LITERARY CRITICISM AS TRANSLATION:
THE STATUS OF THE METATEXT

Brian T. Fitch

I should like to propose that the translation paradigm may serve to throw light on what is at stake in the field of literature in general. At first sight, such a claim would appear, at the very least, to be paradoxical. In the first place, because any translation is a "second best" in the sense that it serves as a substitute when the original is inaccessible, that is to say, in the large majority of cases, because the reader does not know the language in which the original text is written. In the second place, because translation therefore has a utilitarian and pragmatic function, intervening, as it always does, after the event, only when the process of literary creation has been not only completed but also published and handed over to its public, its readers. It is an activity that is, so to speak, supplementary, of whose usefulness there can be no doubt but whose necessity is much more problematic, unless the work in question be written in a language other than one of the main European languages. And it is indeed the notion of supplement that should be stressed here, for any translation constitutes an addition in the literal sense of the term. The term "addition" is in fact more appropriate here than that of "substitute", which presupposes a certain conception of the relationship source text/target text founded on the concept of mimesis. In short, translation — both as an activity or process and as a product — comes after literary production and its resulting product, and, by that very token, adds something to the latter. Proof of this is to be found in the fact that the absence of that "something" in question is never noticed except on the level of the empirical, individual reader confronted by a text in a foreign language. Hence, no doubt, the fact that the translator tends to enjoy — if that is the word! — the status of a poor cousin in the literary community — or, at least, such is the case in the anglophone and francophone worlds, the exception, in this respect, being the germanophone world.

One of the reasons the key place of the translation paradigm at the core of literary studies has been overlooked in the debates concerning literary theory is that most of the writings on translation have been produced by practitioners of translation, that is, by practising translators, and have been written in response to the question of comment faire? — how to do it —, rather than que sais-je? - what do we know about translation? Practising translators have neither the interest in or the ability to query what exactly is involved in translating from one natural language into another. Even those who claim to contribute to the
the theory of translation are often more concerned with providing a series of recipes, more or less co-ordinated with one another, for the activity in question than with reflecting on what is at stake in the enterprise and is so often summed up in the cliched formula: "traduire trahir". If to translate is always to betray, then why do people translate? The few works, in the history of translation, which allow for speculation on the paradoxes involved in such an activity can be counted on the fingers of one hand. One might refer here to Benjamin's essay (1969) on "The Task of the Translator" (and Paul De Man's commentary (1986) on the latter in his Resistance to Theory), George Steiner's book (1975), After Babel, and the writings of Henri Meschonnic. More recently, my own book entitled Beckett and Babel (Fitch 1988) has sought to take its place within their ranks.

The heart of the paradox can be summed up in the following terms: Derrida (1975) states, in his book Positions, that there is no such thing as a transcendent al signified, a statement that has met with general approval. And yet, as he points out, the very activity of translation presupposes such a signified, without which it would be inconceivable. This admits of only two possibilities: either everyone who translates is attempting the impossible or, alternatively, the claim that the signified and the signifier are inseparable is a myth that is disproved by an activity undertaken by thousands of practitioners throughout the world. I, for my part, rather than believing in the impossibility of arriving at a perfectly satisfactory translation and considering that, to a greater or lesser degree, every translation falls to attain its objective, prefer to believe that the very existence of something generally identified and recognized as a translation puts seriously into question the inseparability of the two sides of the linguistic sign. However that may be, what is certain is that what is translated — since it is the only thing that can be translated — is not the signifier but the signified, for the signifiers of two different linguistic systems are always and necessarily incompatible with one another. At all events, there are only two possible conclusions to be drawn from such a situation. First, that the translators' mistrust of theorization in any form is only to be expected and, even more so, as in the present case, when the theory arrived at condemns them to helplessness. Second — and what is more important in the present context — that the phenomenon of translation takes on all the appearance of a borderline case, so that, if it were to be taken systematically into account, it would risk seriously upsetting the positions of many involved in the contemporary debates in literary theory. This is what the rest of my lecture will seek to demonstrate.

***

It should be noted that the target text of the translation process is one of the rare metatexts to draw its reader's attention to itself rather than to the original
text, the source text, which, in the case of translation, has furnished not only the occasion for the production of the metatext in question but its very raison d'être. That is the fundamental paradox that lies at the core of the status of the target text as a metatext. For the source text is ever present in the target text. It can never be lost sight of by the reader of the translated metatext. It is true that the target text replaces the source text, but it does so while at the same time drawing attention to the pre-existence of the latter. The target text comes between its reader and the source text and by the same token, draws attention to the absence of the original. If the critical metatext, through its own intrinsic interest as a text, may appear to reduce the text commented upon to a pretext, the occasion for its coming into being, such cannot be the case for the translated text. Nonetheless the translated text does not run the slightest risk of being lost sight of: the absence of the source text makes the presence of the translated text that much more necessary, indeed indispensable, the presence of the one being the direct consequence of the absence of the other. Is this not tantamount to saying that what we have here is an interdependency between text and metatext in the strongest sense of the term; and because of this interdependency, it is the relationship between the two that comes to the fore. As a consequence, the translation paradigm provides an ideal opportunity for anyone seeking to study the relationship between text and metatext. In fact, it may well constitute the only example of a situation where there exists a perfect equilibrium between the two.

The main interest of the translation paradigm in the present context lies in the fact that the relationship between source text and target text is at one and the same time interlinguistic and intertextual. Now, what characterizes other forms of literary intertextuality without exception is what Michel Charles (1985), in his book L’Arbre et la source, calls the "connaturalité" of the texts concerned, that is to say, the fact that they are of like linguistic nature each belonging to the same linguistic system. This is true of the relationship between the vast majority of metatexts and the texts to which they refer, the two main exceptions being, on the one hand, grammar books of foreign languages and on the other, books of criticism where the work commented upon and cited is written in a language other than that of the critic, its author. Need it be pointed out that the metatext-text relationship is another example of intertextuality? Now, this "connaturalité" or linguistic communality of the two texts relating to one another — whether the second text in fact be a metatext or a text in its own right — does not facilitate the emergence of the specificity of each of the texts as what Henri Meschonnic terms a "text system". There is always a tendency for fusion to occur between the two, and hence for them to become confused with one another. The criticism of identification, practised by the Geneva School of critics such as Georges Poulet and Jean-Pierre Richard, bears eloquent witness to
such a tendency. It is only when the intertextual is accompanied by the interlinguistic that the exact relationship constituting the interaction between the texts comes to light in all its complexity. For in that instance the boundaries of each of the two textual systems are reinforced by the integrity of the two linguistic systems involved, for the linguistic system and the textual system then coincide with one another and are mutually supportive. And so it is that the relationship source text/target text constitutes a privileged example of intertextuality, whose functioning it lays bare so that it can be analyzed in the minutest detail.

Let us now examine the case of that particular type of metatext, the critical commentary and the manner in which it relates to the literary text that is the object of the commentary. It has often been pointed out that any translation, of necessity, constitutes an interpretation of the original.

The reason this is so is that given the fact that semantic fields never coincide exactly from one language to the next, translation always entails a choice, on the part of the translator, between the different possible meanings and connotations of a given word in the original before the latter can reformulate the choice opted for in the target text. Now, if any reading of a literary text is already, by its very nature, an interpretation, there is all the more reason to believe that any translation must, of necessity, enjoy an analogous status by virtue of the fact that the formulation of the text of the translation has to have been preceded by a reading of the original. What the translator seeks to put into words that will come to constitute the target text of the translation is his own interpretation of the original.

That being so, let us now reverse the situation. If every translation is an interpretation, could not every interpretation be considered to constitute a translation of the text that is the object of the interpretation? Such an hypothesis is far less banal and certainly not self-evident, and for that very reason it may well serve to throw light on what is at stake here. In translation theory, as we have seen, the question is often raised as to what exactly is translated and hence carried across from the source text to the target text, the signifieds, the signifiers or both - in other words the vexed problem of "equivalence". The same question — although it would less readily come to mind — might well be put with regard to the relationship that the critical metatext entertains with the text commented upon. However, it would need to be formulated in slightly different terms: what precisely is it that the two texts have in common? What is it that carries across from the literary text to the critical metatext?

An initial response to the question may be found in the concept of dialogue as developed in the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Since any form of interaction between two elements may be represented by the image of the dialogue and since the dialogical situation poses the existence of a subject
or topic that provides the occasion for the dialogue, one might claim that the critical metatext and the original literary text it comments upon both speak of the same thing, that "thing" being, when the text studied is a novel, nothing other than an imaginary world, the world of the novel in question. Now that is certainly the case with a large majority of traditional critical texts (although it is not true at all of what Michel Charles, in L’Arbre et la source, refers to as the "rhetorical" metatexts produced by contemporary poeticians). But let us examine the situation more closely.

The critical metatext can be considered to constitute a translation of the text commented upon in several respects. Two of the constitutive elements of the critical metatext are the quotation from and the paraphrase of the work furnishing the object of the commentary. Now the act of quoting has certain affinities with the act of translating. The two in fact come together in the concept of the paraphrase. For if to paraphrase is to translate while remaining within the realm of the same language, without passing over from one linguistic code to another, in other words without translating in the strict sense of the term, then to quote is to paraphrase without changing the linguistic formulation of the text quoted, to rewrite without effecting the slightest transformation of the original, that is to say without paraphrasing in the strict sense of the term, to rewrite in an identical form (one thinks here of Borges’s Pierre Menard rewriting Cervantes’ Don Quichotte). That is to say that quotation is to paraphrase what paraphrase is to translation.

To put this in another way, there is at work in the text of the commentary a process of reformulation of the literary work studied, a reformulation in other words chosen by the critic in question. This reformulation arises from a reconceptualisation (or is it simply a conceptualisation?) of the original work, that acts as a kind of prism or, in a more neutral manner, at least as an intermediary between the two texts. The distinction between the two concepts, "prism" or "intermediary", depends upon the degree of refraction involved. In order to determine which of the two is most appropriate here, it is necessary to focus on the exact articulation between text and metatext. It is that same point of contact between the two that is the site of the fusion of horizons — that of the work and that of its commentator — to resort to the terminology of hermeneutics.

What one might term the interface between text and metatext, that can be discerned within the metatext itself, consists in precisely those two aforementioned elements: quotation and paraphrase. It is self-evident that the quotations cited in the critical commentary constitute the common denominator, in the literal sense of that term, between metatext and text. Now what is the status of the paraphrase, whose role in the critical commentary is even greater and its presence even more necessary than that of the quotation?
To paraphrase is, of course, to reformulate in other words, and we have already noted that any translation constitutes a reformulation of the original. Therefore, just as translation is an interlinguistic paraphrase, paraphrase is an intralinguistic translation.

It is interesting to note that where the work commented upon is in a different language from the critical metatext, the two concepts of paraphrase and translation overlap, since to paraphrase a text in another language is to produce a text which can only be differentiated from a translation by its length. However, since the target text always tends to be longer than the source text even that differentiation is problematic...

In actual fact, the paraphrase is situated exactly in the middle between the translation and the interpretation, being at one and the same time not only an intralinguistic translation but also an interpretation that declines to acknowledge itself as such...

The basic concepts underlying all these activities are those of "decoding" and "re-encoding". In the case both of the translation and of the interpretation, the text that is the starting point for both activities is subject to a process of decoding that will subsequently give way to a process of re-encoding resulting in a new text, either in the same language as the original text or in a different one. In each case, the reader of a text takes up his pen to write a new text that somehow has its origins in the text read. It should be noted, in passing, that obviously the first, original text had its own origin in an initial process of encoding, the encoding of what the author sought to give expression to through his writing, to put down on paper. Thus it is that George Steiner, in *After Babel*, is led to consider the transition between the different psychic states — thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. — and language, that is to say any form of verbalisation, as being a part of the translation process. The concept of translation would thus concern not only the passage between codes, whether the codes be linguistic or non-linguistic in nature, but also the passage from a given code to what does not belong to any code, and vice versa. In other words, interlinguistic translation, and even intralinguistic translation, would be merely two kinds of a much more widespread species. Hence the pertinence of the concept of translation for everything relating to the status of language in all its forms, literary or non-literary.

Still more revealing in the present context is the situation obtaining in that most exceptional type of translation, self-translation. Very little attention has been devoted to the activity of self-translation before the publication of my book *Beckett and Babel*. Here, the initial encoding gives rise to a second encoding, that may be considered "parallel" to the first encoding, in a second language, both encodings being the work of the same person. The question then arising is the following: is the second encoding preceded by the decoding of the result of
the first encoding, the text of the first or original version, in which case the
second encoding, like the classic translation, would be a re-encoding or, on the
contrary, are we dealing here with what is in fact a new encoding in another
language, parallel to the first encoding.

Thus, at the core of the problem posed by the analysis of the process
involved in the writing of the second text is the interaction between the two
complementary processes: encoding and decoding. Here it is necessary to first of
all examine to what extent the decoding of the original effected by the translator
differs from the decoding involved in any reading of a text. The main difference
lies in the fact that the second kind of decoding constitutes an end in itself whilst
the first kind has another objective: it is effected with a view to a subsequent
re-encoding in a language other than that of the text that has been the object of
the decoding. In Beckett's case, it involves the decoding of what he himself had
encoded to produce his first version, although the passage from this decoding to
the encoding of the second version is also accompanied, as for any translator, by
the passage from one language to another. What is clear is that any decoding that
is undertaken with a view to a re-encoding in another language cannot be of the
same nature as the decoding inseparable from the act of reading — any more than
it can be of the same nature as the encoding involved in the task of re-encoding
the text in the same language in the form of a paraphrase or précis.

It is here that the fundamental distinction between the onomasiological and
the semasiological, as made in translation theory, needs to be drawn. The
onomasiological strategy seeks to reproduce what the author intended by
attempting to recapture and reproduce the creative process that went into the
making of the original text, whilst the semasiological strategy seeks to
 reproduce the effect the original had on its reader. The schema
encoding/decoding/re-encoding would correspond to the semasiological whereas
the schema encoding/new-encoding-in-the-second-language would correspond to
the onomasiological. In fact, the conclusion I drew with regard to Beckett's
practice as a bilingual writer was that in his case, the onomasiological had the
upper hand over the semasiological. The interest of this for the present context
is that self-translation, in that it necessarily tends to combine the two opposite
strategies, renders them complementary and at the same time problematizes their
relationship.

I would add that every translator is inevitably obliged to read the text he is
going to translate in order to become acquainted with it but, in so doing, he can
only guess at the process of its production: this means that a semasiological
strategy is far more readily available to him than is an onomasiological one. For
the self-translator, on the other hand, it is the semasological strategy that is the
most problematic, since it calls for him to read what he has written with the
eyes of another.
Nevertheless, self-translation, by making it impossible to determine the exact dosage of the onomasiological and the semasiological respectively, by implicating both to the point of making them inextricable from one another, blurs the fundamental distinction between the production and the reception of the text. For he who translates his own writing writes as he reads himself and reads as he writes himself, so to speak, thus combining reader and writer in one and the same person. In other words, self-translation problematizes the relationship between these two activities: reading and writing. It thereby draws attention to the fact — often lost sight of — that writing always entails reading so that the two activities progress hand in hand, so to speak. One cannot write without reading what one has written. Hence the fact that the writing of any text involves its own reading, a self-reading that precedes the series of subsequent readings of the completed, printed text by its true addressees, the reading public. Even more interesting is the fact that at the very outset, the production and reception of the written text are intimately and inextricably interrelated, so that the relationship writing-text-reading — the paradigm of all literary activity — is already contained in the original activity of the writer.

Now, if the writer cannot write without reading what he has written, one might well claim that the literary critic, for his part, cannot read without writing, in the sense that he never reads without having in mind the text he is going to write in the form of a commentary. Here, again, his activity approximates that of the translator: in both cases, what is involved is a reading in view of a subsequent act of writing.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the onomasiological/semasiologcal dichotomy is not without its relevance to the relationship between the critical metatext and the literary text commented upon. Here, again, the approach that informs the metatext is more often semasiological than onomasiological. The critic seeks to share with the reader of his critical metatext the effect the literary text has had on him. However, it should be noted that there exists a critical domain, that of genetic criticism devoted to the study of manuscripts, that is of a wholly onomasiological character.

Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay entitled "The Task of the Translator", has already pointed out the analogous status of the target text of translation and the critical metatext in relation to the source text and the text commented upon. What Benjamin emphasises is the secondary status of the two types of metatext, for he points out that, as his commentator Paul de Man puts it, like philosophy as critical epistemology, and literary theory or history understood as a nonorganic process, criticism is derived from an original activity and does not resemble that from which it derives: it is intralinguistic and relates to what in the original belongs to language, and not to meaning as an extralinguistic correlate susceptible of paraphrase and imitation (p. 84). And translation is
equally characterized by its secondary status, being "more like criticism or like the theory of literature than like poetry" (p. 82). Nonetheless, a crucial distinction needs to be noted here: it is the fact that the secondary character of the target text with respect to the source text does not prevent the former from substituting itself for the latter, for very often the original is not available to the reader of the translation. In the case of the critical metatext, on the other hand, there is no question of its replacing the text of the work commented upon, since it is intended to throw light upon the latter and make it more accessible to the reader. In short, the secondary character which the status of the target text shares with critical and theoretical texts and which is the attribute of every metatext, appears to me, itself, to be secondary in relation to another of its attributes: that of being able to be substituted for the original text. At all events, the relationship between metatext and text is not at all the same in the two cases.

Paul de Man goes on to develop the analogy between translation, on the one hand, and criticism and literary theory, on the other, in the following terms: "Both criticism and translation are caught in the gesture which Benjamin calls ironic, a gesture which undoes the stability of the original by giving it a definitive, canonical form in the translation or the theorization. In a curious way, translation canonizes its own verse more than the original was canonical. That the original was not purely canonical is clear from the fact that it demands translation: it cannot be definitive since it can be translated. But you cannot, says Benjamin, translate the translation; once you have a translation you cannot translate it any more. You can translate only an original. The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice." (p. 82).

And De Man adds: "The act of critical, theoretical reading [...] by means of which the original work is not imitated or reproduced but is to some extent put in motion, de-canonized, questioned in a way which undoes its claim to canonical authority — is similar to what a translator performs." (pp. 82-83).

Now what relates the metatext of translation to the critical metatext, according to De Man's reading of Benjamin, is that the relationship they entertain with the original, translated or commented upon, is "intralinguistic", but in a particular sense of the term. For it is obvious that the relationship between target text and source text is always, on the contrary, interlinguistic. By the term "intralinguistic", De Man is in fact referring to die reine Sprache, to "a language that would be entirely freed of the illusion of meaning" (p. 84), "a pure language that does not exist except as a permanent disjunction which inhabits all language as such" (p. 92). The disjunction in question is that which separates language, as a series of signifiers constituting a linguistic system, from the meaning intended by language in an enunciatory situation: "The disjunction is [...] between [...] 'das Gemeinte', what is meant, and the 'Art des Meinen', the
way in which language means [...], the distinction between vouloir dire and dire: 'to mean', 'to say'.” (p. 86). It is precisely this language as such which translation is concerned with and, moreover, with it alone: "The relationship of the translation to the original is the relationship between language and language, wherein the problem of the meaning or the desire to say something, the need to make a statement, is entirely absent.” (p. 81-82). In other words, there is nothing extralinguistic which enters into account for the translator. This means that the relationship between the source text and the target text is the most direct of relationships, since everything that takes place in the passage from the one to the other takes place within the domain of language, that is to say, without going through the realm of meaning.

This calls for two remarks. The first is that this by-passing of meaning in the passage from the source text to the target text is far from self-evident, for how can it be maintained that the translator, in the course of translating, takes no account of meaning? In fact, what De Man is talking about, following Benjamin, is a certain kind of translation: so-called literal translation. This becomes clear both from the example of Sophocles translated by Hölderlin: "Benjamin tells us that [...] from the moment that a translation is really literal, wörtlich, word by word, the meaning completely disappears. The example is again Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, which are absolutely literal, word by word, and which are therefore totally unintelligible [...]” (p. 88) — and from Paul De Man's commentary: "And to some extent, a translator has to be wörtlich.” (p. 88). It is precisely to the extent that translation is literal that it is situated on the level of der reine Sprache. The question that remains unanswered, either by De Man or by Benjamin, is that if, as De Man claims, every translation inevitably and necessarily contains its share of the literal, what exactly is this "share", what proportion of the whole text of the translation does it comprise? And does this minimal, or inevitable, dosage of the literal suffice, as far as the status of the whole of the text of the translation is concerned, for der reine Sprache to predominate?

The second remark concerns the character of the critical metatext. By "criticism", De Man appears to be referring to the texts produced by poeticians, by the proponents of poetics, rather than to those emanating from hermeneutics. This is suggested by his comments when he addresses directly "the difficult relationship between the hermeneutics and the poetics of literature": "When you do hermeneutics, you are concerned with the meaning of the work; when you do poetics, you are concerned with the stylistics or the description of the way in which a work means" (p. 88). The fact that the "extralinguistic", as we have seen, excludes all consideration of meaning means that it cannot characterize the hermeneutic metatext.
These two observations allow us to conclude that the parallel that De Man, following Benjamin, attempts to establish between the critical metatext and the metatext of translation is limited to literal translation, on the one hand, and the metatext of poetics, on the other.

But that does not mean, however, that once meaning enters into account, any parallel between literary criticism and translation is abolished once and for all. On the contrary, when the dire, saying, yields to the vouloir dire, meaning, a new parallel is established, a parallel which is nowhere taken into account either by Benjamin or De Man (in his commentary on Benjamin), but the logic of which is inscribed, by contradistinction, implicitly, in the categorization of criticism and translation made by Benjamin/De Man. For hermeneutic criticism which concerns itself not with the manner in which meaning is made, but with the meaning itself, produces a text that resembles, like a brother, that of any translation other than one that is completely literal, in other words the majority of translations.

How better, or more conclusively, could the profound affinities between these two types of metatext, between translation and criticism, be brought out than by the fact that both are subject to the same categorization resulting from the distinction between saying and meaning?

Bibliography