Theory Impossible: Translation in the Transnational University

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WHITHER THEORY?
OÙ VA LA THÉORIE ?

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Theory Impossible: Translation in the Transnational University[1]

The question "whither theory?" obviously asks where theory might be going. The question presupposes knowing where it is coming from. The question also depends upon the context where it is asked. Where theory has been and where it is going is different depending on whether we ask the question in the States, in the UK, or in European nation-states. The situation of France would require an analysis different from that of these other nation-states. The question "whither theory?" is inseparable from the evolution of the nation-state. Tell me where the nation-state is going or has gone, and I will tell you where theory is going. To echo Heidegger, who, in his 1942 Seminar on Hölderlin's poem *Der Ister*, wrote, "tell me what you think [*hältst*] of translation, and I will tell you who you are."[2] we could say, "tell me

1 This paper was written around May 2003. Some notes have been added, given recent events. From late January to mid April 2004, there have been frequent articles in French newspapers and magazines, in some weeks on a daily basis, about the state of research, and about the tertiary education system in France. A high percentage of these proliferating analyses identify a link between the state of the university system in France and the future of the nation-state itself. This new phenomenon in France-vigorous public political and academic debate about the university-requires a separate study from that undertaken here. In its content, the phenomenon confirms the claims of this article.

2 M. Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne 'Der Ister'*, 76.

what you think of the nation-state, and I will tell you what you think about theory." I mention translation, because I will want, later, to return to the relation between translation and theory. In this nexus of theory, the nation-state, and translation, there is a term that is missing: the university. Although in many nation-states or union of states, the question of "whither theory" occurs in and pertains to the university, the question of theory in France requires that other parameters be taken into consideration. Ever since the dissolution of universities, on the 15th of September, 1793, by the Convention, French tertiary education has been significantly different from tertiary education in Germany, the UK, and the United States, the three cases I know something about. The conference we are participating in is taking place in a French university. Yet, insofar as theory and the question "whither theory?" are conditioned by the place where they occur, the state of the French university and its place within tertiary education in the nation-state of France are so specific that the question "whither theory?" requires a different analysis than does the question in Germany, the UK, or the US. In order to understand the question "whither theory?" in France, it would be necessary to cross the few studies in France of the university in overall tertiary education system (for example, Alain Renaut, Ezra Suleiman, Jacques Derrida) with the prolific production in North America and Britain.[3]

The reason why I begin by pre-empting the question of theory and "whither theory?" with the question of the university, the university as part of a tertiary education system, and the specificity of this constellation in France, is that although many books and articles are published by American and British university professors about the status of the university in the changing nation-state and about the study of theory in that context, almost none are published in France. The list of studies coming out of the U.S. and the U.K. is so long that it

3 A. Renaut, *Les Révolutions de l'Université. Essai sur la modernisation de la culture*; E. Suleiman, *Les élites en France. Grands corps et grandes écoles*; J. Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie*, and *L'université sans condition*. On the sides of the UK and the US, university professors such as Bill Readings, Peggy Kamuf, Samuel Weber, Gerald Graff, John Guillory, J. Hillis Miller (and many more) have published books on the university and the humanities.

would take thirty minutes to read a selection of the titles alone, much less comment upon them. To these would have to be added many journals that regularly debate about the place of the university and of theory in the changing political entity which is the nation or nation-state, such as *Profession*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and forums in the *PMLA*. An observer aware of this self-reflexive critical activity must recognize the absence of any similar activity in France.

The French tertiary education system in fields of literature and languages pretends that the nation-state is still, now in the early twenty-first century, the same as it was in the two or three decades after the Second World War. "The modern University [...] was conceived by Humboldt as one of the primary apparatuses through which this production of national subjects was to take place in modernity, and the decline of the nation-state raises serious questions about the nature of the contemporary function of the University." Thus writes Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins*.[4] Readings argues convincingly that the correlative of the sovereign nation-state at the level of tertiary education but also at the level of economy was the national tradition, or the national company: a certain isomorphism explains why literary studies in a national literature in France have resisted changes just as Air France has been able to be maintained as a national airline, still majority State-owned.[5] By contrast, many North-American universities, especially in the United States, are private, and even a public university like the University of California received, in 1998, only 24% of its funding from public funds. This percentage was 52% in 1984.[6]

4 B. Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 46.

5 [Note added: Here, too, recent events have changed the situation. The merger of Air France and KLM reduces state ownership of Air France to 42%, a percentage inferior to the part owned by shareholders, thereby eliminating state, or political, (majority) control of this company. Would it be merely fortuitous that Air France is privatized at the same time that the outburst of debate about the entire tertiary education and research system of the country envisages, often ambitiously, to re-do the power relations among the universities, the *grandes écoles*, and the research institutes?]

6 This information is taken from the important essay by J. Hillis Miller, "Literary Study in the Transnational University," in his *Black Holes*, here 53. Subsequent references by the abbreviation *M* plus page number follow quotations. As recent articles in the *Detroit Free Press* (February, 2004) have

Universities must seek money elsewhere which means from companies, which are not necessarily owned by American corporations. Even if they are American, their sales and certainly manufacturing occur outside the national boundaries of the U.S. As Hillis Miller puts it, "they do not owe primary allegiance to a single nation-state" (*M* 45). What Miller doesn't add is that if transnational corporations owe no allegiance to a nation-state, universities that become dependent on transnational corporate money also will not owe allegiance to a nation-state. In this perspective, the French university, although it like France is seen by some to be well on its way to being an intellectual back-water,[7] may in fact be a haven which, if it can just hang on a little longer, will weather the globalization storm eradicating the public sphere, and come out looking like a radical resister for having saved relatively cheap university education. The *relative* lack of theory in the French university, manifest most obviously *at the level of curricula* in the faculties of Letters and the Human Sciences, may be owing to a certain stability, yet also rigidity, of the nation-state in France. Miller argues very persuasively that there is a parallel between the political state and the state of theory. Theory did not cause the breakdown of the nation-state or of the national literature department as the place for national culture formation of educated citizens. Here's Miller on this:

> *The rise of theory was more a symptom than a cause. It arose, as I have suggested, out of the necessity of understanding rapid historical and ideological change. The error has been to see theory as causing what it registered and attempted to confront. It responded in part by fulfilling with a clear conscience that other half of the university's mission: to comprehend everything rationally. Literary theory is conceptual reflection on how*

reported it, the percentage of State funding in the University of Michigan has dropped from 75% to 25% between the early 1970s and 2004.

7 [Note added: When Jacques Derrida, at the end of a recent interview entitled, "Si je peux faire plus qu'une phrase," refers to "what is starting to look like a wave of emigration of intellectuals and researchers," to "the great risk of the growing emigration of researchers and university teachers" (34), he describes a phenomenon that has already developed so far as to be the subject of doctoral dissertations in progress. Although I do not name Derrida as one who uses the image of the "back-water," this view is remarkably public since the debates erupting in January 2004.]

> *meaning is generated by words. Theory is intrinsically transnational. It is no accident that European theory, especially as transformed and extended within the United States university, is being appropriated by universities all over the world. This diffusion parallels the global spread of Western technology and capitalist economic organization. That does not mean it is the same thing. M 67*

In this long quote let's spotlight two words. "Mission." And "intrinsically." The "Mission Impossible" implicit in my title, "Theory Impossible," is, in my view, talking about theory in a French university, since my working hypothesis is that theory–theory understood as a parallel phenomenon of the dissolution of nationality (partially its symptom, partially its analysis)–is antithetic with the mission of the French university, which is caught in the grips of a pedagogy based on formation and training and not education, thinking and creation.[8] Regarding "intrinsically," it may be a good thing that theory–as quasi-institutional entity in its own right–is not taught in a widespread way in France. Were it, there would be no *grandes écoles*, no *écoles spéciales*, no *classes préparatoires*, no philosophy taught in high school, etc. There would be no France.

In France, a staple of the teaching done by an English department is translation. Translation from English to French and from French to English is taught where I teach in the second, third and fourth year of university studies. Translation is a significant portion of both the national exams of the CAPES and the *agrégation.*[9] Since nowadays students who start their studies in the university and not in

8 Still dominant, the basis in *formation* as opposed to *éducation*, had its origin in the decisions taken after September 1793, when the National Assembly refused, narrowly, to adopt the proposals of Talleyrand (who espoused *avant la lettre* a prototype of The Johns Hopkins University), preferring instead to suppress the universities altogether, and setting up higher education according to a narrow conception of professional and teacher training. For a patient reconstruction of the history of this debate in the 1790s, see Louis Liard, *L'enseignement supérieur en France*.

9 A history of the French *concours* needs to be written, and there needs to be a history of the way the discipline of English has been conceived within that history.

preparatory classes attempt the CAPES after completing the fourth year, instead of after the third year, as they have the right to do but the good sense not to try, and since the same students only attempt the *agregation* after the CAPES, this means doing five years of translation. In addition, where I teach, Paris 7, the English department has a good professional translation program to produce professional translators, notably of prose fiction, but soon also of poetry and non-fictional prose. Its course work is oriented towards the practical problems of translation. To my knowledge, no theoretically oriented work is taught on what translation is, save at high levels of graduate student instruction. In contrast, when I was a student, and when I taught in the U.S., translation courses involved also reading theories of translation, from, say, Luther to Goethe to Walter Benjamin to Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida. In short, translation would include a theoretical component.

Although *traductologie* and research in venues like the French journal devoted to translation, *Palimpsestes*, are theoretical, in the scientific acceptation of the term *theory*, I would still speak, first, of a lack of what, in North America and the UK, is termed "theory" within translation teaching in France, and, second, of a lack of application of such "theory" to translation in university research.[10] This lack does have a reason, other than the laudable reason of needing to establish practical know-how in students. Theory's lack of place in translation is first related, somewhat curiously, to the lack of creative writers, poets, novelists, playwrights, in the university. In many North American

[10] The quasi-institutional entity "Theory" is not *theory* in mathematics or physics, nor classifiable according to the philosophical concept of *theory*. What we term "theory" is "neither scientific nor philosophical" yet "must not be interpreted negatively." It is a "new element" whose "emergence is *positive*: it is a mutation which no area of the institutional discipline had been able to perform, neither in [the United States] nor in any other." J. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seisms," 81-82. For this reason, I would distinguish between theory intrinsic to, say, *traductologie*, and the importation of "theory" into the teaching of and research on translation. This distinction is sublated in Philip E. Lewis's essay "The Measure of Translation Effects," which reads Derrida on translation together with Jacqueline Guillemin-Flescher's *Syntaxe comparée du français et de l'anglais: Problèmes de traduction*.

universities, the Spanish, French or German department will include translators who are also poets, novelists. Might there not be a correlation between the so-called Creative Writing Programs and Theory Programs? It may not be accidental that places strong in Creative Writing tend also to be in Theory (the University of California at Irvine, notably).

The other reason for theory's lack of place is that teaching in a tertiary system like the French university is called "formation" and not "education," because the teaching aimed at producing school teachers knowledgeable in only one discipline is overly limited to having a practical purpose. Thus, theories of translation would complicate, but perhaps also enrich, the practice of translation, and could be studied profitably in *Licence*.

Such a situation leads to some interesting differences in what translation is thought to be. With the help of my friend Philippe Romanski, I translated *Béliers*, the recent essay by Derrida on Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Celan.[11] To translate Derrida is to deconstruct translation, for deconstruction has always been the complication of theory and practice of translation.[12] Some of Derrida's closest exegetes are not native French speakers who translate his work (Michael Naas, Geoffrey Bennington, Peggy Kamuf, to name three French to English translators). To read Derrida in English is to read first of all an English that has undergone changes. There is significant difference in a professional translation of American fiction into French, and an academic translation of Derrida into English, and my recent experience of translating Derrida bore this out. After finishing a first draft of the translation of the above-mentioned essay, I requested Philippe Romanski, who is *agrégé* in English, and a *Maître de conférences* in English, to go over the translation with me. Now,

[11] Jacques Derrida, *Béliers. Le dialogue ininterrompu, entre deux infinis, le poème*. A translation of the first two of this five part essay will appear in the summer 2004 issue of *Journal of Phenomenology*. All references to this text and its translation will henceforth be given after quotations of it, under the abbreviation *B* for the French, and *R* for the English.

[12] As of his 1962 *Introduction* to and translation of Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, Derrida has written explicitly on the problem of translation.

Romanski's English is amazingly flawless, I learned while we checked the translation, and the translation benefited from his fine feel for both French and English: he is proof that French to English translation, perhaps especially of theoretical texts, should be entrusted to native French speakers, which would go against received ideas. Yet he is understandably wary of translating into an English that would bend the rules of English. His practical training is so good that he knows (better than I) the rules for standard conversions of certain French structures into their equivalent English structures. Yet his knowledge of the rules, and his concern with making the French into an "English" that an *agrégation* jury would approve, would make him stray from the letter of Derrida's French, be it at lexical or syntactical levels.[13] In contrast, although I am a native speaker of American English, my translation is significantly more French than what the *agrégé* will produce. That difference does not only come from the fact that I read Derrida in translation, whereas Romanski, as native French speaker, need not. It also stems from his training in translation, which included practical training, itself governed by a particular idea of translation, whereas because my work in translation mainly came out of reading the different theories of translation that have existed from at least the "Pléiades" of the sixteenth century to Hölderlin, Freud, Heidegger or Derrida, etc., I was never sanctioned by what are called "corrigés" or the correct answer to exam questions. My point is definitely not that one way is better than the other. Rather, it is to raise as problem the fact that theory currently has (and can have, for institutional reasons) no place in translation at the level of studies and teaching up to the *agrégation*,[14] and little research status at levels higher than that. Against practical naysayers, I would propose teaching some theory of

[13] An example would concern the word *envahir*, used twice by Derrida. We translated it as "come over" once, and as "invasive" the other (one was a verb, the other an adjective), because of colloquial French. In retrospect, to have kept "invade" for both instances probably would have been truer to the thrust of Derrida's essay. Yet this should not imply that there is only one right way possible.

[14] Yet there are good reasons for putting on the *concours* the subject of translation, theoretically considered, or treated as a way to study the history of the English language.

and about translation in second and third year translation courses. I maintain that theory in this domain ought not to be postponed until the end of language studies.

One example of this way of conceiving translation is a brief exchange I had with the new director of the translation program where I teach, Jean-Pierre Richard. Richard had heard Derrida lecture on the impossibility of translation at a conference in Arles some years ago on translation.[15] For Richard, Derrida is uninformed, since when Derrida holds translation to be impossible because the letter of the language cannot be translated, he is misunderstanding what translation should be. For Richard, translation operates at the level of the *effect* of the letter. Derrida's view of translation, for Richard, is erroneous since you translate not the letter of an original text but rather the effect of the letter. This unfinished exchange inspires the rest of this paper.

In response to the question "whither theory?" one mission for theory, in France, should be the field of translation. Yet the French conception of the university as a place for formation, as opposed to education, and as still modeled on the nation-state paradigm, corresponds especially well to the kind of university Derrida refers to in the following quotation about translation:

> *Ce que cette institution [l'Université] ne supporte pas, c'est qu'on touche à la langue, à la fois, à la langue nationale et, paradoxalement, à un idéal de traductibilité qui neutralise cette langue nationale. Nationalisme et universalisme indissociables. Ce que cette institution ne supporte pas, c'est une transformation qui ne laisse intacts aucun de ces deux pôles complémentaires […]. Sur le concept de traduction est construite l'université, et notamment quand elle fait de l'enseignement de la langue, voire des littératures […] son thème principal.*[16]

This quotation may apply even more to the French university than to other Western universities (North American, British, German), even if there are many differences among the North American universities, etc.

15 Published since: J. Derrida, "Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction 'relevante'?"

16 J. Derrida, "Journal du bord," 140-41.

According to Derrida here, the concept of translation upon which the university is based involves the opposition between a national language, call it an idiom, and universal transferability. The French language is simple, equal to itself, yet can be translated into any language. Meaning in French is properly French, but that does not prevent it from being utterly common, universal (*gemein, allgemein*). However, both the national language and the ideal of translatability have been already tampered with. Every idiom is poly-angular, the result of numerous sorts of graftings, such that the national language is already in translation with itself, is not one language but many. Correlatively, the ideal of translatability is affected since if the original language is already fraught with an intrinsic movement of self-translation, then how can the receiving language in a translation record or render the irreducible duplicity of the original? The concept of ideal translation upon which the university is based is "paradoxical" because in upholding the notion of a national language it also neutralizes it.

Be it pronounced by Bill Readings, Hillis Miller, or by those who reduce the place of literature in the French university system to the benefit of other approaches to language or culture, etc., the death of literature seems to be closing in on us as fast as the disappearance of nation-states modelled by an idea of democracy. "I run to death, and death meets me as fast./ And all my pleasures are like yesterday." These are the second and third lines of the thirteenth sonnet of John Donne's "holy sonnets." These lines were quoted by Jacques Derrida in his 2002-2003 seminar entitled "La Bête et le Souverain." Our question, "whither theory?" which echoes "Whither Marxism?" which recalls Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, makes me want to ask, about a mission impossible, about an impossible theory such as deconstruction, "Whither Derridean deconstruction"? Marxism, theory, Derrida, these are my pleasures. Their future as pleasure consists in their repetition, in their reactivation. There is no pleasure that is not like yesterday, that does not have the structure of memory. Coincidental to the impossible question about sending, about transmitting, about being charged with a mission, the question "Whither Derrida?" reverberates for me the lines of Donne, "I run to death, and death meets me as fast." To ponder these

lines, "I run to death, and death meets me as fast," is to ask the question "whither theory?" in another *way*. Who here among us is not running to death? Who here among us is not being met as fast by Death? Whose pleasures among us here are not "like yesterday"?

Derrida gave a reading of Donne, of an English poet, in a session of the seminar half of which was devoted to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Derrida focused briefly on the following sonnet:

John Donne, holy sonnet #13:

Thou hast ma**d**e me, an**d** shall thy work **d**ecay?	1
Repair me now, for now mine en**d doth** haste,	2
I run to **death**, an**d death** meets me as fast.	3
An**d** all my pleasures are like yester**d**ay,	4
I **d**are not move my **d**im eyes any way,	5
Despair behin**d**, an**d death** before **doth** cast	6
Such terror, an**d** my feeble**d** flesh **doth** waste	7
By sin in it, which it towar**d**s hell **doth** weigh;	8
Only thou art above, an**d** when towar**d**s thee	9
By thy leve I can look, I rise again;	10
But our subtle foe so tempteth me,	11
That not one hour I can myself sustain;	12
Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,	13
An**d** thou like a**d**amant **d**raw mine iron heart[17]	14

In this sonnet, the I would like to look up (line 9) to a "thou [who] art above", but is tempted by (line 11) "our subtle foe." The I imagines that the grace of the thou, "thy grace," (line 13), "may wing me to prevent his art". The "foe" has (end of line 13) an "art" which pulls to death, to (line 7) "terror," and this "art" of the "foe" is what pulls the I down from the (line 9) "thou [who] art above." One "art" (line 13) associated with simulacrum is the basis of another "art" (line 9), the second person singular of the verb "to be." Derrida no doubt would have noticed the word "foe" in "our old subtle foe", for he first of all insisted in the session that, reading Donne's poem, it is possible to say that it is the

[17] J. Donne, *Selected Poetry*, 205.

"yesterday that gives pleasure," in French, « C'est hier qui *donne* le plaisir." That is, he insisted on the name Donne when formulating giving as making be lost. To repeat myself, what originarily gives pleasure is loss, is the *Gewesenheit* of *Anwesenheit*, the yesterday of today, the yesterday which is inside the today. "All my pleasures are like yesterday." Pleasure is like yesterday because the condition of possibility of having it is not having it. Derrida also would have noticed the word "foe" in "our subtle foe" who destroys time, who makes the I not be able to sustain "one hour" ("our old subtle foe so tempteth me/ That not one hour I can myself sustain") because the same session on Defoe commented upon the name, and on Robinson's constant fear of enemies, of foes, and even the fear of the possibility that God could be a foe. This fear also took the form, for Robinson Crusoe, of being swallowed alive by earthquakes ("these Earthquakes," Robinson says, speaking of "The fear of being swallow'd up alive."[18] An earthquake surfaces in the third paragraph of Derrida's *Rams* (*R* 1). Among this "subtle foe," God, the different types of "art," and the weight of gravity, there is a constellation here–remember that *Béliers* names also a sign of the zodiac–that merits our turning in its orbit.

"Our old subtle foe" in the Donne sonnet represents the fear of being weighed down to earth and to hell by a terror. This "terror" is therefore in Donne thought as weight, as gravity. The word "weigh" (at the end of line 8) ends the octave, and retrieves its riming antecedents notably of "decay" (line 1) and "yesterday" (line 4). It is "terror" that "weigh[s]" down.

Although Derrida only quoted the two lines of the Donne poem, words from it like "foe" and "weigh" occupied other places in the general constellation of the seminar. I'm going to turn to the word "weigh" in order to examine its carrying-distance for translation, but let me mention that sonnet thirteen comes shortly after sonnet ten, the famous sonnet beginning "Batter my heart, three-personed God." Its image is of God as a battering ram knocking down the walls and doors of an enemy city ("Use your force, to break [...] an usurped town"). The ram appears at the end of the poem "La Corona," in the seventh sonnet:

18 D. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 66.

"O strong ram, which has battered heaven for me" (ll. 9). These threads from Donne are motifs in Derrida's essay *Rams*. I pull them, because *Rams* is an essay less on him who superficial commentators took for a foe of Derrida, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer, than it is an essay largely on the poet Paul Celan, who was a major translator, and in some of whose poems rams charge.

The poem by Celan that mobilizes in *Rams* the most of Derrida's resources is "Vast, Glowing Vault." Here is the poem[19]:

GROSSE, GLÜHENDE WÖLBUNG *mit dem sich* *hinaus-und hinweg-* *wühlenden Schwarzgestirn-Schwarm:*	VAST, GLOWING VAULT with the swarm of black stars pushing them- selves out and away:
der verkieselten Stirn eines Widders *brenn ich dies Bild ein, zwischen* *die Hörner, darin,* *im Gesang der Windungen, das* *Mark der geronnenen* *Herzmeere schwillt.*	on to a ram's silicified forehead I brand this image, between the horns, in which, in the song of the whorls, the marrow of melted heart-oceans swells.
Wo- *gegen* *rennt er nicht an?*	In- to what does he not charge?
Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen.	The world is gone, I must carry you.

It's a poem about a ram, no doubt the sacrificial ram of Leviticus XVI and Genesis XXII, and also a poem about a star constellation, "the Ram" or Aries, aspects I'll leave aside here even if the ram, like the I of Donne's sonnet, in Celan's poem "runs" to his death (ll. 11-13: "Wo-/gegen rennt er nicht an?" Against what does he not run, or charge?). The brunt of Derrida's reading bears on the last line of the poem, "Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen," The world is gone, I must carry you, which Derrida introduces prior to quoting the whole poem. After quoting the whole poem, he asks why he began with the last line. His

19 P. Celan, *Atemwende*, 93. P. Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 275.

answer is formulated in terms of weight, recalling here the word "weigh" in the Donne sonnet:

> *No doubt, it is so as to acknowledge its charge. I will try to measure [peser] the import or carrying-distance [portée] of this charge in a moment in order to weigh [soupeser] it, in order to endure the gravity of it, if not to think [penser] it. What is called weighing [peser]? An operation of weighing [Une pesée]? To think [penser] is also, in Latin as in French, to weigh [peser], to compensate, to counter-balance, to compare, to examine. In order to do that, in order to think and weigh, it is hence necessary to carry (tragen, perhaps), to carry in oneself and carry on oneself. [...] We do have in our Latin languages the friendship between thinking and weighing (pensare), between thinking and gravity. And between thought and carrying-distance [portée]. R 11-12*

These lines return us to our questions of translation as something possible, as impossible, as of the letter or of the effect of the letter, as based on the integrity of both the national and the universal. Could the university in its teaching of translation support (I use "support" in both its English and French sense of "endorse" and "tolerate") translation as the transformation of the complementary poles of the national and the universal where the receiving language of the translation has no choice but to overload itself with that other, the so-called original language, which it must carry so precariously as to risk succumbing to its weight? Such would be like a meeting *between* two languages, a meeting that could never possibly end insofar as the receiver would never succeed in getting the guest either to leave or stay in such a way as no longer to be a guest.

We may listen again now to the second line of Donne's poem: "I run to death and death meets me as fast." The verb "meets" in the Donne sonnet revealed to me after the fact that we had translated in *Rams* the word *rencontre*, which appears about ten times, always not as "meeting" but as "encounter," because we wanted to retain the word "counter" or *contre* which is important given the twelfth line of Celan's poem, with its German word *gegen*, where the poem asks what does the ram not run or charge against. Yet the word "counter" or "against" is

also important because the "meeting" of deconstruction and hermeneutics involved their being somehow "against" each other. In opting every time for "encounter" over "meeting" we maintained the letter of Derrida's text, perhaps, but we were unaware of the word "meets" in the Donne sonnet the reading of which in the seminar was almost simultaneous with when *Rams* must have been being written. Yet the sense of Donne's line is virtually the same as what Derrida conceives as the definition of an encounter, a *rencontre*.

The first usage of *rencontre* is already preceded by the word "melancholy," a feeling with which the essay had begun and on which my essay will conclude. Derrida writes, "melancholy [...] must have invaded me as of our first encounter" (*R* 2). The meeting with the other is always a meeting with death. The expression "as of," *dès* in French, returns six pages later precisely at the return of the word "rencontre," at the moment when Derrida defines meeting in a thoroughly Donnean way, but in our translation, we missed completely this repetition. We translated as follows: "From this first encounter [Derrida is talking about any first encounter, not just the first one with Gadamer], interruption anticipates death, interruption precedes death" (*R* 8). Derrida's writing is musical, words are notes. Can musical notes be translated? In translating the French word *dès* by first "as of" and then as "from," we simply did not hear and prevented an English reader from hearing Derrida's composition. Yet the sonority of the letter "d," pronounced "dès" in French, abounds in John Donne's poem (as the boldfaced "d's" indicated above).

This formulation according to which death meets me whenever I meet the other is reversed by Derrida in how he imagines the reason why he reads a Celan poem to be in order to provoke a meeting. He writes, "if, once again, I wish to go encounter [*rencontre*] this poem, it is, truth be told, in order to attempt, if not to feign, to address Gadamer himself, himself in me outside myself. It is in order to speak to him [*lui parler*]" (*R* 9). Wishing to go meet the poem is in order to speak to the other, to the other dead and alive in me. When the word *rencontre* (and *lui parler*) returns near the end of *Rams*, it does so by allying the poem and the other person in a notion of originary contrarity, of an originarily

interrupted meeting which has everything to do with translation, with the practice and theory of translation.

Remember that the last line of Celan's poem is "Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen, le monde est parti ou annéanti, je dois te porter, the world is gone, I must carry you." Within the context of Husserl's 49th paragraph of *Ideas I*, Derrida remarks that the hypothesis of the annihilation of the world does not threaten the sphere of phenomenological experience and the pure ego. "On the contrary," writes Derrida, the hypothesis of the annihilation of the world opens the access to such experience. The last line of Celan's poem, what Derrida calls "the envoi, the sending," the mission, "of our poem," repeats this phenomenological radicalisation. Precisely here, at the edge of emptiness that the last line of the poem embodies and beyond which the mission of the poem is destined, we meet again the word *rencontre*, "encounter," two times. The first concerns the sending of the poem at the eschatological edge where the world disappears:

> *the sending of our poem encounters [rencontre] that which was also the most worrisome test for Husserlian phenomenology, indeed for what Husserl called its "principal of principles." In this absolute solitude of the pure ego, when the world has retreated, when Die Welt ist fort, the alter ego which is constituted in the ego is no longer accessible in an originary and purely phenomenological intuition. Husserl must concede this in his Cartesian Meditations. The alter ego is constituted, only by analogy, by appresentation, indirectly, inside of me, who then carries it where there is no transcendent world anymore. R 41*

The repercussions of this retreat of the world are a mode of consciousness that is unavoidably melancholic. This originary melancholy is what the mission of the poem meets. It is melancholy because I carry the *alter ego*, the you, but not in the mode of self-appropriation. It is a question, writes Derrida, "of carrying without appropriating to oneself." This carrying the other as inappropriable other within the self is nothing if not a meeting. Hence, the word *rencontre* returns:

> *To carry no longer has the meaning of "to be composed of" ["comporter"] [...]in the self, but rather to go towards, to commit towards [se porter vers] the infinite inappropriability of the other, to go towards the encounter [rencontre] with its absolute transcendence even inside me, that is to say in me outside of me. R 41*

My mission, impossible like melancholy is the impossibility of the theory of mourning, is to go to a meeting at which death is in attendance and is that which withdraws the world. I meet the other, the you, but the condition of possibility of meeting the other is meeting his absence, the fact of his sooner or later, and always virtual, absence.

Nothing prevents your becoming the I, either, as Derrida's entire text suddenly rotates 180 degrees such that you its reader becomes the I and *his* writing becomes the *you* who approaches. The deictic "this" in Derrida's next sentence has all the harrowing and unbearably sad uncanniness of the "this" in Keats' "this living hand, now warm and capable [...] see here it is–/I hold it towards you"[20]:

> *I must carry the other, and carry you, the other must carry me (for dich can designate me or designate the poet-signatory to whom this discourse is also addressed in return) even right when and where the world is no longer between us or beneath our feet. R 41*

The "this" of "this discourse" indicates Derrida: "this discourse" is Derrida's discourse. "This discourse" is addressed, like a return letter, to the sender, he who sent the letter, namely the "poet-signatory," Celan. In our turn, it would not be for sure either to whom we are talking or who is talking in us through us.

"I run to death, and death meets me as fast." This theory impossible which melancholy is to "normal" mourning, this mission impossible of being sent to meet you where death will have always arrived first, before me, before being, is perhaps an experience of translation, another way of weighing the practice and theory of translation. In any case, it's how I live the translation of *Rams* which I quote again in this regard, the English facing the French:

[20] J. Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 700.

Before being, I carry. Before being me, I carry the other. I carry *you* and must do so, I owe it to you, I have it to you. I remain *before*, *owing*, *having to*, in debt and owing to you before you. I must meet you at your level but I must also be your import, your consequence and range. Always singular and irreplaceable, these laws or these injunctions remain untranslatable from one to the other, from some to others, from one language to another, but that makes them no less universal. *I must* translate, transfer, transport (*übertragen*) the untranslatable in another turn even where, translated, it remains untranslatable. This is the violent sacrifice of the passage beyond: *Übertragen: übersetzen. R* 42	Avant d'être, je porte, avant d'être moi, je porte l'autre. Je *te* porte et le dois, je te le dois. Je reste *devant*, en dette et devant à toi devant toi, je dois me tenir à ta portée mais je dois aussi être ta portée. Toujours singulières et irremplaçables, ces lois ou ces injonctions restent intraduisibles de l'un à l'autre, des uns aux autres, et d'une langue à l'autre, mais elles n'en sont pas moins universelles. *Je dois* traduire, transférer, transporter (*übertragen*) l'intraduisible dans un autre tour là même où, traduit, il demeure intraduisible. Violent sacrifice du passage au-delà : *Übertragen: übersetzen. B* 77

I re-ask my question: Can the University, I mean the French University, *support* such tampering with the national idiom and with the universal? Could we teach translation along these lines, within the triple restriction of the *concours*, professional training and the nation-state? Given its mastery and twisting of language, the French in particular, can there seriously be any surprise that Derrida's work has not been institutionalized in the French University?

Derrida's point above is not that, translation being impossible, we should never translate. Derrida is not against translation, he personally might even prefer it (his first publication was a translation), but his notion of *différance* remarks a "preferance" of the untranslatable. As in many other situations, his point is to insist upon the glitch in the system, upon not occluding the glitch. Similarly, Derrida does not prefer death to life, but he sees life only as a mode of survival stemming from a more or less constant recognition of death. Life is impossible, therefore, since it is always already informed by death. Survival would be the possibility of the impossibility of life. Likewise for the relation of writing and speech: Derrida doesn't prefer writing to speaking. Yet there is a prior –ference, by which writing is

always already in voice, and so voice is always possibly a programmed voice, and thus impossible as pure voice. I mention this latter relation so as to telescope to my last example that will bear on the speech of Gadamer that is emitted by the voice of Derrida (via the word *parler* which returns, at the end of *Rams*). To hear this "speech," consider first the notions of interview and dialogue.

Although the essay entitled *Rams* bears on the line from Celan about the world being gone and my having to carry you, the essay begins without any mention of Celan or this particular poem; rather, it begins by renewing a dialogue with Hans-Georg Gadamer, with the memory of Gadamer since Gadamer had died prior to the writing of this essay. Dialogue, Derrida advances, is defined by the fact that both interlocutors know that one of them will be doomed to carry with himself the other in an interior dialogue, to carry the world of the other after the disappearance of the other and of the world. All dialogue is the result of this knowledge. All dialogue is nothing other than the translation of this "importance," to use this noun with its form of a gerund.

We can follow this motif of dialogue and interview, by spotlighting a few words of Derrida's *Rams*. These words are "melancholy" (*mélancolie*), "to hold" (*tenir*) and "to guard" (*garder*). Reading the translation of these words will uncover, somewhat, how Derrida conceives his dialogue with Gadamer, but will also practice translation in a way different from how translation is, generally, practiced in the French university, yet in a way which ought to form part of the teaching of translation in the French university. These examples are also meant to address the question "whither theory?", keeping in mind that this title of our event replaces the word "Marxism" by "theory" suggesting that "theory" is just as much of a ghost as is "Marxism", suggesting too that Derrida is somehow implied in this constellation.

"Melancholy" is a theory of the impossible. For Freud, mourning is when I can process the death of a loved one "normally," which means that it is possible for me to digest completely the death or loss of the loved one. Melancholy is the impossibility of mourning, and so melancholy is the theory of the impossibility of mourning, the impossibility, too, of the theory of mourning. The word "melancholy" in

Derrida's lexicon is linked to the verb *mêler*, the signification of which is "to mix," but the letter of which begins mellifluously like the sound of the word "melancholy." Almost the first two words of *Rams* are *mélancolie* and *mêler*. The sentence in French is: "A la reconnaissance, à l'affection dont elle [mon admiration pour Gadamer] est faite, et depuis si longtemps, je sens obscurément se mêler une mélancolie sans âge" (*B* 9). In French, the sound of "elle," referring to "admiration," mingles with the sound of *mêler*, whose sound is echoed by *mélancolie*. Several hours were devoted to translating this sentence, and our choice of the gerund "mingling" for *se mêler*, while losing the mellifluous sound of the French word, strove to make the "m" and the "g" of "mingling" resonate with the "m" and the "k" sounds of "melancholy." This attempt sought to translate the letter of the text, its sound and its sense. Yet my earlier example, on never translating *rencontre* by "meeting," and always by "encounter," testifies to the fact the success of the translation (fidelity to the Celan poem root of "counter" in "encounter" and *rencontre*) can also hide its failure (infidelity to the word "meeting" so important in Derrida's reading of "meets" in the Donne poem, roughly simultaneous with the genesis of *Rams*).

Another instance of the word "melancholy" in *Rams* introduces another family of words whose literality also cannot be carried over into English. What interests me in the following examples are the French words *tenir* and *garder*. Linking melancholy to the structure of talking with a friend, Derrida writes: "Sans doute [la] *mélancolie tenait*-elle, comme toujours dans l'amitié, telle du moins que chaque fois je l'éprouve, à une triste et envahissante certitude : un jour la mort devra nous séparer. Loi inflexible et fatale : de deux amis, l'un verra l'autre mourir. Le dialogue, si virtuel soit-il, à jamais sera blessé par une ultime interruption" (*B* 19-20). The verb *tenir*, in "tenait-elle," is accompanied by the preposition "à" but Derrida cuts his syntax after the verb "tenir," inserting a double hiatus prior to returning to the line of the sentence that picks up again with the word "à." The sentence performs an interruption while also describing interruption. Our translation re-arranged the sentence, and lost its interruptive structure, although I marked it by inserting in italics the French term: "As always with friendship, at least such is how I experience it every

time, this melancholy no doubt stems from [*tenait … à*] a sad and invasive certainty: one day death will necessarily separate us. Fatal and inflexible law: one of two friends will always see the other die. The dialogue, as virtual as it may be, will forever be wounded by an ultimate interruption" (*R* 6). The word *tenir* in "tenait … à" has a sense of holding, as one holds with one's hand a rope tied to something else, yet its repeated usage in Derrida's text denotes separation as well as suturing. Other examples attest the impossibility of its translation.

Two examples, both of which also include the word *garder*, "to keep, guard, treasure, etc.," come on the same page as the previous example, at a moment where Derrida defines what makes dialogue with another person interior and strange, or *unheimlich* as Derrida writes because no translation exists for that German word:

> *Le secret de ce qui entretient cette Unheimlichkeit, ici, à cet instant même, c'est que ce dialogue intérieur a probablement gardé vivante, active, heureuse, la tradition de ce qui sembla le suspendre au dehors, je veux dire en particulieur dans l'espace public. Dans un for intérieur qui ne se ferme jamais, cet entretien a gardé, je veux le croire, la mémoire du malentendu avec une constance remarquable. B 19*

The French verb *tenir* appears here in the verb *entretient*, translated as "sustains," and also in the noun *entretien* which can mean "interview" but because of Gadamer's themes of dialogue and conversation, is rendered as "conversation." The third person singular verb *entretient* and the noun *entretien* are both used in conjunction with the verb *garder*. The first instance of *garder* I translated as "kept" ("this interior dialogue has probably kept alive"); the second, as "treasured" ("this conversation treasured the memory"). These two pairings of *entretenir* and *garder*, in which each word had to be translated by two different words (for e.g., *garder* became "kept" and "treasured"), are very much present when Derrida, in the previous example I had given, writes that melancholy is held to a kind of severance: the *tenait … à* example commented upon above. For Derrida follows his definition of originary mourning–the fact that my relation to you will have always already been severed by the necessity of impending separation – by returning to this

word *garder*. In our translation, he thus writes, concerning how dialogue continues after the factual death of my real or interlocutor:

> *No doubt the dialogue continues, pursuing its wake with the survivor. The latter believes he guards [Celui-ci croit garder] in himself–he did so already while the other was alive–henceforth, the survivor lets the other speak inside himself [il lui laisse désormais au-dedans de lui la parole]. He does so perhaps better than ever, and that is a terrifying hypothesis. R 6-7, my emphasis*

The terrifying hypothesis is that the voice of the other speaks best when the other is dead, but also that I speak best when there is a dead person speaking in me, when a dead person has the floor so to speak in my own head. In short, death is the condition of speech. Speech is purest, at its best, on this condition, and *con-dition* means "speaking with." That hypothesis is sufficiently terrifying for me, in a gesture of self-protection, to have left for a moment the word *garder*, this time rendered a third way, by *guard*. Yet that hypothesis can be extended to the relation of translation to the original. The original is most original insofar as it is translated. Indeed, translation is the condition of the original: "the structure of the original is to be marked by the requirement to be translated."[21] The word *garder* characterizes the survivor. It is the survivor who guards the dead, but it is the dead who speaks best.

Consider how these two words, *tenir* and *garder*, become many in English, "hold, stem, dialogue," and "keep, treasure, guard." Were one to attend only to the effect of the letter–the signified and not to the letter or signifier (assuming that we know how to determine the "effect" of the letter) –, one would miss the melancholy pairing of *tenir* and *garder*. The mingling of *tenir* and *garder*, is melancholic because they link Gadamer to dialogue. These two words, *tenir* and *garder* (*R* 6) return in *Rams*, some pages further on (*R* 18), when Derrida expresses his admiration for Gadamer–remember that melancholy mingled with "admiration" in the opening two sentences of *Rams*, each of which was

[21] J. Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," 184.

incidentally a paragraph by itself. This admiration concerns how Gadamer reads in such a way that indecision is respected and writes in a singular and intentional way.

The context at page eighteen is that Gadamer reads a Celan poem, and the poem concerns a hand, reading a hand, which could be the hand of God. The hand might let a blessing be read, but such blessing can never be proven from the reading of it. The impossibility of proving by an act of reading, Derrida adds, "must [*doit*] remain until the end of time, and [...] must [*doit*] not be saturated or closed by any certainty–there would neither be reading, giving nor blessing" (*R* 17). This verb "must" becomes affiliated with what Derrida calls the "right to leave things undecided". Here's Derrida's sentence, which he placed immediately prior to a long quotation from Gadamer on the enigmatic hand in Celan's poem: "The right [*droit*] to leave things undecided is recognized to belong to the poem itself, and not to the poet nor to the reader" (*R* 17). The modal verb "must," the third person singular *doit* from the infinitive *devoir* in French, becomes the noun "right," *droit* in French. This term then undergoes another minor modulation in the sentences Derrida writes after Gadamer's quote about the hand. First, in French: "Je veux vous confier maintenant ce que, justement ou injustement, je tiens par dessus tout à garder vivant dans l'écho de ces dernières questions. Plus que l'indécision elle-même, j'admire le respect marqué par Gadamer à l'endroit d'une indécision" (*B* 37). Remember, the first sentence of Derrida's text, its first paragraph, expressed "admiration" for Gadamer. What mingles melancholically with admiration here is the living echo. Now, the English: "I want to share with you now [*maintenant*] what, rightly or wrongly, I cling to [*tiens ... à*] above all else, so much so as to want to keep [*... garder*] it alive in the echo of these last questions. More than the indecision itself, I admire the respect which Gadamer shows for [*à l' endroit*] indecision" (*R* 18). Here, it is not just that the French word for "now," *maintenant*, combines the word for "hand," *main*, and the word for "holding," *tenant*. That's common, I mean not proper like a proper name. It is not either just the word for "at the place of," *à l'endroit*, which echoes the modal verb *doit* or the noun *droit*. What is properly Gadamerian about this echo which Derrida tries to keep alive, melancholically in his words, is

the lexicon of the words *tenir* and *garder* which we had highlighted earlier. Yet notice also that the word *tenir* is separated from the word *garder* in the French by the words for "above all," "par dessus tout." This caesura interests *us*.

Precisely these two words, *tenir* and *garder*, return at the opening of the next paragraph, still about the Gadamer quotation on Celan. Again, the French first: "Ce que je tiens à garder encore en vie dans ces dernières questions sur ce que le poème laisse indécidé, c'est la façon singulière et sans doute intentionnelle dont la rhétorique de Gadamer tourne les choses" (*B* 39). This joining of *tenir* and *garder* is their last alliance in Derrida's essay; at this point, he is not yet halfway through. The thread of the word *tenir* is dropped thereafter. The name Gadamer is mentioned just two further times. What occurs in this last example is that *tenir* and *garder*, which hitherto had been separated by various interruptions–the original title of the essay was "The Uninterrupted Dialogue: Between Two Infinities, the Poem"–have now become sutured in the syntagm, *je tiens à garder*. Here is the English: "that which I am clinging to so as to keep it alive [*je tiens à garder encore en vie*], is the singular and no doubt intentional fashion in which Gadamer's rhetoric turns things" (*R* 19). In the expression of admiration–and the previous example also expressed admiration, "I admire the respect which Gadamer shows"–melancholy mingles inside such admiration. Recall the "sad and invading certainty" which melancholy stemmed from, *tenait à*, that we quoted above. Recall, too, that melancholy, i.e. that which defines the survivor, was nothing other than the action of the verb *garder*: "The survivor believes he guards the other in himself–he did so already while the other was alive–henceforth, the survivor lets the other speak inside himself" (*R* 6-7). So, when he, Derrida, joins, for a final time, by the letter *à*, the words *tenir* and *garder*, what he does is let Gadamer, philosopher of dialogue, of the conversation, of the interview, *entretien* in French, speak through him, Derrida. For just as the word *tenir* is made to convey something of Gadamer's philosophy of the dialogue, the word *garder* might keep alive the sound of the name "Gadamer." Dans *à garder*, only a "m" is missing from the anagram "Gadamer."

In this last sentence, where *tenir* and *garder* seem to meet in *tenir à garder*, the expression "alive" is also used: "je tiens à garder encore en vie" or "I cling to it so as to keep it still alive." The "alive" or "en vie" is undoubtedly related to the previous example where Derrida had said he sought to keep alive (*garder vivant*) Gadamer's respect for indecision. In the one English expression "Keep alive," which is used for the two different French expressions *garder vivant*, and *garder encore en vie*, what is happening is that melancholy is obscurely mingling with admiration. Furthermore, expressions like "keep alive" (*garder vivant*, *garder encore en vie*) bear a spectral function: insofar as I speak, I keep alive something disappeared. I keep, still, life, *encore en corps*.[22] Speech is always like the voice of a gramophone. That is why, in Derrida, death transforms him into a prosopopoeia.

In other words, the other, Gadamer speaks through the one ostensibly writing, Derrida. Thus, in the only other time in the rest of the essay where Derrida uses the name Gadamer (he *mentions* it two other times), the name comes back, at the very end of the text, as that through which the other, in particular the absent and the dead other, speaks in the me, in the self. Referring to a question he would have liked to ask Gadamer, Derrida's last sentences save one read as follows:

> *That's one of the questions which, appealing to him for help, I would have liked to ask Gadamer in the course of an interminable interview [entretien]. [...] I would have begun by recalling how much we need the other and how much we will still need him, need to carry him, to be carried by him [par lui] wherever he speaks [parle] in us prior to us. R 44*

The name "Gadamer" returns in the last lines, in Derrida's imagined interview, or *entretien*. The return of *tenir* in *entretenir*, in proximity with

[22] Page thirty-nine of *Béliers*, "garder encore en vie," and page thirty-seven, "garder vivant dans l'écho," reverberate page nineteen, where Derrida writes that his interior dialogue with Gadamer himself, with "Gadamer vivant, et vivant encore," will not have ceased (*n'aura pas connu de cesse*) since he first met him. *Encore*, "still," echoes the body (*corps, Körper–Leib?*), and the "écho" embodies the conversation of *encore* and *en corps*. The *Körper-Leib*, body-'life', is a phenomenological distinction that animates the writings of both Derrida and Gadamer.

the name "Gadamer," recalls the notion of melancholy as the other speaking, and perhaps best speaking, in us prior to us. The sound, of [p-a-r-l], in the preposition and indirect pronoun, "par lui," indeed echoes in the sound of the third person singular verb for the English "speaks," *parle*. The words "par lui," which mean "by him" but sounds like the imperative, "speak to him," *parle-lui*, suggests how when I speak I am not only carried, but also am spoken through, by that absence which is the condition of my speaking. How and by what name-bearer should the name "Gad-a-mer" be spoken? The name "Gadamer" and the stem of "tenir" return at the end of Derrida's text, after their previous alliance halfway through in the syntagm, *je tiens à garder encore en vie*, just as the echo from or by him, by the other, from the French words *par lui*, is heard precisely in speech, in the word "speaks," i.e. in the French word *parle.*[23]

Does translation seek to render the effects of the letter? What would translating Derrida imply for the teaching and research in translation? What we might hear in the literal words such as *tenir, entretenir, garder*, *Gadamer*, *par, lui* and *parler*, ought to make us measure, to weigh and think, in other ways what a correct translation is, and what translation even is, since we in this profession are well-placed not only to teach it but to help re-think, to theorize, its ongoing practice.

Such is what I cling to so as to keep alive, even if, but also because, "all my pleasures are like yesterday."

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[23] Echoing earlier attempts in *Rams*: "I am delighted to have already let Gadamer *speak* in me [parler *en moi*]" (*R* 3, my emphasis) and "If I make his voice be heard [*entendre*], if I hear it now in me […], it is, truth be told, in order to attempt, if not to feign, to address Gadamer himself, himself in me outside myself. It is in order to *speak to him* [pour lui parler] (*R* 9, my emphasis).

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