

1

LUTHER: TRANSLATION AS FOUNDATION

The masterpiece of German prose is therefore, fairly enough, the masterpiece of its greatest preacher: the Bible has so far been the best German book.

—F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

In his “Notes and Essays for a Better Understanding of the West-Eastern Divan”, Goethe writes:

Since the German continually moves ahead of the East by way of translations of all kinds, we find occasion to put forward here some remarks that are well known, but that cannot be repeated too often.

There are three kinds of translation. The first acquaints us with the foreign on our own terms; a simple prosaic translation is best in this respect. For since prose totally cancels all peculiarities of any kind of poetic art and since prose itself pulls poetic enthusiasm down to a common water-level, it does the greatest service in the beginning, by surprising us with foreign excellence in the midst of our own national homeliness, our everyday existence; it offers us a higher mood and real edification while we do not realize what is happening to us. Luther’s Bible translation will produce this kind of effect at any time.¹

This observation is echoed accurately by a passage from *Dichtung und Wahrheit*:

For the circumstance that this excellent man [Luther] handed down a work, composed in the most different styles, and gave us its poetical, historical, commanding, didactic tone in our mother-tongue, as if all were cast in one mould, has done more to advance religion than if he had attempted to imitate, in detail, the peculiarities of the original. In vain has been the subsequent endeavour to make Job, the Psalms, and other lyrical books, capable of affording enjoyment in their poetical form. For the multitude, upon whom the effect is to be produced, a plain translation always remains the best. Those critical translations, which vie with the original, really only seem to amuse the learned among themselves.²

Goethe's judgment, largely shared by the entire German tradition, concerns first and foremost the historical significance of the Lutheran translation. Renouncing the production of a "critical translation" closely tied to the "particularities of the original," Luther managed to create a work accessible to the German people, capable of providing a solid base for the new religious sensibility of the Reformation. This was obviously the issue in the case of the Bible. To what extent does this evaluation correspond to the reality of Luther's work?

From 1521 to 1534, Luther and a team of scholars work on the translation, having recourse simultaneously to the Latin and Greek versions, as well as occasionally to the Hebrew original. There were at the time other German translations of the Bible—the first one published in 1475—, but they were swarming with Latinisms. Luther, for his part, aims at the Germanization, *Verdeutschung*, of the sacred texts from the outset. This aim is explicitly pronounced in a polemical text, "On Translating: An Open Letter," in which he defends his translations and his principles against those who alleged that

in many places the text [of the Bible] has been modified or even falsified, whereby many simple Christians, even among the learned who do not know the Greek and Hebrew languages, have been startled and shocked.³

Concerning a detail—the addition of an *only* in a text by St. Paul, which is found in neither the Latin version nor the Greek text—Luther states:

I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation. But it is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word *solum* (*allein*) [alone or only] along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no]. There are innumerable cases of this kind in daily use.⁴

This discussion refers to a more general purpose: to offer the community of believers a text in good German. But what is, in Luther's

age, good German? Certainly not a German that would obey rules and predetermined canons. It can only be the German of the dialects, the *Mundarten*. Further on in the same text, Luther is very clear on this subject:

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German, as these asses do. Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German with them.⁵

To translate, then, with an ear for popular, everyday speech, so that the Bible may be heard and understood. Good German is that of the people. But the people speak an infinity of Germans. What is at stake, then, is to translate into a German that in a certain way rises above the multiplicity of *Mundarten* [dialects] without denying or crushing them in the process. Hence Luther's twofold attempt: to translate into a German that *a priori* can only be local—his German—*Hochdeutsch*, but to raise this local German in the very process of translation to the level of a common German, a *lingua franca*. In order not to become in turn a language cut off from the people, this German must conserve within it something of the *Mundarten* and the general modes of expression of popular speech. One would have, then, the constant and deliberate use of a very oral language, charged with images, locutions, phrases, together with a work of purification, of dedialectization of this language. Thus, for instance, Luther translates Christ's words "*ex abundantia cordis os loquitur*" (Matth. 12:34) not as "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks," because "no German could say that," but as "what fills the heart overflows the mouth." "The mother in the home and the common man say this." Not Latin, nor a pure dialect, but a generalized popular speech. A difficult operation, as Luther admits:

For the literal Latin is a great hindrance to speaking good German.⁶

Difficult, but apparently successful: as soon as it appeared, the Lutheran Bible was a sensation, despite all the criticism. One re-edition follows another. Very soon the people to whom it was destined learn passages from it by heart and integrate it into their patrimony. From the start, it becomes the cornerstone of the Reformation in Germany, as Goethe very well observed. But it is even more than that: By transforming the *Hochdeutsch* into a *lingua franca*, it makes it into the medium of *written* German for centuries. In the Lutheran translation, a first and decisive self-affirmation of *literary* German is played out. A great "reformer," Luther is henceforth considered a great writer, a creator of

language, and it is in this capacity that he is celebrated by Herder and Klopstock.

Let us have a closer look at what is at stake in the *Verdeutschung*, since this may shed some light on the problematics of translation that will culminate at the end of the eighteenth century in the theories of Goethe, the Romantics, and above all with Hölderlin's translations from the Greek. What Luther violently pushes aside is *Latin* as the official medium of the Roman Church and, more generally, of writing. We are presented here with a phenomenon peculiar to the sixteenth century (to the Reformation and the Renaissance), which Bakhtin has excellently described in his work on Rabelais:

An intense interorientation, interaction, and mutual clarification of languages took place during that period. The two languages frankly and intensely peered into each other's faces, and each became more aware of itself, its potentialities and limitations, in the light of the other. This line drawn between the languages was seen in relation to each object, each concept, and each point of view.⁷

In the present case, the delimitation Bakhtin mentions is, of course, concerned with the confrontation of German and Latin. But at the same time it is concerned with

the sphere of national folk idioms. A single national language did not exist as yet, it was slowly formed. The process of transforming the whole of philosophy to the vernacular and of creating a new system of literary media led to an intense interorientation of dialects within this vernacular. . . . However, the process was not limited to the interorientation of dialects. The national language, having become the medium of ideology and literature, inevitably entered into contact with other national languages.⁸

Here, quite logically, Bakhtin emphasizes

the immense importance of translations in the above mutual clarification of languages. We know that translation played a considerable role in the linguistic and literary life of the sixteenth century. . . . These works had to be translated into a language that had not been finally developed and formed. Indeed it had to be shaped in the very process of translation. . . .⁹

Which is precisely what happens with Luther's Bible. As a matter of fact, the space Bakhtin describes is European, even though his book deals with French literature. But no French translation of that period—as the relatively secondary role assigned to translation in Du Bellay's *Défense et illustration de la langue française* clearly shows—could assume the foundational role of the Lutheran Bible, because there does not exist in France a work that could, by itself, play the role of a

foundation of national and literary French. We do not have a *Divine Comedy*. If Luther's Bible plays this role, it is because it claims to be a *Verdeutschung* of the Scriptures, connected historically to a vast movement of reformulation of the faith, of a renovation of the relation to sacred texts, of a radical reinterpretation of the Testaments, as well as to a national religious affirmation against the "imperialism" of Rome. Conversely, this movement only acquires its strength from the actual existence of a "germanized" Bible accessible to all. We have here a decisive historical and cultural conjunction that establishes a real rupture in Germany: Henceforth, there is a *before* and an *after Luther*, not only religiously and politically, but *literarily*.¹⁰ The rediscovery of a pre-Lutheran literary past by Herder and the Romantics will not question this rupture, and Goethe is perfectly well aware of it in the text cited above: In order to read the *Nibelungen* or Meister Eckhart, the Germans have to resort to intratranslations, not needed by the Italians to read Dante, who is nevertheless a contemporary of Meister Eckhart.

The fact that the foundation and the formation of common literary German should have happened by means of a translation is what allows us to understand why there will exist in Germany a *tradition of translation* that regards translation as the creation, transmission, and expansion of the language, the foundation of a *Sprachraum*, of a linguistic space of its own. And it is by no means a coincidence that the Romantics will link their theories of literature, criticism, and translation to a theory of the Bible, to a "universal method of bibliification."¹¹

Franz Rosenzweig, who collaborated with Martin Buber on a new *Verdeutschung* of the Bible, conforming to the needs of the faith in the twentieth century, has brought out the meaning of Luther's translation for German culture, language, and literature in a remarkable way. We quote at length from his essay "Die Schrift und Luther":

Languages may be accompanied by writing for centuries without the emergence of what is designated with the peculiar expression of "written language." . . . At one time in the life of a people the moment comes when writing, once its servant, becomes the master of language. This moment arrives when a content embracing the entire life of the people is poured into writing; that is, when for the first time there is a book "that everyone must have read." From this moment on, language can no longer proceed unaffected. . . . And truly, from then on the tempo of the development of the language is heavier than before. Today, we still largely understand Luther's German if we modernize the spelling. . . . On the other hand, it would be very difficult for us to read the literature contemporaneous with Luther to the extent that it has not already been influenced by him. . .

To be sure, the domination of a book over a language does not

mean that the latter's development has ended. Nevertheless, it is tremendously slowed down. . . .

The problematic of the classic, foundational book is intensified by the fact that it is a translation. Because for translations there holds a law of unicity, connected here with that unicity of the classic moment of the history of the language. The history of translation has a very typical course. In the beginning, unassuming interlinear translations, which want to be no more than aides for reading the original, coexist with free adaptations—reformulations wanting to convey in some way to the reader the meaning of the original or what they consider to be its meaning. . . . Then, one day the miracle of the marriage of the two spirits of language happens. This does not happen without preparation. Only when the receiving people, out of their own longing and by their own expression, go out to encounter . . . the foreign work, that is when its reception no longer follows from curiosity, interest, cultural impulse [*Bildungsdrang*], or even aesthetic pleasure, but in the broadness of a historical movement, only then has the time for such a *hieros gamos*, such a sacred wedding, arrived. Thus for Schlegel's Shakespeare only at the time when Schiller creates for the Germans a theater of their own; thus for Voss' Homer only when Goethe approaches the antique form. . . . Then the foreign book becomes one's own. . . . This tremendous step in the unification of the Babel of the peoples does not owe its existence to a single translator; it is a fruit ripened by the life of the people under the constellation of an entirely unique historical moment. A moment that cannot be repeated. The moment of the history of the people does not return because it has no need to return; within the limits which alone enter into consideration here—the limits of the horizon of a momentaneous national presence—it is immortal. As long as the connection of this present with the past is not catastrophically broken . . . that which Voss made of Homer remains Homeric for the German people, and that which Luther made of the Bible remains biblical. No new attempt at translation can attain this national significance. . . . To be sure, the new translation of Homer may be much better than Voss' translations, but it cannot constitute a world historic event; it can only seek to obtain the laurels bestowed upon it by the spirit of its own people, not those bestowed by the world spirit, which can be bestowed only once because the world tournament can be played only once, unlike the training games of peoples and people which are played every year and every day.¹²

This important text raises many questions. Rosenzweig links the historical unicity of a translation—in this case Luther's—to the vaguely Hegelian notion of *world spirit*. In Luther's case, undoubtedly there is no need to resort to this speculative notion: The historicity of his translation is obviously linked to precise religious, national, and linguistic factors. But Rosenzweig's text has the merit of raising the problem of the

historicity of translation in general. Indeed, if not evident, the historicity of a *work* is at least undisputed. Homer's work is historic in the sense that Greek history (not only Greek literary history) is unthinkable without it. The same goes for a Dante. Still, at stake here is the historicity of a certain national linguistic or cultural space. But these works are equally historic at the level of the Western space as a whole, and beyond: They constitute what is called "universal literature"—which they certainly could not have been without the mediation of translation. But two points have to be made here. First, it is because they were already *potentially* universal that they have been universally translated. Which is to say that they already carried within themselves, at the level of their form and their content, their own translatability. The work of someone like Kafka, in the twentieth century, has a universal value, and it has been translated almost everywhere. But—and this is the second point—this does not mean that all the translations of those works have an historic value. For instance, Kafka's influence in France did not depend on a translation that drew attention in and of itself, that is, as a *work* properly speaking. The same may be said of the translation of a Joyce or a Dostoevsky. In these circumstances, a translation should be called *historic* if it has been *epoch-making as a translation*, a translation which appears *as such*, and in that way, strangely, attains the rank of a work and is no longer confined to be a humble mediation of an historic text. In other words: The translation of an essential text, a text heavy with history, is not itself necessarily historic. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish the *general historicity* of translation, its role of unassuming mediation which obviously contributes to the movement of history, from those relatively rare translations which, by their own effect, turn out to be heavy with history. Indeed, as Rosenzweig says, these are the unique translations—which do not prevent the existence of other translations (unique or not) of the same originals. In Germany, Luther's Bible, Voss' Homer, Hölderlin's Sophocles and Pindar, A. W. Schlegel's Shakespeare, and Tieck's *Don Quixote*, clearly belong to this type of translation. But one cannot simply state that these translations "came at their time" (it was not the case for Hölderlin), because the translations that only mediate can also only "come at their time"—by virtue of that selectivity belonging to cultures which makes possible all omnitranslation. Moreover, in the case of the German translations we mentioned, it is interesting to note that they are all *re-translations*: there were already numerous translations of these works, often of an excellent quality. To be sure, the new translations emerge from an historically precise soil: The reformulation of the relation to the Bible and revealed faith (Luther), the deepening of the relation to the Greeks (Voss, Hölderlin), an opening to English and Iberian literatures (A. W. Schlegel and Tieck). They could

only exist on such a soil. The deepening of the already existing relation to foreign works demanded new translations. But this is a somewhat determinist view, because we can also consider these translations as that *unforeseeable and incalculable novelty* which is the essence of a truly historic event. It seems that these translations could only emerge as retranslations: going beyond the framework of simple intercultural communication carried out by mediating translations, they manifest *the pure historic power of translation as such*, which is not to be confounded with the historical power of translation in general. At a given moment, it is as if the historical relation with another culture or another work could only be established abruptly by means of translation. It does not necessarily happen like this; for instance (and we shall come back to this), the profound relation to Antiquity maintained by classicist France does presuppose a great many translations—those made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—but by no means one translation in particular; not even Amyot's Plutarch. The peculiarity of German culture is perhaps to have experienced this unique power of translation several times. And it emerged for the first time with Luther.

In this respect, an examination of the limits of Luther's *Verdeutschung*, specifically with regard to the Hebrew text, may have seemed of secondary importance. Besides, these limits have only become evident in the twentieth century, together with the reinterpretations, rereadings, and retranslations of the Gospels and the Old Testament. As Rosenzweig emphasizes—but this is already indicated by the example of Luther's translation quoted above—Luther, even though he certainly referred back to the Hebrew text, in the final analysis worked from the Latin version:

Even as he studied the Hebrew text, he did not think in Hebrew, but in Latin.¹³

Which was inevitable, since it was Latin and not Hebrew that constituted the linguistic, religious, and cultural background of Luther's thought. Nevertheless, by bringing about the delimitation of German and Latin, the *Verdeutschung* did not proceed to a simple germanization in the sense in which we would speak depreciatingly of the "gallicization" of a foreign text today. This is all the more impossible inasmuch as, in the case of a religious translation like that of the Bible and of a return to the "sources" like Protestantism, the Hebrew original could not be simply left aside. Here, the appeal to Hebrew functioned rather to reinforce the efficiency of the "Reform" movement. Even though it was by no means the determining factor in the entire Lutheran undertaking, Hebrew inflected the *Verdeutschung* and lent it a supplementary originality. Luther knew very well that opening the Biblical word to the

community of believers was at the same time giving them this word in the language of the “woman in the home,” of the “children in the street,” and of the “common man in the market place,” and *transmitting to them the Bible’s own speaking*, that is to say, the Hebrew speech, which requires that the framework of the German be sometimes pushed aside:

On the other hand I have not just . . . disregarded altogether the exact wording of the original. Rather with my helpers I have been very careful to see that where everything turns on a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally, and have not lightly departed from it. For example, in John 6 [:27] Christ says, “Him has God the Father sealed [*versiegelt*].” It would have been better German to say, “Him has God the Father signified [*gezeichnet*],” or, “He it is whom God the Father means [*meinet*].” But I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word. Ah, translating is not everyman’s skill as the mad saints imagine. It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart. Therefore I hold that no false Christian or factitious spirit can be a decent translator.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Luther writes of his translation of the Psalms:

On the other hand we have at times also translated quite literally—even though we could have rendered the meaning more clearly another way. . . . Therefore . . . we should keep such words, accustom ourselves to them, and so give place to the Hebrew language where it does a better job than our German.¹⁵

In the same text, he broaches the problem of the “meaning” and of the “letter” in a more general way, stating he has translated

at times retaining the words quite literally, at times rendering only the meaning.¹⁶

This is a direct allusion to Saint Jerome, translator of the *Vulgate*, for whom the translation of the Scriptures was only a rendering of meaning. As he says in his “Letter to Pammachius,” this is a rule already well-instituted by Cicero and the Latin poets:

I do not only admit but recognize clearly that in translating the Holy Scriptures from the Greek . . . I have not translated word for word, but meaning for meaning.¹⁷

St. Jerome and his translation remain the background for the Lutheran Bible, but the latter nevertheless intends to leave “some room” to the Hebrew language. Thus, the *Verdeutschung* seems to oscillate between several modes of translation. And we must use the term *mode* here, because in Luther there is no concern with a set of empirical

rules—as is the case in Estienne Dolet's *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre*—nor of a method in the sense of a systematic definition of types of translation, as in Schleiermacher's "On the Different Methods of Translating."¹⁸ Not to choose between literalness and freedom, between the "meaning" and the "letter," between Latin and Hebrew, does not signify a methodological wavering but a perception of the fundamental aporias of translation and an intuition of what can and must be done at a given historical moment.

As such, Luther's translation opens a double horizon: an historical-cultural one, which we have mentioned above, and the more limited one of future German translations and their meaning. Since Luther, no translation from a foreign work and a foreign language can be made without some reference to his translation of the Bible, even if it is only to put his principles aside and to attempt to go beyond them. Voss, Goethe, and Hölderlin will take precise stock of this. If the Lutheran Bible establishes a rupture in the history of the German language, culture, and literature, it also establishes one in the domain of translations. *Moreover, it suggests that the formulation and the development of a national culture of its own can and must proceed by way of translation, that is, by an intensive and deliberate relation to the foreign.*¹⁹

This affirmation may appear, and in part is, of the utmost triviality. At least it is our custom to consider it such. But it is one thing to think that, for one's own development of whatever order, it is good "to rub one's brains with another" (Montaigne); it is another to think that any relation to oneself and to what is one's "own" passes radically through this relation to the other and to the foreign, so much so that it is by such an *alienation*, in the strictest sense of the word, that a relation to oneself is possible. There lies, on the psychological level, the mental operation of many translators, an operation André Gide once formulated in a conversation with Walter Benjamin:

It is precisely the fact that I removed myself from my mother tongue that provided me with the necessary momentum to master a foreign language. What matters most for the learning of languages is not to learn, but to abandon one's own language. Only in that way does one eventually fully understand it. . . . It is only in leaving a thing that we name it.²⁰

But things become more complicated when this law leaves the psychological sphere and is applied on the historical-cultural level. In addition, the disproportion of the passage through the foreign makes the threat of the loss of one's own identity hover perpetually over the level of the individual as well as that of a people and a history. What is at stake here is not so much this law as it is the point where it crosses its

own limits without, for all that, transforming itself into a genuine relation to the Other. And this is what sometimes seems to happen in German culture: When the “flexibility,” so highly praised by Goethe and A. W. Schlegel (by the former for the German language, by the latter for the German character), is transformed into the *unified and protean power to fall into alterity*. At the outset of the nineteenth century, this power is attested to by the prodigious development of philology, literary criticism, comparative studies, hermeneutics, and, of course, translation. In the literary sense, authors like Tieck, Jean Paul, and Goethe show the same dangerous “flexibility” (in the vocabulary of the time *versatility* is readily used to designate this mental and cultural agility, without a pejorative meaning). This movement, very productive culturally, starts from the paradox, apparent or not, that a community has better access to itself in proportion as it opens itself to what it is not. In his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche will regard what he summarizes by the expression *historical sense* as a genuine disaster—the disaster of the European nineteenth century.²¹

Obviously, a spirit as “versatile” as F. Schlegel’s was perfectly well aware of the nature of this relation. In his fragments, he mentions two nations of translators—the Romans and the Arabs—and what sets them apart in this respect. The Romans made a language and a literature for themselves on the basis of a tremendous work of translation from the Greek, a work of symbiosis and annexation—think of an author like Plautus. According to Schlegel, the Arabs proceeded in a different manner:

Their fondness for destroying or throwing away the originals when the translations are finished characterizes the spirit of their philosophy. Precisely for that reason it may be that they were ultimately more cultivated but, with all their culture, more purely barbaric than the Europeans of the Middle Ages. For barbarism is defined as what is at once anti-classical and anti-progressive.²²

Indeed, to burn the originals—an act of an immeasurable, almost mythical complexity—has a twofold effect: It suppresses any relation to a literature considered to be an historical model (the “anti-classical”) and it makes impossible any re-translation (whereas each translation implies its re-translation, that is, a “progressivity”).

In that way, starting from the historical precedent of Luther’s translation of the Bible, a whole set of questions is posed to German culture, questions that concern its very essence: What are we if we are a nation of translators? What is translation, and what is a good translation, for the people we are? Also, to what extent does this hypertrophic and disproportionate relation not constitute for us a radical threat? Should we

not rather turn to that which, in our culture, has *become* foreign to us, though it actually constitutes our innermost nature—our past? What is *Deutschheit*, if it is the site of all these questions? Herder, Goethe, the Romantics, Schleiermacher, Humboldt, and Hölderlin, each in their own way, attempt to confront these questions that situate translation in a cultural problematic extending far beyond all “methodology.” In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche and philological positivism will take them up again, followed in the twentieth century by thinkers as diverse as Lukács, Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Reinhardt, Schadewaldt, and Heidegger.