Introduction

One of the most urgent problems posed by the existence of Europe is that of languages. We may envisage two kinds of solution. We could choose a dominant language in which exchanges will take place from now on, a globalized Anglo-American. Or we could gamble on the retention of many languages, making clear on every occasion the meaning and the interest of the differences—the only way of really facilitating communication between languages and cultures. The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* belongs to this second perspective. But it looks to the future rather than to the past. It is not tied to a retrospective and reified Europe (which Europe would that be, in any case?), defined by an accumulation and juxtaposition of legacies that would only reinforce particularities, but to a Europe in progress, fully active, *energeia* rather than *ergon*, which explores divisions, tensions, transfers, appropriations, contradictions, in order to construct better versions of itself.

Our point of departure is a reflection on the difficulty of translating in philosophy. We have tried to think of philosophy within languages, to treat philosophies as they are spoken, and to see what then changes in our ways of philosophizing. This is why we have not created yet another encyclopedia of philosophy, treating concepts, authors, currents, and systems for their own sakes, but a *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, which starts from words situated within the measurable differences among languages, or at least among the principal languages in which philosophy has been written in Europe—since Babel. From this point of view, Émile Benveniste's pluralist and comparatist *Vocabulary of Indo-European Institutions* has been our model. In order to find the meaning of a word in one language, this book explores the networks to which the word belongs and seeks to understand how a network functions in one language by relating it to the networks of other languages.

We have not explored all the words there are, or all languages with regard to a particular word, and still less all the philosophies there are. We have taken as our object *symptoms* of difference, the "untranslatables," among a certain number of contemporary European languages, returning to ancient languages (Greek, Latin) and referring to Hebrew and Arabic whenever it was necessary in order to understand these differences. To speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating. But this indicates that their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem, to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or imposing a new meaning on an old word. It is a sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed. Does one understand the same thing by "mind" as by *Geist* or *esprit*, is *pravda* "justice" or "truth," and what happens when we render *mimesis* as "representation" rather than "imitation"? Each entry thus starts from a nexus of untranslatability and proceeds to a comparison of terminological networks, whose distortion creates the history and geography of languages and cultures. The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* makes explicit in its own domain the principal symptoms of difference in languages.

The selection of entries arises from a double labor of exploration, both diachronic and synchronic. Diachrony allows us to reflect on crossings, transfers, and forks in the road: from Greek to Latin, from ancient Latin to scholastic then humanist Latin, with moments of interaction with a Jewish and an Arab tradition; from an ancient language to a vernacular; from one vernacular to another; from one tradition, system, or philosophical idiom to others; from one field of knowledge and disciplinary logic to others. In this way we reencounter the history of concepts, while marking out the turnings, fractures, and carriers that determine a "period." Synchrony permits us to establish a state of play by surveying the present condition of national philosophical landscapes. We are confronted with the irreducibility of certain inventions and acts of forgetting: appearances without any equivalent, intruders, doublings, empty categories, false friends, contradictions, which register within a language the crystallization of themes and the specificity of an operation. We then wonder, on the

basis of the modern works that are both the cause and the effect of the philosophical condition of a given language, why the terms we ordinarily consider as immediate equivalents have neither the same meaning nor the same field of application—what a thought can do in what a language can do.

The space of Europe was our framework from the beginning. The *Dictionary* has, in fact, a political ambition: to ensure that the languages of Europe are taken into account, and not only from a preservationist point of view, as one seeks to save threatened species. In this respect, there are two positions from which we clearly distinguish our own. The first is the all-English one, or rather the all-into-English one—that official English of the European Community and of scientific conferences, which certainly has a practical use but is scarcely a language ("real" English speakers are those that one has the most difficulty in understanding). English has imposed itself today as an "auxiliary international language," as Umberto Eco puts it. It has assumed its place in the chronological sequence of instrumental languages (Greek, Latin, French): it is at once the universal language of the cultured technocracy and the language of the market; we need it, for better or for worse. But the philosophical situation of English as a language deserves a slightly different examination. In this case, English is rather in the line of the *characteristica universalis* that Leibniz dreamed of. Not that English can ever be reduced to a conceptual calculus on the model of mathematics: it is, like any other, a natural language, that is to say the language of a culture, magnificent in the strength of its idiosyncrasies. However, for a certain tendency in "analytic philosophy" (it is true that no terminological precaution will ever suffice here, because the label applies, via the "linguistic turn," even to those who teach us again to question the language, from Wittgenstein to Austin, Quine, or Cavell), philosophy relates only to a universal logic, identical in all times and all places—for Aristotle, for my colleague at Oxford. Consequently, the language in which the concept finds its expression, in this case English, matters little. This first universalist assumption meets up with another. The whole Anglo-Saxon tradition has devoted itself to the exclusion of jargon, of esoteric language, to the puncturing of the windbags of metaphysics. English presents itself, this time in its particularity as a language, as that of common sense and shared experience, including the shared experience of language. The presumption of a rationality that belongs to angels rather than humans and a militant insistence on ordinary language combine to support a prevalence of English that becomes, in the worst of cases, a refusal of the status of philosophy to Continental philosophy, which is mired in the contingencies of history and individual languages.

Neither . . . nor. The other position from which we wish to distinguish our own is the one that has led philosophy from the idea of the spirit of language, with all its clichés, to an "ontological nationalism" (the expression is that of Jean-Pierre Lefebvre). The position finds its image in Herder, at the moment when he determines that translation, as imitation and transplantation, is the true vocation of the German language: "If in Italy the muse converses in song, if in France she narrates and reasons politely, if in Spain she imagines chivalrously, in England thinks sharply and deeply, what does she do in Germany? She *imitates.* To *imitate* would thus be her character. . . . To this end we have in our power an admirable means, *our language*; it can be for us what the *hand* is for the person who imitates art" (Herder, *Briefe*). The position is also represented by a certain Heideggerian tradition of "philosophical language," that is to say, the language best suited to speak faithfully for being, which occupies a predominant place in the history of this so Continental Western philosophy. Martin Heidegger thinks that Western thought is born less in Greece than in Greek and that only the German language rises to the level of Greek in the hierarchy of philosophical languages, so that "untranslatability finally becomes the criterion of truth" (Lefebvre, "Philosophie et philologie"). "The Greek language is philosophical, i.e., . . . it philosophizes in its basic structure and formation. The same applies to every genuine language, in a different degree, to be sure. The extent to which this is so depends on the depth and power of the existence of the people and race who speak the language and exist within it. Only our German language has a deep and creative philosophical character to compare with the Greek" (Heidegger, *Essence of Human Freedom*). Even if it is "true" in one sense (Greek and German words and forms are obligatory places of passage for many articles in the *Dictionary*), this is not the truth we need. Our work is as far as could be from such a sacralization of the untranslatable, based on the idea of an absolute incommensurability of languages and linked to the near-sanctity of certain languages. This is why, marking our distance from a teleological history organized according to a register of gain and loss, we have not conferred a special status on any language, dead or alive.

Neither a logical universalism indifferent to languages nor an ontological nationalism essentializing the spirit of languages: what is our position in relation to these alternatives? If I had to characterize it, I would speak Deleuzian and use the word "deterritorialization." This term plays off geography against history, the semantic network against the isolated concept. We began with the many (our plural form indicates this: "dictionary of untranslatables"), and we remain with the many: we have addressed the question of the untranslatable without aiming at unity, whether it is placed at the origin (source language, tributary words, fidelity to what is ontologically given) or at the end (Messianic language, rational community).

Many languages first of all. As Wilhelm von Humboldt stresses, "language appears in reality solely as multiplicity" (*Uber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues*). Babel is an opportunity, as long as we understand that "different languages are not so many designations of a thing: they are different perspectives on that same thing, and when the thing is not an object for the external senses, those perspectives become so many things themselves, differently formed by each person" (*Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken*).

The perspectives constitute the thing; each language is a vision of the world that catches another world in its net, that performs a world; and the shared world is less a point of departure than a regulatory principle. Schleiermacher throws an exemplary light on the tension that exists between a concept, with its claim to universality, and its linguistic expression, when he asserts that in philosophy, more than in any other domain, "any language . . . encompasses within itself a single system of concepts which, precisely because they are contiguous, linking and complementing one another within this language, form a single whole—whose several parts, however, do not correspond to those to be found in comparable systems in other languages, and this is scarcely excluding 'God' and 'to be,' the noun of nouns and the verb of verbs. For even universals, which lie outside the realm of particularity, are illumined and colored by the particular" ("On Different Methods of Translating"). It is that "scarcely excluding" we must underline: even God and Being are illumined and colored by language; the universality of concepts is absorbed by the singularity of languages.

Multiplicity is to be found not only among languages but within each language. A language, as we have considered it, is not a fact of nature, an object, but an effect caught up in history and culture, and that ceaselessly invents itself—again, *energeia* rather than *ergon*. So the *Dictionary*'s concern is constituted by languages in their works, and by the translations of these works into different languages, at different times. The networks of words and senses that we have sought to think through are networks of datable philosophical idioms, placed by specific authors in particular writings; they are unique, time-bound networks, linked to their address (exoteric or esoteric), to their level of language, to their style, to their relation to tradition (models, references, palimpsests, breaks, innovations). Every author, and the philosopher is an author, simultaneously writes in a language and creates his or her language—as Schleiermacher says of the relation between author and language: "He is its organ and it is his" ("General Hermeneutics"). The untranslatable therefore is also a question of case by case.

Finally, there is multiplicity in the meanings of a word in a given language. As Jacques Lacan says in *L'étourdit*, "A language is, among other possibilities, nothing but the sum of the ambiguities that its history has allowed to persist." The *Dictionary* has led us to question the phenomenon of the homonym (same word, several definitions: the dog, celestial constellation and barking animal) in which homophony (bread, bred) is only an extreme case and a modern caricature. We know that since Aristotle and his analysis of the verb "to be" that it is not so easy to distinguish between homonymy and polysemy: the sense of a word, also called "meaning" in English, the sense of touch, *sens* in French meaning "direction"—these represent traces of the polysemy of the Latin *sensus*, itself a translation from the Greek *nous* (flair, wit, intelligence, intention, intuition, etc.), which from our point of view is polysemic in a very different way. Variation from one language to another allows us to perceive these distortions and semantic fluxes; it permits us to register the ambiguities each language carries, their meaning, their history, their intersection with those of other languages.

In his introduction to Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, which he considers to be "untranslatable," Humboldt suggests that one should create a work that studies the "synonymy of languages," and records the fact that every language expresses a concept with a difference: "A word is so little the sign of a concept that without it the concept cannot even be born, still less be stabilized; the indeterminate action of the power of thought comes together in a word as a faint cluster of clouds gathers in a clear sky." "Such a synonymy of the

principal languages . . . has never been attempted," he adds, "although one finds fragments of it in many writers, but it would become, if it was treated with intelligence, one of the most seductive of works" (*Aeschylos Agamemnon*). This work that is among "the most seductive" is perhaps our *Dictionary*. I hope it will make perceptible another way of doing philosophy, which does not think of the concept without thinking of the word, for there is no concept without a word.

The *Dictionary* aims to constitute a cartography of European and some other philosophical differences by capitalizing on the knowledge and experience of translators, and of those translators (historians, exegetes, critics, interpreters) that we are as philosophers. It is a working implement of a new kind, indispensable to the larger scientific community in the process of constituting itself and also a guide to philosophy for students, teachers, researchers, those who are curious about their language and that of others. It is also the collective work of ten or more years. Around a supervisory team of scholars—Charles Baladier, Étienne Balibar, Marc Buhot de Launay, Jean-François Courtine, Marc Crépon, Sandra Laugier, Alain de Libera, Jacqueline Lichtenstein, Philippe Raynaud, Irène Rosier-Catach—it assembled more than 150 contributors, with the most varied linguistic and philosophical domains of competence. The truly collective work (long, difficult, frustrating, to be redone, to be continued) did in any case seduce each of us, drove us back to the drawing board and to consider from other perspectives what we thought we knew in philosophy, of philosophy. Everyone gave more than his or her share of time, energy, knowledge, inventiveness, for something that expresses both our friendship and our sense of adventure, and that is beyond all possible expression of gratitude.

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