

MEMORY, TRANSLATION AND THE URBAN SPACE

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INTRODUCTION

In “The Origin of Geometry” Edmund Husserl makes a significant claim, whose implications, especially—but not exclusively—for migratory and exilic identities have not been fully conceptualised. Husserl writes that: “the active recollection of what is past [involves] an activity of concurrent actual production.”¹ Following Husserl’s lead, in this article I argue that memory is an act and a result of a comparison between the constructed narrative of the past and the relation that this narrative comes to have with the “here” and “now”.² We remember, and as we remember we look ahead to check if this memory can be recognised, seen, captured in the present. There would be no memory, and there would be no remembering, without this relation, this “active recollection”. But in order to remember—and in order to memorise, to *produce* memories—the vision constituted in our mind finds little of itself in the present. In other words, it produces, and finds, “bad translations”. It is precisely because of the great creative “failure” of translation that memorising can continue to take place, and that identities—like memories—can accrue new forms, new meanings and, in the words of Paul Carter, “new futures”.³ It is in this sense that the appellation of the “Italian Forum” in Sydney (a recent development in the heart of Sydney’s “Little Italy”) as a “bad” translation of an authentic Italian square actually, although inadvertently, catches the essential meaning of this urban space. The Italian Forum in Sydney—like many other migratory sites—is evidence that memory rejects “good” translations in order to remember forward.

1.

“The active recollection of what is past [involves] an activity of concurrent actual production.” The emphasis of Husserl’s statement on recollection is, without doubt, on the idea of production. Not only that, but more importantly on the production that takes place in the present, in the “now” of life. Only this making of memory in the present can

be called, according to Husserl, "active recollection". Husserl's notion of "active recollection" is positive in that it entails the actual intervention of the present that, as a mediator, comes to influence and perhaps manipulate the past in this making that acquires the semblance of an ongoing, dynamic and ever transforming production. Was Husserl implying that memory is never fixed, never static but always moving in time as well as in space? If that were the case memory would not be a crystallised image that stares immobile from the depth of time to catch us as we grope around in the present; to fix us in the eye as a monitor, as a "memory" and remembrance of what we used to be. Rather, it would be something like an event in which we are only a singularity, albeit a conspicuous singularity, within a crowd of other singularities. It is in this sense that Husserl's statement on "active recollection" dramatically shifts the perspective on the traditional and conventional understanding of memory, and provides a new plane through which memory is remodelled as life, instead of life's death mask.

2.

The postulation of an "active recollection" invites the conceptualisation of its opposite, a "passive recollection". What exactly does it mean to recollect actively as opposed to recollect passively? The first answer is provided by Husserl himself when, as we have seen, he pairs the adjective "active" with the adjective "actual". The distinction is, it seems, firstly temporal: a memory that resides exclusively in the past is passive, while a memory that resides in the present is active. But the temporal distinction introduces by necessity a further one, this time of definition. What do we mean by past and present respectively? An agreement arrived at by simply accepting ordinary and conventional interpretation of "past" and "present" would probably fail to see through the complexity of the issue and their implications for a deeper conceptualisation of memory and its impact on life.

3.

As an opening to the question of definition I could point to some of the previous remarks, and say that while a "passive recollection" could be defined as "memory", an "active recollection" could be defined as the "making of memory". As it turns out, the difference is not so much temporal *per se* as ethically temporal, or, as I would prefer, one of labour. By labour I mean here the actual production of an event, be it written, visual, concrete or imaginative. As a consequence, the difference is not between an absolute past—dead, crystallised, gone—and an absolute past in the present—the Hegelian temporality—but between the tem-

poral relation and production of the past in the present as well as the present in the past. The difference is also between a memorisation that entails the interpretation of an object—a memory—by a subject—the present subject—and a memorisation in which subject and object are synthetically interconnected.

4.

Heidegger was one of the first thinkers to warn us about making simplifying distinction between past and present from a chronological perspective. His reflection on origin and beginning are, to my mind, still essential to think fruitfully about memory.⁴ Heidegger is best known as the philosopher of existentialism. There is no doubt that his work is characterised by an indefatigable and uninterrupted quest to capture the event of the origin and essence, their meanings and philosophical implications. What is perhaps less known and articulated is the extent of Heidegger's problematisation of origin (*Ursprung*), which in the German philosopher is never a static, temporally encrusted event. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth. For Heidegger the origin, which is often looked for among the fragments of pre-Socratic thinking, especially in the thinking of Anaximander and Heraclitus, is never located behind. It is instead always forward, invariably preceding and informing the present, here and yet already ahead. The origin is, according to Heidegger, the very essence of becoming and the very thing of philosophy. The origin, paraphrasing his mentor Husserl, provides the actualisation of productive thinking. It is in this sense that Heidegger seeks the origin through placing the present—the present thought (his philosophy)—in the service of tradition. But in doing so tradition jumps (sprung) ahead, turning from past to future.

5.

If it is true that for Heidegger the event of the origin (*aletheia*) remains the ultimate goal of philosophy, for Walter Benjamin the origin turns into a philosophical mediator, whose presence is indispensable not as such, as an absolute value, but in relation to the beginning of its own disappearance.⁵ The slight and yet significant difference between Benjamin and Heidegger is found in their distinct treatment and conceptualisation of production. Whereas for Heidegger, production is instigated by the origin in order to rejoin the origin in a movement forward, for Benjamin production, although still driven by the origin, becomes the thing of philosophy and the house of thinking.

What assimilates these two very different, and yet in certain aspects similar thinkers, is the firm belief in the impossibility of returning.

"Returning" must be understood here as the going back to the original home. In Benjamin and Heidegger there cannot be any return simply because the home that one looks for is either ahead (Heidegger) or firmly embedded in the now-time (*Jetzt-Zeit*, Benjamin) of the present event. There is no home to be found if one looks for it through memory—through passive recollection in Husserl's terminology. A slightly better chance is to look for home through the making of memory—through active recollection.

6.

As one leaves, as one begins to be, the origin disappears into the beginning or jumps ahead. Going back has no meanings in that nothing is left behind. The notion of returning is one of the great misnomers of language and thought, unless one understands returning not as a movement backward but a movement forward or on the spot. And if it is true that departing implies a return, this return can never be a simple reversal. It is rather a process that takes the traveller even further ahead, away from itself in order to catch itself or, in the second hypothesis, to catch the production that encapsulates the singularity of the self.

7.

In *Cahiers 1894-1914*, Paul Valéry wrote that "L'étrangeté est le vrai commencement. Au commencement était l'étrange."⁶ Valéry points to the beginning as the locus of an irredeemable fracture which brings about not so much a loss as a sense of estrangement, inauthenticity. In other words, the beginning—which must not be confused with the origin—is not the authentic place, is not home. Turning back to it as if it were "true home", the authentic space of the subject *quidditas*, can only provoke nostalgia and melancholia. Should the beginning be confused with the origin, with singularity as such, it would, then, present the absence of the origin—its foreignness—plunging the observer into passive nostalgia and a sense of impotence as the observer confronts the impossibility of returning. This impossibility is determined by not finding the desired object where it was thought to reside. In its place there is only dispossession, the feeling of "not-feeling-at-home." Nostalgia ("passive recollection") is memory that turns back, believing that what is missing has been left behind.

8.

The Italian philosopher Aldo Giorgio Gargani, one of the most careful readers of Heidegger's philosophy, once wrote that: "the original can be thought only through the relation with the copies that preceded it."⁷

Heidegger's influence is obvious; obvious too is the influence that Benjamin's reflection on translation might have had on Gargani's thought. As in Heidegger, the original is located forward, it has jumped ahead of its copies. But most importantly the original is thought through the copies that inform it, as in Benjamin's understanding of translation as that which catches the originality of language—pure language (*die reine Sprache*)—through the synthesis of unsupplemented languages. Translation comes after the beginning of the original and yet it precedes the origin as the origin jumps ahead of the beginning and, consequently, of translation. If this is true the entire theoretical tradition on translation must be revised. Should translation turn back to look for the origin in order to compare its validity, its "truthfulness", it would only find nostalgia, dispossession and failure. Conversely, should it look forward to see the origin, it would catch its event as becoming and potentiality. And it is within its very nature as the "language-that-comes", that translation can glimpse the origin. If "passive recollection" is memory, "passive translation" is the copy; if "active recollection" is the "making of memory", "active translation" is the "language-that-comes".

9.

Translating and the making of memory, as well as translation and memory, share many things in common. Most importantly they are significant ciphers of the relation between the origin and the beginning, presence and absence, past and present, visibility and invisibility, authenticity and inauthenticity. As such they might very well say something useful about identity.

10.

The notion of identity can be approached from different angles—linguistic, sociological, anthropological, literary, philosophical and so on—and its definitions are multifarious; does it relate, for instance, to the "what" of subjectivity (the *idem*) or to the "who" of subjectivity (the *ipse*), or to both of them simultaneously and/or alternatively? Further, identity is usually connected with a larger entity (the nation for instance) than the subject and yet it informs the subject in ways and to degrees that exceed other individual qualifications. Identity is in turn inside and outside the subject, and it simultaneously includes and excludes it, determining, as a result, notions of normality and abnormality, inclusion and exclusion. It is inevitable that "identity" plays an enormous and significant psychological as well as social and political role in the life of the individual and the community. Through the sharing of the same identity an individual belongs to a particular

group; but it is precisely because of this simple principle that an individual's exclusion from a group is measured on its alleged and perceived differences. What is rarely grasped, as groups draw lines to include, and by association exclude, is that identity is a dynamic concept, forever changing and adapting, always jumping ahead of its presumed static inception. And yet, and notwithstanding identity's inherent forwardness, identity is often sought out by turning backward. It is interesting to note that when an individual looks for a definition of his/her identity, the locus of this definition is the past and seldom the present or the future. Identity, in the ordinary understanding of the word, lives in the past and it is measured by comparing our being in the present with our being in the past, the latter being the essential yardstick through which one comes to recognise or fail to recognise himself/herself. There are two things to reflect on at this stage: a) in order to read and interpret identity the individual turns back and stares at an image which surreptitiously implies that the onlooker is potentially inauthentic and therefore less original than the image observed; the onlooker is "guilty" unless proven otherwise. It is in this sense that dealings with identity are usually marked by a feeling of guilt and loss; b) the face staring at us from the past is our face and yet it looks like that of a stranger. "The foreign is the true beginning. At the beginning there was the foreign", said Valéry.

11.

Could we talk, borrowing the concept from Husserl, of "active identity" and "passive identity"? In other words, could we speak of an identity in the making that produces itself actively, and, on the other hand, of a passive identity that keeps on memorising insistently? What would the productive relation between an active identity and the present, the future and the past be? And what political, social and cultural implications would an active identity have?

THE ITALIAN FORUM

12.

Almost ten years ago, in 1996, I organised a conference on Comparative Literature at La Trobe University. I decided that one session of the conference should discuss translation and the impact of translation and translation studies on the reception of comparative literature. One of the guest speakers was the author Robert Dessaix. His presentation was, as usual, challenging and intriguing.⁸ However, what stuck in my mind about Dessaix's paper above everything else was the architectural metaphor he offered to articulate his view of translation. He said that

translation is like building a German castle in the Dandenongs (a hilly suburb in Melbourne). Clearly, something will tell you that that castle is not really a German castle. Yet it is still there, visible, experientiable, readable. If what you really want is to see and experience a German castle, Dessaix argued, then there is nothing left but to go to Germany. No amount of criticism, hair splitting “buts” and “ifs”, adjustments and refurbishments will ever turn the German castle in the Dandenongs into a real, authentic German castle.

13.

The idea is that there is no ideal, perfect translation. Which also means that there is no ideal, perfect double. And this is a great relief because the idea of a perfect translation is contrary to the very essence of translation, as the idea of a perfectly identical double is anathema to our true essence as unique and inalienable singularities.

14.

The existence of an original, whatever that might mean, implies the existence of a translation and vice-versa. Translation and original are relational and not substantial. One cannot exist without the other. The original needs the translation to exist as the original and the translation needs the original to be itself. This sounds so true, and also so banal and trivial until we begins to investigate not so much the original and the translation but the extremely interesting process that the relation between translation and original brings about. The epistemological significance of this relation might perhaps be brought home more powerfully when considering the need to relate to the “other” to make sense of what we are, to see who we are. The other is a mirror without which our life would simply be intangible and inherently invisible to ourselves. In the book *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart writes:

The voice and the eyes take part in the more general truth that I cannot witness my own motion as a whole: I cannot see what is alive about myself and so depend on the view of others. It is the viewpoint of the beloved that gives witness to what is alive in our being.⁹

I like the idea of the translation as the “viewpoint of the beloved that gives witness to what is alive” in the original.

15.

Our very productivity, our very being is predicated upon the existence of the relation between the original and the translation, and this is not only true for literature. In fact, I wish to write about memory. As Dessaix said on that evening of 1996, whenever somebody sees an

architectonic translation the notion of "bad" inevitably arises. What they do not realise when they claim that that translation is a "bad" translation, is that a translation must perforce be "bad". What they utter is a significant truth, however for reasons completely opposite to those they proclaim.

16.

The Italian Forum on Norton Street, Sydney, was opened in 2001. The Italian Forum is a residential as well as business complex in the heart of the so-called Little Italy of Sydney. The cultural scope behind this development was to re-create the idea, the feeling and the function of an Italian square. The Forum is divided into three layers. The ground floor and the first level are occupied by restaurants, cafes and shops while the other levels are taken by residential units and flats. Private balconies and windows open on the public space beneath, enabling exchange and constant dialogue between the public and the private.

17.

The Italian Forum is meant to bring alive the idea of an authentic Italian square in the middle of Sydney. But what is an authentic Italian square? It is perhaps the most emblematic embodiment of the connection between the public and the private. Let us take, for instance, of Campo de' Fiori in Rome, where cafes, restaurants, shops of many descriptions share the space with a lively fruit and vegetable market and a host of apartments which overlook the bustling activity taking place at ground level. It must have a fountain and a statue. The statue, in the instance of Campo de' Fiori, is the statue of Giordano Bruno who was burnt at the stake in this very square. Campo de' Fiori, like many other squares in Italy, is a place to go and relax while sipping coffee or wine, to have something to eat in-between shifts, do the shopping, chat. It is simultaneously an oasis and a bustling centre of activity, a place where one enters and exists at ease, a convergence of streets and desires, a pulsating heart that attracts, that pulls in. All the narrow and sometimes circuitous streets that surround the square seem to have been designed with the express purpose of leading the passer-by to it; like a well-constructed spider web, you do not know how you ended up right in the middle of it.

18.

The Italian square, whatever else it might be, is essentially a place of exile from the linearity and purposefulness of day-to-day life. Its circularity, its con-fusion between private and public, its sense of history that glances at you from its tall statues, the sound of water, all this

forces the walker to stop, look, rest, even for a moment, to think, to look up and to give in to a sense of eternal space and time.

19.

It is no accident that the square is so important to the exilic mind. And it does not seem a coincidence that the exilic imagination wished to re-create a square as a way to not only negotiate memory but also to produce a narrative for those who do not have memories. But why is it that the Italian Forum is so different, almost to the point of the grotesque? The statue of Dante, for instance, is nothing but a caricature of Dante. It is a little, insignificant, almost ridiculous figure, posing as to deliberately attract smiles and sniggers. Why is there so much concrete, so heavy, so temporally anchoring? In other words, why is the Italian Forum wrong?

20.

The Italian Forum is a translation, and as such it is an interpretation of what has been seen, been experienced, and yet remains irretrievably negative, out of reach, absent. There is no Italian square in Sydney, just as there is no French author by the name of Robert Dessaix (all of Dessaix's books have been translated into French). There are only translations. But it is precisely the impossibility of fusing and confusing the original with the translation that gives rise to the tremendous significance of the productive relation between the original and the translation; a productive relation that generates a further narrative, usually unwritten, unspoken and non-articulated, and yet so essential to the understanding of what we do and why we do it like that.

21.

I would like to take the case of the migrant. For the migrant it is the power of a clearly visible image (the memory of the past) that stamps itself over the pliable surface of the present. It is the extraordinary visibility and vividness of that memory, of the original, that suddenly demands that the gaze "turn ahead" to compare that image with the manifested reality. Clearly, the "turning ahead" is not to the origin, but instead to the reality of the exilic condition. The "turning ahead" is a movement back into the present where the visionary memories of the past crumble, dissolve against the backdrop of incomparability. It is this impossibility of comparing that induces the migrant to build structures, "real" buildings that can actually sustain, absorb the turning gaze. The urban design of migrant and ethnic suburbs all around the world are testimonies to the urgency and necessity of erecting these screens, these theatrical props which exist as tangible phantoms and simulacra,

whose ultimate purpose is to simply reflect. These buildings are not reminders of a lost past, rather, essential supports for a present whose existence depends entirely on their being there. On the other hand they cannot be the same. In fact, sameness will annul and destroy the memories, and ultimately deny the present. They have to be different and yet similar; they might be called "bad translations". And yet their essence, their very purpose is predicated upon them being "bad". Memory, like translation, can only exist in the latency of its origin. It is in this sense that these buildings reflect, not as a mirror but more like a window where the shape of those who look through it are faintly sketched. The perfection of the memories of the origin is vaguely imprinted on these buildings, and yet so removed that the gaze that "turns ahead" must perforce be forward looking. This "turning ahead" is not only the site of suspension but also the site of the making of memories. It is here, on the stage of memories that memory is made, and it is in the uncertainty of the comparison—which is also the necessary relation of production—that memory grows, constantly, incessantly. The perfect memory of the origin that we carry before us is nothing more than the result of this "turning ahead" to face the indefinite, the "bad" and the unfinished.

NOTES

- 1 Husserl, Edmund, "The Origin of Geometry", in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 360.
- 2 See also my forthcoming book *About the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing* (West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2006).
- 3 Paul Carter, *Material Thinking* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p. 126ff.
- 4 See especially Heidegger's seminar with Eugen Fink, *Heracitus Seminar*, trans. Charles H. Seibert, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993); *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) and *What is Philosophy?*, trans. W Kluback and J. T. Wilde (London: Vision, 1963).
- 5 See especially the essays "On Language as Such and on the Language of Men", in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978); and "The task of the translator", in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1973).
- 6 Valery, *Cahiers 1894–1914*, vol. VI (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 85.
- 7 "[U]n originale che è soltanto l'effetto delle copie che l'hanno preceduto." In Vattimo (ed.), *La copia e l'originale, Filosofia '91* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1992), p. 65.
- 8 Dessaix's presentation is published in Bartoloni (ed.), *Re-Claiming Diversity: Essays on Comparative Literature* (Bundoora: La Trobe University, 1996).
- 9 Stewart, Susan, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 108.