

We cannot help but wonder whether Hölderlin's Sophocles announces a new, more numinous art of translation, or simply betrays the poet's ignorance of the most elementary rules of Ancient Greek. Meaning, in these translations, as Walter Benjamin wrote, "plunges from abyss to abyss, until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language." And yet, the only text to which Benjamin could compare these translations was — *scripture*.

A staggering name stands today before those works, a name that meant nothing when they first found their way into the world: in his translations, Hölderlin's contemporaries saw nothing but the ramblings of a madman. Those men were, perhaps, poor judges — but the latecomers might be worse. Two centuries of worship now hang like a nightmare over these works.

Ruth Walker one day attended one of Derrida's seminars, a man whose works she had not yet read; and as the lecture ended and the philosopher packed his papers and left, Walker followed him outside — around him, a raptured throng of students vying for a glance, and perhaps, even, a word. It was winter in Paris. Around Derrida, the graduate students staggered down the street under the beating rain. Walker lagged a few steps behind, hidden under her umbrella.

A confusion of voices sprang from every side, with, at their center, a Derrida who gazed at the pavement, hearing nothing. But at a street corner the man stood still, for an instant, silently looking around. He opened his lips, and his students fell silent. A bus drove by. Streams of water hurtled along the sidewalks and into the drains. Anxious for the philosopher's pronouncement, his students readied themselves, quivering — one of them even took out his notebook. Derrida's gaze fell upon Walker: "You were right to bring your umbrella today."

"I never forget my umbrella," she absentmindedly responded. The philosopher went mute. His students, shocked, barely muttered anything. Years later, at a symposium, a lecturer mentioned how a student, decades ago, had thrown the great witticism "I never forget my umbrella" at the master himself.

One rainy day of Fall 1881, scribbled in one of his notebooks, Nietzsche left behind a well-known mark: "Ich habe meinen Regenschirm vergessen, *I forgot my umbrella.*"

Twenty pages of *Éperons*, that's what Derrida devotes to this sentence of Nietzsche. And Derrida is right: it shatters the text as a totality. Is there an intent, is Nietzsche here writing as a philosopher, as an author, or as somebody who forgot their umbrella? If it's the former, what does it *mean*, or does it wink at us as a refusal to *mean anything*; and if the latter, where does the person end, and the author begin? And but Nietzsche puts those words between quotation marks: they are meant as literature, either his or someone else's. Or are they? Whatever the solution, Derrida went for the

right sentence — it throws us at a *threshold of indeterminacy* between what constitutes mindless scribbling and literature.

It's Nietzsche who killed the author the day he forgot or didn't forget his umbrella. But then Walker did forget her umbrella that day. Quite unwittingly, her witticism made her an author. And yet — *no*, she later corrected us, *no*, she was no author: there was no intent. Here, someone more cynical might interject: "And? the story stands."

Hölderlin stammers in language. As an alien god before him it stands, and he too stands before the speechless world, speechless. *Bread and Wine* and *Rousseau*: already language looms as an impossibility. Night, *sacred to the lost and the dead*, night steals in over the hills of Reason — and, Hölderlin says, *you prefer reasonable day, but a clear eye loves the dark sometimes*. Night will grant us *forgetfulness and joy, and sacred intoxication*. Here, no object to be grasped, and no subject to grasp it. And yet: holy remembrance.

Language is already more otherworldly. A first designation, a pointing out, a setting apart, which always entails "I'm not of it." And yet — it's as if this separation presupposed its dissolution.

With language the world emerges suddenly before our eyes, and already we stand world-weary, as criminals, and more priestly too, before a mute, alien obscenity. And yet, whenever I speak, I must first say "I and the world" — this original sundering, by its very gesture of sundering, must presuppose that something has been sundered.

Language, as it loses us to the world, preserves yet a remembrance; and not the remembrance of what we forgot, but rather, the remembrance of forgetfulness. A higher remembrance. But Reason forgot itself. It forgot it lost the world, and it started to think it was the world. For language to remember that it forgot, to keep alive the remembrance of its own forgetfulness—it cannot remember the world, and this is its more original wound—then language must first forget itself.

Antonio Negri, accused by a reactionary journalist of the violence of the Red Brigades during Italy's *Years of Lead*, calmly responded: "Who controls memory? Faced with the weight of memory, we must become unreasonable." Perhaps we must learn to forget.

Hölderlin, who coined the word *communism* in 1796, could not endure the collapse of the French Revolution; arrested for his participation in a later, foiled Jacobin insurrection, he was sent to the madhouse for a year of torture under the barbaric practices of 18th century 'psychiatry'. The failure of humanity's emancipation left him broken and mute; and yet, to his death, he never abandoned writing and speaking. His visitors he would address in an ecstatic mixture of Latin,

German, French and Ancient Greek; questioned as to why he spoke so, “have you not seen,” he always responded, “what happened in France?” The possibility of a community of language had been voided along with that of a community of humans. Hölderlin was alone, and alone in his madness.

The stately, intoxicated, piercingly lucid free verse of his mature poems melted away, and left nothing behind but simple, childish, rhyming lines about nothings. The imminence of the returning gods was forgotten; and the gods also; and God too. Neither past nor future: the abyss of the present. No objects, no speaking subject — pure language. These are poems and words that seem to us all too common; but here, never has language been pushed to such extremities of estrangement. These are the words of a mind eradicated by the light of the world, words like a child’s.

*The gleaming of nature is higher shining,  
Where itself the day with many joys accomplishes  
It is the year, that itself with splendor accomplishes  
Where fruits themselves with joyful gleam besingle,*

*The unbworld is like ornate, and seldom rattles  
The sound through open field, the sun warms  
The day of autumn mild, the fields stay  
As an oversight far, the air blows*

*The twig and branches through with joyful sough  
When soon into void themselves the fields then turn.  
The whole sense of the bright picture lives  
As like a picture that golden splendor beflies.*

Here nothing remains but a strange and all too homely language without content — there is nothing to interpret in this silent immediacy of becoming. The fields and the subject have turned to void, and the emptied world stands profane, useless, godless, without meaning or purpose, without past or future; and it stands in its innocence, like the stillborn babes of Limbo, beyond damnation and salvation alike — a joyful, higher gleam.

This poetry offers no onto-logy; the meaning of those words is *the sense of a picture* and it lives *as like a picture*. To speak on more priestly terms, *the signifying chain of language has collapsed*, and it no longer refers to anything outside the immediacy of its enunciation. Yes, these are the lines of a child. The lines of an infancy of language; everything has receded in the distance, foreign, and yet — gleaming with joy.

To speak of *intent* here would be misguided; we are reminded of Jameson's description of *schizophrenia* as a "breakdown of the signifying chain" and this testimony of a schizophrenic he cites: "My eye encountered a field of wheat whose limits I could not see. The yellow vastness, dazzling in the sun [...], filled me with such anxiety that I broke into sobs. It was the first appearance of those elements which were always present in later sensations of unreality: illimitable vastness, brilliant light, and the gloss and smoothness of material things."

If Hölderlin had always sought to get at the space between language and world, as Nietzsche later did by collapsing onto-logy, the terrible possibility arises that they both *rationally thought themselves into madness*. And thinking too far into language, into the *radical nihilism* implied by abandoning the primal postulate of onto-logy, one might feel the limits of things blurring before their eyes; perhaps there are truths too hostile to life to be worth pursuing.

We ask ourselves: are these the translations of a babbling madman reduced to stupidity, or the last peaks of genius? A more dangerous answer looms over a field of wheat: *there is no difference*. Hölderlin's translations: the mark of the lattermost command of Greek, or that of a struggling schoolboy? The question returns: what if the last extremity of language is *the infancy of language*?

Perhaps, then, it is as Deleuze says: philosophy is about learning to stammer again.