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Res 15th Anniversary Symposium
Tradition—Translation—Treason

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Editorial

Traducere et tradere

FRANCESCO PELIZZI

Why must the work of betrayal be the condition sine qua non of the work of Redemption?


At the RES Fifteenth Anniversary Symposium, whose "proceedings" occupy a good portion of the present issue of the journal, I was an almost silent moderator. There is consonance between the discretion required in such a role and the way in which an editor must know how to listen and also, more often than not, how to shut up. But, as on that occasion, a few words on some of the themes that were discussed then may be in order, particularly since not all of the orally presented contributions on that occasion materialized into "articles" for this commemorative issue of RES. Celebrations are a bit like funerals: an air of compunction hovers over them. The simple fact of having survived for 15 years is celebration enough for a periodical like RES. But this symposium on the twists and turns of translation was particularly appropriate to mark the date. As an international journal of "anthropology and aesthetics," RES was from the start, in one way or another, about translation (and perhaps even "apostasy"). And this symposium was attended by a suitably heterogeneous group of friends and collaborators who had come to commemorate an enterprise in which they had been in various ways involved for some time, across quite different fields, languages, cultures, and so on.

A journal, and particularly a multidisciplinary one, is not only, as William James famously said, a "dragon" that must periodically be fed new "virgins," but a gathering place—a watering hole—where different energies are combined towards results that transcend each particular contribution. The effect is cumulative, which means that duration ("tradition") and innovation ("betrayal") are both of the essence; what is accomplished through time gives time—our persistent enemy—a good (or bad) name. Time, of course, is what tradition is supposed to be all about: memory upheld, for its own sake. What is there to apply oneself to, or to betray—after all—if nothing is remembered? The problem is that collective memory can be as arbitrary and capricious as individual recollections. Said the Latin quotation from Ennius, inscribed over our head in the old Casa Italiana, where the symposium was held: *MORIBUS ANTIQUIS RES STAT ROMANA VIRISQUE*. It is indeed quite "Roman" this thing that "rests" (but stat is stronger, one could say "is well planted," *founded*, like the Colosseum) on "ancient mores and men." To the Latin spirit—a pragmatic and normative one—"that—which-is-to-be-acted-upon," the subject-matter, is something as tangible as the things of nature (and as the nature of things, *rerum natura*). For the Romans, "translating" Greek *ars* (*technē*) meant, perhaps for the first time in world history, both transferring (*traducere*), *transfierre* originalis and copying them as precisely as (technically) feasible. But were the Romans aware that

1. RES's Fifteenth Anniversary Symposium was held in the central hall of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies at Columbia University on November 16-17, 1995, as the inaugural event of its newly renovated Casa Italiana. A celebration is also a thanksgiving and I would especially like to thank Professor Maristella Lorch, then Director and soul of the Academy, for making the event possible; without her energy and determination, it would never have happened. She saw it to celebrate, at the very reinauguration of the Italian House, the trajectory of RES, an American and international journal in which the Italian presence has always been strong. It was not an obvious choice for such an occasion. Her staff was also wonderful: Susan You, first and foremost.

A very warm thanks, both personal and on behalf of all participants, to Jane Gregory Rubin and the Interamericas Foundation, not just for the financial help without which this event would not have been possible, but for the intelligence and care with which Mrs. Rubin followed, indeed often influenced and directed, many aspects of the symposium's planning. Interamericas, of which she is the driving spirit, was a natural partner for RES in this venture, because it promotes intercultural events of which translation is the explicit or underlying theme.

I wish to thank G. Alhadeff for a helpful reading of this editorial.

2. RES was founded, after all, by two Italians of mixed allegiances: one, myself, a permanent resident of the U.S. who long studied and worked in France; the other, Remo Guidieri, a naturalized Frenchman, raised as both an Anarchist and a Marxist (in itself a contradiction), who later converted to Catholicism. We were then joined by Joseph Rykwert, a naturalized British architect/scholar, also a converted Catholic who was born in Poland of a Jewish heritage.
something of the Greek “thing,” of its substance (ousia), never was “truly” translated into Latin? To some extent, they must have been, if a good late-Republican/early-Imperial Roman education was not considered complete without the physical transference of spending a substantial schooling period in Athens itself. How can one actually imagine an identical twin for an artifact (before the work of the machine)? If the brother is one whose existence one cannot prescind from, how could one possibly be separate from one’s twin? Translation is always looking for the (lost, disguised) twin—as in all these late-Medieval and Renaissance romances Shakespeare liked so much. Archaic cultures, though, contemplate and affirm the impossibility of the twin or the monstrosity of the identical. With the rationale of upholding and maintaining quality (in truth a mask for the promotion of quantity), the modern world idealizes the reproduction of the same. It even tries to reduce any consideration of “objective” disparities in order to promote such a program on a universal scale. Such a parti pris is of course paradoxical, for an age that purports to extol the dignity of difference, the rule of the relative, and the irreducible validity of polyvalent interpretations.

Tradition is the transportation, the transference of something impalpable through time. But what is time? How is one to say that something has been transmitted from “time A” to “time B”? Zeno’s paradox applies to time as well as to space, because the only image of time that we are capable of conceiving is one in which time moves. But what actually “moves” with time? Or should we say that time is movement itself? I am neither a philosopher nor a physicist. The movement one is called to deal with in anthropology and history, traditionally, is the one that is reflected in the re-production or trans-mission of contents and forms.

There is, however, an overarching idea of the identical in the archaic; it lies in the recurrence in, and of, time. Time is the dimension of repetition in the archaic. Conversely, time itself, in the archaic (nonliterate) world, only exists in repetition. That is why time and tradition are one in the archaic, and the word for “tradition,” when made to appear (by modern outside intervention) invariably signifies “the repetition” or “the ritual” (custom) and, particularly in early literate stages, “the norm” (dhharma). Change, in archaic societies, constantly occurs—as always—but is never acknowledged; the new is ever appropriated and ritualized. When this process of absorption and

"backward projection" becomes impossible, the end for those cultures is near. For us, who harbor a mystique of constant change, the game is that of making appear novel that which is in truth quite repetitive. For some of our most “mediatic” artists, dealing with creative mimesis in our industrial world has meant adopting repetition as a strategy of both minimal intervention on the material and maximum attunement to the movements (changes) of inner states—and their possible translation. For at least two of these artists—Samuel Beckett and Morton Feldman—translation was the almost mediatonic operation for the expression of these states and the betwixt-and-between place of their notation. In Feldman’s keen description:

... [Beckett] would write something in English, translate it into French and then translate that thought back in the English that conveys that thought. ... He wrote something for me in 1977, and I got it. I am reading it. There is something peculiar. Finally I see that every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening. What you are doing, in an almost Proustian way, is getting deeper and deeper saturated into the thought. ...3

If even the very term for translating cannot be translated without “betrayal,” if übersetzen is not equivalent to “to translate” (see Crapanzano below), and if even traduire and traduzire have different connotations from “to translate,” how can we help assuming that there is something fishy about this whole post-Babelic moving across language! It is Nimrod’s betrayal of God that brings about the confusion of tongues—that is, the condition in which saying and understanding are split, do not coincide. But isn’t this also the condition within all languages? The post-Babelic condition is that in which language (as Benjamin saw: “there is no such thing as a meaning of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity, i.e., something communicable per se” [emphasis in original]) has fallen from its primordial, and divine, roots—those in which the name is still the double of creation—into that of action-intention.4 Babel, that is, represents the fall from symbolic to “conventional” (or Saussurean) language. If


the symbol is not linguistic any more that is because there isn’t one language any more; that language that was the original (and originating) language of things, giving them existence. The breaking up of the unity of that language is not just the effect of the scattering of humanity all over the world, it is the fission of the unity and immediacy of consciousness. How could there not be betrayal at the root of translation when we are bound to question what we mean the very instant we formulate “something” into “words”? There is more to tradutore/traditore than any (untranslatable) Italian play of words. The key root is that of tradere (as Vattimo also notes), or “trading”; there is the sense that any certainty is an illusion, that transmission of any sort, implies a leap, again a break, of something that was whole. That is how tradition is preserved and also constantly betrayed and renewed, that is also how translation—made necessary by the awareness of an “inside” and an “outside,” an interior (in interiore hominis) and an exterior—is bound to operate. And treason itself (tradire), even linguistically, is connected to translation (and tradition) by the well-grounded attraction of opposites: to take something over versus to take oneself over (tradire). There is, in both instances, an obstacle to be surmounted, a gap that has to do with the identity of the object and of the self. As Benjamin saw, once more, the aporia of continuity versus discontinuity in translation is resolved by the notion of “transformation”:

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered as a translation of all the others. . . . Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity.6

But what is all this if not an image of “trade”? Trade is for us the set of actions by which we give something for something. The giving is primary in relation to the receiving; trade relations are those that establish routines (rituals) that guarantee the exchange (return) for the giving. But as Remo Guidieri stresses in the discussion towards the end of this issue (not his original contribution to the symposium), a gift, a true gift, is not something to be returned. Essentially, a true gift would be one of which there was no memory, a forgotten gift. It would be the ideal “Christian gift” (the gift of Life) and, of course, the opposite of a loan, and even more so of any kind of interest charging or usury. No exchange, no trade, except that of the identical, can escape the accusation of not being perfectly symmetrical and allowing for the possibility of gain in the trans-action. Redemption is costly—not just at the pawn shop. In the order of the absolute, treason itself may actually be the “price” of Redemption, if nothing else because it sets the stage for sacrifice. Death shadows the betrayal of the “covenant” by which a new “contract” is established as guarantee of another Life. The asymmetry of exchange (some die sooner than others) leads to the promise of Resurrection. (We all, men and God, die.)

RES deals principally with the translation of objects. Objects, are entities most human—animals by and large don’t have them, nor do they “think” about them, as far as we know—and most inhuman, too, because there is an inevitable deadness in the very idea of “things.” In many, perhaps all, non- and protoliterate cultures of the world, objects are only superficially inanimate; they are so only as long as one does not direct a certain kind of attention towards them and does not “speak” to them (reminiscent of the way we feel, inattentively, about our computers). But outward attention to the object, talking to it, enveloping it in ritual action is also a way of taming its secret inner life, the danger represented by its hidden “intentions.” That is why objects are always double—at once dead and alive—and why, in archaic perception, they display the “behavior” of symbols. Perhaps, the first utensils already had this character, which from them was extended—by analogy—to all things (that is, this is how these actually became “things”). Perhaps again, it is with the mechanical reproduction of tools that things have lost their “souls”—or acquired “demonic” ones. More generally, however, we can see ourselves as characterized, qua humans, by the use of both language and objects, neither seemingly being sufficient without the other. This implies that we constantly translate language into objects and vice versa. Where language is objectified, its “abstract” nature appears to be betrayed, and objects acquire “existence” through language—perhaps also a primordial (and Biblical) form of betrayal is at play. One key and recurrent perspective of our symposium’s discussions of translation—although an elusive one that it was not possible, I am afraid, to adequately represent

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5. Ibid., p. 326.
6. Ibid., p. 325.
in these pages—dealt with the manyfold shifts, reversals, transmissions, and betrayals, between the thing and the word—res and verba. But RES, the journal, was created not so much to study things through language, as to point to what the language of things, in and of itself, may be. This cannot always be said. In front of the object, for an instant, something un-speakable may be revealed; even to us the “inanimate thing,” though it may not be quite dead after all, could still have a life before and after the word.

In the symposium presentations—as again and again in the pages of this journal throughout the last 15 years—oddly varied entities appeared that could remind one of Lewis Carroll’s “cabbages and kings.” In particular, we heard about “black-points of translation” and “metaphorical catastrophes,” of “double agents as embodiments of modern alienation” (but who might even turn out to be “messiahs”), of “hermetic trade” (the secret as merchandising principle), of the “intercessor as transgressor,” and of treason itself as the “driving principle of reason” (what makes it move). But we were also reminded of Dantesque translation as “harmony of the spheres”; we were confronted with puzzles such as translation within the language (the translation of the identical) and Beckettian double identity as nontranslation, the genre of the novel as actually born in translation and the seemingly irreparable shrinking of the public sphere, putatively because of universal translation. We also heard that there is no “perfect translation,” that in certain respects the “worse” translation is the “best” translation, and that translation, like exchange, gift-giving, and trade, is never evenhanded; there are always “winners” and “losers.”

We heard both that the traduttore\ traditore conundrum has become irrelevant, or at least uninteresting as something to think about today, a cliché, and that it may still be at least a valid starting point for reflecting on the very possibility/impossibility of the whole business of translation.

We were told that a text is always already “translated,” ab principio, that it is never an “original.” As if against previous hints at the physicality and “feeling” of translation, it was argued that the text is not an “object” that can be transposed or transferred, despite the growing obsolescence of the “peculiarity of the natural languages.” The tension between “cosmopolitanism” and “vernacularism” that was so central to the modernist age and movement seemed to have lost all urgency in the ever more pervasive “world culture,” if one can call it that, that was set in motion by the “invention” of the figure of the teen-ager. Fleeting years, fleeting products ever to be replaced, compulsive, irrepressible “growth,” and so on. But the frenzy of constant change has already given way to nostalgia, and to the cult of a pop tradition. And the universal language of this “world culture,” at the end of the “American century,” mimics outwardly the hidden one that had perhaps always been responsible for the very possibility of both cultural “memory” and translation. One can detect a thought of this nature in certain posthumously published notes by Fernando Pessoa:

Many of us can fairly well make out the soul and life of works that they have never read thanks to a dim memory of references, of obscure and casual allusions; and the same holds for works, in foreign languages, of which there does not exist, or at least we have not read a translation. Here the invisible translator operates invisibly [emphasis added]. We are not driven by intuition: we guess. It is as if there were in us a superior portion of the soul that naturally knew all languages and had read all works.7

This invisible-translation-operating-invisibly is as good a definition of “culture” (and even of what may make us consider ourselves, or others, “cultivated”) as can be found. Yet Pessoa knew too, as any true poet does, that language is also a sweet trap, a sort of golden prison, from which it is not possible to escape but that must in some way or other be fought against:

... Shakespeare... among poets, [is] the one most faithfully married to the character and resources of the language in which he writes and hence, as any good husband, also to the ways and means of betraying that language.8

Betrayal is not only intrinsic to translation, it is also the necessary ruse by which we free ourselves of received discourse, and of resignation in the face of the Given.

The symposium also dealt more directly with the realm of aesthetics. It is a realm in which we are today so constantly immersed—as Marcel Duchamp was the first to show and as Remo Guidieri and others have stressed in recent years—that we tend to not be even aware of it being actually a critical and most problematic dimension of our postmodernist (not “postmodern”) condition. With that, the symposium also moved into the world of traditional objects, both “alien”

8. Ibid., p. 38.
and domestic, and their fate. The subtitles of the two sessions, *Tradition, Translation, and the Betrayal of Aesthetics* and *Works of Treason: The Object of Tradition and the Translation of Objects*, were purely indicative and obviously interchangeable. Underlying both, is the question of aesthetic treason: on the one hand, aesthetics as the (often creative) betrayer of tradition and, on the other, aesthetics betrayed, as in today's translation, or transference, of the old traditional cults of forms into new and disquietingly heterogeneous molds. In Robert Farris Thompson's extraordinary presentation (and performance!), the "unfolding" of the Afro-Caribbean "geometry of the spirit" leads to the naming and honoring of gods; the abstract image becomes "incarnated," through the institution and practice of possession, so that the protection of the person that the African sign, the inscription, had originally guaranteed, turns into a visitation that extends, communally, to the inclusion (and hence coprotection) of others. In the trade off between abstraction and possession, between the power of inscription and that of in-spiration, the magic of a traditional African religion is transformed, translated, and even "betrayed" into the renewed inclusiveness of a multiethnic American one. The spirit and the sign, traveling sometimes parallel but often independent routes—aboard slave ships and throughout dispersed archipelagos, wildernesses and the slow, short-lived generations of plantation life—are symbolically reunited into a new and lasting *tradition*.

The domain of architecture—the ancient art-of-all-arts, within whose confines, for better or worse, we spend most of our lives—was not ignored. The very nature of its boundaries—between design and construction, between imagination and the thing—was among the questions to be addressed. Transgression, treason, are problematic concepts in architecture, because living is inhabiting, and inhabiting is akin to the construction of an environment, of an inhabited space; can we move at all out of the inhabited place? Can we betray it in any creative way? And what does the mythopoetic essence of any constructed space consist of? John Hejduk addressed this elusive subject at the end of the symposium, by reading a long "litany" of poetic/surreal sentences on the House as a place of Love and Death.⁹ Although describing emotive moments and dimensions, these statements—hundreds of them—were not metaphors (hence not "translations") but precise descriptions of the at once impalpable and essential "things" (read, also "acts") that constitute a building's *magic*—in an analogous way to those space/time and color elements in the music of Morton Feldman (discussed at the end of this issue) that elude notation but are integral to its true *performance*.

It is common to hear John Hejduk spoken of as "the architect who does not build." This is of course not true. In recent years he has done a number of buildings, particularly in Berlin, and many of his most daring designs have been translated into remarkably original (if not readily inhabitable) constructions. But even those well-known objects of his that appear not meant to be lived in, are not just "things," or "environments," or even "sculptures"; they are metaphors for which there is no obvious referent, dwellings for forms of living that may not, yet, exist, but should be found. His is a sort of virtual anthropology of living. Its close connection to the "real thing"—into which it could at any moment be translated—is clear to anybody who has had the privilege, as I have, to study or teach in the old building of the Cooper Union, which Hejduk completely gutted and rebuilt from the inside more than twenty years ago; here one feels, physically, the beneficial, one could even say therapeutic, quality of Hejduk's architecture. And not just of that, but of his person. I think of him, at Cooper, as a benign rhinoceros fiercely inhabiting a double-skin—his own, a sensitive armour, and the building's innards, a rampart—repelling all that is dead and flat. A friend noted how unique it is, perhaps unprecedented, for the dean of an architectural school to teach within a space entirely of his own shaping. It is in part what makes it possible for John Hejduk to transmit to his students what is essential about him; the environmental translation of the fact that he is a poet-architect.

The subtitle of the last of the symposium's three sessions was *The Translation of Identity: Tradition and Betrayal*. One could say of it succinctly that it was a call to explore today's shifting redefinitions of "collectivity" conceived by Hejduk himself, Morton Feldman, and David Shapiro—who were also, from the start, authors and editorial advisors of the journal. In 1984 it became a joint installation at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, called *New England Masque Antimasque* (see John Cage, "On Collaboration in Art: A Conversation with David Shapiro," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 10 [1985]:103-115).
and to describe the ways in which new sorts of "identities" might relate to the old concepts and categories of "tradition," "translation," and "treason." In other words, the subtitle, in its deliberate vagueness, was simply meant as a reminder that "translated identities," in every possible sense of the expression, are a pervasive feature of our dying century. While the previous one had seen the ultimate flowering of relatively rigid "national" identities, our time, though still marked by that heritage, relived that nationalistic ideal in paroxysmic, problematic, and even nihilistic ways within its dominant, industrial, capitalist, and "imperialist" states as well as in their "transitional," colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial spheres of influence. The Romantic myth of a "pure" connection between people, Volk, and their land—the nation-state as Garden of Eden—already called into question by the complex ethnic composition and pioneering ethos of the new transoceanic countries, in striking contradiction to the late colonial enterprises, gave way to less specific and "concrete" post-Romantic ones: first to the practical implementation of transnational manifestos of opposed ideologies that have led tens of millions to slaughter, then, more and more, to the infranational ones of religious and ethnic affiliations that in their archaic and pseudotraditional bloodlines are in fact a betrayal of all that the word "tradition" should stand for.10

William Pietz, in his address to the symposium (only the introductory portion of which is included in these proceedings), provided a sharp analysis—from a Marxian standpoint—of that transvaluation of all borders that belongs to the new international order of infinitely (hence "pointlessly") translatable finance, on the one hand, and global (hence "pointless") information, on the other. An order of the world in which the old fetish of trade that had once given birth, as Pietz so convincingly demonstrated in some of his previous RES essays, to the composite object-magic, the ōtito, has been translated—and betrayed—as, or into, money assuming the status of ultimate, universal and immaterial fetish.

In his concluding remarks at our symposium, Arthur Danto raised the possibility—tantalizing to many of us—that Italians might nurture a cultural and historical, post-Machiavellian fascination with treason, if as we are faced with the weight and redundancy of the Latin word and tradition, embodied, I suppose, in the traditions of the classics and of the Church (I am thinking, for instance, of Paolo Fabbri's evocation, at the meeting, of Theophilo Folengo's perfectly crafted and perfectly empty, that is, deceptive, Renaissance Latin verses). In Italy, according to Danto's view, "Benedict Arnolds" somehow easily become heroes—Italian revolution through treason as opposed to the American treason of revolution. If true, one is tempted to view the tendency as the inevitable precipitate of fifteen centuries of fragmentation and occupation of the land—a condition in which, as so strikingly emerges from Dante's depiction of the struggles of his time, "belonging" could never be more than a temporary and always problematic vocation. If treason, in a way, gradually becomes a "normal" aspect of life then its opposite can end up being viewed as unpardonable rigidity (almost—nothing in Italy is ever unpardonable). It is certain that for all the intrigues and shifting alliances of centuries—among a myriad of states—in Italy far fewer heads rolled off the butcher's block for treason than in Tudor England or Revolutionary France (but as for poisoning, murder, and plain old banditism, that is another matter). All this seems to relate to the question of different societies' varied levels of tolerance for concealment—a topic not thoroughly discussed at our meeting—and to the possibility of secrecy functioning, under certain conditions, as some sort of two-way channel of translation. (Paolo Fabbri actually observed that all "pentiti," the mafia snitches, are by necessity double agents). So, there may be a "tradition of treason" next to the treason of tradition in which identities and even "things," precious forms and contents, are constantly "translated," hence renewed. By such transformations, the eternal recurrence of the same—human to human—can forever be masked and remasked. As Max Scheler wrote in Ressentiment, "beyond all conscious lying and falsifying, there is a deeper 'organic mendacity.'"11

With her witty and thoughtful account of her own staging of Beckett's Waiting for Godot amidst the shelling of Sarajevo, Susan Sontag provided the RES symposium with a haunting image—indeed a deeply

10. The word "tradition," of course, only acquires importance when the sense of tradition is already lost or waning. Some of these issues of ethnic versus national identity were dealt with in a Rothko Chapel (Houston, Texas, 1983) conference published as R. Guidieri, F. Pellizzi, S. J. Tambiah, eds., Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relations in Latin America, South East Asia, and the Pacific (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

anthropological one—of the **epidemiology** of translation—not only the fact that translation, as she reminded us, once denoted the transmission of illnesses, but also the potentially pathogenic—that is, transformative—nature of translation itself. Between the “translated” common history of the region, steeped in many decades of regimented nationalism and the untranslatability-gone-wild of rampant fragmentation, the Bosnian microcosm, desperately stuck in its trash can condition of “waiting for NATO,” became grotesquely and ferociously similar to the paradigmatic Tower of Biblical memory. “Who knows,” as Pessoa noted:

... whether we have not seen it all already, the past and future of this world, *sub specie aeternitatis*; and so... whether we ourselves today might not be invisible translators, unconscious masters of works yet to be born in the future course of the world?\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) Pessoa (see note 7), p. 37.