

The Time of Translation

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Abstract: In this paper, I analyze the time dimension at play in translation processes. First, I consider the simple time relation between a translation and its original. I then consider the multiple and overlapping relations between the translation and the original in history through a specific case study: the translations of the *Laozi* collected in Micha Tadd's project *Laozegetics*. This move discloses tensions in the "history of translation," which I try to understand with the help of Michel Serres's conceptual tools. Finally, I stress translation's inherent power to erode the present state of things and its intimate relation with possible futures.

Keywords: Translation, time, history of translation, Laozegetics

In this paper, I build on a particular diagnosis of our time voiced by Mark Fisher: "What's at stake in 21st century hauntology is not the disappearance of a particular object. What has vanished is a tendency, a virtual trajectory" (19). I claim that, because of its internal structure, translation cannot belong to the present. In its delay, in its *Nachträglichkeit*, in its being *après coup* in relation to the texts to which it refers, translation contributes to eroding the present state of things. It creates a fissure, a juncture, forcing us to think of another temporal dimension. Because of this quality, translation has been an ally of those philosophers who seek to criticize the metaphysics of presence, namely Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.¹

In the following, I first discuss the temporality that is unfurled by the simple translation relation. I will then focus on the multiple translation relations in history with the help of a case study: the more than two thousand translations of the *Laozi* collected by Misha Tadd in *Laozegetics*. I then turn to the difficulties and limits of different approaches to the history of translation. Finally, I consider the resources provided by translation when it comes to eroding the present and disclosing possible futures.

1. Out of sync

What kind of temporality does translation unfold? When I am translating a Chinese philosophical text dated to around the sixth century BC, in what time am I living? What kind of temporality is hosting me, am I dwelling in? What kind of temporal relation exists between the text I am translating and the text I am writing? What happens to time when we translate?

The translator must deal with at least two temporalities: the temporality of the text she wants to translate and her own temporality, the temporality in which she is living. Furthermore, with her work she is generating a new temporality, that of the resulting translation. The attempt to join these different temporalities brings translation out of sync. It is not in sync with the text on which it operates – translation occurs "after the fact," at a remove from the original – and is not even in sync with the time in which it occurs. It is oriented toward an object that is already there, that is present and comes from the past. The activity of translation seems to reveal the non-contemporaneity of the present time with itself. It takes place in a suspended time, almost outside of time.

At the same time (!), every literary masterpiece is also out of sync, but for another reason: because it is timeless. Because of its timelessness, a work is worthy of translation and – as soon as the operation begins – becomes an original. What does it mean for a work to become an original? If every work is potentially an original, it is only at a certain point in time – in its life, in its history – that translation changes the work retrospectively.

Translation works with a text that is timeless; nevertheless, translation is affected by time. Because it is affected by time, it can affect another text retrospectively, marking and changing its status in time. This is a first signal of how translation affects the time of the original text, generating it as such. Precisely in this relation, translation is posthumous, and, reciprocally, the text becomes its forerunner. It is in this sense that we can read Borges's statement that "every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (192).

This is especially true of the relation between translation and the "source" text, which becomes a "source" only a posteriori. From the point of view of the translated text, we can invoke Walter Benjamin's conception of translatability: every text is a priori translatable; translatability is an inner property of the text, according to its essence. The question of whether the text can be translated is "apodictic" and goes beyond humanity, beyond the capacities of the human, and beyond human time (16). The text not only allows for translation in itself – even if this translation will never appear in human time, precisely in history – but also demands translation. But why should a text demand translation? And what has this fact to do with time?

Translation, which in creating its source text as source is answering its plea, arises from the source's own temporality, from a kind of extra time (in Benjamin's terminology *Fortleben* and *Überleben*) that belongs to it. The time of the translation has always potentially been there with the text. With the translation, time is dislodged, and translation gives time to what is timeless.

Because it gives time to a timeless object, translation seems to be susceptible to time. And it ages very quickly: "Whereas the originals remain eternally young (whatever the degree of interest we have in them, and however near or far they are in cultural terms), translations 'age (*vieillissent*)'" (Berman 1990, 1).

In this passage, Berman radically differentiates the two temporalities of translations and originals. Originals are "eternally young"; they are timeless – as we have already seen. On the contrary, translations "age," they fade, they are obsolescent.² For this reason, it seems that originals can generate effects – e.g. translations, commentaries, glosses – *ad infinitum*, while translations seem sterile and dead-ended; e.g., they seem to lack the property of translatability.

But is it fair to compare the temporality of the two texts? Is it not the case that the original and the translation "exist in two parallel and disparate time spectrums" (Topia 46)?³ Topia's suggestion that we keep the two time spectrums separate would seem to be an attempt to remedy the actual cultural situation that we also find in Berman's utterance: every time we bring the original and the translation into proximity, the translation looks wrong; it almost needs to excuse itself for not being the original.⁴ Our understanding of translation is shaped by the fetishization of the original. According to this model, translation is but a surrogate, a second choice to which we have recourse if we cannot have the original. Translation appears imperfect; it always misses the "true meaning" of the original. This has consequences for the dimension of time: translation has been connected to a past dimension, understood as a digging into the folds of the past with the intent of restoring its own proper meaning.

In Derrida's terms: the original text – as we usually conceive of it – is a specter of the metaphysics of presence:

A striking diversity disperses across the centuries the translation of a masterpiece, a work of genius, a *thing* of the *spirit* which precisely seems to *engineer itself* [s'ingénieur]. Whether evil or not, a genius *operates*, it always resists and defies after the fashion of a spectral thing. The animated work becomes that thing, the Thing that, like an elusive specter, *engineers* [s'ingénie] a habitation without proper inhabiting, call it a *haunting*, of both memory and translation. A masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost. (1995, 18)

The original – in this passage, described by Derrida as the “work of a genius,” a “*thing of the spirit*,” “the Thing” – haunts translation. It is there without being there; its presence is desired but structurally impossible. The original acts as a cause, a unifying focal point of its different translations. The age of translations is then an age inhabited by ghosts that live it without living it, an age that desires the presence of the original meaning. Translations refer to a non-present original that is the source of the presence, whose proper meaning can be indicated, but mostly missed.

Moving from this diagnosis, it seems important to take a path that is the opposite of Topia’s – but that has the same goal – and to study the reciprocity of the temporal relation between the translation and the original. If the translation is not consumed, if it does not age, it will cast a shadow on and replace the source text. It will demand a translation of itself. But isn’t this the way originals arise, e.g. when a translation answers this request?

The path is that of eroding the strict ontological difference between translation and original, recognizing at the origin of the original a translation movement, as suggested by Derrida (1985). I will try to develop this argument, focusing on its implications for the dimension of time.

One of the strongest arguments against this proposal is an empirical one: the difference between the original and the translation resides in the simple fact that the latter cannot be further translated. In Benjamin’s terms, translations do not have the property of translatability. The case study I will consider will refute this argument on the same empirical field. In addition, it will help us to put it into historical perspective: we will discover that translations’ untranslatability is a limited and relatively new praxis in the history of thought. From a diachronic perspective, a translation calls for other translations that do not necessarily refer to the so-called “original” text but often build on previous translations.

2. A case study: *Laozegetics*

Laozegetics is a project developed by Misha Tadd on the global effects of the Daoist classic *Laozi*. In contrast to traditional studies on the *Laozi*, Tadd adopts an “inclusive perspective,” one that gathers classical Chinese commentaries and the many translations of the *Laozi* within the same project. Thus far, Tadd has identified more than two thousand translations, in ninety-seven languages. In this regard, the project is “global” and aspires to be exhaustive. *Laozegetics* does not seem to derive from encyclopedic aspirations, however. Rather, it seems to be the product of a conceptual shift: from an obsession with the original to the history of its effects. Tadd is all too aware of this radical shift of perspective: a shift of “focus away from the supposed original or ‘true’ text [...]. This move affirms the continuity of the Chinese and non-Chinese traditions of interpretation and positions translations as creative projects instead of flawed simulacra” (Tadd 2022a, 88). Indeed, the historical depth of this project helps us to recognize that fixation on the true ‘original’ is specific to our time: “the Chinese traditionally celebrated the plurality of *Laozi*’s meaning [...]. Even for a Daoist devotee such as Du Daojian [(1237–1318)], the *Laozi* does not exist in eternal unchanging perfection but adapts to the ever-transforming needs of the people. As a result, no singular ‘authentic’ *Laozi* exists” (Tadd 2022b, 5).

Laozegetics not only historicizes our idolization of the original but also questions another important contemporary taboo, that of retranslation, that is to say, of translations made from an existing translation rather than from the original text. It shows that retranslations are both common and fruitful. For example, Stanislas Julien’s French translation of the *Laozi* as *Le Livre de la Voi et de la Vertu* (1842) gave rise to an impressive number of translations in European languages, among which the earliest complete English translation. It made the classic Daoist text accessible to a new audience and imprinted its decision to translate “Dao” as “Voie” on all its retranslations, opening up a new path for understanding this key concept of Daoism. This is only one case of many that we find in the *Laozegetics*: the result of a translational process, a translation, in turn became the “source text” for a retranslation. But can we really exclude the possibility that our first “source text” is not itself a translation of a previous text, of which we have lost track?

Moving from Tadd's notion of an "interpretative lineage," let us consider the possibility of tracing "translational lineages" in history. The notion of a "lineage" offers an opportunity to undermine the linear model of knowledge transmission. Translations do not travel in a single direction; they move in parallel, creating a different line at every step: "The *Laozi* did not just travel in a single direction from a single origin" (Tadd 2022b, 11). History itself assumes a branched-out form that proceeds through jumps in time and space. One of the greatest challenges of tracing the history of a given translation is the difficulty of following and producing such a historical temporality: there is a specific characteristic of writing that limits it to linearity. Linear narration is possible only if we start from the end, from the last node, from which we trace the work back retrospectively, giving us the illusion of a straight path. This is why *Laozegetics*, with its more than two thousand translations, puts in place and becomes the model for a nodal conception of history: "Thus, each Chinese or non-Chinese interpretation forms a node within one or more lineage transmitting particular conceptions of the text" (Tadd 2022b, 11). Rather than being linear, this approach is diagrammatic or cartographic, one in which each text – unique in its peculiarity – is a node at which different lineages cross and start, or could start in the future. Indeed, the 580 English translations of the *Laozi* alone provide us with a glimpse into the possibility of "infinite translations" (Tadd 2022a, 99). I will return to this knotty history with the help of Serres in the next section, after having explored the tensions that pervade the "history of translation".

3. Translation for history

What is the relation between translation and history? What does the expression "history of translation" mean? In this section, I will follow Christopher Rundle's suggestion, according to which we would do better to ask "not what history can tell us about translation but what translation can tell us about history" (239). If we focus on translations and on translation lineages, what kind of history do we face? We face a knotty history, a history that branches out and constantly revises its diagrammatic form – a history that is difficult to write.

Furthermore, combining the question of translation with the question of history can give rise to a special problem: is translation not a fickle parameter? Is this translation the same as that translation? Is what we today call translation the same as what Cicero or Luther called translation? Can we really compare different translation activities that are far away from each other in space and time? Is Heidegger's work on the Pre-Socratics or on the *Laozi* still a translation?⁵ Less vague and more radical: is every translation a unique case per se? Shall we follow Adamo's or Munday's invitation to offer a microhistory of translation based on Carlo Ginzburg's methodological legacy? Or shall we heed Antoine Berman's critique of the Platonic essence of the entire Western translation tradition? In other words, shall we favor a discontinuistic or a continuistic approach?

Microhistory focuses on the lives of specific individuals in their normal exceptionality – e.g. the sixteenth-century Friulian miller Menocchio in Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* – rather than on general macroprocesses. Such a history proceeds not via analogy but via anomaly (Ginzburg, 532). The contest's peculiarity is stressed, and every historical situation is read as the result of the interaction of specific individualities in their finitude. A microhistory of translation considers the normal anomaly that a specific translational case embodies and stresses its context – or the reconstruction of this context – delving into extra-sources such as "archives, manuscripts and, especially, translator papers, post-hoc accounts and interviews" (Munday).

Belonging to the continuistic approach are those works that accept the commensurability of translation experiences as a premise. These studies stress the constants of translation activities, rather than lingering on the peculiarities of the specific experience. This approach tends to presuppose a transhistorical translational activity that operates immanently in history. The continuistic position presupposes translation outside of history and, as such, sees in translation the unifying factor of

different experiences.⁶ To a certain extent, however, a minimal continuistic approach is necessary for doing history as such.

Antoine Berman stresses the “Platonic essence” of translation as it is understood in Western thought, unifying the multiplicity of different translation experiences under a single paradigm:

From its very beginnings, western translation has been an embellishing restitution of meaning, based on the typically Platonic separation between spirit and letter, sense and word, content and form, the sensible and the non-sensible. When it is assumed today that translation (including non-literary translation) must produce a ‘clear’ and ‘elegant’ text (even if the original does not possess these qualities), the affirmation assumes the Platonic figure of translating, even if unconsciously. (2000, 296–297)

What Berman denounces is the traditional predominance of the meaning over the letter in translation across the entire history of Western thought, regardless of the language, epoch, or specific circumstances in which the translation takes place. This is an invariance in the history of translation that has held for over two millennia, with the sole exception of Friedrich Hölderlin’s anomalous translations. Translation is not only a constant in history, but the problematic continuity is in the *way* it has been conceived.

At this point, it may be useful to consider the specific idea of history developed by Michel Serres. In what follows, I will not refer to Serres’s work on translation, *Hermès III*, but to his considerations on the history of science in *Les anamnèses mathématiques*. Translation emerges here as a conceptual tool for better understanding the relation between scientific languages and the systems of different ages. I suggest that we consider things from the other way around and apply to the history of translation the conception of history that Serres proposes in the context of science. Every scientific concept belongs to at least three ages: the age in which the concept appears, the age of its reactivation, and the age of its powerful effects. According to Serres, in the history of science there is a contrast between the historian’s and the scientist’s priorities: the historian investigates the specific role that the concept plays in history without missing any detail in the accumulation of data, while the scientist takes an interest only in the teleological truth (e.g. the current truth) of the concept, disregarding the errors and important parts of the systems that generated that concept. This contrast is insolvable and leads to indeterminism: “either *I know the position of the concept and don’t know its speed*, its particular motion, which is its veracity, or *I know its speed and don’t know its position*” (84).

Serres’s understanding of the history of science helps us to conceive of a more-than-linear historicity for translation, free of any obsession with the original. If we put into chronological order, e.g., the different translations of the *Laozi*, we miss not only their inner relations but also their context, the needs that translation is responding to, and its immediate effects, among other things. Concurrently, if we investigate the translation context, e.g. the context of Heidegger’s translation of the *Laozi*, we open up a discussion with specialists of that period and the author, bypassing the work’s historical trajectory. The historical weaving is necessarily interrupted. Translation can leap over thousand years of translations. It can exclude the entire tradition and open up a different way of understanding it. In special cases, translation can tear apart and retie the knots of the history of Western metaphysics. Serres’s description of the “inventor mathematician” thus also applies to the translator: “in a system that’s a network whose every element is a knot of anachronic diachronies, he is free to cut or retie” (94). By a “knot of anachronic diachronies” Serres means historical objects (diachrony) that also belong to an anachronic dimension, that is to say, to “the fusion of every possible time: times that are unpredictable, determined and overdetermined, irreversible and reversible, finalized and recurrent, connected and always rent, referred to one, two, a thousand origins” (94). The act of translating seems to develop one of the possible temporalities that are virtual in every text. The text’s translatability assumes a strong temporal dimension here. Every translation that can move from the text is different also – and maybe especially – because it has its own specific temporality. Not every translation plays a disruptive, non-linear role in the history of thought; translation is also the way one

specific ontological setting is linearly reiterated, preserved, and confirmed.⁷ The translator has the opportunity to cut, but also to confirm the line (and to a certain extent is always confirming some aspects of the tradition).

4. From the future

Translation is one of the means philosophy uses (and has used) for saying the words of the tradition anew and, in doing so, for opening up new regions of thought. Translation is one of the ways in which the unthought and the unspoken come to the fore. The novel stems not from a tabula rasa but – as Leibniz suggests – from the accumulation of the tradition and from its reactivation: “there are veins of gold in these sterile rocks “ (Leibniz et d’Arnauld, 566).⁸ Or, forcing Benedetto Croce’s operation on Hegel, it is a way to separate what is living from what is dead. Croce himself was a translator: his translation of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia* launched a new cultural epoch, giving to the Italian philosophical tradition its current vocabulary. Dead and living aspects of the translation’s original are not determined once and for all, because translations allow the text’s other possibilities to open themselves to future unearthing.

We began with the observation that translation is out of sync with its time. Like Heidegger’s poet – that is to say, Friedrich Hölderlin – the translator speaks of what has passed, announcing in “the pre-saying that is a saying-after (dictating something that is heard)” (2000, 37). The activity of translating collects different temporalities within itself. From the point of view of the so-called “target text,” translation is a retroactive move, an activity that addresses the past and digs into it. In this digging, translation can preserve the text’s lineage or lead to a crossroads, generating an unheard parallel history of the text. From the point of view of the so-called “source text,” translation comes from the future, shaping it anew. Translation substantially interferes with its life: it transforms its – newborn – original into one of the possible forms disclosed by its translatability. The way in which this specific transformation takes place is not determined a priori. Translation, through a kind of maieutics, nurtures certain possibilities within the text and excludes others. But it does not definitively orient its future. The possibilities remain untouched, open to new future translations.⁹ Stepping into the future it creates, translation reveals other possible futures at every moment of its linear history. If necessary, translations can also play a crucial part “in undermining the present state of things” (Fisher, 18).

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Notes

¹ I discuss this alliance in Nardelli (2021). On Heidegger and translation, see Illetterati, Giometti, Sallis. On Derrida and translation, see Foran, Davis, Benjamin (1989).

² The term ‘obsolescent’ can help us to recall that, in the contemporary era, translations are commodities of the cultural industry, and their ways of being (quality, form, standard) depend on the material conditions of this industry.

³ Developing Topia’s argument, we might also add that the original cannot be accused of ageing, because it usually serves at the same time as a criterion for the canonization of the specific language in which it is written. A masterpiece shapes its own language and becomes one of its own reference points.

⁴ As efficaciously summarized by Mounin: “All arguments against translation are limited to one: it is not the original” (13).

⁵ On Heidegger's translation of the *Laozi*, see the doubts of Paul Shih-yi Hsiao: "I have to admit this – I could not during our work together get free from a slight anxiety that Heidegger's notes might perhaps go beyond what is called for in a translation. As an interpreter and mediator this tendency unsettled me" (98).

⁶ It is again Rundle who offers an important suggestion: "The assumption that necessarily underlies histories of translation, that there is a kind of organic unity to the activity of translation and that the experiences of different translators in different historical contexts are implicitly linked and comparable, is both debatable and essentially ahistorical" (236).

⁷ I will not take into consideration the specific way in which Heidegger understands the history of translations. He focuses on historically decisive translations, calling them "essential translations," that is to say, those translations that mark the passage from one being's era to another, confirming and deepening its misunderstanding (1997, 145).

⁸ The passage is evoked, even if not explicitly quoted, in Serres in relation to the translation of the languages of science: "The new language is at the same time anterior and posterior of the prior one. It makes it explode, cut it, filters it, eliminates its impurities, preserves in it only the gold of its mathematicity" (105).

⁹ The future dimension of the work of art is stressed by Justo in *Inversão de marcha*. Hrnjez (192) compares the movement of translation with that of Klee's *Angelus Novus* in the reading that Benjamin gives of it in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

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