



Universalism and the (un)translatable

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Open Access

Mckeane, J. (2019) Universalism and the (un)translatable. *Translation Studies*, 12 (1). pp. 64-77. ISSN 1751-2921 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2018.1459309> Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/77544/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2018.1459309>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Universalism and the (un)translatable

John McKeane

To cite this article: John McKeane (2019) Universalism and the (un)translatable, Translation Studies, 12:1, 64-77, DOI: [10.1080/14781700.2018.1459309](https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2018.1459309)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2018.1459309>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 21 May 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 758



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Universalism and the (un)translatable

John McKeane

Department of Modern Languages, University of Reading, Reading, UK

ABSTRACT

A unified set of questions arises in translation theory as it does in philosophy: how can one particularity be related to another? Can any general truth emerge from this relationship? And if so, in what particular language might this general truth be thought about and discussed? This article explores how various French thinkers have addressed these questions, from Alain Badiou's recent account of philosophical French in terms of universalism, to Antoine Berman's and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's readings of an alternative approach to universalism provided by German thought. Where a key passage in Badiou's text suggests that he has Friedrich Hölderlin in mind, this poet-translator provides an explicit model for the other two thinkers.

KEYWORDS

Universalism; translatable; untranslatable; Badiou; Berman; Lacoue-Labarthe

Something must be happening or must have happened to the diaphanous purity of [philosophical discourse's universality] (Derrida 1982, 112; trans. mod.).

A unified set of questions arises in translation theory as it does in philosophy: how can one particularity be related to another? Can any general truth emerge from this relationship? And if so, in what particular language might this general truth be thought about and discussed?

The *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Cassin 2004) is animated by such questions. On the one hand, it counters the market-driven dominance of “globish” by insisting on linguistic singularity or difference, and by foregrounding particular terms as “untranslatables” (something amplified by the title of the American version, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* [Apter et al. 2014]). On the other hand, it presents itself both as a European project and a philosophical one – two paradigms that rely on transfer, exchange, a move beyond particularity; in short, on translation. From the perspective of this European, philosophical side of the project there would be a danger in opposing globish by vacating the ground of generality and retreating onto that of fragmented particularism and untranslatability. Indeed, the *Vocabulaire's* editor Barbara Cassin has more recently written that “[t]he entire undertaking of the *Dictionary* goes against this tendency to make the ‘Untranslatable’ sacred [...], a fault reflecting that of universalist disdain” (Cassin 2016).¹ This is to say that while we must remember that

CONTACT John McKeane  j.mckeane@reading.ac.uk

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

untranslatables exist, we must also keep them as a pluralized gathering of untranslatables rather than a disempowering category of the Untranslatable. We must keep on translating, even as we accept that translation is necessarily imperfect, that it is an art of compromise and betweenness, an activity coloured in shades of grey.

In what follows we shall explore the reception of the translations of Greek tragedy produced by Friedrich Hölderlin, which are often cited as major examples of the limitations of translation, which is to say as examples of untranslatability or even of *untranslation*.² Our particular focus will be on French thought, particularly Antoine Berman's and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's reception of Hölderlin, and the nuanced accounts of the relation between universalism and the (un)translatable that emerge from this reception. But in order to set Berman's and Lacoue-Labarthe's accounts in context, we will begin by looking at an Alain Badiou text on the French language and its association with philosophy. This text puts forward a very different view of universalism to that of Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe, but – I shall argue – also relies on a reading of Hölderlin's (in)famous translations.

Universalist particularism: Alain Badiou

French thought is at issue in discussions of universalism and the (un)translatable due to France's own universalist heritage, on the one hand, and, on the other, the new universalism of globish and the marketization of the global and European economy. But it is also at issue because since the Enlightenment many prominent strands within this intellectual tradition have laid claim to a different universalism, not one based on marketization and general equivalence, but on a language of clarity allowing for the affirmation of philosophical truths and the defence of human rights. Antoine de Rivarol's work *On the Universality of the French Language* (1784) made this argument, which it expressed in simple fashion: "what is not clear is not French" (cited in Hazareesingh 2016, 7).³ It could be seen to proceed from here that the influence of French around the world was less due to economic, military or colonial power than to the inherent nature of the language itself. Its drive to clarity broke down obscurantism, placed fewer barriers in the way of understanding than other languages, and thus allowed for the expression of the most general or universal truths (for instance, concerning human rights).⁴

Whether such claims appear to us as quaint or alarming, or both, they cast a striking light on Alain Badiou's (2014) article on French in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. In this entry, Badiou presents French as being particularly suited to the aspirations of philosophy, namely the aspirations to establish general or universal truths. It seems fair to characterize this paradoxical position as that of a universalist particularism and therefore as one that risks failing to convince with its claims to universality, instead being explainable within a theory of untranslatables: the particularity of French would make it just one more untranslatable, its global reach notwithstanding. Let us look at Badiou's text in order to support this characterization of his thinking in it.

The dictionary entry begins by stating, implicitly contra Rivarol, that the characteristics of French under discussion are not due to any inherent linguistic quality, but instead due to the political and philosophical heritage carried by the French language:

the privilege given to French does not derive from any intrinsic character of the language, but instead from the possibility of a universal and democratic philosophical communication. A

language of women and the working class rather than of scientists, philosophical French relies on the belief that the act of thinking is open to everyone. (Badiou 2014, 349)

French is said to allow for modes of communication that are anti-elitist, transparent and open to all. There is an admirable desire here to steer clear of attributing these positive universal, democratic characteristics to any essence, nature or genius of the language: these benefits were not caused by linguistic determinism, but rather by real struggles in the contingent world. The French language seems to act as something akin to a cultural memory, a repository unable to positively create characteristics, but instead serving to retain them passively, to reflect the political and philosophical discourse of the past, and act as a brake on any radical alterations of that discourse made by the present.⁵ Thus it is hard to free ourselves of the suspicion that in this instance Badiou's argument is a culturally conservative one, even if it is based on liberal values agreeable to many. His argument seems to be that French acts as a cultural repository, storing up legitimacy over time; such conservatism is hard to reconcile with views of liberal values as those which disrupt orthodoxy and its established mantras.⁶

If French thus appears to feature as part of an argument for the continued relevance of enlightened, democratic values, we might imagine that the implied countervailing force is that of globish and the destabilizing forces of the market economy. But in truth, when Badiou's text addresses English, the language most associated with Anglo-Saxon marketization, it is not in terms of its simplified offspring, globish. Instead, Badiou's interest in English concerns its rich lexis – we might imagine that he has in mind the shared Latin and Germanic sources of much English vocabulary, not to mention the variety of expression seen in Shakespeare. Thus, writing comparatively about French, he downplays the importance of breadth, vivacity or colour:

Unlike English, [French] is not a language of the phenomenon, of nuance, of descriptive subtlety. Its semantic field is narrow; abstraction is natural to it. Accordingly, neither empiricism nor even phenomenology suit it. It is a language of decision, of principle and consequence. (Badiou 2014, 351)

Where English is presented as allowing for nuance and subtlety, breadth and variation, French is said to concentrate on a narrower range. It applies a series of formal rules – decision, principle, consequence – rather than allowing space for uncertainty or multifariousness.⁷ One might have thought that the more broadly based one's vocabulary, the higher (as it were) the abstractions that one would have been able to build upon it. For Badiou, however, such variety in English provides too distracting, it scrambles and overwhelms the formal philosophical principles that French is better able to hold on to. On this view, the local colour allowed by English inhibits the functioning of the wider rational system.

As French thus begins to be painted as the philosophical language, Badiou turns to deal with German thought, especially in its relation to language. This comparison will allow French to be depicted as always already sympathetic to political philosophy, and as privileging clarity over ambiguity, freedom over determinism. Badiou writes that

[a]gainst a fascination with words and etymology, that is, with origin and substance, French sets the primacy of syntax, that is, of relation and assertion. This is why, once again, philosophy in French is political: between axioms and sentences, against consensus and ambiguity, French plants its certainty and its authority, which are also the source of its persuasive beauty. (Badiou 2014, 349)

Here the implied contrast seems to be with German and more specifically with philosophical German which, under the influence of Martin Heidegger's concern for etymology, provides many of the terms forming the currency of continental philosophy (to take a small sample from the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*: Dasein, Ereignis, Sorge). As he goes on to say, "nothing managed to impel philosophy in France toward the hard German labor of opening words up, deriving their Indo-European roots, entreating them to mean 'being' or 'community'" (Badiou 2014, 351). If German is the primary philosophical other in Badiou's mind (and German thought's huge influence on post-World War II French philosophy would suggest as much), this implied other to French as a philosophical language is painted as being unreactive, as rooted to its origin, as formed of a heavy, immobile substance. It could be argued that these are so many ways of describing a language rooted to singularities and particularisms, one ill-suited to the movement and exchange of philosophical generalization. French by contrast is said to privilege syntax, which is to say that it sets particular words in a general structure; it relates these particularities to one another, in a way recalling the way that philosophy provides a general framework weighing and assessing the individual truth-claims. What Badiou depicts as French's leaning towards political philosophy situates it clearly in the debate over translatables and untranslatables: the model of generalized, rational, free exchange places the French tradition firmly on the side of translatability. While Badiou's generalizations are problematic when assessed as truth-claims, there is also a sense in which the less convincing they are in such terms, the more interesting they become. These generalizations about generalization stand in for French philosophy's tendency to synthesize, and inscribe Badiou in a broader tradition of Republicanism that a major and politically radical figure such as he might instead have been expected to critique.⁸

In contrast to both English and German, two languages that strongly influence and compete with French in differing domains (commerce and philosophy), Badiou therefore presents and valorizes certain capacities of the French language. Over and against broad lexis and strong etymology, this language is said to prefer abstraction, syntax, and to allow for so many movements towards the general or the universal. As the dictionary entry moves towards its end, Badiou comes to concentrate on the importance of maxims, aphorisms or *pensées*.⁹ He writes that

[w]hat French offers philosophy that is universal in character is always in the form of somewhat stiff maxims or badly nuanced derivations. Again, the latent style is that of a speech that aims to make an assembly, seduced, vote for someone without examining the details too much. One must accept this strength, or weakness. It enters into the composition of eternal philosophy, like that which, from the Greek source, retains mathematics rather than mythology, litigation rather than elegy, sophistical argumentation rather than prophetic utterance, democratic politics rather than tragic caesura. (Badiou 2014, 354)

Here Badiou is pursuing the line that we saw above, namely that French philosophy, due to the particular history of that philosophy and its important role in society, retains a political function. If French philosophy produces maxims – Badiou quotes amongst others Sartre's "man is a useless passion" (354) – it is because they are an effective way of communicating a philosophical position in a non-specialist discourse, to wider society. The contingent, particular history of French is presented as having given it this universalizing function or aspiration. It acts not as a specific set of values, but rather as a kind of accelerant,

capable of more effectively communicating whatever one might be arguing for. Or rather than an accelerant, we can take Badiou's description of "French as a thin language" (351). The thinness or non-viscosity of this language means that it can be used to bring views into a philosophical arena that is shared, public, as well as unable or unwilling to deal with tough singularities resisting this fluid process of communication. In order to do so, philosophical French – as it were – thins or dilutes the ideas in question; this is a mechanism of compromise allowing for naturalization within a particular, accepted discourse. We can surely better understand the process being described by thinking of translation theory, with its sensitivity to naturalization and foreignization – and the comparison with Berman's and Lacoue-Labarthe's thinking, below, will enable us to do this. We can also note that something specific is at work in Badiou: he finishes the passage quoted by excluding a series of others – "mythology", "elegy", "prophetic utterance", "tragic caesura". These exclusions seem to have had in mind a particular model of translation, a particular relationship to universalism, and a particular philosophical and literary figure: Friedrich Hölderlin.

Universalism and translatability: Antoine Berman

Before we come to look at the particular, Hölderlinian context of the way Badiou characterizes philosophical French, let us consider that Hölderlin plays an important role in the debate around universalism and (un)translatability in other areas of late-twentieth-century French thought. A key intervention here is that of Antoine Berman's *Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, which bears as its second subtitle the names of the major figures it explores: Herder, Goethe, Schlegel, Novalis, Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Hölderlin.¹⁰ On one level, this work gives an account of a model of universalism rivalling the French one.¹¹ But beyond this, it has been highly influential because it has provided a major argument against the naturalizing school of translation. Its sheer ambition helps it to do so: it argues that foreignizing, altering, stretching language is not the task of translation alone, but that of literature in general. We read as follows:

[T]hat a translation that "smacks" of translation should be considered bad is a contradiction which overlooks that the writing of a translation is an irreducible mode of writing: a writing that welcomes the writing of another language in its own writing, and that cannot, lest it be an imposture, suppress the fact that it is this operation. We should even go further, and say that in all literary writing there is always a trace of such a relation. Just like in our speech, as Bakhtin says, there is always the speech of the other, and just like this interlacing of two speeches constitutes the horizon of translation (and this, in a profound way, is the meaning of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*), it is absurd to demand that a translation appear as a "pure" writing – which is itself a myth. (Berman 225)

In other words, there can be no division between translated or impure language on the one hand, and untranslated or pure language on the other, because no such pure language exists. There is always heterogeneity, multiplicity, difference, even within what were more traditionally considered single traditions (and all the more so in the case of major, mature literary traditions). "Pure" writing or language, the direct, formless, language also claimed to exist by universalist philosophy, is presented here as being a myth. Already we are at a great distance from Badiou's sharp and clear distinctions between French, English and German as languages and traditions of thought.

It is nonetheless striking that Berman arrives at this conclusion in a work based on a period in German writing and thought that placed great importance on the universal. Rather than a universalism that values clarity and therefore tends towards naturalization (as in the account of French given by Badiou), this universalism would be one based in cultural receptivity, and more particularly translation. In other words, the argument is that the absence of any great past or tradition is what forced German writers to undertake translations, and is what made German the ideal vehicle for the literature and philosophy of the modern age. Berman quotes Goethe's statement:

Soon other nations will learn German, because they will realize that in this way they can to a large extent save themselves the apprenticeship of almost all other languages. Indeed, from what languages do we not possess the best works in the most eminent translations? (11–12)

In other words, translation into German, when coupled with the learning of German by other nations, serves relatively straightforwardly as a way of accessing the breadth of cultural productions from across the world (in short, would German be simply a technology setting information free – the internet of its day?). The objection can of course be made: why should one particular language, rather than any other, be the voice of universalism? To this it might be responded first that the concern for the universal here is more receptive than the French one as outlined by Badiou, not requiring the same naturalization. And secondly, there is the broader argument that the most obvious alternative to universalism – a fragmented world lacking in communication – is not attractive.

Berman continues to unpack such arguments by turning to the notions of translatability and untranslatability.¹² Taking one of the most famous examples of the translation practice broached by the Goethe statement above, he discusses the versions of Shakespeare produced by A.W. Schlegel, and quotes the letter to the translator by fellow Romantic Novalis in which the latter declares that “I am convinced that the German Shakespeare today is better than the English” (105). Berman addresses the argument that this is simply a nationalist game of one-upmanship, the victory of German being all the sweeter because it concerns the most canonical of English authors. “Is it a judgment of the ‘nationalist’ type. Certainly not, since the Germanness mentioned in the letter, as for Herder, Goethe, and Schleiermacher, is above all conceived by the capacity of translating” (106). In other words, the success or superiority of these translated plays is not down to the fact that they are *German* translations, but rather because they are German *translations*. The German tradition does not seek to stand out from those of other nations, but rather takes on the higher or universal task of bringing something extra to the work in question.

This something extra is defined through Berman's reading of the notion of *Bildung*. He writes:

Through *Bildung* an individual, a people, a nation, but also a language, a literature, a work of art in general are formed and thus acquire a form, a *Bild*. *Bildung* is always a movement toward a form, *one's own form* – which is to say that, in the beginning, every being is deprived of *its* form. (43–44; emphases original)

This is a notion applicable at once to individuals, nations and works of art (and the thinking in question sees the three as developing in mutually reliant ways). Self-identity is not a given at the outset, but something that is arrived at through a process involving

– in the case of the individual – experiences of otherness (romantic love, travel, or the two combined), or – in the case of the work of art – modes of reception such as criticism and translation. These various processes lead to dynamic self-fulfilment (rather than inert self-identity), they lead one to *become what one is*. We might name these aspects, albeit awkwardly, as receivability, criticizability and translatability; let us look further at the latter, in line with our current investigation. Berman writes that for German Romanticism, “[t]he work is that linguistic production which *calls for* translation as a destiny of its own. Let us provisionally name this call *translatability*” (126; emphasis original). The possibility of openness and exchange is painted as having been crucial for these early generations of Romantics, before the debate switched round, and the ineffability of personal experience became dominant for later Romantics. This shift in the debate is addressed as follows:

[T]his strange destiny by which those who affirmed the *a priori* translatability of literature gave birth to a *poetics of untranslatability*, a far less innocent poetics than it appears to be at first sight, since in the final analysis it can only be a *regressive poetics of the incommunicable*. (120; emphases original)

It is notable that Berman does more than describe the shift in the debate, he labels it as regressive. It is as if the incommunicable and the untranslatable are not only the opposite of the communicable and the translatable, not simply categories reserved for empirically recalcitrant material, but instead ones that reveal an ideological resistance to exchange and openness. By describing the poetics of the incommunicable and the untranslatable as regressive, Berman suggests that such notions inherently belong to an earlier stage of the debate, that their fate is always to be overcome by the implicitly progressive forces of communication and translation. Here there is some proximity to the arguments of Badiou explored above; to state that the untranslatable and the incommunicable are regressive imply that a model of generalization, universality and therefore translatability would be preferable. However, Badiou and Berman differ insofar as the former explicitly excludes Hölderlin from his account of French philosophical discourse, whereas the latter, although the aim of his book is not to characterize this discourse, relies on Hölderlin as he argues that all writing is impure and polyphonic.

The second generation of Romantics mentioned by Berman clearly interests him less than the first. But even amongst the seven authors cited in his subtitle, there are clear divergences – whether of generation (Herder and Goethe being 20–25 years older than the others), or of community (the central group of Jena Romantics does not include their contemporary Hölderlin). But whilst Hölderlin is somewhat marginal in terms of the groupings, he is central to Berman’s work. Indeed, its title is taken from one part of Heidegger’s two-part reading of Hölderlin’s poem “Remembrance”: for the philosopher, the experience of the foreign contributed, alongside the learning of what is one’s own (or proper), to the process of *Bildung* (Berman 160). There are obvious political reasons why the notions of own-most-ness or proper-ness raised by Heidegger are unpalatable, and Berman’s intervention transposes these questions into the realm of translation: naturalizing translation thus easily becomes an expression of linguistic nationalism. In the case of the process of *Bildung* carried out by experiencing the foreign, Berman argues that Hölderlin in fact interrupts a model applicable in the case of the other writers with whom he is grouped in *The Experience of the Foreign* (Herder, Goethe, Schlegel, Novalis, Humboldt,

Schleiermacher). Although the work culminates in a chapter on Hölderlin, he – paradoxically – displaces what has been a dominant schema throughout it. In Berman’s words,

the movement of leaving and returning to itself of Spirit, as it is defined by Schelling and Hegel, but also by F. Schlegel, as we have seen, is also the *speculative reformulation* of the law of classical *Bildung*: what is one’s own gains access to itself only through *experience*, namely the experience of the foreign. This experience may be the *Reise*, the romantic journey of Henrich von Ofterdingen, at the end of which what is one’s own and what is foreign discover their poetic identity, or the *Apprenticeship Years* of Wilhelm Meister, during which Wilhelm slowly discovers the virtues of self-limitation, far from the attacks of the “demonic”.

Hölderlin’s thinking does not depend on either of these two laws; its complexity bursts the simplicity of the schema of *Bildung*: It is neither the apprenticeship of the infinite, nor of the finite. (162; emphases original)

There is no doubt that Hölderlin does experience the foreign: in travelling to Bordeaux in 1801–02, in undergoing the power of elemental sunlight, in communing with Greek culture through his readings and translations of Sophoclean tragedy. However, he is said to be radically different from the other figures discussed insofar as he does not make anything of this experience, does not put it to use by means of any greater knowledge of himself.¹³ His experience of the foreign is indeed as an untranslatable, as something not translated back into comprehensible terms, not explained away. This way of relating to otherness has been influential and represents a distinct move away from the universalism seen in Badiou’s argument (there remain problems with this apparently more ethical approach, nonetheless).¹⁴ Let us now turn to our third and final section, in which a subtly different account of Hölderlin, universalism and (un)translatability is given by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.

Mimetic universalism: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

We have already seen that Badiou in his account of French philosophical language describes it as “that which, from the Greek source, retains mathematics rather than mythology, litigation rather than elegy, sophisticated argumentation rather than prophetic utterance, democratic politics rather than tragic caesura” (354). The reference to “elegy” can be seen as reacting to German thinkers’ (not least Heidegger) narratives of *Dichten und Denken*, and perhaps to the poet featuring most prominently in these narratives, Hölderlin.¹⁵ “Mythology”, for its part, may well be a reference to the rehabilitation of ancient mythologies (Greek, but also Hindu and Germanic) by the early German Romantics; and an important text in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s critical anthology of Romanticism calls for a new mythology of reason.¹⁶ But beyond this, as we shall now see, the mention of “prophetic utterance” and “tragic caesura” can be tied to the account of Hölderlin given by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and specifically that of his translations of and writing on the tragedies of Sophocles.

The German poet’s translations of the *Cædipus* and the *Antigone* played a major role in Lacoue-Labarthe’s career. He took the two texts, themselves translated by Hölderlin from Greek into German, and translated them into French (Hölderlin 1998a, 1998b), before producing stage productions of each drama. These activities were accompanied and extended by a significant number of critical essays on various aspects of

Hölderlin's translations including their implications for philosophy and (a)theology, the light they throw on other thinkers including Hegel and the Jena Romantics, Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as the accounts of Hölderlin's so-called madness.¹⁷ In this final section, I aim to draw out the references made by Badiou and to show how Lacoue-Labarthe's thinking on Hölderlin's translations opposes what I have named the particularist universalism of Badiou's account of philosophical French. This opposition is more closely related to the translatable universalism that Berman depicts emerging from German Romanticism (of which Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy [1988] edited a critical anthology, *The Literary Absolute*). Lacoue-Labarthe avoids the naivety of believing that universalism could ever be expressed purely or directly without establishing a new version of particularism. Therefore over and against this direct or diegetic universalism, it is possible to see Lacoue-Labarthe's position as one of mimetic universalism: one that speaks not directly, but in and through a series of adopted languages, discourses or masks.

Badiou's references to "prophetic utterance" and "tragic caesura" adopt terms from Hölderlin's elliptical discussions of the two dramas he translated, the "Notes on the *Cedipus*" and "Notes on the *Antigone*" (Hölderlin 2009). Hölderlin discusses each play as if it were a poetic verse, with the *Antigone* being stressed in its earlier part, and the *Cedipus* in its latter part. Although bearing different stresses, each drama therefore is divided into earlier and latter parts, and in each case the division is provided by a caesura (literally, a cutting). Lacoue-Labarthe's work places great importance on this figure of the caesura, seeing it as a transformative interruption, and indeed using it to describe Hölderlin's broader significance in relation to the philosophy of Hegel in the essay "The Caesura of the Speculative" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998a). It seems that Badiou's exclusion of "tragic caesura" is a direct reference to Hölderlin's usage (which he could have found in the texts included in Lacoue-Labarthe's published translations of the two dramas). We know that in 2007, at least, he was aware of the caesura text: he refers to it as "one of the most astonishing texts of these past decades" (Badiou 2007, 18). It thus seems likely that in the 2004 text Badiou's reference to "tragic caesura" is strongly determined by Lacoue-Labarthe's reception of Hölderlin's reception of the tragedies. And the same can be said for the reference to "prophetic utterance". For, returning to Hölderlin's Notes on the tragic plays, the caesura in each drama is said to be represented by the intervention of the prophet Tiresias. As a prophet he is able to recognize and speak truths that normal humans cannot – an inability that brings about tragic *dénouements*, punishing these humans for their hubris. The divine or quasi-divine nature of these truths as they play these determining roles in the dramas shows why these Sophoclean tragedies, translated and discussed by Hölderlin, are particularly important in understanding the Romantic project of a fusion of mythology and reason.

This thinking of caesura and its various consequences is found refracted across Lacoue-Labarthe's oeuvre – in his critical essays, translations and theatre productions. For instance, when discussing Hölderlin's translations, Lacoue-Labarthe uses the Hellenistic term *metaphrasis*, which is presented as follows in an eponymous essay:

Metaphrasis, in ancient Greek [...], means: translation. [...] But other meanings are associated with the word, thanks to the polysemy of the preposition *meta*: for example what we, for our part, refer to with another term borrowed from Greek, "paraphrase";

or, on the basis of Latin, with “explication”. *Metaphrazein* means “to express in new terms” or, generally, “to speak afterwards, following”. And the same verb [...] means “to reflect afterwards, to deliberate, to examine after mature reflection”. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998b, 7–8)

For Hölderlin to produce a metaphrasis of Sophocles therefore means most straightforwardly a translation, but also a restatement, an explanation, a paraphrase, and even – as the final example from the passage suggests – a mature reflection based on the material in question. This convergence of meanings in a single term allows Lacoue-Labarthe to suggest that Hölderlin was more than the simple facilitator of Sophocles, and that his translations have equal status to the so-called originals, being a way of restating, rethinking, and thinking further than them. These translations, this “desperate and even incomprehensible manner of overwriting [surphraser] Sophocles” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998b, 10), allow something to be said in a second-order way that would not be achieved by simply writing a new text. In a similar way to the Romantic Theory explored by Berman, this model of translation is at some distance from a paradigm of fidelity to the source text and language. Instead the emphasis is on foreignization, but with the proviso that this is a dynamic process, a foreignization of a target text and language, rather than simply a replacement of them with other texts and languages (which may be foreign from one perspective whilst also being native and self-same from their own). What is important in terms of translatability or untranslatability for Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe is not the destination arrived at when translation takes place, but the journey undertaken in order to get there.

Let us recall the terrain traversed by the three thinkers Badiou, Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe. Badiou’s article on the French language painted it as bearing a strong cultural association to philosophy, and more specifically a political mode of philosophy. On his account, French discourse has a commitment to generalization and the universal, which seems to us to align with notions of translatability: to resist taking part in a general economy of translation is to open the door to special pleading, obscurantism and privilege (etymology: private law). Thinkers of the untranslatable such as Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe seek to counter such arguments by stating that the easy circulation of ideas can equate to the erasure of cultural difference, and that surface universality or equality can mask underlying, unspoken differences. We do not need to be aware of our epistemic biases for them to be operative. Now, these two basic arguments are relatively well known. What I have tried to show is a further stage in the debate, where the argument for generalization and equality has been updated in a text written in 2014 (albeit by a philosopher in his late seventies). Not only this, but it has been updated using terms associated with the untranslatable by those such as Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe in the context of Hölderlin and Romantic Theory: Badiou’s use of “mythology”, “elegy” and “tragic caesura” shows as much. Should we reject his argument as simply a return to an outdated paradigm, a conservative moment reaffirming the importance of philosophical and political tradition? Or should we accept its admonitions that when we affirm untranslatable cultural difference we lose sight of the goal of generalized equality? In either case, it seems that these theorizations of translatability and untranslatability constantly return to political questions; and it is by looking briefly at this aspect that we can conclude.

Conclusion: wearing a mask

We have seen that Badiou's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* entry on the French language seeks to characterize philosophy in that language, in terms of what he argues is its leaning towards the clarity of democratic politics. This reading excludes a certain linking of mythology and reason present in Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, and is taken up by figures such as Lacoue-Labarthe (who provided Badiou with the very terms he uses). Let us return briefly to Badiou's account of philosophical French, the better to then close by seeing what Berman's and Lacoue-Labarthe's responses might be. Badiou states that in French, "a basic democratic intention [...] turns philosophical discourse toward discussion and seduction" (350). As he continues later, "the reason philosophers, starting with Descartes, began writing in French is one that was in their eyes *political in nature*" (351, emphasis original). Rousseau, Sartre and Lacan will all be aligned with this same reading: namely, that the first priority in philosophical French is one located in a societal or political sphere, the necessity to convince. Badiou confirms this when he asks:

To whom, further, is philosophy *not* addressed? To the learned, to the Sorbonne. Just writing in French is not enough to prove this. One must write this "modern" French, this writer's French, this literary French, which is distinguished from the "academized", or "correct", French transmitted in universities. (351, emphasis original)¹⁸

In such a light, the much-discussed influence of French academics on public life would only exist insofar as, in taking part in this public life, they are altering their properly academic work. In any case, Badiou's argument seems harmless: who would not be in favour of democratization or pulling down barriers to entry?¹⁹

It is not philosophy's democratic responsibilities as such that should be called into question, but rather the notion that they must be its first priority. For an alternative philosophical responsibility is that towards truth, the search for truth. If that can be done alongside dissemination, all the better – but if dissemination becomes synonymous with populism (not to mention a post-truth populism), then problems arise. This can be seen when Badiou's comments about the political responsibility that is unavoidable for philosophical French are related to the discussions of naturalization and foreignization familiar to translation theory. His argument implies that naturalization is best: that philosophical French should always try to be understood and to seduce *at all costs*, i.e. before it tries to accurately represent the nature of or the evidence concerning whatever matter is under discussion. This is opposed to the view according to which such a translation should attempt to alter and expand the French language, even if it is at the cost of impairing one's ability to win whatever debate is immediately at hand. And this latter position has closely informed that of the French thinkers we have seen drawing on the example of Hölderlin's translations – Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe. Rather than arguing that there should be a single language for philosophical debate, and that that language happens to be French (or English, or German, etc., or even formal logic or mathematics), their argument is based upon the notion of *philosopher en langues* (philosophizing in tongues or philosophizing in languages). Translations associated with this school therefore often choose a foreignizing approach; and deconstructive writing often chooses to emphasize linguistic patterning, wordplay and circumlocutions, to celebrate linguistic singularity and difference. But in doing so, neither Berman nor Lacoue-Labarthe seeks to replace the dominance of the home language and culture with a displaced or

inverse chauvinism based on the other language and culture in question. Instead, they are seeking to make a point that can only be made in a second-order or mimetic way: that the search for broader, more general, more universal truth carries on, but it does so in and through linguistic and cultural situations, rather than abstractly or directly. To repurpose Descartes's expression, the search for truth moves forward wearing a mask.

Notes

1. Translations are my own except where specified otherwise.
2. The translations are cited in the key texts for translation studies, Benjamin (2012, 79–83) and Berman (1992; Benjamin's last chapter looks at Hölderlin).
3. One of Rivarol's arguments is that subject-verb-object constructions are particularly logical and clear (see Cassin 2016, 215).
4. Similar claims can of course be made on behalf of English, with its relatively simple rules on gender and morphology, for instance, being foregrounded. To these claims, similar objections about the underlying economic, military and (neo)colonial considerations can be made.
5. The past thus carried by French was of course one of nation-building and centralization. "In his report on idioms to the Committee of Public Safety in January 1794 the Jacobin Bertrand Barère observed, 'Federalism and superstition speak Lower Breton, emigration and hatred of the Republic speak German, counter-Revolution speaks Italian and fanaticism speaks Basque.' Lest there be any misunderstanding, he added, 'Let us destroy these damaging and mistaken instruments.'" Cited in Hazareesingh (2016, 180–181).
6. This conservatism surfaces in one vein of Apter's reading of Badiou on comparativism in relation to translation, which depicts him as making a special case for "great poems" and as "pay[ing] little heed to linguistic class struggle" (see Apter 2006, 85, 87).
7. In making such statements Badiou is rehearsing a position, and a comparison with English, already found in Hippolyte Taine: Translating an English sentence into French is like copying a coloured figure with a gray pencil. Reducing aspects and qualities of things, the French mind ends up with general ideas, simple ones, which it aligns in a simplified order, that of logic cited in McQueeney (1987), 410.
8. It is of course paradoxical to attempt to demonstrate the existence of such a general tendency (within French philosophical discourse) by way of individual examples. Nonetheless, let us direct the reader towards a further association of Frenchness with freedom: Jean-Luc Nancy's chapter "Franchement [Frankly]" in *Identité: fragments, franchises* (Nancy 2010, 27–32). Here he writes that "[l]e nom 'France' et l'adjectif 'français' porteraient ainsi un bien beau privilège: car le mot *franc*, comme nom du peuple et comme adjectif, a été généreusement chargé des valeurs de l'indépendance, de la non-inféodation [[t]he name 'France' and the adjective 'French' can thus be seen to carry a very fine privilege: for the word *frank*, as the name of a people and as an adjective, has been generously endowed with the values of independence, of non-subservience]" (30).
9. See Wood (2015). Here Badiou's entry is described as "highly tendentious" (6), although the essay has been read as an exercise in unstinting praise of Frenchness, an expression of galloping linguistic chauvinism. I think it is more ironic than that, in the end something more like a comic lament about French philosophy's desperate commitment to epigrammatic cleverness (6).
10. This work quotes extensively from the anthology jointly edited by Lacoue-Labarthe, which appeared in French in 1978: *The Literary Absolute* (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988). It is one of the major expressions of the influence of this critical anthology.
11. Berman paints this rivalry as an explicit one at various moments; for instance, here (where Badiou's claim for the naturalizing tendencies of philosophical French is reflected): "At the time when, in Germany, fidelity is being celebrated with almost marital overtones by Bretinger, Voss, and Herder, France translates without the least concern for fidelity and continues its never-abandoned tradition of 'embellishing' and 'poeticizing' translations. The German theory of translation consciously positions itself against these translations 'after the French manner'" (35).

12. The “-ability” suffix (e.g. in criticizability, translatability, reproducibility) is explored in Weber (2008). Benjamin wrote on the same German Romantics (whether Hölderlin, or the Jena group) as Berman and Lacoue-Labarthe; the latter alongside Anne-Marie Lang translated Benjamin’s work on the topic as *Le Concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand* (Benjamin 1986).
13. Such a reading glosses over the fragmentation that affected the work of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, however.
14. We can note in passing that when pursued further, this argument leads to a near-celebration of Hölderlin, with his 36 years in a diminished mental state in Tübingen and his foreignizing, literal translations of Sophocles. There is a danger that this can exoticize his experience, celebrating suffering from a safe distance, and turning him into a holy fool. For instance, the issue of madness is given pride of place in Lacoue-Labarthe’s thinking around his two French translations of Hölderlin’s translations of tragedy (Hölderlin 1998a, 1998b). Derrida criticized Blanchot for assigning a similar role to Hölderlin’s madness as the essence of poetry (see McKeane 2013).
15. Lacoue-Labarthe wrote the introduction to Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hymnes, élégies et autres poèmes* (Hölderlin 1983, 7–20).
16. The “Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism” was presented by the first section of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s *L’absolu littéraire*, though it was excluded from *The Literary Absolute* because like many of the other texts it was already available in English. It is available in various volumes (e.g. Behler 1987, 161–163).
17. Details and discussion of these translations, productions and critical texts can be found in McKeane (2015), 87–108. The German translations have been translated into English by David Constantine (see Hölderlin 2001).
18. Badiou’s definition of “literary” French here is not the one associated with high register and convoluted syntax found in dictionaries and elsewhere. Instead it involves direct speaking or an easy appeal to non-specialists.
19. However, the gendered aspect of it is more problematic: Badiou paints philosophy’s need to seduce as running from René Descartes’s correspondence with the princess of Sweden up to Jacques Lacan and beyond; “the conviction arose that philosophical discourse must be addressed to women, that the conversation of intelligent women is a means of approval or validation that is much more important than all the decrees of the learned” (350).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

John McKeane is lecturer in French at the University of Reading. He works on the relations between literature and thought in the twentieth century. This has included articles on Maurice Blanchot and the monograph *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: (Un)timely Meditations* (Legenda, 2015). His next project asks what structures are necessary if there is to be thinking, debate or knowledge, and explores philosophy’s relationship with French ideas of education and citizenship. As a translator, his most recent work is Christophe Bident’s *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography* (Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

References

- Apter, Emily. 2006. *The Translation Zone*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Apter, Emily, et al., ed. 2014. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: a Philosophical Lexicon*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Badiou, Alain. 2007. “Dits’ de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.” *Lignes* 22: 16–20.

- Badiou, Alain. 2014. "FRENCH: Language Stripped Bare by Its Philosophers." In *Dictionary of Untranslatables: a Philosophical Lexicon*. Translated by Nathanael Stein, 349–354. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Behler, Ernst, ed. 1987. *The Philosophy of German Idealism*. New York: Continuum.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1986. *Le Concept de Critique Esthétique Dans le Romantisme Allemand*. Translated by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Anne-Marie Lang. Paris: Aubier-Flammarion.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2012. "The Task of the Translator." In *The Translation Studies Reader*, Translated by Steven Rendall, edited by Lawrence Venuti, 3rd ed., 75–83. London: Routledge.
- Berman, Antoine. 1992. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Translated by S. Heyvaert. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Cassin, Barbara, ed. 2004. *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies: Dictionnaire des Intraduisibles*. Paris: Le Robert/Seuil.
- Cassin, Barbara. 2016. *Éloge de la Traduction: Compliquer L'universel*. Paris: Fayard.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1982. "The Ends of Man." In *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass, 109–136. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hazareesingh, Sudhir. 2016. *How the French Think: an Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*. London: Penguin.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1983. *Hymnes, élégies et Autres Poèmes*. Translated by Armel Guerne. Paris: Flammarion.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1998a. *Antigone de Sophocle*. Translated by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Paris: Bourgois.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1998b. *Cédipe le Tyran de Sophocle*. Translated by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Paris: Bourgois.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. 2001. *Hölderlin's "Sophocles": Oedipus and Antigone*. Translated by David Constantine. High Green: Bloodaxe.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. 2009. "Notes on the *Edipus*" and "Notes on the *Antigone*." In *Essays and Letters*. Translated and edited by Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth, 317–332. London: Penguin.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. 1998a. "The Cæsura of the Speculative." In *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, edited by Christopher Fynsk, 208–35. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. 1998b. *Métaphrasis Suivi de Le Théâtre de Hölderlin*. Paris: PUF.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: the Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Translated by Philippe Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: SUNY Press.
- McKeane, John. 2013. "Périmètre D'avance: Blanchot, Derrida, and Influence." In *Questions of Influence in Modern French Literature*, edited by Thomas Baldwin, James Fowler and Ana de Medeiros, 111–125. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McKeane, John. 2015. *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: (Un)Timely Meditations*. Oxford: Legenda.
- McQueeney, Terence. 1987. "Beckett, Chamfort, and the Wastes and Wilds of Self-Translation." *Literary Review* 30 (3): 407–13.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2010. *Identité: Fragments, Franchises*. Paris: Galilée.
- Weber, Samuel. 2008. *Benjamin's Abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wood, Michael. 2015. "French Lessons." *Barthes Studies* 1: 6–16.