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On the Eventful Nature of Translations

Translation as Event. Performing and Staging Translations

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On the Eventful Nature of Translations

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1 Introduction

Ton Naaikens has written that "there is a strong case to award translations the status of event" (Naaijkens 2008: 311). Paradoxically, that strong case is based on what may seem to be a rather weak claim, namely that translations, when they are received by the host culture, have the capacity to alter that culture to some degree: translations can effect change, and that change can be called the event at issue. Moreover, the evental moment of such change occurs at the time of a translation's introduction and reception by that host culture. As Venuti puts it, replacing culture by 'institution': "The translation that sets going an event introduces a linguistic and cultural difference in the institution, initiating new ways of thinking inspired by an interpretation of the source text" (Venuti 2013: 4). Once there is a registration of difference, and the initiation of new ways of thinking, one may permissibly claim that there has been an

event caused by that translation. Or, as Venuti also puts it, it is a matter of agreeing that translations "initiate an event, creating new knowledges and values" (Venuti 2013: 185).

Evidently, such novelties, differences and changes can be modest, and thus sometimes it is a matter of a translatory microevent, but at other times, one can instead refer to a macroevent that would occur at the level of an entire cultural disposition or paradigm, an event that would accordingly have the impact of a paradigm shift, a deep alteration in the cultural *status quo*. In this latter case, "Die Übersetzung eines Textes ‚verändert', so dramatisch dies auch klingt, die Gesellschafts- und Weltordnung" (Agnetta 2021: 24). Agnetta's observation is echoed by Venuti, insofar as we would be invited to measure the "exorbitant gain" (Venuti 2013: 4) of such a translation event. There is, however, a risk of exaggeration, as when Venuti also claims that "As a linguistic and cultural practice, translation is unique in initiating events on an international scale, potentially affecting the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving situation" (ibid.). As a linguistic and cultural practice, perhaps that is true for translation, although of course it cannot be claimed that translation is unique in initiating events on such a scale—the dropping of the first atom bomb, for instance, was a unique event that decisively altered the world order. Whether it is fair to expect of a translation event to have the capacity to massively disrupt, or even overturn, "the global hierarchy of symbolic capital" (Venuti 2013) is very much a key question, moreover.

If exaggeration is one risk to be run when attempting to make the case for deeming translation an event, the other risk is the recourse to somewhat empty notions of an event as an occurrence, as something that just happens, or as the modification of a certain situation. In order to avoid the risk of empty, or indeed theoretically meager notions of eventhood, there

have been attempts, in Translation Studies scholarship, to invoke specifically philosophical concepts of the event. Venuti, for instance, looks to Alain Badiou's concept of the event, profiling that event as the occasion of an innovative form or praxis that effects a rupture with established cultural and social institutions (cf. Badiou 2001: 67; Venuti 2013: 4). However, the difficulty with the attempt to appropriate Badiou's concept of the event for the use of Translation Studies, or at least a thought of 'translation,' is that Badiou's criteria for what can be deemed an event are extremely stringent, and it is unlikely that any translation event would fulfill those criteria. At best, one might claim that the profile of a true event is that it cannot be translated into any other context where it might retain the same profile as an event. An event is thus untranslatable; it cannot be implanted into a different context or rather what Badiou, in *Logics of Worlds* (2019), calls a "world," without losing its own singularity as an event bound to the original context or world in which it occurred.

Moreover, the stringency of Badiou's criteria are rooted in what an event must be: first, it must be indisputable that it did occur, and second, the meaning of that event must also be indisputable. For only once its meaning is indisputable can the event become amenable to the philosophy Badiou espouses —a philosophy that is capable of speaking on behalf of *truth*. For him, there is no truth if meanings remain disputed. Hence his philosophy is highly resistant to hermeneutic approaches that debate and interpret the meaning of a given event. From Badiou's perspective, if there remains such debate and interpretation, then that event cannot be considered an event at all. For the history of translations, perhaps one can invoke "traductions marquantes" (Dayre 2017: 15) and consider them sufficiently impactful to claim that these translations actually do fulfill Badiou's criteria. Luther's translation of the Bible, one

might suggest, is an example: we can truly say that the event of that translation was seismic for the German language, for religious culture, and not just in Germany. Yet it is difficult to provide an extensive list of translation events such as the Luther translation event. Many translations were important to the host culture, to be sure: Chateaubriand's translation of Milton was important for French literature, but it is debatable whether it was decisive. Once there is debate, then for Badiou, the notion of event is unjustified.

An equally vexing difficulty is that, prior to any theoretical contemplation of translation as an event, and which translations should enjoy that status, is simply that one should define what we mean by a translation. But as translation scholars know very well, despite the many attempts to define what is and what isn't a translation, enormous problems emerge when the definition of what a translation properly is yields to the ambiguities of adaptation, parody, pastiche and even plagiarism. Take pseudotranslations, for instance: could a pseudo-translation ever elicit an event? Perhaps James MacPherson's Ossian poems did have the Europe-wide impact of a true literary event, enthusiastically translated as they were in Germany, France, Italy and elsewhere. But that eventful impact was only possible because MacPherson's poems were not the result of the event of his translation of Ossian, since they were his own and Ossian never existed.

It is as difficult to stabilize what we mean by 'event' as it is to stabilize what we mean by a 'translation.' But these are stimulating, productive difficulties, particularly if one is prepared to acknowledge the theoretical and methodological risks involved. One risk is almost supreme in its dangers. It is one thing to define a given translation event as an occurrence that introduces difference, or what Badiou says is "something other" (Badiou 2001: 67). Presumably one would be able to

register the degree of otherness involved while still recognizing that translation as relatively similar to all the other translations we are familiar with. Even a pseudo-translation remains sufficiently in touch with the term 'translation.' But what if there was a translation event of such radical otherness that it couldn't be recognized as a translation at all? What if a text so thoroughly redefined the very notion of translation that we found it impossible to revert to any extant characterizations of translation? Policing the boundaries of eventhood is arguably the concept of impossibility: an event should be possible rather than impossible, recognizable rather than unrecognizable, realizable rather than utterly unrealistic and inconceivable. Hence the significant investment Derrida, in "Des Tours de Babel" (2007) and in "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?" (2013) makes in the almost inconceivable event of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—a work one can very legitimately claim is a work so committed to translation that it textualizes Babel itself, and a work one can legitimately claim is untranslatable. A work that hence forbids the event of its translation into French, German, Portuguese and so forth. Yet, *Finnegans Wake* has been translated not once but twice into French! This, surely, is a translation event, since it overcomes what otherwise seems impossible. Perhaps that is the condition here: an event is only worthy of being called an event when it makes the apparently impossible possible.

Theoretical approaches to the notion of translation as an event oscillate between the invocation of extreme cases like *Finnegans Wake* on the grounds that the notion of an event, especially in philosophy, is itself conceptually extreme, and more moderate positions where it is enough to register a translation's effects of change and alteration on the receiving culture. To adopt that moderate position, Translation Studies can assuredly ally itself with sociological approaches, reception-theories and indeed hermeneutics, since with the notion of 'horizon,'

hermeneutics gives us a way to measure the impact of the translation event against the historically situated horizon of a receiving culture. Hermeneutics is methodologically equipped to assess both the "collective impact" (Agnetta 2021: 18) of a given translation and the specific effects of the translation practice on and through the individual translator.

The translator's personality, status, and visibility within the target culture (see Cercel/Leal 2025) can—especially against the backdrop of extraordinary historical circumstances—bring about a genuine translation event. The publication of the Romanian translation of Goethe's *Faust* by the poet Lucian Blaga (1895–1961) in 1955, for instance, was met with overwhelming enthusiasm: all 25,100 copies were sold out in just three days in the capital, Bucharest, and in just three hours in Cluj, Blaga's hometown (see Cotter 2014: 48). When Blaga gave a lecture in 1957 titled *Întâlniri cu Goethe* [*Encounters with Goethe*] at the university library in Cluj, he addressed an enraptured audience. Photographs taken immediately after the event show "destroyed chairs and pieces of parquet ripped from the floor under the pressure of those trying to get from the corridors and stairways into the overcrowded hall" (Gruia 1981: 21), desperate to hear the poet-translator speak. Scholarly consensus holds that the remarkable success of the Romanian *Faust* is due to the prominence of Lucian Blaga: "It is the Romanian translator, not the foreign author, who drives the work's reception" (Cotter 2008: 853). At the time of the translation's publication in 1955, Blaga was already a major poet with considerable cultural authority: he was "a major presence in pre-World War II Romanian culture, a figure of breadth and balance" (Cotter 2014: 5). Having refused to support the new communist regime, he had been banned from publishing and effectively silenced in public life since 1948. Translation was the only activity he was permitted. The *Faust* translation and

the corresponding lecture, marked his first public appearances after seven and nine years, respectively, of politically enforced silence. Thus, it was not Goethe and his canonical work that drove the record-breaking sales of the Romanian *Faust*, but rather the high esteem in which Lucian Blaga was held: "The reputation of the translator, rather than the importance of the translated work, explains such a reception" (Ciobâcă 2019: 9). In the Romanian context, authorship of Goethe's work was attributed to the translator himself: "The same people who rushed to buy copies of Blaga's *Faust* [sc. not Goethe's!] came to his lecture in droves" (Cotter 2014: 48). That this formulation was no accident or mere rhetorical flourish is made explicit: *"Faust* was received as Blaga's work first and Goethe's second" (Cotter 2014: 78). Contemporary accounts of Blaga's lecture in Cluj mention Goethe only in passing; they unanimously attribute the event's extraordinary success to the authority of the poet-translator (see Gruia 1981: 17–22). For many in the audience—especially the younger generation—this unforgettable lecture marked their very first opportunity to encounter Blaga in person after years of social and academic isolation. Agents of the *Securitate* (the then Romanian secret police) were also present and documented the event, as confirmed by Blaga's now publicly accessible *Securitate* file. In short, this example strongly suggests that the "le pourquoi et le comment" (Dayre 2017: 14), namely the conditions of possibility and the manifestation of a translation event, are to be found in the subtle interplay between various actors and perspectives. The translator (as producer), the audience, the new sociocultural system, and the historical context in which a translation exerts its effect together form the constellation in which an event may occur. The individual (hermeneutic) and collective (sociological, historical) factors that constitute such an event must accordingly be understood in their interaction.

The question of whether translation *as such*—or any translation, for that matter—can be considered an event remains open. In this regard, some have recourse to theories of performance, and accordingly foster further developments in what Bachmann-Medick has called the performative turn in Translation Studies. Yet, if that recasts the translator as a performer, and envisages the event of translation as something that would resemble a musical event, or a dance performance, the difficulties concern whether the translator/performer is enjoined to be faithful to the event he or she has enabled. For Badiou, an event worthy of the name is something that has the compelling power to enforce postures of fidelity, ethical commitment and responsibility. But, as is well-known in Translation Studies, the matter of the translator's fidelity is much debated, and indeed criticized. At issue, in any case, is whether a concept of translation as an event must be accompanied by an ethics that deems translators responsible for that event, or one rejects the necessity of providing that ethics. Certainly, in respect of the nature or quality of that event "there is no guarantee that change will be good or bad" (Pym [3]2023: 125), but the question is perhaps whether to retain criteria of 'good' and 'bad' in any case or whether, instead, one claims that an event thoroughly removes, disrupts, or reinvents those very criteria. Translations, writes Venuti, "should not be faulted merely for exhibiting features that are commonly called unethical: wholesale manipulation of the source text, ignorance of the source language, even plagiarism of other translations" (Venuti 2013: 185). But the question remains whether translators might escape all notions of 'fault,' and not just the ones Venuti specifies, and hence happily find themselves always deemed innocent, absolved from any ethical considerations whatsoever, never deemed culpable of the event of abusive translation and indeed, immune from any le-

gal prosecution for the crime of plagiarism or breach of copyright either.

Once ethical and legal matters enter into the debate concerning translation as an event, then the options are these: one can take the position that such matters should not enter the debate at all, or one is forced to contemplate the consequences of the translation event on the source text and indeed the source author. Doubtless, it is possible to take the position that source text authors can be radically discounted, although invocations of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" in Translation Studies scholarship perhaps risk identifying the very crime—a symbolic murder, so to speak—that translators wish to be exonerated for. In any case, there is scope to examine the event of translation in terms of a certain violence, namely "destruction of an original text form and its replacement by a new, target-language text" (Agnetta 2021: 24) by the person of the translator who performs the transition. Here the translation involves as much an outright destruction (*Zerstörung*) of the original text as it does a subtle dialectic. There is also scope to examine the many metaphors used to describe what translation is like, and to question whether the numerous metaphors describing translation as a violent activity can be envisaged as genuine events of violence.

That invites us to wonder whether the event of translation must be an event that really occurs, or whether there can be events that do not really occur, but only do so in the metaphorical realm where a good deal of translation 'theory' prefers to be—one thinks of George Steiner here (see O'Keeffe 2021). *Where* does the translation event take place? In the innocently figurative domain of mere metaphors for translation? To which we can add the corresponding question: *when* does the translation event happen? The time of an event might only be the time of the 'now,' or of the present moment of its eventual

occurrence in perhaps the same way the time of a dance performance is taken to be the time of present immediacy. Yet, these are not the only temporalities with which Translation Studies reckons, of course. At the very least, it reckons with notions of futurity, including the difficult events and advents of which Walter Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," speaks—the events of *Fortleben* and *Überleben*, not to mention the event promised by a certain messianism, namely translation's hoped-for presentation of *die reine Sprache*. Or consider the unpredictable future of an event of translation that is yet to come by way of Derrida's French rather than Benjamin's German: that would be an *événement* that is *à venir*, coming, that is to say, but one which has not yet arrived.

Perhaps it is not just a simple irony, therefore, that any approach to translation as an event has to begin with the various translations one must make of the very word 'event.' English and French can activate the Latin resonances of the verb *venire*—'to come.' The German *Ereignis* activates quite different resonances, however. Other languages, I am sure, present other translation difficulties, making of that very word 'event' a *mise en abyme* of the splendors and miseries of our theory and practice.

Many of the chapters in this volume adopt theoretical approaches that blend Translation Studies and Performance Studies. In that regard, it may be useful to elaborate in broad terms what, methodologically, is at stake.

2 Possible Synergies between Translation Studies and Performance Studies

The research fields of Translation Studies and Performance Studies are based on a multitude of sources that can be located in different disciplines and take on a variety of theoretical

forms (on the status of Translation Studies as an interdisciplinary field, see Kaindl 1999; on Performance Studies, see Hempfer/Volbers 2011). This plurality of sources can be seen as potentially enriching for the formation of one's own theory because it remains dynamic and open-ended.

One of the things the present volume wishes to bring to the fore is the action character of translation: Translation is a powerful act, it results from and causes other actions. It is transformative, because (non-)existence determines the actions of individuals and groups. This is evidenced, for example, by the many reflective texts surrounding the publication and dissemination of translational products, such as forewords and epilogues, footnotes, commentaries, translators' correspondences, etc., in which the legibility of the (first or new) translation is combined with a deontic assessment of its subsequent use.

Performance analyses always deal with ephemeral objects. This is also the case in Audiovisual Translation and Interpreting Studies. But even in translation-related research, performance-related variables can be considered: On the one hand, the performance of a translation subject (or translator collective) in the narrower sense, i.e. the actual translation process and its creation of the target text, can be analyzed. On this basis, translation has been described as a fundamentally creative activity (cf. the contributions in Cercel et al. 2017). However, the concept of performance is not just used in relation to human translation, but also—as even superficial web searches will confirm—and perhaps even more in assessments of the performance of machine systems in the execution of translation and other textualization tasks. However, the adequacy of the concept of performance to describe variables of translational activity can also be disputed (see Stolze in this issue). On the other hand, a performance-theoretical concept of transla-

tion also includes considerations relating to the performativity (in the linguistic sense) of the translator's actions as a result of certain conditions—be they temporal or spatial constraints, the (non-)existence of parallel texts and previous translations, client and customer specifications, etc. These conditions supply points of departure for studying a translation's effects and consequences both in the present context and also for the future, in the sense of the effects and consequences for posterity. Translation (qua product *and* process) is accordingly seen here as part of a more extensive chain of action, a discourse.

Non-translations also shape this discourse. Consider, for example, Kovács' (2018: 123–129) account of the interpreter and translator Fritz Paepcke, who worked as a reporter during the Second World War and whose decision to withhold the information he received about the Allied landing in Normandy bears witness to how translators and interpreters can sometimes determine global political destinies. Donna Leon's case is different: she does not want her Commissario Brunetti novel translated into Italian due to sensitive issues such as corruption, and this creates a telling blank space that gives fans and critics alike reason to exchange their views (see UEPO 2012).

Looking at translation under the auspices of performativity theory is not a far-fetched theoretical game resulting from a combination of two arbitrarily selected fields of research (although such a modern-day approach would certainly have its appeal). Rather, it is the logical and at the same time promising consequence of scholarship that has already been undertaken in translatology: If translation—as proponents of theories of agency and hermeneutic approaches always claim—is an (expert) activity to be taken seriously; if translation is subject to variables such as translational subjectivity, the purpose of translation and the situational context in general, and if we agree that its social relevance should not be underestimated,

then a performativity-theoretical approach invites us to grasp the practice of translation in terms of everything that secures its social effectiveness. This applies both to a synchronic approach, which aims to describe the interaction of translators' actions with other fields of action, and to a diachronic perspective according to which the history of translation is to be seen as an ongoing discourse between different networks of actors. In such a discourse, encompassing as it does multiple texts, cultural domains, and possibly generations to come, the emergence, existence, oblivion, non-existence and revival of a translation are equally significant events and inevitably form the components of a general cultural history.

3 Translatological Positions on the Eventfulness of Translations

The discussion of translations as "communicative events" (Alavi 2018: 170; Agnetta 2021: 9) or simply "events" (Pym 2018, 2019, [3]2023: 123–125) is recent in Translation Studies and it is more a discussion amounting to an invitation, or even a plea to break new scholarly ground rather than a discussion that indicates an already established research field. This dimension of translations is thematized from two different perspectives, namely (1) the hermeneutic-performative and (2) the cultural-historical or cultural-sociological perspective. The starting points are different, but both meet in the common idea of the real or potential eventfulness of a translation.

Ad (1): In hermeneutic-performative terms, translations are recognized as fundamentally eventful due to the translator's individuality and the performative character of every translational approach to texts: The translator encounters the original text informed by his or her own presuppositions and these factor into the process of understanding or interpreting that text

and then the production of the target text—the entire process occurs, therefore, in the context of his or her own experiences, emotions and attitudes. Text comprehension is therefore "an event or a chain of events in which the information inferred from the text interacts with the recipient's constantly changing knowledge and intentions" (Agnetta 2021: 14; our translation). The "very 'event' of understanding" (O'Keeffe 2018: 16), specific and individual as it is, leads to the production of the translation, a translation whose form and content is based on the prior "crucial chains of events" (ibid.: 24) culminating in the translation's own address, dialogical in a sense, to the target readership. The performative assessment of the translation process, from the reception of the original to the production and effect of the translation, a process whereby the translator "performs for its authorship and invites their response" (Bermann 2014: 285), leads to the concept of (eventful) emergence: translation is thus "a phenomenon that occurs in specific historical and situational contexts. Translating is an event, a happening" (Agnetta 2021: 25; our translation).

Ad (2): From a cultural-historical or cultural-sociological perspective, it is also assumed that "all translations are events" —regardless of their quality (Naaijkens 2010: 7). This hypothesis is supported by examples such as the King James Version of the Bible, "which is surely not a very good translation," but "a text that unquestionably is to be regarded as an event, since it generated considerable cultural change" (ibid.: 7). Rather, the decisive factor from this viewpoint is that translations provide "an impulse to change" (ibid.: 4). Translations change existing configurations, and translators are agents of change, not of preservation. According to this approach, translational events are viewed against the broad background of cultural dynamics. In contrast to the leveling perspective whereby translations are regarded as mere "incidents" (*incidens*) (ibid.: 5) in the diverse

and complex process of inter-cultural communication, this approach ascribes a key role to translations in the context of cultural transfer: they contribute decisively to the construction of the map of world literature and to the dissemination of major cultural revolutions. The focus here is accordingly on impact analysis and on the effects of translations on socio-cultural dy¬na¬mics and processes (cf. ibid.: 8).

4 Hermeneutics and Semiotics as Methods of Performance Analysis

As mentioned above, scholars working in Translation Studies hope that approaching the phenomenon of translation and interpreting from the perspective of performance theory will provide a new impetus to the discipline. The question of whether translation can be understood as an 'event' or not, the question to which the present volume responds, is perhaps a matter of whether the activity of translation can be profitably approached by using the analytical categories of performance research and performativity theory. It is not possible to provide here a complete overview of performance theory and its analytical bases, but nonetheless, it may be instructive to briefly advert to Erika Fischer-Lichte, one of the central figures of (German-speaking) performativity research, and relate her work to the topic at issue in the present issue of the *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics*.

In *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004), Fischer-Lichte expresses doubts concerning the utility of semiotic and hermeneutic theorems when studying performative art:

> Such a performance [sc. like *Lips of Thomas* by Marina Abramović] eludes the grasp of traditional aesthetic theories. It stubbornly resists the claim of a hermeneutic aesthetics that aims to understand the work of art. For here it is less about understanding the actions that the artist

> performed than about the experiences that she made and that she evoked in the spectators, in short: about the transformation of those involved in the performance. (Fischer-Lichte 2004: 17; our translation)

Although there are all sorts of things to interpret and evaluate as signs in a performance, it cannot be reduced to the reproduction of these semiotic structures (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2004: 18). After all, the performance constitutes "a new reality of its own. This reality was now not only interpreted by the spectators, but first and foremost experienced in its effects" (ibid.: 19; our translation). In short: Fischer-Lichte is pursuing two ideas here that deem hermeneutics and semiotics inadequate for analyzing performances. One is that that the experience and emotionality of reception has little to do with understanding, and the other concerns the idea that signs are discrete set pieces that precede the performance and are removed from the circumstances of reception, and at any rate are materialized primarily as artefacts—as if semiotics had nothing to do with somatics (i.e. the somatics of the subject in the here and now of its existence). According to Fischer-Lichte, hermeneutic and semiotic methods of analysis are also inappropriate with regard to performances because they are usually applied to written texts, or at least to materialized works of art. It is precisely because of the fact that in the case of performances there is not an "artifact that can be detached from him [i.e. the author of the work], the artwork" (ibid.: 19; our translation), but rather an experience, that we arguably need a new research paradigm, one which other scholars (in Translation Studies) have described as a "performative turn" (ibid. 2004: 22; see also Bachmann-Medick 2016: 104–143).

Fischer-Lichte's objections to hermeneutics and semiotics, her rather apodictic statements in that regard, run the risk of not being accurate, or no longer so. Contemporary hermeneutics is not a normative science prescribing how a work of

art or other phenomenon 'is to be understood,' rather, it is a descriptive approach that investigates how a work of art 'is understood' or 'can be understood'—the latter formulation is not just aimed at the plurality of meanings of the work or phenomenon, but also at the processes and mechanisms of understanding in general. Hermeneutics, among other things, is a theory of human cognition, and it attempts to comprehend the activity of a recipient in absorbing and processing the phenomenon to be understood. Any separation of the operations of understanding and (bodily) experience is—as the cognitive model of 4EA shows (cf. the contributions published by Robinson in the *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics* 2, 2022)—an artificial one. Hermeneutics is interested in the process and the (provisional) culmination of these inwardly occurring processes of understanding whereby the consciousness is directed towards what is to be understood and in which—there is no other way—one's own knowledge and one's own wealth of experience are activated in equal measure.

Admittedly, in the main, the translations that are studied by Translation Studies scholars are textual artifacts. But they are also products bearing the traces of the translator's work. In this respect, all (and even strongly modifying) methods of intertextual reference can be exploited. And it is precisely the fact that a translated work exists separately from its author that can lead to other performers of this text becoming involved, empowered indeed, and thus historically instantiating all of its effects, both good and bad. The separation of the work from its author is therefore no reason to assume a performance-independent hermeneutics and semiotics. On the contrary: every use of a text is a performance in itself and at the same time linked to others in a discourse. However, hermeneutics—here: translational hermeneutics—is not purely concerned with the texts themselves and a separation of subject and object, as Fi-

scher-Lichte states, but rather, and particularly in the form in which it has been pursued since the twenty-first century, hermeneutics affords a theory of action in which text, author, recipient and the situational context of production and reception are central in their dynamic relationship (cf. the contributions in Cercel 2009, Cercel/Stanley 2012, Stolze et al. 2015, Stanley et al. 2018 and 2021). Moreover, twentieth-century hermeneutics, since it repeatedly invoked the metaphors of the conversation with the text and the dynamic play of question and answer, foregrounded a relational event, and because of this hermeneutics is hardly an obsolete or antiquarian approach that amounts to a separation of production, work and reception aesthetics (Fischer-Lichte 2004: 22) and therefore cannot be used for performance analysis.

In *Performativität. Eine Einführung* (Fischer-Lichte 2012), the connection between an over-arching hermeneutics and a theory of performativity is almost a given. According to her, a practice is to be considered 'performative' if it can be classified as "self-referential" and "reality-constituting" (2012: 38, 133). However, it is not just performances in the narrower sense (in the theater, concert hall or museum) that can be understood as performative, but also a specific approach to speech acts, texts, images, etc. (cf. ibid.: 135) in all possible contexts of action. The categories of performance description already developed in her earlier book in 2004 are now somewhat expanded here in her 2012 volume and, in a large chapter ("Expanding the Field: Performative Studies"), that expansion makes matters fruitful for the analysis of texts (ibid.: 135–145), images (ibid.: 147–159) and things (ibid.: 162–178). (For initial applications to the object of study of Translation Studies and to public readings by translators, see Agnetta 2021 and Cercel 2025.)

For literary (and philosophical) texts, Fischer-Lichte (2012: 139), commenting on reception-aesthetic positions,

cites the distinction between 'structural' and 'functional performativity' resulting from the work of the Collaborative Research Centre *Kulturen des Performativen*. The former describes the way the text is made and draws attention to "how the text does what it talks about or, if necessary, does something other than what it claims" (Fischer-Lichte 2012: 139; our translation). The second is concerned with the 'cultural impact' of a text, i.e. what the text triggers in (overall) social and historical terms (cf. ibid.). Negotiations of the first form of performativity have always been relegated to the second in (normative and descriptive) translation discourse. Since translations are often understood as (implicitly) performative speech acts, namely as acts that must always be supplemented by the statement 'I, the unsigned translator, hereby refer to what the author or sender of the source text has written in it,' questions about the nature of the derivative can never be completely separated from a trans-textual discourse that also thematizes the pre-text and the changes that may have been made to it.

5 About the Volume

Brian O'Keeffe's chapter, "The Events and Non-Events of Translation," sets a tone common to a number of essays in this volume, namely a tone of critical hesitation or circumspection as regards whether the notion of an 'event' can be rigorously applied in Translation Studies. Partly, he argues, it is too easy to devolve to the suggestion that translation is *like* an event, and hence one reverts to over-convenient metaphors for translation, none of which properly describes what translation actually *is*. Partly, it is a matter of the difficulty of transposing philosophical accounts of eventhood into Translation Studies. Evidently, as some of the essays in this *Yearbook* demonstrate, utilizing insights from Performance Studies (since it too invokes

an idea of the event) can lessen the philosophical challenges, or even provide a warrant to ignore philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Derrida. But challenges still remain, O'Keeffe argues. One challenge, set forth by Derrida, is whether a translation event worthy of the name is an occurrence that makes the impossible possible—a stringent requirement for an event, clearly, one which considerably narrows the number of case studies one might plausibly select in order to exemplify the translation event.

Radegundis Stolze's contribution, "Die Metapher als hermeneutisch-performatives Sprachereignis," also expresses doubts concerning the notion of the event. For if one takes the view that anything that happens at all is an event, then writing a book is an event, reading a book and being affected by it is an event, translating a book is an event insofar as that translatory activity happens. The risk is that the notion or concept of the event becomes too ubiquitous to be of any theoretical use. Yet, as Stolze's discussion shows, there are degrees of eventhood—some are modest, some more consequential. Selecting Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill we Climb," Stolze assesses a text that had considerable meaning, including political meaning, and her question is how that meaning is or is not retained in the German translations made of her poem. To make such an assessment, Stolze argues, requires a close reading of those German versions, and also a hermeneutic enquiry into translators and the holistic way they practice their craft. Nonetheless, Stolze's notes of caution remain significant: while an event is often conceptualized as a one-time, unrepeatable occurrence, the practice of translation is processual, and this requires a different thought of the time of translation—it is the time taken by the translator's mind and body, the time required to implement what Stolze calls "a cognitive movement." Moreover, despite the theoretical utilities that may lie in de-

ploying notions of eventhood from Performance Studies, or indeed from Translation Studies's own performative turn, Stolze argues, however, that "the performance of an original or translated play on the theater stage is, of course, an event in which the content is conveyed as a performance. Here it is not the translation that is the event, but the performance." As O'Keeffe also argues in connection with performance artists like Marina Abramovic, it is clearly much easier to consider eventhood in theatrical or performance-art cases. Much accordingly depends on whether one can theorize translation in terms of the presentational immediacy of *Darstellung* in the same way one can apparently do in terms of a theatrical performance.

Besides considering the theatrical stage, or *skena*, the more general question, posed by O'Keeffe, is *where* a translation event occurs. What other locations might one propose? He suggests that one locale might be the page itself, assuming we are willing to restrict matters to the translation of written texts. But there are other sites one might select, however, and hence other translation events—and performative events—to take into account. Ralf van Bühren, Alberto Gil, and Juan Rego, in their essay "Performance as Translation. The Representation of the Sacred in the 'Sagrada Familia' (Barcelona) by the Interaction of Architecture, Visual Arts and Liturgy," are willing to start from the claim that "every communicative act is a kind of performance." The theoretical convenience of that idea of performance is that it enables, in their view, 'translation' to occur as that performance, and as that communication as well. The site the authors choose for their enquiry is the Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona, an edifice that 'translates' Christian doctrine by means of its stained glass windows, its stone carvings, and its architecture in general. Furthermore, the authors inspect the significant event that occurred when the cathedral

was dedicated by Pope Benedict XVI, during which he delivered a homily. As they show, many performative and translatory events were happening at the same time, *inter alia* the homily, which they deem a liturgical translation of the Word of God, one that addressed the congregation there and then, and the rite of dedication which can be understood as a performance that effectively transmits faith itself, and indeed renders God present.

What emerges from their essay is the idea of "translation as performance." Much depends on whether such a formulation—and the convenience of "as"—needs to be considerably caveated, however, lest both the idea of performance and the idea of translation lose conceptual specificity, or, on the contrary, one takes the view that there is much to be gained in regarding translation as performance and vice versa—the authors also speak of "performance as translation." In a notable sense, perhaps one way of measuring that gain is by addressing expressions of religious faith, precisely. Priyada Padhye is also concerned with such matters: her contribution is titled "Translating Divinity in the Liminal Space. Performative Translations in the Medieval and Early Modern Period in India." It is an extraordinary title, in a sense: how does one translate divinity? Wouldn't that be a supreme event of translation? Erika Fischer-Lichte's work proves useful for Padhye's discussion, one notion of Fischer-Lichte's being that of 'emergence' which, *per* Fischer-Lichte, concerns "all those phenomena that appear not as a consequence of specific plans and intentions but as unforeseen and, in this sense, contingent events." Padhye cites Fischer-Lichte again: "Unpredictability constitutes a defining feature of emergence." These quotations from Fischer-Lichte interestingly, but problematically resonate with O'Keeffe's discussion of Derrida's conditions for an event, particularly given Derrida's theorization of how *radically* contingent such condi-

tions would have to be. Possibly, for Derrida, 'emergence' would, in that case, be preferably replaced by a term like 'interruption' or 'rupture.' Padhye studies two texts: the saint poet Dnyāneshwar's 1290 *Bhāvārthadeepikā,* a Marathi language translation of the Sanskrit *Bhagwad Gitā*. The second is the *Discurso sobre a vinda de Jesu Christo* ("Discourse on the coming of Jesus Christ"), popularly known as the *Kristapurān*. The *Kristapurān* is a 1616 re-telling of biblical stories into the language spoken in Goa by the English Jesuit Father Thomas Stephens. Padhye's question is whether these two works meet the conditions, some (but not all) of which are theorized by Fischer-Lichte, that must be met in order to be considered events, and indeed events not just of translation, but of religious, literary and cultural significance.

Padhye proposes a number of further conditions, one of which is highly interesting in this regard: 'transgression,' which suggests that a translation merits the name 'event' if that translation disturbs, in a significant way, the status quo. Invoking Doris Bachmann-Medick's definition of the condition of transgression, namely "the practice of crossing over or dissolving boundaries, of carnivalization and breaking of codes," one perhaps discerns the profile of translation in that movement of crossing-over, but a good deal depends on the codes at issue, and indeed, what one's attitude is to Bachmann-Medick's tacit recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnivalization. Padhye's characterization of translation's eventhood in terms of transgression is suggestive in that regard, particularly if the texts at issue are sacred texts, which one would normally think should not be subject to the transgressive licentiousness of Bakhtinian carnivalization.

Suggestive as well is Padhye's reference to Sachin Ketkar, a scholar of the history of translations in the Marathi language, who says (as Padhye quotes him), that "when culture and semi-

otic systems change, they sometimes bring about explosive changes in the language." "Explosive" is attractively vivid, of course, and one can see how philosophers like Derrida would endorse that characterization of the event and of its impact. Equally vivid is Padhye's reference to Ketkar's metaphor for translation: "For him translation of a text in another language is the birth of a text in a different *yoni*-vagina, it is a different species, it is a "new animal." The issue O'Keeffe raises in his essay perhaps re-emerges here: what theoretical weight is one to place on such a metaphor, and on terms like "species" and "new animal"? Moreover, it would be interesting to wonder how Walter Benjamin, in "The Task of the Translator," would have reacted to that. Given the extensive investments Benjamin made in notions of the life, but particularly the afterlives of texts in translation, one could possibly claim, following Padhye and Ketkar, that Benjamin neglected to think about that womb or vagina that births the source text into those new lives. Padhye tacitly issues a challenge to Benjamin, therefore, when she writes that "A performative translation too, in my opinion, is radically different from its source text, making its birth eventful." "Radically" is the main thrust of the challenge put to Benjamin, clearly.

One problem Padhye draws attention to is that the notion of the event produces two different discursive and indeed philosophical registers. One is radical, almost hyperbolic, as when an event is taken to be 'explosive.' The other is more moderate in tone, as when one declares that an event takes place whenever a translation changes the status quo. This change does not need to be dramatically explosive or paradigm-shifting. It can be modest, and as long as one can register that change, then there will have been an event. Padhye's essay, in that regard, resonates well with Marie Herbillon's "Translation as Multi-Layered Performance: The Case

of "Le Feu au cœur," Bertrand Belin's French Cover of Bob Dylan's "Ain't Talkin'." The event at issue is modest: Belin's cover translated Dylan's song into French. So doing, he evidently had to modify Dylan's original. Yet, for all that a cover might seem modest in that way, the theoretical consequences Herbillon draws from that exercise are considerable. Here, one notes how Derrida is used to profile those consequences. At issue is his approach to iterability, which Herbillon transposes into a discussion of "the status of songs as intrinsically iterable events and their iterations in the form of actual performances or eventual occurrences." Note "intrinsically," which is perhaps the crux of the matter. Strikingly, Herbillon argues that a "song could possibly be conceived of as the performative *par excellence*, namely as the 'most *event-ridden* utterance' (Derrida 1988: 19; my emphasis) in discourse." Herbillon's quotation from Derrida's *Limited Inc.* is accordingly very thought-provoking, particularly in view of Derrida's reference to something that is "event-ridden." Derrida's notion of iterability invites us to contemplate another 'ability,' namely translatability. We might accordingly displace matters to Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" once more and recall what he has to say about translatability or *Übersetzbarkeit*. Samuel Weber's *Benjamin's-abilities* is worth reading for his commentary on that '-ability' or that '-barkeit' (see Weber 2008). Yet, in connection with Derrida, when iterability is put alongside his own thoughts concerning translatability, one should recall Derrida's counter move, since he does not neglect scenarios of untranslatability. This is at issue in both "Des tours de Babel" and in "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?" Thus it is perhaps important to consider Derrida's reflection on what resists the events of iteration and translation. As O'Keeffe's title suggests, it is worthwhile to consider the non-events of translation as much as the events of translation.

Translation Studies understandably embraces thoughts of translatability, however, and is more inclined to agree with Lawrence Venuti's polemical exhortation that we "STOP asserting that any text is untranslatable. START realizing that every text is translatable because every text can be interpreted" (Venuti 2019: x). Nonetheless, one almost verges on outright untranslatability when one considers the challenge of translation in the context of sign language for the deaf or hard of hearing. Imagine the difficulty of transposing a song into sign language, for instance. This is the topic addressed by Angela Tarantini in her essay "When Performance is not a Metaphor for Translation: Translation as "Performative Event." Her text examines the practice of sign language interpreting in music, considering that practice as a translation and a performance. She accordingly expands the concept of performativity to encompass the evental and experiential aspects of translation. The demands are extremely strenuous: translating a song must adapt to the serial immediacies of a song—the translator's decisions, as she puts it, must be made instantaneously in order to keep pace with the song as it is sung, and there must be a high degree of expressivity in order that the translator convey the emotional registers of that particular song. Tarantini therefore raises the key question: "But where is the emotion in a song? Is it an intrinsic feature of the song or is it something that is fostered in the listener by the song itself?" Her answer goes by way of another question: "So, how can an interpreter translate an element that is not in the text, but is their own experience of the text? I would argue that this is not dissimilar from any other work of translation. The work of the translator is to convey the meaning of a text, but that meaning will always be their own interpretation (i.e. their understanding) of the same text, their experience of the text."

Translating songs and music is also the focus of Carmen África Vidal Claramonte's essay "Translation and Dance. The Case of Matthew Bourne." Bourne's ballets show us the expressive capacities of the body, and furthermore show how the *mise en scène* of a balletic performance, blending as it does music, images, colors and so forth, makes for a very complex performative event. In order to introduce translation into the discussion, Vidal Claramonte advocates for an "enlarged" definition of translation, one which clearly departs from Roman Jakobson's assertion that "interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (Jakobson 1992: 145). For her, that enlarged or expanded definition of translation should go "beyond the verbocentric tradition." Yet, as the second part of her essay shows in particular, when Bourne's *The Car Man* 'translates' Bizet's opera *Carmen*, it is notable that the term 'text' appears. For Vidal Claramonte, Bizet's opera can be considered a 'text' insofar as it affords many kinds of translations, adaptations and recontextualizations: "Matthew Bourne's performative translations through the body," she writes, "will highlight that a text is always many texts and has many readings." Moreover, "*The Car Man* highlights the palimpsestuous nature of the original text, of any 'original' text. Bourne's translation highlights the plural readings inside any text."

As many of the essays in this volume demonstrate, the concept of 'text' is key to the various negotiations between event, performance and translation. As Vidal Claramonte rightly puts it, "Bourne is, in my view, a clear example of how […] in our visual culture the definition of 'text' has been expanded." To what extent, then, would it therefore be important to engage (to mention only three relevant works) with Roland Barthes's "From Work to Text," Paul Ricoeur's "What is a Text?" or Stanley Fish's book *Is there a text in this class?* Or,

frankly, to engage with Derrida's claim that *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*? For it is a revealing fact that Derrida is a key reference point in many of the essays in this volume. And if Derrida's thoughts on iterability prove necessary to contemplate the event, and besides, a performative event, then when Vidal Claramonte cites Karen Emmerich's *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals* to buttress her claim that Bourne's translations are iterations: "translation as iteration, as repetition-with-a-difference, a mode of textual proliferation rather than a mode by which semantic content is transferred," then one is left to trace a path, once more, to Derrida's *Limited Inc* (1988).

6 Conclusion

When Vidal Claramonte cites Emmerich in order to envisage "translation as a mode of iterative proliferation," perhaps it remains for us to wonder if one might take a negative, or even anxious attitude to such proliferation. Should one try to stop such proliferations and translations from happening? Bourne's engagement with Bizet's *Carmen* (and by extension Prosper Merimée's text) is very innovative, to be sure, but is it merely provocative to wonder if classic texts should be immune from such translators, lest they take too much liberty with them? That might be a question for Hans-Georg Gadamer in view of what he calls "the traditionary text" (Gadamer 1996: 392). Or we might advert to Benjamin's claim that "Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, ne must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability" (Benjamin 2004: 254). But perhaps that law (the English translator, Harry Zohn, erroneously has "laws"), which permits so much, should be replaced by a law of untranslatability that prevents events of unauthorized or unsupervised translation from tak-

ing place. And indeed, might we even worry that such events would not exactly be translations, but perhaps pseudo-translations, pastiches, or even plagiarisms? Fernando Pessoa ironically said, in this regard, that "a translation is only a plagiarism in the author's name," adding that "a translation is a serious parody in another language" (Pessoa 2001: 222). But what if one took Pessoa seriously?

Anxieties about the license that events of translation enjoy (but perhaps shouldn't) arguably have their roots in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates expresses considerable anxiety about the unpreventable tendency of writing to drift and end up in the wrong hands. It may well be, therefore, that iterability and translatability are, from a Platonic point of view, damaging scenarios, and not to be welcomed at all. It is perhaps worth allowing some registration of anxiety into the discussion, as if allowing for a moment of Devil's Advocacy for Socrates and his concern that writing drifts too much—it might drift into the unauthorized hands of translators who will do with that text what they choose.

But are we really sure that what such translators will choose to do with it will be recognizable as a *translation*? This is the issue Pessoa raises, but it is surely an issue for Translation Studies as well. If, instead of being a *translation*, it is now profiled as a *performance,* is Translation Studies thus forced into becoming Performance Studies, and is it precisely the notion of the 'event' that enacts that forcing? Is the consequence that Translation Studies surrenders its theoretical competence over its own master term, namely 'translation'? What are the disciplinary risks Translation Studies is willing to take, given the many 'turns' Translation Studies has made (or been forced to make), *inter alia* the performative turn? When Vidal Claramonte observes, quoting Mieke Bal, that "Bourne is, in my view, a clear example of how translation is "a travelling concept" [Bal

2002]," one question is perhaps whether the concept of translation has travelled too far, and indeed so far that 'translation' is losing its conceptual and eidetic profile. Consider, for instance, Bachmann-Medick's introduction to an issue of the journal *Translation Studies* devoted to "The Translational Turn" in this regard. She writes:

> This broadening of the horizon of translation currently poses challenges both to translation studies and to other disciplines in the humanities, specifically cultural studies. Admittedly, the process risks diluting the concept of translation, and it seems important at this stage to delineate the concept more precisely. (Bachmann-Medick 2009: 2)

Contemplate the scenario where the *concept* (a term that might already be in doubt) of translation risks being "diluted" by the vagueness of usage when other disciplines invoke it. For Bachmann-Medick, it is specifically Cultural Studies that provokes that dilution. But given the considerable investment made by many of the contributors of this volume in Performance Studies (and in Fischer-Lichte's work in particular), perhaps Performance Studies is also an agent in that "dilution."

The alternative, less anxious view, is that it is intrinsic to the interdisciplinary nature of Translation Studies that it embraces other fields of academic enquiry. This is a view that willingly embraces ballets (Vidal Claramonte), songs (Tarantini), a cathedral (van Bühren, Gil, Rego) and Indian texts (Padhye) as case studies, as well as literary texts like Gorman's poem analyzed by Stolze. For, in the end, this view is the hermeneutic view, whereby understanding the operation of translation begins from the proviso that translation is an operation of *interpretation*. Stolze's essay valuably insists on this in particular. It is less important to police what is subject to interpretation so much as to embrace the challenge of understanding the very nature of understanding itself. This is the hermeneutical spirit

shared by all the contributors to this volume, a spirit the editors of the present *Yearbook* hope will be inspiring to its readers.

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