Linguistic Hospitality:
The Task of Translation in Ricoeur and Levinas

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In a sense, nothing is untranslatable;
but in another sense, everything is untranslatable;
translation is another word for the impossible.
<div align="right">Jacques Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other.</div>

Translation is very difficult . . . but it is not impossible.
<div align="right">Octavio Paz, Translation: Literature and Letters.</div>

1. Translation as an Experience of the Foreign

Human communication takes place across an amazing diversity of over five thousand different languages spoken all over the globe. This vast array of languages presents a significant obstacle whenever one encounters a speaker of another language than one's own. It is in response to this encounter with the other—as a speaker of a language that is foreign to oneself that the need to translate first emerges. Although the problem of translation is as old as language itself, it comes as little surprise that the theory of translation finds its starting point with the Romans, and in particular, with their appropriations of classical Greek culture and the Bible.[1] In their translations of Greek texts, the Romans displayed little concern for the original. Translation, for the Romans, was carried out as a transformation that sought to mold the foreign text into its own culture. Remarking on this fact, Nietzsche observes that "In those days, indeed, translation meant to conquer."[2] Saint Jerome displayed a similar attitude in his famous translation of the Greek Bible. In the creation of the Vulgate, Jerome thought that he could perfect the original text by releasing its own unrealized possibilities in this new and superior language. His goal was to outdo the foreign text by producing a translation that was better than the

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[1] See François Ost, *Traduire: Défense et illustration du multilinguisme* (Lyon: Fayard, 2009).

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Problem of Translation," in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 69.

original. The views of translators during the Roman empire reflect an attitude toward the task of translation that would prevail for quite a long time afterward. On such a view, the primary task of the translator is to take the author to the reader, and it is only surprisingly late in the history of translation that the opposite task—that of taking the reader to the author—becomes prominent. It was chiefly the German Romantics, such as A.W. Schlegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher, who called for this new emphasis on fidelity to the original text and thereby called on the translator, in Schleiermacher's words, "not to leave the reader in peace and to move the writer toward him, but to leave the writer in peace and move the reader toward the writer."[3] This movement of the reader toward the author signifies a new realization of the purpose of translation. Instead of seeking to perfect or expand the language of the original, translation ought to expand the possibilities within one's own language— the target language through this encounter with the foreign.

It is within the historical context outlined above that I will approach the theme of translation within the work of Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas. Although their thinking on translation has gone underappreciated by scholars up to now, here I want to highlight the importance of their respective contributions to the theory of translation.[4] From Ricoeur, I will borrow the insight that the significance of translation goes beyond the ordinary concerns of actual translators who work from one language to another. More profoundly, it can become a general model for "the experience of the foreign."[5] From Levinas, this encounter with the other in translation will gain a normative dimension. Translation becomes a practice of "linguistic hospitality" in which the language of the other is welcomed into one's own. Taken together, Ricoeur and Levinas thus help us to see how the practice of translation can provide a normative model for all sorts of encounters between what is one's own and what is foreign.

2. The Task of Translation

The task of translation begins "after Babel," so to speak, with the amazing array of different languages scattered across the globe.[6] Clearly, the co-existence of these languages motivates the difficult question about how it is possible to translate at all

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[3] Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," in *Theories of Translation,* 42.

[4] The one genuine exception to this statement is Richard Kearney whose recent work has helped to call this theme to the attention of Ricoeur scholars. For instance, see his article "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation," *Research in Phenomenology* 37 (2007): 147-159.

[5] I use this expression in reference to Antoine Berman's reflection on the nature of translation: *The Experience of the Foreign*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). Note, however, that the title of his work is actually borrowed from Heidegger, who, in writing on Hölderlin, employs the phrase *Die Erfahrung des Fremden*. This indicates the strong influence of Heidegger over all of Berman's project. For a recent account of the relation between Ricoeur and Berman, see Hyang Lee and Seong-Woo Yun**, "**Ricoeur and Berman: An Encounter between Hermeneutics and Translation Studies," *Philosophy Today* (2012).

[6] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1998).

from one language to another.[7] In response to this question, the history of philosophy has been guided by two speculative extremes that are diametrically opposed to one another. On the one extreme, the diversity of languages has been taken by some to be so radical that it renders translation altogether impossible (the Safir-Whorf hypothesis).[8] Here it is thought that languages are separate from each other like isolated islands. Each has its own self-contained intelligibility which cannot be bridged by any translation. On the other speculative extreme, the actual fact of translation has led some others to infer that its possibility is due to the existence of an original or universal language (the myth of the tower of Babel).[9] This prompts the search for a universal language that can be connected to all of the different languages. Such a language would provide the bridge that would make communication across languages possible. Instead of pursuing the speculative extremes of either complete untranslatability or complete translatability, however, Ricoeur's account of translation situates it within a practical dialectic of fidelity and betrayal.

To orient the translator's task within this dialectic, let us first take a look at the etymology of the word translation itself. The English word "translator" derives from the Latin *transfero*, meaning "to carry across." The French word "*traducteur*," though also derived from Latin, comes from a different verb, *traducere*, meaning "to lead across." Thus regarded, the etymology of translation would suggest that it is analogous to the activity of trading, in which the translator is like a trader who transports ideas from one language to another one. To complicate this overly simplistic model, however, we can follow one of John Sallis's important insights and add that this crossing over or exchange does not occur without also bringing about a shift or transformation in what gets carried over.[10] In support of this point, it should be noted that the Latin root for translation—*traducere*—also forms the basis of the English verb "to traduce," which refers to the act of making malicious or defamatory statements. This suggests that to translate is not simply to exchange one word for another but, in so doing, to betray the original word. "*Traduttore, traditore*"—to translate is to betray, the Italian adage goes. Does not this etymological duality—which presents the translator as both a trader and a traitor— suggest something important about the fate of translation—that both fidelity and betrayal are inextricable from any work of translation?

The dialectic of fidelity and betrayal is inescapable due to the fact that the translator is obliged "to serve two masters": the author who writes in a foreign language and the reader who reads in one's own language.[11] Describing this dual

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[7] To convey this point, Ricoeur cites the title of a paper by Donald Davidson: "Theoretically, Hard: Practically, Easy."

[8] Sapir was a student of anthropologist Frans Boas, and Whorf was Sapir's student. Their hypothesis of linguistic relativism can be expressed in the following terms. First, structural differences between language systems will, in general, be paralleled by non-linguistic cognitive differences in the native speakers of the two languages. Second, the structure of anyone's native language strongly influences or fully determines the world-view acquired in learning the language.

[9] See *Genesis* 11:1-9.

[10] John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[11] See Ricoeur, "The Paradigm of Translation," in *On Translation,* trans. Eileen Brennan (New York:

allegiance to the author and the reader, Friedrich Schleiermacher observes that a translation can move in either of two directions: "Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader."[12] If, on the one hand, the translator chooses the author as the exclusive master and imposes the author's culture in its foreignness, then she or he runs the risk of appearing to be a foreigner, a traitor, to his or her own culture. If, on the other hand, the translator chooses the reader as the exclusive guide and leads the author to the reader's culture, then she or he runs the risk of stealing the work from its original cultural context and thereby betraying it. As a result, the task of the translator seems to be caught up within a double bind in which betrayal is inevitable. Fidelity to one language would entail the betrayal of the other one, and vice versa. Due to its inescapability, does betrayal not come to have the final word in translation?

Ricoeur, in response to this dilemma, does not give in to the inevitability of betrayal too quickly but instead continues to hold on to the possibility of a "happy" translation. This possibility can be realized through the adoption of a new practical standard for translation, one "which acknowledges the difference between adequacy and equivalence, equivalence without adequacy."[13] Taking the term "adequate" in its philosophical sense as an adequation between a thought or word and what it represents, this means giving up the pursuit of an absolute or perfect translation. Instead, the attainable goal is to pursue a translation that conveys a relative equivalent to the original—an "equivalence without adequacy."

To illustrate this distinction, consider the following passage from a text by William James, where James writes: "Is life worth living?—it depends on the liver."[14] And the French translation, which has been praised as "one of the happiest translations ever made," renders this phrase in the following way: "La vie vaut-elle la peine?—Question de foie." The English text, on the one hand, plays on the pun based on two senses of the word "liver"—which can refer to either "the one who is living" or the bodily organ. Depending on which of these two senses is adopted, the phrase will express two very different claims—1) that the worthiness of life depends on the condition of one's liver; 2) that the worthiness of life depends on the individual. But, if we follow closely, we see that the French translation means something different. Here the English word "liver" is rendered literally by the French word "*foie*," but in French the words "*foie*" and "*foi*" are homonyms. Accordingly, we find both similarity and difference in the two claims implicit in the French translation: 1) the same—that the worthiness of life depends on the condition of one's liver; 2) different—that the worthiness of life depends on having faith. So, something gets carried over but something else gets lost here in the French translation. The French translator has chosen to emphasize the fact of the pun, but part of the content of the original pun has been left behind and its meaning has been

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Routledge, 2006), 22.

[12] Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," in *Theories of Translation,* 42.

[13] Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 10.

[14] William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *Pragmatism and Other Essays,* ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin, 2000), 219-241.

altered due to the different resonances of the two languages. The point is simply that, even though the translation is not a perfect or adequate translation of the original, it does not fail. Instead, it opens up a productive path for working through the dialectic of fidelity and betrayal—or what Ricoeur calls a "happy translation."

3. Ricoeur and The Paradigm of Translation

It has been suggested by Domenico Jervolino that translation is a third paradigm governing Ricoeur's later thought.[15] Yet, if it is to perform this role, translation must go beyond the regional concerns of actual translators over how to transfer a message in one language to another and take on a general significance that applies to all sorts of linguistic exchanges. In other words, what holds true for interlinguistic translation will have to become a model for other types of exchanges as well, including encounters with other cultures, other people, and even with ourselves. These exchanges can be shown to take place within the practical dialectic of fidelity and betrayal that defines the task of translation. There too we find that something is preserved but something lost, something is transferred but something blocked, something is understood but misunderstood. Yet, in spite of the difficulties posed by the encounter with the other, this model holds open the hope of finding a happy equivalent in these encounters.

To develop this broader account of translation, we can follow the lead of Roman Jakobson who distinguished between three different levels of translation.[16] For Jakobson, there is first interlingual translation or translation proper—where verbal signs in one system of language are rendered by verbal signs in another language. Second, there is intralinguistic translation—or rewording—where verbal signs are rendered by synonymous signs within the same language. Finally, there is even a level of intersemiotic translation—or transmutation—where verbal signs are translated into non-verbal signs or vice versa. In what follows, I want to provide a brief sketch of how the dialectic of fidelity and betrayal operates on those levels in the same way as it does on the plane of interlinguistic translation.

One would ordinarily say that, between the speakers of a single language, the work of translation is not needed. It is possible for speakers to communicate their own thoughts and wishes, simply because they share a common language. But, there is a difference between the ideal of a perfect language, in which each word would only have one meaning, and the reality of actual languages, where each word can have multiple meanings. This is why there is a need for translation even in the everyday interactions between people who use the same language. The need for intralinguistic translation is evident, for instance, when we say to another person that "we are speaking two different languages." On a superficial level, this can occur through the creation of different types of slang or innovative uses of terms, but more deeply, this can arise when speakers of the same language—due to the diversity of

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[15] Domenico Jervolino, "Rethinking Ricoeur: The Unity of His Work and the Paradigm of Translation," in *Reading Ricoeur*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2008), 225-235.

[16] Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

their age, race, gender, social status, or life experiences—find it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate with one another in spite of a shared language.[17] In such cases, one is called to alter or rephrase or clarify something that has been said through the use of another saying. And, in this way, it is clear that the activity of translation that takes place within a language is precisely the same operation as the one that takes place from one language to another. External and internal translation alike render one word in terms of another one; they substitute one sign for another in order to say something in a different way.

In addition to dealing with the diversity of speakers in a single language, the paradigm of translation also characterizes our relation to ourselves. Hermeneutic thinkers commonly deny the existence of a direct, non-linguistic access to oneself. Just as it can be said that we use language to express our thoughts, this implies that our language, in turn, shapes what and how we think. But, regardless of the direction in which it proceeds, this transfer doesn't always happen smoothly. For instance, we often get carried away by our own language and then find ourselves going back on what we said, clarifying that "that isn't quite what I meant to say." In this gap between what is said and what is meant, one's own words are experienced as being other than one's own, as being foreign in some way to what one means. Here the task of translation no longer involves commerce with an external other but with an otherness inside oneself. Octavio Paz sheds light on this when he connects it to the acquisition of language, observing that "when we learn to speak, we are learning to translate."[18] Paz observes that children translate their experiences into a language that gradually becomes their own and that all of us are thus involved in this process of translation as we continue to acquire and emerge as speakers of our own language. This suggests the profound insight that translation is not just a secondary phenomenon in language; it is part of the original acquisition of language—indeed, for the later Ricoeur, it is woven into the fabric of language itself.

The above account indicates how the paradigm of translation can extend beyond the actual practice of translation in order to become a model for other exchanges between what is one's own and what is foreign. In addition to interlinguistic translation, we have also pointed to the role of intralinguistic translation in the exchanges taking place between oneself and others as well as those in which one's own language is encountered as an other. All of these encounters, as we have noted, are marked by the practical dialectic of fidelity and betrayal. This dialectic includes the misery of failure to find the right word as well as the joy of discovering the happy equivalent.

In a few brief but provocative moments, Ricoeur invokes the notion of "linguistic hospitality," which refers to the pleasure of welcoming the language of the other into one's own. But, he never provides a sustained discussion of how this notion might guide the practice of translation.[19] To understand the normative

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[17] For a more detailed discussion of the intralinguistic aspect of translation, see Paul Ricoeur, "Introduction," in *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 23-31.

[18] Octavio Paz, "Translation: Literature and Letters," in *Theories of Translation,* 152.

[19] For an initial sketch of the ethical dimension of Ricoeur's work on translation, see Richard Kearney

dimension of the translator's task more deeply, then, we have to look elsewhere. In what follows, I will turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas and suggest that an implicit ethics of translation can be found there as well. If this suggestion turns out to be accurate, there are two direct consequences that follow: 1) the role of translation turns out to be much more central to Levinas's project than Levinas scholars have suspected up to now; 2) translation—as a practice of linguistic hospitality—will gain a normative inspiration from Levinasian ethics.

4. Three Figures of Translation in Levinas

Levinas's ethics of hospitality, I suggest, lends a normative dimension that grafts perfectly onto the model of translation described above in order to yield a linguistic hospitality.[20] This notion, which can be found in both Ricoeur and Levinas, offers an ethical justification for an important reversal of the history of translation. The task of translation, as we noted earlier, is faced with the challenge of serving two masters: the author and the reader. Ever since the Roman appropriation of Greek and Christian thought, translators have favored one side of this equation: the task of bringing the author to the reader. As a result, they tended to display little concern for the original and sought to mold the foreign into their own culture. Interestingly, such an attitude toward the task of translation mirrors the activity of totalization that Levinas denounces throughout his work, because it reduces the significance of the original in another language to its meaning for the readers of one's own language. Levinas's critique of the totality would call into question the narcissistic or egoistic tendencies of a given language or culture. Instead, under the sign of the ethical, it gives another impetus to translation by introducing a reversal of the direction of translation. Instead of appropriating the language of the author in order to satisfy the interests of the reader, the "ethical" practice of translation would seek to disappropriate the reader from his or her own language and culture by taking the reader to the author. In so doing, translation becomes a practice of linguistic hospitality—that is, a practice of opening one's own language to welcome what is foreign to dwell within it. This practice of linguistic hospitality will be developed in more detail through a study of three key articulations of translation in Levinas's work.

a. The Translation of Scripture

Levinas's Talmudic reading, "The Translation of the Scripture," examines the legend about the origins of the Septuagint, which was the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch.[21] The issue at stake there is the question of whether, and if

who is the only other scholar, to my knowledge, who has caught up to this idea: "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation," *Research in Phenomenology* 37 (2007): 147-159.

[20] Derrida himself famously described *Totality and Infinity* as an immense treatise on hospitality. See Jacques Derrida, "Le mot d'accueil," in *Adieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), 49.

[21] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Translation of the Scripture," in *In the Time of the Nations,* trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 33-54.

so to what extent, the Hebrew of the Torah can be translated into other languages without losing its holiness. Put more broadly, the question also concerns the distinctiveness of Judaic culture and whether its practices are utterly untranslatable or whether they can in fact be translated into other cultures. To address this question, Levinas reflects on the following Mishnah:

> Between the [holy] books on one hand and the tefilin and mezuzot on the other, this is the only difference: the books are written in all languages, whereas the tefilin and the mezuzot only in "Assyrian" [Hebrew]. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: "Even for the [holy] books, they [the masters] have only authorized [by way of another language] their being written in Greek." (TN, 33)

The Mishnah presents two competing views on this question that are polar opposites. The first of these views would endorse an "unlimited universality" (TN, 39). According to this alternative, the Torah, as well as Judaic culture, would be translatable into all other languages and cultures. Their sacred qualities would be expressible to anyone. The second of these opinions holds that the Torah and Judaism are untranslatable into other languages and cultures. According to this alternative, any translation of the Torah would annul its religious qualities by definition. This opinion is supported by the *baraita*, or tradition, holding that the text is religiously disqualified whenever any changes occur to its traditional forms, including the letter of the text as well as its material construction. This would result in an untranslatable Judaism. However, in his own reading of the Talmudic text, Levinas seems to avoid either of these two extremes and to navigate toward a third option, which might be characterized as a limited universality allowing for a limited translatability of the Torah (TN, 39).

The translation of the Torah into Greek, on this latter view, is a necessary trial through which the Torah must proceed in its development. Levinas draws this lesson from the last part of the Talmudic text, which comments on the verse "God enlarge Japheth! May he dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen 9:27). This verse is taken to encapsulate a spiritual trial that is faced by students of the Torah over the question of the proper balance between the desire, on the one hand, to retain the distinctiveness of Judaism and, on the other hand, to open it onto a shared humanity and intelligibility. By calling for the speech of Japheth to dwell in the tents of Shem, the Talmudic text answers that it is necessary for the Hebrew language to open its doors to the influence of another language: in this case, the Greek tongue that is spoken by the descendants of Japheth. It calls for the Hebrew language to welcome another language into its tents, that is, into the tents where the study of the Torah takes place. And, moreover, the text goes on to suggest that this welcoming of Greek is necessary precisely because the study of the Torah has something to learn from Greek. What it acquires from its translation into the Greek language, according to Levinas's interpretation, is "the language of deciphering. It demystifies. It demythicizes. It depoeticizes as well. Greek is prose, the prose of commentary, of exegesis, of hermeneutics" (TN, 53). The Greek translation thus contributes a

greater clarity and understanding of the meaning of the Torah than could be gained through Hebrew alone.

But, this transfer of the Torah into Greek can only succeed to a degree. Even while it acknowledges the need for translation, the Talmud is at the same time quite hostile toward the Greek language, viz. its very same role of demystifying and depoeticizing the Hebrew language. These functions, to be sure, can render the text more intelligible, but they can also produce the opposite effect of distorting or covering over its original meaning. In support of this point, the Talmud records fifteen cases where the Septuagint alters or corrects the translations of the Pentateuch. The deep significance of these corrections, on Levinas's reading, is to suggest that there is something untranslatable about the Pentateuch which does not flow into Greek (TN, 50). In highlighting these untranslatable aspects of the text, the Talmud thus emphasizes that the Greek translation cannot stand alone and that it is still necessary to learn Hebrew in order to study the Torah.

The above account does not aim to capture all the intricacies and subtle nuances of Levinas's Talmudic reading, but it suffices for our purposes to provide some important clues into his understanding of the task of translation. Translation from Hebrew into Greek is possible. The ideas in their holiness, on his view, are translatable into a foreign tongue, and in fact, the original text can even stand to gain an increase of clarity or intelligibility through its translation. However, a translation can never be an absolute or perfect rendering of the original; its meaning is always altered or transformed in some way through the process of carrying the text over from one language to another one. Translations, as a result, inevitably run up against the limits of the untranslatable, and as Levinas's Talmudic reading suggests, these limits stem partly from the materiality of language and partly from cultural or historical differences.[22] This leads to the conclusion that, for Levinas, the study of the Torah entails the inseparability of the two texts the original and its translation are both necessary to its intelligibility.

But, even if this Talmudic reading can shed light on the relationship between the Hebrew and Greek languages, it still leaves open the question of whether Levinas's account of translation only applies to these two languages in particular or whether it can be extended to all languages. For this reason, the following sections will turn to Levinas's philosophical writings in order to determine the further extent to which an implicit theory of translation might be articulated there.

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[22] And, before Levinas is charged with cultural chauvinism here, note that this is the case not only between Judaism and other traditions but also within Judaism itself—the spiritual meaning of Judaism is inaccessible within the Jewish community itself, specifically those who do not know the Hebrew language or partake in the materiality of its culture or history. The very same gap that separates Hebrew from Greek or Hebrew from other languages also separates the Jewish community from itself, between those who know Hebrew and those who do not.

b. The Ethics of Hospitality in *Totality and Infinity*[23]

Levinas's implicit account of translation can be uncovered indirectly through the notion of hospitality in *Totality and Infinity*. "To exist," Levinas says, "is to dwell." That is to say that human beings are not simply scattered out and delivered over to the world; they do not begin from just any starting point whatsoever. A human life emerges in the context of a dwelling or home. A home, of course, is an object situated within the world and identifiable as an object among other objects, but it is not just a physical arrangement of materials. A home is also an enclosure that separates itself from the world and establishes an interior space that is apart from the world. In this way, it becomes "for itself" in the sense that its self-enclosure establishes both a shelter and a refuge from the world in which we find comfort, gentleness, and warmth. Levinas, not uncontroversially, describes this in terms of the feminine, and takes this to represent a type of nurturing that protects one against the harshness of the world. As both for itself and in the world, the shelter of the home is not like a Leibnizian monad that has "no windows" and is wholly self-contained; instead the dwelling is described as both "open and closed" (*TI* 148). Paradoxically, the enclosure that closes the interior space of the dwelling from the world is at the same time the condition for it to open onto the world. This is why Levinas goes on to say that "the possibility for the home to open to the Other is just as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows" (*TI* 173).

This description of the home becomes relevant to our argument, if we consider language to be analogous to a home in which we dwell. It almost goes without saying that we do not find ourselves abandoned by language at birth or able to take up any language from an array of possibilities. And, although all human beings dwell within language, it is obvious nonetheless that each one of us always enters into language through the shelter of a particular language—note too that this gets described in feminine terms as a maternal language. That is where we first emerge "at home" as speakers of a language that can be called our own. Like a dwelling, a maternal language provides a place for us to emerge as speakers, and also like a dwelling, it is both open and closed to what is outside itself. It is closed in the sense that it is sufficient for giving shape and expression to a human life, but it is open in the sense that it is the basis from which we can come to learn or adopt other languages.

A language, just as much as any dwelling, can resist the influence of other languages by closing its doors to them and, so to speak, posting a "Keep Out" sign. Even though languages need other languages, they often strongly resist external influences. One source, among others, of this resistance to translation is the false belief that a language forms a pure and self-sufficient whole and thus does not need translation in the same way as a monad needs no windows. But the work of translation plays an important role in breaking up the narcissistic and ethnocentric tendencies that plague languages and cultures, because it exposes them to the test of

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[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); subsequent references will be cited in text as TI.

a foreign element. This is why the essence of translation, as Antoine Berman understands it, is "to be an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering" of a language.[24] Although cultures may resist it, every culture needs this de-centering and exposure that comes about through translation—cultures expand and thrive through the cross-fertilization of ideas in translation.

The translator might be described, in Levinasian terms, as playing an ethical role. By opening a language onto what is foreign, the translator stands at the vestibule of his or her own language and offers a word of welcome to a language that is foreign. In this way, the translator brings the language that is foreign to dwell within one's own language. Moreover, if it is true to say that we dwell in a language that is our own and if the translator is the one who welcomes a language that "comes from another shore," then there is perhaps no better formula to describe the practice
of translation than Berman's phrase "the shelter of the faraway" (*auberge de lointain*).[25]

The implicit account of translation at work in *Totality and Infinity* connects it to the practice of linguistic hospitality. But, if this initial account could be faulted, it would be for its overly simplistic picture of the task of translation. It seems to assume, as Levinas's ethics at this period does, that if one's own language were simply opened to a foreign language, then it could provide a safe place of refuge for that language. However, as Levinas's Talmudic reading already suggested, the work of welcoming one language into another one does not occur without transforming the two languages between which this exchange takes place. In the translation from Hebrew to Greek, for instance, the Greek translation gained religious qualities but lost some of the meaning from the original, while the Hebrew original gained greater clarity but lost its poetic complexities. As a result, it is clear that in the welcome of the other language, both the host language as well as the foreign language are altered through this exchange. This highlights the need, in turn, for Levinas to develop a more sophisticated account of translation, one which highlights both the transformative risks and rewards that motivate the desire to translate.

c. The Task of Translation in *Otherwise than Being*[26]

The dialectic of fidelity and betrayal becomes an explicit theme in the opening pages of *Otherwise than Being* with their treatment of the verb *traduire*. The French verb *traduire*, of course, primarily means to translate or convey, but it also covers a broader secondary and figurative range in French than it does in English. It can include "bringing something to justice" (*traduire en justice*), "being shown in" (*se traduire par*) or "finding expression in" (*se traduire par*). In all of these various senses, though, it is connected to the idea that something comes to be shown in a

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[24] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, 4.

[25] Antoine Berman, *La Traduction et la Lettre: Ou l'Auberge du lointain* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).
The expression in this subtitle might be rendered as the shelter of the one from afar or the hostel for the foreign.

[26] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981); subsequent references to this text will appear in the text as OB.

result or in an expression. Oddly enough, this type of manifestation is also connected to the French verb *trahir* (to betray), which commonly indicates betrayal but can also be used to indicate a negative way of showing or expressing something. Think of the sense in which we might say in English that someone gave herself away by her smile (*elle s'est trahi par son souri*). In this latter sense, the verb *trahir* takes on the sense of showing something that one did not intend or want to show. This pairing of *traduire* and *trahir* in *Otherwise than Being*—which echoes the adage *traduire, c'est trahir* ("to translate is to betray") opens the way to the more subtle account of translation that was missing from Levinas's earlier work but is yet contained in his Talmudic reading. On such an account, a translation can allow something to be shown faithfully in one's own language but it can also betray itself through what it shows.

Although the pairing of translation and betrayal is present in the French original, English readers of *Otherwise than Being* are likely to miss this connection due to the English translator's own word choices. For example, in Chapter 1.3, Levinas writes that "*dans le langage comme dit, tout se traduit devant nous—fut-ce au prix d'une trahison,*" a statement which establishes an explicit connection between the two terms. But their connection drops out altogether from the English translation which reads: "in language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal" (*OB* 6). Here the translator opts for the expression "is conveyed by" in order to render the French *se traduit*. While the English translation captures the underlying meaning of Levinas's claims about the relation between the Saying and the Said here, it misses the literal reference to the work of translation, and as a result, leads English readers to miss the Levinas's attempt to establish a connection between the Saying and the Said and the task of translation.

The translator of *Otherwise* is not unaware of such perils. In his own introduction to the book, Alphonso Lingis identifies a set of choices that were made in the translation of the work: a syntactical choice in favor of English stylistic conventions, a subject-predicate sentence structure, and declarative statements. The strategy behind such choices clearly reflects the dominant tendency in the history of translation: it favors what we have described as the task of bringing the author closer to the world of the reader. As an alternative, one might wonder what the opposite strategy of translation—one inspired by the practice of a linguistic hospitality that takes the reader to the author—might yield. While that strategy may be more closely attuned in some respects to the Levinasian project, my sense is that such an attempt would fall short as well.

Deeper than the interlinguistic question of how to translate the French original faithfully into English, there is a question of the translatability of the book into language as such—or, in other words, what we earlier called a question of intralinguistic translation. This issue is already anticipated by Lingis in his translator's introduction. He observes:

> The very sentences of this book. . . . What they mean to translate into a text
> is always betrayed, in a translation always unfaithful to the pre-text. But it is
> only thus that they can be said. And the saying cannot be utterly

obliterated under the said. It is also conveyed nonetheless in this
unfaithful text. (*OB* xliii)

It would take a lot more work to unpack the full significance of this statement, but suffice it to say that *Otherwise than Being* raises the question of how such a project can be articulated in language at all. This can be seen, for example, in the well-known dynamic of the Saying and the Said. The Saying, in order to be shown, must be conveyed in the Said. But, in turn, the Said also betrays the Saying. So it must be unsaid and then said again. What can this possibly be about, if not the task of translation?

The interplay between the Saying and the Said corresponds perfectly to the dialectic of fidelity and betrayal in which the work of translation is inscribed. The translator is one who substitutes the Saying for the Said by exchanging one word for another one. But, since the dialectic of fidelity and betrayal is insurmountable, this means that no substitution can ever be perfect or quite adequate. Due to what gets lost in translation, the work of the translator always falls short. Every translation, it might be said, must be undone and thereby calls forth another translation. This does not necessarily imply endless betrayal or the misery of translation without end. It also points to a wonderful feature of language—its infinite resources—everything that is said can be said in a different way. Through translation, everything can be said otherwise.

What emerges, then, in Levinas's later work is a more sophisticated understanding of the work of translation. His earlier account of the welcome of the other in hospitality was overly simplistic, because it assumed that this welcome takes place according to the logic of an "either . . . or": either one welcomes the other or one does violence to the other. In *Otherwise than Being,* however, a more nuanced understanding of the work of translation emerges. There is no longer a purely hospitable or inhospitable practice of translation, instead every translation is an irreducible pairing of the Saying and the Said, of welcome and closure, of fidelity and betrayal.

5. Linguistic Hospitality in Interfaith Dialogue

The above account has highlighted the valuable contributions that Ricoeur and Levinas, respectively, can make to the theory of translation. Translation, as a practice of linguistic hospitality, opens up an exchange with the other where, as Ricoeur says, "the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house."[27] The linguistic hospitality practiced in translation, as we have suggested, can be extended beyond the scope of interlinguistic translation and become a general model for all types of engagement between what is one's own and what is foreign. In consideration of the theme of the present volume, I would like to close with a

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[27] Ricoeur, "Translation as Challenge and Source of Happiness," 10. 13

suggestion about how this model could be especially fecund in a world, such as ours, which is marked by religious pluralism.[28]

The linguistic hospitality described above, as it turns out, outlines an important orientation toward religious plurality. Instead of ignoring different faiths or simply appropriating them to the extent that they reinforce one's own faith, this model calls for a welcome of other faiths that does not leave them as they were but rather transforms them as a result of this exchange. To bring this about through interfaith dialogue, what is needed is something like an "ethos of translation."[29] Just as the translator is someone who speaks at least two different languages, this would call for the development of "cultural bilinguals," so to speak, who are able to speak at least two different faiths. Such people would be able to take part in the exchange of customs and convictions from one faith culture to another one. This type of exchange takes place on a deeper level than interlinguistic translation it concerns the issue of sharing life and the question of how to live together through our differences. Living together in the ethos of translation would imply that, in addition to understanding their own faith, everyone ought to become proficient in understanding at least one other faith.

Levinas's Talmudic reading, for instance, can help us to establish what results can reasonably be expected from interfaith dialogue. It suggests that faiths, like the languages that encode them, are not self-sufficient. They stand in need of instruction from other faiths, just as much as languages are in need of other languages. Exchanges between faiths can result in a happy translation which yields greater clarity and insight about one's own faith.[30] But, at the same time, it should be acknowledged that these exchanges can also run up against what has been called the misery of translation. This includes the potential dangers that result from the difficulty of translating from one faith to another one. As we have shown, no translation is likely to be absolutely perfect. Translation thus always carries the risk that a faith will be distorted or betrayed through the exchanges that take place between faiths. This, however, does not imply that interfaith dialogue is impossible—it is difficult, to be sure, but not impossible. It simply serves as an important reminder that interfaith dialogue, like the task of translation, always takes place within the dialectic of fidelity and betrayal.

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[28] For further exploration of this topic, see Richard Kearney and James Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[29] Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in *The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), 5.

[30] I have in mind here particularly some interfaith work that has been done in the area of human rights. See, for example, Michael Brannigan, *Ethics Across Cultures* (McGraw-Hill, 2004).