

Damion Searls

The Philosophy of Translation

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With *The Philosophy of Translation*, Damion Searls marks a turning point in his already rich and varied corpus of writings, dedicating himself for the first time to the composition of a philosophical text. In this volume, he creates a fruitful blend of his philosophical knowledge, developed during his years of study at Harvard University and further cultivated through translations of authors such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, and his *expertise* as an award-winning translator from German, French, Dutch, and Norwegian. Indeed, the author's stated aim is to provide a significant contribution in terms of both theory and practice: a general study of the nature and meaning of translation, always linked to the experience of its concrete practice.

The volume is divided into eight chapters, the first half of which is devoted principally to the development of philosophical reflections, while the second half focuses on the analysis of various concrete examples of translations and ends with a final section dedicated to some concluding remarks. However, it should be emphasised that this structural division into two different parts, which the author makes explicit in the introduction to the volume, should not be understood in a radical sense: at every point of the argumentation, both the theoretical and the practical levels of analysis are simultaneously active, as evidenced by the abundance of examples cited in the first section of the volume to support the philosophical discussion and, conversely, by the emergence of the theoretical problem of defining what is a faithful translation in the penultimate chapter.

Considerations such as these bring us to the first aspect of originality that characterises Searl's volume in relation to the literature produced on the subject to date. On the one hand, since the 1970s, there has been a proliferation of academic texts that have developed a theoretical study of translation, often detached from any

reference to actual practice. On the other hand, more recently, an increasing number of renowned translators have published writings that aim to introduce non-professionals to their work, making them aware of its complexity and relevance. Searls, on the contrary, attempts to produce a text which is directed at a heterogeneous audience and is neither explicitly academic nor limited to an introduction to the practice, but ultimately presents what, in his view, and in light of his personal experience, constitutes the philosophy of translation.

In the introduction of the volume, Searls presents the central core of his proposal: to understand translation as a particular form of reading. Translators are, in fact, first and foremost readers; they navigate through the pages of the original text trying to understand and enhance the author's intent. The aim of this kind of reading is to recognise the elements of strangeness in the text and its discrepancies from the usual use of the language. This idea is gradually developed and explored throughout the various chapters.

The first chapter is devoted to reconstructing three moments in which the practice of translation and the relationship between humans and language have undergone significant reconceptualisations essential for understanding the current way of interpreting translation. Specifically, in this section, Searls draws on the analysis developed by Antoine Berman in *Tradition, Translation, Traduction* (1988) and *L'Épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (1984), focusing on the shift from the ancient paradigm of tradition to that of the universal communication of meaning which developed during the 14th century until the emergence of Renaissance ideas about the impossibility of separating form and content in works of art. Within this theoretical framework, Searls also analyses the Romantic reconceptualisation of the relationship between language, individuals, and the spirit of the nation. In fact, according to the author, the current confusion about the nature and meaning of the practice of translation can be traced back to the accumulation over time of all these different theoretical demands, which are often at odds with each other, if not in open contradiction, and none of which has had the power to prevail over the others.

After tracing the causes that led to the current way of interpreting translation, Searls states at the beginning of the second chapter the scope that he wants to achieve through the volume: to overcome the dichotomous approach that produces all the oppositions

through which the practice of translation is usually described. Among these, the source-target opposition, whose origin the author states can be traced back to Schleiermacher's essay *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens* (1813), has particular relevance. Searls highlights how it is entirely senseless to hypothesise the existence of monolithic and sharply separate linguistic-cultural communities; the translator is an individual who, operating within a context that is already heterogeneous from the outset, carries out a process of realignment of the text. In particular, this realignment involves the relationship that the text establishes with its readers, the vector that ideally connects the author to the audience. Therefore, Searls acknowledges a continuity between the practice of translation and other types of intra-linguistic relationships: within a spectrum composed of the various levels at which one text can influence others, the practice of translation represents a particular type in which linguistic change becomes a purely technical matter. The original, according to Searls, influences and guides the translator; it is the latter's crucial task to take from the text its most specific characteristic, that of strangeness, and to return it to the reader, enhancing it through the change of language. With translation, therefore, the text can reach us as *étrange*: its anomaly does not need to be transported from one place to another, but rather collected and noticed.

The idea of translation as *relevatour* is further developed by Searls in the third chapter, which is dedicated to the interaction of the philosophy of translation with the phenomenology of perception and, in particular, with the philosophical work of Merleau-Ponty. The interesting elements identified by the author concern the deconstruction of the subject-object dichotomy and the French philosopher's proposal to recognise an almost vital relationship that binds us to what we perceive. Indeed, the act of perception requires a certain degree of intentionality, understood as an existential movement towards the object, a form of *external directionality*. In the same way, the translator enters into a very particular relationship with the text, responding to its very demand to be translated. In works of art, in particular, this form of external directionality coexists with an internal one, which concerns how the text moves within the universe of language.

This dual movement is particularly analysed in the fourth chapter of the volume, where Searls, taking up the discussion of the strangeness of the artwork already developed in the second

chapter, emphasises that every literary text contains a dimension of deviation from the baseline of language and from its common usage. Indeed, in every literary composition, there is a particular linguistic constellation that the translator has to recreate.

Following this theoretical elaboration, the next three chapters focus on concrete examples of translations. Firstly, the author concentrates on the role of words, also with reference to the specific case of the translation of proper names, emphasising that the unit of translation is actually the utterance. This fact is particularly relevant because, according to Searls, it implies that there are no untranslatable words. The author also underlines through examples that different languages do not have overlapping units of meaning and that various literary devices, such as repetition, do not always behave in the same way in all linguistic contexts. He also considers titles and negatives as particularly interesting elements for a discourse on translation.

Next, Searls focuses on the so-called *force of language* that he considers the central element of the translation process. In fact, he explains that the utterance is not simply a message communicating an action through language, but is a piece of language that *does* something. Hence, Searls distinguishes and analyses in depth through numerous examples four qualities of utterance (sound, register, association and movement) which he identifies as crucial elements to which the translator must pay particular attention.

Finally, in the seventh chapter, the author, starting with the historical example of the debate generated by the translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's poems produced by M.D. Herter Norton and Robert Lowell, addresses the issue of fidelity to the original, setting out his argument which rejects the radical dichotomy between faithful and free translation. As already highlighted, Searls considers translation as a particular form of reading. Consequently, it is not texts that are translated, but readings of them, and for this reason, a single original can give rise to translations that are very different from each other. From this, it follows that all translations, according to the author, are faithful because each translator decides which aspects of the text are important to preserve.

In the conclusion of the volume, Searls points out that translation does not stand in opposition to the preservation of the poetic element, but rather generates it itself, by determining the birth of new linguistic constellations. Moreover, he participates in the current debate on the nature of machine translation: interpreting

translation practice as a form of reading makes Searls recognise an essential difference between the work of a human and that of an artificial intelligence tool, since the latter does not possess a reading ability like the former.

Starting precisely from these last considerations, it becomes clear that one point of interest in the volume is the author's constant attention to the current state of the discussion, with frequent references to the contemporary publishing world as well. Beyond this, another significant and original aspect of the text that should be noted is the author's use of argumentations drawn from different readings and disciplines that are not typically considered in the field of philosophy of translation. Notable examples include Merleau-Ponty, James Gibson, Viktor Šklovskij, and Mikhail Bakhtin, authors who, although not central to debates on translation practice, serve as essential sources for the construction of Searls' philosophical proposal. Particularly relevant in this regard is the reference to the phenomenology of perception, which also opens up further possibilities for analysing the nature of the type of communication that characterises works of art. However, the author's aim of not producing an academic text laden with mentions of the literature on the subject sometimes leads to a lack of references to some classic texts in the philosophy of translation, the analysis of which could have enriched the potentiality of the argumentation. This is the case, for instance, of the missing quotation of Jacques Derrida's lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "rélevante"?* (1999), in which translation is first interpreted in terms of *relève*. Without a doubt, Searls' interesting argument regarding translation as *releatour* could have benefited from a Derridean reference with regard to further deepening and developing the theme. Similarly, the interpretation of translatability as an intrinsic characteristic of the literary text proposed by the author of the present volume would have benefited from a reference to Walter Benjamin's essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923). Beyond this remark, we can undoubtedly conclude that Searls remains faithful to his original intentions, both in terms of methodology and the discussed topics. The volume also deserves credit for considering translation from an unprecedented perspective, which opens the door to further exploration of various themes, such as the role of communication in art and the relationship between the translated text and the original, interpreted beyond the classic dichotomies that establish ontological hierarchies.

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