

**IN TRANSLATION**

by

**SUSANA FUENTES-ESCALANTE**

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Graduate School*

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*David S. Ferris*

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*Anthony Abiragi*

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*Lauren Stone*

*Date*\_\_\_\_\_

*The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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## Abstract

Fuentes-Escalante, Susana. (M.A. in Comparative Literature)

In Translation

Thesis directed by Professor and Chair of the Department of Humanities & Comparative Literature David Ferris

This thesis uses the *act of translation* in order to better illustrate our modern conception of *humanity* in linguistic form at the same time it challenges the problematics of defining the discipline of *Comparative Literature* in relation to this *humanity*. It touches on three valences of the act of translation (historical, political, and literary) so as to provide a literary framing of what the discipline of *Comparative Literature* – the *human discipline* in illimitable form – may look like. The *historical* section of this work introduces the displacement of origin as *humanity's* notion of coming into being as a community of multiple individuals in coexistence; the *political* side of the act demonstrates a transformative and expansive surface area wherein this polividual coexistence that is *humanity* resides, coming to terms with its own multiplicity as a unity; the final chapter, on *literature*, expresses *humanity's* desire to challenge its conception as irreducible absolute in relation to the possibility of an alterior being it creates in language. The *theory of translation* will be employed in order to unfold a mirroring act throughout the sections that allows for the discipline of *Comparative Literature* to be transformed into a multi-valent discipline of human understanding.

**Hors-Text**

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What of this place? It is nameable? And wouldn't it have some impossible relation to the possibility of naming?

Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* or *On the Name*

## Hors-Text

### *An Introduction*

The purpose of this thesis is to unfold the question of the modern problematics of defining what world literature is, as understood by David Damrosch in his book *What is World Literature?*,<sup>1</sup> in relation to a modern idea of what *humanity* is.<sup>2</sup> This question is similarly addressed yet differently (and contrastingly) conceived by Emily Apter in her book *Against World Literature*, where she focuses on the differences between languages and peoples, their untranslatability, as the impossibility of purely unifying them under one single commonality.<sup>3</sup> This thesis, however, will focus instead on the positive side of translation in an attempt to answer the present question of what the discipline of Comparative Literature is or can be, by incorporating the act of translation as that which is translatable language and that which is shared and common within human language and human history (thus reinforcing a positive commonality instead of differentiating negativity).<sup>4</sup> As such, it traces the unfolding of this answer through three over-arching aspects of the act of translation: its relation to human history, to human politics, and to human literature.<sup>5</sup> The discipline of Comparative Literature,

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<sup>1</sup> Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* p.4: “The idea of world literature can usefully continue to mean a subset of the plenum of literature. I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language (Virgil was long read in Latin in Europe). In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base.”

<sup>2</sup> According to the *OED*, humanity means “the quality of being humane; (now) *spec.* kindness, benevolence.”

<sup>3</sup> Apter, *Against World Literature* p.18: “Screwed-up literature...in standing the world on its head...encourages the literatures of the world to mess with World Literature, turning it into a process of translating untranslatably. It beckons one to run the experiment of imagining what a literary studies contoured around untranslatability might be.” This act as the *untranslatable translatable* is in effect what we wish to develop in this work.

<sup>4</sup> The movement of this act of translation as a positive and humane end will be portrayed at an intersection between the ambiguity of the parameters of a delimited people as presented by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* and the singularity of a focal point as represented by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*. On the one hand, we shall see this ambiguity introduced in chapter two, in relation to Spivak’s understanding of Area Studies in fusion with Comparative Literature. On the other, we shall maintain the universality and uniqueness inherent to the singularity of the individual work, similarly, with Spivak’s incorporation of Comparative Literature into Area Studies. Benedict Anderson’s *imagined communities* can be understood as this ambiguity; Pascale Casanova’s *Paris* can be reflected in this singularity.

<sup>5</sup> We take these three valences to represent *human expression in translated language*. We do acknowledge however, that these are non-absolute categories.

as it will be illustrated below, will come to be understood as the active and contemporary representation of humanity's most primitive humanism.<sup>6</sup>

In the first chapter, we present the act of translation in relation to a human origin that would allow for the possibility of better understanding our modern conception of a philosophy of history.<sup>7</sup> The second chapter, traces this historical unfolding in relation to a human politics as demarcated by a quite material (and much more practical) surface area that is the planet. Finally, the last chapter employs translation as an act of literature in order to return to the personal and intimate a relation with alterity<sup>8</sup> that is not necessarily fulfilled as presence, and yet nonetheless categorically imposed by the very act of translation.

The first chapter then, *On Origin as Such*, will understand the general process of translation as that which enables and makes possible a history of philosophy, *historically*. Its process and act allows for the possibility of not only considering the existence of this history of philosophy as such but similarly of understanding the structure of its sociohistorical model.

Through an analysis of the biblical story of *Genesis* this chapter we trace the traditional analytical process of Western literary theorization. As we shall see, the story of Genesis as the origin story of the West par excellence, unfolds in a dichotomal process, a set of derivational binaries that present themselves always in opposition to something other than itself. That something other, of course, varies in form. Its role, however, is always equal in necessity to what it stands in relation to, fulfilling the need of its presence, being in turn delimited and determined by this other presence. In the first instance of Genesis for example, God is presented against the empty abyss that is the cosmos as “the face upon the waters” while

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<sup>6</sup> Essentially as what most *commonly* defines us as human. What this commonality is will be explained in *The Naming Being*, ch. 1

<sup>7</sup> We reiterate: “a human origin” – i.e., one of many.

<sup>8</sup> *Alterity* is here meant to be understood in relation to Michael Taussig's conception of it in his book *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, where the mimetic act (in this thesis, the act of translation) has the paradoxical effect of creating both sameness and difference.

further on, when he stands in relation to the Earth, he becomes the creator of the created planet and no longer the abyss that holds together that other abyss that is the universe. We see in this example that God changes form according to both the relationship he sustains and the form of the object he is sustaining this relationship with.

The purpose of this chapter then is to demonstrate that if we wish to conceive of language as a purely original production we must first come to terms with the fact that binaries, dichotomies, and polarities introduce into the theoretical model of understanding a restriction and limitation reliant upon the form of reference this medium wishes to take. In other words, the exposition of analysis in the form of binaries and dichotomies (even when presented from within a dialectical movement) restricts the linguistic productive process to a determined set of forms and established relationships graspable only at a surface-level of understanding. We find ourselves with the typical “on the one hand” and “on the other;” opposite sides of the same equation, reflections of each other in both image and movement. What we have as a product when a dichotomal analysis is employed then is yet another derivational instance of the same form, the same “God” that only appears to undergo a transformative change and yet does not, in essence, find himself a god altered at all.

What this means is that the continuation of a dichotomal way of analysis will not only intrinsically seek to sustain itself as a theoretical model but it will also attempt to produce a result identical to itself. In other words, a dichotomal model of understanding will always produce a binary that understands and reflects that model. Take as a basic and well-known example the biblical phrase that accompanies the creation of humankind, where not only the content but also the structure of the phrase reflects this self-productive process very clearly: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female



created he them.”<sup>9</sup> Even though a translation is made between God and man, this translation returns to the same God essentially untransformed: it is always God as “he,” “his,” and “him” in all its forms. Similarly, even if we do not have a symmetrically constructed balance for the male-female relationship in the latter part of the sentence, we can still easily assume that the same is to happen (the emptiness of this equation however, as we shall see, is significant). What this means is that when we concentrate on these sets of binaries, and even if a surface translation occurs (God-man, he-God, male-female), we will still not witness the presence of a purely originary and creatively transformative process at work.

Translation as the act that both allows and delimits the possibility of these (non)transformations then, is what most clearly elucidates the limitations and reproductive excesses in the unfolding of this dichotomal process. In other words, the act of translation finds itself, like a rapidly bouncing pinball, caught between two adjacent walls inside one same machine. According to Samuel Weber, in the act of translation these metaphorical walls have been historically identified as “two inseparable and yet incompatible motifs: fidelity and betrayal.”<sup>10</sup> French translation theorist Antoine Berman agrees, referring to this tension as “the ancillary condition of translation.” In act, translation finds itself strained between “fidelity and treason” he explains, both demanding that it “serve two masters.”<sup>11</sup>

Let us briefly explain the paradoxical nature of this binary for it will be retraced and returned to throughout the paper. Fidelity as one of its masters sustains the sameness of the transfer. Fidelity demands of the act of translation that the essence of one thing be transferred from one place to another without being subject to corruptive liberalisms. In the example above (and below), it is what allows “God” to remain and be God throughout all the phases of

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<sup>9</sup> *Genesis* 1:27, King James Version

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Weber, *The ‘Task of the Translator’* p.66

<sup>11</sup> Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign* p.3

transformation found in the creation story of Genesis. According to Berman, under this category we can place “the work, the author, [and] the foreign language,”<sup>12</sup> what similarly marks for Weber “the singularity of the individual texts.”<sup>13</sup> Fidelity then demands that whatever is unique (i.e. singular, individual) in a literary work remain faithful to an origin and therefore the same, in relation to it, without alteration to its essence as it undergoes the process of translation.

Betrayal as the other master however, demonstrates the differential excess of the act of translation. It binds the process of translation to the inherent possibility of it being incessantly reproducible and unstoppably reflexive. It is, if we return to the example of Genesis, what in fact allows God to transform into the face upon the waters or into planet Earth or even into the image that is to be man. Betrayal is what allows a difference to intervene between what has been traditionally recognized as the original and its translation, the power of being able to transform a work of art written in one form in one language into another form in another. It is what allows language to shed its skin or change its colors, categorically demanding a change from the original, a literary difference that is in turn mandatory to the act of translation in general. These are the two faces of translation.<sup>14</sup>

We will demonstrate in the latter sections of this chapter then that the very existence of a process such as translation is in fact what proves this dichotomous binary effective as a dialectical process. Weber remarks that historically and traditionally translation is “the medium [that] was thus construed as an intermediary between two places:”<sup>15</sup> between one language and another, between fidelity and betrayal, between sameness and singularity and

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<sup>12</sup> Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign* p.3

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Weber, *The ‘Task of the Translator’* p.66

<sup>14</sup> For more on this relationship see Antoine Berman’s “Translation and the trials of the foreign.”

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Weber, *The ‘Task of the Translator’* p.67

difference and excess. In other words it construed the two poles at the same time it construed the relationship that is translation sustaining them.

We read further in Genesis and into the story of Babel as the first instance of a cohesive multiplicity that does not necessarily know each other but understands each other in some way, as a conglomerate of communicable human beings, in order to challenge the dichotomal rhetoric surrounding the act of translation. As we shall see in the latter sections (Babel and The Naming Being) the process and act of translation or translation as medium, is what in fact allows for the movement between the singular (same, fidelity, proper) and the multiple (difference, betrayal, common) to take place (with)out doing away with either pole of the binary but at the same time challenging its delimitations. The act of translation allows a de-politicization (think: poles but also politics)<sup>16</sup> of the binary in order to extend its poetic movement out and across an open and illimitable surface area.

In the second section then, we will refer to Jacques Derrida's work on the theory of translation *Des Tours de Babel*, taking the biblical story of Babel as the disseminating city proper, a proper name that becomes the common origin of an expansive movement of linguistic expression. In summary, the metaphor of Babel represents an entirely centered and contained proper people within and of a city. Babel or "the Family of Nations"<sup>17</sup> challenges God with the building of a tower in an attempt to "touch"<sup>18</sup> the skies and reach the height of God, i.e. be something-like God (think: at his level). This arouses "God's jealousy," provoking a dispersal of the Family of Nations, all descendants of Noah after the flood. We will see here that translation is made effective (again) but in a diverse form, moving away from the dichotomal binary. In this biblical story it is employed in order to disseminate the people of

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<sup>16</sup> This word, we will be using it in relation to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of it in her book *Death of a Discipline*, ch.1

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 1:67, King James Version

<sup>18</sup> For a metaphorical unfolding of "touch" see Samuel Weber's *The "Task of the Translator"*

the Family of Nations into a vast world while at the same time it makes possible an understanding between this conglomerate of entirely independent beings.<sup>19</sup> We will demonstrate that the individual is not born in relation to the individual, but rather in relation to a society of unknown other individual peoples, understanding the realization of one's own *Bildung*<sup>20</sup> as a multifaceted existence of kingship and coexistence. We shall thus come to a better understanding of what it means to find (id)entity in the vast multiplicity that is humanity.<sup>21</sup>

For clarity, let's restate that if we concentrate on the movement of translation, we may better understand that which gives rise to the dichotomal model of understanding that has been pervasively present through literary (and/or historical) centuries. We may in this way not only recognize but challenge its denominational heteronormativity. If in fact the process and act of translation is what allows a history of philosophy the very possibility of being considered as a culturally and politically significant corpora of work, we must return to the process of translation as the originary movement of signification, the movement that brings about the first creative instance.<sup>22</sup> This is because translation's relationship to origin is what actually originates origin, "it transports" the very act of creating "its origin or original"<sup>23</sup> as it moves from place to place constantly dis-placed.

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<sup>19</sup> This conglomerate can be related here to Benedict Anderson's *imagined communities*

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis on the word *Bildung* in relation to translation and *Bild* (image or form) see Derrida's *Theology of Translation* and Antoine Berman's *The Experience of the Foreign*.

<sup>21</sup> Both Carol Jacobs in her essay *The Monstrosity of Translation* and Paul De Man in his *Conclusions* to the Cornell University's Lectures on Walter Benjamin and *The Task of the Translator*, reiterate the importance of keeping the fragment, a fragment part of a multiplicity that, *in translation*, finds cohesion through an interaction of particular forms in singular relation to one another. The original is never like its translations and its translations are never like the original and yet they nonetheless stand leveled and equal in the face of each other as individual literary works in history.

<sup>22</sup> This "first origin" will be better understood after chapter two, section two, *Babel*, where its location becomes indecipherable.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Weber, *The 'Task of the Translator'* p.67

In the second chapter, we will develop this notion of a constantly originating origin in relation to socio-political dimensions. Here we will introduce translation as the process that allows Comparative Literature to effectively take place. By transforming our understanding of the act of translation from a fixed movement between two located and fixed binaries into a process that unfolds over and against a surface area that we modernly recognize as the globe, planet, or Earth, we may then much more clearly perceive the movement that is translation as such and the possibilities that its act opens for humanity as a whole. Taking our philosophical understanding of the general process of translation as developed in chapter one, and setting it against a physical space or area, will give translation the opportunity of moving away from its juggling position of opposites and into an actively playing performance set against a constantly expanding literary playing field. In short, we shall translate our philosophical conception of translation as a general act developed in the first chapter into a more practical understanding of what it means and what are the consequences of employing translation in the contemporary physico-political sphere.

The first section of this chapter *Death of a Discipline*, will analyze Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's first chapter *Crossing Borders* in particular and her book *Death of a Discipline* in general. In this chapter and book, Spivak calls for the need of merging Area Studies with the discipline of Comparative Literature in order to de-politicize Comparative Literature from its fixed boundaries of origin and political nationality. According to Spivak, Area Studies offers a more expansive (and indeed, perhaps more ambiguous) understanding of the physical limitations we take to demarcate the planet. Political and national frontiers, borders, and walls fall<sup>24</sup> in the face of a act of translation seeking a coalescence of demographically similar peoples instead of a separation between nationally estranged entities and (id)entities. The

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<sup>24</sup> She begins her book with the fall of the Berlin wall

expansive movement we perceive in this chapter in a way mirrors the disseminating dispersal of peoples offered in Babel, with the inclusion of a physical space giving us the opportunity of translating the philosophical act of translation as understood previously into a physically tangible scene of unfolding human politics. It gives our philosophical surmises of the first chapter, in short, a more practical understanding and experience in the real world.

Once we are able to translate each unique individuality into a multiplicity of coalescing beings residing in one common space or area that is the planet, we are able to develop the notion of a unified conglomerate of peoples, all human beings in relation to one another, properly denominated as the human species. Taking the tellurian<sup>25</sup> planet (and not the nation) as our home and our place of residence, we may conceive language as the overarching concept that subsumes all world languages under itself. Language becomes human language when, through a process and act of translation, one is able to pluralize the singular at the same time the singular finds itself pluralized.<sup>26</sup>

What language is, on top of that, is the conglomerate not only of all the linguistic mediums of expression but also of all the mediums of human expression no matter its form. The human species is the expression of this language. Like-God in the very first binary, he is the creator and the form of the created in the space that is language, absolutely reflected back unto itself. In other words, in language, the human being finds its completion as a unified human species.

Finally, in the last chapter of this thesis Khôrazón,<sup>27</sup> we introduce an eerie return to the individual after a journey launched into the vastness of the universal through an

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<sup>25</sup> Adjectival earth.

<sup>26</sup> This same idea is developed in chapter three in an analysis of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in relation to Spivak's *The Politics of Translation*. They both use the metaphor of an infinitely multiple "drop of water."

<sup>27</sup> The Derridean *khôra* phonetically punned and completed by the Spanish *corazón* (heart).

understanding of the act of translation in literature. With a brief analysis of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* we demonstrate that, when pushed to its limits, translation (and humanity as an expressive entity in its act) is nothing other than the (non)intelligible possibility of alterity. Jacques Derrida's *khôra* is thus employed as a positive and final way of translating human existence in relation to this alterity, even if this means giving up or lending oneself to the possibility of entirely losing oneself in the process of such translation.

## Chapter I

### *On Origin as Such*

#### *Translation as the Act of a Philosophy of Human History*

#### Genesis

According to Samuel Weber in *A Touch of Translation: On Walter Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator,'* translation may only be properly conceived and understood when first rendered against “the traditional notion of origin...found in the first book of *Genesis*, where origin is understood as creation.”<sup>28</sup> Weber argues that in *Genesis* we find “a series of dichotomies” unfolding with the narrative’s progression, introducing in turn, the problematics of translation. Translation problematizes the question of origin because it both grants full rights to the singular at the same time it bestows absolute space to the expansion of the multiple. What this means is that on the one hand, the origin or conception of an original implies a derivational stance that demands singularity. On the other, translation is extant precisely because there is a way of relation between the original and its other. (These polarities, if we recall from the introduction, are parallel to the idea of fidelity and betrayal demanding both sameness and difference at the same time. This, in turn, coincides with Michael Taussig’s *alterity*). Thus we return to *Genesis* and the biblical story of creation in order to better illustrate the unfolding of this dichotomal process wherein translation is bound.

Weber remarks that in the biblical beginning, space is “defined through a series of oppositions that progressively differentiate the place called earth.”<sup>29</sup> “Place” as a marker of area thus allows us to understand space as what is first delimited and parceled out in the act of creation in the story of *Genesis*. The first lines of *Genesis* read:

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<sup>28</sup> Samuel Weber, *A Touch of Translation* p. 67

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Weber, *A Touch of Translation* p. 68



In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.<sup>30</sup>

We observe that difference is created first in the delineation of space with the separation of heaven and earth. Delimiting this space is the figure of God, presented as an invisible “Spirit...upon the face of the deep...upon the face of the waters,” dividing in darkness heaven and earth. He moves upon the surface of the waters as demarcator of difference, as the embodiment of that which differentiates and sustains this difference. “God” represents the negative space built within, across, and right through the scene of creation.<sup>31</sup>

Weber remarks that this movement introduces “a certain convergence and contact between the two [heaven and earth], without any sort of merging or fusion taking place.”<sup>32</sup> God is therefore simply the line delimiting the positive spaces it differentiates, negatively. This convergence and contact is actually an act of differentiation “without any sort of merging or fusion.” The name (in this case very much proper name) of “the Spirit of God” is transformed into what we may visualize as a thin differentiating pellicule, an invisible (darkness, *untranslated* into something that we may see and understand) surface dividing into meaning a space. Unto the contrasting form and surface that is “God” standing between eternities, the reader of Genesis may begin to differentiate meaning.

Further in the story, with the appearance of space in the scene, comes its opposite: time. Coincidentally, however, with and at the same time *time* is proposed, appears the name

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<sup>30</sup> King James Bible, 1.1

<sup>31</sup> This understanding of God is parallel to Apter’s conception of the Untranslatable. In *Against World Literature*, we read: “World Literature rely on a translatability assumption. As a result, the incommensurability and what has been called the Untranslatable are insufficiently built into the literary heuristic [...] World Literature seemed oblivious to the Untranslatable – as shown by its unqueried inclusion of the word ‘world’.” (p.3.9)

<sup>32</sup> Weber, *A Touch of Translation* p.68

or word as language.<sup>33</sup> We read: “And then god said, Let there be light: and there was light.” God finally speaks, and with his speech introduces light. The word *light* (we can think here of the rise and fall of the sun, the light of day and the dark of night) *alludes* to time and therefore without naming it brings its presence into the story. What bears remark however is that light comes after space, and only when there is time. This means that the word light as the spoken word of God carries within itself two contradictory opposites, a binary and dichotomal set known as spatial time. How can we then come to define it, delimit it, translate it?<sup>34</sup> In the Sciences, for example, light is understood as a spatial particle named the photon, moving in waves through time. This in turn is reflected in the possibility of giving the name “the speed-of-light” to a *unit* of time. If we then relate this back to language and light as the spoken word by God, we may understand time also to translate into light as name-language, a language that necessarily carries spatial time within itself as the binary that sustains it. In this way, humankind is able to receive from God a history, a history structured by the binary of space and time in the spoken word “light.” It is as if light swallows up this dichotomy in order for it to be translatable, or spoken, to humankind even if what it holds within itself remains untranslatable.

In this way, with language, a history-in-the-making emerges: the divine, pure, and spoken word precipitates into the crystallized name that is transformed into knowledge, translated into the rigidity of human language, distanced from the infinite possibilities of formation that are represented in the divine word that *is* God.

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<sup>33</sup> Both spoken and written. The words *are written* in the Bible while at the same time the words are pronounced by God in *Genesis*

<sup>34</sup> See, for example: <http://scienceline.ucsb.edu/getkey.php?key=512> : “Light is not matter...It is not matter as much as it is energy...Light is light.”

God need no longer stand between the heaven and the waters in order to delimit space. Through translation of the divine word into the human name, God employs a temporal dynamic that opens a space of automated difference between him (the creator) and the world (the created). In other words, with the acquisition of the spoken word humankind can begin writing its own history, making legible the first words of Genesis even if they only first referred to space.

The dichotomal process of understanding as created in God is thus handed-down, or translated as binary, to humankind. It is indeed a derivational process of translation: first is God as the divine word, the embodiment of “the Word” that stands absolutely absolving infinity. Then, heaven and earth discriminated in order to place space. Then comes time with the spoken word “light,” serving to delimit an exterior place of existence, the parceling out of an alterior space that becomes the “world.” Here, man is thus able to take place and inhabit this world, writing this history. The spoken word now corresponding to the reflected name bound to the instance of an immediate presence, carries within itself both creation and termination, the beginning of its conception and in it the delimitation of its boundaries, giving rise to the possibility of a *philosophical* history. The name as language, once articulated from within the specters of the alpha and the omega, introduces the possibility of a living, historical presence, a latent agency<sup>35</sup> potentially activated at any given moment of time in the form of any event of human history as recorded in language. Here then begins the writing of history. Human life is hereon considered as its own active representative, a free and self-acknowledged agent of its own history-in-the-making. According to Benjamin, “in man God set language” not in order to “subject him to language,” but because it had “served him as a

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<sup>35</sup> For a better understanding of what this *agency* or *agent* may look like and represent see Spivak’s *The Politics of Translation*

medium of creation, free.”<sup>36</sup> The history of language thus means human being’s first and last known conception of infinite freedom of existence. Human history begins with translation and the becoming of man through language, the precipitation of God (the divine word) into human form (the name).

## Babel

The act of translation however, does not in this case free itself from “the traditional notion of origin” described by Samuel Weber. We must further its historico-philosophical boundaries away from the dichotomy of spatial-time bound within light in order to meet our understanding of humanity today.

When considered as such (“progressively differentiated”) we are unable to widen the scope of our vision enough to consider the possibility of an infinite multi-dimensional way of existence. Modern studies and theories of literature have suspended the idea of a singular, traditional conception of origin, an origin that would unfold according to a progressive development, beginning with a beginning and ending with an end, bound by a movement (traditionally ascribed to translation)<sup>37</sup> in between. Such a notion has been instead displaced by the notion of an active and constant self-renovating movement that allows for the possibility of infinite diversity to coalesce within a singular particularity. According to Weber our contemporary understanding of a historical origin is characterized by this uninterrupted motion. In order for an origin to be translated as historical, one must elucidate the fact that “its historicity resides not so much in its ability to give rise to a progressive, teleological movement, but rather in its power to return incessantly to the past and through the rhythm of

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and the Language of Man* p.68.

<sup>37</sup> See Walter Benjamin’s analysis on the *Let there be!* words in *Genesis* in *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*

its ever-changing repetitions set the pace for the future.”<sup>38</sup> It is not only then that the singular derivational hand-me-down has been – with the growth of communication and the ample, astronomic vision of humanity now being grasped – surpassed by the multiple, by the polividual state of being that is in every single one of us a source of renewing historical life. It is more so the fact that there no longer exists a progressive teleological movement of growth or *Bildung* that would employ the binary that traditionally defined it and allowed for its construction and recognition. This movement has instead been replaced by a *return* (as characterized by Weber and Spivak) that sets instead a rhythm of being in motion.

This is where we wish to see the act of translation unfold.

The act of translation gives rise to the possibility of conceiving both a singularity and a multiplicity at the same time: it allows the *polis* to exist within the *vidual*. Contemporarily, the modern notion of the universal and the individual meet in the “ever-changing repetitions [that] set the pace for the future.” They set the pace for the future without, however, seeing its end. In relation to each other, the universal and the individual weave their stories together in harmony, like an infinite orchestra of life, light, sound, and movement following a rhythm that is still unique and absolutely singular at all times. Walter Benjamin uses a similar metaphor in *The Task of the Translator*, where he speaks of the conviviality of languages in harmony as the manifestation of a pure language in-the-making.<sup>39</sup> Like in the multiplicity of languages that spread through the globe, the orchestra has multiple instruments – each with their own sound, their own voice, their own “words” – tuning into each other in order to find (and sustain) an immediate differential unicity of sound. In playing, the instruments find harmony with one another the same way languages in translation relate to one another,

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel Weber, *A Touch of Translation*, p.73

<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Task of the Translator* p.257 For Walter Benjamin, *pure language* is the active correspondence of all languages in translation.

endlessly and immediately renewing the “ever-changing repetitions” of their vibrations in rhythm. Benjamin finds in Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles for example, a “harmony of...language...so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an Aeolian harp is touched by the wind.”<sup>40</sup>

Our contemporary understanding of the singularity that is humanity and in which every individual on the planet earth bears a part of has therefore surpassed the traditional and derivational understanding bound within the story of *Genesis*. Let’s move on then, to the next genitive story.

In *The Tower of Babel*, the origin of humankind as a conceivable network of differential beings in coexistence begins. For the first time we are introduced to a Family of Nations that formulates itself in relation to each other and not in derivation of each other. Translation here becomes crucial as the act that presents to man (in the face of God) a possibility of the conception of a united mankind coalescing and interacting, equally and yet differentially, with each other. Walter Benjamin speaks of languages engaged in the act of translation under similar terms when he speaks of pure language as the experience of the interaction of all languages in translation, holding a relationship of *kingship* amongst themselves.<sup>41</sup> In an analysis of the story of Babel then, we will attempt to demonstrate that our contemporary conception of humankind (and the individual as part of it) has philosophically and thereotically expanded to astronomical proportions surpassing the political realms of our act.

At an intersection of myth and history then, through a deconstructive performance of the word Babel, Jacques Derrida in *Des Tours de Babel* imaginatively theorizes the biblical story of the Tower of Babel as the origin story of humanity made possible through the act of translation. He moves us away from Genesis as humankind’s point of origin and argues

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<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Task of the Translator* p.262

<sup>41</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Task of the Translator* p.260

instead that humankind's origin is in fact portrayed by its attempt at claiming a proper name for themselves as a united plurality. In other words, the Family of Nations was not satisfied with a hand-me-down such as "light." In the story, the Family of Nations decides on Babel as the proper name for their people, their city, and their tower, differentiating the signification of Babel already at the point of origin by presenting its multiplicity of meanings (and meanings of meanings).

Further in the story, the Family of Nations' building of the tower is perceived as challenging God's universality. The building of the tower and the execution of the plan stirs God's attention and arouses "God's jealousy."<sup>42</sup> Angered, he "imposes his name" and "confounds" Babel, mankind and the family of nations, demanding the necessity of translation in the confusion of their tongues, languages, and people, scattering them throughout the world. Derrida states that God "punishes them for having thus wanted to assure themselves, by themselves, a unique and universal genealogy."<sup>43</sup> In other words, they sought their own origin, breaking from the derivational tradition of God as absolute Father (with a capital F), and were prevented from completing their task. Babel thus becomes the proper name of the "would have been" of humanity: a name that would have united humankind as "a pure signifier to a single being"<sup>44</sup> but was instead reduced to a multiplicity irreducible to an absolute singularity like God.

Through the act of translation however we perceive and may conceive of Babel disseminating. It is in translation that God sets his name against humankind as the Family of Nations, against Babel. In his namesake, God builds a presence that marks the impossibility of humanity's potential absolution, scattering and breaking the singular bond that in a proper

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<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p.7

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p.6

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p. 4

name would have given humanity, like God, a shared, unique and absolute sense of identity. Against *God*, then the tower of *Babel* falls. The descendants of Noah, the Family of Nations, disseminate, move, open a distance, a gap amongst themselves and each other. In his name, God establishes dissemination (the production of the act of translation) against Babel and the corpus that is humanity, a now becoming multiplicity of beings coalescing and interacting with one another, each in their own particular (yet not absolutely singular) way.

The ambiguity of the parameters delimiting humankind as Babel represents the ambiguity of humankind's place within its history, the dissemination of its beginning and end, and the breaking down of the binary. In the story of the Tower of Babel, humankind as Babel refers to an "irreducible multiplicity of tongues," "an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating."<sup>45</sup> Against God or something-like God, humanity bears Babel as the fallen story, the displacing into eternal incompleteness.

*Babel* thus "opens... the universal language."<sup>46</sup> With Babel, God marks the imposition of a multiversal coexistence as he "scatters the genealogical filiation [and] breaks the lineage."<sup>47</sup> Once Babel falls, it is evident that as a multiplicity it becomes insoluble. In other words, never again will (hu)man be one. Instead of that one, God takes its place; instead of God, Babel disseminates. The scattering of peoples and the dissemination of tongues that comes from the fall of the tower of Babel marks a change in a historical era, an era where Babel, i.e. man, is diversified and separated into what we now understand as the human.

The negative yet inevitable aspect of this dissemination of words, languages, and tongues in translation is that man, from here on, will face man confused, perhaps not entirely understanding him, conceiving him instead something-like a darkness of God,

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p.3

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p.7

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p.7



incomprehensible yet present. This often leads to acts of incommunication and muteness (not silence) that create abysmal gaps between one individual and another. Confused and misunderstood, we perceive our differences as an unknown threat we are unable to translate into something we may understand.

Positively conceived however, the dissemination inherent to the act of translation proposes a diverse way of understanding humanity. As illustrated in Babel, the act of translation allows for the possibility of understanding humanity as a multiplicity of beings standing in relation to each other in an infinite number of possibilities, all contingent to one another, without beginning or end.

Thus *Babel* becomes *poliversal* and *polividual*, unfolding against an endless multiplicity of beings, inaugurating a “language contract [that] among several languages is absolutely singular.”<sup>48</sup> It therefore demands the existence of the act of translation in order for the possibility of this multiplicity to coexist as the individuality that is humanity. The act of translation thus dissolves our traditional conception of what origin or original is by way of becoming the harmonious expression that is humanity across all languages. Translation is the infinitely possible ways of engagement with the voice of another individual at any given possible moment of time. The act of this process results in the infinitely original production of human language, human knowledge, and human history.

### The Naming Being

Translation thus commonly originates a conception of humanity as a historical multiplicity at the same time it sustains its singularity as sole creator of this history. It delimits

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<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel* p.18

the space “where the self loses its boundaries”<sup>49</sup> as it weaves through language a commonality that is meant to move and be shared amongst humanity as human history. It allows for borders and binaries to be displaced, re-placed instead by difuminated and ambiguous lines of demarcation that defy the very notion of absolute origin. It is what allows Babel to be Babel at the same time it is everything else.

Walter Benjamin makes this point clear in *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, where “translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language...can be considered a translation of all the others.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, every particular language shares the same origin with all the others, thus purposely defeating the very uniqueness that characterizes origin. The act of translation detaches each language from its territorial bindings and elevates it into a linguistically communicable sphere where every language communicates itself with another in pure creative signification like an orchestra in absolute harmony, where each instrument originates its own sound but where, simultaneously, every sound converges and confuses itself with the others without losing its rhythm. The act of translation thus allow for the possibility of not only moving from the individual into the multiple, giving rise to a united sense of human history, but also of sustaining the multiple as the individual. The act of translation itself, as we shall demonstrate shortly, also mirrors the process of this movement.

(We here take a slight deviation and return to the depths of translation theory in order to demonstrate that the act of translation itself mirrors the movement between the individual and the universal human).

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<sup>49</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Politics of Translation* p.313

<sup>50</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* p.70

The act of translation has been spoken through many voices – to use Tom McCall’s word in *Wrathful Translation*<sup>51</sup> — and reinterpreted in many different ways. Mostly, however, there are two sides to the argument weaving and unweaving “the intense theorizing that has spawned the world-wide discipline known as ‘translation theory’.”<sup>52</sup>

There is then, on the one hand, a sense of unity delimited by the circumference of a singularity. This end of the spectrum is composed of individual and particular works of art usually attached to at least one, but more commonly multiple, proper names.<sup>53</sup> They represent the individual and the particular, the God and the Babel. These translations are characterized as being historical, living (id)entities of human language expression that both contribute and indulge in the infinite, rhythmic movement of history. In other words, inherent to these works is the power of unicity granting individuality, a sense of a delimited self and life. (We recall again our understanding of fidelity).

On the other hand, there is dispersion, dissemination, deconstruction, infinite and endless allegorical mirroring, the tearing open of language into ever-changing possibilities and endless incomprehensibility. Samuel Weber uses the words “diversity,” “distinct,” “distinctions,” “differentiate,” “decision,” “destabilized” all in an attempt to lay hold of this process in just a couple of sentences. We may here also recall the diverse valences of betrayal, as proposed in the introduction, in relation to the act of translation.

In order to enter a communal and interactive historico-linguistic harmony then, the original work must forego the rigidity of its proper and individual frame and enter into “a constant set of flux,” where “it is able to emerge [in relation to all the others] as the pure

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<sup>51</sup> Tom McCall, *Wrathful Translation: The Sophocles of Hölderlin*: “Arguably, one *must* posit a voice in a text as the condition of its readability, for ‘voice’ is a principle of continuity, projected onto a textual field, that makes it possible to leap from articulation to articulation, as the means to render the text continuously readable.” (p. 32-33)

<sup>52</sup> Tom McCall, *Wrathful Translation: The Sophocles of Hölderlin* p.4

<sup>53</sup> The title, the author, the editor, the translator, etc.

language...the harmony of all the various ways of meaning.”<sup>54</sup> Benjamin makes it clear: “the original cannot enter there in its entirety,” meaning that the proper name must necessarily shed its skin in order to wear the robe of translation in the name of pure language, moving “beyond transmittal of subject matter<sup>55</sup> and into an interactive “constant state of [linguistic] flux.” Only when it moves beyond its original form, beyond the graphic and proper individual mark through the act of translation, a translation as work can enter the bigger playing field that is history in all its multiplicity of forms.

When one stages the problematic of translation theory then, one is faced with the task of delimiting that which seeks with immense intrinsic power to disperse. According to Weber, translation is “the stopping place of an ongoing movement.”<sup>56</sup> For Walter Benjamin, it is not a stopping place but rather “a removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations.”<sup>57</sup> In order for a continuum of transformations amongst languages and across history and individuals to take place however, we must first identify a common denominator sustaining this interaction (“ongoing movement,” “continuum of transformations”) between them. In other words, who is the being effecting and affecting this history and what allows for the possibility of this translated human history to take place?

The name, and therefore humans’ ability to name, is what confirms the human species as intelligibly human and allows for the possibility of not only the act of translation but also a human history to take place. In *On Language as Such and the Language of Man*, Benjamin writes that “man is the namer... man can call name the language of language (if genitive refers to the relationship not of a means but of a medium), and in this sense certainly, because he speaks in

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<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Task of the Translator*, p.257

<sup>55</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Task of the Translator* p.257

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Weber, *A Touch of Translation* p.74

<sup>57</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* p.70

names, man is the speaker of language, and for this very reason its only speaker.”<sup>58</sup> The fact that for Benjamin humans can “call name the language of language” entails that humans are the creators and the employers of the language of their making. If the human species is “the namer” of the human language, this means that in naming it generates (“genitive”) language as medium of communication at the same time it uses names in language in order to communicate itself, its mental entity, in relation to another thing or being. In other words, humans name in order to identify themselves. This in turn means that humans originate when they name, and they name in relation to each other; humanity (and not God) is “the speaker of language, and for this very reason its only speaker.” For this reason it is not God that speaks “light” but humanity, robbing God of the privilege of language instead of waiting for it to be handed down.

According to Benjamin, humankind is in fact everything that is nameable language. In *On Language as Such* he remarks that the “name as the heritage of human language...vouches for the fact that language as such is the mental being of man.”<sup>59</sup> Human beings thus identify themselves with language as the expression of their conscious self-aware being, crossing material boundaries and delimiting themselves as alter-linguistic beings. “The name as the heritage of human language,” a language meant to represent the mental being of the human, thus entails that in the name unfolds the history of human beings, the “light” wherein “language as such” is absolutely equated with “the mental being of man” precisely because “language as such is the mental being of man,” expressed historically in language. The name as the common denominator of all human languages then is what unites humanity in expression, each language translated into another in the creation of human history.

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<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* p.65, my emphasis

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* p.65

In other words, the name works within humanity and beyond humanity, equating the individual with the universal human. The name as translatable amongst all languages presents humanity as an insurmountable multiplicity in ever-wavering fluctuations, a humanity that as a human species responds to alterity in a diversity of forms.

Effectively then, translation theory must first recognize not only the commonality of all languages in invisible and ephemeral interaction with each other, but must simultaneously allow for the singularity of each individual work to be translated into another. In order to do so it must shift away from politico-socioeconomic demarcators and into human demographics, a species swarming with individuals buzzing around each other, unfolding according to a multiplicity of reflections. It may in this way not only propose but also sustain the idea that there may in fact exist an infinite movement of transformation taking place between the individual and the universal, between the universal and the poliversal, between a proper and a common name, the translational and transnational, allowing for a united human history to take place.

## Chapter II

### *Human Politics*

#### *Translation as the Act of Human Politics*

#### ~~Death of a Discipline~~

The formulation of human history then is conceivable and possible under the common name of the human species as language in general and in particular, as a reflection of the mental being of humanity, the namer, in all its multiplicity of forms.<sup>60</sup> When we speak of human politics and the surface reality that exists when attempting to employ these theoretical surmises into act however, we come across a set of inevitable questions: where do we place ourselves when boundaries and frontiers are confused? how can all these already extant borders be undone without violence if we wish to conceive of ourselves as an individual human species?

Within the smaller universe that is the university, we find the discipline of Comparative Literature haunted by the same questions. What is Comparative Literature exactly if we cannot place it within the frontiers of any of the already demarcated national literatures? What delimits it if not the already established political boundaries? What is it and what holds it together? In order to unravel this problematic at the heart of both the act of translation and human history then, we turn towards the discipline of Comparative Literature as it currently stands so as to find a clearer understanding of these questions (if not, necessarily, its answers).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduces the notion of planetarity in her book *Death of a Discipline* as a possible conceptual solution for answering these questions. The first move

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<sup>60</sup> Benjamin remarks in *On Language as Such* that translation exhibits the possibility of interaction not only amongst linguistic forms but also a-linguistic forms and media.

towards understanding this concept is found in the opening chapter titled *Crossing Borders*, where she reiterates the importance of Area Studies in relation to the discipline of Comparative Literature. Area Studies is bound by a much more ambiguous and loosely bound focus of study. Comparative Literature is instead much more politically centered, bound by the national literatures that temporarily compose the academic system of letters. She establishes a direct translation between the two disciplines, incorporating into Comparative Literature the watery delimitations of Area Studies while at the same time bestowing Area Studies with the political history that accompanies Comparative Literature.

Spivak is thus able to consider the territorial space that is the planet as a singular tellurian<sup>61</sup> area instead of a composition of frontiered political nations clearly delimited by borders, sometimes even walls. With the planet, she moves us (and the discipline of Comparative Literature) into an abstract human-commonality, a much more confused and confounded space uniting the human species without riding it of its differences. She thus “propose[s] to overwrite the globe” – the space economically demarcated by globalization (“the same system of exchange everywhere”) and politically delimited by frontiers – with a Spivakian planet, an “undivided ‘natural’ space,”<sup>62</sup> that as such allows human beings the possibility of being united as a single tellurian species.

With areas in the place of frontiers, overwriting a territorially mapped-out space, Spivak suggests we conceive of the planet instead as a demographical sphere, liberating place and origin from the rigidity of the confines that national borders introduce to our understanding of human identity (both singular and plural). “What we are witnessing in the postcolonial and globalizing world is a return of the demographic, rather than territorial,

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<sup>61</sup> Adj. of the earth.

<sup>62</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.72



frontiers that predate and are larger than capitalism.”<sup>63</sup> In referring to a return of something that predates frontiers she appeals to our most primitive sense of humanism. Her purpose in doing so is to de-politicize borders, or “crossing borders” as her chapter title indicates, and reintegrate humanity into a unified spatial whole. In order to do so however we must return to a more primitive time, where human beings were related to each other by something other than socioeconomic and political factors defining the nationalistic world.

Her appeal to demographics in fact implies an address (or redress) to our most eth(n)ical sense of humanism: our intelligence as marker of cognitive human awareness. According to the *OED*, demographics signifies “the study of human population and its composition.” A study of demographics would thus entail a conception of humanity as a unified demos, or people (think: democracy) but also its written history, or graph. She brings us back to our human body as marker of a same human species, but most importantly, she brings us back to the human language we share in common as a way of relating to each other. We here recall the name as the common denominator of humanity, reflection of its mental being in history. The graph or the grapheme of demographics is the to have been written of the demos that are the human people. In one swift motion, Spivak integrates a physical humanity into a historical language that has been in turn grown alongside the development of this people, describing this people. Language is what most characterizes humans as humans, as an intelligent people, as self-aware cognitive beings. Language is what we all have in common.

She uses the Internet and modern Geographical Systems as an example for explaining the possibility of such a unification. According to Spivak, the world has been technologically cut-up by imaginary lines that we take to be real, divisions that we understand to be

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<sup>63</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.15

categorically imperative. This same technology that is used to demarcate those imaginary lines, however is also an example of the abstract and unified concept that she intends the planet to be. “The idea of shifting demographic frontiers caught in the virtuality of the Internet and telecommunication is generally assigned to postmodern globalization” she writes but, it can “work in the interest of this globalization in the mode of the abstract as such.”<sup>64</sup> We perceive here the same movement of translation between the delimited and the disseminated happening, although here, it takes place within a more political and less historical sphere.

This “abstract as such,” this alterity, in mode and effect, is language as translated human expression. It is the grapheme of the demos that remains as human history. If we broaden our social and political sphere into an abstract demographic sphere as Spivak wants us to do, we begin to relate to each other as individual parts of a grander and more complex entity that is the human species within the planet as reflected in human history. What this means is that when we find ourselves displaced from a territorially place of origin, we may then only conceive of ourselves in relation to each other through language. This is our place, and herein our unfolding. In language, the human may express itself to its full capacity at the same time it allows itself to be understood by every other human also seeking to express itself in order to understand itself. In our ability to name and thus communicate with one another, in our recognition of the other as other, we identify each other as human beings part of the human species, constantly abstracted from a singularity and into a universal (and vice versa). If we conceive ourselves in this way, we see that we play a similar role to the individual works translated into the broader rhythm that is the act of translation in general, i.e. human history in general and particular. As such, according to Spivak, we are able “to move away from a

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<sup>64</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.18, 72

politics of hostility, fear, and half solutions”<sup>65</sup> and into an “inter-”planetary “hospitality” of peoples.<sup>66</sup>

### *Out There*

Although the name can be understood as the common denominator that allows every human to be translated in the face of every other human as part of humanity, Spivak is clear about the fact that human language is not omnipotent and omnipresent in its universality. “Language is not everything,” she states, “the simple possibility that something might not be meaningful is contained by the rhetorical system as the always possible menace of a space outside language. This is most eerily staged (and challenged) in the effort to communicate with other possible intelligent beings in space.”<sup>67</sup> Spivak here introduces quite a complex contradiction. If there is such a thing as “a space outside language” it must then mean that this space, whatever it is, is entirely unintelligible to a human intelligence that already encompasses everything that is nameable language. If this space then stands outside language, and not within and part of any of the forms or mediums the human species knows and can recognize as language, how is this place even nameable? recognizable? intelligible even as unknown space?

Even if this space outside language is unintelligible, it still alludes to the existence of “other possible intelligent beings in space” arousing in humanity a desire to “(challenge) in the effort to communicate.” She remarks earlier in the essay that “one is not always satisfied...with

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<sup>65</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.4

<sup>66</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.8: “One might say that U.S. Comparative Literature was founded on inter-European hospitality.” Spivak calls for a return to the foundational ethics of the discipline.

<sup>67</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Politics of Translation* p.314

“generating” thoughts of one’s own.”<sup>68</sup> Because of this we reach out and challenge the silent space of the non-intelligible and set it against translation in an attempt to translate it (an untranslatable alterity residing at the other, darker side of the linguistic form) into an intelligible form that the human may understand. At the end she reinstates: “the lesson is the (im)possibility of translation in the general sense. Rhetoric points at absolute contingency, not the sequentiality of time, not even the cycle of seasons, but only ‘weather.’”<sup>69</sup>

In other words, rhetoric challenges the rigid logic of language, pointing towards the alterity and nonintelligibility that its existence mean but does not translate. This is why it is so difficult to understand and even more so difficult to express in language. This is also however, why there exist surmises as to what this challenge may look like.

The Arecibo broadcast transmission (Spanish for a-receipt or a-receive, in other words, never received or answered but also alteriorly received or already received) was sent out into the universe in 1974 under the leadership of scientist Carl Sagan.<sup>70</sup> Three years later in 1977 a second attempt was made when the Voyager Golden Record was launched into the universal vastness containing anything from photographs, classical music by Mozart and Bach, drawings of the anatomical bodies of females and males, images of a broad range of tellurian species, even samples of human DNA and ancient hieroglyphics.<sup>71</sup> All these different mediums of human language expression were included in order to consider every single possible that may convey an understanding to another, entirely and absolutely different intelligent being. This is why, for human understanding, alterity has to irresistibly be “differed

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<sup>68</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Politics of Translation* p.312

<sup>69</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Politics of Translation* p.325

<sup>70</sup> See: <http://www.seti.org/seti-institute/project/details/arecibo-message>

<sup>71</sup> See: <http://goldenrecord.org/>

into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate,<sup>72</sup> no matter its form. No response (has ever been received).

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<sup>72</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Politics of Translation* p.314

### Chapter III

#### *Khôrazón*

#### *Translation as the Act of Alterity*

A cry for help in all its forms

What human beings look for in order to challenge this space is other “intelligent beings.” What this means is that what language as such means, is only the possibility of absolute alterity<sup>73</sup> without its necessary fulfillment. It promises a history, but does not deliver a life or a presence. And yet, it does not categorically demand the existence, presence, or appearance of its history either. The message sent out into space, from the very beginning *a-recibo*, is thus only a challenge and not an identifiable and successful realization of a historical event of universal and trans-universal communication between alien species. In other words, it did not integrate the human species and all its human history into a broader universal spectrum of historical expression and sociopolitical existence that is translatable into human language or intelligence.<sup>74</sup> In the face of no response to another form of intelligible beings, the space outside language remains inconceivable.<sup>75</sup> “There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-text*]” has written Jacques Derrida elsewhere.<sup>76</sup>

This problematic, in all its twistedness, is bound then by a magnetic desire. Alterity recognized as such, recognized as language in translation is what it means to be human, to reach out into the vastness of the a-received. The human species is inherently predisposed

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<sup>73</sup> According to the *OED*: “the fact or state of being other or different; diversity, difference, otherness; an instance of this. “

<sup>74</sup> *Something-like* Star Wars.

<sup>75</sup> Therefore, historically thus far (until recently), conceived of only in relation to the idea of a “God.”

<sup>76</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* p.158

with the desire to understand and be understood, to be intelligent and intelligible (“one is not always *satisfied*”).

Our inability to conceive of a space hors-text, outside language, is a message perhaps unanswered but, “however minimally,” reflected back at us with the notion of an absolute individuality, the idea of a personal existence that is entirely singular in this universe. Here, at the limitless expanding fringes of the universe, with this expanded absolution, when human beings realize that each and every one is only a part of the infinitesimal human species in the universe, often comes a feeling of immeasurable isolation and insignificance. We must recognize that we have yet to find an alterior intelligence to our own; which means, that when everything that we know of, everything that we understand and conceive of is finally understood as only a however minimal part of an irreducible vastness of time and space that is the universe, we find ourselves absolutely displaced, haunted by the “eerily staged” scenario that is universal reality. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak uses as examples to this feeling the Freudian Heimlich/Unheimlich<sup>77</sup> and a metaphorically constructed “vagina dentata”<sup>78</sup>

James Joyce illustrates this “eerily staged” feeling with intensity and power in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where he is haunted by an unceasing religious guilt in the face of his own (ironically) young man *bildung*. For effect I here quote in its entirety:

What must it be, then, to bear the manifold tortures of hell forever? Forever! For all eternity! Not for a year or an age but forever. Try to imagine the awful meaning of this. You have often seen the sand on the seashores. How fine are its tiny grains! And how many of those tiny grains go to make up the small handful which a child grasps in its play. Now imagine a mountain of that sand, a million miles high, reaching from the earth to the farthest heavens, and a million miles broad, extending to remotest space, and a million miles in thickness, and imagine such an enormous mass of countless particles of sand multiplied as often as there are leaves in

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<sup>77</sup> Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p.77: “The Heimlich/Unheimlich relationship is indeed, formally, the defamiliarization of familiar space.”

<sup>78</sup> Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.79

the forest, drops of water in the mighty ocean, feathers on birds, scales on fish, hairs on animals, atoms in the vast expanse of air. And imagine that at the end of every million years a little bird came to that mountain and carried away in its beak a tiny grain of that sand. How many millions upon millions of centuries would pass before that bird had carried away even a square foot of that mountain, How many eons upon eons of ages before it had carried away all. Yet at the end of that immense stretch time not even one instant of eternity could be said to have ended. At the end of all those billions and trillions of years eternity would scarcely begun. And if that mountain rose again after it had been carried all away again grain by grain, and if it so rose and sank as many times as there are stars in the sky, atoms in the air, drops of water in the sea, leaves on the trees, feathers upon birds, scales upon fish, hairs upon animals – at the end of all those innumerable risings and sinkings of that immeasurably vast mountain not even one single instant of eternity could be said to have ended; even then, at the end of such a period, after that eon of time, the mere thought of which makes our very brain reel dizzily, eternity would have scarcely begun.<sup>79</sup>

It is not the idea of hell that terrifies the young man, but the infinite conception of what “forever” may be, what this “all eternity” is that forever might even possibly signify. It triggers in him an immense desire to communicate this feeling, an idea of forever shattering into an avalanche of words, almost a repetitive ramble and clear (because incessant) need of being listened: one word after another.

Consider then the opening and closing sentences of the scene and the structure of the chunk of the paragraph they bookmark: “Forever! For all eternity! Not for a year or an age but forever! Try to imagine the awful meaning of this...at the end of such a period, after that eon of time, the mere thought of which makes our very brain reel dizzily, eternity would have scarcely begun.” The first sentence sets the foundation for an ever-growing forever that is in reality never reached because with every end comes a new beginning that is, like its previous foundation, not permanent, an ever-repeating eternity that at its end “would have scarcely begun.” In between these two beginning-ends there is a repetitive flux similar to the

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<sup>79</sup> James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p.101



transformative and translative rhythm of history proposed by Weber in chapter one, and now quite far from the dichotomy that marked the original binary.

Another example: the eternity found in a single “drop of water” (and every other thing Joyce signifies above) presents itself when the single drop of water is conceived of as only a part of an infinite and eternally disseminating, ever-expanding multiplicity across both space and time. It may be these or this, it may be that, it may be anything, everything, and nothing: “stars in the sky, atoms in the air...leaves on the trees, feathers upon birds, scales upon fish, hairs upon animals:” over and over again. We recall: “One is not always satisfied [when] one feels that the production of identity as self-meaning, not just meaning, is as pluralized as a drop of water under a microscope.”<sup>80</sup>

### Fear

This brief and schematic characterization of *Bildung* shows immediately that it is closely connected with the movement of translation – for translation, indeed, starts from what is one’s own, the same (the known, the quotidian, the familiar), in order to go towards the foreign, the other (the unknown, the miraculous, the Heimlich/Unheimlich), and, starting from this experience, to return to its point of departure, precisely because it has in reality never left it, still perhaps only buzzing around it.<sup>81</sup>

Presented with an incredible individuality within a multiplicity of beings that in some way seem to systematically function together with and against each other, the individual employs one of the two facets of desire: to either shut down in fear and impotence, building

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<sup>80</sup> Spivak, *The Politics of Translation* p.312

<sup>81</sup> Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign* p.46

walls and borders, or reaching out with unconditional love<sup>82</sup> and hopes of an answer even if there might not be one: ~~crossing borders~~.

The relation of this desire to fear is clearly expressed in the reference to “hell” in Joyce. Mostly, it is the fear of being left empty-handed, without an answer, *a-recibo*, of giving without receiving, of having one’s intention toward the other rejected and shut down. We may recall here the Bloom’s relationship in *Ulysses*, Poldy’s paralysis and Molly’s out-bursting affair. Antoine Berman speaks of this fear as an irretrievable loss, a fear of not being lent a space for growth with the establishment of “a genuine relation to the Other.” When writing of translation’s “double horizon” he notes:

But things become more complicated when this law leaves the psychological sphere and is applied on the historical-cultural level. In addition, the disproportion of the passage through the foreign makes the threat of the loss of one’s own identity hover perpetually over the level of the individual as well as that of a people and a history. What is at stake here is not so much this law as it is the point where it crosses its own limits without, for all that, transforming itself into a genuine relation to the Other.<sup>83</sup>

Berman here means that there is no communication established, no translation, and that the Other remains entirely proper (notice the capital) and therefore incomprehensible (and under certain circumstances even irrational). Fear prevents human beings from recognizing each other intimately, from sharing themselves and lending themselves for the sake of each other’s completion and satisfaction in an (even if a-received) attempt at translation. Fear stands between all human beings as indiscernible as the body each of us bears through life<sup>84</sup> and slowly builds walls and borders between us. Fear demonstrates but does not intimate difference; it is what prevents the individual from allowing itself to be lent

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<sup>82</sup> One of God’s attributes.

<sup>83</sup> Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign* p.32-33

<sup>84</sup> Racism or any other form of demographic delimitation of judgment.

as medium and reproductive space to the other. It stops the human from being human through language, writing its history. “Disciplinary fear” writes Spivak in reference to the resistance Comparative Literature faces, “institutional fear on both sides.”<sup>85</sup>

In order for human beings to be able to consider themselves as a human species within the broader spectrum that is universal existence, they must first position themselves as a united and multiple entity that is, in turn, part of a larger entity. (We see, again, the movement of translation taking place between the individual and the universal, without the necessary return however). Our traditional conception of what is a self – the individual person as delimited by an ego, the universe as delimited by a God – must be translated into an entity and not an “id”-entity that is the species, an intelligible and communicable (i.e. translatable) species delimited by a perhaps more appropriate eco, a resounding still in a language other than one’s own, a lending of oneself first in the face of unknown alterity. In other words, the boundaries that have traditionally delimited the self must fall, just like Spivak’s Berlin wall, rendering the human being as a selfless entity that gives itself at the risk of losing itself in order to be one and other with each other on the surface of this planet inside this universe.

### Khôrazón

The space of the a-received however, *el espacio de lo ha recibido*, can also be positivized.<sup>86</sup> In 1993, Derrida writes a book and essay titled *Khôra*, a theoretical and literary analysis on Plato’s *Timaeus*. For Derrida, *khôra* becomes the space of the alterior dissolving into itself each other as anything necessarily comprehensible and yet ungraspable, understood “however

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<sup>85</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* p.19

<sup>86</sup> The Spanish reflexive pronoun-verb “se llama” indicates a reflection that does not translate to the English. It demonstrates an intrinsic multiplicity that may communicate with itself even if it never actually receives *any other* response but the one that it gives itself. “Se llama” is equated to “to call itself, to name itself,” such as the French *je m’appelle*.

minimally” while at the same time entirely elusive. It is the originary space that is also the creator (with a minuscule c) of everything that is known to be living language, i.e. a timeless human history, a human history inside the infinite insurmountable history of time conceived as universal space. In the *khôra*, “thinking and translating here traverse the same experience,” writes Derrida.<sup>87</sup> *Khôra*, as an active and translating intersection, as a harmony and meeting point of the two, does not necessarily, as such, demand a beginning and end.<sup>88</sup> As far as we know, it is a-received and universal, alterior and unique,  $\alpha$  and  $\omega$ , all at the same time, entirely liberated from delimitation.<sup>89</sup>

It thus stands at all ends of language as demarcator of representation itself without presenting what it is meant to represent. This is because *khôra* does not receive (it is always a-received) and therefore does not have or possess anything to present. According to Derrida, the *khôra* “causes itself to be named without answering, without giving itself to be seen, conceived, determined” precisely because “she<sup>90</sup> must not receive, [but] merely let herself be lent the properties (of that) which she receives.”<sup>91</sup> In order for something to “be lent the properties (of that) which she receives” without necessarily possessing these properties as its own, it must first be what is common and shared, contingent space surrounding us and delimiting us (and not the other way around). The *khôra* is always actively translative, transformative; it is universal space at the fringes of creative and expansive limits, representation itself as medium, as intelligible language as such, the illimitable space of the

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<sup>87</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* p.93

<sup>88</sup> If we recall in the first chapter, according to the story of *Genesis* that represents a traditional and derivational understanding of the *logos*, after the creation of space came time with the spoken word. The introduction of time as related to the *logos* demands a beginning and an end. Understood as the *khôra* however, it demands only creative space that allows for the possibility of timeless creation, re-creation, and renewal.

<sup>89</sup> Greek characters for *alpha* and *omega*.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida decides to refer to the *khôra* as a female due to its expansive, transformative, and creative properties.

<sup>91</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* p.97-98. It bears remark that in *Death of a Discipline* Spivak refers to this also in relation to a female, a woman, and more precisely a woman’s vagina in relation to Luce Irigaray’s platonic (think: desire) cave. In *Politics of Translation* she remarks: “Let us use the word ‘woman’ to name that space of para-subjects.” p.323

other and the space of becoming one as other, the space of becoming alter and therefore the most exhaustive representation of the mental being of man as such within universal history. In a broader, even more common sense, the khôra as translation, as our modern conception of humanity, is the infinite vastness of the universal as a self-originary space composed of a multiplicity of beings coexisting in a single harmonious interaction that we recognize in our own human understanding as universal human history.

## Conclusion

Comparative Literature is the discipline that puts this theory to effect, challenging our notion of what it means to be human. The act of translation comes into play as it establishes for Comparative Literature the foundation it needs in order to stand between languages as an alterity that is always multiple, endlessly transformative and translative. An indefinable reflection, in turn, of our modern conception of human history, politics, and literature. Through the act of translation, Comparative Literature is granted the space needed in order to develop historically, politically, and literarily and portray the human being as represented in historical language, an individual that is already multiple and illimitable from the start, from the very moment of origin, when this origin is conceived of in terms of the origin of the human (both the individual and the universal human). The multiple facets of human existence then come together under the framing of this discipline in order to formulate a better understanding of what it means to be human within a universe that both spatially and temporally has long surpassed us.

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