn’t Manea go so far as to say in *La llengua nòmada* that his texts, except for a few biographical data, have nothing remotely to do with Paul Celan’s *torn and deaf and dumb* project? Was not the poet of Cernauti (or Czernowitz) well aware of the effort of reading that his poems demanded once they were published? The hope in that reader who is capable of opening the bottle cast into the sea and finding the message inside, is that not very frail in Celan’s case?

A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the —surely not always strong— hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. [Paul Celan, *Bremen Prize Speech*, 1958]⁷

It is worth making clear in passing and, contrary to what Manea asserts, that Celan did not use German in Paris, not even at home with his family. It was a language that he reserved for his poetry and reading, as well as for the few visitors he received and fortuitous or concerted encounters (with Ingeborg Bachmann, Nelly Sachs, Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem). His friend Jean Bollack never managed to have a conversation with him in German in Paris, and he didn’t even hear him speak German when they were both with Peter Szondi (who, in Paris, always insisted on being called Pierre). Part of *La llengua nòmada* seems to be aimed at erasing this difference of attitude regarding the mother tongue:

In New York, I have kept living in the Romanian language,
just as Paul Celan lived in German in Paris. [p. 41]

“Living”? He must have meant to say “writing”. If that is so, what kind of life —or vitalism— oozes in Celan’s German? When speaking of another link he has with Celan, the *calembour*, based on the evident asymmetry between the two languages of artistic expression that separate them, Manea has the following to say:

With the feeling of lightheartedness and unconcern to which youth is prone, [Celan] defined that brief stay in Bucharest as “the period of *calembour*” since he often felt that he had an unjust advantage over his writer friends in Romania because of his language. [...] For me, neither my Romanian language, nor my Romanian biography was a juvenile episode. My *calembour* has continued spinning, through all my ages, with its meanings, moving from tragedy to happiness, from danger to rebirth, from apathy to creation and once again to drama, humiliation and uprooting. [p. 38]

The —rather truncated— anecdote to which he refers here, without giving the source, comes from Petre Solomon —Romanian poet and translator and friend of Celan in Bucharest from 1946 to 1947— in his book *Paul Celan. Dimensiunea românească*

■ 7 The translation into English is by Rosemarie Waldrop [translator].

| **Bolsito (Bag)**, Carmen Calvo (1999)
Mixed media, collage, photography, 190 x 122 cm



(Kriterion, 1987). Solomon presents the facts, but very differently. Celan had not spoken lightly or unconcernedly or even youthfully of that period of his early manhood in Bucharest in which word plays and frays ruled the day. As one might deduce from this paragraph, the word *calembour* does not indicate artistic frivolity (perhaps specifically Romanian and thus pertaining to a supposedly “minor” and “not very serious” culture) but it signals the agitated years of the spread of surrealism, which is to say the discovery of linguistic effervescence and the frenetic practice of an edifying juggling act. Celan’s tone—it is worth pointing out—is quite another since, as Solomon tells it, he used to evoke, years later, that Romanian “season” with nostalgia and affection, expressing it in French as “*Cette belle saison des calembours*”. Manea’s page takes on a whole new dimension in the light of these facts.

Celan’s relationship with the Romanian language is not limited to the *calembour*. Neither can it be passed off as a “juvenile episode”. It is quite well known that his poem “Todesfuge” (Deathfugue) was first published in Romanian and that the translation of “Tangoul Mortii” (Death Tango) was done jointly with Petre Solomon. The word “tango” was to be replaced by “fugue” in the German version (and the implications of the change are quite significant).

The historical event is very close to the centre of this poetic irruption in Romanian. Was one to expect that he would definitively change his language, once he had decided to write some poems in Romanian, during that stay in Bucharest, even though he came from the German-speaking zone of Cernauti (Czernowitz)? Does not his book *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952; *Poppy and Memory*, 2000) convey the particularity of the Romanian poetry of those years? Suffice it to read his versions of Gellu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu and Tudor Arghezi⁸ to intuit this whole expressive backdrop. Anyone would say that the words, “Aus Asche ist dein Haar das keinen Schlaf fand” (Ashen is your hair that cannot find sleep) from a poem by Teodorescu (“Castelana înecată”, 1945) were transferred, with the same headiness, to the Shulamith of the “Todesfuge”.

To say that the writer is “an exile *par excellence*” and at the same time to see “exile as a human destiny” is all very beautiful—so beautiful that it has been repeated a host of times until becoming a literary commonplace that always makes a good impression. Beyond all this, the expression contributes towards neutralising the effects of history and annulling the diversity and the contradictions between the different kinds of exile (I cite a few names of writers who have had to undergo this experience to make myself clear: Osip Mandelstam, Carles Riba, María Zambrano, Aharon Appelfeld, Mahmud Darwix, Gao Xingjian). If, as Norman Manea sustains, everyone lives in exile, then the internal exile of the writer who holds out, despite everything, against the abuses of power (and here I’m thinking of Mikhail Bulgakov) becomes imperceptible—and even ineffectual. With this, the contribution and the significance of such resistance is lost and also blurred, at the same time, are the oppositions between these different singularities.

Indeed, Manea is not the only writer who believes that man always lives in exile wherever he might be. Roberto Bolaño came out with something similar, with regard to the writer, using an equally beautiful and, at once, somewhat artful formulation: literature is the writer’s motherland, which can be turned on its head by saying that the true writer always lives in exile:

■ ⁸ Paul Celan, GW V, 544-577.

Literature and exile are, I believe, two sides of the same coin,
our destiny placed in the hands of chance.”

(*Literatura y exilio* [Literature and Exile] in *Entre paréntesis* [2004, Between Parentheses], p. 43).

I hasten to say that this is true, as I see it, if “exile” equals “autonomy”, every time the writer can exercise sovereignty in writing by means of a critical consciousness that steadfastly confronts different kinds of political aggression, literary violence or collective delirium, wherever he goes and wherever he lives. However, Bolaño’s declarations take on the dimension that rightly pertains to them when we bear in mind that he writes and expresses himself in a language with 400 million speakers, so that one can move from Chile to Mexico to Barcelona without having to change language when speaking, or having to be translated when writing. He himself describes it thus:

Sometimes exile boils down to the fact that Chileans tell me I speak
like a Spaniard, Mexicans tell me I speak like a Chilean and Spaniards
tell me I speak like an Argentine: a matter of accent

(*Exilios* [Exiles], *ibid.* p. 53).

Bolaño can brag that, for him, exile is reduced to a mere “matter of accent” because in his head he had a linguistic region that almost covers more than half the Americas and a piece of Europe. And this enables him to go still further to assert that exile, taking its nostalgic dimension into account, is wholly suspect because it turns out to be nothing but a variation on nationalism. Bolaño’s arguments in this collection frequently jump around as unpredictably as a flea.

Exile, in most cases, is a voluntary decision. Nobody obliged Thomas Mann to go into exile. Surely, the SS would have preferred Thomas Mann not to go into exile. [...] In the best of cases, exile is a literary option. Not unlike the option of writing. Nobody obliges you to write. The writer voluntarily goes into this labyrinth, for multiple reasons of course, because he doesn’t want to die, or wants to be loved, etc., but he doesn’t enter it because of being forced [...].

(*Exilios* [Exiles], *ibid.* p. 53).

Surely Thomas Mann wouldn’t have wanted to lose his German citizenship in 1936, or maybe he didn’t care, since a passport doesn’t count when we’re talking about literature. Surely, in 1933, he’d settled in Switzerland by chance. Or to be able to write more calmly, without any headaches. At bottom, the reasons that took him out of Germany at such a significant time are not very important because writing, in being a free and voluntary act, surely doesn’t compel anything and still less having to flee from a country. Surely Mann’s exile in the United States was not forced but craved: a mere option among so many others. Maybe he was, in fact, just following the impulses of his errant pen. Bolaño urges us to give wing to all these speculations. In the end, though, he only covers over the facts with his vivacious and supposedly liberating discourse, one that behoves the truly “enlightened” man. I can’t help comparing these articles of Bolaño on exile, which contain lines such as the following,

The same old story intoned by Latin Americans and also by writers of other pauperised or traumatised zones insists on nostalgia or returning to their birthplace, and to me this has always sounded like a lie. For the real writer, his only homeland is his library, a library that can be in the form of shelves or in his memory. (“Literatura y exilio” [Exiles], *ibid.* p. 43)

with the interview by the Israeli poet Helit Yeshurun in 1996 of the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwix (and I have this in mind because right now I’m working on the publication of *Palestina com a metàfora* [Palestine as a Metaphor]) since the same issues frequently appear, although treated with a very different sensibility. Even the words they say, which are apparently the same, only turn out to be the opposite. At most, these are nothing but artificial equivalences. Darwix is struggling all the time to be recognised as a poet and not just as a poet of the Palestinian cause:

The personal price of exile is nostalgia and a feeling of marginality. Yet compensation comes with the creation of a world that is parallel to reality. And this also makes distance possible. Geographic distance also creates the tempo of the poem, which has no need of an immediate reaction.

(*No torno: vinc* [I’m Not Coming Back: I’m Coming], *La Palestina com a metàfora*, translated by Eulàlia Sariola).

However, at times he dives into some ideological wildernesses that, for me, are terribly problematic:

After the land has been taken from me and I’ve gone into exile, it has been transformed into the origin and objective of my spirit and my dreams. These are the causes that are external to the place that the land occupies in my work. The symbol of the homeland. This land is all nostalgia and the dreams of return. But it shouldn’t be seen only as a place. It is also the land of the world and that, too, is basic in my poetry. Land is a synthesis: it is the fount of poetry, matter and also language. Land is the physical existence of poetry. [*Ibid*]

The closing pages of *La llengua nòmada* insist, over and over again, on the “apprenticeship of exile, which is life itself”, as a “preparation” for death, which is seen as the “last exile”. These are ponderings, which leave a teleological, almost gnostic wake behind them or, better said, they are directly inspired in the 12th century monastic attitude of Hugues de Saint-Victor:

The adventure of being uprooted and of expropriation acquires new modulations. / The discovery and assimilation of the novelty ameliorates the crisis and confers on the neophyte always changing portions of the happiness of being alive, of surviving but also simultaneously brings him a more dramatic awareness of his condition prior and subsequent to the particular exile: the original one. In this basic premise of precariousness, the exile again finds himself with, without finding himself, all those who are like him, however different they are. / The neophyte takes possession of the different fragments of the offer [sic] with which he assaults the surrounding milieu. It is an invasion that is not only phonetic but also of mental provocations and stimuli that are surprising in their novelty: the shock of the unknown that envelops him. The linguistic endowment

is enriched in a slow, sinuous process of hybridisation, as the sense [sic]⁹ of the new accumulations keeps revealing the surprises it conceals and which are being assimilated. / The lightened burden of the present is replaced, however, by the deep, internalised burden: acceptance of the condition of the man exiled in the world, which has no other sense than that of being the prelude to the ultramundane exile. [pp. 49-50]

Constantly speaking of God —a God that is very much the poet's— Darwix never loses sight of the specific:

And the fact is that we are all exiles. I and the occupier both suffer exile. He is exiled in me and I am the victim of his exile. In this pleasant planet we are all neighbours, all exiles, all heading for the same human destiny, and what unites us is the need to tell this story of exile.

SQUEEZING FOREIGNNESS

The three lectures Paul Ricoeur gave on translation (the first two between 1977 and 1998, while the third, undated, one is dedicated to Jean Greisch —the Heideggerian Catholic philosopher— as an example of true ecumenical dialogue between Protestantism and Catholicism, since both Greisch and Ricoeur were interested in hermeneutics, phenomenology and translation and the close ties of all three with religion) could surely have been edited into one single text instead of being published separately in one little book in 2004. Rewriting would have condensed them and, to begin with, avoided many repetitions. Moreover, there are moments when the reader feels caught up in a spiraloid movement as if he is hardly advancing at all thanks to the disjunctives Ricoeur repeatedly raises while barely resolving anything. Is there perhaps no intention of resolving anything where Chouraki [sic]¹¹ and Meschonnic are both cited without any kind of conflict, under the same biblical and Hebrew cover? Is it possible that such a deployment only has the aim of sinking the reader into a well of existential mystery, which only religion will manage to illuminate? In fact, Ricoeur's book presents a whole series of blind alleys in the realm of translation, as a result of the separation between languages, in order to construct, underneath it all, a kind of allegory of religions. It is as if we are wondering whether the different forms of faith are condemned to not understanding each other or if, on the contrary, there is a common denominator that might bring them together, for example belief in just one god, and within this notion the biblical one. And if this one god unites them, with what kind of ideal text should it be? What sense should be given to the comparison that formulates a "eucharistic hospitality" when speaking of translation (p. 24)? Is this not the way that a "Christian philosopher" —as Ricoeur wanted to describe himself— would perforce have to take when he is consistent with his faith? The little book *Sobre la traducció* must be

■ ⁹ Pons has added "[sic]" in his citing of the text, which reads, "El neòfit pren possessió de fragments diferents de l'oferta [sic] amb què [...]" [translator].

¹⁰ Pons has added "[sic]" in his citing of the text, which reads, "La dotació lingüística s'enriqueix, en un procés

d'hibridació lent i sinuós, a mesura que el sentit [sic] de les noves acumulacions revela les sorpreses que amaga [...]" [translator].

¹¹ Pons has added this "[sic]". The name appears in both English and French as both "Chouraki" and "Chouraqui" [translator].



read in the context that befits it, even in the Valencian translation of this work¹². It is thus worth recalling that one of these lectures was given at the Faculty of Protestant Theology of Paris and that Ricoeur's friend Jean Greisch teaches at the Catholic Institute of Paris, two rather conservative academic and religious training centres.

Raising the possibility of an *ideal* text —of “a third text” (p. 34)— as Ricoeur does when he speaks of translation, resorting to Plato's *Parmenides*, only to discard it, while elsewhere accepting the existence of the “pure language” (Adamic) of which Walter Benjamin speaks in his essay “The Task of the Translator” —a “magnificent text” (p. 9)¹³— is to get off on the wrong foot, even if it is to think about the paradox of translation by way of oppositions, alternatives and hypotheses without ever settling anything. One thing is that Humboldt, for example, should consider that grammatical categories and thinking of linguistic relations, in addition to the abysmal differences between languages, were universal —and thence that there should be a common functional base— and quite another is the elaboration of a discourse or of a language of art by an author subject.

The translator, too, must have these things as a writer subject, with an author subject, but not with a pure or a collective language. Or with a text in the context of a culture. Practice tells us that translation is much more complex than all that. Neither is a dictionary sufficient. Not even a rhyming dictionary.

I insist on this: there cannot be, in fact, “a third text”, as Ricoeur would have it, just as there cannot be a “pure language” (Adamic) that would be “redeemed” in translation, when one is dealing with the fatal singularity of language (as is the case of poetry), for the simple reason that this singularity is organically and historically —which is to say artistically— inscribed in the continuity of a rhythm and also in a resemantisation of words. And all these operations are related with the “intention” of an author “toward the language”¹⁴. I mean to say that, in translating, we do not messianically aspire to a common celestial linguistic origin (which would have been lost) but we address a person (a subject and his history).

What I am talking about goes way beyond the fact that the word “silence” —as I have said on other occasions— does not say the same thing in Celan, in Riba or in Char, since this can often be conserved in translation, although at times the translator is not fully aware of it. I'm talking about the matter of sense in the sense that Jean Bollack

■ ¹² I very concisely took into account the French original, *Sur la traduction* (Paris, Bayard, 2004) in a lecture I gave, “La reescriptura poética?” (Poetic Rewriting?), which was published in *Reduccions* 81-82 (March 2005).

¹³ Suffice to cite the following words of Benjamin: “[...] the growth of religions ripens into a higher language the seed hidden in languages” and, “To set free in his own language the pure language spellbound in the foreign language, to liberate the language imprisoned in the work by rewriting it, is the translator's task.” [Both these quotes, and those that follow, are taken from Steve Rendall's translation which may be found on-line at <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/1997/v10/n2/037302ar.pdf> last accessed 11 February 2010 - translator], while the version cited by

Arnau Pons is the translation of Antoni Pous, *Art i literatura*, Vic, Eumo / Edipoies, 1984, translator]. See my critique of Benjamin's text and, on the rebound, Derrida's ideas on translation: “Hélène Cixous en mis manos: un alma arrojada.” (Traducir a una lengua para volverla contra sí misma)” (Hélène Cixous in *My Hands: a Projectile Soul*. [Translating a Language to Turn It against Itself]) in the jointly-authored volume *Ver con Hélène Cixous* (Seeing with Hélène Cixous) ed. Marta Segarra. Icaria, Barcelona 2006.

¹⁴ Szondi borrowed this concept of *Intention auf die Sprache* from Benjamin (see “The Translator's Task”) after stripping it of its theological sheath, so as to analyse Celan's intent as the translator of Shakespeare's Sonnet 105. See my translation into Spanish of Peter Szondi's *Celan-Studien* (*Celan Studies*, Stanford University Press 2003): *Estudios sobre Celan* (Trotta, Madrid 2005).

approaches it. I shall offer an example that I think is quite representative. When Karen Andrea Müller presented in Barcelona the translations that she and Andreu Vidal had jointly done of Celan, she commented that they had not translated “the Shoah poems”. She was saying that her anthology (Paul Celan, *Poemes*, Edicions 62, 2000) shied away from *that*. This declaration (and one must bear in mind that it is made by a German woman who did not directly experience Nazism) doesn’t require much in the way of comment. Nevertheless, it is surprising that there was no reaction. The scandal is the assent. Müller is of the opinion that there are poems in which the thematisation of the camps is evident and others that deal with something else that is surely more interesting than the greatest tragedy of the European Jews in the 20th century. What is, however, the sense of the poems in this anthology? And what is the centre of gravity, once we understand that Celan never spoke of anything without at once speaking of Auschwitz?

Has Karen Müller ever been aware of what she was dealing with? That a German speaker (I mean “native” speaker) doesn’t understand a good part of what she’s translating shows that the matter is, at bottom, much more complicated. And, moreover, neither the unutterable nor the intensity of the versions (whatever Enric Sòria and Bartomeu Fiol may think) resolves anything.

Ricoeur never speaks of the historic or artistic subject that the author is, or of his particular language, made up of distanciings. In these lectures, the *person* is absent all the time. Ricoeur is much more bothered by every language’s “struggle with the secret, the hidden, the mystery, the inexpressible” since, in fact, the inexpressible initially represents “the most entrenched incommunicable, initial untranslatable” (p. 33). I cite him once more¹⁵: “Translators know it perfectly well: it is texts, not sentences, not words, that our texts try to translate” (p. 31). And he cannot resist, hot on the heels of this, an explicit borrowing from Humboldt with a refined reference to “visions of the world” when, for Humboldt, the expression describes, from the outset, national or collective languages. Ricoeur never gives —I repeat— as much as a single example of the *épreuve* that represents an author with his irreducible singularity. Better said, when he makes some vague reference to an author, such as Celan (by means of “the Celan effect”) it is, for the umpteenth time, to blame him for the death of the “inexpressible”, of the “unspeakable” (p. 29), which is a polite way of fulminating against the critical content of his texts. Like the Müller-Vidal versions (reconciling Carl Gustav Jung and Paul Celan).

The fact is that Ricoeur only has eyes for the “stranger”, this radical abstract otherness. While starting out from this figure that so fascinates him, he only sees “segments” and “glossaries”, which is to say general problems: “In the end the construction of the comparable expresses itself in the construction of a glossary” (p. 32). He says this, not speaking of a discipline but of François Jullien and his work as a translator from the Chinese. Yet the sinologist Jean François Billeter has conclusively shown in *Contre François Jullien* (2006) what political effects are derived from an attentive reading of both Jullien’s essays and his translations.

Just as the word *tao* cannot be translated univocally (in contrast with Ricoeur’s views, there are no glossaries of any use and one has to ponder the valency of the word every time), neither can Carles Riba, Miquel Bauçà or Salvador Espriu be translated with the idea that all three wrote “texts” in the same “language” during the Franco dictatorship¹⁶.

However, what must be discussed above all is the sense of Ricoeur’s strange notion when he is trying to define translation (because what he has in his head is always poetic translation, and the Bible and philosophical translation as well). Is this always an

“equivalence without identity” (p. 22) in the sense of a non-identical equivalence to the original? What is Ricoeur trying to say when, elsewhere, he describes it as “equivalence without adequacy” (p. 7)? Is the Luther Bible (what is understood as the “Old Testament”) equivalent to the Hebrew Bible? How could there ever have been any equivalence if the text translated —and also the author who originally wrote it— will be maintaining in any case the status of “foreigner” (I’m no longer saying “stranger”; I’m saying “foreigner”) in the target language? Or is it that the translations of Karen Andrea Müller come to be equivalents, with regard to the message they contain, of the original texts of Paul Celan? And if we believe that, like Ricoeur, one must resort to the psychoanalytic “work of mourning” —because of the fact of not achieving the “perfect translation” (p. 5)— then what would a psychoanalytic analysis have to say about Karen Andrea Müller’s declaration, “We haven’t translated the Shoah poems”? Do these words, spoken at the launch of the book, come to be part of the “work of mourning” perchance? What mourning?

What Ricoeur should have retained of Benjamin’s essay —as Szondi did— is the concept of “intention toward the language”, which inevitably entails consideration of the subject. Were perhaps Müller and Vidal aware of Celan’s intention toward the German language? Was it necessary for Karen Andrea Müller surreptitiously to invoke the fact of her knowing German as a “native” at the launch of her translation? Of what German are we speaking? Hers? Did not Celan write against such mentalities and against the obscurantism derived therefrom?

If we are aware that, in translating, we find ourselves face to face with an author and with a discourse, or with a language of art – and hence with a text that is, from the start, an interpretation involving historicisation – the notion of “perfect translation” expressed by Ricoeur (“give up the idea of the perfect translation”, p. 8) ceases to pertain since translation will always be, perforce, the result of the asymmetrical encounter of two subjects in time. This means that, beyond the need of constantly having to re-translate the classic texts, a specific translation, for example Nerval’s translation of Goethe’s *Faust*, is unique and never loses its validity or its historicity either. As Meschonnic says (with the truth of a rhyme) “*pas un transport, mais un rapport*”. Rather than speaking about perfection, it is better to speak about pertinence and responsibility. Neither evacuates criticism but rather they call for it ■

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■ ¹⁵ Here, Pons notes that he is citing from the original text (“El torno a citar a partir de l’original [...] [cf. p. 60]”) [translator].

¹⁶ An inescapable datum: I was prevented from publishing some translations I did —with Nicole d’Amonville— of Bauçà into Spanish, the pretext being that there was no way he wanted to be translated into that language. At the same time, the people who imposed the prohibition contributed towards paying for and circulating a translation into Spanish of some of his poems in an anthology edited by Bernat Puiglobella, which was published on the occasion of the Guadalajara International Book Fair in 2004, at which Catalan culture was Guest of Honour. The translation policy here follows the illogical logic of Miquel Bauçà with regard to French culture: he railed against it while yet scattering his texts with Gallicisms because, apart from Spanish, French

was the only language he was able to read in literary terms but, in truth, he didn’t read it when he was reading it. This not reading a language when one thinks one is reading it is an irrepressible fount of poetry, as many people understand it: a strange mixture of incomprehension and intensity. I analyse the whole affair in my text “*Amb aquestes mans: la vocació de poeta en l’obra tardana i novella de Miquel Bauçà*” (With These Hands: The Poet’s Vocation in the Later Works and Novel of Miquel Bauçà) in the jointly-authored work *Poesia és el discurs. Miquel Bauçà* (Poetry is Discourse: Miquel Bauçà) edited by Antoni Artigues, and published by Lleonard Muntaner Editor in 2009. This volume brings together the papers given at the meeting: “Miquel Bauçà. Poesia és el discurs” (Palma, 3 and 4 November 2005).