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# Levinas, Latin American Thought and the Futures of Translational Ethics

## Lévinas, pensée latino-américaine et avenir possibles pour une éthique traductrice

Christopher Larkosh

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Article abstract

This article underscores the relevance of the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to contemporary discussions of translational ethics, especially with respect to contemplations of the discipline's future. It posits thinking of the future as an ethical imperative against the historical backdrop of the Holocaust and other human ethical crises. Despite the foreclosure of utopian thinking that such a context might imply, there are nonetheless other modes of imagining translation in other terms, whether "dés-inter-esement," cross-identification, or other forms of transcultural ethical consciousness. The discussion is highlighted by examples from Latin American literature, liberation philosophy and anthropology, as well as from the historical trajectory of the discipline of translation studies from the 1970's to the present.

# Levinas, Latin American Thought and the Futures of Translational Ethics

Christopher Larkosh

*On peut se montrer scandalisé par cette conception utopique et, pour un moi, inhumaine. L'humanité dans l'être historique et objectif, la percée même du subjectif, du psychisme humain, dans son originelle vigilance ou dégrisement, c'est l'être qui se défait de sa condition d'être : le dés-inter-essement. C'est ce que veut dire le titre du livre : « autrement qu'être ». La condition se défait, ou est défaite, dans la condition ou l'incondition humaine. Être humain, cela signifie : vivre comme si l'on n'était pas un être parmi les êtres.*

(Levinas, 1982, p. 97)

*Se supera la razón emancipadora como “razón liberadora” cuando se descubre el eurocentrismo de la razón ilustrada, cuando se define la “falacia desarrollista” del proceso de modernización hegemónico. Esto es posible, aún para la razón de la Ilustración, cuando éticamente se descubre la dignidad del Otro (de la otra cultura, del otro sexo y género, etcétera) cuando se declara inocente a las víctimas desde la afirmación de su Alteridad como Identidad en la Exterioridad como personas que han sido negadas por la Modernidad. De esta manera, la razón es trascendida (pero no como negación de la razón en cuanto tal, sino de la razón violenta eurocéntrica, desarrollista, hegemónica).<sup>1</sup> (Dussel, 2000, p. 50)*

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<sup>1</sup> The reason of emancipation as a “liberating reason” is overcome when the Eurocentrism of Enlightenment reason is discovered and the developmentalist fallacy in the hegemonic process of modernization is identified. This is possible, even for Enlightenment reason, when the dignity of the Other (of the other culture, the other sex and gender etc.) is discovered ethically, and when the victims are declared innocent, out of the affirmation of their Otherness as Identity in Exteriority, as people who have been negated by Modernity. In this

Giving importance and space to the subject of ethics in translation studies remains a decisive move in the often divided present-day environment of the discipline, not because of any lack of awareness of a possible relationship between ethics and professional practice, but because many practitioners in our field may still be unconvinced of the necessity of humanistic, and especially philosophical/theoretical, approaches. I would hope that the prominence given to a concern such as ethics in current discussions confirms our ongoing commitment to the crucial need of critical thought in asking some of the most pressing questions in this our 'ever-emergent' field of study, as the answers we give them translate into concrete institutional decisions related to pedagogical and professional practice inside and outside of the more obscure cerebral alcoves of academe.

To name a few of these questions: How do issues of linguistic, gender, racial and ethnic identity give broader meaning to the individual acts we perform as translators and interpreters? How does the discussion of ethics in translation extend to instances in which translation assists in linguistically reproducing and institutionally maintaining relations of cultural, political or economic hegemony? Is it possible to exercise the translator's craft in such a way as to facilitate a reading of 'linguistically othered' texts for large audiences, while respecting and extending the scope and potential for cultural diversity, and what is the ethical position of work that insists (be it tacitly) on a depoliticized approach as the unquestioned state of *business as usual*?

As I have stated elsewhere in discussions of what we might begin to call the *theoretical imperative* in translation studies (Larkosh, 2004, p. 108), such an ethical commitment should not be construed as either 'anti-practice' or 'anti-linguistic.' On the contrary, the translator's presence as a theorizing subject, now more than ever, can be recognized as inseparable from this practice. Clearly, discussions of translational ethics must be concerned not only with the accurate transferral of meaning, but also the broader cultural significance and potential public spaces of the texts we translate and the institutionalized positions from which we do so. Translating ethically, especially from Global South to Global North, may well imply an interruption in official discourses by enabling voices not traditionally audible in present-day academic discussions of translational ethics to come forth,

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way, Reason is transcended (but not as a negation of reason *per se*, but of a violent, Eurocentric, developmentalist, hegemonic reason). (My translation)

and thereby challenging the Eurocentric foundations of present structures of symbolic domination. As I intend to show, Latin American thinkers have had much to contribute to this discussion of ethics that emanates from a critique of conventional constructions of identity, alterity and mechanisms of global hegemony.

Viewing translation through this theoretical lens underscores these extratextual ethical concerns, including that which the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has called “la responsabilité pour autrui” (Levinas, 1978, pp. 22-25). At first glance this idea may seem simple enough, but this apparent simplicity conceals a complex ethical task that many would judge to border on the impossible:

Positivement, nous dirons que dès lors qu’autrui me regarde, j’en suis responsable, sans même avoir à prendre de responsabilités à son égard; sa responsabilité *m’incombe*. C’est une responsabilité qui va au-delà de ce que je fais. D’habitude, on est responsable de ce qu’on fait soi-même. Je dis, dans *Autrement qu’être*, que la responsabilité est initialement un *pour autrui*. Cela veut dire que je suis responsable de sa responsabilité même. (Levinas, 1982, p. 92)

I would argue that this nearly unattainable ethical standard set by Levinas’ discussion of ethical responsibility is ironically what also makes it most pertinent to the act of translation and interpretation, one with which we are already familiar in the study of translation and whose relevance recent interpretation studies scholarship has also begun to recognize (Furmanek, 2004).

Moreover, it is no coincidence that the work of Levinas in which this ethical relationship is given in greatest detail, *Autrement qu’être ou Au-delà de l’essence*, is dedicated to “les êtres les plus proches parmi les six millions d’assassinés par les nationaux-socialistes, à côté des millions et des millions d’humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l’autre homme, du même antisémitisme” (Levinas, 1978, p. 5). Levinas’ own Jewish identity is pivotal in the development of his ethical stance, one that emerges from his own personal experience as the survivor of a forced labor camp in one of human history’s greatest tragedies, the Nazi Holocaust (Peperzak, 1993, p. 4). So if indeed Levinas’ ethical stance of absolute responsibility is an impossible one, it is perhaps because of the absolute human ethical crisis from which it emerges. Impossible, but considering what is at stake, then perhaps precisely why it is all the more necessary, a stance also reflected in the Derridian

paradox of translation that has been circulating in translation studies for some time: “the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility” (Derrida, 1985, p. 171).

In his book *Postmodern Ethics*, the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman elaborates upon Levinas’ most dramatic reversal of the principles of modern ethics, in which he grants the Other that priority which was once unquestionably assigned to the self (Bauman, 1993, p. 85). Indeed, Levinas inverts the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza’s concept of *conatus essendi*, i.e., the drive to be and remain who or what ‘we’ are. The contemporary critique of Spinoza’s *conatus* extends beyond continental philosophy, however. A rereading of the Argentine short story entitled “Borges y yo” is useful not only to illustrate this concept, but also to allow for a discussion on how such an attachment to identity may not be as tenable in a contemporary context:

Spinoza entendió que todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser; la piedra eternamente quiere ser piedra el tigre un tigre. Yo he de quedar en Borges, no en mí (si es que alguien soy), pero me reconozco menos en sus libros que en muchos otros o que en el laborioso rasgueo de una guitarra. Hace años yo traté de librarme de él y pasé de las mitologías del arrabal a los juegos con el tiempo y con el infinito, pero esos juegos son de Borges ahora y tendré que idear otras. Así que la vida es una fuga y todo lo pierdo y todo es del olvido, o del otro.

No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página.<sup>2</sup> (Borges, 1974, p. 186)

This vision of ethics and alterity is thus interrogated in one of the most identifiable of Latin American literary contexts, although often with an extended set of ideological and cultural underpinnings. Borges’ wish to identify with the texts of others may result from his own history of reading, one which has in effect shaped his own identity to such an

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<sup>2</sup>. Spinoza understood that all things wish to persevere in their being: a stone eternally wants to be a stone, and a tiger to be a tiger. I have to remain in Borges, not in me (if in fact I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. A few years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to playing with time and the infinite, but those games belong to Borges now and I will have to think up other things. Thus my life is a fugue and I lose it all, and everything belongs to forgetting or to the other. I do not know which of us has written this page. (My translation)

extent that it often appears to upstage his own activity as an author. What Borges' blurred distinction between self and other evokes, at least as illustrated here, is more evocative of the inherent limits of this otherness, as it is by extension an encounter with his own self-constructed Western cultural canon and its (mis)interpreted others. It is through this developing awareness that we begin to speak of *transcultural consciousness*: one which places the recognized limits of one's own identity within an expanded historical context of cultural exchange. Nonetheless, it remains troubling that in this example from an author so frequently at the center of 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussions on translation, the relationship with the other is internalized to such an extent that it is difficult to evaluate its potential in imagining a relationship with those others who cannot be appropriated into one's own conception of identity. It becomes necessary, especially in the Latin American context, to extend such solipsistic conceptions of translational alterity to examine the more complex spaces of linguistic and cultural otherness, as it is this movement that makes a conception of "Otherness as Identity in Exteriority" (Dussel, 2000, p. 50) possible.

In Latin America, the ethical necessity to move toward a more complex transcultural consciousness emerges as a response to the legacy of structures of colonial power. As we have already begun to examine here, links to Levinasian ethics<sup>3</sup> are particularly evident in the 'liberation philosophy' of the Argentine Enrique Dussel, who writes:

Teníamos la conciencia de ser la 'otra-cara' de la Modernidad. En efecto, la Modernidad nace en realidad en 1492 con la 'centralidad' de Europa (el 'eurocentrismo' se origina al poder Europa envolver el mundo árabe que había sido el centro del orbe conocido hasta el siglo XV). El 'yo,' que se inicia como el 'yo conquisto' de Cortés o Pizarro, que anteceden prácticamente al *ego cógito* cartesiano por un siglo, produce el genocidio, la esclavitud del africano, las guerras

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<sup>3</sup>. The impact of Levinas upon Dussel's work is apparent beginning with the epigraphs in Dussel's 1973 work *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*: the first from the 16<sup>th</sup> century defender of indigenous peoples Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, the second from Levinas' *Totalité et Infini*: "La ética, más allá de la vision y la certeza, designa la estructura de la exterioridad como tal. La moral no es una rama de la filosofía, sino la filosofía primera" [Ethics, beyond vision and certainty, designates the structure of Exteriority as such. Morals are not a branch of philosophy but rather philosophy first and foremost.] (My translation, in Dussel, 1973, p. 9)

coloniales del Asia. La mayoría de la humanidad presente (el 'Sur'), es la 'otra-cara de la Modernidad.'<sup>4</sup> (Dussel, 1994, p. 59)

As a philosophy which claims to be “popular, feminista, de la juventud, de los oprimidos, de los condenados de la tierra,” etc. (“popular, feminist, of youth, of the oppressed, of the condemned of the earth,” Dussel, 1994, p. 59), Dussel’s *cross-identificatory drive* is clearly broad-based, going so far as to take up an identitarian stance firmly on the ‘Other’ side of humanity. Even if each of us might not find a reference to his/her own subject positionality in this outline of otherness on the threshold of our new millennium (and if one were simply to place an ellipsis there at the end of that always incomplete list, what would become of the division between these two distinct “faces”?), it is nonetheless clear that the goal for Dussel is no longer simply to explore the multiplicity of identity, but to provide, through philosophical observations grounded in an ethical imperative, the theoretical and practical means for oppressed people to convert this consciousness into social acts of liberation.

But is this the only way to create a change between the Western subject and its others? What if it were to come not by ‘choosing a face,’ but by affirming the “anyoneness” (“*quodlibet ens: l’essere tale che comunque importa*” [that being—in any way—that matters *anyway*]; Agamben, 1990, p. 9) of one’s own sense of identity and community? Or, even more radically, could such a transformation emerge by allowing for difference out of a recognition of one’s own inability to understand, much less translate, those expressions from non-Western languages that inevitably must accompany (and probably, will at least partially displace) many of the linguistic and philosophical traditions through which thinking and ethics itself have traditionally been possible in the West?

One may question whether this imaginary crossing between various identities, whether actual oppressed subjects or others perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> We were aware of being the other face of modernity. In effect, modernity is actually born in 1492 with the centrality of Europe (Eurocentrism originates when Europe is able to envelop the Arab World, which had been the center of the known world until the 15<sup>th</sup> century). The “I” which begins as the “I conquer” of Cortés or Pizarro, which precede the *ego cogito* by nearly a century, would produce genocide, the enslavement of Africans, and the colonial wars in Asia. The majority of present-day humanity (the South), is the other face of modernity. (My translation)

still only vaguely understood yet already given a place in his own imagination, truly allows for a multiplicity of positions both within and beyond the monolithic models of ‘human’ subjectivity. This fantasy of the foreigner within, whether as elaborated by Borges, politicized and critiqued by Dussel or even as revisited by contemporary poststructuralist theorists—“l’étranger nous habite; il est la face cachée de notre identité” (Kristeva, 1988, p. 9)—could indeed be considered an appropriation of the other, but this other found in ourselves is arguably less negating than the all-too-common alternatives of marginalization, absorption or outright extermination which have marred the history of cultural contact in the transatlantic encounter and beyond...

But does this radical repositing of identity suggest something more? While it is necessary to recognize the ways in which personal experience determined by class origins, ethnicity and gender can shape one’s ability to identify and speak about how social injustice, hegemony and inequality is articulated in the ideologies of state, society and culture, these are by no means the only ways in which such discourses of identity and alterity are authenticated and legitimized. The injustices that result from the arbitrary exercise of power are at times too subtle to be reduced to a set of readily identifiable categorical reasons (language, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.).

What, then, is the relevance of this philosophical discussion on ethics to our work as translators, interpreters and scholars in translation and interpretation studies? This question is actually one of the main reasons why the preoccupation with the fictional turn in translation studies continues, as these studies point toward the way representations of translators and interpreters in literature and both intellectual and popular culture has had an enormous power to shape public perceptions or misconceptions regarding the necessity and value of work in translation and interpretation. The awareness of the popular conceptions or misconceptions regarding who we are and what we do as translators and interpreters may also be considered a part of that relationship of ethical responsibility for the Other.

### **Translational Fictions: Ethical Frictions?**

The challenge, nonetheless, is to examine the nature of our own translational cross-identifications in the context of a responsibility for/to the Other. Are translators and interpreters willing to allow a



largely depoliticized discussion of localization, linguistic accuracy and equivalence to stand in for a more broad-based discussion of translational ethics? And how would established humanistic sectors of the discipline contribute to such a discussion?

On a more ‘site-specific’ level, another set of such ‘fictions of translation’ can be found in the 1997 novel by Pablo De Santis entitled, aptly enough, *La traducción*, and which may suggest any number of discussions on the ways that discursive heterogeneity and alterity are negotiated in our profession. It deals with a conference of translators held at a virtually deserted coastal resort in southern Argentina<sup>5</sup> with the enigmatic name of Puerto Esfinge, lit. ‘Port Sphinx.’ The partly abandoned, partly still unbuilt hotel stands as yet another incomplete Latin American project of modernization, and is peopled with translators of one sort or another. It recounts their failed attempts at understanding one another, whether through tormented love triangles or violent academic disputes, which once again reveal the act of translation within the framework of its most revisited of metaphors, the relationship of love and the mystery before death, a struggle between languages and landscapes, and with one’s own often multiple identities and those of others, whether past or present, fictional or all of the above. In this translation of self and culture, especially in these geographical extremes where all forms of human language may seem foreign, the translators’ relationship with their profession becomes all the more agonizing, intensified by the fact that for many of these characters, translation is not even a vocation, but rather a detour from other deferred literary or academic aspirations, “un desvío” (De Santis, 2000, p. 12).

These absurd characters at the ‘end of the world’ employ a wide range of methodologies to arrive at their investigative conclusions, all the while insisting on the infallibility of their scientific,

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<sup>5</sup> It could be also stated here that this region of Argentina is the site of one of the country’s most brutal final campaigns against native peoples, known historically as the Conquest of the Desert (April 1879). It is a detail never mentioned here explicitly, but one that De Santis nonetheless evokes through his description of the landscape, whose desolation is interrupted only by abandoned buildings, cemeteries, the sea and an all-pervasive silence. It is this very silence that most often accompanies unpunished acts of murder, regardless of scale, and it is this kind of ‘dead silence’ upon which much of the construction and perpetuation of a Europeanized Latin American culture ultimately hinges.

psychological, linguistic, literary or even paranormal methodologies: one example is Valner, who specializes in the relationship between translation, UFO's, and obscure prophetic texts. Others concern themselves with clinical cases of brain damage or psychological disturbance. For example, the main character, Miguel De Blast, is studying a fictional psychoanalyst named Kabliz and his patient, a simultaneous interpreter who, after losing the thread during an important international conference, cannot stop interpreting: "una máquina de traducir descontrolada" (an out-of-control translation machine, De Santis, p. 39). Another character, Doctor Blanes, brings a patient with him, one who, after being hit with a bullet during a political demonstration, 'suffers from' the delusion that he can understand and translate absolutely everything, and in any language. Blanes must thus deflect the inevitable criticism that he is turning his scientific research into a spectacle: "¿Cree que mis conferencias son un espectáculo de feria porque traigo a un paciente? Es fácil hablar de los ausentes, describir tratamientos exitosos aplicados a enfermos encerrados a mil kilometros de distancia. El noventa por ciento de la historias clínicas que conozco son ciencia ficción. Psiquiatría ficción."<sup>6</sup> (De Santis, p. 103) This reference to science fiction (and other scientific fictions) not only underscores the role of fiction in scientific inquiry, but also returns the discussion of the limits of disciplinarity in translation studies to the realm of the literary. This novel, as yet another Argentine fiction of translation, thus inadvertently becomes a parody of the territorial disputes "on the name and nature of translation studies" which mark the continual emergence and development of a discipline still by no means *one*.

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<sup>6</sup> "Do you think that my lectures are a freak show because I bring my patients? It's easy to talk about those not present, to describe successful treatments of the ill, locked up a thousand kilometers away. Ninety percent of the clinical histories I know of are science fiction. Psychiatry fiction." (My translation) Through these psychological fictions of translation, I am reminded of Andrew Benjamin's book *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy* and his discussion of the relationship between the act of translation and Freudian case studies, highlighting the role of unconscious and conscious memory, as well as the literal and figurative connotations of language in the act of psychoanalysis that ensures room for a new conception of "pragmatic" interpretive divergence, in which "the original becomes inseparable from its translation. It is of course an inseparability that must be understood in terms of non-equivalence" (Benjamin, 1989, pp. 146-148).

Among the most disconcerting caricatures in the novel is that of the academic superstar Silvio Naum, who has returned to Argentina from Paris—the culminating scene of any ironized Argentine academic or literary success story—not only to present the keynote address, but also to carry out a bizarre suicide pact with a number of the other distinguished conference participants. As we shall see, his opening remarks are telling, more in their capacity to obscure his own criminal intentions than to expose any theory of translation (that is, if criminal intention does not in fact also propose its own theory of translation):

Habló de tribus perdidas en la selvas de las enciclopedias, que pensaban que había que hablar poco, porque las palabras gastaban el mundo. Habló de los que volvieron mudos de la Guerra, hombres de distintas naciones, que habían decidido lo mismo, como si se tratara de una conspiración, no decir nada, no admitir que lo que habían vivido podía ser contado. Habló del oído humano, que no soporta el silencio, y que cuando no tiene nada para alimentarse, comienza a generar su propio zumbido. Habló de ciertos chamanes que pasan años sin hablar, hasta que encuentran un día la palabra verdadera, que nadie entiende. Habló de los que morían con un secreto.

El verdadero problema para un traductor —dijo al final— no es la distancia entre los idiomas o los mundos, no es la jerga ni la indefinición ni la música; el verdadero problema es el silencio de una lengua —y no me molestaré en atacar a los imbeciles que creen que un texto es más valioso cuanto más frágil y menos traducible, a los que creen que los libros son objetos de cristal—, porque todo lo demás puede ser traducido, pero no el modo en que una obra calla; de eso —dijo— no hay traducción posible.<sup>7</sup> (De Santis, 2000, p. 90)

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<sup>7</sup>. He spoke of lost jungle tribes found only in encyclopedias who believed that one should not speak too much, that in speaking the world wears out, and of those who came home from war mute, men from different countries who all came to the same conclusion, as if it were some kind of conspiracy, not speaking, unwilling to admit that what one had experienced could be told. He spoke of human hearing and how it can't stand silence, and how, when it has nothing on which to feed, it begins to generate its own buzzing sound. He spoke of certain shamans who spent years without uttering a single word, until they found the one true word that no one understands. He spoke of those who die with a secret.

At the end, he said: “The real problem for a translator is not the distance which exists between languages or worlds, nor specialized vocabulary nor vagueness nor music; the real problem is that of a language’s silence—and I won’t bother to attack the imbeciles who believe that a text is the more valuable when the more fragile and less translatable, who believe that books are made of glass—

In short, De Santis presents us with yet another Argentine Tower of Babel, one in which translators and scholars refuse to communicate with and understand each other even when they are speaking the same language, that is, when not insisting that they understand each other when they in fact do not. The disconcerting possibility that we as specialists in cross-cultural communication cannot understand each other, however, pales in comparison to De Santis' suggestion that we simply refuse to do so. However comfortable we may be with our own silences, they are made all the more audible against this backdrop of other silences: tribal knowledge, the trauma of genocide (whether as victim, perpetrator or 'innocent bystander'), or the innumerable moments of commonplace, yet no less unbearable, solitude. If this is the case, then Levinas' call for ethical responsibility is more urgent than ever, especially if we are to achieve a working dialogue among the divergent linguistic, cultural and ideological groupings in our discipline and beyond.

At this point, one must relinquish any illusions of a single theory capable of adequately accommodating the phenomenon of translation and multilingualism in a rapidly globalizing cultural environment, a reality shaped not only by erudite specialists who negotiate the continual encounter between pairs of Western European languages, but one also explored by anthropologists and no less by the communities they study, whose acts of translation and interpretation reveal an entirely different set of encounters with 'metropolitan' culture. It thus comes as no surprise that in his contribution to his collection of essays on translation and ethnography, the Brazilian anthropologist Tullio Maranhão has recognized the relevance of Levinas to his own work in interpreting the cultures of Amazonian Indians, not as yet another Western theory to be applied or European counterpoint to the inherent threat under which many of these populations attempt to plot out their own survival. What ethnography teaches us about translation may be something quite different, and will in all probability not be what we were expecting. It may not reward our institutionalized standards of competence, nor privilege our traditional modes of organizing knowledge in language; as he notes in his introduction, "ethnographic mistranslation has deep roots in the political history of the nation-state introduced in Western Europe and

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because everything else can be translated, but not the ways in which a text remains silent; for this there is no possible translation." (my translation)

the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the economic and political correlate of society” (Maranhão, 2003, pp. xix-xx). Thus, in this reconfiguration of the study of translation under the sign of ethics, if it is indeed to the Other to whom our ethical responsibility as translators must be addressed, it may not only be through the exactitude of our translations, but in a critical revision of our very understanding of translation itself and the cultural preconceptions on which it is predicated.

### **On the Ethics of Futurity in Translation Studies**

The question of future, whether expressed as a utopian philosophical consideration or a concrete set of institutional goals, is one that has been intimately linked to the act of translation at the most basic level, as the original text must invariably await in the form of a future translation, one that is by no means guaranteed. In this sense, translators are artists of futurity, as much as translation studies scholars are theorists of futures, in both their past and present conceptions: who, in posing the questions of futurity, are also engaged in the most ethically committed of philosophical discussions. It is these critical interventions which make a renewed conception of future possible, whether in ‘our own’ languages and cultures or in those of others.

I would suggest, moreover, that it is this relationship between translation and future that has encouraged so many diverse visions of the discipline over the last thirty to thirty-five years in the course of the foundation and development of Translation Studies. One might even go so far as to state that translation studies, in its recurrent use of maps, disciplinary visions and even utopian proposals to plot its future, has already provided enough material for us to write at least a preliminary history of it. Through the examination of the discipline’s own future visions, one will discover that the future that translation studies has been creating for itself cannot be imagined as singular, but is irrevocably pluralistic at this stage in its development. Diversity of approach is perhaps the identifying mark of contemporary translation studies. Since the formative period in which James Holmes was writing about the name and nature of translation studies and mapping out possible futures for it, a constant characteristic of translation studies has been the lack of a common language (Holmes, 1988, p. 70).

Through this point of view, one informed by both Levinas and contemporary Latin American thought and by which theories of

translation are by nature theories of radical cultural alterity, it becomes all the more impossible to ignore the ethical considerations regarding the relationship with the Other as Identity in Exteriority in relation to the acts of translation and interpreting. For this reason, global debates in ethical philosophy should continue to inform studies of ethics in translation, and perhaps even more so in the growing area of community interpreting, especially given the crucial relationship between translation and the political struggle for human rights. By the same token, it is by no means the only disciplinary dialogue that this question calls forth; continuing work in anthropology, sociology, ethnic studies and other social science disciplines will no doubt continue to challenge the largely Western confines in which much of the discussions of translation studies and its methodologically divergent futures have been situated.

In this far from final analysis, it should come as no surprise that this vision of the future will no doubt continue to negotiate with at least a measure of ambivalence, if not hopelessness. At the end of his book, *Translation and Taboo*, Doug Robinson expresses his own ambivalence for the future of translation studies. He writes, “As I move toward an ending I am finding it hard, surprisingly hard for a utopian romantic thinker like myself, to summon the energy needed to radiate hope” (Robinson, 1996, p. 215). According to Robinson, there are still too many taboos in Translation Studies for it to have any kind of assured future, too many prohibitions set in place by our own sense of the legitimate discursive limits of translation and its discipline, if not a lingering rigidity in personal and professional conviction that at times makes any significant dialogue impossible.

Robinson is far from being the only disillusioned utopian among established Translation Studies scholars. One only need return to Lawrence Venuti’s book *The Translator’s Invisibility* to recognize that there appears to be an ongoing crisis in translation studies, one perpetuated by the often hostile institutional environment in which many translators are still forced to operate:

The translator’s invisibility today raises such troubling questions about the geopolitical economy of culture that a greater suspicion is urgently needed to confront them. Yet the suspicion I am encouraging here assumes a utopian faith in the power of translation to make a difference, not only at home, in the emergence of new cultural forms, but also abroad, in the emergence of new cultural relations. To recognize the translator’s invisibility is at once to

critique the current situation and to hope for a future more hospitable to the differences that the translator must negotiate. (Venuti, 1995, p. 313)

There may be ways that this hopelessness can be mitigated, perhaps precisely in the recognition of our discipline's social value beyond the confines of academe. Contrary to Venuti and Robinson's conjectures, however, a commitment to futurity need not be utopian, and may not even be contingent upon "faith" or "hope," at least not in any traditional sense. As Levinas reaffirms, another ethics is possible, one based not only on emotions or illusions but also on a measure of "*dés-inter-essement*." This emphasis on the role of disinterested commitment by no means precludes the role that feelings and beliefs may play in the continued commitment to projects of futurity, but more importantly, ensures a continued commitment to those projects at the inevitable moments when our sense of expectation does not in itself suffice.

After all, as historical experience in Latin American cultures underscores, social change is often precipitated by cultural agents who demand and succeed in the transformation of their societies precisely because they act out of intolerable—often dictatorial, but also genocidal—spaces in which a significant amount of, if not all, hope and faith have already been exhausted. As the Chilean critic and social researcher Martín Hopenhayn reminds us in his discussion of the possibilities of Utopian thought today:

Between literature, landscape, culture, the partial rationalization of life, utopia can and must be produced. Utopia in order to reread crisis and split it open. Utopia, in order to stock with meaning what administrative rationality (imposed in the adjustment, in Mephistophelian deals regarding external credits, in the worthless composure of the utterly hopeless) has previously despoiled. Utopia that would not necessarily be universal, rational, western. [...] Utopia that mixes, that hybridizes, that combines and recombines anew the scarcity of the present in order to suggest the plentitude of the future. Utopia that is both a factual impossibility and a cultural necessity, a political challenge and threat, dreams to trick both integration and the apocalypse. (Hopenhayn, 2001, p. 153)

Viewed from this critical context, translation remains, in spite of its history of institutional subordinations and inequality, a particularly privileged form of "being-in-the-world" when viewed from a broader sociopolitical perspective, composed as it is of subjects who, in spite of their other professional responsibilities and institutional vicissitudes,

use their own multilingual abilities to expand, transform and complicate the cultural environment in which they operate. By giving a virtually exclusive importance to either statistical corpus-based or purely literary research, translation studies runs the risk of limiting itself to elite academic environments, thus diminishing the socially transformative potential of its work in the very cultural and linguistic margins that we as scholars often claim to represent.

As academics and/or intellectuals, we can no longer claim to speak from a space of relative security, no more than we can delude ourselves about the instrumental role that translation already has in the operations of major global conflicts. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we as translation scholars must recognize and explore critically the ways that the acts of translation and interpreting are continually enlisted before this widening expanse of linguistic and cultural complexity. In light of these historical and institutional changes, it is perhaps more important than ever to recognize how translation is not simply our object of study, but also an essential intellectual and cultural tool that can allow the translator a measure of critical distance and selectivity in relation to current discourses, policies and priorities, thus shaping a new set of future ethical imperatives with relation to language, culture and society.

In the end, the field of translation studies remains an ongoing investigation, not only into linguistic diversity, but also into the cultural and discursive heterogeneity of our societies and institutions. After all, it is not only through linguistic competence or academic rigor that we as a community of specialists determine our future, but also in our ability to understand as well as dialogue with those who articulate their academic concerns in ways different from our own, and allow discursive and institutional space for those yet to arrive. Such considerations are not merely disciplinary, but have come to bear far more extensive social and human repercussions, and thus deserve a place in any vision of our shared future.

**University of Connecticut**

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**ABSTRACT: Levinas, Latin American Thought and the Futures of Translational Ethics** — This article underscores the relevance of the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to contemporary discussions of translational ethics, especially with respect to contemplations of the discipline's future. It posits thinking of the future as an ethical imperative against the historical backdrop of the Holocaust and other human ethical crises. Despite the foreclosure of utopian thinking that such a context might imply, there are nonetheless other modes of imagining translation in other terms, whether "dés-inter-essement," cross-identification, or other forms of transcultural ethical consciousness. The discussion is highlighted by examples from Latin American literature, liberation philosophy and anthropology, as well as from the historical trajectory of the discipline of translation studies from the 1970's to the present.

**RÉSUMÉ: Lévinas, pensée latino-américaine et avenir possibles pour une éthique traductrice** — Le présent article souligne la

pertinence de la philosophie éthique d'Emmanuel Lévinas dans les débats actuels sur l'éthique dans la traduction, et en particulier à propos des considérations sur l'avenir de cette discipline. Avec l'Holocauste, ou d'autres crises éthiques humaines pour toile de fond, cet article postule une réflexion sur l'avenir comme impératif éthique. Bien qu'un tel contexte semble exclure la possibilité de toute pensée utopique, il existe néanmoins d'autres modes de concevoir la traduction, que ce soit par le « dés-intér-essement », la transidentification ou d'autres formes de conscience éthique transculturelle. Nous étayerons notre discussion par des exemples tirés de la littérature latino-américaine, de la philosophie de la libération, de l'anthropologie, ou encore pris dans la trajectoire historique de la discipline de la traductologie depuis les années soixante-dix.

**Key words:** Levinas, ethics, transcultural consciousness, cross-identification.

**Mots-clés :** Lévinas, éthique, conscience transculturelle, transidentification.

**Christopher Larkosh: Dept. of Modern and Classical Languages,  
University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269  
Email: larko@rocketmail.com**