

# Conflicting Humanities



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# Conflicting Humanities

EDITED BY  
ROSI BRAIDOTTI AND  
PAUL GILROY

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Further Reflections on Exile:  
War and Translation<sup>1</sup>

Étienne Balibar

I am not entirely sure of the exact definition of the concepts that I am using here. This definition is part of the problem. To place 'translation' in a symmetric place with respect to 'war' is not only a way to modernize traditional antitheses such as 'war and peace', 'war and diplomacy', 'war and commerce', in a world that is increasingly characterized by multiculturalism and multilingualism, it is also a way to *displace them*, so that their complexity becomes apparent. War and translation are *different* categories, in theory and in practice, they oppose each other, but they also *penetrate* each other. Edward Said's contribution, as a critic, a cultural historian, a political analyst, is especially illuminating here. Being permanently concerned with the role of war in politics and the extent to which politics models itself on war,<sup>2</sup> Said is also one who reflects on the importance of translation, both in the strict philological sense and in the sense of establishing reciprocities, or challenging cultural hierarchies and relationships of domination which unequally distribute the 'hermeneutic function'. These two concerns constantly interfere: it appears that the politics of translation are involved in the waging of wars and it appears that strategies, if not actual operations of combat, are involved in the construction of the models of translation and interpretation on which our culture relies, especially in the humanities. For this reason, Said is crucial to the project of comparing or articulating war and translation as political models, which I sometimes call the 'polemological' and the 'philological' model.<sup>3</sup> He occupies the place of their necessary interference. In that location, we also find some representatives of the so-called 'post-structuralist school', particularly Lyotard and Derrida, with whom I will attempt a kind of virtual dialogue, in spite of their well-known differences and disagreements. Allow me to call this an exercise in contrapunctal criticism.

I begin with two quotations from Lyotard's *The Differend*.<sup>4</sup> They refer to the tradition of opposing war and commerce, which also indicates their common element, namely the idea that *alternative forms* of sociability, offering a *transcendental choice* to politics, are centrally concerned with representations of the *stranger* and the institution of the *border*. I start with the second one:

A phrase, which links and which is to be linked [to others], is always a *pagus*, a border zone where genres of discourse enter into conflict over the mode of linking. War and commerce. It's in the *pagus* that the *pax* and the pact are made and unmade. The *vicus*, the *home*, the *Heim* is a zone where the differend between genres of discourse is suspended. An 'internal' peace is bought at the price of perpetual *differends* on the outskirts ... This internal peace is made through narratives that accredit the community of proper names as they accredit themselves. The *Volk* shuts itself up in the *Heim*, and it identifies itself through narratives attached to names, narratives that fail before the occurrence and before the differends born from the occurrence. Joyce, Schönberg, Cézanne: *pagani* waging war among the genres of discourse ... (Lyotard 1988: §218, 151)

What is crucial here in my opinion are two things: one is the absolute reciprocity of the issues of interior vs exterior and the dilemma of war and peace, which itself is interpreted in terms of establishing or interrupting the possibility of commerce, exchange, reciprocity. The other one is the fact that, in order to 'politicize' the 'differend' (or difference without a common genre) or to express the immanent *political* character of a differend, which he has defined in very general terms as a relationship of incompatibility among 'phrases', Lyotard must have recourse to the *territorial representation* of the political institution: its way of assembling and separating collectives through the establishment of the border. This is a very classical problematic that has been associated with the constitution of nation-states and the juridical categories of sovereignty and territory as the 'normal' basis for the institution of collective identities. What is 'critical' or 'deconstructive' in Lyotard's way of alluding to this classical problematic is indeed his way of relating distributions of self and other within separated territorial entities to the invention of *narratives* (therefore 'phrases'). These narratives are typically national or nationalistic, but they are also *imperial*, or perhaps they relate in a generic manner to the imperial element that is always already involved in the figuration of national states as sovereign entities. The aesthetic examples of Joyce, Schönberg and Cézanne are invoked as metaphors of the failure, the limited power of these narratives for regulating the heterogeneity of phrases, analogous to an insurrection or a partisan war that blurs the distinctions between genres, spaces, states of normality and states of exception.

In another passage, which technically refers to the interpretation of different genres of discourse within Kant's philosophy, namely the scientific or 'cognitive' and the ethical or 'normative', Lyotard invokes a very different scheme for the imagination of the 'differend':

Each genre of discourse would be like an island; the faculty of judgement would be at least in part, like an admiral or like a provisioner of ships who would launch expeditions from one island to the next, intended to present to one island what was found (or invented ...) in the other, and which might serve the former as an 'as-if intuition' with which to validate it. Whether war or commerce, this interventionist force has no object, and does not have its own island, but it requires a milieu – this would be the sea – the *Archipelagos* or primary sea as the Aegean was once called. (1988: 130–1)

What is interesting here is that, by transferring the issue of crossing the borders from a 'continental' imaginary to an 'oceanic' one, thereby invoking a different kind of narrative of the imperial nation (let's suggest a reference to Conrad rather than Kipling or even Joyce), Lyotard is not only stressing the reversibility of the operations called 'war' and 'commerce', which belong to the same world and the same political regime, he is also drawing the attention to the strategic function of translation and its obstacles. What is suggested is not only that the borderline is disputed and uncertain, but that the border itself ultimately cannot be found or located: no fixed line can be inscribed in the marine element unless it is inscribed virtually by a map. Similarly, we have a distinction between the two opposite political notions of war and commerce which is destined to remain uncertain. Indeed, it is particularly in the marine element that one finds the hybrid figure between the trader (*le commerçant*) and the warrior, namely the *pirate*, a public enemy of all States except when they utilize him in order to 'illegally' combine war with commerce. The 'insular' character of the phrases separated by the differend is a metaphor of the *untranslatable* character of the phrases, but it also indicates that what is impossible cannot be avoided, or *must be attempted*. In Lyotard's terminology: one must 'link onto' another phrase, which remains heterogeneous. In particular one must 'translate' heterogeneous phrases *as if* they were translatable: *this* is the wager of judgement, or the wager of politics.

The opposition of war and commerce is always susceptible to being inverted, made into a complementarity, or even made to express a fundamental identity. This is why its alternate formulation – war and peace – becomes so problematic in the modern era. From Augustine to Kant, political philosophy has reflected this ambivalence. Sometimes it sees peace, in the heart of an empire, or within the framework of an 'international order', as the condition of possibility for commerce. At other times it sees in commerce a moral and material factor for the establishment of

peace.<sup>5</sup> However, the peaceful essence of commerce remains eminently dubious. It is not only that there are hybrid forms (such as piracy or the *guerre de course* [privateering]). But these roles are exchanged in certain circumstances, perhaps inevitably: there are commercial wars and above all there are *wars for commerce*, to impose its 'freedom'. This ambiguity was immediately seized upon by thinkers such as Kant, who referred to the combination of reciprocity and antagonism that constitutes the 'motor' of historical progress as an 'unsocial sociability' (*ungesellige Geselligkeit*). Marx also identifies this ambiguity when he insists on the two sides comprising the extension of commodity circulation: on the one hand, the creation of a cosmopolitical 'universality' through the institution of a *general equivalent* that measures all values, and homogenizes all 'social labour'; on the other hand, the *violent dissolution* of traditional communities and their corresponding cultures, as their commodity exchanges with the exterior intensify and are monetized. In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) adopts this schema to describe two models of 'translation' and thus two modalities of relation to language and to the diversity of languages.

Let us now return to Lyotard. The notion of a 'differend' (*le différend*) around which he organizes his book gradually elaborates on an experiment in thought which concerns the absolute 'wrong' (*tort*) suffered by victims of extermination processes and, more generally, 'universal suffering' (an expression that refers to the proletariat in Marx's early writings). One such demonstration is as follows:

The plaintiff lodges his or her complaint before the tribunal, the accused argues in such a way as to show the inanity of the accusation. Litigation takes place. I would like to call a *differend* the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. If the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of testimony are neutralized, everything takes place as if there were no damages. A case of differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom. For example, contracts and agreements between economic partners do not prevent – on the contrary, they presuppose – that the laborer or his or her representative has had to and will have to speak of his or her work as though it were the temporary cession of a commodity, the 'service,' which he or she putatively owns. This 'abstraction,' as Marx calls it ... is required by the idiom in which the litigation is regulated ('bourgeois' social and economic law). In failing to have recourse to this idiom, the laborer would not exist within its field of reference, he or she would be a slave. In using it, he or she becomes a plaintiff. Does he or she also cease for that matter to be a victim? (Lyotard 1983: 24–5; 1988: 9–10)

This demonstration is followed by another soon after:

Would you say that interlocutors are victims of the science and politics of a language understood as communication to the same extent that the worker is transformed into a victim through the assimilation of his or her labor power into a commodity? ... To give the *differend* its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease to be a victim ... No one doubts that language is capable of admitting these new phrase families or new genres of discourse. The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible ... What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them. (Lyotard 1983: 29–30; 1988: 12–13)

There are many ways in which these formulations turn around the problem of the 'untranslatable'. They suggest a much broader use of the notion of translation, and consequently of language (or *idiom*) than that which is officially received. The 'borders' in question here are not purely 'national', they could be *social*, or *moral* or *religious*.<sup>6</sup> The differend itself, in other words *the absence of the possibility to discuss*, and first of all 'to respond' or 'to present one's case' to the other, comes first. Differends are induced within one language – in the official sense of the term – just as they are among *different languages*. But Lyotard complicates this analogy by inverting it. He argues that it is possible *in language*, through the invention of new idioms that make 'translatable' what was not, to express all conflicts based on an absolute or radical 'wrong' (*tort*), a 'wrong' that somehow excludes from humanity or community those who suffer. Obviously, to say that differends can be expressed does not mean that they are thereby 'resolved'. Rather, as demonstrated at the end of the statement quoted above, it means that these differends *can become the object of a politics*, and generate 'subjects' for this politics, with the help of literature and philosophy.

I want now to move to Said's own analysis of the regimens of phrases, translations and interpretations, and its relationship to an understanding of the political. There is no suggestion here that Said and Lyotard think the same thing but express it in different words, as if they were not separated by different attitudes with respect to modernity, and in particular the function of the 'narrative' which constructs collective identities. But I will argue that we can retrieve from their work a similar way of problematizing the political meaning of the activity of translation and its association with an intrinsic ambivalence of the political institution, blurring the separations between states of war and regimes of commerce, or more generally reciprocity. Admittedly, Said's critical analyses are less allegoric. They refer

to a precise historical background in the construction of narratives, the 'orientalist' framework that interweaves culture and empire. But they also force us to consider the task of the translator as one that is simultaneously impossible and necessary.

Said's way of articulating the models of war and translation is particularly explicit in his reading of Fanon, to whom he would return several times in his life. They also support his analyses of 'hegemony'. For Said, 'hegemony' (a notoriously ambivalent notion itself, even in its Gramscian sense, denoting at the same time the institution of the universal and the expansion of domination to the cultural sphere) is linked in particular to categories of interpretation that allow for *one-sided*, or historically *dissymetric* 'translations' between cultures – a production that is linked in turn with the development of philological *disciplines*, therefore institutional *dispositifs* of 'power-knowledge' in the Foucauldian sense. Its ultimate result is a historical development of 'communities of interpretation', which could be considered the *political subjects par excellence* in Saidian criticism, or better, its *quasi-subjects*, since they are pictured as inherently unstable, contradictory even when they are violently imposed on the world. As a consequence, Said analyses interpretation as a practice with a dialogical but also a coercive internal dimension. This was the central orientation in *Orientalism* (1978), a guiding thread for the book's reconstruction of Europe's projection of its Other. But it became even more insistent, in a political environment which evolved towards new forms of imperialism, as Said was discovering that models of interpretation are not only a matter of *representations* (and conflicts of representations, or conflicts between *representing* and *being represented*), but also involved a crucial 'performative' dimension. To represent the other as *absolute* other is not only to presuppose a basic impossibility to translate or to communicate on an equal footing; it is also *to create* that impossibility. In a disturbing manner, this performative aspect of interpretation also allows for the possibility of mimetic reversals, as illustrated by the way in which a nationalistic discourse of resistance to Empire, and above all a certain Islamic political theology, would appropriate the 'orientalist' idea of the absolute incommunicability of the West and the East, in order to make it a weapon against the cultural domination of the Empire.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said writes the following *a propos* of Fanon's relevance to understand the tragic conflicts which developed in post-independence Algeria, culminating in the quasi-civil war of the 1990s between a military government and a militant Islamic opposition:

In his chapter on 'the pitfalls of nationalist consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon foresaw this turn of events ... His theory of violence is not meant to answer the appeals of a native chafing under the paternalistic surveillance of a European policeman and, in a sense, preferring the services of a native officer in his place. On the contrary, it

first represents colonialism as a totalizing system nourished in the same way ... that human behaviour is informed by unconscious desires. In a second, quasi-Hegelian move, a Manichean opposite appears, the insurrectionary native, tired of the logic that reduces him, the geography that segregates him, the ontology that dehumanizes him, the epistemology that strips him down to an unregenerate essence. 'The violence of the colonial regime and counterviolence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity' (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 88). The struggle must be lifted to a new level of contest, a synthesis represented by a war of liberation, for which an entirely post-nationalist theoretical culture is required. (Said 1993: 267–8).

Several pages later, we read these remarkable formulas:

One has the impression in reading the final pages of *The Wretched of the Earth* that having committed himself to combat both imperialism and orthodox nationalism by a counter-narrative of great deconstructive power, Fanon could not make the complexity and anti-identitarian force of that counter-narrative explicit. But in the obscurity and difficulty of Fanon's prose, there are enough poetic and visionary suggestions to make the case for liberation as a *process* and not as a goal contained automatically by the newly independent nations. Throughout *The Wretched of the Earth* (written in French), Fanon wants somehow to bind the European as well as the native together in a new non-adversarial community of awareness and anti-imperialism. (1993: 274)

It would not suffice, it seems to me, to attribute such considerations to a desire to retreat from an antagonistic view of the imperial relationship. I prefer to read them as part of an attempt to elaborate a truly dialectical picture of that antagonism. So, as expressed in the title of a previous section, 'there are two sides', there is domination and there is resistance (cultures of resistance and resistance through culture), but in *the process* of their antagonism, it can be the case (and probably it must be the case) that the language, the interpretive patterns of domination, become reproduced and replicated, 'translated' as it were within the language of resistance. In other terms, after *Orientalism* had powerfully elaborated the critique of the *representative* construction of the non-Western Other, which reduces him either to the figure of the 'exotic object' for a naturalistic description or to the 'native informant' whose discourse always needs a translation that he/she cannot provide, a new context now leads Said to a *dialogic* understanding of the conflict of interpretations, whereby not only the line of demarcation between 'self' and 'other' and the associated relationship of power and resistance becomes *more uncertain*, less and less resembling a 'borderline' (however imaginary), but room has to be made for a



consideration of the *feedback effects of representation and interpretation*. Said does not position himself *outside* of this game of translations and counter-translations, as if enjoying a privilege of objectivity or externality by virtue of his intellectual commitment to *understanding*. He is within the battle, not only as combatant, but doubly so because he is a combatant whose discourses can become used in unexpected and unwanted ways. However, not to be outside is not the same as fully *identifying* with the representation that the camps opposed to one another. It should be possible, perhaps necessary, also to introduce a degree of critical distance with the very cause one is defending in order to preserve its future. It is tempting to link this with Said's insistence on the function of 'exile' – to which I will return – and his sense of the possibilities, as well as the uneasiness, opened up by the condition of being 'out of place' in life and politics, especially from the point of view of the national order. That is, neither inside nor outside.

But before turning to this 'subjective' dimension of the reflection on translation, we must read some passages from another crucial essay, called 'Knowledge and Power', which features as a conclusion to the volume *Covering Islam* (published in 1981 and in a revised edition in 1997), with the subtitle *How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. It is divided into section I, 'The Politics of Interpreting Islam: Orthodox and Antithetical Knowledge', and section II, 'Knowledge and Interpretation'. Said would begin with a demonstration that to interpret another culture is always a function of definite power interests, articulating the opposition between the two regimes of interpretive activity which work as *hegemony* and *dissent*: on one side there is the tradition of orientalism, which essentially *speaks for others that it defines itself*, by claiming a monopoly of interpretive activity (Said 1997: 143 sq.). On the other side, we may identify the figures of 'antithetical interpreters' (1997: 157 sq.), a heterogeneous group of scholars, writers and activists who in various ways challenge this monopoly, essentially through a deconstruction of the *disciplinary metalanguage* (or 'framework', 1997: 163) conferring upon it the appearance of the only possible 'intellectual idiom'. But then, in the second part of his essay, Said comes to an affirmative presentation of the *conditions* under which the interpretive activity of 'knowing another culture' could actually blow up the 'framework', in other terms escape the narcissistic self-identification of a community through the imagination of its other and its enemy. There are two main such conditions, which one is tempted to identify as 'objective' and 'subjective', except that once again these polarities dialectically penetrate each other. The first condition is a 'non-coercive contract' among the dialogic agents of the process of interpretation. The second is 'self-consciousness about the interpretive project itself' (1997: 150), which means a reflective practice of interpretation, and in practice a deconstruction of the dominant 'interpretive community' (or *affiliation*, a key word as we know in Said's theory of criticism).<sup>7</sup> We understand that

this deconstruction amounts to an infinite task of *translation of oneself*, not in the sense of assimilating all the products of other cultures, but just the opposite: in the sense of *estranging one's own culture* through the encounter with others who are *real*. In many ways, this is what Said himself never tires of attempting anew in his critical essays on philosophy and literature. Read now the striking lines on pages 164–5, featuring a veritable 'discourse on method' (more Vichian than Cartesian, as we know):

Interpretation is first of all a form of making; that is, it depends on the willed intentional activity of the human mind, moulding and forming the objects of its attention with care and study. Such an activity takes place perforce in a specific time and place and is engaged in by a specifically located individual, with a specific background, in a specific situation, for a particular series of ends. Therefore the interpretation of texts, which is what the knowledge of other cultures is principally based on, neither takes place in a clinically secure laboratory nor pretends to objective results. It is a social activity and inextricably tied to the situation out of which it arose in the first place, which then either gives it the status of knowledge or rejects it as unsuitable for that status ... Every reader, in other words, is both a private ego and a member of a society, with affiliations of every sort linking him or her to that society. Working through national feelings like patriotism and chauvinism to private emotions like fear or despair, the interpreter must seek in a disciplined way to employ reason and the information he or she has gained through formal education ... so that understanding may be achieved. A great effort has to be made to pierce the barriers that exist between one situation, the situation of the interpreter, and another, the situation that existed when and where the text was produced. It is precisely this conscious willed effort of overcoming distances and cultural barriers that makes knowledge of other societies and cultures possible – and at the same time limits that knowledge. At that moment, the interpreter understands himself or herself in his or her human situation and the text in relation to *its* situation ... This can occur only as the result of self-awareness animating an awareness of what is distant and alien but human nonetheless. (Said 1997: 164–5)

One might say that the process described here is perfectly *circular*. Its result – the 'self-awareness animating an awareness of what is distant and alien but human nonetheless' – being in fact also its precondition. I believe, one has to admit this hermeneutic circularity, but not necessarily to picture it as a 'vicious circle'. This is linked to the fact that Said is never reluctant to investigate the various *anomalous positions* with respect to the hegemonic distribution of places and discourses which provide conditions for the production of counter-interpretations or the emergence of alternative affiliations: heretical 'communities of interpretation'. There is an affinity with

the Lyotardian allegory of the 'pagan' here, but I am also tempted to recur to the category of *heterotopia*, which comes from Foucault (1998: 175–85). One of the possible names for heterotopia is also 'exile'.

Any description of the politics of translation as a conflict between communities over 'interpretation' inevitably leads to asking a question about *who* displaces the established pattern, and how it becomes possible to displace it? This is not – rather, it is not only – a Marxian and Gramscian question of the *forces* involved in a relationship or an antagonism, even if we are ready to admit that there are 'communicative forces' (e.g. *mass media*) as well as 'productive forces' involved in social conflicts. It is rather – in Said's preferred formulation – a question of 'speaking truth to power' (Said 1994: 85–102) or it is a question of a *discursive agency* which requires a 'mode of subjectivation'. But when we discuss it also as an agency of interpretation and translation, this becomes the question of the 'subjective' relationship to language and the plurality of languages which provides at least some of the conditions for a critical action against dominant modes of interpretation. Said expressed himself on this question, being careful, however, not to propose his personal case as a model, but also trying to understand what made it a critical predisposition to the subversion of existing patterns of translation, whereby we retrieve the subject-object dialectic of 'self-awareness'. We can read here a passage from the opening pages of his autobiography, *Out of Place* (1999):

The travails of bearing such a name were compounded by an equally unsettling quandary when it came to language. I have never known what language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt. What I do know, however, is that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commenting on, the other. Each *can* seem like my absolutely first language, but neither is. I trace this primal instability back to my mother, whom I remember speaking to me in both English and Arabic, although she always wrote to me in English ... Certain spoken phrases of hers ... were Arabic, and I was never conscious of having to translate them or ... knowing exactly what they meant. They were a part of her infinitely maternal atmosphere ... promising something in the end never given. But woven into her Arabic speech were English words like 'naughty boy', and, of course, my name, pronounced 'Edwaad'. I am still haunted by the memory of the sound ... Her English deployed a rhetoric of statement and norms that has never left me ... I hadn't then any idea where my mother's English came from or who, in the national sense of the phrase, she was: this strange state of ignorance continued until relatively late in my life. (Said 1999: 4–5)

This development takes us far away from generalities on 'hybridity' and 'multiculturalism', to a veritable 'differend of phrases' located in the most basic layer of subject-formation, but also reconstructed retrospectively in the form of a narrative, or through a method of 'dramatization'. It is interesting to compare it with a development in Derrida's also largely autobiographic essay, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin* (published in 1996 in French), to discover a quite different relationship to the enigma of the 'first language', which nevertheless also exhibits an internal distancing:

My attachment to the French language takes forms that I sometimes consider 'neurotic.' I feel lost outside the French language. The other languages which, more or less clumsily, I read, decode, or sometimes speak, are languages I shall never inhabit. Where 'inhabiting' begins to mean something to me. And dwelling [*demeurer*]. Not only am I lost, fallen, and condemned outside the French language, I have the feeling of honoring or serving all idioms, in a word, of writing the 'most' and the 'best' when I sharpen the resistance of my French, the secret 'purity' of my French, the one I was speaking about earlier on, hence its resistance, its relentless resistance to translation; translation into all languages, including another such French. Not that I am cultivating the untranslatable. Nothing is untranslatable, however little time is given to the expenditure or expansion of a competent discourse that measures itself against the power of the original. But the 'untranslatable' remains ... Word for word, if you like, syllable by syllable. From the moment this economic equivalence – strictly impossible, by the way – is renounced, everything can be translated, but in a loose translation, in the loose sense of the word 'translation.' In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; *but in another sense*, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible. ... The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable. *To inhabit*: this is a value that is quite *disconcerting* and equivocal; one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia. Most certainly. That is all too well known. But it does not follow that all exiles are equivalent. From this shore, yes, *from this shore* or this common drift, all expatriations remain singular. For there is a twist to this truth. This *a priori* universal truth of an essential alienation in language – which is always of the other – and, by the same token, in all culture. (Derrida 1996: 97–114; 2006: 56–8)

A full interpretation of these lines would doubtless situate them in relation to the entire linguistic and philosophical tradition, at the origin of which appears the name of Humboldt and at the end of which lies that of Benveniste. This tradition poses the question of *subjectivity in language*

in terms of reciprocal appropriation: the appropriation of the subject by language, at least the one which is for him/her 'maternal' or 'first', and the appropriation of language by the subject, through the first impregnation in infancy relayed through learning, which is also in part a translation process. This linguistic and philosophical tradition always inscribed such moments of appropriation within a 'community' of interlocutors, who trace the 'borders' of membership (of the nation, but also of class, or in a culture), making the *mutual comprehension* of a 'shared language' between these interlocutors the means of passing or re-passing endlessly from I to We, from We to I (see Benveniste 1966/1974). What, then, does Derrida mean when he writes: 'I only speak one language, and yet this (unique) language is not mine', if what he calls 'the language of the other' does not mean 'a foreign language' but rather concerns the foreignness (*étrangèreté*) and strangeness (*étrangeté*) of the *mother tongue* itself?

In the text, the response to this question combines three aspects, each of which is situated at a different level of experience. The first aspect is *biographical*, marked by a dramatic episode in the author's childhood. The Jews of Algeria were deprived of their entitlement to the French citizenship that they had received two generations earlier (with the Crémieux Decree of 1870) in order to distinguish them from the other 'natives' (*indigènes*). The Vichy government took advantage of the defeat to institute anti-Semitic legislation.<sup>8</sup> That loss resulted in exclusion from the public schools, which in France are principally concerned with the internalization of language as the principal institution of national identity.

Here, thus, we encounter the second aspect, which is *cultural*. The French language, with which Derrida tells us he shares a 'neurotic' or ultra-perfectionist 'purist' relation, is an imperial language, protecting itself from contamination by other 'inferior' or 'subaltern' idioms, whether from linguistic minorities in the metropolis, or colonized populations, who are contradictorily compelled both *to assimilate* to the dominants and *to stay in their own place*, i.e. remain dominated, and are thus held in a situation of *internal exclusion*. It therefore rests implicitly on a 'communitarian' hierarchy that is simultaneously the object of a powerful denial, the counterpart of which is the 'haunting' of the dominant language by dominated languages and the more or less vast permeability of its expressions of social class.

We see here also a third *philosophical* aspect that we can call 'transcendental' in the technical sense, since it concerns the *conditions of possibility* for the subject's access to language which conditions his insertion into the world. Instead of instituting equality, putting the speaking individual into a simple relation with a community in which he naturally 'inhabits' language, it forms a relation to language as much 'expropriated' as it is 'appropriated', which is riddled with difficulties and permanent conflict (here Derrida coins the portmanteau term 'exappropriation' to express this contradiction). The subject is 'at war' with language, and fundamentally,

through the subjects who utilize it, it is language that is 'at war' with itself, with its 'proper' instituted existence (Derrida 2006: 63–4). But the representation of this internal conflict also opens onto a constructive practice: that of translation. A subject or speaker (*locuteur*) who is not in a natural relation of belonging with his 'mother' tongue is always already inscribed into a process of 'translation' of his own (*propre*) language, a process made all the more difficult precisely because there are no rules or codes for it. This is what Derrida after Benjamin calls 'absolute translation' (Derrida 2006: 61), which operates in relation to all *others* – that is to say to all 'encounters' with foreign languages – both as a predisposition and as an obstacle.

At this point it is interesting to return from Derrida to Said, who draws from personal experience in the opposite direction to give us a proposition that nevertheless converges in part on the relations of politics to translation. As we remember, Said – the son of a Palestinian father who acquired US citizenship but returned to settle in Egypt, and a Lebanese mother from a family of Baptist ministers, with an English first name and an Arabic last name, not to forget the middle name, which was his father's – recounted the impossibility in which he found himself as he tried to determine which of the two languages he learned as a child was 'his language', even though they had never been interchangeable (Said 1999). We have here another form of uncertainty, which seems to be more 'objective', but also locates translation as the condition for access to language in an unconscious zone that precedes the formation of individual consciousness. In his critical and political works, Said gradually worked out the conflictual and cultural dimensions of this uncertainty, which took the form of an *unstable* relation between the dominant and dominated languages of the 'imperial' world.

The transformation in his thought is particularly visible when we compare his formulations related to the *representation of the non-European other* in *Orientalism* with the essays from 1981 to 1987 that I quoted a moment ago on the treatment of Islam by the American media (Said 1997) and the criticism collected in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Between these two moments, the Iranian Revolution and the First Gulf War had taken place, as had the Oslo Accords on the 'settlement' of the Palestinian question, to which Said, a member of the Palestinian National Council, was opposed from the outset. Rightly he predicted that they would be used by Israel to intensify its colonization, and tie the Palestinian Authority to its colonial interests. In *Orientalism*, the theory of 'hegemony' and its reproduction beyond the moment of formal decolonization rests on the detection of a *double asymmetry: between those who 'represent' and those who are 'represented', and between those who 'translate' and those who are 'translated'*. Along with idioms of different status come the *narratives* that assign a more or less mythical personality to peoples and cultures, as well as the academic disciplines which allow them to be managed. But in his later works things become complicated because Said is confronted

with the fact that the discourse of domination can be *reappropriated* by the 'dominated' themselves, who use it either to express demands for autonomy, or to overturn and expose imperialism to its image of itself. Something more 'dialogic' but always conflictual is added to the apparatus (*dispositif*) of 'power-knowledge', in which the representations of East and West produce effects far more *ambivalent* than can be seen in the simple schema of colonial domination. *Nationalism* and especially the *politico-religious discourse* of Islamic 'fundamentalism' are always susceptible to co-optation, since their own representation of the 'Orient' as a system of values incompatible with those of the 'Occident' regenerates an essential 'untranslatability' between the two halves of the world.

Said's critique, which, as we know, is not universally accepted, operates simultaneously *on two fronts*, which are bound together in a common task of demystifying the stereotypes of cultural difference. The unity of the 'representation of the other' and of 'asymmetrical dialogue' is precisely what Said also calls *interpretation*. Its subjects or agents are not individuals so much as they are historically and institutionally constituted 'communities of interpretation' within the framework of a certain distribution of power between the various parts of the world and of humanity. But this distribution gives way to a dislocation of the relations of forces: in the face of the hegemonic disciplines and established discourses, which reproduce the stereotypes of alterity, we discover the existence of *antithetic interpreters* who produce effects of contestation and nurture resistance by modifying the regime of translation (Said 1997: 135). We thus discover a lesson comparable to that proposed by Lyotard in terms of the 'differend' and by Derrida in terms of 'expropriation', despite all the divergences that separate these authors from one another. It was on the basis of this comparison, and also this idea of the *singularity* of all expatriations, that I asked what kind of relation Said has to 'exile', not only as a personal experience, but as a *general condition* for the deconstruction of the monopolies of interpretation in the post-colonial world. This is not, it seems to me, a relationship of simple identification, but rather a more oblique, overdetermined relationship, which involves identification and distance. This becomes clear when we read again the essay 'Reflections on Exile' (from which the title of the namesake book is derived). It begins like this:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said 2002: 173)

But, following a quotation (taken from Auerbach) of the medieval monk and mystic Hugo of St Victor ('The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land'), it ends like this:

For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy. There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be. This remains risky, however ... Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew. (ibid.: 186)

My suggestion therefore is not that Said identifies with exile or elevates its experience to the meaning of a symbol of post-national identity, but rather that he struggles to retain with it a relationship of uneasy vicinity, or familiarity, that makes it also possible to picture the correspondences between *different exiles*, which remain 'singular' in Derrida's words, or perhaps are separated by some irreducible 'differend' in the sense of Lyotard, i.e. will never become unified under common names and narratives. They will remain at war, literally or metaphorically, and they will foster translation as much as postpone it indefinitely.

## Notes

- 1 This lecture is based on a paper that I presented three years ago at the International Symposium on Edward W. Said organized by the American University of Beirut, with the title 'Politics as Translation: Lyotard, Derrida, Said', in the presence, in particular, of Mariam Said.
- 2 Being part in this sense of the great contemporary debate launched by Foucault in his lectures on *Society Must Be Defended* from 1976 (2003), where he puts forward the idea of 'reversing' the well-known Clausewitzian formula on 'war as a continuation of politics by other means'.
- 3 This is especially the case when I try to think about the historical function of Europe in the process of modernization and globalization: see my essay 'Europe as Borderland' (2009).
- 4 *Le différend* was published in French in 1983, and translated into English in 1988.

- 5 Montesquieu's famous expression in *The Spirit of the Laws*: 'le doux commerce', is often cited in this regard. It refers to a broad and differentiated notion of commerce, 'anthropological' *avant la lettre*, which includes both commodity exchange and relations of 'civility' or 'politeness' – especially as they are established by the initiatives of women within the framework of a civilization based around a court society (see Elias, 1983 and Spector, 2004). The complexity of the semantic spectre of 'commerce' in the classical age can be located in the English *intercourse* and in the German *Verkehr* as well.
- 6 Note that I do not say 'cultural', precisely because the examination of the question of the differend is one of the means we have to *put into question* the notion of 'culture' itself, hitherto promoted by anthropology, which is in the process of being renounced here.
- 7 For an extensive discussion of the opposition between *filiation* and *affiliation*, see in particular 'Introduction: Secular Criticism', in Said 1983: 23 sv.
- 8 See Stora 2006. We must recall, as Derrida insists, that the German troops did not occupy Algeria – the government of the French state was not obeying in this case any external coercion, but following its own tendencies.

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