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ON TRANSLATION

A profile of John Sallis, *On Translation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.
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IN HIS ESSAY “*Des Tours de Babel*,” Jacques Derrida—echoing Walter Benjamin—pronounced “there is nothing more important than a translation.”¹ This is to say that translation involves all that is at stake in the passage into philosophy, be it a passage into Greek or translating the Harry Potter books into an American idiom. Yet, as John Sallis writes in the opening line of his recent book *On Translation*, “translation goes astray” (xi). This thesis guides Sallis’s interrogation of the commotion wrought in the activity of translation. His interpretation is methodically structured as a circumnavigation around one theme: the movement of alterity and semblance in the work of translation.

The variations that result from this play between sameness and alterity betray the fertility embedded in the act of translation. We may already know this, but what Sallis’s text does is uncover the work of translation from four distinctive standpoints. In doing so, the text also broaches important theoretical and philosophical concerns such as sense, creativity, language and meaning.

Given the thesis that translation goes astray, Sallis argues that the traditional purpose of translation is a “gesturing towards the production of sameness” (xi), which is never realized in an uncontaminated form. Instead, it continuously involves alterity. The author suggests that “it is as if an ineradicable errancy belonged intrinsically to the very truth of translation” (xi).

This thesis is examined in four chapters or as Sallis would have it, four variations. Sallis’s variations shift from the dream of nontranslation (Chapter 1), to the doubling of translation “at large” in drama (Chapter 2) to the more

¹ Jacques Derrida, “*Des Tours de Babel*” in *Acts of Religion*. Transl. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 102.

linguistic approach to the translation of words (Chapter 3), and to the final confrontation with untranslatability in both painting and music (Chapter 4). The four chapters converge and expound upon Sallis's theme as specula that reflect at once the alterity of the four perspectives and the collective destabilizing act of translation at work within it. In all of the chapters, Sallis moves across his topology of translation by translating translation into a specific site of discourse that maintains its own economy of signification.

The first chapter argues that the dream of nontranslation or, put differently, the ideal of a pure translation is in fact the dream of modernity. Sallis traces the bond of thinking to discourse and hence, representation, through Leibniz's dream of a universal alphabet of human knowledge, which would become a "point of nontranslation, a zero-degree point where discourse would contract into a purely monolingual and nonmetaphorical operation" (3). This "zero-degree point" precedes any linguistic discourse that could be a candidate to anchor understanding. Our only way "in," then, is through language. It is Heidegger that "dissolves the dream of nontranslation" by picking up on the translational activity of thinking. Translation is always already at work in the spinning and weaving of text. It reigns supreme, no discourse is untouched.

Sallis's second chapter starts over within the theatrical realm of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here, we witness an interrogation of the play in light of the manifold levels of translation that take place within the play itself. Translation, argues Sallis, is otherwise than Nietzsche's perverse dictum that "we possess nothing but metaphors of things, which correspond in no way whatsoever to the original entities" (24). Such a dictum suggests that all that is available to us is a continual series of lousy translations, translations that verge on translating nothing at all, or worse, not even being translations. Instead, the author suggests that "its [translation's] alterity with respect to itself lies only in its polysemy and mobility" (25). This polysemy is exhibited in the play by the play within the play, where the actors become translated into other characters: Bottom's translation into a head of a donkey, the translation of the world into the faux world, and finally the identification of the whole play with a dream. Sallis weaves quite a bit of theoretical profundity into this chapter. Allow me to touch on two instances of this profundity.

All in all, the chapter converges on the deconstruction of the play, as the performance of a singular and integrated representational presence. It does so in order to lift out the multiplicity of translation at work within the interiority the play itself. Sallis then juxtaposes this slippage always already embedded in the play against Schlegel's German translation of Shakespeare in order to make manifest the multiple elements which rest exterior to its translation and

translatability.

The lengthy third chapter interrogates the primary site where translation functions, namely, language, linguistics, semiotics and the philosophy of language. As a whole, the chapter considers translation as the art of loss. Sallis sets aside the question of limits considered in the previous chapters in order to translate translation and to engage what Jakobson “awards the designation *translation proper*” (46), namely the one to one correspondence of meaning that carries something from one language over to another. From Aristotle and Plato’s *Critias* to Cicero and Locke up to Gadamer, Sallis traces the development of translation. In this characterization of the classical determination of translation culminates with Gadamer’s insistence that “translation is always interpretation” (72). In this sense, translation always entails a sort of continual (re)creation.

To get at this claim, Sallis returns to Schlegel’s translation of Shakespeare twice in this chapter, the first time to exhibit the relationship between translation and interpretation, the second time (where Schlegel’s translations are put side by side with Shakespeare’s original) to broach the question of whether there is gain in translation. In the end, commenting on Schlegel, Sallis writes “While the association does not occur in Shakespeare’s English text; it enhances the metaphors of that text, compensating to a degree for the loss of association of Bottom’s name with the beast with whose head he comes to be endowed” (94). This allows Sallis to suggest that translation is not merely about a gain in expression or an uncovering of intentionality, but instead “deploys its force as a play of imagination” (98).

Finally, after a brief interrogation of Derrida’s destabilization of the hierarchy between original and translation that characterizes the classical determination of translation, we see how the translation and the original mutually determine each other: “in passing between languages, the play of imagination will produce a regulated transformation” (107). Sallis often weaves Benjamin’s well-known work on translation throughout the book only to suggest that Benjamin’s split with the classical determination is in fact no more than a re-structuring of this ideal as an emancipation of pure meaning, the redemption of pure language. Benjamin’s translator is bound by duty to restore the meaning of the original. However, Sallis, like Derrida, attends not to the inaccessible virginal meaning but to the very activity of discourse, “that which speech or word make manifest” (110). Translation has to rely upon the force of words, which are in the business of making manifest. Manifestation creates in turn a measure to make translation into a regulated transformation of the original governed by the play of imagination.

This insistence upon the activity of discourse leads right into the final chapter, which takes its departure from three distinct modalities of untranslatability: poetry, painting and music. For brevity's sake, I will restrict my comments to painting. The central problem with painting—Sallis utilizes examples from the contemporary Italian painter Mimmo Paladino—is the lacuna between the seen and the said. If the painting is untitled (“disentitled”) it is “touched by language only to be released into a silence that can't be touched by words” (117); it is this silence that creates and maintains the untranslatability of the painting, which occurs because we ask the question “what does it mean?” On the other hand, Paladino's paintings that bear titles self-consciously block any hermeneutical attempt to translate visibility into signification, the title functions to disturb and disrupt interpretation.

It is at this point where Sallis is most interested in drawing out the philosophical consequences of translation. He connects the relation (or non-relation) between “linguistically signifiable meanings and configurations of the visible in which the visible is brought to present its very visibility” (120) with Socrates' second sailing. Socrates' turn away from the merely visible, that great difference of differences subsequently domesticated by Western philosophy, is, for Sallis, that to which painting testifies: “the untranslatability of sense into sense” (120). Music testifies to this even more than painting. It is here where we find ourselves pushing beyond the limit of the constraints of translation. The context is not determined a priori. It is determined instead by its relevance outside of any consideration or adherence to structure or the law of form.

Sallis's book provides an almost dizzying interrogation of language and meaning, which end up being nothing more than figurative patterns of modernity. The author deconstructs these patterns to lay bare the commotion of both creativity and wisdom that binds the arts with philosophy. Seamless in its movement across disciplines, Sallis's approach assembles and dis-assembles weighty concepts such as language, sense and meaning only to turn them inside out in order to expose their limits. After all, imagine trying to translate John Cage's famous experience in the anechoic chamber to the sphere of the visual. Translation, for Sallis, cannot be caught.

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