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Foreign Translation: The Hermeneutics of Foreignness in Translation Theory

Gábor Mezei

Should we not make new for ourselves
what is old and put ourselves into it?
Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*

- 1 If we are to transcend the question the critical approaches of translation theory so often use as a final and only argument, i.e. the question of successful mediation from the source to the target text, we first have to deal with the differences continuously operating between these positions. While this critical way of putting questions seems to be competent only in evaluating differences on the basis of qualitative criteria, and listing them as errors – even if this aspect is relevant in respect of the practice of translation –, it is exactly the analysis of certain differences that can lead to the re-understanding of not only the texts read together, but also the notions of translation theory. The deviations from the source text are from our point of view – keeping a distance from the questions arising in the critical approaches – not necessarily to be understood as errors, because they can often be traced back to the specific features of the target language. These are the very cases when the analysis – while giving up the unidirectional model of mediation – can become capable of emphasizing the relationship between the two texts that manifests itself in constant changes, and stressing the differences between the two presences linguistic self-understanding produces, together with the poetic tradition these languages call into play. After all these, one can circumscribe the newly established language position translation creates.
- 2 However, first of all, we have to consider the status of the translation in relation to the original version, and at the same time the changes in this original position as well, because as the Derridean idea of 'unpayable debt' ¹ shows, we cannot come to the conclusion that the text of the translation should be regarded as a kind of subordination. At first sight, this idea may remind us of the tension between the impossibility and necessity of translation after Babel, which, in Hungarian translation theory, was so often

and for so long correlated with the 'translator as subject'², but, as Derrida shows it while analysing *The Merchant of Venice*, what happens in the process of translation is an 'indebtedness in which the exchange-values are incommensurable'³ and with this term he accepts the operation and the position of the target text as one bearing an autonomous role. As for the question of verse translation, these aspects make us understand that the poetic tradition of the original text plays exactly as important a role during this process as the poetic tradition belonging to the target text. The translation has to come up to both these, and if the translation is meant to be 'successful as poetry', it 'must in some measure meet' the poetic tradition of the target language.⁴

- 3 While reading *The Task of the Translator*, and analysing the translation of the text from a critical aspect, Paul de Man comes to the conclusion that the different texts of the source and the target languages looked upon as fragments of a vessel symbolizing pure language do not construct a whole, because 'fragments are fragments and they remain essentially fragmentary'⁵. Although he does not mention how this reading overwrites the hierarchic relationship Benjamin assumes – according to which 'while a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal'⁶ – he reconstructs the frames of interpretation the English translation produces so that the original and the translated texts can be regarded as equals. To reach this point, he first breaks down the amphora metaphor, gives up the notion of similarity-based identification, and shows that the relationship between fragments has basically metonymical features. In the last few decades different theoretical frameworks have built up notions of translation simultaneously, where the target text is never subordinated to the original.⁷ This equalizing step is necessary and may turn our attention towards the language operating in the text of the translation, because this is the step that makes the position of the translation stressful, and shows how the translation becomes able to 'lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification'⁸. From our point of view the most important conclusion of Benjamin's concept – the 'Art des Meinens'⁹ – is that, instead of the immediate comparativity and the claim to identify the 'modes of intention'¹⁰ ('das Gemeinte'), it shows the differences between texts as differences in language use, differences in experiences acquired through language. In this way, translation theory is not restricted to the alternatives of either forgetting about these differences or handling them as errors. Though the subsequence of the target language version is already in itself a very important factor, the hermeneutic significance of the temporal distance separating the two texts – in the sense Gadamer speaks about it – will become very important. These differences may point out new aspects of the translation process, the status of the target text and the consequences of the two texts' common presence.
- 4 Without identifying the 'modes of intention', these differences become analysable and together with these differences, and with the help of the two concepts used in translation theory, the 'own' (das Eigene) and the 'foreign' (das Fremde), the relationship forming between the texts seems to be definable. These terms are applied in translation theory following the tradition of hermeneutics. The possible connections between the hermeneutics of foreignness and translation theory are discussed for example in Günter Figal's and Hans Jost Frey's texts; here we use them in the same sense while trying to examine such effects on the models of translation that have not been reflected on yet. The roots of this bipolar model first appeared in Schleiermacher's writings, who understood the process of translation as an approaching and receding movement

between writer and reader, happening in both directions.¹¹ Understanding the polarity of the own and the foreign on this basis – applied of course to the relationship of the two language uses – is from our point of view very important because it lets the ways of the own's self-understanding be seen. This self-understanding happens in translation when the foreign world appears within the world of the own, this way indicating what the world is like.¹² This is the exact reason why the poetic traditions of the target language can be reunderstood, but we have to take into consideration that the position of the target text – as we will see it later – is situated between the poles of the own and the foreign, in a distance from the own, as it is stated (and cited in this present paper) further on in Figal's text as well.

- 5 Applying this polarity is also important because it presents the role of the foreign in a modified way, because, although 'translation is always an attempt at appropriation that aims to transport home, in its language, in the most appropriate way possible, in the most relevant way possible, the most proper meaning of the original text¹³, this foreign meaning can not be understood as a static construction, either. As its foreignness is only due to the own's coming into existence, i.e. to translation, this foreignness is only imaginable from that point on only in a shared presence with the own, and as a common operation that changes the position of the foreign too. On the own's side, this shared presence after meeting the foreign generates moving away from the own's position, because 'the target text – as it is unable to step out of the mother tongue – has to gain the experience of its own language, that the foreign possesses something (and mostly that is what makes it foreign) that the own does not...' As a consequence of this understanding 'the overwriting of the own's absolute nature may necessarily happen only at the cost of (and what is more, thanks to) the foreign truth taking effect¹⁴. This experience of foreignness puts the own into a distance, and after this alienation the target text will be situated 'between languages and at the same time outside the own language', and from this position 'the own language will appear as foreign¹⁵. The own having the traces of the foreign can not be understood as own, because after confronting the foreign it does not only perform the understanding of itself, but its reunderstanding, resituating as well. Consequently, 'it may reappear in a different context, and in this way may become foreign¹⁶. So the target text is to be found in an in-between position different from the positions of the own and the foreign, establishing a new language use. That is how the translation establishes its position outside the two, previously existing poles, a third pole that was still not recognized in the model Schleiermacher used. This newly created position pointing beyond them will be accessible just in its foreignness, and as an experience of foreignness acquired through language, even for the own.
- 6 Derrida describes the operation of the bipolar model – that he questions through the above cited notion of incommensurable exchange-values – as a transportation of the original text's most proper meaning into the language of the target text, this way holding a dialogue with Heidegger's concept of translation, which is based on the metaphor of the river, where this process takes place between the two banks. For Heidegger, however, this event of transportation, or mediation never ends with an arrival, because it is always the wrong track, it is always just meandering, and it mostly ends up in a shipwreck. Though these conclusions assume the necessary failure of translations – that was discredited just by Derrida's statement – as according to this notion they are 'either bad, or less bad; but they are bad in any case¹⁷, he still assumes the existence of a position that is established between the two banks in this plastic description. Concerning this metaphoric notion we

have to add that this third pole in the presently used theoretical framework does not necessarily perform its mission as a shipwreck or any meandering. This position created by translation is not understood here as one unable to accomplish the task of mediation, but as one establishing a language in a distance from the two previous positions.

- 7 Nevertheless, the target text emerging between the two poles of the own and the foreign can not leave the position of the original in a static steadiness either. It is not only because the event of translation constructs its foreignness, but also because the gesture of translation – according to de Man's reading of Benjamin due to its canonizing, freezing effect, and its critical, interpreting character – 'shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice'¹⁸. Even the common presence with the target text may already be a good reason for instability, as the original with the new text – functioning with its differences – creates such a combined construction of meaning that from that point on could not be imagined without these differences. In this way, the original meaning the source text had before their common presence, will never be recreatable, so the original can at most be understood as a text necessarily situated in a preceding position only in a temporal sense. This conclusion can be formulated from an other point of view emphasizing the subsequence of the target text so that 'the translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original thus assuming and confirming the death of the original'¹⁹. This statement confirms this train of thoughts in as much as it refers to its original quality used in the sense of the word as critical approaches usually do. So the question is not whether the target text successfully transports the meaning of the source text, because the question itself becomes impossible when the source text, in its previous condition, is not available any more after the process of translation. On the basis of all these we can say that the foreign is not only shown in a changed way in the mirror of the own, but there is already a tension within the position as well. After the translation comes into being, the original meaning of the foreign is accessible only in a changed, reinterpreted way.
- 8 Stepping into a different environment, the language of the target text necessarily creates a new construction of meaning, but as this meaning belongs only to this position – and as only this position bears the whole meaning –, it takes over the primary function of the original (which loses its original role), replaces it and gets an autonomous character. Consequently, this in-between position of the translation situated between the own and the other cannot be understood as one performing a unidirectional transportation, or mediation between the two poles of the own and the foreign, but as a result of an event establishing a new meaning, and what is more, a new language. The language brought about by this productive tension of the dialogue 'in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors'²⁰, but an autonomous position reunderstanding the own and the foreign, and initiating a retroactive operation. However, this is established in a different way from the hermeneutic concept of the dialogue just because of the event of replacement, and as it deprives the foreign of its original role. Thinking over Figal's above mentioned definition of translation we can say that the translation does not only indicate what the world is like when the foreign world appears within the world of the own, but it contributes to the reunderstanding of the world of the own and the foreign as well while covering up the original meaning.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *What is a »Relevant« Translation?*, transl. Lawrence Venuti, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, 183.
2. Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, *Irodalom és hermeneutika*, Budapest, Akadémiai, 2000, 259.
3. Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, 186.
4. James S. Holmes, *Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1988, 24-25. cited by: Józan Ildikó, *Műfordítás és intertextualitás*, in: Kabdebó L. – Kulcsár Szabó Ernő – Kulcsár Szabó Zoltán – Menyhért Anna (ed.), *A fordítás és intertextualitás alakzatai*, Budapest, Anonymus, 1998, 133-145.
5. Paul de Man, "Conclusions" on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", in *Yale French Studies* No. 97, 32.
6. Walter Benjamin: "The Task of the Translator", in: Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 18. translated by: Harry Zohn.
7. Ildikó Józan, *Mű, fordítás, történet*, Budapest, Balassi, 2009, 249.
8. Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, 21.

9. Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. IV. 1., Frankfurt/M., 1972, 14.
 10. Walter Benjamin 2000, 18.
 11. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On the Different Methods of Translating*, in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader (Second Edition)*, New York, Routledge, 2004, 49. translated by: Susan Bernofsky.
 12. Günter Figal, *Übersetzungsverhältnisse. Vom rechten Umgang mit dem Fremden im Eigenem*, in *Existentialia*, Vol. 6-7, 153.
 13. Jacques Derrida, 178-179.
 14. Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, *op. cit.*, 266-267.
 15. Hans Jost Frey: *Die Sprache und die Sprachen in Benjamins Übersetzungstheorie*, in Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Hg.): *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin*. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 2001, 149.
 16. Günter Figal, *op. cit.*, 154.
 17. Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit. Der Anfang des abendländisches Denkens*, in: *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 55. Frankfurt/M., Klostermann, 1979, 45.
 18. Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, 22.
 19. *Ibid.*, 25.
 20. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London and New York, Continuum, 2006, 371.
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ABSTRACTS

This article's objective is to examine models of translation that could possibly be brought into connection with the hermeneutics of foreignness and produce new notions concerning translation theory. Even if the identification of the source and the target texts' meanings can never be identical, the position of the target text – starting from Paul de Man's interpretation of Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* – cannot be considered subordinate. Thus these two positions can be described as 'own' and 'foreign' in the sense that Günter Figal and Hans Jost Frey use them. But as the position of the target text is to be situated between these, it creates a new language position, and because the target text is the only one bearing the whole meaning-construction, the role of the original changes radically.

L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier les modèles de traduction susceptibles d'être mis en relation avec la notion d'herméneutique de l'altérité et de produire de nouvelles conclusions sur la théorie de la traduction. Même si le sens du texte-source et celui du texte-cible ne peuvent jamais être identiques, le texte-cible ne se trouve jamais – selon les commentaires de Paul de Man sur *La tâche du traducteur* de Walter Benjamin – en position subordonnée par rapport au texte source. On peut ainsi décrire ces deux positions par les termes de « propre » et d'« étranger » qui sont utilisés ici dans le sens que Günter Figal et Hans Jost Frey leur ont donné. L'œuvre traduite établit une nouvelle signification et comme elle se manifeste en tant que le propriétaire unique de cette signification, le rôle de l'original change radicalement.

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Born in 1982, studied Hungarian and English language and literature at the University of Debrecen. He started his PhD-studies in 2009 at Eötvös Loránd University attending the General Literary Studies doctoral program. His fields of interest are translation theory, poetry after modernism and contemporary poetry. He writes critiques of the latter, and does literary translations as well. His first translations of theoretical texts are under publication