BETRAYAL’S FELICITY

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In translation, there is always the question of fidelity and betrayal, and even Benjamin seemed to understand that fidelity, in its literalness, was one dimension of translation, a dimension, he said, that tended to make translations bad. He thought that in addition to literalness, there was the necessity of “license” understood as “the freedom of faithful reproduction.” For him, license is not precisely betrayal, but another kind of faithfulness. But from the point of view of fidelity, understood as being bound to the literal text, it may well be that other order of faithfulness, the one associated with freedom and license, can only be read as betrayal.

Barbara Johnson’s reflections on translation carry many affective tones derived from this ambiguous scene in which faithfulness quarrels with fidelity. In fact, it is unclear whether translations can ever be other than “bad” or, at least, have some badness in them, since the original has to be crossed, if not partially mutilated, with the emergence of the translation itself. In a way, her inquiry into translation becomes, in *Mother Tongues*, an occasion in which an array of human emotional predicaments are explored as linguistic predicaments. One can discern in her discussion several ways in which translation operates emotionally: it can constitute a slander, a calumny, and so an accusation. It can become bound up with a nostalgia for a lost wholeness, and so with a problematic of grief. It can refuse the idealizations of the past, and so, in its de-idealizations, release the present as a field of play; it can work the felicities of the arbitrariness of language, and so sidestep a pathos that might bind one to an elusive original. It also brings up questions of pain and damage, whether reparation is possible, and whether it should even be sought. And finally, it establishes a relationship to damage itself, as necessary, even as the means by which the afterlife of any given text is secured.

Johnson introduces her discussion of translation in *Mother Tongues* by asking whether translation comes after, and is dependent upon, the original. She cites Kafka’s *The Trial*, a book she happened to pick up while thinking about this question. That book begins with the following line: “Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.” Johnson registers her amusement and surprise: “Traduced”? She writes, “This is an English word I see only in lame attempts to translate the Italian tradutore, traditore, or the French traduire, trahir. To translate is to traduce—the betrayal of the original in the process of transmitting it is inherent in translation. In other words, ‘traduce’ is a bad translation of a pun on the inevitable badness of translations. Joseph K. had been betrayed in exactly the same way” [15].

Johnson goes on to remind us that in the German, *traduced* is translated as *verleumdet*, implying the idea that this is a false accusation, a calumny, a slander. But Johnson is clear that to have *traduced* someone conveys something different from “telling lies about” someone. If the text were to read, “someone had been telling lies about Josef K.,” then it would follow that there is a truth that could and should be told about him, a truth that is not being told, a truth that would, in fact, exonerate him. *Traduce*, however, does not allow us to set up that opposition between truth and falsehood. If the translation had read (as some do), “someone had been telling lies about him,” then, according to Johnson, the translator would be “making more sense of the arrest, [and]
destroying its senselessness” [16]. It seems clear that someone has said something damaging about Josef K., and this damaging sort of saying is conveyed not only by the word *traduced*, but by the resonance that *traduce* maintains with translation itself. Thus Johnson writes, “only translation can betray without necessarily instating the polarity from which it deviates” [16]. The point here is not that translation must betray to communicate well, but that “the act of arresting Joseph K. cannot be better figured than by translation” [16].

Something else is going on in the way that Johnson builds her reading here, since before opening her copy of *The Trial*, she has been reflecting on Derrida’s *pharmakon*. This leads her to query what the original field of language is considered to be. There she notes that “Derrida’s brilliant reading of Plato’s text as opposed to its intentions makes visible the fact that philosophy’s founding trick is to make us believe that it constitutes the prior medium in which translators and, after them, readers, will carve decision” [14].

So this prior medium is put into question, and what appears as prior is constituted there, as the prior—in what she calls a “back formation” but only in relation to what comes after—by the after, by virtue of what comes after.

*Derrida’s essay on Plato discovers in the word pharmakon an undecidability that all translators—and therefore all Platonisms—have assumed was a decidability. The divide between “poison” and “remedy” occurs in translation. It is not, however, that such inadequate translations could be avoided if one stayed with the original. It is that an actual history, shaped by a decision that the translators could not choose not to make, makes the original perceptible in resisting it.* [34]

The original becomes perceptible in resisting it; that it becomes perceptible does not mean that it becomes restored. On the contrary, it becomes perceptible at a moment of contact. This contact is a strange one, and it will be described in different ways by Mallarmé (as a contact that cannot quite be made), by Benjamin, as a light touch that happens at the point of sense, but by Johnson, a bit more ferociously, when, in her reading of Benjamin, she concludes that translation must do some kind of damage to the original, even undertake a defilement, for the original to realize something of its translatability.

This effect counters much of the attitude that translators do take toward their originals, and this comes through, I think, if you were to read Michael Hamburger’s introduction to his translation of Celan, or Mary Bernard’s afterword to her established translations of Sappho. Johnson, in a moment of remarkable discovery, finds the following quotation from Willis Barnstone as he quarrels with various Sappho translators about the right way to translate her poems. Johnson quotes the following: “If a very fragmentary work is to be rendered into English it must function not only as a gloss for reading the original but come through with the dignity and excitement of an original text. Anything less is to traduce Sappho” [16].

There, she found *traduce* again, and now it is being explicitly opposed to the notion of good translation. To traduce Sappho is not exactly to slander her, as it is to traduce Josef K. But I gather that for Sappho to be traduced would be to suffer a violation of some kind, a trammeling, a spoiling, and Barnstone’s remark is a righteous effort to speak in her honor, in the name of her dignity and, indeed her inviolability. Whereas this is morally high-minded, it has the disadvantage of leaving Sappho untouched, embodying principles of inviolability and purity that the poetry itself would sometimes seem to be oppose. But what if to traduce Sappho is to betray her, but also to damage
her in a way that lets her live, in the sense that Benjamin clearly understood translation to be a matter of providing for the afterlife, the continuing life, of a text? If translation commits necessary damage, and if translation is not precisely beholden to the original in neither its letter or, indeed, its original spirit, then translation meets the original at the site of resistance. This means refusing the original conceived as a totality, commit-
ing a reduction to the point of resistance, if only then to convey that nucleus of “pure language . . . concealed and fragmentary” into the translation itself.

Any consideration of pure language here would quickly give us a headache, so let us see what we need from Benjaminian territory in order to follow Johnson, trying in my faithful way, to do justice to her writing, without making the mistake of regarding what she has written as too pure to touch or, indeed, mishandle.

So much translation theory gets caught up with the problem of loss and inade-
quacy, with the inadequacy of translation, its failure to recapture, reconstitute, and repair what is prior, what is lost. It does not always see that the figure of the past that feeds this nostalgia is one that is induced by the process of translation itself; that is, translation requires appropriation into a new language, and there we find guilt over its capture and remaking, the transfer, the equivocation of ownership that takes place, say, when a poem appears in another language. Mary Bernard, for instance, understands herself to labor under a mimetic imperative in response to which she can only fail. Of Sappho she writes: “The ambiguities which enrich her simplest lines, the overtones and undertones, the occasional puns, which are not quite puns and seem right instead of ridiculous, are almost impossible to convey in another language. Besides, I would have to be technically as expert as she was in order to approximate the music of her poetry” [vii]. Although there is no exclamation mark at the end of this last line, I can hear it nonetheless—the defensive utterance of the careful translator who knows that what she will feel in the end is necessary failure.

Johnson points out that there is another way to approach the prospect of capture, the workings of prohibition. Prohibition is part of the process of translation, not that which should or does stop it. What forbids the return to the original text is precisely what facilitates translation itself. There seems to be less reason to mourn or to berate ourselves than we might have thought. She points out that when one considers the longer version of the quotation from Mallarmé that Benjamin cites in “The Task of the Translator,” there is something that actively prevents or prohibits the return to an origi-
nal language, understood as immortal speech. This prohibition not only prevents the return to an original, but establishes the very rule and effect of the idiomatic itself. To write in an idiom is to have entered into a condition of enforced exile from divine lan-
guage, so that translation, understood as a translation from divine to human language, is the active constitution of idiomatic speech.

For Mallarmé, it is clear that only immortal speech, whatever that is, can proffer words that would at once constitute the material reality of that to which they refer. That is precisely what idiomatic speech cannot do. Idioms are, in fact, defined as prohibi-
tions against immortal speech, and what they do, effectively, is to prevent anyone from proffering those words. Human speech is not only thoroughly idiomatic, but any effort to move beyond idiom is a dangerous act that seeks to contravene the limits of the human, one which, in Mallarmé’s words, “lead one to take oneself for God” [qtd. in Johnson 48].

Johnson points out that the language of God is not just an impossibility, but a prohibition. If it is a prohibition, then some sort of transgression is doubtless possible. Poetry is associated with this transgression to the extent that “poetry makes up for the deficiency of languages that is caused by their plurality” [50] (or is, rather, an attempt to supplement that deficiency).
So what’s the relation between poetry and idiom? It would seem that poetry is the effort within idiom to overcome idiom, to approach the divine language, and as such, it is an effort that is bound to fail. When Sappho writes, “Although they are / Only breath, words / which I command / are immortal” she does not confirm the immortality of those words, but only displays the poetic desire to achieve it. For Mallarmé, it is less the commanding assertion of immortality that moves close to the divine utterance, than it is the fantasy of a perfect unity of sound and sense. Johnson points out, however, that even the concept of harmony presumes the ongoing difference between sound and sense, and that we can in the end find no original unity here.

This failure to reach the divine through poetry is likened by Mallarmé to a frustrated touch, specifically, by a “closeness” between word and thing that remains, in his words, “perversely” unaccomplished. It is as if there is a taunting by the proximate object, a proximity to touch, but a prohibition as well, a constantly reinstated frustration that deserves the name of perversity, if only because the touch is almost always made, the proximate distance is almost always closed. That proximate distance is precisely what establishes, in Johnson’s view, the arbitrary relation between word and thing. In her view, the failure to achieve divine speech indicates “the arbitrariness of language in its perversity” [53].

Johnson turns to Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” to understand something more about this effort that translation makes to almost always accomplish something it cannot accomplish. There she reads his vexing and important remark that, “All suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language” [qtd. in Johnson 49]. Just as the unity of language was not once lost in time, after which we came to suffer the division of language and material reality, so the process of “making up for this deficiency” is not one that begins in time and can then be accomplished within the realm of time. It is coextensive with time itself. There is no time where this effort at compensation is not happening.

The supplementing of intentions for one another, this complex and continuously present action, is called “pure language” so that, instead of translation defiling purity, we have translation facilitating a new purity, one that is associated with a complex action, and with no final end, no eventual stasis. This complex action, a compensatory action, is like the “making up for deficiencies” that Mallarmé says is what poetry does. But neither of these can achieve a compensation. They are both, as Johnson says, “a process whose ongoingness depends upon its failure” [50].

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1. Johnson reminds us importantly of the difference between how God names things, and how Adam does. She calls these the “crucial difference between creative and uncreative referentiality” [52]. God brings things into being, into material reality, through his act of naming, but for Adam, the world and language are two separate things. In this sense, not only is God perfect reference, but perfect reference, understood as the condition in which God creates through naming, is the condition in which the name and the thing named are indissolubly one. But even with God, this oneness does not seem to stick. Johnson points out that for god to have brought animals into language, there must have been a separation between animals and language such that the one could be brought into the other. So the very language by which we describe perfect reference reinstalls the distinction it is said to overcome. Similarly, when the Bible says that the “word is with God,” Johnson points out that the “with” marks a proximity, and so a difference, one that interrupts the claims of primary unity even here, at that primordial level where we might least expect to find it. Indeed, the very notion of a perfect reference, if it were possible, is the destruction of reference as we know it, since reference requires the distinction between what refers and its referent, and any dissolution of that distinction undoes reference or renders it nonsensical.
When Johnson turns to de Man, she points to something else that happens in translation, and that is the ways in which associations and connotations exceed the conscious mastery of the translator. It is as if one is taking a word from one language and releasing it into another, affecting that second language in ways that cannot be anticipated or controlled. In the discussion of the difference between the German *brot*, for “bread,” and the French *pain*, Johnson points out that the arbitrary and idiosyncratic associations that these words convey are distressing for de Man, and she cites him in his distress: “I now hear in “brot” batard. . . . [I]f I have to think that *brot* and *pain* are the same thing, I get very upset . . . the quotidian aspects of the word, ‘bread,’ daily bread, is upset by the French word *pain*, which has its set of connotations which take you in a completely different direction” [qtd. in Johnson 58–59].

Johnson reiterates what these associations seem to be for de Man: bastards, mother tongues, daily bread, and being upset. One cannot help but wonder whether *pain* is not associated with the English *pain*, and that the whole problem of translation, in its arbitrariness, but also in the associations it compels, is painful. To get rid of these connotations would be to overcome not only what is idiomatic in any given language, but also the basis of what might be called its poetic possibilities, the conditions of resonance itself.

In de Man’s essay, he not only gives voice to the painfulness that the connotations within idiomatic speech convey, but then turns explicitly to the word *wehen* (birth pang) in Benjamin’s essay, where Benjamin writes, “Translation . . . [is of all literary forms] . . . the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pang of its own” [73]. In a sense, this word, *wehen*, is no arbitrary word; it emerges here for a reason, even as it could be another word that does this word; the reason it is no arbitrary word is precisely because it delivers something of the affective meaning of the arbitrariness of language itself [60].

Johnson writes, “The scenario of suffering designed to lead to new life is everywhere suggested by Benjamin’s text, but here he says merely ‘die Wehen des eigenen,’ translated as ‘the suffering of the self-identical’ but perhaps better translated as ‘the suffering of own-ness, of what is one’s own’” [60]. De Man corrects the translation from the other direction, saying that *wehen* should be read merely as “pain.” (And my Yiddish associations, “oy weh ist mir,” literally, “oh the pain that is coming to me,” tempt me to concur.) But when we do correct and concur in matters of translation, what precisely do we do? It seems that part of what we do is to foreclose upon a set of associations that would make any selection possible, any selection seem right.

Johnson writes, “The task of the translator suddenly becomes even more complicated if he has to edit out a swarm of associations that are not functioning in order to stick to ‘what is meant,’ and their presence is purely irrelevant. Yet the linguistic ‘noise’ of the act of translating, in not being meant or intended, comes close to the pure linguisticness of language” [61]. If what Johnson means by linguisticness is the noise in language, and that noise includes the connotations that are unintentionally induced with any given translation, then it would seem that linguisticness includes a host of effects that pull language in different directions, moments of linguistic opacity to which one returns, the unworked-through, the traumatic, that which preoccupies the psyche and compels its repetitions. In this sense, translation induces an affectivity that is largely unwilled, one that is enfolded and borne by language itself.

Thus, when Benjamin makes his well-known reference to translation as a vessel (another complicated passage we cannot attend to here), and identifies the task of the translator not as imitation, but as “lovingly and in detail incorporat(ing) the original’s way of meaning” [61], he is suggesting that this loving and detailed incorporation is something other than fidelity. Indeed, when he goes on to say that both “the original and
the translation [are] recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” [61], he asserts an analogy between language and the vessel that, to be right, has to assert something other than a mimetic relation. In fact, language is not exactly a vessel, but the difference between language and vessel illustrates something of the breakage he is writing about. What is of course most confounding here is how both texts might be “made recognizable as fragments,” since fragmentation itself seems only to be recognizable as such against the ground of a greater whole. The task of translation, though, is not to reconstruct the whole, that is, to reconstruct the original, or to assemble the original and the translation in such a way that a structural and mimetic relation is asserted between them.

Johnson provides important kabbalistic background, through Gershom Scholem, for Benjamin’s description of how translation works. Over and against Mallarmé, for whom idiomatic language could only close in to touch immortal speech but fail to make that contact, Benjamin refers to the “light touch” that translation places upon the original. Benjamin writes: “Just as the tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, . . . a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” [qtd. in Johnson 64].

What is interesting here is that this loving gesture that translation is said to be is one that does not seek to repair what is broken. And though Benjamin claims that the translation “touches upon the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense,” suggesting a gentle touch, one that does not disturb or dent the surface on which it lands, it seems that there is a movement in the other direction as well, one that heightens the fragmentation, its rough edges, one that might be said to further fragment and break that vessel. As a result, Johnson says, “Every effort to patch the vessel together only breaks it further” [64].

So I remember a few years ago Barbara Johnson was identified in a newspaper as “Barbara Johnson, translator of the work of Jacques Derrida,” and my first response was to be incensed, to rise to her defense, to declaim this reduction, and to insist, as you all know, that she is doubtless the finest literary theorist of her time. I suppose I was a bit like Willis Barnstone at that moment, wanting to defend the purity and inviolability of Barbara and express my fidelity. But when I wrote to Barbara to express my dismay, she responded quite jovially, “I love being identified as a translator. That is the name for what I do.” Had she been mishandled? So I had to make a choice, to continue to defend her honor, or to let stand the gracious and unassuming way that she bears the language that unwittingly names her brilliance. Sappho surely would not have wanted to remain unspoiled, spoiling being such an opportunity, and Barbara, as always, releases life from the arbitrariness in language, perversely, brilliantly, precisely when one might think it is not quite possible.

WORKS CITED