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The Events and
Non-Events of Translation

**Translation as Event.
Performing and
Staging Translations**

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to gain critical and theoretical purchase on the notion of an "event" as it may or may not relevantly apply to the practices of translation. The essay allows itself to be quizzical as regards the possibility that translation can be called an event at all, but it also inspects the ways in which, nonetheless, it is meaningful—and indeed useful—to consider the eventhood, or eventuality of translation. In that regard, I suggest that Translation Studies can avail itself of philosophical accounts of the "event," and moreover relate translation to the ways in which reading has been called an event. This essay concludes on a set of observations concerning how one might widen the scope beyond considerations concerning the event of translation restricted to texts and consider other, multi-medial events of translation.

Abstract: Translation, Event, Non-Event.

1 Introduction

In the effort to construe translation as an event we are, from the outset, confronted with the vast field of research we call Translation Studies. If we described Translation Studies' sub-

fields, moreover, and then proposed a thought of the "event" for each subfield, we would face a gargantuan task. But, so as not to give up straightaway, let me deploy Antoine Berman's *La Traduction et la Lettre, ou l'Auberge du lointain* (1991) in order to gain purchase on matters nonetheless. I'll adduce my thoughts concerning the "event" to certain passages from his book. His book hasn't yet been translated into English, so I'll supply Berman's French and then my own translations. Berman (1991: 20) writes:

> [L]'ambition de la traductologie, si elle n'est pas d'échafauder une théorie générale de la traduction (au contraire, elle démontrerait plutôt qu'une telle théorie ne peut exister, puisque l'espace de la traduction est babélien, c'est-à-dire récuse toute totalisation), est malgré tout de méditer sur la totalité des "formes" existantes de la traduction.

> [The ambition of traductology, if it isn't to construct a general theory of translation (on the contrary, traductology would demonstrate, rather, that such a theory cannot exist since the translation space is Babelian, namely, refuses all totalization), is, despite everything, that of reflecting on the totality of the existing 'forms' of translation.]

Consider the Babel event. If that event happened to traductology, we arguably have two towers: one erected in the name of traductology's unitary *logos*, a *logos* which some prefer to stabilize via empirical approaches and "scientific" enquiry in order to better serve the interests of a general theory of translation. The other tower is constantly subject to collapse, Babel being in this case the event that scattered the field traductology would otherwise prefer to weld into the rigorous compass, purview, or remit of a scholarly discipline. Berman continues by observing of traductology that "[e]lle peut, par exemple (et à la lumière des remarques de Derrida, cela serait essentiel), réfléchir sur la traduction du Droit" (ibid.: 20). [it can, for instance (and in light of Derrida's observations, it would be essential to do so) reflect on Legal translation.] We'll see later how Jacques Derrida con-

tributes to our thinking of translation as an event (albeit rather beyond *le Droit*).

There is more. Berman observes that traductology "peut (et elle doit) réfléchir sur la traduction technique et scientifique, sur la *traductique* qui, peu à peu, met en forme (informatique) cette traduction, dans la mesure où quelque chose d'essentiel se noue ici entre la technologie et l'acte de traduire" (1991: 20). [can (and must) reflect upon technical and scientific translation, on *traductic*s, which, little by little, is realizing this kind of translation, insofar as an essential knot is being tied here between technology and the act of translation.] Consider the translation event in terms of *la traductique*, therefore. Would one event involve an *essential* knotting of the act of translation to the technical prostheses of machines and computers – prostheses which still imply human translators using such devices? Or must we now contemplate devolving the events and activities of translation to the inhuman operations of Google Translare and AI enabled translation platforms? At issue, to deploy Walter Benjamin's German, would perhaps be human translators' surrender of their task (the giving-up possibly described by *Aufgabe*) of *Übersetzen*, as if translation occurs by itself, like a machinic or computerized activity without needing the *Übersetzer* as a person.

There is yet more to consider. Berman acknowledges that some restrict the meaning of translation to an inter-linguistic negotiation (compare Roman Jakobson's "translation proper"—see Jakobson 1992: 145) whereas others understand translation more widely. For Berman, George Steiner and Michel Serres count among those who embrace that wider sense, but then Berman remarks that "il est vrai qu'il faut 'tenir' à la traduction restreinte (inter-langues), en tant que c'est là, rigoureusement parlant, *qu'il y a* de la traduction" (1991: 20). [it is true that one must 'tether' oneself to restricted

(interlinguistic) translation, inasmuch as that's where, rigorously speaking, *there is* translation.] *Il faut*: one *must* limit matters to inter-lingual translation, since perhaps it's only there that the translation event, *rigorously speaking*, takes place. Berman's own italics stress *il y a*. Let's translate Berman literally: *it has there some translation*. It has there: the translation event involves place-having and place-taking, the taking or having *there* of the place previously occupied by the original text.

Berman, accompanied by my own remarks, gives us ways to broach the notion of translation as an event. The remainder of this essay is an attempt to further engage with these ways, and in the next section we will begin – again – with Berman's acknowledgement that efforts to restrict translation to inter-lingual events are always in tension with more expanded acceptations of the word "translation."

2   Metaphors for Translation's Event

For attempts to define "translation proper" are constantly threatened by the tendency to relay translation to analogy and metaphor. Here, perhaps, is another event: the perpetual losing of the conceptual or eidetic profile one might wish for the idea of "translation." At issue is the surrender of stable definitions of "translation" to metaphors, similes and analogies describing what translation is *like*, rather than what it *properly* is (Jakobson), or should be, *rigoureusement parlant* (Berman). The exercise to say what translation is *like* has given us a plethora of metaphors and it has given us many essays and books titled "Translation *as* this, Translation *as* that." "Translation as Event," if it were my title, would be yet another attempt to describe the art, craft, work and task of translation. Depending on one's point of view, however, either these metaphors have a certain heuristic utility if we wish to describe what happens when translation

happens, or else these metaphors steer us away from describing what translation actually *is*. At issue, to put it bluntly, is whether one grants the force of the literal-minded, or pedantic objection to all such metaphors: if the event of translation is described as cannibalism or vampirism, as it has been, then the objection is that translators neither eat texts nor suck their blood. When George Steiner, in *After Babel* (1975/1992: 314), describes certain hermeneutic operations of translation as akin to smashing eggshells or strip-mining, the objection is that the act or event of translation in no way resembles these activities: translators don't smash texts. Texts don't offer their ore-seams to a mining operation either – not *really*.

Pedantry, or literal-mindedness, in short, provides a bracing challenge to Translation Studies' metaphorology, checks, therefore, the serial bid to *liken* the event of translation to something or other when nothing of the sort actually occurs. Either pedantry enables a serious reflection on the translation event – if we wish to say what *does* occur – or pedantry disables any further reflection on what events translation *might* resemble. Either one grants the pedantic objection and hence ventures to accuse the long history of translation "theory" as being an active avoidance of that very objection, or one must ask translators whether they seriously do regard their practice as cannibalism or egg-smashing, or find some utility in at least countenancing those scenarios. The present essay can neither devolve itself to a series of interviews with translators, however, nor can it inspect that long history either, given the limited pages at its disposal. But in view of that history (its recent chapters, at least), let me focus on two attempts to profile the translation event – two examples of a non-event, in a sense.

In respect of the first example, consider Steiner's *Real Presences* (1991) where he says that encounters between literary texts and their readers or translators should be conducted in

the spirit of *cortesia*. So much for the spirit, but what—a pedant might ask—about the letter? How to show courtesy to a text? What in fact are we to do with accounts of translatory hospitality? How seriously to take Richard Kearney's "Linguistic Hospitality – The Risk of Translation" where he writes that "Translation serves as a paradigm for linguistic hospitality insofar as it involves a mediation between host and guest languages" (Kearney 2019: 1). This would presumably be an *ethical* mediation during which the rites and rituals of hospitality should be enacted (if they aren't, Kearney can speak of bad translations; if they are, of good translations). But the question is whether there is, or should be, any ethics governing translators' activities given that such an ethics presides over events that don't really occur. If there is ethical obligation here, modelled on hospitality's courtesies, perhaps another event involves the *invention* of ethical strictures in the minds or consciences of translators—an invention, since the pedantic point is that texts aren't something to which one can really show hospitality—written on paper pages, printed in books, they can make no realistic appeal for such hospitality and so the ethics of translatory hospitality is a figment of the translator's mind, a weight on the translator's conscience that original texts never asked, never *can* ask a translator to bear. The event of the invention of that ethics would perhaps involve various (silent) speech acts which *perform* that event of invention: "Here I am," "Be welcome," "I promise to shoulder my ethical responsibilities without alibi," "I can, I will, I respond." Perhaps these performative speech acts nonetheless do what they say, and this would be the event at issue: the saying makes it so, and hence *there is* ethical obligation, no matter what "constative" description one might pedantically provide concerning what happens to texts at the moment of their encounters with translators.

Let's turn to my second example. One metaphor for the event of translation that emerges with signal persistence concerns the sex event—oftentimes, sexual intercourse. Doubtless Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, or any sexologist will explain why sex thoughts are never far from anyone's mind, and so not far from translation theorists' minds either. I'm not about to write a psychoanalytic history of the translator, however, nor is my ambition to interpolate a chapter devoted to translators into Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976ff.). It's a vast subject, in any case. It becomes vaster still once one agrees that the sexual activities at issue shouldn't necessarily be limited to heterosexual scenarios. Nor should the discussion be narrowed to the somewhat predictable example of George Steiner. I admit this, but I nevertheless consider Steiner particularly illuminating, and appreciate Douglas Robinson's (2021) discussion of Steiner's depiction of some of his translation events (the so-called hermeneutic motions) as acts that resemble sexual penetration. In *After Babel*, Steiner unabashedly countenances an erotics of translation, writing that "Ortega y Gasset speaks of the sadness of the translator after failure. There is also a sadness after success, the Augustinian *tristitia,* which follows on the cognate acts of erotic and of intellectual possession" (Steiner 1975/1992: 314). To be pondered is Steiner's use of the term "cognate," clearly. After translatory coitus comes post-coital melancholy, it seems. When he describes his four motions in terms of a "hermeneutic of trust (*élancement*), of penetration, of embodiment, and of restitution" (ibid.: 319), it's all too easy to deem "penetration," in this case, as sexual penetration. A violent one as well – an un-consensual ravishing, so to speak. Steiner writes: "The appropriate 'rapture' of the translator—the word has in it, of course, the root and meaning of violent transport—leaves the original with a dialectically enigmatic residue" (ibid.: 316). Leaving aside what Stei-

ner might mean by "enigmatic residue" (the scar, or wound attesting to the pain of that violence?), what apparently clinches the sexual interpretation is Steiner's reference to Lévi-Strauss: Steiner avers that "the translator creates conditions of significant exchange" (ibid.: 318), and then adds, "the general model here is that of Lévi-Strauss's *Anthropologie structurale* which regards social structures as attempts at dynamic equilibrium achieved through an exchange of words, women, and material goods" (ibid.: 319).

But, as Robinson (2021) observes in "George Steiner's Hermeneutic Motion and the Ontology, Ethics, and Epistemology of Translation," if one endorses Lévi-Strauss's characterization of patriarchal societies and agrees that he realistically describes what such societies *are* and *do*, in view of the treatment of women, one still cannot then say that this is what the act of translation also *is* and *does*. The further consideration, for Robinson, concerns why Steiner's analogy between the translation event and this sexual event has the force to offend some readers. Robinson asks "What is the *ontology* of that 'certain violence,' and why did it 'offend some readers'?" (Robinson 2021: 103). Indeed: how can an event that cannot really take place (one cannot have sex with a book) nonetheless offend some readers?

Well, an event doesn't have to be "real" for it to have the impact of an event: at issue, here, is the evental force of offence itself. In Robinson's eyes, it's female and feminist translation theorists who reacted with such offence. What "eventalized" Steiner's sexual metaphor was its affective power to provoke vigorous reactions. At issue, for Robinson, though, is the "*ontologization* of metaphors" (2021: 111), namely the crediting of a metaphor as a description of what *is* happening as the event of translation. Robinson asks:

> How does a vague affective response to this *talk* of violence first get
> channeled through a group (say, feminist translation scholars) then
> project onto the talk a negative valence as a harmful attitudinal and
> behavior action-potential associated with a group commonly associat-
> ed with violence, especially against women (say, men), and finally come
> to identify and critique the theoretical model as a "truth" or "reality"
> (ontology)? (Robinson 2021: 112)

A non-event becomes an event when the metaphor describing that "event" is "ontologized" to the point that the metaphor becomes an apparently truthful or real depiction of what translation actually does. The translation of a metaphor into something other than a metaphor occurs if that metaphor has the power to provoke strong reactions in a particular group. Once it does, then an "event" or process of eventalization occurs to the metaphor itself: the acquisition of being, truth, or apparent literality. Sexual metaphors, particularly if they describe what can be interpreted as sexual violence, have that provocative power. Provocativeness, therefore, is a dimension of 'eventalization'. In other words, some metaphors have the power to provoke us (or a particular group of theorists) into suspending our disbelief such that we provisionally believe that the metaphor in question is something other than a metaphor, and instead has the persuasive force of a true account of what occurs. For a translation event to have that force, it must have the performative power to provoke the suspension of disbelief. That suspension would be the event at issue.

Consider another view of translation as an erotic desire for sexual commingling, this time Derrida's. In "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?" he writes:

> I believe I can say that if I love the word, it is only in the body of its
> idiomatic singularity, that is, where a passion for translation comes to
> lick it as flame or an amorous tongue might: approaching as closely as
> possible while refusing at the last moment to threaten or to reduce, to
> consume or to consummate, leaving the other body intact but not
> without causing the other to appear—on the very brink of this refusal

or withdrawal—and after having aroused or excited a desire for the idiom, for the unique body of the other, in the flame's flicker or a tongue's caress. (Derrida 1997/2013: 351)

The pedant will point out to Derrida that one neither kisses an original text *really*, nor can the contact between translation and text be described as a fiery consummation either. Doubtless Derrida would have granted the pedant's point (pedantry is undeconstructible), but there's more to say here. Thoughts of the event enjoin us to consider the time and space of the event. The time here is the time of Derrida's holding back, his tarrying on the brink. And with that brink, that threshold, we pass to thoughts of space: the place (or no-place) of the translation event – the borderline between text and translator maintained by the *noli-me-tangere* intactness of the idiom's alterity. Only the flicker of a fleeting kiss transgresses that boundary, but if the desirous Derrida draws back from the brink, tarries on the verge of a translation that would be an act or event of transgression, a step into sexual intercourse, then we might risk saying that the place at issue is the virginal womb, the borders of which are protected by the intact hymen.

Derrida relays this erotics of translation and its self-denying bid for sexual consummation to other ideas of consummation and consuming: eating is one idea, the other is the event of incineration. Doubtless Derrida knew Gaston Bachelard's *Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938), and he might have been familiar with the following from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existential Psychoanalysis* (1967), where Sartre describes appropriative, or possessive desire in terms of an urge to destroy the object of that same desire:

To destroy is to reabsorb into myself; it is to enter along with the being-in-itself of the destroyed object into a relation as profound as that of creation. The flames which burn the farm which I myself have set on fire, gradually effects the fusion of the farm with myself [...] I *am* this barn since I am destroying its being. (Sartre 1967: 101)

Note the symptomatic example of burning by fire. Here, for that matter, is Benjamin in "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" speaking of a reader reading a novel: "He is ready to make it completely his own – to devour it, as it were. Indeed, he destroys, swallows up the material as fire devours logs in the fireplace" (Benjamin 1936/2006: 156). At issue for Derrida, Sartre, and indeed Benjamin, are the metaphors—eating and burning—that characterize appropriative desire. It's about the desire to make something completely one's own. As for Derrida's depiction of the *translator's* appropriative desire, it concerns the desire to consume the idiomatic word, a desire entailing either eating or conflagration. In the latter case, it's a matter of incineration in the fires of the translator's ardent desire such that nothing remains of the original text, not even a flake of ash. We will return to the matter of ash and cinders later, as well as to the appalling resonances of the word "holocaust." For now, we might wonder if Derrida is serious here. But that wonderment is somewhat otiose, since we might as well ask psychoanalysis whether the metaphorical and metonymic condensations and displacements of the desiring unconscious are "serious" either. Perhaps there is no expression of desire without metaphors doing some of that expressive work (if they didn't, Freud and Lacan would be redundant). Desire has its metaphors. Appropriative desire—the appropriative desire of translators in this case—has its metaphors as well. What possibly triggers desire, indeed, is the allure of the unpenetrated core or kernel, that which is sealed inside, invisible, untouchable and *virginal.* Here is Sartre: "What is seen is possessed; to see is to *deflower.* If we examine the comparisons ordinarily used to express the relation between the knower and the known, we see that many of them are represented as being a kind of *violation by sight.* The unknown object is given as immaculate, as virgin, comparable to a *whiteness*" (Sartre 1967: 67).

Violation, violence, virginity. An all-too familiar triad informing our (or just the male?) erotic imagination whenever appropriation and possession are at issue. In any case, Derrida expresses his desire, and we might prefer his last-ditch refusal to consummate the event of translation that his passion nonetheless looks forward to, compared to Steiner's depiction of translation's unhesitating violation of textual bodies.

3 The Events of Translation and of Reading

But, my pedantic objector might ask, isn't it time to desist from metaphors, whatever their relevance for an assessment of the translator's desire, violence, guilt, etc., and high time to speak of the events we can envisage? Yet if we contemplate those events in terms of what the interaction between translator and text causes each to actually *do,* we must consider what a text does to a translator, and what a translator does to a text. But surely the first thing a translator does is *read* the text at hand. If so, then can theoreticians of reading provide some illumination on the events, not just of reading, but of translation as well? Let's see.

Shall we invoke structuralists like Roland Barthes or Michael Riffaterre, though, or Paul Ricœur, or phenomenologists like Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser and Georges Poulet? Let's prefer Stanley Fish. In *Is There a Text in this Class?* (1980) he describes the readerly and interpretive events at issue in terms of an equivocation "between a reference to the action of the text *on* a reader and the actions performed *by* a reader as he negotiates (and, in some sense, actualizes) the text" (Fish 1980: 3). Actualization is the event here, but at issue is also how the text *causes* the reader to perform the actions of that actualization. For Fish, these actions unfold over time (the time of reading), and the space of the page is discounted:

> I challenged the self-sufficiency of the text by pointing out that its (apparently) spatial form belied the temporal dimension in which meanings were actualized, and I argued that it was the developing shape of that actualization, rather than the static shape of the printed page, that should be the object of critical description. (Fish 1980: 2).

But should one pass over the "static shape of the printed page" so quickly? I'm not sure, and I'll return to this. Let's continue. "[I]f meaning develops," Fish writes, "and if it develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader's expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions, these activities (the things the reader *does*) are not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential" (ibid.: 2–3). These appreciably hermeneutic activities contrast, for Fish, with "instrumental" and "mechanical" activities, though it's not clear, to me, what those latter activities consist in. For Fish, at any rate, if one wants to see those interpretive doings, or events in action, one must slow down:

> It is as if a slow motion camera with an automatic stop-action effect were recording our linguistic experiences and presenting them for viewing. Of course the value of such a procedure is predicated on the idea of *meaning as an event*, something that is happening between the words and in the reader's mind, something not visible to the naked eye, but which can be made visible (or at least palpable) by the regular introduction of a "searching" question (what does this do?). (Fish 1980: 28)

Perhaps that's what any engagement with translation as an event must do also: capture *meaning as an event* in the moment of inter-lingual transference. Such would be the *photographic* desire of our theoreticians of translation, besides that of our theoreticians of reading: to snapshot that meaning-event in the very moment of its occurrence. As I turn from readers and toward translators, in any case, I want to note that when Fish answers the objection that his account of reading is too generalizing, he writes, "I met this objection by positing a level of

experience which all readers share, independently of differences in education and culture. This level was conceived more or less syntactically, as an extension of the Chomskian notion of linguistic competence, a linguistic system that every native speaker shares" (Fish 1980: 4–5). Many theories of reading begin from the premise of native linguistic competence. One wonders how such theories would get on if they relinquished that premise and began instead with non-native speakers, or indeed began with the dual linguistic competence of translators. In any case, we can perhaps agree that translators are readers, but then we must mark the point where translators stop being readers, the point where, having read the text to be translated, translators actually translate.

Here, however, we confront other problems: is it that to *be* a translator is to subscribe to the ethical or deontological edicts that factor into the differentiation between what it is to be a reader or interpreter and a translator? Translators don't necessarily enjoy the interpretive license to offer a manifold variety of interpretations, and such license is effectively prohibited by the edicts of equivalence and fidelity. But if that translation achieves one-for-one equivalence, achieves "transparency," then the translation event is as invisible as translators are themselves, as Lawrence Venuti (1995/2018) would doubtless observe. Hence Venuti's critique of doctrines of equivalence, transparency and instrumentalism, and his advocacy for strategies that force readers to notice that something *has* happened —the receiving language foreignized, that foreignization being the way in which the translation event is registered as having occurred at all

Nonetheless, the obdurate difficulty remains that of describing what translators actually do. An alternative approach, suggested by Hans-Georg Gadamer, is to discriminate terms by comparing reading and translating. The question for his

1989 essay "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen" ("Reading is like Translating") is to what extent reading is like translating, and to what extent it isn't. To better understand that essay, let's first contemplate an anecdote Gadamer recounts in his 1984 essay "Hören-Sehen-Lesen" (Hearing-Seeing-Reading"). When he was a student in Breslau reading a text, he noticed "that when writing I always moved my lips, as if I were speaking. Perhaps this was an early intimation of my hermeneutic talent, given that when I read something, I still wanted to hear it. So what is at stake is the transformation-back [*Rückverwandlung*] of writing to speech and the listening associated with it" (Gadamer 1984/1993: 272, my translation). This lip-reading enables *Rückverwandlung*—writing turned back into speech. Now to "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen." The parallel—reading is *like* translating—is strategically limited in Gadamer's argument because a reader can convert writing into speech, whereas Gadamer claims that translators only translate *written* texts into other *written* texts. Translators only shuttle between the shores of *writing*. But readers—if they enact that silent murmur as Gadamer did in Breslau—can reach the shore of hearable speech. Translators cannot perform the *Rückverwandlung* Gadamer desires for writing. Hence the disappointment of translation: "Reading translated texts is generally disappointing. What is lacking is the breath of speech, which breathes-in (*anhauchen*) understanding itself" (Gadamer 1989/1993: 281, my translation).

This is not the place to rehearse the philosophical consequences of the deep-seated preference for speech over writing dating back to Plato's *Phaedrus*, nor the place to reiterate Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967) where that (phonocentric) preference, coupled with the desire to overcome writing, is countered by what Derrida regards as the irreducibility of the written mark. But Derrida raises, for me at least, curiously nagging questions: if one place where we encounter writing is on a pa-

per page, would it be possible to declare that translation happens on the very surface of that paper? Could we envisage matters in terms of the *on-ness* of that translatory event—the whereupon translation occurs, the place upon which we suppose *Übersetzen* (to speak German) supra-imposes or supra-posits itself over, above, and *on*? Why not?

It's difficult to speak of the materiality of books and paper pages. Many of our theories of reading and interpretation envisage the text as a phenomenon, a virtual entity untethered from the support of the page. Recall how quickly Fish refuses "the static shape of the printed page." In *The Implied Reader*, Iser says that "the phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text" (Iser 1972/1974: 274). But I'm not sure that phenomenological theories do take into account the "actual text" since if they did, then the pages on which that text is written might have to be accounted for as well. A page isn't a phenomenon, it's a material subjectile (to invoke a term Derrida makes much of) that resists phenomenalization. Iser continues: "The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized" (ibid.: 274). Note the ontologization, to use Robinson's term in a different sense: the taking on of *life* itself. Iser again: "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (ibid.: 275). Note how the language of "existence" (and "virtuality") is in tension with the material *reality* of the text. Life is the event phenomenologists of reading cherish and bestow on texts so that they become something *more* than texts—they become "works." Some are more auda-

cious with this kind of life than others. Here is Poulet, quoted by Iser: "And so I ought not to hesitate to recognize that so long as it [i.e. the literary work] is animated by this vital in-breathing inspired by the act of reading, a work of literature becomes […] a sort of human being" (ibid.: 293). Compare Gadamer: he too offers a respiratory model of hermeneutic reading. And, in *Real Presences*, Steiner (1991) invites us to to greet and hospitably host works of literature as (and not exactly *as if* they were) *real presences*.

It's not quite a matter of accusing certain theoreticians of hallucinating real presences where there is only writing, though it's tempting to do so. It's as if the event of their own theories is a matter of eliding the materiality of writing, paper pages, or books, even as they phenomenalize texts in order to afford the possibility of an *ontology* of literary works (not "texts"). Consider Hans-Robert Jauss. He might observe that what confers "existence" upon a text (assuming "text" is the right word) is its adherence to a temporal horizon where the ongoing process of time ensures that its existence can be prolonged (if not necessarily "lived"), a process which can be called the text's reception history, and which Jauss describes as a fusion of successive horizons provided for that text as long as there is time enough for it to be received anew by succeeding generations of interpreters, readers, and surely also translators. Thus do texts live in time and outlive the time of their original horizon—they enjoy their phenomenality because that phenomenality is tantamount to their historicity. We don't need a mystique of real presences, or have to wonder if theorists too quickly confer *being* upon written pages and material books, as long as we advert to time and to history—this is Jauss's way and, to an extent, Gadamer's too. What makes translation an event, in short, is the same eventuality that makes all "receptions" of a given text an event: the event of interpretive horizons fusing at a mo-

ment in historical time and place. Hermeneutics can now situate the event of interpretation against these two temporal horizons. Those working in the field of Translational Hermeneutics can now envisage the translation event likewise.

Still, what if we insisted on the materiality of the paper page? What if we said that the translation event happens right there, right on the page? Consider Clive Scott's *The Work of Literary Translation*: he speaks, in connection with translation, of "the sub-arts of language *on the page*, or rather, the sub-arts of relating language and page as a creative reciprocity" (Scott 2018: 167). His insistence on the page, on the paginal art of the translator, offers a highly creative account of the literary translator's art. For "what the translator essays," Scott writes,

> is the transformation of the indifference of the white paper into an energetic participation, and the transformation of language from something operating independently of any particular page into a specific typographical performance integrated into the stagecraft of a particular page. (Scott 2018: 167).

We are worlds away from Fish's "static shape of the printed page," since here, in the translator's engagement with paper pages, the language is of energetic participation, of stagecraft and typographical performance. Assuredly, Scott's engagements are with poetry, and we can appreciate that poetry (e.g. Mallarmé, Apollinaire or Michaux) solicits the reader's or translator's engagement with the paginal arrangement of writing to a far greater extent. Still, imagine translation as stagecraft and, moreover, as a *typographical* performance: at issue in this latter case would surely be the translator's creative play with the imprints of font and type-face—imprints or impressions on the surface of the very page. Scott continues:

> When, therefore, we claim that translation is […] a setting in motion of languages, a setting in motion such that the source of motion—the ST—itself becomes mobile and that there is no destination, we must

> have strategies for outwitting hard copy. To say these things is to commit ourselves to re-designing and re-imagining the page, to undoing the rectangularity of the rectangle, to unframing the frame of the page's edge. (Scott 2018: 167)

Outwit "hard copy": to do that, one has to work with the subjectile—with the paper page of the ST on which it's engraved, imprinted, stuck fast and hard. It's the *subjectile*, then, which now needs to be taken into account by translators—that page, not just the poem's "meaning." The page must be re-arranged, its shape deconstructed, its margins or *paragons* deconstructed or otherwise made to blur and overflow. Scott provides illustrations of his own paginal art of rearrangement: translations as pictures, or pictures as translations, depicting a French poem translated into English, to be sure, but where "translation" works more radically to disassemble the lines, to alter typefaces, and to play with what would otherwise be the page's sharp edges. He also offers doodles and splotches of ink or paint—as if Jean-Michel Basquiat had "translated" Mallarmé. Acoustically, Scott's poems resemble DJ samples or mixes—sound-collages, resonating neither true nor false to the original, just differently.

But it's the insistence on the *page* that is strikingly new in Scott's account of translation. "How then is one to use the page," he asks, "and indeed to use the translational process, to capture language in its formation and dissolution, in its constant circulation and re-circulation?" (Scott 2018: 168) This is the novel question here, and one which gives us a different set of translation "events" to consider: Scott's stagecraft, his typographical performance, his pictorial and sonic mixing, are all somehow enacted *there* on the surface of a paper page. There, and also then (the two terms we need to think the event). The "there" of space: "Translation is, in fact, the business of translating the page, translating the function of the space of the

page" (ibid.: 168). And the "then" of time: "The conditions of existence of the translational page are: (i) the page as instantaneous cross-section of temporal flux, dynamized by the reader's sense of its constant precariousness" (ibid.: 169). The static fixities of pages cannot thwart this instantaneity, and the reader's or translator's opportunity lies in that un-fixed space-time, one which is significantly described as an awareness of "constant precariousness": not even the stabilities of a bound *book* can prevent our sense of the valuable precarity of words on a page.

Translate the page: this is Clive Scott's suggestion. It means that one has to engage with the materiality of that page, and also the impressed materiality of *typography*. And if translation is "a setting in motion of languages, a setting in motion such that the source of motion—the ST—itself becomes mobile and that there is no destination," it means that one has to envisage a mobility or motion that can only be activated and impelled by a translator if the page to which that ST is affixed has fallen, as if at random, into the translator's hands. The scenario, here, is perhaps that of the poem, or rather the *text* of the poem, sent without an intended addressee, sent to no specified destination. To think of "sending" in this way perhaps gives us a sense of textual mobility, or of errancy, such that the ST is always susceptible to ending up into the hands of a Clive Scott who proffers another page for that ST's alternative inscription, staging, or performance. For Scott, therefore, it is possible to consider that translation happens right on a page. But given Scott's insistence on "there is no destination," then we have now to consider how pages, books, or texts liberate themselves from their ostensible destinations and hence make themselves available—intentionally or not—to the event of translation. It is the "ability" of such availability I wish to consider next.

4   Enabling and Disabling the Translation Event

The translation event is presumably an event that *can* happen to a text. But no sooner has one said that, then one confronts "ability" and "disability" talk in connection with the possibilities or impossibilities prescribed for that event. We might now ask whether speculations on what is untranslatable assist us in profiling that event, or rather its opposite, the non-event of translation. There are caveats to be entered, in respect of declarations concerning untranslatability, however, and I will enter these shortly. For now, we might consider (dis)ability talk by way of Benjamin (and moreover recall Samuel Weber's *Benjamin's-abilities* book—see Weber 2008). When Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," says that "if translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of certain works" (Benjamin 1923/2004: 254), the difficulty concerns what Benjamin means by "form." Is translation a form the source text could potentially adopt, another form or guise, that is to say, of the source text? But why deem that potential "essential" and then only in view of "certain works"? "Translatability is an essential quality of certain works," Benjamin continues, "which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability" (ibid.: 254). If we regard this as a claim reminiscent of Schlegel's critical theory, then perhaps Benjamin means that a source text harbors a "theoretical" intimation of its capacity to become other to itself—other, but not necessarily different vis-à-vis its own originality. That other being would then be revealed by translation which now perhaps elevates the source text into the superlative existence of *Überleben*. But talk of "essences," of what is "inherent," and of the "quality" of certain works remains mysterious (to me, at least), and it's tempting to wonder,

instead, if the ability at issue—the *Übersetzbarkeit*—is a matter of how a text makes itself *practically* available to translation: what makes a text able-to-be-translated is simply the way in which material things—books, or else the graphic, material traces of writing inscribed on paper pages—present themselves *there,* before translators undertake their tasks. Writing is unfixed and errant, as Plato feared it so in *The Phaedrus,* and thus what enables translation, just as reading and interpretation are enabled too, is that errancy—writing's escape from orality for one thing, and for another, from the parental supervision of original authors. Writing, supported by its page (or any other suitable subjectile) is able-to-be-translated, that is, as long as translators, or translation, can rendezvous with that errant writing, that orphaned letter, locate the place where writing disseminates or destinerrs (to adapt Derrida's term) itself to. From this perspective, translatability is simply a condition of being written down. Writing is able-to-be-translated, iterated, disseminated etc., but able like this only if we locate the places where such graphic inscriptions are found: on paper pages like Scott's poems, for instance, or bound in books *available* in bookstores, libraries, or archives.

If Benjamin's "abilities" are too mysterious for some, or if my interpretation is too literal-minded for others, then in what alternative context might we address the "ability" of translatability? A different approach is to assess what some regard as a recent development in translation studies, namely untranslatability studies. Consider Jacques Lezra's *Untranslating Machines* (2017) and Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2014). But here, especially in connection with Cassin, is where caveats must be entered. For her, what is untranslatable is what solicits the ongoing effort to translate—untranslatability isn't a categorical claim for what can never be translated, but rather a characterization of what

persistently asks for the serial events of translation to occur. What interests me, however, is the format whereby "untranslatables" are proposed: for Cassin, the format is a *philosophical* lexicon. Could we not wonder why, when philosophy intervenes into the messy world of translation, it does so by speaking of words and concepts designated as untranslatables? Does philosophy have the final authority to designate such things?

Let those questions resonate with Derrida's adoption of the philosophical discourse which proposes *theses*—in this case, theses on translatability and untranslatability. In "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?" he writes "(1) Nothing is translatable; (2) Everything is translatable" (Derrida 1997/2013: 355). Attitudes to Derrida's theses vary. In Venuti's polemic against instrumentalism (which "conceives of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text" (Venuti 2019: 1), an instrumental model comes into play once "the originary differential plurality in language constitutes an invariant that cannot be reproduced or transferred" (ibid.: 123). Venuti continues, "The same point can be made of Derrida's assertion that "a given 'formal' quantity always fails to restore the singular event of the original": the "event" in all its irreducible singularity, when facing the process of translation conceived as an economic equivalence, has effectively been turned into an invariant" (ibid.: 123). Two things are to be retained here: firstly, "invariant" suggests something that never changes, and, in view of translation's "economic" desire for equivalence, never *should* change. But once translation is yoked to that economic task, then it's faced with defeat since what is invariant is inevitably going to lose that invariance in the process of translation. It's that inevitability Venuti resists, just as he resists economic models of translation. Secondly, however, we have to reckon with the "singular event of the original," and this prompts me to claim that Derrida's theses

cannot be properly understood without taking into account his thinking of the event.

In order to proceed with that claim, however, it's worth wondering if Derrida is *feigning* the philosophical strategies of thesis-proposing. One should be on one's guard when Derrida says "How can one dare say that nothing is translatable and, by the same token, that nothing is untranslatable?" (Derrida 1997/2013: 355) I think one needs to appreciate the rather archly performative discourse Derrida adopts—many of his texts are daringly performative in this way, self-ironizing and self-displacing, especially in view of the discursive conventions of "proper" philosophy. In any case, and to insist: these theses, feigned or not, cannot properly be understood without accounting for Derrida's reflection on the event. For what the notion of "event" focuses is the question of what is, or isn't possible—whether for translation or anything else. The event as such negotiates the eventualities of the possible and the impossible.

Let's approach Derrida's theses more patiently, therefore, and ask our philosophers "What is an event?" It's a question for Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Derrida. It can quickly become a question for translation as well: for Heidegger, *Ereignis* conveys a notion of own-ness, a sort of property secured by that event and shared with nothing else. But for Derrida, the Latinate implications of *évènement* enjoin a reflection on the root verb *venir* ("to come"). This allows for the event to be envisaged as a *coming*. The event comes to pass, and indeed arrives from the horizon of the *avenir* ("future," or the "to-come"). Thus, on Derrida's account, one must countenance the happenstance of events in terms of their arrival, and also the semantic field of eventuality—*évènement* and *avenir*, *aventure* ("adventure") and *invention* (strictly, "in-coming"), among others. Above all, since an event comes from the "to-

come," then the eventuality of an event, the coming of its arrival, must partake of the unpredictability of chance—there's no chance for chance if the future is forecastable or foreseeable. Hence Derrida's disinclination to endorse the hermeneutic investment in interpretive horizons, since horizons, after all, are just about visible. Events, for Derrida, come from beyond visible horizons—their chance arrivals are unforeseeable, precisely. The French for "future" (*le futur*) is foreseeable in that way, but the *avenir*, the other French term for "future," harbors the chancy potentialities of events that arrive quite unexpectedly. And it may be that the thwarting of what's expected, possible, foreseeable or deemed practically feasible for translation (and its putative "economies") is what characterizes the event of translation.

This is what I want to explore. But, for now, let's continue asking "What is an event?" It should be identifiable as an occurrence or taking-place that suffers no interpretive dispute as to whether it merits that evental status. An event should interrupt into predictable time. That interruption should have the time-signature of a *punctum,* a point-in-time intervening into the predicable course of time's flow. It should occur but once, and suffer neither repetition nor iteration since otherwise the event loses its evental integrality, diminishes instead into replicatory patterns that lose the utter difference an event should otherwise instantiate. The event should be indivisible and not share its eventhood with anything else—neither with the past nor with the predictable future. But how long can an event last—an instant, occurring in the blink of an eye? Is that still too long? If the event thwarts temporal capture, we might need technology to capture this: the photographic snapshot or cinematic freeze-frame that fix the event in its eventuality as an instantaneous point-in-time. We aren't far from Fish's desire for a photographic capture of the event of meaning, of course.

For translation to fulfill these conditions for eventhood, then besides that we might have to devolve our thoughts to the time of the millisecond, capturable only by camera technology, then firstly, we must contemplate the coming or arrival of translation. Secondly, translation's event must happen in partnership with chance, happen like an accident or an adventure, and perhaps moreover as an unexpected invention or reinvention of the original text, an invention of the text now suddenly, in the blink of an eye, invented as other to what it once was. Thirdly, that event must be unpredictable: the event must outplay the predictabilities of what was previously thought impossible. I stress my third point. An event shouldn't be predictable or forecastable according to any frameworks that "saturate" the horizons of what can and cannot come to pass. If the saturation at issue is a matter of determinations of what is and isn't possible, here and now and for all future time, then the event is what instantiates the impossible, what makes the impossible possible. Once the event arrives, it takes place (in French, the verb is *avoir lieu*), and hence takes a place previously not provided for it, a place peremptorily declared impossible for it to occupy. But it still does so, and hence possibilizes the impossible, so to speak, finds a *lieu* for itself despite the topical and topographical saturation of *all place* that hitherto delimited the knowable, the predictable, and the anticipatable—the fixed *horizons*, à la hermeneutics, circumscribing space-time itself.

This is philosophically complex. But let's say this: the translation event must disrupt the saturated field of translation "theory" that declares what can and cannot be translatable, declares what is possible and impossible for translation to accomplish. This "theoretical" field—which Venuti is right to consider is based on certain thoughts of "invariants"—is either translatability studies or (since it makes no difference) untranslatability studies. Consider how "poetry" is almost axiomatical-

ly declared to be untranslatable. Recall the dictum attributed to Robert Frost, cited by Venuti: "poetry is what gets lost in translation" (Venuti 2019: 83). So "poetry," whatever that really means, whatever is rendered generic or generalizable by that term, perhaps saturates the field of translatory (im)possibility for every singular poem since if "poetry" is always lost in translation, then "poetry" determines the conditions for the event Derrida describes. "Poetry" names the event it forbids: a translation which would render the impossible possible—one that *does* translate a poem and *does not lose* its "poetry."

My point is this: if we are to construe translation as an event, then it earns the name "event" if it makes possible what was previously deemed impossible. Translation faces the impossible (faces, for instance, "poetry") and the translation event refutes that impossibility by possibilizing the impossible. For that's what an event really is: the refutation of the saturated field of (im)possibilities in the enactment of what was previously deemed impossible, and thus the demonstration that the field wasn't saturated at all. If we suggested a translation that did the impossible, consider James Joyce. We could claim that it's impossible to translate *Finnegans Wake*. Yet it has been, and so we can regard those translations as events in the ways we're trying to describe with Derrida: events that do the impossible, that show what is possible. Hopefully we're now better able to understand Derrida's "theses." Consider:

> It is necessary to imagine two extreme hypotheses, the following two hyperboles: if to a translator who is fully competent in at least two languages and two cultures, two cultural memories with the sociohistorical knowledge embodied in them, you give all the time in the world … there is no reason for him to encounter the untranslatable or a remainder in his word. If you give someone who is competent an entire book, filled with *translator's notes*, in order to explain everything that a phrase of two or three words can mean in its particular form (for example, the *he war* from *Finnegans Wake* …), there is really no reason,

> in principle, for him to fail to render—without any remainder—the intentions, meanings, denotations, connotations and semantic overdeterminations, the formal effects of what is called the original. (Derrida 1997/2013: 355–356)

Derrida forces the sober rigor of philosophical hypothesis into the risky embrace of hyperbole. The overcoming of untranslatability is envisaged as the gift of infinite space ("an entire, possibly endless book"), and infinite time ("all the time in the world"). The coming of the overcoming of untranslatability would therefore be a matter of the gift of time and space which alas is always rationed (by editors, including of the present essay!). Here, with that rationing, is what Derrida also means by "economy"—economies of time, and economies of space. Practically, one can ration time. *On principle* one cannot, since time is endless until the apocalyptic End-Time. *On principle*, time gives itself: such is time's unpredictable generosity. That generous donation, when, where, and if it is given in the time to-come, would afford the time requisite for the event of the impossible, that which might take the time and space to overcome the challenge of untranslatability.

Is this fanciful? Well, it depends on what one's attitude is to Derrida's "in principle"—philosophy deals in principles, so why not? Is this instrumentalism? If it is, then it's instrumentalism raised to a higher power, so to speak, since what is involved is nothing less than those two central philosophical topics, namely time as such and space as such. Need we invoke Heidegger here? Need we also add that these topics cannot be addressed, by Heidegger and Derrida at any rate, without thoughts concerning the giving of the gift? It also depends on the example of *Finnegans Wake*: the Anglo-German pun *he war* is untranslatable, but it isn't inexplicable, which is why Derrida adverts to translator's notes—(un)translatability is related to *explicability*, an "ability" Derrida is unwilling to give up on: he

thinks (or feigns to think) that a "phrase of two or three words" can be so exhaustively explained that no linguistic opacity would remain. Derrida's "theses" address the giving of space and time. It's why the gift is put into opposition with the *economical* rationing of time and space Derrida considers to be the outcome of one-word-by-one-word translatory doctrine. Despite the apparently categorical pessimism of "nothing is translatable," Derrida—for the sake of his im-possible event to come—is optimistic. That optimism is rooted in the way the event shares its eventality with the infinite unpredictabilities of the *avenir*, with chance's temporal lottery (*un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, you might say), and with the gift of un-rationed time and space. Everything can be translatable, on principle, as long as one doesn't foreclose on time's eventualities and generous infinities, and hence avoids presumptuous forecasts concerning what the future can and cannot bring.

What of "nothing is translatable," however? What is that "nothing" preventing the translation event from occurring (as a successful event, at least)? Consider poetry again, and Derrida's essay on Paul Celan, entitled "Rams": "The poem no doubt is the only place propitious to the experience of language, that is to say, of an idiom that forever defies translation and therefore demands a translation that will do the impossible, make the impossible possible in an unheard-of event" (Derrida 2003/2005: 137). *The* poem: at issue is the idiom that poem doesn't share with any other poem, idiom being, therefore, that which protects the poem's singularity. Yet, if such idiomaticity forever defies translation, then it's precisely that defiance which primes the translation event: that defiance *instantiates* the seeming fact of translatory impossibility. That instantiation is what, in the passage cited by Venuti from "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?" makes for "the singular event of the original." The time of translatory impossibility is that of

"forever," but impossibility is the paradoxical condition of possibility for an event to even occur. A poem must say (as I imagine it): 'Nothing of my idiom is translatable, and it will be so *forever*.' A translator resists the time of the "forever" and replies in the name of the *avenir*, since it's the horizon from which the unheard-of translation event might come. When it does so, then we have an event worthy of the name: as Derrida says, that which makes the impossible possible.

5 The Saving Event: Translation and the Archive

Translators thus undergo the ordeal of the impossible in order to preserve the chance for the event of possibility. It's the ordeal translators undergo in view of "poetry," no doubt, and vis-à-vis *the* poem. But what does the poem want? Does it want to be translated? Or does it want to resist translation given its singular traits and (*à la* Celan) shibboleths? Does it want to protect its idiom from translation, since that's how a poem's singularity is seemingly secured? That poem might be mindful, moreover, of the violence—including sexual violence—that apparently accompanies the translation event. It might prefer Benjamin's organic metaphor where the original text is likened to a fruit possessed of a kernel and skin, and it might therefore withdraw into the untouchable, intact core of itself, roll into a self-protecting ball like a threatened hedgehog (to change metaphors, and to allude to a certain *hérisson* deployed by Derrida in the course of his reflections on translation (see O'Keeffe 2016).

Benjamin asks us to consider a text, intimating mortality, and appealing for the translation that ensures its survival—the afterlife and superlative life of *Fortleben* and *Überleben*. True, one doesn't have to read Benjamin's essay as a meditation on tex-

tual mortality and translatory afterlives—one can translate *Fortleben* as "ongoing life," this translation being one that doesn't prompt thoughts of a text's finitude. Still, if one reads "The Task of the Translator" in terms of life, death, and afterlife, then the issue is whether there are only three events in an original text's life: the text's birth, life, and death. Reception Theory might assess the evolution of a text's lifespan, and one might claim that, for Gadamer, a classic text is well-nigh immortal, given the classic's ability to secure its canonicity and core meaning against the vicissitudes of successive interpretive horizons (and perhaps retain what Benjamin calls its "fame"), despite the contingencies of changing tastes in literature. But if a text can die, then to what graveyard does it go, in what sealed archive is it laid to rest, immured in a tomb of unreadability or untranslatability?

While there are three events in an *original* text's life, there is nonetheless a supplementary event that can happen to it, namely that of translation. Translation ensures the postmortem living-on of that text in sundry foreign languages. Here we can cite Berman, invoking a host of authors, including Marina Tsvetaieva, for whom

> la traduction signifie non seulement le 'passage' interlangues d'un texte, mais – autour de ce premier 'passage' – toute une série d'autres 'passages' qui concernent l'acte d'écrire et, plus secrètement encore, l'acte de vivre et de mourir" (Berman 1991: 21).

> [translation doesn't just signify the interlinguistic 'passage' of a text, but also – in and around this first 'passage' – a whole series of other 'passages' that concern the act of writing, and, more secretly still, the act of living and dying.]

While Berman or Tsvetaieva aver that there is a "secret" relationship between textual life and death, and that this secret also concerns translation, it's tempting (or pedantic) to declare, instead, that the secret is that there is no secret. Texts don't die,

because they only live on paper (or, nowadays, live in the digital archives of *Google Books*). Still, let's feign to believe in that secret, and pretend that original texts live and die. But if an original text wishes to enjoy its translatory afterlife, then *while living*, while living out its own originality, that text must prepare for its survival to come—that preparation would perhaps be the text's embrace of its translatability, its *Übersetzbarkeit.* The text anticipates or hopes for its eventual translation, but it cannot forecast what will happen to it once translation occurs. The aftermath is a matter of what happens to the translated text rather than the original text whose life is now over, or at any rate is different from the life it lives on in translation.

Benjamin writes: "Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers?" (Benjamin 1923/2004: 254). Imagine an anxious text asking this: if that translator is never found, if that translation never arrives or happens, the text might die as if sealed, as I just put it, in a tomb of unreadability and untranslatability—its secrets lost to reception history, its shibboleth or password unknown, its hieroglyph undecipherable. Faced with that doom, a text will tarry on the edge of its tomb, and find an alternative locale for itself, a place to await the translation event it hopes will come, one day. Where would that place be? I suggest the archive.

In archives, texts await, hoping to be resuscitated, perhaps thanks to translation. Consider that "ability" called *archivability*, therefore. What enables texts, but not just texts, to be deposited and made available in that way? Back to subjectiles—the "supports" enabling texts or videos to be preservable and conservable. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida asks, "Can one imagine an archive without foundation, without substrate, without substance, without subjectile? And [...] what of the history of substrates?" (Derrida 1995/1996: 27). Residing in archives, one imagines books and tape-recordings hoping their subjectiles

aren't biodegradable, hoping for the securer supports of non-biodegradable digital formats (whether such formats are amenable to the philosophical determination of "substance" I'm not competent to judge). Feared, therefore, is the archive's destruction. Feared is the (Freudian) death drive, whose "silent vocation is to burn the archive" (ibid.: 12). Feared is *holocaust*, a pyre that leaves no trace, ash, or cinder. Texts would like archives to preserve their traces in order that "translation" be one of the ways they survive their past. Archives preserve the future of the event (the event, say, of translation) and hence protect texts from being consigned to the "death" of an irretrievable past—a past without trace.

Derrida links the archive to translation:

> The archive always holds a problem for translation. With the irreplaceable singularity of a document to interpret, to repeat, to reproduce, but each time in an original uniqueness, an archive ought to be idiomatic, and thus at once offered and unavailable for translation, open to and shielded from technical iteration and reproduction. (Derrida 1995/1996: 90)

Whenever Derrida's thoughts concern preservation and conservation, shielding and saving, it's about singularities—the irreplaceable document, the singular poem and its idiom, as in "Rams." The problem, however, is that to preserve such singularities, the archive would presumably have to close its doors and, likewise, translation would have to be forbidden, lest translation lose the idiom during the inter-lingual journey. But if Benjamin is right that translation ensures the text's survival or living-on, then the archive must remain open, just as texts must remain open to translation—this openness would imply their *Übersetzbarkeit*. Yet texts thereby remain open to the risk of loss-in-translation even as they hope for those future lives Benjamin characterizes for us. That's the loss to be risked, the loss that *cannot* be wagered against any gain in translation (a gain

in life itself) because that "economic" calculus is what Derrida deconstructs in the name of the incalculabilities of the "gift" and the "event."

6   Performance and the Translation Event

Archives preserve documents in their repositories—books, tape-recordings, etc. But archives cannot capture the liveness, so to speak, of a performance: you had to be there and experience that performance yourself. In broaching the issue of performance and the translation event, we might recall Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility": "In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place" (Benjamin 1935/2006: 253). The here and now: archives cannot capture this, nor can our technologies of recording and digital capture it either—not quite. When Marina Abramovic, for instance, staged her "The Artist is Present" performance piece in 2020 at MoMA in New York, one had to be present in her company. That event took place, came to pass, and can never come again. Consider all those events which took place there and then, and which can never be recaptured in their original chronotopic eventality, whatever re-enactments, re-performances, or "translations" one might stage thereafter. One only reminiscences about an event now gone, or reviews video recordings and photographic snapshots that caught the event in its momentary coming-to-pass.

Performance artists know this: their temporal context is that of the present. Yet, unlike Abramovic's performance, where there was no prearranged script (hence what happened during that performance was subject to chance, fulfilled, therefore, the philosophical conditions for the pure event), other engagements with the performative circumstances of art-

events do come with scripts—with instructions, that is, for how to stage the event in question. Consider George Brecht, whose 1960–61 *Event Scores* blended the textual instructions of a script and those of a musical score to propose the means by which to stage his artworks—artworks whose "art," however, was subject to the whims of the persons interacting with them (and indeed to the possibility that the event prescribed by those scores didn't have to happen at all—one can always not interact, and an event can always not take place).

One of the most interesting attempts to recover artworks from the archive, and re-stage them as enactments of translation, was recently organized by Sébastien Pluot. In 1969, certain artists participated in an exhibition, curated by Jan van der Mark of the Contemporary Art Museum in Chicago, called *Art by Telephone*. The artists sent instructions for the realization of their works by telephone—museum staff or local craftsmen made, performed, or otherwise activated these works on the artists' behalf. Mel Bochner proposed *Transduction*: he was to have called the museum, read a text which would have been transcribed and then passed along, via telephone, to a person in Italy—that person would have transcribed it again and then translated it into Italian. Another phone call was to have been placed to a person in Germany, and by telephonic relay Bochner's text was to have circulated in various translations to various locations. The circuit would have been closed when the last translator called back to the museum in Chicago. But *Transduction* never happened. The event or events of translation it proposed didn't take place. *Transduction* remained in the archive, its translatabilities remained latent (albeit, as Benjamin might say, still "essential" to the meaning of the piece), until Pluot and Dean Inkster asked Bochner, in 2009, about enacting the piece. Bochner only dimly recalled his original proposition, and indeed only gained access to the archives where the

documentation for *Transduction* was kept in 2012. *Transduction* then took place, with Pluot and others translating the text into multiple languages—English, French, Swedish, Italian etc. *Art by Telephone…Recalled* duly took place (or places) and it re-entered the archive, so to speak, in the form of an exhibition in Montpellier in 2014, and two books (see Pluot/Vallos 2014 and Pluot 2014).

Consider this event—or these events—of translation and transduction. They were possible thanks to the archive: while Bochner might have almost forgotten his proposal, the archive didn't, and hence permitted the proposed event's *recall*. The transductional event to-come, latent in the meanwhile since 1969, depended on archivability. But the events of translation and transduction were indeed plural: usually we think of a (performative) event occurring *one* time only, and in *one* place only as well. Yet thanks to the technology of telephony, the event became multi-situated and multi-lingual. Those events couldn't quite be restricted to the one-time, blink-of-an-eye *punctum* normally reserved for the event, as I said earlier. For the times of the event were blended: on the one hand, the time would have been the time it took to *place* a phone call (notice how we put it like that), the time of the millisecond "click" of telephone wires connecting. On the other, given the multiple locations at which this event of transcription and translation occurred, the alternative time evidently implies the delay caused by the *work* of doing those transcriptions and translations, not to mention the difference in time zones. Hence there was time for chance: the chance that the connection might be dropped, that noise interrupted the communication, or that the transmission/translation might have gotten garbled.

Here is translation partnered to the technologies of telephony (or teleportation). On this note, recall Berman declaring that traductology "peut (et elle doit) réfléchir sur la traduction

technique et scientifique, sur la *traductique* qui, peu à peu, met en forme (informatique) cette traduction, dans la mesure où quelque chose d'essentiel se noue ici entre la technologie et l'acte de traduire" (Berman 1991: 20). The import of *Art by Telephone…Recalled* is that Bochner, like the other participants in *Art by Telephone*, were also asking whether the knot or link between translation and technology—here, telephonic technology—is essential for the nature of art and the *event* of art, as well. They were asking that question from the archive, so to speak, and it's a lucky chance that Pluot and his colleagues recalled that *Transduction*, and the translatabilities it promised, remained in the archive, and hence realized that *Transduction* wasn't quite lost to history, nor had it suffered the fate envisaged by Derrida as that of the incinerated archive.

Still, *Transduction* wouldn't have emerged from the archive and entered into its translatory "afterlives" had it not been for the translators acting as switchboard operators, ready to plug in, listen in, and then transcribe, then translate, and then phone onwards. "Translator, Transponder!" you might say. The event or events of *Transduction* occurred thanks to translators who duly met the appointment with Bochner's text as it passed down the wires. Nonetheless, it's tempting to wonder if a translator might have hung up the phone, and thereby prematurely ended the event (or turned it into a non-event). As Avital Ronell asks, in an interview with Pluot and Dean Inkster, "Is it possible to *not* respond to a call?" (Pluot 2014: 19; transl.: B. O'K.). *Transduction's* reliance on translators for its serial eventhood illustrates—indeed performs—what has been at issue in the present essay more generally, namely an exploration of what translators do for the sake, and for the saving of the event as such.

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