Swinburne University of Technology

Dominique Hecq

Enter ghosts, authors and translators

My sentences arise out of images and feelings
that haunt me - not always painfully; sometimes quite pleasantly.
- Gerald Murnane, *Invisible yet Enduring Lilacs*

Translation, because of its insistence on faithfulness,
originally belongs to the ethical dimension.
- Antoine Berman, *les tours de babel*

Abstract

In the light of psychoanalysis, writing may be understood as a doubling of the absent. Starting from this premise, and grounding it in personal experience, my paper explores the fundamental nature of translation. I argue that the process of ethical translation has an ontological dimension that involves a twofold doubling, or double ghosting. The act of translating indeed entails both a reading and a writing, and therefore a ghosting of the voice at first and second removes.

No other book has made such an impression on me as has Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (Murnane 1982). I first read it in one sitting on the fourth floor of my office in the Babel building at the University of Melbourne, spooked by the cadences of the author's sentences, wondering what a French translation of the text would sound like. After some years of further spooking, of allowing my francophone being to be inhabited by the body of the text - its insistent voice, complex imagery, rich textures and expanding rhythms - I translated the book into French. The process of translating it left me haunted: I could not rid myself of Murnane's voice and of his cadences in particular. Every time I'd put pen to paper, I'd have to face the spectral authority of Murnane in my writing. In fact, I felt like a translator of my own thoughts in both French and English. In an attempt to free myself from the ghost, I wrote a story titled 'Hijacked' (Hecq 2001), only to encounter another ghost and the figure of death at the end of it: the ghost of my father and the fantasy of my own death by linguistic inanition, for the narrative, I then discovered, really articulates the impossibility of representation. However I had, paradoxically, also found what some would call my own 'voice'.

Castration, doubling and repetition are what unite the figures of the ghost, author and translator in the uncanny territory that is the haunted text. But if death, as 'the uncanniest thing of all, can only return in fiction' (Wright 1984: 149) and if the ghost is 'the fiction of our relation to death' made visible (Cixous 1976: 542), one question arises with respect to fiction in translation: what is the fundamental nature of the translation?

As a literary translator schooled in the late 1980s, and right up to my own difficulties with language, I would have answered that despite differing genres of translations (for instance, technical versus literary) and divergences in approaches to translation within one particular genre, the act of translating is ethical in nature. I was taught in the wane of what Fawcett describes as 'the heroic age' of linguistically-oriented translation studies, which roughly extends from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s (Fawcett 1997: Foreword). At the time, the work of Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet (1995), with its insistence on grammar, syntax and style, was still considered a sacred text by aspiring francophone translators. Yet ideology was creeping into the field of translation studies, and I listened eagerly to Antoine Berman's papers on the ethical dimension of translation.

'Because of its insistence on faithfulness,' said Berman over twenty years ago, translation 'originally belongs to the ethical dimension'. This is because 'in its very essence', translation is about the 'desire to open what is Foreign as Foreign to its own space of language', with the act of translating aspiring to 'recognise and receive the Other as Other' (Berman 1985: 89; my translation). This ethical approach to translation is still valid today. Poet, translator and editor Jacques Rancourt recently wrote:

Translation is a highly complex activity ... The technique (literal, literary, adaptation, etc.) is dictated by the text itself ... Nevertheless, from the ethical point of view, an incontrovertible principle remains: fairness both to the writer and to the reader. Beyond words and even ideas, each language is actually an original way of thinking and feeling, and translation ... has to transmit this otherness. It has to resist the common temptation of 'ethnocentric translation', which naturalizes anything from abroad, as if there were only one way of being throughout the world. (Rancourt 2009: 158)

With regard to *The Plains*, this ethical approach to translation was a must: the novel already translates a highly idiosyncratic vision of the world for the Australian reader, thus forcing the translator to uncover some foreign alterity at the heart of the writing. The book is indeed all about 'a man who went looking for the true centre of his native district' in which one can finally 'see properly' (Murnane 1988: 1). The place at stake is a familiar place made not-familiar through the process of representation in the allegorised plains 'that I could only interpret' (Murnane 1982: 9). Though striving to be faithful to the original in my translation of the book, I was also keen to convey the 'experience of the foreign' conveyed by the idiosyncratic consciousness of the unnamed narrator of *The Plains* (Berman 1992). In order to convey the novel's strangeness in French, I kept all Australian words (e.g., paddocks) and neologisms (e.g., Horizonites) and I inflected the French language with Belgian accents. But most of all I re-read the novel again and again to achieve the kind of ghosting I spoke of earlier. I wanted to learn the text's music and memorise its rhythm and cadences. But there was a catch: I then had to find a way of forgetting the music, for my ethical approach to translation proved to have weird ontological repercussions. Because I now believe that the ethical and the ontological intertwine in the very act of translating, I would like to re-visit translation in the light of readings in philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Drawing on psychoanalysis, I have discussed elsewhere how writing may be seen as a doubling of the absent (Hecq 2008). According to Freud, writing is indeed communication with the absent, the reverse of speech, which has its origin in presence.

In psychoanalysis, the contrived conditions of the analytical situation seek to create a kind of present absence or absent presence. The analyst sits, mostly silent, behind the analysand: the invisible and ineffable cause of desire, i.e., what Lacan called *objet a*. The transference - sometimes called 'transference love' in Freud's early writings, depends on this present absence, absent presence.

In writing, no-one is present. The potential and anonymous reader is absent by definition - she might as well be dead. This situation of absence is a prerequisite for all written act of communication. Yet absence is here compounded by the fact that writing is not the transcription of speech. Writing fashions this dimension of absence while it re-presents - while it renders present through imaginary and symbolic operations. Thus writing intensifies the dimension of absence, which endows it with its specificity, which is also its annihilating capacity: the gaze of Narcissus who loses the object as he attempts to capture it. If nothing else, writing enacts an incessant *agonism* and antagonism of fusion and defusion, of conjunction and disjunction, of condensation and displacement, of Eros and the death-drive.

Conversely, in reading, the author is always absent. The text alone creates this quasi-presence or quasi-absence, much as the analyst opens up a space of quasi-presence/absence for the analysand. Even when I read a text whose author is known to me, he remains absent. Because as well as I may know him, the author never resembles the breathing being with whom I converse. The author is a secret sharer whose name and palimpsest of traces are part of the text. The text could be said to be a series of potential planes inscribed in what Winnicott called 'transitional space' (Winnicott 1971), the potential planes that I, as reader, make up, for reading is the aptitude to re-cover. It is on this site of trans-narcissistic communication, where the doubling of reader and author occurs, where doubles indeed communicate through the writing, that ghosts might reveal themselves.

Ghosts. Death. Absence. Loss. Presence. Ghosts. We are on a familiar-not-familiar plane: the Uncanny Plain, perhaps. In German, '*Unheimlich*' is, as Freud points out, a compound word (Freud 1919: 337). The negation prefix '*un*' precedes '*Heimlich*', familiar. '*Un*', Freud writes, is the mark of repression, which is part of the term as such: something that was familiar has become not-familiar, strange and threatening. Through the peculiar status of the unconscious, where opposites, far from excluding one another, make up for, substitute for, or replace one another or are implied in pairs, the familiar and the strange end up surfacing together. Writing is suspended in the provisional space, of reading / writing, which is the point at which the text breaks silence by saying something, but also does not divulge what is more essential: the truth of our desire for the lost object once familiar, yet now made unfamiliar via the operation of symbolic castration. Thus reading and writing constitute an uninterrupted search for the lost object, an uninterrupted work of mourning. It is a ghosting process whereby the subject hides from the dark object of desire, i.e., *Das Ding*, in order to keep desire alive via a series of metonymic displacements.

It is the ghost's disruption of temporal and spatial boundaries that makes it such an effective figure of psychic and semantic disruption. Temporally, the spectre has to do with what Derrida calls the 'pre-originary and properly spectral anteriority' of every event, the way every human action is motivated by anterior ones (Derrida 1994: 21). Yet the ghost also embodies the paradox of its own 'radical untimeliness': it represents both the first originating time and its endless repetition (Derrida 1994: 25). Spatially, the spectre effects similar disruptions. For Derrida, its challenge to identity and presence makes it a crucial concept

for modern philosophy. The spectre functions as 'an identity that ... invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it ... *this* that comes with so much difficulty to language, *this* that seems not to mean anything, *this* that puts to rout our meaning-to-say' (Derrida 1994: 172).

Traditionally, translation is 'concerned with meaning' (Hervey and Higgins 2002: 132). Acclaimed research in the field of translation studies, with its emphasis on the 'target literature' and its 'norms', would not dispute this (Venuti 2000). Walter Benjamin, however, suggests that 'a translation ... must *lovingly* and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification' (Benjamin 1970: 79; emphasis added). I am struck by the use of the adverb 'lovingly': does this mean that for Benjamin a translation should bear the mark of love? A love of the work? A love passed on to the text? A love of this palimpsest of signs we call an author? If this is so, then, love is the con-text of translation, that which accompanies the text. It is in this con-text that the work of translating occurs, a work that produces another text just as fiction produces parallel texts to desires and fantasies.

Benjamin's comment also refers to incorporating the body of the original text. This reference to an oral relationship to the text resonates with my own reference to a tactile relationship: what the translator does in working the text is to experience it as a texture - be it in the mouth or on the skin, i.e., when the translator has become a disembodied subject ghosting herself into some other's voice. The text is a textile composed of differing threads or strands, now loose, now woven tightly together, always retaining a set of relations to each other. Imagine insisting too heavily on the side of meaning in the translation: then you would lose the trace left by these strands; you would no longer be able to follow the threads, the insistence of certain sounds, the cadences of sentences. This might explain why in Steiner's view only a few authors have, over two millennia, succeeded as translators - most of whom being poets (Steiner 1998: 283).

To allow something of this to pass into the translation, we need to follow what Lacan called the *letter* of the text, that is, to create a translation that is idiomatic, or readable, and therefore one whose primary purpose might be to lose what is fundamental in the text. As Benjamin observes: 'meaning is served far better - and literature and language far worse - by the licence of bad translators' (Benjamin 1970: 78). This does make sense, for what is fundamental in the text are events and affects transformed by the process of writing where the unconscious plays a part. It is as though the function of the text, reduced to the linearity of language, is to resuscitate all that has been killed in the process of writing. Tolstoy knew this:

In everything, in almost everything that I have written, I have been led by the need to gather my ideas, each connected to the next, in order to express myself; but each idea expressed in words loses its meaning ... the connections themselves are made, it seems, not by thought, but by another process; to directly reveal the principle of these connections in impossible ... we can only indirectly, through words, describe types of activity, situations ... (Tolstoy 1905 [1876]: 289)

And so types of activity, situations, are transformed by the creative process and become words that are spun into sentences and woven into texts with 'hidden meanings', even from their authors - fortunately (Murnane 1988).

But let us return to translation. If, as Benjamin suggests, a translation must '*lovingly* and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification', the

translating itself is an act of creation predicated upon reading - a re-writing that entails a double ghosting. In my own case, for instance, it was less a question of bringing Murnane into French than of bringing my Belgian French into the complexities of Murnane's Australian English. This, oddly enough, is in accordance with Benjamin's proposition that the translator must allow his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. He further suggests that it is not the highest praise of a translation to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in the original language.

Commenting on Benjamin's essay, Derrida notes that Heidegger says somewhere that it is 'an operation of thought through which we must translate ourselves in the thought of the other language, the forgotten thinking of the other language. We must translate ourselves into it and not make it come into our language' (Derrida 1988: 115). Derrida adds that it is indeed 'necessary to go toward the unthought thinking of the other language' (Derrida 1988: 115).

Heidegger himself, in reference to the question of seeking to grasp and interpret the Platonic dialogues, once suggested that 'to appropriate a past means to come to know oneself as indebted to that past' (Heidegger 1997: 7). Here, the foreignness of the text is posited in a temporal sense. We could just as well posit this in a spatial sense, or in an 'unthought thinking', intuitive sense, this not-known or familiar-not-familiar of the poetic text.

Benjamin's essay raises the question of what it is that is translated. Prefaces to literary works in translation often bemoan the difficulty of finding the 'exact translation', the 'right equivalent' or 'potent correspondence'. But what is the status of translation conveyed by such comments? In what units is exactitude measured? If anything, these comments sustain a belief that there could be equivalences between languages, i.e., the ideal of a universal borne by the equivalence of translation. Surely this must be the ideal of 'technical translation', whereby units of meaning can be passed on via the master's discourse, but not of 'literary translation', where the puns, ambiguities, contradictions, unfinished phrases, modal inconsistencies, grammatical transgressions and syntactic trespasses gesture towards a kind of knowledge that might be transmitted in other ways - ways consonant with the theoretical frameworks of psychoanalysis or indeed, of its praxis.

In any case, from the point of view of literary translation, there is never a complete equivalent for a word or expression between two languages. If it is a question of meaning or empirical knowledge that is conveyed in a translation, it has failed from a poetic point of view. Such are the limits of what can pass in translation. For Jorge Luis Borges, 'bilingual dictionaries ... make us believe that each word of a language can be replaced by another from another language. The error consists in not taking into account that each language is a mode of experiencing and perceiving the universe' (Rodríguez Ponte 1986: 25). Although I'd like to invoke as an echo to Borges' comment Lacan's conceptualisation of poetry as site of knowledge, as translation predicated upon desire, it strikes me that we are not far from Benjamin's proposition that what is to be translated is a mode of signification.

Yet each mode of signification is a particular one. Particular to each language, but also particular to each subject. The aspiration to equivalence and exactness perhaps also ignores the joke that Freud takes up, that of '*Traduttore - Tradittore!*', where it only takes the substitution of one letter to betray the fact that any translation is itself a betrayal. Freud observes here that 'the similarity, amounting almost to identity, of the two words represents most impressively the necessity that forces a translator into crimes against its original' (Freud

1905: 67). Thus, this betrayal by the translator is a necessary betrayal in the face of the inexistence of an exact translation.

But what is betrayal? Betrayal of the home. *Heimlich*? Yes, for in one sense it is an act of disloyalty or infidelity, i.e., of being unfaithful to the text translated. But if betrayal is an act of disloyalty, transgression, distortion, it is at the same time, through the equivocation of language, an act by which something is revealed. So, through the act of betrayal, something new is being conveyed. Through the absence in the original, the presence of something other is denoted, just as 'it is from the structure of fiction that the truth is enunciated' (Lacan 2001: 376). It is in this sense that we can put forward that the translation produces a fiction - a fiction veiling the uncanniness of Das Ding, itself veiling the possibility of death and the necessity of castration.

In relation to translation, these propositions highlight two aspects inherent in the very act of translating. On the one hand, the text of the translation betrays the original, having committed a crime against it while pointing to the text's translatability through meaning. On the other hand, through this work of fiction that is the translation, there arises something of truth in the half-saying, a truth belied through *semblance*. For Benjamin, this difference is established through a working of the split between meaning and form:

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax, which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (Benjamin 1970: 79)

Lacan also speaks of a wall in a similar way: of a wall between the subject and that which lies beyond language. Beyond the wall, he says in his seminar on 'The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst', 'there is to our knowledge, only this real which is distinguished precisely from the impossible, from the impossible beyond the wall' (Lacan 2001: 231; my translation).

On the wall, however, can be left a mark: the writing - or trace thereof - on the wall, a script made of letters, a *literalness* in the impossible approach towards something of the ineffable. These letters, then, pre-eminent among which is the love letter, or *lettre d'a-mur*, with its reference to the wall ('*mur*' in French), speak of something untranslatable, that which is written on the wall, allowing the possibility of touching upon what lies on the other side.

Thus, if the concept of fidelity in the translation has any value, it is insofar as it is some fidelity to the letter of the text, but a text that has recourse to what Benjamin refers to as 'pure language'. In this sense, however, not every text is translatable - certainly not as pure language, for this literality of the text is one according to which 'all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished' (Benjamin 1970: 80). Hence we can say that it is the very untranslatability of a text, that is neither reducible to meaning nor to empirical knowledge, that paradoxically makes it translatable - I would exclude from the category of these texts that are likely to give access to the letter those texts in which the subject is elided, as in the discourse of objectifying science and in the discourse of the university.

For Benjamin, this so-called pure language, or the kernel of pure language to which he refers, however, does not lend itself to translation. Yet, all the same,

as the translation is not able to communicate it, the 'tremendous and only capacity of translation' is also the attainment and conveying of this kernel intact (Benjamin 1970: 76).

It is not clear, however, what the nature of this kernel might be, since for Benjamin it is, by definition, untouchable. Today, we could not possibly follow him into the realms of a mythical metalanguage of which he does posit that each language is a fragment. For us, at the very least, the kernel perhaps evokes the '*Kern unseres Wesen*' - the 'kernel of our being' - that Freud refers to in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900: 145). For Derrida, this desire for the intact kernel is desire itself, which is to say that it is irreducible. Further, this desire for an intact kernel is a desire for a kernel, that has never been, to be intact. The kernel thus presents itself as a lack of kernel, an absence that would be best forgotten. In one word, the desire to retain this intact kernel is desire itself. However, to take this a little further, one could say that the kernel of being is a lack in being, a castration with its mark on the proper name - the author's signature, or the translator qua author.

It is perhaps in this very proper name that we can find the 'mode of signification' referred to by Benjamin and Borges. We could also refer to this mode of signification as 'style', something that marks the subject's relation to the signifier. For it is through the mark of the proper name on all common names in a text that we might find something of an access to truth in the text. If the task of the translator is to incorporate the mode of signification of the original, then something of this mark must be able to pass through the translation. But the translator, of course, only has recourse to the common name that constitutes the body of the text. And yet, the translator lends her own name to the text. Thus if translation is a reading, it is also a writing, and since any writing worthy of the name does leave the mark of a style, translating is a double ghosting, which means that the translator ends up as ghost twice over. What the ghost both covers and uncovers is the subjective dimension of what we call 'voice', i.e., a distributive, rather than univocal, dimension of the signifying chain according to which the subject of the signifier is assigned a place in the Symbolic, for as Jacques-Alain Miller puts it, 'the voice inhabits language, it haunts it' (Miller 2007: 145).

By way of conclusion, I'd like to return to the personal anecdote recounted at the start of this paper. When I said that after writing the unnerving story 'Hijacked' which had freed me of the tyranny of Murnane's authorial voice I had paradoxically found my own voice, I meant that through the act of writing I had intuitively discovered a series of Imaginary identifications and rivalries I had covered up in the act of translating, only to uncover, in the end, *objet a*, the Real cause of my desire to write.

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Dominique Hecq is the author of The Book of Elsa (a novel), Magic, Mythfits and Noisy Blood (fiction), The Gaze of Silence, Good Grief and Couchgrass

(poetry) as well as two short plays (One Eye Too Many, and Cakes & Pains performed in 2004). Out of Bounds is forthcoming. Her most recent award is The Martha Richardson Medal for poetry (2006). With Russell Grigg and Craig Smith, she co-authored Female Sexuality: The Early Psychoanalytic Controversies. She has published in the areas of literary studies, translation, creative writing and psychoanalysis. She currently is a Senior Lecturer in Writing at Swinburne University of Technology.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au