Thought/Translation[1]

Morad Farhadpour
Translated by Kayvan Tahmasebian and Rebecca Ruth Gould

I

In 1999, in the preface to *Depressed Reason (ʿaql-i afsordeh)*, I compared translation to thought in this way: 'In the past years, I have frequently emphasized that in the contemporary era, beginning roughly with the Constitutional Revolution and ending perhaps in a future not so near, translation, in its broadest sense, is our only true form of thought. My personal experience as a translator and an author as well as the achievements of others in these two realms are evidence of this.' So, the main idea is that for us the only true form of thought is translation. The idea matters because it is related to the concept of situation (*vazʿiyat*).

In the sentence quoted above, a particular historical situation was implied, that is, 'the contemporary era.' It means that the idea of translation emerges from within the confrontation of thought with its own actuality (*feʿliyat*) and essence (*mahiyat*) in a particular situation, not as what it should be, not as an ideal. The situation itself consists of different layers. The most superficial and the simplest layer is the personal experience of the translator as an intellectual and the experience of intellectualism (*rowshanfekri*) during the past twenty years, especially with regard to the means through which different intellectual projects are brought to fruition. On a deeper level, the concept of situation suggests entry into particular historical conditions which can be summoned under the rubric of 'entry into history' or 'entry into modernity.' This is to say that the question of the nature of thought and its relation to translation emerges out of a particular situation, called 'modernity,' which has been introduced to us roughly since the late Qajar era.

What I call history here, namely the history of Europe, has always been modern in a sense. There is an essential relation between history and modernity which will be discussed later. When I call the entry into history and modernity a situation, I mean that it involves a retrospection that links us to the phenomenon of translation movement (*nahzat-i tarjomeh*) in our past history. We are the only Middle Eastern country and Islamic civilisation to have been in close relation with the history of Europe well before entering modernity. This relation has been realized to a great extent through translation. In other words, Islamic philosophy is the only non-European philosophy for which the evolution has been connected to the development of European philosophy, from Plato to the commentarial tradition that developed around Ibn Rushd in Paris and Toledo during the thirteenth century. If the form of rationalism that has evolved in Europe can be called philosophy, then the branch of Islamic thought that culminates in the work of Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and Farabi is probably the only form of non-European thought that can be called 'philosophy.' Collocations such as Indian and Chinese philosophy have a different meaning entirely.

Despite the collisions between two Islamic and Christian civilizations, we have always had one historical foothold in the history of Europe. Through translation, even in premodern

---

times, we have been in relation, however transitorily, with the form of thought that calls itself philosophy. By 'situation' I reference a duality: situation both as entry into modernity and as a certain presence in history. It is important that we begin our argument from within a particular situation. Therefore, we are not concerned with 'should' and 'should not'; our question addresses neither the abstract nor the ideal. It does not aim at what thought 'should be' but is instead concerned with actual reality or the actuality of thought.

The emphasis on the situatedness of thought is one of the main contributions of philosophical hermeneutics, which is rooted in a Hegelian tradition. Prioritizing translation and introducing it as the true form of thought resulted directly from my choice of hermeneutic philosophy in a certain time. In the first part of this discussion, I will demonstrate this hermeneutic aspect of the problem through the concept of translation. In the second part, I will show how a passage migrates from a hermeneutic space to what could be called Lacanian space, and how in the process the concept of translation is transformed from within.

As far as the modern situation is concerned, it is important to introduce thought, not as the action of an abstract un-situated subject that is to choose between tradition and modernity. The concept of situation is meaningful only when we recognize that this question, this choice, as such, is the outcome and the feature of a particular situation. Our dilemma is not facing a choice between two abstract universals (*koll-i enteza'i*), tradition and modernity. The scrutiny that is already attached to tradition and modernity attests to our location within modernity. If we were not already modern, the contrast would pose no dilemma for us. However, when thought refers to its situation, it loses its abstract and ideological quality. Extracting the categories of tradition and modernity from within a situation, here modernity, leaves them neither pure nor ideal. Rather, such categories are meaningful to us only in the context of particular historical conditions.

One of my purposes in translating Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*[2] was to introduce modernity as a concrete experience (*tajrobeh-ye enzamami*). Also, in several articles on the subject of tradition, especially 'Ideological Traditionalism,'[3] I tried to demonstrate that the general abstract category of tradition, used by ideological traditionalism, is an outcome of the modern situation. In this situation, it has had an anti-traditional and nihilistic sense that eradicates all living tradition. The thought that takes the question of situation and its own situatedness seriously cannot see itself in face of a choice between the two abstract universals, tradition and modernity. It experiences both as sets of evolving processes and traditions, concrete and specific traditions. The most important part of our critical argument is that thought becomes, in precise terms, ambiguous and abstract when we regard a problem without a situation.

In regard to our historical situation, veins of such a hermeneutic choice can be seen in other intellectual paradigms too. For example, in the debates around a certain kind of Islamic Heideggerianism, mainly proposed by Ahmad Fardid, I am interested in the point in which this theoretical problematic (*mo'zal*) becomes a hermeneutic dialectic. The problem of *West-struck-ness* (*Gharbzadegi*) comes to be formulated as 'even West is West-struck,' thereby transferring the gap between East and West to within West itself. Such an internal gap or tension exists in the West itself and it is impossible to define the East as an independent, solid and original ('*asil*) totality or identity against this West-struck West. Like it or not, the gap is drawn inside us. To know the West critically, or to negate the West, is impossible without negating the East. This exemplifies the transformation of an ahistorical and abstract negation into a definite negation and amounts to the Hegelian 'negation of negation [*nafy dar nafy*].'

---

[2] The title in Persian is *Tajrobeh-ye moderniteh* (The experience of modernity). [Translators' note]

[3] See Morad Farhadpour, *Badha-ye gharbi* (Western Winds) (Tehran: Hermes Publishing House, 1382/2003).

Here the negating subject is not faced with a spiritual or religious choice between two universals, West and East, or tradition and modernity. Rather, it experiences the tension between the two within itself and in a concrete way. To experience this tension means to restore it to a situation. We recognise that the choice as such emerges from within a modern situation, that is, fissure of the self in face of the other. This historical fact that we are undertaking this choice shows that we live and think in a particular situation, that is, in the modern world. Within modernity, nothing and no one owns a pre-defined fixed identity. Everyone must construct their own identity, or essence, through historical discourses, narratives and images. As a result, reflection on the situation can reveal the historical and concrete essence of thought.

Another example of this dialectical movement or passage can be seen in leftist thought. Not having reflected on itself and not having defined itself as situated, leftist thought always conceptualises the passage into capitalism in a dogmatic, abstract and as a result, arbitrary way. Different theories, including dependence theory, were proposed as though we were in transfer from pre-capitalist or feudalist conditions into capitalist ones without recognizing that if that were the case, then leftist thought would lose its political purpose. Leftist political thought would have traction only once society passed structurally into the capitalist mode. If this transfer were not accomplished, leftist thought simply be a benevolent sermon. As an imaginary form of socialism, leftist political thought arbitrarily prefers a general situation to according to a set of ideals and abstract general concepts. As in the paradigm of tradition and modernity that reveals itself as an abstract choice between two totalities through a thought without self-reflection, a thought that is unaware of its status within a specific historical situation, leftist thought reproduces itself in the form of a general choice.

Most recently, this process is evident in debates around religious intellectualism (*rowshanfeki-ye dini*), and its possibility or, to the contrary, its paradoxicality. Such debates characterize the attempts of a tradition or a theoretical discourse to confront its inner tensions, to overcome its abstraction and to discover its historical status. However, as the most important aspect of thought is its reflexivity, even the attempt to overcome abstraction and to attain self-consciousness can take an abstract form and indistinguishable from self-delusion. A striking example of this reflexive turn can be seen in stagnated epistemological frameworks and in repeating the primal event of this tradition: Abdolkarim Soroush's epistemological and Popperian arguments. Beyond the theory of religious intellectualism, Sayyed Javad Tabatabai's theory of the 'impossibility of thought [*emtenaʿ-i tafakkor*]' questions all of our intellectual traditions. Despite its historical form, this theory lacks any concrete historical content. In Tabatabai's thinking, the attempt to overcome abstraction and to understand the causes of weak and barren thought is itself rooted in historical conditions and the result of hundreds of significant and insignificant historical factors. It turns into pure abstraction and reproduces the same barrenness on a wider scale.

The poverty of thought manifests itself [in Tabatabaei's thought] dialectically as a philosophical theory meeting all the academic norms: voluminous books, an ocean of historical and philosophical information and the claim to the discovery and demonstration of the singular truth that condenses the entire history of our thought and shows why all Iranian intellectuals, except the author himself, are ignorant and incapable of thinking. Overcoming the poverty, abstraction and dogmatism turns dialectically into its antithesis and produces the most idealistic, that is, the most voluminous yet the hollowest theoretical discourse, which is rooted in the historical situation of our modernity today characterized by, among other things, an abundance of [the hybrid genre combining] authorial work and translation [*ta'lifat-i tarjomei*] and

voluminous books covering the history of ideas from Aristotle to modern times. Hundreds of such books have already appeared in the West in different formats ranging from encyclopaedias to handbooks.

This conceptual structure which is at the same time sort of historical process, that which I call 'concretized-historicized thought,' attracted me to hermeneutics as the most interesting philosophical tradition of that time because hermeneutic philosophy was concerned with and emphasized the situatedness of thought. For this reason, when my friends and I decided to start a translation project. We chose books that spanned the hermeneutic tradition, from Schleiermacher and Dilthey to Heidegger and Gadamer. My translation of David Couzens Hoy's *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics*[4] was the outcome of such a choice.

The unification of thought and translation is accomplished through the return to situation. As we saw, this particular situation, which we call modernity, indicates our confrontation with the other in which self is the outcome of the confrontation with the other. In this sense, we are not concerned with a pre-determined pre-historical subject in face of a choice between tradition and modernity. Rather, the subject and the choice are outcomes of the modern situation and, as a result, outcomes of the confrontation between self and other. What matters is the dialectics of self and other. In a Hegelian-Lacanian sense, the main point is the internal gap and negation that the other creates. As a result of this gap, I will become a subject with the potentiality of self-consciousness. Extending the question further, we confront the concept of translation in its different layers and aspects, from the broad meaning of cultural transfer to translation in its specific sense. I mean translation as the dialectical motif which Gadamer's hermeneutics derives from the relation of thought to situation.

If understanding and thought are situated, then all understanding of the other requires a transfer from a situation to another. In other words, understanding is primarily related to interpretation and translation. Transfer (*enteqal*) is a spatial, temporal and at the same time verbal metaphor: transfer from one place to another, from one time to another and ultimately from one language to another. The concept of translation can reflect this historical and cultural dialectics. In this dialectics, recognition of oneself *through* an other often means recognition of oneself *as* an other. In a sense, this recognition involves an understanding of translation as negativity: recognition of oneself as an other consists of interiorizing the alterity (*ghayriyat*) that is concretely located in the objective culture, especially in traditional texts. When I summoned the concrete concept of tradition and stated that tradition in its plural form, as a set of traditions, is essentially situated in modernity (and for this reason, history, as it contains living traditions, has been modern in this sense, even in the pre-modern era), I emphasize the fact that we are concerned with living traditions that always experience their past as an other, nor with indistinguishability of tradition from life—as habit—or with the handing down of hollowed out, frozen customs.

Tradition is a space in the continuity of which one can regard, from a new position, oneself and one's own history as an other, as something alien but still related to oneself. This gives way to a critique of tradition and invigorates it. The opposite is also true: when I, as an Easterner, confront a European or the Western civilization, when I want to know it and internalize it, *I have to confront the other as not-I or as the negative side of my interiority.* Perhaps an example can elucidate the dialectical interweaving of self and other that is tied to different layers of the concept of translation, our knowledge (*shenakht*) of modernity and of

---

[4] David Couzens Hoy's *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Translators' note.

West (as the other) as well as our knowledge of our own past. When I centralise the concept of translation, putting it forward as the main form of thought, I mean that not only our relation to Western modernity but also and more importantly our relation to ourselves is established through translation.

If any kind of thought can be considered a kind of translation, then we need to translate, not only in order to know Kant and Hegel, but also to know our own past. I mean we need to translate Mulla Sadra and Ibn Sina, and, more importantly, Saʿdi, Hafez and Ferdowsi for ourselves. When we develop this conception of translation along with the dialectics of the particular and the general entailed in this concept, the central role of the metaphor of translation will be illuminated. In simplest words, we all know that, as modern subjects, we are inside modernity and confronting the history of modernity and the philosophical attempts of modernity at self-understanding. Given own situation within modernity, reflection on this condition, in any form, is for us part of self-reflection. So, we are obliged to translate and publish Hegel and Kant into Persian.

It is in this way that we can recognize our today's 'identity [*hoviyyat*]' or 'lack of identity [*bihoviyyati*],' as well as our premodern, so-called 'authentic self [*hoviyyat-i ʿasil*],' or 'the self of the self [*khishtani khish*].' This recognition will be realized in the modern historical situation. As a result, in order to properly and consciously import our own past into modernity and history—a past that has always had a foothold in history through Ibn Sina and other Islamic philosophers—we should 'translate' the works of Islamic philosophy in both the restricted and broad senses of the word. Distinguished figures such as Ibn Sina, Abu Rayhan Biruni, Mulla Sadra should cease being cultural heritage—mere inheritance from the dead—and become a living tradition.

This type of translation necessarily has various aspects and layers. We should be able to provide comprehensible Persian texts of the works of Farabi, Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra, and so on. More importantly, we should be able to interpret these works in the context of our current situation. This is translation in the broadest sense. We should draw Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra, among others, into our tensions, decisions, and concrete experiences of our situated subjectivity. Now we begin to see how different branches and layers of the hermeneutic act of translation are intertwined: in order to be able to think Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra in our situation, we need Kant and Hegel. When understood (even if through translation), Kant and Hegel enable us to turn Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra, beyond translations of their works into Persian, into part of modern Persian thought. This is true also for texts that show no trace of translation in the narrow sense, for example Hafez, Saʿdi, and Ferdowsi, among others.

To make Hafez, Saʿdi and Ferdowsi meaningful for ourselves, we need to translate them into the current situation. They should be criticized and rethought from the point of view of modern thought. To be meaningful in the modern situation requires confrontation with the shock of this 'respectful literary treasure.' This is necessarily accomplished in different forms and through different literary theories. For this purpose, it is imperative to be familiar with Barthes, Derrida, new criticism, structuralism and other theoretical traditions and literary-critical tools. It is important that all of these layers are joined through various media (*mianji*). This dialectics relates specific and concrete aspects to general dimensions.

Despite what is usually thought, neither the philosophical category nor the metaphor of translation posits a passive state or a subject that is ashamed because its role is reduced to praising the West. To the extent that translating Hegel and Kant is necessary for making Ibn Sina and Hafez accessible, European philosophical texts stand in need of interpretation well beyond

merely verbal translation. However, this interpretation is derived from within our own situation. Part of this situation includes traditions that belong to us and not to others, such as works of Ibn Sina and Hafez, that distinguish our situation from the situation of an Argentinian or Icelandic. Close reading, criticizing and engagement with these works, among many other factors, enable me to understand Hegel differently.

If my dialectical relation to Hegel goes beyond buying Hegel's books in Persian then this relation certainly pertains to all my situation and intellectual history, including all my past. These books will be eventually abandoned on the shelves or pointlessly taught in academies. They will be produced in thick volumes to adorn the libraries of the middle-class and lead to disgust for Hegel and kill any desire for thinking. In all these cases we are concerned with what thought is, not with what it should be. The question is not if I can decide to use Hegel to comprehend my own past. This comprehension either takes place, in which case I use parts of European philosophy, whether I like or not and whether or not I acknowledge it or not, or it does not.

The same logic is followed when considering the opposite side of the relation. I either comprehend Hegel according to my own situation or I don't comprehend him at all. Nothing remains to say if I do not comprehend Hegel and keep the translation of his *The Phenomenology of Spirit* into Persian (which is indeed meaningless and unreadable) 'on the shelf' in both the literal and figurative sense of the term, either not reading it at all or only consulting it for 'valuable philosophical knowledge [*maʿrifat-i falasafi-ye goharbar*]' that is separated from and irrelevant to my situation.

When I understand Hegel, my situation with all its diversities, paradoxes, traditions, complexities and gaps partakes in this comprehension. This involvement is not arbitrary. A dead thought will ooze out the head of an inarticulate unsituated subject who cogitates among abstract ideas and ideals. This is not thought. It is the dead body of spiritual fossils that are incapable of self-reflection. It is built on misunderstanding and falsity, like the ideological traditionalism that is the worst form of nihilism.

Situatedness is indeed what determines the fate of thought and its relation to truth (*haqiqat*) or falsehood (*kazb*). Rimbaud's famous phrase, 'one must be absolutely modern,' affirms this. However, the word 'must' here, as we will see, is not a universal and moral 'must.' Rimbaud's phrase is not only different from but also contradicts Taqizadeh, who said 'one must be modern from head to tiptoe.'

As I argued, the claim that translation is the only true form of thought implies that there is no thought that is not translation in some way. To translate or not to translate, that is not the question. In the contemporary era, whatever we do is essentially translation. This is another way of emphasising our situatedness in today's modern situation. To clarify this aspect of the question, we need to refer to another key concept of Gadamerian hermeneutics. In explaining the problem of understanding, Gadamer evokes *subtilitas explicanda* in contrast to *subtilitas intelligendi*, premised on a distinction that has been common to hermeneutics since antiquity.

Throughout the history of theological and literary hermeneutics, that is, in all attempts to interpret and understand sacred texts and ancient literary works, one encounters these two notions. *Subtilitas explicandi* speaks to what Schleiermacher proposes as a technical interpretation. This hermeneutic method or subtlety is mainly limited to philology; it makes a text meaningful through the application of philological techniques, editing texts and removing the inevitable technical problems that attend all philological endeavours. *Subtilitas intelligendi* serves to understand the author's intention and discover the true meaning veiled by the text, especially in cases that involve textual ambiguity and foreignness and where misunderstanding is

likely. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics consists of becoming familiar with the foreign. This is why Schleiermacher believes that the text must be understood in the way the author intended. One has to grasp the hidden meaning in the text that is the meaning intended by the author through empathy (*hamdeli*), that is, putting oneself in the author's shoes and reconstructing the author's situation and intellectual horizon. First we see a set of philological techniques that makes the text technically comprehensible (*subtilitas explicanda*), then, through empathy with the reconstructed world of the author, we attain an understanding of the original text (*subtilitas intelligendi*). This second aspect has a psychological, not philological nature: it involves a psychological act, that is, empathy.

Gadamer adds a third aspect, called *subtilitas applicandi*, to these two. In his view, this aspect concerns the hermeneutic truth: the understanding being situated in a certain historical horizon. This practical dimension shows exactly that understanding and interpreting a foreign text or a foreign culture, even understanding the past, require that the horizon of the text or of the past fuse into the horizon that surrounds the interpreter in their historical situation. For Gadamer, the foreign text must be understood according to the requirements and exigencies of the existing situation, which are not exterior to understanding.

Highlighting *applicatio*, Gadamer emphasizes that hermeneutic understanding is not a pure theoretical knowledge (*episteme*); rather, it consists of that kind of knowledge Aristotle called practical (*hikmat-i ʿamali*): *phronesis*. Understanding is necessarily practical; its significance is only realised by putting this meaning into practice or application. In contrast to practical sciences like engineering, it is not that there is initially an understanding or theory that is put into practice or into use in our own situation. Rather, understanding is realised from the very beginning according to this practical (*karbordi*) or performative (*ejra'i*) dimension. Performativity or practicability in a situation forms the inner side of the understanding that occurs in that situation. Yet performance and practice are not optional and arbitrary.

Understanding a text, or understanding history, is not premised on universal theoretical principles that have been independently formulated and determined. We cannot use them in whatever way we wish to discover the meaning of a text or a historical event. Examples can be drawn from literary hermeneutics and legal hermeneutics. In literary hermeneutics, a director's understanding of a play is nothing but the director's production (*ejra'*) of that play. A director cannot claim that there is a distance between her understanding of the play and its performance. In fact, from the moment a director interprets a play, she reads it according to the requirements and exigencies of its performance. The practical dimension is present in her understanding from the start. In addition, the director's understanding will ultimately be judged in light of the performance. No director can claim after the production that her understanding is different from its performance unless the performance has failed due to external causes such as poor acting or stage design. Otherwise, a bad performance equals a misunderstanding.

Legal hermeneutics functions in a similar way. A judge shows her understanding of general laws in any particular case with the decision (*hukm*) she issues. Here too, a judge's understanding and interpretation of the law is not independent from her decision. In fact, it is through performing the law in a particular form that a judge reinterprets the law and clarifies her understanding of it. She comprehends the general law in terms of a particular situation, a particular case. This is accomplished through interpreting the law and performing it in that particular situation. This example illustrates the relation between three dimensions of understanding, interpreting and performing. It shows that understanding always involves a non-arbitrary practical dimension.

The question is whether or not to translate. **For us Iranians, translation is the performative dimension of understanding.**[5] This axiom (*hukm*) logically follows from and supplements the previous axiom that today for us translation is the only form of thought. Our understanding, whether of Europe or of modernity or of our own past and present, always has a performative dimension that is itself an example of translation. In other words, all of us, as long as we think and understand, consciously or unconsciously, like it or not, are active translators. This return to translation by prioritizing it is an essential part of the attempt to self-reflect and part of the question thought poses to itself, part of the historical self-consciousness of the thinking subject in its concrete situation. Here the distinction between an authorial work (*ta'lif*) and a translation fades and the superiority of one to the other ceases to matter.

Everything is translation. The only meaningful distinction is between good and bad translations. On a basic level, this appears in the form of different types of translated authorial works (*ta'lifat-i tarjomeyi*) which cannot conceal their translated status. As they do not reflect on their relation to translation and pretend not to be translations they will make bad translations. Blindly preferring 'writing' and claiming to an 'authored work', these scattered fragments are badly translated and stitched together.

Recently, alongside these translated authorial works, we witness instances of authorial translations (*tarjomeha-ye ta'lifi*) in which an inaccurate word-by-word translation from a philosophical text is later published as an original work and defended in the name of an original translation or cultural translation. In all of these instances, ignoring the performative dimension of translation or reducing it to one option among others turns these works into translation in a bad and barren sense. In contrast, wherever thought becomes sensitive to its performative dimension, and therefore to translation, it transforms into translation in a good sense, namely into a form of understanding, understanding oneself, understanding modernity and understanding the other. From this vantage point, true thought is simply the distinction between conscious and unconscious translation.

The question of translation cannot be reduced merely to translating the books deemed worthy of translation. What matters is how thought becomes concretised with reference to an historical situation. This provides criteria for choosing the texts that should be translated. When the act of translation is meant to be a medium for situating thought, the situation itself with its tensions, paradoxes and inner processes provide criteria for deciding what to choose for translation and to what extent translation should be in the interlingual form and where translation acquires its broader meaning. In this way, translation manifests itself as a tension between European philosophy and modernity as experienced by Iranians. So far, we have dealt with the hermeneutic aspects of translation. In the next section, the relation of history to modernity will be presented through another interpretation of the meaning of translation.

II

As noted above, the recognition of the self is accomplished through recognition of the other. Our own past serves as an-other self (*khod-i digar*). So, can we define self (*khod*) as a perfectly shaped, solid and authentic (ʿ*asil*) identity? Can we ascribe this authenticity to conscious authentic translation with regard to the decisive role of translation in shaping thought and self-consciousness? If the answer is yes, self can be restored, in a perfect way, via an other, in the form of a project or intellectual process, called 'conscious translation,' that facilitates a

---

[5] This sentence is reproduced here as it occurs in the original: in bold. [Translators' note.]

transparent and perfect self-awareness with recourse to 'the only possible form of thought in our own situation.' In this way, our dialectical odyssey would reach its happy ending, thanks to the magic of 'conscious translation,' after many ups and downs, paradoxes and tensions, and after overcoming the intellectual poverty of abstraction. This happy ending would generate a harmonious self capable of modern critical thought yet still connected to its authentic past tradition. This identity would be constituted by combination of tradition and modernity, that which chooses the best parts of the past and the present in the 'supermarket of history' and that which we all seek through different traditions and theoretical discourses at different levels of dialectical simplicity or complexity.

This conception of the historical identity of the thinking subject and the relation of history to thought is the concern of philosophical hermeneutics. In fact, this concept gives to situatedness an ontological meaning. In philosophical hermeneutics, we encounter concepts such as temporality in Heidegger, and historicity in Gadamer. These categories facilitate the transformation of the dialectical theme of situatedness into an abstract concept in the form of a general ontological discourse. As [Walter] Benjamin shows, historicity characterises Heidegger's attempt to save historical comprehension, historical thought and the concept of history as such for phenomenology, or it is phenomenological philosophy that ends in failure.[6] For Gadamer, one sees the same solid and complete I that attains a complete understanding of itself via the other, without referring to what can be called the history of hermeneutics in contrast to historicity as a part of hermeneutics.

The difference between history and historicity becomes clear when one recognizes that hermeneutic philosophy recognises the likelihood that people will begin to think non-historically. Historicity itself, or the axiom that any understanding is historical and bound to a certain historical situation, is a historical and therefore changeable axiom. One can further argue that even at present not all cultures understand everything in a historical and hermeneutic way. Past history confirms the existence of many ahistorical cultures, civilisations and societies. The credibility of the category of historicity as an existential or ontological situation is therefore open to challenge. We recognize that Gadamer's genuine, deep and detailed description of the understanding of history is a historical achievement in Europe, beyond defining a certain ontological situation. At this point, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics becomes radically fissured as a general theory of understanding that argues for situatedness but extends it, ontologically, to all times and places. We may ask why such a hermeneutic view was developed only in Europe.

The emergence of hermeneutics from within a particular historical experience leads us to a fundamental, and at the same time concrete and non-idealistic concept of history. In the course of the evolution of the European theoretical and philosophical space, the challenges posed to the hermeneutic tradition accompanied by growing internal crises in this humanist and historicist tradition, paved the way for the passage from hermeneutics to structuralism and, later, post-structuralism. New theories emerged about subject, meaning and truth, mainly inspired by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Void and gap become the main element in the definition of subject or self (*nafs*). The hermeneutic interpretation of the relation between self and other was questioned, especially its assumption that one can reach a homogeneous and perfect recognition of oneself or recognition of a perfect and homogeneous self through confrontation with the other.

---

[6] Is this a reference to Walter Benjamin's "on the concept of history" or to another text tk? [Translators' note]

We had previously experienced this perfect authentic subject or self in Iran under the rubric of return to 'the self of the self [*khishtan-i khish*],' pseudo-religious, mystic and spiritual readings of Heidegger and sorts of theories of West-struck-ness (*gharbzadegi*). The interesting and fundamental point about these theories, as I indicated earlier, is where the thesis of the West-struck-ness of the West itself is proposed. In that sense, there is not a gap between the West and the East with each one as a homogeneous totality on each side of this gap. Now this gap is internalised by the West and consequently by us, who are, according to that theory, part of the historicity (*havalat-i tarikhi*) of Europe. Now the universal homogeneous sphere of modernity emerges, not as a closed totality against our previous Eastern life but as a gap within this life, namely as a process that disrupts any life, worldview or value system which are linked by this gap to the universal: universal morals, universal values, scientific facts, and so on. The universal, or universality, is realized as a sort of void or empty sphere at the heart of the full and empirical content of any substance (*jowhar*), any form of life or any social system, not as an abstract and general sphere beyond all particular spheres. This gap is produced by the negative, abyss-like (*moghak-guneh*), nihilistic and void-like dimension of modernity. It is this dimension that forms the basic ground of the globalisation of modernity. If modernity is globalised, it is because, while being born out of a particular lifestyle, namely that dominant in Europe, it relates to that life through creating gaps and holes in it, whether in politics, economy, ideology, culture or in the individual psyche of Western people. This hole, this gap, is transferrable to the farthest ends of the world exactly as the negative, as nothingness and as void with no positive ground or mechanism. This is how modern life circulates in China, India, and across the world.

The globalisation of modernity is an effect of this negative aspect or void, of the fact that modernity is not related to a particular content. Notions such as 'religion and democracy,' 'tradition and modernity' and 'the impossibility of thought' are raised by the suppression and denial of this situation by efforts to fill this void. These notions characterize a thought that does not refer to a particular situation. They especially demonstrate that thought, even when it refers to a particular situation, namely modernity, defines it as full and without gap in the form of instructions or a substance, for instance, in the form of the category of 'autonomous reason [*ʿaql-i khodbonyad*]' as a substance or as something positive, or ultimately in the form of a tool (technology): which European have and which we lack. In this way, such a thought indeed denies its situatedness in the modern. The 'essential [*zati*]' characteristics of modernity are crisis, change, disruption and void. In other words, what Europe has is what we lack.

In order to realise the idea or spirit of modernity, we need subtraction (internalising the lack and paradox), not addition (filling the void). Modernity is produced by rupture, by the failure of the organic substance and the internalisation of external antinomies. It is no surprise that in Europe itself, autonomous reason was questioned during the evolution of philosophy, as a metaphysical surrogate for categories such as 'existence' or "God." Modernity cannot be characterised by a rationality cut off from so-called 'religiosity [*din-khuyi*]' or by that which allows rational thinking with reliance on super-historical, scientific and epistemological bases (*mabani*). When we try to define this 'religiousity and clarify its relation to thought, we end up in a vicious circle and with tautology. The definition of religiosity which apparently must explain impossibility and incapability of thought, simply means that a group of people are bound to irrational religious beliefs and are therefore incapable of critical thought. More clearly stated, the entire concept of 'the impossibility of thought' is summarised in the statement that there is no thinking here because people do not think and therefore there is no thinking.

European modernity is characterised by the existence of "the critical"[7] (*bohrani/enteqadi*), the crisis that is present in everything and everywhere without this gap relying on any foundation. Modernity knows no basis for critique. The critique that makes up the modern is the internal gap and void of modernity itself. It is this critique that joins us to the universal by separating us from any particular life, opinion, religion and historical content. The reference of thought to the modern situation means the return to critique and rupture, and not to an autonomous subject or a fundamental rational project, even if the fundamentality of this reason were not substantial or metaphysical and even if it were presented within the framework of a consistent formal, normative system as in Kant and later Habermas.

For anti-metaphysical viewpoints, rationality certainly has nothing substantial. It organises itself as a set of transcendental and formal pre-requisites. Or as in Fichte's subjectivist idealism, the conditions of rationality and the bases of reason as such are nothing but the search into the conditions of rationality. In this conception of reason, there is no particular content or metaphysical substance. However, a formal, *a priori,* and transcendental consistency dominates critique, a consistency that already makes it subject to the existing situation and system. For this reason, this philosophical view always leads to reformism (*eslah-talabi*). The existing system and capitalism itself act more radically than does formal Kantian-Habermasian thought in its movement toward universality and reaching the universal through creating voids and gaps. For this reason, in its movement toward universality, such a thought is always left behind by the existing system.

Well ahead of this kind of critique, capitalism itself generates crisis, tension, rupture, conflict and a void in the body of society and in the individual's mind and body. That is why capitalism easily draws any radical challenge and any radical desire within itself. A thought that is unable to explain universality and the universal in terms of gap—as a joining through rupture or a singular event at the heart of the situation with a singular universality—a thought that still seeks to propose universality in the framework of a formal, a priori consistency; this thought is more concerned with a set of particular contents than capitalism, which is able to leave behind those contents more easily. That is why capitalism circulates in a place like Saudi Arabia without the fetters of Habermas's rational liberal democracy. It is able to dissolve and transform the particular content of any form of life or life-world. By contrast, Habermas's formal thought confronts, in its first step, the ambiguities of the particular content of Arabian life, challenging its formal principles and turning it into a reformist discourse, an educated nagging that continues its marginal, decorative and already assimilated life, in the vicinity of that system, merely in the form of a 'gradual movement' toward an unrealizable ideal.

If, in line with the main ideas of Hegelian thought and Adorno's negative dialectics, we replace the hermeneutic paradigm with a paradigm derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis and structuralist and post-structuralist notions, then we should accept that return to the historical situation of thought means return to a gap or a void, rather than to a solid and perfect self. If we extend this insight to the concept of thought, which has translation as its primary metaphor, as we showed, we will recognise that a thought that moves according to situation, which has is its own situation as its point of departure, is a thought that is chosen more than it chooses. It turns into what it already is, namely, chooses what it already is as its identity, in case of someone whose freedom is defined as a forced choice[8] and a retrospective act. This structure describes the shaping of the subject according to the mechanism of interpellation in its Althusserian sense.

---

[7] This term appears in English in the Persian text. [Translators' note].

[8] For more on the concept of 'forced choice,' see the chapter 'Kantian Ethics' in the present volume.

In this structure, the metaphor of translation will be disrupted as well. As we saw, any concept or any metaphor of translation should take that gap and crisis within itself. We cannot put an authentic thought, corresponding to conscious translation, against an unconscious translation that apparently escapes thoughtfulness and merely disseminates a kind of self-deception or ideology. If this internal gap or negation exists, then there is a fissured subject or self-consciousness in any form of translation and any form of thought. This means that, according to Lacan, thought is always intermixed with misunderstanding in one way or another. There is a lack of understanding at the heart of any understanding. We fill this void or lack with fantasies or imagined stories. According to Lacan, truth is always structured like a fantastic story. Gadamer's hermeneutics ignores the existence of this gap at the heart of understanding, denies it, in Freudian words. It identifies truth with perfection and richness of meaning or with supplementary interpretations.

In this way, the metaphor of translation, as a centre that gathers everything around itself in a consistent whole, as a clear and perfect understanding in opposition to an outer misunderstanding, comes to be questioned. Plans that specified different realisations of this conscious translation as the only model of 'genuine thought' lose their certainty and rigidity. The phenomenon that was somehow excluded, namely unconscious translation, comes to the fore again and becomes internalised. One reason for this can be politicisation that is the choice or the risk implied in any situated thought.

In Badiou's description of thought, the concrete situation of thought is analysed not as an epistemological system but in terms of a truth-procedure. This procedure begins with naming an event and remaining faithful to it. In fact, the subject is an effect and an aspect of this procedure (and the endurance, risk and strategy it implies), not an already existing thought that chooses freely. The subject is chosen, according to a structure similar to the experience of blessing (*faiz*), coming from an exterior vocation (love, revolution, artistic creation, scientific discovery). The subject is an effect of this choice, or in better words, an effect of this choice as well as accepting to be chosen. The subject and its freedom are produced by a retrospective act through which we choose an identity we always already had. In this way, we choose to be Iranian, an activist, Black, worker or leftist, and turn into a subject with such and such particular identity. But choosing as such is a characteristic and potentiality of the subject. We must already be a subject in order to choose.

There is nothing like a thinking subject without identity and situation. The act of choice, or the act of becoming a subject, is only possible in the context of a retrospective structure. However, this 'forced choice' in face of the vocation of history, this choosing to be chosen or choosing what we have already been, testifies to the truth of freedom because the subject's identity is not natural, existential, substantial or innate; rather existence as such and its maintenance depend on a thought beyond language and the recognition of the 'objective conditions.'

As Mallarme notes, any thought is a throw of dice. Therefore, the radical subject can maintain its thought as a 'logical revolt' by submitting to the risk. At this point man's being, or man's 'passion and reason [*shur va shuʿr*],' becomes politicised. In the course of subjectification and seeking truth, we do not confront the transfer of knowledge or culture through an education system. Rather, we confront a risk that already involves the danger of misunderstanding and mistake. Only by submitting to this constructive misunderstanding internal to itself can the subject move toward sort of comprehensive and correct understanding of the situation, or toward truth. This conception of the structure of the subject, thought and truth procedure raises what we

had already criticised from outside in a new way (through an abstract negation) under the rubric of unconscious translation and sheds new light on it. Considering this, we should take up critical examinations of books such as Babak Ahmadi's *Structure and Interpretation of the Text* (*Sakhtar va ta'vil-i matn*), this time without centralising the category of 'unconscious translation' in our criticism. The aim of this return is removing ambiguity, misunderstanding and one-sidedness that are raised by this category. It does not aim at moderating or diluting the radical nature of our previous criticism. The positive role of such books in education and expansion of knowledge among a particular class of readers necessitates, without doubt, a new interpretation of their historical function. However, the confusion and vacuity of these theoretical texts remains a problem.

Now with regard to the new sense of translation as a thought containing a void and inner gap, and according to the dialectic relation of understanding and misunderstanding in a particular situation, it can be argued that thinking based on unconscious translation has been more effective than what we imagined. Unlike the hermeneutic judgement that prioritized good conscious translations, unconscious translation has opened up new spaces and create different concerns and forms for thought. However, our purpose is more than the fair gesture of recognising the positive role of misunderstanding. In the hermeneutic view, the dialectic of understanding and misunderstanding transforms into an ontological structure, in a way that plays the role of a Hegelian synthesis in this transformation. This synthesis automatically imposes unity and homogeneity and general peace on the historical situation.

Despite affirming the misunderstanding in the context of the historical evolution of understanding, Gadamer's view ultimately subjects this evolution to an ontological ahistorical universality. What is lost here is the concrete and historical quality of thought, the situatedness that goes well beyond the subject in complexity and breadth who is only an aspect of that situation. What is lost is taking the risk and remaining faithful to an unrealised unfinished truth. That is everything that highlights the political nature of thought as a risky act, perceived, in the existing context, as uncanny, new and even an incomprehensible rupture. From this point of view, the main problem of unconscious translations is not their misunderstanding and thoughtlessness in comparison to conscious, perfect and clear translation. Rather, it is ignoring or veiling this political aspect of thought. In this respect, concrete thought is more similar to a performative sentence or a promise than to an affirmative sentence, the truth or falsity of which can be determined at any moment through empirical verification. The attempt to prove **truth as an enunciation (*qowl*)**[9] will expose thought to all its gaps, misunderstandings, complexities, paradoxes and voids which are implied in the historical situation as well as to the possible emergence of an event, something new, on the margins of this void. The principal meaning of being concretely situated is nothing but this.

This new conception of the relation between thought and translation, and the dialectic of understanding and misunderstanding, is itself an effect of the changed social circumstances and the emphasis on the political side of theoretical thought. Throughout 1990s and the early 2000s, as the reformist movements and their fervid political space were the main feature of our historical situation, even a radical theoretical discourse could play a role as a cultural discourse on the margins of the reformist movement. Back then, it was not necessary for a theoretical discourse to directly address the political situation, because the density and attraction of political changes, power struggles and even different types of political infections (*siasatzadegi*) facilitated the rapid dissolution of theoretical discourse into journalism. By distancing itself from the

---

[9] In the original this clause is in bold type. [Translator's note].

political scene, theory could play a critical role more than when it directly addressed the problems that were politically introduced to the everyday life. Problems that were unaffected could not be judged because of the hidden dimensions involved in them. In this way, marginal translation projects, so-called 'cultural work [*kar-i farhangi*]' could nurture radical critique, or at least prepare the ground for it. Translation projects introduced new texts and concepts and developed human resources [into Iranian culture]. This kind of thought could as well be a preliminary but effective form of radical politics thanks to dynamic space and the social capacity of the reformist movement beyond the interests and intentions of the different parties involved in the state.

As society became more and more de-politicised, we witness a convergence between theory and politics according to which first, politics, especially radical politics, increasingly takes refuge in theory; second, according to the principle already discussed (that is, comprehension of theory as a form of situated thought related to translation, that does not consider translation as a return to a perfect, homogeneous, riskless thought), theory receives more direct, more concrete form and more political content. As politics approach theory, theory approaches politics and becomes more deeply involved with historical conditions and problems.

To what extent is this new situation unlike earlier periods? In previous periods, we distinguished between conscious and unconscious translations. How to distinguish one theoretical project from another when we believe even a conscious translation contains a gap of misunderstanding or unconsciousness? I think that as long as theory (as faith in truth) links itself to truth, this shows itself epistemologically as a kind of tension, interruption, stop or pause rather than as something positive or as a visible measurable progress. Because in the existing knowledge, truth lies beyond representation. We should change the existing epistemological paradigm or language so that the representation of this truth becomes possible. This reveals the indeterminacy, risk and inconsistency at the heart of the project of radical thought, and of this new conception of thought/translation. To rupture the existing epistemological system can be insignificant, like a small change in point of view that displaces everything. What was irrelevant becomes an important problem. Thus, what is chosen is based on a judgment or decision that cannot be proven within the framework of an existing epistemological paradigm. The justification for this decision depends on remaining faithful to the thought it evokes, maintaining the rational consistency of this thought and clarity and universality of truths that are raised by it. This justification has a retrospective structure.

But as far as the negative side of the distinction among projects is concerned, that is, as far as other theories are concerned, everything pertains to this question that whether the main function of these discourses -whether as original work or simply as translations- is not to exactly fill and cover up this void with mythological and ideological narratives, namely, to veil the paradox, tension, conflict or void in the situation. The ideological nature of these discourses derives from their conformity to the prevailing conditions. Radical thought is indeterminate, that which separates itself, in a radical and fundamental way, from the big Other[10], or, from the Symbolic, which is always contaminated with risk and ambiguity. Yet, there are ideologies that remove those ambiguities and which thoroughly compromise existing conditions.

This kind of thought or thought/translation does not reveal its inner misunderstanding or gap. It does not preserve it as a productive tension at the heart of theory or theoretical act, but it covers up this gap immediately with an ideological narrative that is both delusional and demagogic. The main difference between all these instances lies in the question whether such

---

[10] In today's situation, this big Other includes the criticism posed by those in power to Western liberalism as well.

discourse functions to conceal. This does not amount to an infinite set of postmodernist differences at whose heart anything can happen. In fact, the affirmation of ambiguity and difference in the form of postmodernist infinite multiplicity can be an ideological way of getting along with the chaotic and fluid space of modern capitalism.

As Badiou suggests, philosophy should distance itself from the fluid course of perceptions and imaginations, information, opinions and beliefs, goods, gender and ethnicity that comprise the substance of the modern capitalism. Can its discourse highlight the un-resolved tension or gap? In psychoanalytic interpretation, what is defined as law, what Lacan calls the name of the father, always has an ideological role in this sense. Not that there is a hidden repressed desire somewhere 'inside' us; to the contrary, the desire we experience in disguise of a denied fantasy is a veil that removes the tension and covers up the gap by filling up the hole produced by the trauma that is formed through the confrontation with the other and with the mystery of the other's desire. This scar or gap that has torn apart our 'natural and innate' order is called a 'symbolic castration' by Lacan. However, it is this castration or the primary negation and digression that makes desire possible and makes us capable of desire. The perverse and digressive nature of desire (*meyl*) is affirmed in language through its links to passion and perversion (*mayel*). The inscription or the trace of the unconscious is a gap and rupture on the surface not a hidden treasure inside. The unconscious is the discourse of the other and, in order to discover it, one must look out at the other. The Lacanian structure of the subject resembles Kant's description of the transcendental subject. In Kantian philosophy what makes objective experience possible and consistent is what can never be experienced. What makes us ethical subjects in search of infinite good and evil is breaking with our natural desires. Kant's transcendental subject, like Lacan's notion of fantasy, is a veil that turns our sense data into a consistent image of reality at the same time as it covers our inner void or lack of essence, namely, our lack of access to our own noumenal reality.

The above points can be summarised as follows. By proposing the idea that translation is the only true form of thought in our age, we aim to make thought return to its historical and concrete situation. We also move away from abstract negation to determinate negation, a movement that conditions the attainment of truth and radical critical theory. This movement involves two stages. In the first stage, which I described with the help of Gadamerian hermeneutics, the abstract peace and narcissism of thought is disturbed by the idea of translation. This stage can be described by the formula thought/translation. But this formula leaves abstract oppositions and polarities intact and reproduces them in a new framework. We must bear in mind that 'situation,' 'concretisation,' even 'thought' and 'translation' are abstractions.

Overcoming the abstraction of thought depends on a constant action at the heart of the thought itself, the act of driving concepts towards the ultimate and dialectical borders of the self where it will overcome its abstract stagnation through the mediation of its opposite. However, there is always this danger of falling into abstraction. This risk can never be overcome in an absolute and a priori way. Situatedness also means partaking of the ambiguity of the situation. Removing this ambiguity depends on the evolution of the situation and preserving thought's openness and sensitivity to change.

The formula thought/translation includes both overcoming the abstraction and the danger of falling into it again. The dialectical concept of translation as the negative, the tension or the inner gap within modern thought has become substantial only by accident. This only reproduced the abstract nature of thought in the form of the opposition between conscious and unconscious translation. This opposition, itself an effect of the hermeneutic interpretation of the metaphor of

translation in the peak of the reformist movement, still restricted and distorted the historical understanding of the situation and the situatedness of thought. Transformation of the metaphor of translation, as I indicated by reference to Lacan, was a reaction to this problem. This transformation can be most clearly and most briefly formulated as follows:

Thought/translation → conscious translation/unconscious translation → ~~thought translation~~

With regard to what we said about the new historical post-reformist stage, the convergence of politics and theory in the context of popular depoliticization as well as the intensified theoretical directness, there is no doubt that today reflection on the interior of the exterior paradoxes of ~~thought~~/~~translation~~, and on the dialectic relation of translation-thought and on the immanence of the negative to any theoretical discourse, is essential to any form of critical theory that pursues radical politics under present conditions.