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TRANSLATING THE SUBJECT À LA FRANÇAISE

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Towards the end of the long and complex entry entitled 'SUJET' in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* is a sub-section – 'La subjectivité à la française' – surveying the ways in which recent French theorists have attempted to rethink the concept of subjectivity. David Macey, in translating this entry for a special issue of *Radical Philosophy*, chose to keep the term *à la française* in the original.¹ Indeed, there could hardly be a more perfect coincidence of form and content, *énonciation* and *énoncé*. It does exactly what it says: it is 'the way the French do things', and as such is one of those terms we like to keep in French because, like *savoir-vivre*, or *je ne sais quoi*, or countless other banal examples, there is no satisfactory equivalent. One could say that the original contains, folded within itself, the very quintessence of Frenchness, and to that extent foregrounds its own untranslatability. To expand this linguistically, it functions much in the same way that proverbs, idioms, or other commonplace sayings do in another language, for example, and are often those instances of ordinary language that are so commonplace they almost pass unnoticed. But one might say this folding back on itself is *also*, as we shall see, one of the essential characteristics of the other term, subject (at least in the French tradition), that is, as the irreducible self-reflexive foundation of, or possibility of, thought. What becomes clear in the entry on 'SUJET' is that the conceptual history of the subject, and its distinctive reformulations within contemporary French philosophy, at least since Descartes, *is* the history of its constituent translations, and of the tensions that emerge between theories of subjectness (*subjectité*), subjectivity (*subjectivité*), and subjection (*sujétion*). A crucial part, of course, of the story of the subject 'in French' is the explicit claims it makes to a certain universalism since Descartes' own French translation of *cogito*, which opens the way for our understanding of the modern subject, and recent French and francophone attempts to rethink the subject.

In Ancient Greek, where the story begins, there was no one term corresponding to the three semantic fields covered by *sujet* in French (or subject in English). The Greek word *hupokeimenon* was originally, in Aristotelian philosophy, both a physical subject (whether in the classical distinction between substance/essence and accident, or between matter and form) as well as the logical subject (understood as the support of predicates, that which is predicable, and this is equally true of logical and well as grammatical propositions (subject and

1. 'Subject', *Radical Philosophy* 138 (July/August 2006), p. 32.

predication). *Hypokeimenon* thus conveys both material subjectness, and logical subjectness. Philosophically, the question of the essence of truth is one of subjectness, or *subjectité*, understood as a kind of unchanging support, basis, foundation, or *suppositum* (to which *hypokeimenon* is closely linked). The determining moment in the emergence of modern philosophical, political, and psychological concepts of the subject and subjectivity comes with the translation of *hypokeimenon* into Latin, as *subjectum*. This translation from Greek to Latin is a crucial moment, indeed *the* event, in Heidegger's rethinking of the Western metaphysical tradition. According to his analysis in his 1942-43 Parmenides lectures, the Latinisation of Greek thinking is the event in which 'the essence of truth originally assigns itself, and transmits itself, to beings', and involves a fundamental shift from one régime of signification to another. The weightiest burden of proof in Heidegger's account falls on the translation of *aletheia* as *veritas* (and its associated links to a whole range of other philosophical terms, such as *ratio*, and *adaequatio*).² Central to Heidegger's analysis is that there is a determining link between the Latinisation of Greek thinking, and *imperium* ('The realm of essence decisive for the development of the *Latin* falsum is the one of the *imperium* and of the 'imperial', *Parmenides*, p.40), and for him this event of translation precedes and makes possible everything else, indeed shapes the new order. This political, juridical 'Roman stamp' [*der Romische Prägung*], as Heidegger calls it, is thus the overriding effect of this Latinisation of Greek, opening the way for imperial expansion, along with its political self-justification in all its forms, from Christianity onwards.³ So the *imperium* folded within subjection in a sense accompanies the transformation of *aletheia* into *veritas*, of *hypokeimenon* into *subjectum*, and for Heidegger *the* founding historial, epochal event is a forgetting of Being, which 'seals' henceforth the question of truth as one of correctness (as opposed to falseness), or *adaequatio*. At the same time it marks the West's covering over *of* this event, or at least its event as an epistemological rupture. There are then two related etymological strands, which become confused and intertwined over time: that of subject as subjectivity (derived from *subjectum* in Latin, and which sets itself against the object and objectivity); and that of subject implying an idea of subjugation or dependency (derived from *subjectus* or *subditus* in Latin: *subjection*, *sujétion*, or *assujétissement*). This latter strand opens up an entire juridical and political lineage, starting with imperial and Christian Rome, which will be carried over through to the French Revolution, once the question of the subject is transformed politically into the question of citizenship.

2. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 41.
3. The religious aspect is of course essential. Derrida in *Foi et Savoir* will coin the term '*mondialatinisation*' (translated as 'globalatinisation') to underline the inseparability of Christianity and Western imperial and epistemic dominance. See *Foi et savoir* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 48.

For Heidegger, Descartes inaugurates the modern philosophical concept of the subject (that is, the moment when the subject becomes an active, thinking subject, insofar as it perceives itself *as* subject), and the Cartesian *je pense, donc je suis* – which Heidegger rephrases as ‘I think myself thinking’, *cogito me cogitare* – is the invention of the transcendental subject. Kant’s emphasis on Descartes, and ‘the Cartesian *cogito*’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, subsequently determines Western philosophical thinking of the subject as a question of ‘self-constitution’. From this point on the two genealogies of the subject (the logico-grammatical one, in which ontology and transcendental metaphysics are rooted, and the juridical, political, and theological one), that is *subjectum* and *subjectus*, are in effect pulled together and become inseparable. Kant’s systematic rationalisation and psychologisation thus prefigures not only the Hegelian dialectics of self-consciousness, but also most modern concepts of subjectivity, ego psychology, and all of their subsequent transformations. It also means that the question of the subject is marked by the tension between theories of subjectivity (*subjectum*), and theories of subjection (*subjectus*), through what the authors of the entry ‘SUJET’ term a ‘*jeu de mots historial*’, a pun, an unintentional linguistic confusion that is not so much historical as historial, or epochal. However one takes Kant’s and then Heidegger’s assigning such an inaugural role to Descartes in the history of the modern subject (and as the *Vocabulaire* says it is ‘contestable’), there is an unquestionably French dimension to this history, which it will fully assume, particularly with Rousseau, who plays a key role, and who will become the point of departure for much of the critical reflection on the subject in the twentieth century. Georges Bataille, for example, defines the subject in terms of its sovereignty, or its ‘non-subjection’ (*son non-assujettissement*), and for him the confusion between the subject-as-sovereign and the subject understood in terms of subjection is also a ‘*jeu de mots mal venu*’ (an inappropriate or abnormal, almost illegitimate, and certainly undesirable, play on words). This very tension, however, has had a determining effect on much French theory that has followed on from Bataille, notably Lacan (for whom the subject is a decentred ‘subject of the signifier’, an effect of linguistic or tropological processes), Althusser (for whom subject formation takes place through ideological ‘interpellation’), Foucault (tracing the histories of subjects produced through a whole range of regulatory and disciplinary regimes), or Lévi-Strauss (whose anti-Cartesianism is described by V Y Mudimbe as ‘the philosophical basis and the founding motto of ethnology’⁵).

Where is
footnote
4?

4. Etienne Balibar has a long section in ‘SUJET’ on the emergence of the citizen as a political category, which reprises an earlier essay he wrote for the volume *Who Comes After the Subject*, where he replies very simply that it is the republican citizen who comes after the subject (‘Citizen Subject’, in *Who Comes After the Subject*, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 33-57).
5. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. xv.

In this philosophical genealogy of the subject, it is clear that the place of language and of translation is critical. From Heidegger's locating the foundation of the modern philosophical subject in the Latinisation of Greek thought, through to its more recent theoretical rearticulations, there are two crucial moments of translation, and mistranslation; the translation of *hupokeimenon* as *subjectum* is seen as 'forgetting of Being'; and then Kant imputes to Descartes a *substantialisation* of the subject (*le cogito*, even though Descartes never in fact named it *le cogito*). The contemporary thinking of subjectivity as apperception (I can only *appear* to myself as such....) and the transcendental philosophising of the subject as something to be freed from nature (or from its subjection, to nature) will become the question of the realm of human freedom, and '*sujet est le mot qui dénote désormais cette étonnante unité de contraires*' (*Vocabulaire*, p.1226).⁶ So while the two originally unconnected terms, *subjectus* and *subjectum*, do not start out as part of a connected history, they become intertwined, *precisely by an effect of language, a 'jeu de mots'*. *Sujet* in French in effect becomes a kind of 'homophonic antonym', one of those words which means itself and its opposite at the same time, and which so fascinated Freud (as well as Jean Paulhan, it should be noted).

Alain Badiou in his entry on 'FRANÇAIS' gives us another, related, version of Cartesian inauguration, and for him it is very precisely an effect of translation, a function of Descartes's decision to rewrite *cogito* as *je pense*. According to Badiou, Descartes's act, rather than challenging the hegemonic superiority of Latin through a national-linguistic appropriation, or reclaiming, of the privilege of writing and teaching philosophy (as was the case with Greek Philosophy before him, and as will be the case with the German metaphysical tradition after him), in fact *has nothing to do with language*, but claims for itself a paradoxical universalism: 'le privilège accordé au français ne tient pas à un quelconque caractère intrinsèque de la langue, mais à la possibilité d'une adresse universelle et démocratique de la philosophie' (*Vocabulaire*, p.465). Indeed, as Badiou says, referring to Jean Paulhan's little-known but intriguing essay on etymology, 'La France a toujours moqué ce que Paulhan nommait «la preuve par l'étymologie»' (p. 468). So this universalism is both a profoundly political act, as Badiou sees it, and a radical departure from the etymologising tradition which for him characterises German philosophy, not only insofar as this rupture severs language from any essential, natural relationship to national community, but also because it brings about a radical shift to privileging the *syntax* of language, its form, over its *substance*, its nouns or substantives (*substantifs*), and thus the very ground of the

6. See also the entry on 'JE/MOI/SOI' in the *Vocabulaire* for a lengthy discussion of the inherent capacity, but also limitations, relative to German metaphysical idealism, of the first person pronoun in French, which cannot in and of itself convey the self-reflexivity and symmetry of *Ich = Ich*, or of Hegel's *Ich/Wir*, and the movement of Spirit in its process of becoming absolute knowledge.

subject as *suppositum*, and then *subjectum*, that Heidegger traces modern subjectivity back to: 'En dépit des efforts importés les plus véhéments, rien n'a jamais pu plier en France la philosophie à ce dur labeur allemand qui ouvre les mots, les dérive de leur racines indo-européennes, leur enjoint de dire l'être et la communauté' (p. 468). At most, according to Badiou, 'Ce que nous offrons d'universel à la philosophie est toujours sous forme de maximes un peu raides ou de dérivations mal nuancées' (p. 472). Descartes's gesture is thus perhaps an example, to put it into Badiou's own language and radical ontological philosophy, of a *singular event*, but his interpretation of this act of translation is highly problematic. French subjectivity after Descartes is irreversibly grounded within the French language, but to the extent that it confers upon French philosophy, and its claims to universalism, the special privilege of being indifferent to its own language, this universalism only works by virtue of a kind of evacuation – Badiou's own term is '*évidement*' – of language, and of the complex genealogy of translation to which it is bound. What I would like to suggest, *contra* Badiou, is that this claim to French universalism, founded on the sovereignty of the subject, had a determining effect in ushering in the age of colonial and imperial expansion (in the same manner that Heidegger claims the Latinisation of Greek did), and that this epochal act of translation itself lends a distinctive style or idiom to French colonialism, what we might term 'subjection à la française'. In other words, the Eurocentrism of its humanism is instituted at the moment when the subject affirms itself as subject.⁷ To put it differently, French colonial imperialism does not contradict or undermine its claims of universalism, but this universalism would have everything to do with French, and the process whereby the question of citizenship becomes tangled up with France's encounter with other cultures and languages. The use of the French language and educational system as vehicles for linguistic and ideological subjection, and the production of colonial subjects, was crucial to the success of France's 'mission civilisatrice', as has been abundantly documented.

Now Jean Paulhan, although a marginal name in this narrative, turns out in fact to be rather a pivotal figure here. He is best known as the influential editor of the *Nouvelle revue française*, and author of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. What is less well known is that as a young man he was sent to Madagascar as a teacher from 1908–10 at the island's newly established *collège européen*, but he quickly slipped out of his own 'subject position' as coloniser, and he increasingly neglected his official duties, much to the irritation of his colonial superiors. He escaped from the space and rhetoric of French colonialism, spending more and more time with

7. Gayatri Spivak will make a similar argument along these lines in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), referring to her text as a 'counternarrative that will make visible the foreclosure of the subject whose lack of access to the position of narrator is the condition of possibility of the consolidation of Kant's position' (p.9).

his Malagasy friends, and gradually becoming fluent in Malagasy. He was fascinated in particular by Malagasy proverbs, and translated an anthology of popular traditional poetry, known as *hain-tenys*, which contained many such proverbs. Paulhan's thinking about language thus *begins* with the question of translation, and his interest in proverbial expressions is the source of his more fully developed thinking on language, clichés and commonplace expressions (*lieux communs*, for which his shorthand term will later on be Rhetoric), whose strange power he was drawn to. He narrates his increasingly more involved colonial linguistic interaction in a short text, *L'expérience du proverbe*, in which he describes his efforts not only to learn the language, but more importantly to somehow tap into the mysterious influence of Malagasy proverbs (what we would perhaps now term their performative force, as opposed to their constative meaning). What Paulhan discovered was that *all* language can potentially become proverbial, since what starts out as original expressiveness can quickly, or over time, turn into consensually accepted forms, or '*maximes raides*', as Badiou would say. In one sense, this is entirely consonant with Badiou's thesis that French is a language in which syntax overrides the polysemantic richness, or the etymological depth, of substantives in other languages, notably English and German. For Paulhan, proverbs are effective because the syntactical, mechanical function of language seems to operate independantly of semantic depth or subjective intention. He diverges radically from Badiou, though, in seeing this as a feature of *all* language, and not something whereby French can lay claim to a kind of unique privilege (even if it is through a negative recognition of its linguistic poverty relative to German or English). Paulhan's experience is very much one of translation or untranslatability (more precisely, of the untranslatability of word order, as opposed to the untranslatability of words)⁸, but it is one which also dramatizes the possibility of universalism (transcending the division of self and other, understood here as colonial *subjectum* and colonised *subjectus*) as the impossibility of any language arrogating itself the privilege of this transcendant status.⁹

Badiou's thesis locating the Cartesian moment as the foundation of a paradoxical universalism suggests at the same time a radical break with a certain faith in etymologism, and as we saw, he makes reference in this regard to Paulhan's text *Alain, ou la preuve par l'étymologie*,¹⁰ in which Paulhan questions etymology's claim to be able to recover, through an archeological process of reconstruction, an original, authentic meaning beneath the sedimented layers of its

8. See the entry 'ORDRE DES MOTS' in *Vocabulaire*, pp. 891-92.

9. This is perhaps one way one might interpret Derrida's reflections on his relationship to the French language in *Monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

10. *Alain, ou la preuve par l'étymologie* [1948-52] *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris : Editions Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-70), pp. 261-303.

successive transformations and translations, an argument Badiou extends to the use of etymology as a paradigm for philosophical genealogy more generally. Paulhan's text takes as its main target the French philosopher of language Alain's belief that earlier languages must have expressed more closely an original meaning, which must have therefore been motivated and not arbitrary. Paulhan, however, argues that etymology as the search for the origin, or the truth in language (the *etymon* off/in etymology), often turns out to be about as reliable as a play on words, or paronomasis (his word is *calembour*), which can never give us access to truth, but merely to more and more language: 'Au surplus, le nom même nous l'apprend: *étymologie*, c'est *etumos logos*, le sens authentique. Ainsi l'étymologie fait sa propre réclame, et renvoie à l'étymologie.' (*Alain*, p. 265). Thus etymology, like *à la française*, doubles back on itself, its 'truth' revealed as a fiction of true meaning, and it begs the question of how we can ever distinguish between true and false etymologies. It becomes for Paulhan an epistemological aporia, and in a typically witty and light-hearted style, he offers a profusion of examples in support of his claims:

...on voit très bien que l'étymologie ne peut servir qu'à nous tromper sur le sens des mots. Quand nous avons appris que le sou était une pièce d'or (*soldus*), le maréchal un valet d'écurie (*mariscalcus*), le soldat un mercenaire (*soldato*), l'invité un homme à qui l'on fait violence (*invitus*), quand on nous a bien montré que chrétien et crétin sont un même mot, certes nous n'en savons pas davantage sur l'invité, le soldat, le sou, le maréchal, le chrétien. Nous en savons même beaucoup moins. (*Alain*, p. 276)

And ironically, false etymologies teach us more about the underlying meaning of a word, it would appear, than so-called 'true' etymologies:

Le mot de *miniature* s'explique assez bien par *mignard* ou *mignon* (mais il vient de *minium*). *Forcené*, par *force* (mais il vient de *forsener*, hors de sens) [...] *Forain* semble tenir son sens de *foire*, *avachir* de *vache*, *flotte* de *flot*, *hébété* de *bête*. Pas du tout ! C'est de *fors* (dehors), *weich* (mou), *flod* (germanique : flotte), *hebes* (émoussé). (*ibid.*, p. 276)

The epistemological aporia we are confronted with is thus the following: how can we know true from false etymology, when the terms which allow us to make such a determination are themselves indissociable from this very history, and philosophical genealogy? Underlying this playfulness is thus a very serious question. Regardless of whether such etymologies are mistaken or not, they have had actual historical effects, as we have seen, and indeed Paulhan explicitly includes Heidegger among the list of philosophers who look to etymology for 'proof' of their theories ('La métaphysique de Heidegger, entre autres, est tout entière étymologisante' (*ibid.*, footnote 2, p. 267). It leaves us with a more radical undecidability, in which it becomes impossible to tell whether a particular etymological genealogy (say, that of the subject) is a historical fact, or simply a

series of linguistic puns, or accidents of language. Maurice Blanchot, in the section of *L'Écriture du désastre* in which he discusses Heidegger's etymologism, explicitly refers to Paulhan's text, and describes this historicisation of linguistic accidents as 'nécessité d'une provenance, continuité successive, logique d'homogénéité, hasard se faisant destin...' ¹¹

What Paulhan does is thus to allegorise this problem as a linguistic drama, such that we could read the history of the subject as a kind of allegory of translation, which radically questions the natural relationship of language to subjectivity (and is thus akin to Benjamin's famous statements about the impersonal nature of art and language at the start of his famous essay 'The Task of the Translator'). By extension it also questions the supposed natural relationship of language to any philosophical nationalism, but reinscribes it as a question of translation, or more precisely of untranslatability, the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of linguistic community. Paulhan seems to be also suggesting that there are perhaps different philosophies of translation that are coterminous with, and run in parallel to, the shifting political stakes in the various transformations of the subject through history, so one might imagine at times a more 'democratic' form of translation, at other times a more 'elitist', philological one, and at times a more repressive, totalitarian form. At any rate, his critique of etymologism does not lead him, like Badiou, out of the French language to a philosophy of universal 'truth', but to a radical rethinking of the very politics of translation as such, and in particular rethinking subjectivity in terms of the colonialist ideology of language, all of which will become resonant questions of postcolonial theory.

If we are to take seriously the postcolonial concern, as articulated by Gayatri Spivak for example, about the imperial underpinning of European philosophies of the subject, and their complicity with various forms of colonised thinking that are merely masquerading as universalism, are (formerly colonised) non-European writers and thinkers any more able to 'step outside' of this history? This is in part the project to which the African philosopher, Valentin Mudimbe, has devoted himself, namely the possibility of conceiving, and more importantly performing, an 'African *cogito*'. As the title of his best-known work *The Invention of Africa* suggests, Mudimbe is concerned with deconstructing and reconstructing the

11. *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 51. Maurice Blanchot explicitly alludes to Paulhan's text in the sections in *L'Écriture du désastre* in which he questions the privilege accorded etymology in Heidegger's 'return to the Greeks'. He talks about the suspect faith placed in etymologism as an epistemological method: 'Le savoir d'érudition se distingue beaucoup ou peu des étymologies dites populaires ou littéraires – étymologies d'affinité et non plus seulement de filiation : c'est un savoir statistiquement probable, non seulement dépendant de recherches philologiques toujours à compléter, mais dépendant des tropes du langage qui, à certaines époques, s'imposent explicitement...' (p. 147). For a more extended discussion of Blanchot's text as it relates to Paulhan and Saussure, see Kevin Newmark's 'On Parole: Blanchot, Saussure, Paulhan', *Yale French Studies* 106, 2004, pp. 87-106

'archaeology' of representations, or misrepresentations, of Africa and its culture, going back to the Ancient Greeks, but primarily in relation to the French and Belgian colonial missions in Africa, a process he describes explicitly as a 'socialization of the *cogito*.'¹² Mudimbe often cites Frantz Fanon, one of the most radical and influential anti-colonial thinkers of subjectivity, as an important influence on his own work, particularly his phrase 'Je suis mon proprement fondement', although on a first reading his 'return to the subject' might appear surprising, given his avowed debt in his theoretical enterprise to French 'anti-subjective' thinkers such as Foucault and Lévi-Strauss. But the African *cogito* which he promotes enthusiastically at the end of *The Idea of Africa*¹³ involves in its very affirmation both a disarticulation of Western discursive objectification, and a claim to a new form of subjective agency. So Mudimbe reaffirms African subjectivity as a necessarily double gesture. The affirmation of subjectivity is indissociable from the performative narrative act whereby it is inscribed, or reinscribed, and Mudimbe himself continually draws attention to his own subject position in his text, and the circumstantial, contingent nature of his writing.

The francophone Cameroonian social theorist, Achille Mbembe, has also persistently argued for the need to find a way out of the 'bonds of subjection' which have been the legacy of European colonialism in Africa. His book *On the Postcolony* describes the interlocking dynamics of economic interests, the violent exercise of power, and structures of desire in contemporary Africa. One of the major concepts of the book is that of *commandement*, which describes the relations of power in much of postcolonial Africa.¹⁴ In the chapter 'Of Commandement' Mbembe traces the corruption and violence that is at the heart of many African postcolonial regimes back to the 'founding violence' of the act of imperial conquest, a violence that is in essence the exercise of an arbitrary force that affirms its own right to supremacy, precisely by denying the rights of those it conquers. Postcolonial regimes have thus inherited the same unwritten laws of impunity and violence, sustained through a representation of the native population as less than human. The forms of 'citizenship' which this produced in postcolonial Africa were thus grotesquely distorted, since the ruling elites put in place technologies of domination that denied individuals many of the basic rights of citizens, and governments dominated by violence and coercion. This domination is economic in its multifarious corrupt and repressive forms, but Mbembe argues that *commandement* works perhaps even more powerfully at both a sensual and an imaginary level (so he stresses the need to bring the body back into the question of the subject, so in that sense, like Mudimbe, goes back to Descartes, but in a way that reconceptualises the mind/body dualism of Cartesianism).

12. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 190.

13. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

14. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Of course, this is not in any way to deny that French philosophy has itself wrestled for the last century or more with the question that is posed in the final section of the entry 'SUJET': 'Comment sortir la philosophie française de son idiome?' From within the tradition, this is to pose the very question that Jean-Luc Nancy posed 'Qui vient après le sujet?', and the many attempts since Nietzsche to articulate what might precede classical (i.e. Western metaphysical) determinations of the subject. This tradition will run through phenomenological forms of transcendental idealism, such as Merleau-Ponty's theorising of a primordial, bodily intentionality that is prior to reflective thought; Bataille's 'inner experience'; Levinas's subjectivity as an originary ethical responsibility to the other; Foucault's histories of subjectivity as so many histories of discursive regimes, and then latterly, of practices and procedures by which the ethical subject is constituted; Blanchot's neutrality or impersonality; Nancy's antifoundationalist critiques of various philosophies of the subject, and in particular of phenomenology; or Derrida's positing of a series of neologisms that enable us to think the pre- or post-subjective, such as *différance*, supplement, trace, signature, spectrality, the subjectile, or auto-immunity. The question remains, though: are we still 'inside' French philosophy, that is, the heritage of its syntax and its idioms, which are all ineluctably determined by the history of the subject *à la française*?

Jean Paulhan's own attempt to think through the question of subjectivity outside of the historical and metaphysical determinations of the subject took an explicitly politicised form in the figure of '*le premier venu*', most clearly formulated in his short 1939 essay 'La démocratie fait appel au premier venu'. The idiom '*le premier venu*' can mean 'no-one in particular', 'anyone', 'any old person', 'the first person to come along', but has no immediately available equivalent in English that carries all of these connotations. In editing a volume of essays on Paulhan for an issue of *Yale French Studies*, I was faced with the decision of having to choose between competing English versions in many of the essays, which were translated by different translators. I had to admit to my failure, or inability, to settle on one universally acceptable term. This had less to do, I would like to think, with my own incompetence as an editor and translator, than with the elusive power of the term itself. Its resistance to translation, and the sheer contingency of the solution to each singular use that is made of it, is in fact the very point Paulhan is making when he uses it in his text. The irrational, seemingly undemocratic principle, he argues, is in fact a kind of irreducible necessity underpinning the very existence and possibility of democracy. He underlines this point in his texts after the war when he stresses the fact that in his view language (considered as a working model for the way any human community is bound together, in much the same way as in his essay on proverbs) has to make room for a kind of arbitrary, random force. In this sense, all linguistic encounters with others, and the Other (which is really every time we speak, as speaking subjects), are fundamental ethico-political engagements. The competing translations of *le*

premier venu were all ‘good translations’, all happened to work equally well, to the extent that they all actively engaged with this irresistible resistance of Paulhan’s language, and indeed this is perhaps what Derrida is trying to get at when he says that translation *takes place* whenever there is untranslatability.¹⁵ Coincidentally, but tellingly, Derrida happened across Paulhan’s term in one the last texts he wrote, *Voyous*, while he was working through the concept of a ‘democracy to come’. As he writes:

L’expression «démocratie à venir» traduit certes ou appelle une critique politique militante et sans fin. Arme de combat contre les ennemis de la démocratie, elle proteste contre toute naïveté et tout abus politique, toute rhétorique qui présenterait comme démocratie présente ou existante, comme démocratie de fait, ce qui reste inadéquat à l’exigence démocratique, près ou loin, chez soi ou dans le monde, partout où les discours sur les droits de l’homme et sur la démocratie restent d’obscènes alibis quand ils s’accommodent de la misère effroyable de milliards de mortels abandonnés à la malnutrition, à la maladie et à l’humiliation, massivement privés non seulement d’eau et de pain mais d’égalité et de liberté, dépossédés des droits de chacun, de quiconque (avant toute détermination métaphysique du «quiconque» en sujet, personne humaine, conscience, avant toute détermination juridique en semblable, en compatriote, congénère, frère, prochain, coreligionnaire ou concitoyen. Paulhan dit quelque part, je la transcris à ma manière, que penser la démocratie, c’est penser «le premier venu» : quiconque, n’importe qui, à la limite d’ailleurs perméable entre le «qui» et le «quoi», le vivant, le cadavre et le fantôme). Le premier venu, n’est-ce pas la meilleure façon de traduire «le premier à venir» ?¹⁶

This felicitous chance encounter with Paulhan, and Derrida’s own experience of translation which it occasioned, is indeed one extraordinarily precise and insightful way in which we might ultimately be able to ‘translate the subject’, French or otherwise.

15. See Jacques Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’, trans. Joseph F. Graham, in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader : Between the Blinds* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991).
16. Jacques Derrida, *Voyous* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), p. 126.