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Montesquieu's Geometer & the Tyrannical Spirits of Translation

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1.1 Introduction

Within the whole of the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu's 18th-century epistolary pseudotranslation, only once does the issue of literary translation arise. In letter 123,[1] Rica, the primary reporter on life in Paris, recounts a stroll with an unnamed friend along the Pont Neuf, where they compel a geometer deep in contemplation to join them at a café. Following some disagreeable banter there, the geometer departs, and on his way out has a run-in—physical as well as intellectual—with a *savant* whom he knows. This acquaintance, who reveals he has been a translator for twenty years, shares the wonderful news that his translation of the Roman poet Horace has just been published. Instead of the admiration and accolades he expects, however, his math-minded interlocutor immediately deflates his pretensions with a single question: "You haven't done any thinking for twenty years?" (*Il y a vingt ans que vous ne pensez pas?*) When the translator mounts a feeble defense, which is in truth merely a plea that his valuable public service be recognized, he is assailed with a series of pointed barbs, none of which, even if now hurled with far less gusto, will fail to touch translators today:

> —Monsieur, dit le savant, croyez-vous que je n'aie pas rendu un grand service au public,
> de lui rendre la lecture des bons auteurs familière?
> —Je ne dis pas tout à fait cela: j'estime autant qu'un autre les sublimes génies que vous
> travestissez. Mais vous ne leur ressemblerez point: car, si vous traduisez toujours, on ne
> vous traduira jamais. Les traductions sont comme ces monnaies de cuivre qui ont bien la
> même valeur qu'une pièce d'or et même sont d'un plus grand usage pour le peuple; mais

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[1] Letter 123 in the 1721 edition, 129 in subsequent editions.

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elles sont toujours faibles et d'un mauvais aloi. Vous voulez, dites-vous, faire renaître
parmi nous ces illustres morts; et j'avoue que vous leur donnez bien un corps: mais vous
ne leur rendez pas la vie; il y manque toujours un esprit pour les animer.

— "But monsieur," said the scholar, "don't you think I've performed a great service to
the public, making it easy for them to read the best writers?"
— "I wouldn't say that. As much as anyone, I hold in high regard the sublime geniuses
whom you dress up in rags. But you're not like them at all—you could translate forever,
but no one will ever translate you. Translations are like brass coins: they have the same
value as a gold piece, and are common currency with the people, but they don't last, a
cheap alloy. You say you want to give these illustrious dead a rebirth in our day, and I
grant that you do provide them with a body, but you don't give them life: what's always
missing is a spirit to animate them."[2]

As a Parthian shot, the geometer suggests, not without condescension, that the translator make
better use of his time in the discovery of beautiful truths (*belles vérités*) available to anyone via
simple calculation. The two disengage and go their separate ways, equally annoyed with one
another. The translator, however, offers no rejoinder to the geometer's assault, as if he could not
find the words.

The tropes the geometer manages to deploy in these few lines, clothing (*travestissez*) and
currency, are translation commonplaces, and his concluding binary of body and spirit is a
metaphor coterminous with the idea of translation itself (Steiner, 1998: 280-1). Indeed, the
separability of a text's body (letter, signifier, *verbum*) and spirit (meaning, signified, *sensus*) lies
at the heart of translation, and the oscillations between them supplies its lifeblood. In Plato's *Ion*,
one of the earliest explorations of translation, Socrates interrogates a rhapsode by that name, who
"translates" Homeric texts in dramatic performance. Ion's activity represents the most
fundamental form of translation (*hermēmeuō*),[3] an intralingual interpretation, yet it already
involves a separation of the letter and the sense. When Socrates first praises Homeric rhapsodes,
his assumption, at least before Ion, is that to be successful, they must know not only the words of

[3] Johnson's (2001) claim that "Plato did not write on translation" (p. 44) and that "Socrates does not
mention the translator explicitly" (p. 45) thus depends upon a narrow definition of translation.

the text they recite (*ta epē*), but its meaning (*dianoia*) as well. It is impossible, Socrates says, that a rhapsode could be a translator (*hermēneus*) of the poet's meaning if he does not know what the poet says (530C). The hapless Ion, perhaps only the first award-winning translator who could neither resolve the dilemma of body and spirit nor explain what he does, can only agree to Socrates' ironic conclusion that his translation abilities must be some divine power (*theia dunamis*), not a technical skill (*technē* or *epistēmē*).

The trope of body and spirit survived various translations to live on in Montesquieu's strange epistolary essay on translation. His geometer would agree that real translation involves the transfer of a spirit into a new body, but for this very reason also declares it impossible. In his view, the scholar-translator attempts an interlingual transfer of meaning—translation proper, in Jakobson's (1959) terms—, which, like a brass coin (or paper money), functions quite well as a matter of common faith, but fails upon close inspection to be in any real sense what it purports to be: i.e., *his* Horace is not *the* Horace. The geometer does not require even a cursory perusal of his acquaintance's translation to know that the vital element is missing; *ipso facto* he knows it to be a travesty of the original, since the spirit of Horace does not—cannot—inhabit the French version. Nonetheless, his recognition of the separation of body and spirit as the precondition for translation, as well as his elevation of the spirit to its necessary and sufficient cause, situate the geometer within the mainstream of translation theory (Seidman, 2006: 17). However, he acknowledges this separation only to deny its reality; it exists for him, as form and matter for Aristotle (*Physics* 193b4-5), only in speech, and translation understood as the transfer of an original's animating spirit into a different body is simply a manner of speaking. The geometer's world, composed of abstract and ideal bodies—points, lines, planes, and solids—, permits no actual translation, and the word "translation" itself possesses for him only metaphorical meaning.

From this perspective, translation cannot be a matter of degree, with the original's meaning expressed imperfectly, since a geometrical circle is by definition perfect, else it is no circle. An approximation sketched on a napkin the geometer will not recognize. In fact, he at first does not even realize that the translator is talking about a translation, and reacts with incomprehension when the scholar announces his publication of "my Horace" (*mon Horace*):

Je suis bien aise que vous m'ayez heurté, car j'ai une grande nouvelle à vous apprendre: je viens de donner mon Horace au public. —Comment! dit le géomètre, il y a deux mille ans qu'il y est.

"I'm glad you've run into me, as I have some important news to tell you: I've just presented my Horace to the public."
—"What?", said the geometer, "He's been around for two thousand years!"

For the geometer, Horace can only be Horace in Latin, and people had been reading him, in Latin, for almost two millennia. A new presentation of Horace—the real Horace, the only Horace there is—confounds the geometer, for whom Horace in French is an oxymoron. If, on the other hand, the translator had not handled the words of Horace, but instead had communed with his muses, he would not have translated in the everyday (and, to the geometer, illegitimate) sense, but would have instead "translated" original poetry, infused with the spirit of Horace. Montesquieu's *savant* would then no longer be a translator who will never be translated, but one of the exalted authors destined to be travestied in translation: as Vergil was the Roman Homer, he would be the French Horace.

In the geometer's extremist view, which calls into question the existence of translation proper, the poet's living spirit, entombed within his original language, cannot be set free to inhabit another textual body via some kind of metempsychosis. Unlike those who traffic in evergreen truths, whether among the timeless axioms of Euclid or hexameters straight from the Muse, Montesquieu's dispirited translator, his eyes fixed on someone else's words and never turning to the heavens for inspiration, can produce nothing but lifeless relics. The metaphorical binary of body and spirit that makes translation possible at the same time places the translator in an extreme dilemma. Borges (1996: 400) puts it in the starkest terms:

Traducir el espíritu es una intención tan enorme y tan fantasmal que bien puede quedar como indefensiva; traducir la letra, una precisión tan extravagante que no ha riesgo de que la ensayen.

> Translating the spirit is an undertaking so immense and illusory that it may well seem
> indefensible; translating the letter, an exactitude so outlandish that there is no danger it
> will be attempted.[4]

Translation proper thus exists as an excluded middle, between the impossibility of replicating textual bodies and the spiritual ideal of semantic identity.

Montesquieu also burdened his fictional translator with the choice of Horace, a poet whom he admired, especially as a satirist (Montesquieu, 1964: 978). Among Horace's odes, epodes, satires, and epistles, his most influential poem, particularly after Boileau published *L'Art Poétique* (1674), is the *Ars Poetica*, a 500-line poetic discourse on how (not) to write poetry. At one point, Horace advises would-be poets to avoid the trite and commonplace and to eschew literal translation if they hope to treat popular subjects in an individual and original way:

> publica materies privati iuris erit,
> si non circa vilem patulumque moraberis orbem,
> nec verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus
> interpres…

> You'll possess private rights over public property
> if you don't waste your time on an easy and open track,
> and don't try to render word-for-word as a faithful
> translator…   (131-134)

The final line, sundered from its context, becomes in translation studies readers an imperative to translators, though Horace does not address them directly, and translation is at best a secondary concern.[5] Fidelity, a canonical virtue of translation, normally refers to accuracy in reproducing the original sense and certainty in capturing the original spirit. Here, however, it signifies a faithful rendering according the letter (*verbo verbum*), and is not a translator's vice, but an

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[4] For a translation with a different sense, see Allen, 1999: 95.
[5] See, e.g., Lefevere, 1992: 15, which translates: "Do not worry about rendering word for word, faithful translator, but render sense for sense." Johnson, 2001: 172-175, discusses the various interpretations of the lines.

author's. (An earlier translator nicely offers "slavish" for *fidus*).[6] Horace nowhere mentions *sensus*, which is present only implicitly as the other and, in the mainstream tradition, more important half of the translator's binary, nowhere does he advise translators to heed the spirit rather than the letter; his advice is directed to poets alone. In fact, Horace presumes that faithful translators adhere to the word, and for this reason create nothing worthwhile as literature: literal translation makes for bad poetry. Unfaithful translation, freed from the word and seeking only to capture the spirit, is, at least implicitly, an approved mode of literary creation, in which the original text inspires rather than dictates. Word-for-word translation leads to lifeless literary productions, new bodies without an animating spirit, while translation of the spirit is equivalent to original authorship. Just as in the geometer's view, translation is either travesty or no translation at all, and Montesquieu's translator cannot escape the irony that a faithful rendering of Horace, by Horace's own terms, would validate the geometer's attack.

The inability of a translator of Horace to find common ground with a geometer (itself a failure of translation) is not accidental, nor is their encounter in a pseudotranslation fortuitous. Poetry had often served alongside geometry as exemplar of the inseparability of word and sense, and thus as evidence of translation's impossibility. Geometry, in a role traceable to the square drawn in sand by the slave in Plato's *Meno*, had long represented a perfectly unified symbolic system that can be understood by everyone, possessed of an ideal universality that renders translation both impossible and unnecessary, as in a pre-Babel condition of linguistic unity. Poetry joins geometry in mutual resistance to the separation of body and spirit, but individuality of a poem lies on the opposite end of the spectrum opposite from geometry's universality. It approximates a private language, its particular meaning cloistered within the bounds of its own text. The In 1751, Diderot, for whose *Encyclopédie* Montesquieu contributed an "Essay on Taste" (*Essai sur le goût*), proclaimed in his *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* poetry's ultimate untranslatability in contrast to geometry's common intelligibility (2010: 234, 243). He allowed that a poem's ideas could be reproduced and equivalent expressions might be found, yet the distribution of vowels and consonants create a subtle symbolic effect (*l'emblème délié, l'hiéroglyfe subtil*) that cannot be replicated in a different language. As an example, he compares the L-sounds of Homer's *elelixen Olympon* to those of the French version *où l'Olympe ébranlé*. Despite their similarity, the greater distance between the L's in the French fails to capture the

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[6] Fairclough, 1929: 461.

original's vivid impression (*sentiment vif*) of a shuddering Mount Olympus. For Diderot, this inability to reproduce the meaning inherent in and inseparable from the physical quality of the text results in a loss, no matter how miniscule, that prevents a complete semantic transfer and renders all translation futile. He reiterates at the conclusion to the *Lettre* the impossibility of translating a poet in another language, again in contrast to geometers, who are commonly understood. The bodily qualities of the literary text necessarily disappear in translation (2010: 228), utterly disheartening translators, whom Diderot calls, in an echo of Montesquieu's geometer, "imitators of Genius" (*décourage les imitateurs de Génie*). Here, too, close approximation counts for naught.

As a final irony, Montesquieu embedded this encounter of impossibilities within a pseudotranslation, first published anonymously in Holland (though his authorship of the *Persian Letters* was an open secret). Pseudotranslations such as Macpherson's Ossian poems of the 1760s and Pierre Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis* of 1894, now canonical texts in translation studies, complicate in obvious ways the standard discourse of translation (Venuti, 2002: 34-44; see also Apter, 2005; Bassnett, 1998; Toury, 1985), yet Montesquieu's deliberate meditation on translation surpasses these forged artefacts of literary history. In particular, the rigged collision of geometry and poetry in letter 123, a pseudotranslation within a pseudotranslation, collapses without recourse to historical or social context the categories of original and translation, obscures the pseudo and the real: did the fictional Rica, in his (pseudo)original letter to Usbek, translate the overheard French banter between geometer and translator into his native tongue, in which case Montesquieu (pseudo)translated it back to the (original) French? Or did he transcribe it, for Montesquieu to leave "untranslated"? The geomter's disavowal of the translator's activity cannot be distinguished as original or translation, even before it has been (pseudo)translated. Letter 123 does more than demonstrate "the fundamental unreliability of translation's claim to approximating the original in another tongue" (Apter, 2005: 167); the geometer's perfectly rational demand for an animating spirit, an all-or-nothing proposition, and the translator's silence in response call into the question the concept of close approximation as a meaningful way to talk about translation. In Montesquieu's imbrication of translation fictions, belief in the possibility of translation is totally irrational.

1.2 The Miracle of Translation

The geometer's pseudotranslated refusal to acknowledge the everyday miracle of translation hearkens back to rabbinic debates about the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (Alexander, 2014: 238-242; Wasserstein & Wasserstein, 2006: 51-83). While some disputed its accuracy, most famously in the choice of *parthenos*, with its explicit reference to virginity, as a translation of *'almah* at Isaiah 7.14, others offered a more fundamental resistance to a Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures: the Hebrew script possessed a spiritual authority that would be lost in any other physical form (Veltri, 2002: 83-92). *Megillat Ta'anit Batra*, a calendar of fast days, declares that "darkness fell on the world for three days" on the occasion of the Septuagint's appearance (Veltri, 2002: 144-150), and the post-Talmudic tractate *Massekhet Sepher Torah*, possibly deriving from much earlier sources, equates the Greek translation to the golden calf of Exodus, with the explanation that a proper translation of Torah is impossible (1.8; Wasserstein & Wasserstein, 2006: 69-72; Simon-Shoshan, 2007).[7] At stake was the "translatability" of Judaism itself, and Jewish resistance to being translated lay not in a spirit of opposition, but unwilling flesh (Assman, J., 1996), a refusal to recognize translation even as metaphor. Since spirits of translation freed from the body allowed for the possibility of complete semantic transfer, untranslatability's last bastion was the unbridgeable separation of texts written, as *Megillah* 9a puts it, "in our body" (*beguphan selanu*) from those "in their body" (*beguphan selahen*). The Talmudic debates, naturally, reach no definitive conclusion on the question of translation,[8] yet at least one thread held fast to this absolute position of untranslatability, grounded in the indispensability of the body to the significance of the text (Levinas, 1984: 341). Without the separability of body and spirit, the would-be translator inhabits a no-man's land between the horns of Borges' dilemma: "He who translates a verse according to its form is a liar, and he who adds is a blasphemer." (*Tosefta Megilla* 3.41) To survive, the translator needs to believe in a textual spirit that can rise from a lifeless body, and have faith in a semantic resurrection.

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[7] Similarly *Masskehet Sopherim* 1.7, with five translators instead of seventy. Rabbinic literature only speaks of the translation of the Torah, though the tradition eventually expands to include other Hebrew scriptures.

[8] *Megillah* 8b even cites one view that the scriptures of the Jews remained sacred only when translated into Greek.

Upholders of the untranslatable might have recruited Montesquieu's geometer to be their standard-bearer for the inseparability of body and spirit in a language of eternal truths, yet it was the defenders of the Septuagint translation who appropriated geometry as an ideal to explain their uncorrupted, and incorruptible, (non)translation of the holy scriptures. In ancient accounts of the Septuagint's miraculous genesis, seventy (or seventy-two) identical Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures were produced independently. Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenized Jew writing in the early first century AD,[9] likened this perfect transfer of sense from Hebrew into Greek to geometry and logic, which are not liable to mistranslation becausethey are untranslatable:

> καίτοι τίς οὐκ οἶδεν, ὅτι πᾶσα μὲν διάλεκτος, ἡ δ᾽ Ἑλληνικὴ διαφερόντως, ὀνομάτων πλουτεῖ, καὶ ταὐτὸν ἐνθύμημα οἷόν τε μεταφράζοντα καὶ παραφράζοντα σχηματίσαι πολλαχῶς, ἄλλοτε ἄλλας ἐφαρμόζοντα λέξεις· ὅπερ ἐπὶ ταύτης τῆς νομοθεσίας οὔ φασι συμβῆναι, συνενεχθῆναι δ᾽ εἰς ταὐτὸν κύρια κυρίοις ὀνόμασι, τὰ Ἑλληνικὰ τοῖς Χαλδαϊκοῖς, ἐναρμοσθέντα εὖ μάλα τοῖς δηλουμένοις πράγμασιν. ὃν γὰρ τρόπον, οἶμαι, ἐν γεωμετρίᾳ καὶ διαλεκτικῇ τὰ σημαινόμενα ποικιλίαν ἑρμηνείας οὐκ ἀνέχεται, μένει δ᾽ ἀμετάβλητος ἡ ἐξ ἀρχῆς τεθεῖσα, τὸν αὐτὸν ὡς ἔοικε τρόπον καὶ οὗτοι συντρέχοντα τοῖς πράγμασιν ὀνόματα ἐξεῦρον, ἅπερ δὴ μόνα ἢ μάλιστα τρανώσειν ἔμελλεν ἐμφαντικῶς τὰ δηλούμενα. (*On Moses* 2.37-40)

And who is ignorant of the fact that every language, and especially Greek, possesses an abundance of words, and by metaphrase and paraphrase you can form the same thought (*enthumēma*) in different ways, adapting different expressions on different occasions? Yet according to the story this is not what happened in the case of the Torah. Instead, the right Greek words were matched with the right Hebrew words, perfectly fitted to the intended ideas (*tois dēloumenois pragmasin*). In geometry and logic (*dialektikēi*), what is signified (*ta sēmainomena*) does not admit different translations (*hermēneias*), but what is originally set down remains unchanged, and in this same way, I believe, these translators discovered words corresponding to the ideas (*tois pragmasin*), which were the only words, in fact, or the best ones that would make the meaning (*ta dēloumena*) unmistakably clear.

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[9] In the different accounts of the Septuagint translation, the number of translators oscillates between seventy and seventy-two before eventually settling on seventy. Philo, however, never mentions the number of translators, and maintains a narrative distance from the miraculous aspects of the story. See Canfora, 1996: x.

Philo acknowledges in the first sentence the mundane ideal of accurate translation—preserving the same sense with different forms of expression—, but this Septuagint translation exceeds human understanding because it maintains identity of spirit together with identity of body, despite all appearances to the contrary. The impossible geometric ideal is thus achieved, and the "horizontal" transfer of meaning from Hebrew to Greek is only apparent. Instead, the translation derives its spirit from the same divine source as the original, in what might be called a parallel "vertical" process, like multiple correct proofs of the same geometric problem (Stierle, 1996). Translation no longer requires original's spirit to undergo a process of extraction from the textual body, since this spirit maintains an independent existence.

The Hebrew scriptures, then, are not in truth the original source, and the Septuagint is not strictly speaking a translation at all. It is, rather, a different worldly manifestation of the same divine truth, the same universal spirit in a body different yet somehow the same, the (re)creation, in fact, of an identical original. Reading the Greek Septuagint would be an experience exactly equivalent in every sense to reading the Hebrew scriptures: a translation perfect on every level, in which the distinction between horizontal transfer of meaning from one textual body to another and vertical inspiration from an identical spiritual source collapses. As with the eternal truths of geometry, texts with a claim to sacred status cannot, strictly speaking, permit degrees of accuracy. To guarantee sanctity, translation must occur without any loss, both in body and spirit, a requirement made explicit in the charge given to the translators not to omit, add or alter anything, but to preserve the original's content and form (*On Moses* 2.34: *tēn ex archēs idean kai ton typon*). to overcome the logical paradox Montesquieu's enlightened geometer could not accept, Philo's miraculous account seeks to generate an impossible ideal translation rather than declare translation impossible. Without a faith in miracles, the geometer cannot resolve the diametrically opposed horizontal translation of the body and vertical translation of the spirit, nor discover any point of intersection. From his rational perspective, perfect identity of Hebrew and Greek is an ontological impossibility, and exact equivalence can never be epistemologically guaranteed.

Whereas the geometer's refusal to acknowledge the separability of body and spirit in anything but word leads to the outright rejection of translation, the Septuagint's supernatural preservation of both threatens the existence of translation with its perfection, which is identity

with original authorship. Philo, in fact, opens the story of the translation with a description at pains to identify the translators of the scriptures with the original's divinely-inspired authors:

> καθάπερ ἐνθουσιῶντες προεφήτευον οὐκ ἄλλα ἄλλοι, τὰ δ᾽ αὐτὰ πάντες ὀνόματα καὶ ῥήματα, ὥσπερ ὑποβολέως ἑκάστοις ἀοράτως ἐνηχοῦντος. (*On Moses* 2.37)

> Like the divinely inspired, they began to translate, not each in a different way, but all with the same words and phrases, as if some unseen prompter sounded in the ears of each of them.

The same prophetic muse of Moses whispers the words directly into their ears, bypassing the body of the text before them. Only the existence of a prior Hebrew original, a stubborn historical fact, preserves the distinction between translator and original author. An emphasis on the miraculous identity of the two texts, however, diminishes the inconvenient presence of an original, and the translators are elevated to the status of prophets, granted all the attributes of inspired authors:

> ἐάν τε Χαλδαῖοι τὴν Ἑλληνικὴν γλῶτταν ἐάν τε Ἕλληνες τὴν Χαλδαίων ἀναδιδαχθῶσι καὶ ἀμφοτέραις ταῖς γραφαῖς ἐντύχωσι, τῇ τε Χαλδαϊκῇ καὶ τῇ ἑρμηνευθείσῃ, καθάπερ ἀδελφὰς μᾶλλον δ᾽ ὡς μίαν καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔν τε τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ τοῖς ὀνόμασι τεθήπασι καὶ προσκυνοῦσιν, οὐχ ἑρμηνέας ἐκείνους ἀλλ᾽ ἱεροφάντας καὶ προφήτας προσαγορεύοντες, οἷς ἐξεγένετο συνδραμεῖν λογισμοῖς εἰλικρινέσι τῷ Μωυσέως καθαρωτάτῳ πνεύματι. (*On Moses* 2.40)

> When Hebrews have been taught Greek and Greeks Hebrew and they read both texts— the Hebrew and the translation—, they are astounded, and revere them as siblings, or rather as one and the same text, in words and meaning. They call them not translators, but hierophants and prophets, for with their immaculate intellects they were able to join together with the completely pure spirit of Moses.

The comparison to siblings is apt: both texts are children (twins, really) of the same parent, and the distinction between the textual bodies loses all significance. As a result, the Septuagint usurps the original and can now authorize all other translations, even those made from yet other

translations. Each translation, divinely inspired, would be as "close" to the original, because it would in fact be a "translation" of the same original spirit, and as with timeless Euclidean truths, the historical and physical differences between versions become inconsequential. The King James translation, for example, can claim to possess the same holy spirit and to represent the original and unaltered word of God, obviating the need to gauge its fidelity against any earthly text. Modern-day evangelicals who regard it as the only authoritative Bible (in contrast to "debased" versions such as NRSV) unwittingly hearken back to this earlier tradition.

The translation's perfect identification with the original endangers the status of the original text *qua* original (what does chronology matter to timeless truths?), and as a consequence, its very existence as a text. The spirit, freed completely from the original's textual body, remains untouched by historical or political context, and authorizes constant overwriting. (The Hebrew text that served as the basis of the Septuagint is, in fact, no longer extant.) In his own account of the Septuagint (*City of God* 18.42-44; see also *On Christian Doctrine* 2.15.22), Augustine provides unintended dark testimony to the consequences of this well-intentioned striving for a return to the days before Babel. The miraculous identity of all seventy translations, without a single difference even in word-order, created the impression there had been only one translator (*tamquam unus esset interpres*), a result of the one spirit that all the translators possessed collectively (*spiritus erat unus in omnibus*). Nor was this one spirit common only to the seventy translators, for, as in Philo's account, they all shared the same spirit that had originally inspired the Old Testament prophets:

> quia sicut in illis vera et concordantia dicentibus unus pacis spiritus fuit, sic et in istis non
> secum conferentibus et tamen tamquam ore uno cuncta interpretantibus idem spiritus
> unus apparuit.

> Because just as one single spirit of peace was in them [sc. the Old Testament prophets] as
> they spoke truth in perfect agreement, so too in these [sc. the Septuagint translators], who
> did not consult one another and yet translated everything as if speaking with a single
> mouth, was the same single spirit manifest. (*City of God* 18.43)

In Augustine's account, the divine authority acquired by the Septuagint through a singularity of spirit cast other,translations into darkness.[10] He mentions translations by Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and an anonymous individual, only to note that the church treats the Septuagint as if it were the only one (*tamquam sola esset*). Most Christians in the Greek-speaking world, he adds, are not even aware that other versions exist (*plerique utrum alia sit aliqua ignorant*). The reverence paid to the spirit in this binary model, coupled with the need to eliminate any potential source of loss, leads to the elimination of bodily difference, and the original physical text loses its own form of primacy as the *sine qua non* of translation. Under this unifying spirit, all signs of plurality disappear, and a Pentecostal ideal of universalism, in which every strange tongue is heard as one's own, overcomes the broken unity of Babel. (Assman, A., 1996).

In Christian writers, the cavalier attitude towards the earthly *verbum* arose from a felt need for the translatability of Hebrew into Greek and Latin, and of Judaism into Christianity. Pagan Romans, however, had already developed an ideology of translatability, born of a combination of cultural anxiety and will-to-power. The Romans were in thrall to Greek language and literature, a condition they addressed through translation and acknowledged well before Horace's oft-quoted line on the cultural dominance of Greece (*Epistle* 2.1.156: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit.* "Captive Greece captured their savage conqueror."). Their literature began in the middle of the third century BC with a translation of the *Odyssey*, and they never stopped producing translations in various senses of the term: the first Roman epic, adopting from Greek epic the non-native dactylic hexameter for its form, was composed by the trilingual Ennius, who claimed at the opening of the *Annales* that Homer's soul now inhabited his body, and Vergil's *Aeneid*, the great epic of Rome, had to be heralded by contemporaries as something greater than the *Iliad* composed by a Roman Homer. In the late Republic, the Roman elite were nearly bilingual, thanks to both years of study and time spent in rhetorical and philosophical finishing schools in Athens or other Greek-speaking communities. The first-century AD biographer Suetonius records the tradition that Caesar's final words on receiving the most unkindest cut of all were the Greek *kai su, teknon (Divus Julius* 82). (*Et tu, Brute* is the "translation" that Shakespeare has made famous, left "untranslated" in *Julius Caesar*.) Indeed, such was Rome's debt to Greek culture that much 19th-century classical scholarship was dedicated to *Quellenforschung*, source-criticism that sought to discover, or conjecture into existence, lost Greek originals of extant

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[10] See Johnson, 2001: 48-54, for a different comparison of Philo and Augustine on the Septuagint.

Roman texts. Even if not all of Rome was translated—Quintilian could claim satire as completley Roman (*tota nostra*)—, it often seems as if it were, and the spirit of Rome was one of translation, often indistuinguishable from appropriation and domination.

Nietzsche saw the darker side of this spirit of translation, and gave utterance to its underlying aim, the preservation of the spirit at all cost. He attributes this attitude to French authors of the 17th and 18th centuries, but more pointedly to Horace himself, who represents the original of this ideal (Nietzsche, 1887, §83: "Übersetzungen"):

> Sollen wir das Alte nicht für uns neu machen und uns in ihm zurechtlegen? Sollen wir nicht unsere Seele diesem todten Leibe einblasen dürfen? denn todt ist er nun einmal: wie hässlich ist alles Todte!

> Shouldn't we make what is old new for ourselves, and compose ourselves into it? Shouldn't we be allowed to breathe our soul into this lifeless body? For it is dead, after all: how disgusting everything dead is!

These reanimations of earlier texts are the perfected form of a translation whose origins lie in the separability of body and spirit. No longer would the poets whom Nietzsche ventriloquizes count as translators, since no one, least of all Horace himself, would claim Horace was a translator of Alcaeus or Archilochus, or Racine a translator of Euripides. Their translations, their "transmogrifications," of the original spirits of their Greek predecessors demonstrate a willful disregard of earthly history, or at least of other histories, which ends in the appropriation of other spirits and the burial of original bodies:

> In der That, man eroberte damals, wenn man übersetzte, — nicht nur so, dass man das Historische wegliess: nein, man fügte die Anspielung auf das Gegenwärtige hinzu, man strich vor Allem den Namen des Dichters hinweg und setzte den eigenen an seine Stelle — nicht im Gefühl des Diebstahls, sondern mit dem allerbesten Gewissen des imperium Romanum.

> In fact, at that time to translate was to conquer, and not simply by leaving out the historical, not at all: allusions to the present were added, and first of all the poet's name

was stricken from the page and your own put in its place—not with a feeling of theft, but with the very best conscience of the *imperium Romanum*.[11]

Even when in this model the act of translation is recognized as asymptotic approximation at best, the founding trope of body and spirit still generates the spiritual ideal that governs the translator. After all, earthly possibilities can only be realized when the impossible is demanded, as Wilamowitz says in his essay on translation (1891: 6). With an increasing production of and appetite for texts from across the globe, and an explosion in contemporary world literature in translation, the expanding army of translation studies marches forward, with all best intentions, under a conquering banner borrowed from the Roman and Christian tradition: *in hoc signo convinces!*

The originals that sucumbed to this tradition maintained a dogged, if failed, resistance to translation by their temporal successors. Ancient Greek, from the hybrid Homeric to the *koinē* of the New Testament, can claim to be one of the most translated languages in the history of the world, yet the ancient Greeks themselves, generally speaking, refrained from translation: singularly uninterested in literature from other languages, they almost never engaged in the activity (Rochette, 1997: 12-19). Even if we think they were overly arrogant in their approach, much of the ancient Mediterranean seemed to acknowledge the basis for it. Not until the time of the Roman emperor Hadrian in the 2nd c. AD do we have any evidence for literary translation of Latin literature into Greek, and even then examples are rare, perhaps motivated by the emperor's well-known philhellenism. Akin to the Talmudic proponents of an untranslatable Judaism, the Greeks treated their alphabet with singular reverence, to the degree that a Greek rarely if ever saw a document that incorporated Roman letter-forms (Rochette, 1997: 291). In the terms of the dominant trope of translation, the Greeks maintained a reverence for the body, cultural rather than religious, and thus never practiced translation, while the Romans concerned themselves chiefly with the spirit of the text as the surest means of cultural appropriation. Never overly scrupulous in their regard for the letter, epitomes and abbreviated versions of texts suited the Romans perfectly well (McElduff, 2013: 9-11). The Jewish tradition, as already noted, kept alive a resistance to being translated, but after the invention of the Septuagint tradition, this resistance was based upon issues of accuracy and fidelity, rather than a refusal to recognize the possibility

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[11] For a different translation, see Nauckhoff, 2001: 82-83.

of real translation across bodies. Once the oppositiom was conducted in these terms the separation of body and spirit, along with the privileging of the latter, established itself as *the* trope of translation.

The real question of translation, then, is not what it is in some Platonic sense, but how it has been translated, because *this* translation has consequences for texts, but even more so for those who translate them. In fact, within the traditions under discussion, words to which we customarily attach the meaning "(interlingual) translation" do not always distinguish between various forms of translation. Greek *hermēneuō* and its cognates can mean "to explain, to expound," or simply "to express, put into words," and the same applies to Latin *interpretor* and Hebrew *targum*. Alexander (2014: 229-30) succinctly defines the semantic field of all three: "to explain a word or statement by another word or statement." But the "Roman" and "Christian" translation of translation (the labels are more ideological than historical) leads to the ideal of metempsychosis and promotes the sacrifice of textual bodies. In claiming he translated Greek speeches as an *orator* rather than as an *interpres*, Cicero, for example, makes translation a matter of sacrifice, a choice between word and sense, and, like Horace, he denigrates the *verbum pro verbo* translator who fails to preserve the style and force of the original (*The Best Kind of Orator* 14). Jerome, too, followed this view of translation in his "Letter to Pammachius" (*Ep.* 57), a foundational text of translation theory. Although he makes an exception for the sacred scriptures, he ultimately harmonizes all translational discrepancies under a unifying spirit: *sermonum varietas spiritus unitate concordat* (*Ep.* 57.7: "variation in expression finds harmony in unity of spirit"; see McAlhany, 2014: 446-448). When this translation of translation becomes the authoritative version, those who would bodily resist translation find themselves in danger of being overwritten, much like the Septuagint critics who sought to impugn the accuracy of the translation in the same terms that made translation possible: free spirits of translation turn tyrannical.

Thus Montesquieu's geometer, despite his fervent denial, becomes a secular heir to this tradition and an unwitting ally of universal translatability. His denial of translation within the tradition of tropes keeps alive the possibility of translation, as his repetition of these same tropes to a very different end demonstrate. Well over a century after the *Persian Letters*, the great 19th-century classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff prefaced his translation of Euripides' *Hippolytus* with a short disquisition *was ist übersetzen?* ("What is translating?"). Like

Montesquieu's Horace translator, his fictional forebear, Wilamowitz touts the public utility of providing translations, but echoes the geometer's tropes, not to mock faith in translation, but to proclaim its ideals (1891: 7):

> es gilt auch hier, den buchstaben verachten und dem geist folgen, nicht wörter noch sätze übersetzen, sondern gendanken und gefühle aufnehmen und wiedergeben. das kleid muss neu werden, sein inhalt bleiben. jede rechte übersetzung ist travestie. noch schärfer gesprochen, es bleibt die seele, aber sie wechselt den leib: die wahre übersetzung ist metempsychose.

> It is important here as well to disregard the letter and follow the spirit, to translate neither words nor sentences, but to capture and reproduce the thoughts and emotions. The clothes must be new, their contents must remain. Every proper translation is a change of dress (*travestie*). Or to put it more finely, the soul remains, but changes body: real translation is metempsychosis.[12]

Another echo of the demand made by Montesquieu's geometer for an animating spirit is found in Edward FitzGerald's jocular but no less dangerous defense of his non-literal "transmogrification," the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam*. In a letter to a friend (Wright, 1901: 5), he writes: "But at all Cost, a Thing must *live*: with a transfusion of one's own worse Life if one can't retain the Original's better. Better a live Sparrow than a stuffed Eagle." Once the Septuagint translations had been translated into their miraculous Christian form, with the ultimate conquest of spirit over body, translation, even only as a manner of speaking, became something it never was before: the secular miracle of metempsychosis. And even more miraculous, the metempsychosis could be partial, since not all of the original spirit would survive the transfer. All it takes is faith.

1.3 Translation Untranslated

Translations of the Septuagint translation, operating under the ideal of a Roman and Christian appropriation of spirit, promoted the overwriting and burial of textual bodies, yet the earliest account of the process, which fortunately escaped overwriting, demonstrates its own resistance to

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[12] For a different translation, see Lefevere, 1992: 169.

the translation of translation. It is an account remarkable, in fact, for the complete absence of translation tropes. The pseudographical *Letter of Aristeas* (ca. 2nd c. BC) established more than a century before Philo the legitimacy and spiritual authority of the Septuagint translation not by means of a miracle, but through the translators themselves, elders selected by the High Priest who represented (anachronistically) the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Before they begin their work, King Ptolemy II Philadelphus treats the translators to a week of banquets, over the course of which he poses one by one to all seventy-two translators a question on ethical behavior or good governance. Each individual by his response demonstrates his outstanding wisdom and piety, assuring the king and the readers of their *bona fides* (their responses make up the bulk of the letter). The letter acknowledges that the Jews worship the same high god as everyone else, yet the translation work proceeds without divine intervention, without a union of pure intellects, and without whispers straight from Moses. These translators, forebears of Montesquieu's *savant*, act very much like the Homeric scholars of the library of Alexandria, who through the process of careful collation and criticism established an authoritative text of the Homeric poems, though these scholars competed as much as they collaborated (Honigman, 2003: 119-143):

> Οἱ δὲ ἐπετέλουν ἕκαστα σύμφωνα ποιοῦντες πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς ταῖς ἀντιβολαῖς· τὸ δὲ ἐκ τῆς συμφωνίας γινόμενον πρεπόντως ἀναγραφῆς οὕτως ἐτύγχανε παρὰ τοῦ Δημητρίου.

> By making comparisons among themselves, the translators brought everything into agreement and finalized their task. Demetrius had the text that resulted from their agreement properly transcribed. (*Letter of Aristeas* 302)

These translators remain very human, never rising to the status of prophetic authors as in Philo's account. Despite their uninspired process of collaboration, without the mystical process in the tradition Philo preserves, they managed to produce a translation so "excellent, pious, and completely accurate" (310) that after a public reading, the High Priest and leaders of the Jewish community decree that it should forever remain unchanged, placing a curse upon anyone who might in the future alter the text in any way and thus impugn its authority (311).

In this version of the translation, body and spirit generate no separation anxiety, there is no claim to perfect identity, and no recourse to miracles. Unanimous agreement among the seventy-

two translations is neither required nor expected, and whatever the majority agree upon (*to sumphōnon ek tōn pleionōn*) becomes the authorized version. Augustine critically describes this process of collaboration as *more hominum* ("in the manner of humans"), and claims that even if the translators did work in this manner, the divine spirit nonetheless intervened in the translation process. On the other hand, Jerome, an experienced translator, rejects the miracle of identical Septuagint translations that Augustine emphasized. In the *Profatio in Pentateuchum*, he dismisses the isolation of the translators in individual cells as a "lie" (*mendacium*), since the sources he knows, first and foremost the *Letter of Aristeas*, say nothing of the sort (PL 28.150A-151A). Quoting the *Letter* and the first-century AD historian Josephus, Jerome declares without reservation that the translators worked together in the same building, comparing what they wrote, and the role of divine prophecy is denied outright (*in una basilica congregatos contulisse scribant, non prophetasse*).

The Septuagint translators of the *Letter of Aristeas*, for all their wisdom and piety, remain resolutely along the horizontal, and thr Jewish community possesses an unquestioned confidence in the ability of human translators to render a text, even a sacred one, accurately. The problems of fidelity and epistemology that a translation absolutist such as Montesquieiu's geometer would raise are simple ignored, and their version acquires authority from its public acceptance by the entire community, creating a form of legitimacy founded upon the realities of translation in the human world, rather than a faith in the workings of a holy spirit. Here, the spirit that is privileged does not belong to the original text, but to a community of translators. The harmonious text produced by the collaboration of human hands and minds, interestingly enough given the source text, requires no faith in the supernatural as precondition to acceptance and fears no rejection for dies to an absence of divine spirit. Remaining grounded in the body of the text, without appeal to a spirit separable from it, this version of translation, a human endeavor *more hominum*, necessitates a larger community that privileges plurality and non-identity. The inevitable differences among the multiple the multiple human translations unify the community in a way the perfectly identical versions could not. In truth, the translators in the miraculous accounts of Philo and Augustine needed to produce only one translation, and only one translator needed to perform the work, since all the translations would inevitably be identical; the large number of translators, and their isolation, serve only to prove the miraculous nature of the translation and

furnish it with spiritual authority. The process described in the *Letter*, on the other hand, produced a collaborative translation no single individual would have produced on his own.

Neither Montesquieu's geometer nor the anti-Septuagint absolutists could accept *the Letter of Aristeas* version of the translation: a human translator not directly infused with the original spirit introduces suspicion of error and usuprations of authority, and cannot guarantee reproduction of the original spirit that gave life and vitality to the original production. No matter how "pious and completely accurate" a translation may be, it cannot escape charges of concealment, much as the Jewish translators themselves came under suspicion of King Ptolemy in Augustine's account. Nor can a translator who is involved in a purely horizontal process of translation that does receive its impetus from the same source as the original text escape the stigma of intermediacy. The genuine rebirth or revivification absolutists demand can only occur through unmediated engagement in the divine realm of the spirit, while the everyday work of translation operates upon earthly bodies, and as such is imperfect and human. Their denial of translation's reality, whether as geometrical superfulity or poetical impossibility, is a denial of mistranslation's potentiality, and a denial of humanity. Montesquieu's anonymous and fictional scholar-translator, when confronted with the geometer's challenge to translation, may not after all remain speechless out of incapacity, but ends the letter in silence in accordance with Wittgenstein's famous final proposition of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*: "There must be silence about that which cannot be spoken." (*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*.)

In truth, the translator had already said enough. When he first announces his translation to the geometer, he does not use the language of translation. He merely states that he has just given his Horace to the public (*je viens de donner mon Horace au public*). It is the geometer, well versed in the commonplaces of translation theory, who draws the translator into a discourse for which he seems unprepared, if not unwilling. It is likewise the geometer who claims thst the translator wishes to reanimate the dead, putting words into the translator's mouth via mistranslation (*vous voulez, dites-vous, faire renaître parmi nous ces illustres morts*). The translator makes a simple claim, to which the geometer, if he had ears to hear, would agree in letter, though in a very different spirit: the nameless translator only offers to the public *his* Horace, not *the* Horace, and not anyone else's Horace—certainly not the geometer's. There are many Horaces, and to what degree any of these approximate the real Horace must remain an unsettled epistemological issue, but] to aim at approximation of the original spirit can only lead to translation's undoing. On the

other hand, the *savant*'s separation of his Horace from all others, including *the* Horace, rather than the separation of textual body and authorial spirit, allows for the possibility of translation and mistranslation without stumbling into epistemological rabbit-holes.

The geometer, in fact, speaks in a language that is unnatural and inhuman, and travels in realms of pure spirit, detached from the messiness of life and history. He is first encountered on the Pont Neuf deep in thought, contemplating a curve that had troubled him for a week, and it takes several tugs of his sleeve to "bring him back down to himself" (*pour le faire descendre jusque à lui*). Prior to his confrontation with the translator, which ends the letter, the geometer had revealed during his coffee-house conversation a mind abstracted to a disturbing degree. On a visit to a magnificent chateau and beautiful gardens (*une château superbe et des jardins magnifiques*), he saw only a building measuring 60'x30' with a ten-acre oblong grove (*un bâtiment de soixante pieds de long sur trente-cinq de large, et un bosquet barlong de dix arpents*), and complains that rules of perspective had not been applied to the pathways to make them appear uniform from every view, as his "orderly spirit" (*esprit régulier*) would have preferred. (Ironically, he cannot recognize his own inexact approximations, as when he notes Horace had been around for two thousand years—eighteen hundred would be the correct figure.) More disturbing, a report of a bombardment in Spain elicits from him delight in describing the arcs the bombs traced through the air, with little concern for their results (*charmé de savoir cela, il voulut en ignorer entièrement le succès*), and another patron's lament over recent floods that have ruined him brings joy to the geometer as confirmation of his calculations of the comparative amounts of rainfall (*"Ce que vous me dites là m'est fort agréable," dit alors le géomètre, "je vois que je ne me suis pas trompé dans l'observation que j'ai faite."*). The geometer always looks up to the heavens, where he believes the eternal truths worth pursuing reside, and chides the translator for neglecting these *belles vérités*. Yet while he takes an interest in objects in the sky above, such as bombs and rain, their consequences for humans down below trouble him not at all. Earthly bodies do not concern him, and even his head-on run-in with the translator occurs only because he pays no heed to what is in front of him (*il négligeait de regarder devant lui*). His refusal to acknowledge the possibility, much less the value and necessity, of imperfect translation perfectly accords with his lack of humanity, borne of impossible and inhuman ideals of perfection.

Given our human frailties, translation should strive not for identity of spirit (its perfection and end), but for multiplicity of bodies (the historical record of its failings). Rather than hope and pray for the monolithic miracle of seventy identical translations, we should labor to produce seventy or more different ones. The translations of the Septuagint translation demonstrate not so much the need for a faith in the miraculous as much as the need for multiple translations and constant retranslation, because the best translation is always all of them. Translation should involve the translator not in a fruitless perpetual struggle to overcome an inevitable loss of spirit, but a fruitful constant negotiation of loss. In *The Task of the Translator*, the cryptic preface to his translation of Baudelaire, Benjamin recognizes that theory cannot provide an account of canons of accuracy, and more importantly, has nothing to say about what is essential to translation. Translation is not even possible when it strives, with all its being, to become like the original (1923: x).[13] a misconceived ideal of translation founded on the binary of body and spirit, though Benjamin uses the more mundane pairs language (*Sprache*) and content (*Gehalt*), form (*Form*) and meaning (*Sinn*).

Benjamin escapes the false dilemmas of mainstream theory, to a place where traditional notions of fidelity and freedom are no longer operable, and the separability of body and spirit, always a misleading trope, no longer needs to be accepted in speech or denied in reality. His ideal translation, an interlinear version of the holy scriptures, is shockingly unsatisfying within the traditional discourse of body and spirit, but perfectly sensible if the aim of translation is no longer to illuminate the original, but to reveal translation as a way of meaning, as something that always occurs in between the lines. Like any language, translation is a way of seeing, and revelation comes only through failure to achieve identity. To translate is *ipso facto* to fail, and successful translation, like Horace in French, is an oxymoron. In this regard, Montesquieiu's geometer is right about translation as it has traditionally been translated and is commonly understood. But as inevitable failure translation is revelatory not of texts (which should not be its object), nor even of illusory notions of originality, but of ourselves as translators, which is to say, as human beings. In the best of all possible worlds, successful translation is a continuous failure, a welcome moment of human possibilities between universality and individuality, between body

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[13] Benjamin, 1923: x: Über den Begriff dieser Genauigkeit wüßte sich jene Theorie freilich nicht zu fassen, könnte also zuletzt doch keine Rechenschaft von dem geben, was an Übersetzungen wesentlich ist. … …keine Übersetzung möglich wäre, wenn sie Ähnlichkeit mit dem Original ihrem letzten Wesen nach anstreben würde.

and spirit, between the nightmarish uniformity of Babel's unity and the chaotic isolation of Pentecostal universalism. When confronted with the inhuman bluster of translation theorists like the geometer, we ought to maintain the silence of Montesquieu's nameless translator and let our flawed and unmiraculous Horaces out in to the world.

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