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Thingness of the Work of Art: Reflections on the Ontology of Untranslatability

Sounak Das | Jadavpur University
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Abstract | The paper begins by disclosing untranslatability not as a given fact, but as a consequence resulting from a certain epistemological attitude towards the work of art. A subjectivist outlook towards art and translation encounters the work in its thingness that eventually resists its reification. Taking cue from the insights of phenomenological thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Ricœur, this paper seeks to elaborate on the etymology and ontology of the thing while distinguishing it from the notions of aesthetic object and selfhood that have percolated through time since Kant. Thereafter, the approach to the thing as the hermeneutic event of projection is shown as the crucial break from subjectivity, one that leads to a fresh understanding of the literary experience in terms of becoming. This shift absolves untranslatability from the negative connotations of hindrance, and the irreducible otherness of the thing becomes instead the sole enabling condition of the infinitude of our engagement with it. Communication and conversation as modes of being liberate the thing from the delusional specter of untranslatability, shifting translation from being an act of transfer of identity towards a movement generating difference.

Keywords | Untranslatability, Thingness, Other, Event, Ontology

The prefix ‘trans’ in translation stipulates, in the usually accepted sense, a crossing over, a change, a passage through, as it also does in a similar fashion in other usages such as transformation, transmutation, transfusion, and so on. The occurrence of such processes is predicated by two assumptions. Firstly, there must exist two zones or realms, well demarcated from one another. For example, during blood transfusion, there has to be two distinct bodies, or that the Christian metaphor of transubstantiation has as its point of departure the distinction made between the realms of mankind and of God. Secondly, an entity, also distinguishable as a discrete and detachable part of a whole, must undergo a transfer from one of the systems to the other. Thus, blood in transfusion and the idea of substance interchangeable as blood-wine and flesh-bread in transubstantiation, conceived as independently existing entities, make this transfer possible.

In the case of translation of a literary work, seen as a transference from the source to the target language, our identification of these two systems as structural planes determining the crossing over entails an inevitable and necessary act of regression. The act of translation, as one that ‘works over’ or ‘edits’ a text within the parameters and constraints of its meaning, faces the obligation of treating the literary work as a product of culture. This in turn implies that its origin lies in the language, customs, and traditions of the said culture, and this implication renders the work the status of an entity derived from a more general realm, to which the translator turns to in order to de-code and subsequently re-code the text in the target language. Literature, however, understood as the creation of a unique language, is certainly a leap from the lexicon of linguistics towards new possibilities of significations.[1] The study of languages alone cannot fulfil an engagement with literary works, for literariness precisely consists of defamiliarizing our everyday notion of language that conventionally represents a stable, since it is anesthetized, reality to us. The identification of source and target languages or even cultures as the two pre-given systems for translation is therefore taking a step back in relegating literature to be an extension of something other than itself. The literary work is considered then to be a particular manifestation within the general system to which it is assumed to belong. This particularity comes to be equated with how a work is configured within the ‘assumedly larger’ frameworks of language and culture. Thus, on one hand, the work is conferred a self, an identity of its own, to the extent that it is perceived to be an ‘individual’ specimen with specific intrinsic attributes. However, on the other hand, this self-identity of the work is understood as the representation of a typical relation it evinces with respect to the generality of the system.

[1]Seen purely from a lexical point of view, a literary work is merely a combination of words that are already to be found in the dictionary and in social use. However, literature is involved in the creation of new significations, thereby extending the horizon of conventional use of language. It is in this potential to disclose hitherto unprecedented meanings that the primal or original quality of literature subsists.

No matter what strategy is employed in translating a work, the very endeavor of making it pass from one system to another eventually culminates in replicating its particularity with relation to a new general framework of the target language and/or culture. The act, although involving change on the level of appearances, is essentially a conservative one, for it attempts to re-instate the original particular-general relationship in a new foreign environment. If the text was considered first and foremost to be a particular manifestation of a language system and/or culture, the translated text attempts to re-enact this relationship with respect to the target language and/or culture. The question to consider here is: how do we come to believe that this relationship can be repeated identically elsewhere? The clue lies in having first accorded the work with a self. We have assumed that the uniqueness of the work corresponds to an essence of ethos that resides 'inside' it, and it is in the assumption of such an intrinsic quality that makes the possibility of the identical repetition of the latter plausible. The faith that the self can afford to remain identical irrespective of its 'outer, linguistic surface' is tantamount to investing the work with an immanent trans-linguistic identity.

Despite our attempts to straightjacket a work in a given perimeter and depth, it comes to reveal its otherness as soon as we try to process it like a malleable product. Instead of behaving as a mute and co-opting equipment, it generates irreducible differences at the site of translation. Untranslatability is this alterity of the text that it comes to manifest, that challenges the efforts of inscribing it within any general framework, be it language or culture. Its resistance to be subsumed within a conserved self-identity is an indication of our misjudgment in having accorded it selfhood in the first place. The attribution of self and identity to an entity and regarding it in relation to a system aid in the manipulation and transformation of the same. These are techniques which concern epistemology, because the fundamental question around which these practices circulate has to do with the 'what' of the literary work. On the other hand, the nature of the work not as a product but as a happening or event of signification is related to its ontological aspect; the 'how' that makes it. Thus, we can sense at this point that the nature of the problem of untranslatability is not an epistemological one involving transfer of knowledge. Rather, it is this very assumption of the literary work having a transferable epistemic status or state that encumbers our realization of the problem as essentially ontological in nature. This can be elucidated by reverting translation to a more basic realm, that of reading. Does not the act of reading also inherently involve a process of translation? Since we distinguish at the onset of reading a marked distinction between ourselves as the subject and the literary work as our object of perception, our engagement with it more often than not involves a transfer similar to the one discussed so far. Either we try to penetrate the otherness of the work by presumably sublating our selfhood in it, or we may try to assimilate it within our own life experiences and worldview. In both attitudes, the alterity of the work is disregarded in favor of sating our ego, of either consuming or conquering the other. The work is no longer accorded an autonomy of its own; it is rendered as an object which is sought either to be assimilated to the self of the person 'consuming' it, or to be forayed, penetrated, and eventually 'possessed.' In both cases, the work is invested with a status of an entity that is approached in favor of pre-supposed interests. Such commodification of art plays out the same epistemological outlook in conceiving it as knowledge, for it essentially conceives the artwork as a product of language and/or culture. Art comes to be regarded as a product of the culture industry that is firstly identical to itself in keeping with notions of selfhood, and which

can moreover be repeated identically. Associating the work of art with a self has the implication that its uniqueness comprises in being a receptacle of fixed characteristics, whereas the assumption that this self is maintained or is to be maintained intact in reading and translation is based on the belief that this self is repeatable. Both these outlooks are the culminations of a long tradition of Enlightenment which, as Adorno rightly points out, tends to erase out differences in favor of "the reproduction of sameness" (106). And once identified as knowledge, the work yields to relations of power where our faith in subjectivity is but whetted. And yet, do we not meet resistance in relegating the work to just another assimilable or conquerable element within the range of our unchanging worldview? Does it not challenge us when we try translating its singular variegations within the folds of our subjectivity? The negative connotation associated with the phenomenon of untranslatability is contingent with the positivistic attribution of identity and knowledge to the work. We see, therefore, that untranslatability, instead of being a given fact, is an inevitable outcome of a perspective associated with regarding a work through epistemic lens. Instead of behaving as an obedient, manipulable object, the work resolutely maintains its thingness, which in fact is the key to understanding its untranslatability.

Hannah Arendt begins her book *The Human Condition* with the simple yet profound musing that human existence is a conditioned one (9). If indeed so, what is human existence conditioned by? *Bedingt*, the word for 'conditioned' in the German language, contains within itself a clue to the question, for *Ding* refers to a thing. Also echoed previously by proponents of analytic philosophy such as Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*, our thingly existence among things is the governing condition which co-figures all that takes place, be it in the physical sense or non-material abstract sense, for thoughts and emotions too are as much thingly as anything tangible, as our discussion on thingness would attempt to elucidate. "The horizon of ours, of humans as finite beings, is thingly. Thus man, as a being thrown into a finite horizon, always and everywhere is thingly and is sensibly conditioned. Man cannot escape things" (Sliogeris 9).

As human beings, we are always in confrontation with things. The great tragedy and tension of human existence as the counter-position of man and thing is hinted by Rilke: "That is what fate means: to be opposite/ to be opposite and nothing else, forever" (Rilke 42).[2] With the development of the supremacy of human race over nature and other animals, we have become prone to the habit of often categorizing things as belonging to either nature or of our own making. Such a binary implies the relegation of all the differences and plurality of the world based exclusively on their relation with the human subject and human use. In attempting such a categorization, we fall back upon the same anthropomorphic worldview that places the human subject at the center of the world and explicates all phenomena with relation to this organic center. Such a constructivist worldview had begun with Kant's falling back on the Copernican Revolution, implying every experience to be a product determined by perspective, and gradually gave rise to an epistemology where every occurrence had to pass through the filter of human perception, conceding in the process any claim to autonomy or a beyond-human alterity. The exacerbation of the centrality of human subjectivity in post-Kantian philosophy bears

[2]This points to the impossibility of transcendence since our existence in the world is inevitably co-figured and conditioned by things.

witness to this phenomenon, where alterity came to be subsumed and selfhood became the cornerstone of all knowledge and truth.

The understanding of the world as the representation of human will and ideas as in Schopenhauer, or claiming the world exists primarily for the sake of the human subject in the philosophy of Fichte, attest to the tendency of Enlightenment and Humanism to 'reduce' plurality of the world to a unifying dimension that serves human interests. This dominant anthropocentric outlook is embodied in the significance with which the notion of truth has been envisaged in relation to the human subject. Hans Blumenberg traces in his essay, "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel," the evolution of the notion of truth in the shift it has undergone from being an epiphanous "instantaneous evidence" towards that which is constructed and hence associated with a "progressive certainty that can never reach a total, final consistency, as it always looks forward to a future that might contain elements which should shatter previous consistency" (*History, Metaphors, Fables* 488). This shift attests to the growing importance with which the human subject becomes indispensable as the center of every event, which in turn gradually contributes to a weakening of supra-human ideals which were prevalent in earlier epochs. In contrast to the Platonic Idea that formed and individuated man, ideas now point to the cognitive and intellectual faculty of human beings to manage and manipulate resources better for their own benefit. The world is what it appears to me and hence a subjective phenomenon, or that which appears to many like me where experiences come to be understood in an intersubjective field. This not only reifies the thingness of the thing to the limits of human subjectivity, but at the same time delimits the condition of being in the world within the scaffolds of a self that remains identical to itself throughout. The notion of the self is rooted in the belief of a continuum that pervades and maintains the being of a subject as a stable and continuous accretion of experiences through the vicissitudes of time, and is accompanied by a certitude that this subject has at its disposal his perception in representing phenomena to himself. In *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Blumenberg further notes that "while the 'invisible force of truth' may still play a role in the vocabulary of the Enlightenment, there is rather a *topos* of modesty serving to conceal the self-consciousness of a spirit that illuminates with its own light" (16). The self thus regards itself as the sole arbitrator of things.

However, the thing's thingness lies in the fact that it cannot be rendered as a subjective representation fulfilled by an object.[3] The thing does not give itself over as an object of knowledge that can be exhaustibly defined. Thus, the human being, as a thing among things, too loses its foothold over superficially institutionalized and somewhat calcified Humanism. Modernism, in effecting the shift from Kantian *disinterest*—where the human seat of perception maintained itself distinct in its perception of form or aesthesis—to Heideggerian *Interesse*—where the human being loses its immanent subjectivity resulting in an "exteriority of the inward" (Levinas 134)—plays out the transition from an epistemology-driven worldview towards an ontological enquiry, a journey that was necessary to affirm and appreciate the thing for what it is by and in

[3]The distinction between objects and things is based on the presence of the human subject. That which the subject represents to itself and can exhaustively describe is an object. An object, in this sense, is always represented, hence created, by subjectivity. Things, on the other hand, are sovereign and exist over and beyond the subject. They are not created by us, although they engender us with their presence when we confront them, like a landscape does, or a work of art.

itself.[4] Heidegger charts out the changing significations of the thing in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." The thing understood by the Greeks as *hupokeimon*, referred to an organization of characteristics around a core (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 20). The thing was essentially a happening; a gathering whose event itself created a core. According to this understanding, the thing does not possess any immanence or center, for its core is basically nothing by itself, rather only imaginable with respect to the becoming that comes to form it. However, the reception of this notion in Latin as *subjectum* marks, in Heidegger's view, the very rootlessness of Western thought. The thing as subject was now regarded as a bearer of properties. This understanding assumes an epistemological priority of the thing and thus relegates the becoming of a thing to a definition at once conceptual and exhaustive.

This proclivity for viewing the thing as a subject containing definite features in a sense prefigures a culture of subject-object duality that would be heralded by Descartes's formulation of reason as the ground for human existence. Since the subject in Descartes is conceived purely as a thinking substance cogitating everything that it is not, the very substantiality of the subject is taken for granted and not questioned. Likewise, in Hume's empiricism the subject is merely a receptacle of sensual impressions, where the very nature of the receptacle is passed over in favor of what it comes to accumulate. Heidegger's attempt to understand the thingness of the work of art along Rational and Empiricist dimensions reveals their inadequacy in addressing the problem at hand. The literary work does not agree to an exhaustive definition whereby a set of countable properties are applied to it. We can understand this from the fact that scores of books have been written on classics, and yet interpreting them hasn't come to an end. The rational outlook fails for there is no concept to be discovered in art. Likewise, our experience of art cannot be encapsulated by sensual experience alone, for it involves affect and understanding, a translation of material forms to responses as varied as ranging from empathy to disgust. While the Rational method places the work too far, the Empiricist outlook brings it too close.

Can the thingness of the work then be understood as formed matter, a shaping of a pre-given material according to a pre-given plan? After exploring the thingness of the work from Rationalist and Empiricist framework, Heidegger turns to this third category (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 26). Had it been so, the 'manufacturing' of the literary work would have to conform to a pre-existing design, meant to fulfill a specific purpose. Hammers or tumblers belong to the category of formed matter, whose making involves the choice and form of material as determined by their function. Assuming artwork to be fashioned similarly, would be to understand it as an equipment. The functionality of an equipment consists in it being minimally perceived during an operation. Ideally, one should not be perceptible of the presence of the hammer during using the same to put a nail on a block of wood; the equipment must act as an extension of our natural faculties without forcing us to cognize its unique presence. The presence of the equipment thus necessarily dissolves itself in the act where it finds its use, in contrast to a literary work

[4]The Kantian notion of Beauty associated with disinterested pleasure maintains the non-involvement of the subject in the aesthetic phenomenon, so as to preserve the thing of beauty from being subsumed into human purpose. Heidegger, on the contrary, associated interest as an indispensable element in the event of perception of art. Here, interest does not refer to pragmatic use but involvement independent of motive, that is, participation.

where words are not means to an end, but stand out in inviting the reader towards perception.[5] Moreover, to subscribe to this notion of art being pre-determined by a function would be somewhat self-contradictory for the definition of art since Romanticism has precisely consisted, in what Gadamer calls "aesthetic differentiation," of distinguishing art from reality (71). Such a segregation of art as something sovereign by itself begins in Kant, who in his *Critique of Judgement* accorded Beauty in art as purely formal, without serving any human purpose [*formale Zweckmäßigkeit*] (53). This was not without a sense of anxiety, for in divesting content or any ethical element from the artwork, Kantian subjectivity found itself face-to-face with something that could not be framed exclusively in human terms. On account of this anxiety, the otherness of the artwork as thing is overlooked by Kant in his favoring of the Sublime over the Beautiful, for the former by inspiring awe and terror elevates [*aufheben*] the perceiving subject to a morally good state, thereby effecting a return to the folds of Humanism and subjectivity (Ellison 12). The thing cannot be approached by the rational, sensual, and pragmatic attitudes because each of these dispositions is a manifestation of a belief and certitude of the human self as the sole arbitrator of experience. The untranslatability of the literary work is not a given fact, but acquires valency only in relation to a self that confuses being with knowledge. The thing in its thingness does not give itself over to be translated into subjective knowledge whereby the self (as that which is identified with the work, and the one belonging to the reader) can seek to maintain its undisputed centrality.

It was necessary for phenomenology to depart from analytic logic, psychologism, and positivism to shift from subjectivist modes of thought aligned on the lines of 'humanism and human progress' to go back to understanding thingness beyond the myopic and reifying gaze of the human self. "The thing must be allowed to remain in its self-containment. It must be accepted in its own constancy" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 26). The phenomenological turn in the history of European thought was fundamentally a shift of sovereignty from the rational human subject to the things themselves. Husserl's famous invocation of "we must go back to the 'things themselves'" was indeed 'regressive' as phenomenology was accused to be (168).[6] By challenging the undisputed certitude of the self's ability to represent the world to itself, one encounters for the first time the thing in its intransigent thingness. "The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 31). The literary work in its thingness cannot be approached by reason, since seen in this light, it continues to behave as an inert receptacle of properties that could be represented or transferred. The departure from associating art with epistemology likewise absolves the possibility of making it belong to a general system, and challenges our fixation with art's identity in correlating with other knowledge systems like sociology, psychology, and so on.[7] "If the work of art itself

[5]Unlike an equipment, which is the perfect example of matter formed according to a design to fulfil an end, perception in the event of reading is without a telos. What words seek to do in a literary work is to make us aware of their presence without any ulterior motive. It is from this vantage point that Deleuze describes the event (or perception in art) as sense itself ("Logic of Sense" 22).

[6]While Rationalism and Positivism were based on the Enlightenment principle of human progress, phenomenology's departure from humanism and its empathy for things beyond anthropocentrism was in contrast to the then contemporary trend in European thought. It is in this respect that its journey 'back' to the things themselves was castigated as regressive.

[7]This has to do with the domination of the analytical and universal method of natural sciences in humanities since the Enlightenment. The development of disciplines such as psychology and sociology as components of a universal human science overlooks the hermeneutic and contextual feature of human expression and

could speak, it would have said, 'I am, and this much is enough for me, maybe someone needs me, maybe indeed I arouse catharsis, but all this does not depend on me and I do not give a damn, I am a thing. I simply am'" (Sliogeris 2–3).

We have encountered the uncompromising thingness of the literary work by beginning to conceive it as an object of representation for the human self. Thingness entails untranslatability in that it cannot function as an entity to be transferred from its otherness to the workings of our selfhood without it being lost to an object-identity. And stepping aside from the zeal of representation which is wont to our subjectivity, we find the thing in its irreducible otherness. As Blanchot says, "The work is without any proof, just as it is without any use. It can't be verified. Truth can appropriate it, renown draws attention to it, the existence it thus acquires doesn't concern it. This demonstrability renders it neither certain nor real- does not make it manifest" (21). Does that mean a literary work is indifferent to our approach? Does untranslatability as the lack of amenability to subjectivity make art absolutely arbitrary to our existence?

In his essay "The Thing," Heidegger elucidates the etymology of 'thing.' It stems from the Roman *res*, which means whatever that concerns somebody, an affair, a law case (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 173). The phrase *in media res*, literally meaning 'in the middle of things,' is often attributed in academia to an exposition in theatre (or in epics like *Iliad*). Case or *causa* is that which comes to pass, that happens. In Romance languages, the *causa* shifts to *la cosa*, trickling further in French as *la chose*. While the present-day usage of *chose* refers to everyday objects, the usage previously, as in with *res*, involved a sense of being engaged with the thing and not the bare-naked object alone. When we say, he knows his things, we mean he knows that which concerns him (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 173). Unlike the formal purposiveness in Kant, the artwork as thing is not something indifferent and purely formal representation but has care or concern in sense of being involved with it.

Untranslatability as arrived from subjectivist attitude reveals its other face when selfhood is allowed to take the backseat. The thing, by dint of its otherness, provides an occasion for involvement. No longer deemed as an aesthetic object, the artwork as thing opens up the space and possibility of movement. And is not translation, understood in the sense of an event occurring across a plane rather than as a crossing over between two planes, essentially movement?

A return to the understanding of thing as a happening nullifies the notion of it being a *subjectum* or given. In his essay, "Heidegger and the Question of Subject," Paul Ricœur says, Dasein is not given [*gegeben*], but given over to, as a projection [*aufgegeben*]. Phenomenology is hermeneutic (227). How 'is' then the literary work in the world? Its existence cannot be assumed in the conventional structure of a self as receptacle of properties, but could be envisaged in terms of possibilities that engagement with it entails. The thingness of the work does not therefore cut off access to it, but instead provides the possibility for its event as a projection. The thing has to become itself, and this self-becoming evidently belongs to the workly nature, as in how the work [*Werk*] comes to work/effect [*wirken*]. "The thingly feature in the work should not be denied;

behavior in favor of creating a generalized paradigm like that of physics or mathematics. Art, in being the affirmation of differences, is ontologically set against such systematizations.

but it belongs admittedly in the work-being of the work, it must be conceived by way of the work's workly nature. If this is so, then the road towards determination of thingly reality of the work leads not from thing to work but from work to thing" (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 38). The thingly nature of the artwork can never be given over directly to the subjectivity of human perception, and our access to it must take the form of an event. It is here, Heidegger opines, that the work works. The working of the work absolves it from being a completed, ontic self that could otherwise be simply presented or reflected, and hints at the indispensability of an event without which the work is inconceivable. In other words, the opening-up of the work points at its phenomenal character.

A return to pre-logocentric mode of understanding reality makes the work, according to Heidegger, a gathering of elements, where the elemental nature of the constituents themselves comes to be realized for the first time in taking this primal leap[8] [*Ursprung*]. The gathering does not end up collating the elements to a point of identity, but like trees in a forest, clears up a space amidst themselves [*Lichtung*] (*Essence of Truth* 43). Clearing allows us to see the thing in its thingness, it is that which reveals the thing by providing the light to see it in [*Licht*]. Heidegger's play on *Ereignis,* the word for event, has a connotation to the verb *eräugnen*, and hence seeing, since *Augen* means eyes. Also, *Ereignis* refers to becoming oneself, achieving ownness [*eigen*]. But unlike subjectivist thought which associates identity with correspondence, Heidegger's notion of truth as an event of unconcealment [*Entbergsamkeit*] makes it necessary that the perceiver give himself over to becoming along with the thing, for phenomenology being hermeneutic, as the above quoted passage of Ricœur points out, requires a projection from the part of the perceiver as the compossibility of the event[9] (53). The perceiver becomes a perceiver only in the event of perception, and does not precede the event as a possessor of perceptive faculties. The event engenders us. We are then the "offspring of the event," as Deleuze puts it (*Proust and Signs* 97).

The thing given over to as projection in a work entreats us to participate in the event of its becoming. Human freedom does not consist in imagining ourselves to be free from bonds with things, for then our bordered subjectivity would only have to deal with objects. Rather, true freedom, as Heidegger points out in *Essence of Truth*, consists in the projective binding [*Entwurf*] of being with the otherness of the thing (45). Instead of trying to reify he thing as an object, or to regret its otherness as unknowable, the task at hand is to give oneself over to the possibility of becoming anew in relation to this other.

[8]"Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 75). The work appears as if it happens for the first time. The appearance of the work and the world it thus discloses in the event is 'original,' which means both unique as well as unprecedented. The coming-into-being of the work is in this sense figuratively described by Heidegger as a primordial jump [*Ur-sprung*].

[9]Heidegger says, "Primordial unhiddenness is projective deconcealment as an occurrence happening in man, i.e., in his history" (*Essence of Truth* 55). The exposition of the thing and of man are concomitant here. Art reveals its face to us in conjunction with revealing our own selves to us. This is the compossibility of the event that occurs as a mutual illumination of the work and the reader. The work seeks to become in us, and we seek to find ourselves in it.

The thing cannot be mastered because it has no core; it is bereft of immanent centrality that we had considered it to possess.

The space that is opened up in the event of the thinging of the thing[10] does not belong to a particular location of general spaces, but the event is such that nothing happens other than the happening of the space itself. In other words, unlike the Cartesian model that abides by the universal and transcendental network of space and time where all phenomena can be mapped, the occurrence at play in art cannot be sought to be located in such pre-given frameworks of experience. Art is involved in showing us something that does not and cannot exist without it. Thus, whatever we come to see in art is due to the light and space it itself generates in our projection with it, and not an excavation amenable to dissection tools. Art makes things visible which had hitherto surrounded us invisibly, and it does so by effecting a new light into existence that makes this vision possible. But this nothing at the heart of things is not to be taken in the sense of non-being, for if it is a void, then it is always a shaped one, con-figured by that which brings it into existence.[11] Had the work really possessed a center, its discursivity must have been finite. The very reason why a literary work subsists in time and outlives all interpretations is that its alterity has nothing 'substantial' to offer other than occasioning the becoming of being of the reader in relation to how it appears in the act of projection. The otherness of the work is inexhaustible, because it is empty (Levinas 163).

Once the literary work is shifted from a concern for knowledge to a concern for being, untranslatability no longer appears as an impedimentum, but the necessary condition for the infinite scope of the event of becoming. This shift necessitates a fresh understanding of the experience of literature. The word Kant uses for aesthetic experience is *Erlebnis*, which comes from the verb *erleben*. *Erleben* means to be alive when something happens. "It points to the immediacy that precedes all interpretation" (Gadamer 53). The word *Erlebnis* occurs many times in the works of Goethe and is close in its temperament to the Romantic spirit. Poetry acquires intelligibility from what is experienced, "what is directly given, the ultimate material for all imaginative creation" (54). *Erlebnis* refers to both the experience and the result out of it, and the concept of the given [*Gegebenheiten*] is dormant in its empiricist attitude towards the world. However, in a worldview where being in the world does not grant any special centrality to the human subject, but advocates an understanding of being-with [*Mitsein*] other things, the indifference of human existence in not being involved in *Erlebnis* but only being a witness and a collector of happenings calls for a radically new formulation of experience. Gadamer suggests *Erfahrung* as that sort of experience which we undergo instead of simply having (xiii). In projecting actively to the other, a shift of literary experience from

[10]If the thing, unlike a stable representation that forms an object, is to be encountered only in an event, then it is not merely a noun, but something that is revealed only in action. Heidegger 'creates' verbs out of nouns to focus on the event where it is revealed to us. The thinging of the thing, like the worlding of the world, is the becoming of the thing in the event. In other words, the thing does not have a self which can exist independent of the event in which it is disclosed.

[11]The notion of being is long-supposed to be associated with the notion of self. The work of art lacks an immanent nature that could be identically repeated, and thus its existence and its becoming do not partake of the same features which go hand in hand with being. There is no doubt that the work has an ontology, but it is empty of a core. This emptiness is contingent with the form of the work; it is not transcendent with respect to the work. Emptiness then is here not a negative condition or a lack, but rather the superabundance of possibilities.

Erlebnis to *Erfahrung* implicates a shift from result to participation, from ego to dialogue, from differentiated object towards 'conversation.'

Gadamer's metaphor for conversation is interesting in how he compares it with play. Players are crucial merely for the play to arrive at presentation [*Darstellung*]. Just like the game individualizes the players, the essence of literary experience consists not just in the work being individual, but individualizing us in the process. "The work of art is not a subject that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead, the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it" (103). Thus, the 'trans' of translation in reading (or extrapolated to experience in general) as subsuming one into the other has to give over to a sort of being in co-habitation with the other. Indeed, the Latin prefixes 'con/com' as meaning togetherness in contrast to 'trans' as exclusion of one for the other evince a fundamentally different attitude towards being. The negative connotation in Untranslatability makes it look detrimental to communication in literary experience. Levinas points out the fallacy as resulting from a problem of attitude in his essay "The Other in Proust,"

> But if communication bears the mark of failure or inauthenticity in this way, it is because it is sought as a fusion. One begins with the idea that duality must be transformed into unity, and that social relations must culminate in communion. This is the last vestige of a conception that identifies being with knowledge, that is, with the event through which the multiplicity of reality ends up referring to a single being and where, through a miracle of clarity, everything that encounters me exists as coming from me. It is the last vestige of idealism. (164)

To conclude with the issue of literary translation, untranslatability of the thingness of a work should thus, firstly, be taken as an indication that we might as well give up our efforts to reproduce the identity of a literary experience in another language. The work becomes a gathering of differences which cannot be boiled down to a self, neither can we, as readers, continue to nurture the belief in our own subjectivity by tampering with a work without ourselves being altered in the process. Once we accept the work not as identity but difference, the question of immanent essence being lost in translation too becomes redundant. Literary translation is repetition of a work, but repetition as Deleuze explains is a singularity, a unique instance of gathering of pure forces of becoming to the realm of creation. Translation, understood in this sense, would not be a return to the same, for the work absolved from selfhood would have its being only in occasioning a becoming:

> [R]epetition is being, but only the being of becoming. The eternal return does not bring back the same, but returning constitutes the only same of that which becomes. Returning is the becoming identical of becoming itself. Returning is thus the only identity, but identity as a secondary power; the identity of difference, the identical which belongs to the different, or turn around the different. Such an identity, produced by difference, is determined as 'repetition.' (41)

No longer chained to the duty of replicating and transferring knowledge, translation of works as well as translation as a mode of relating to the world would have the significance of moving beyond one's habits, of re-fashioning oneself infinitely in discovering and empathizing with the beyond-ness of the unknown and unknowable.

"The thing things world" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 178). To approach the thingness of the thing would mean firstly to give up the world of the subject's fantasy, the world where all things are mere transferable objects of knowledge. And it is only by giving up this make-believe world and casting aside the calcified shells of the self that the untranslatability of things ceases to appear as a specter, as hindrance, for us being free now finally to be involved as thing among things, their erstwhile resistance flakes off, which was but a delusion born from the point of view we had adopted towards them. Borrowing the words of Alain de Botton, a genuine homage to an artist (and therefore art) "would be to look at our world through his eyes, not look at his world through our eyes" (213). We should thus be thankful to the untranslatability of things, for without it, we would never have undertaken journeys to become anew; for without it, translation in the truest sense of movement would never have been possible.

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