

In the Middle of a Conversation:  
Reflections on Ortega y Gasset's "The Misery and Splendor of Translation"

by Kathleen Longwaters

I wish to thank all those who have organized this conference from those who had the first glimmer of the idea to those who put chairs in the room and water on the table. I am grateful.

Whatever we study today, be it physics, economics, or philosophy, we are coming in on the middle of a conversation. The past is below our feet like a watershed we draw on. We can dig a well a right back to the source of Plato and read him in the Greek (as Ortega y Gasset did). Or we can learn something of Nietzsche as alluded to in the poetry of Allama Iqbal, like a tree drawing up buried water filtered through subsoil. I claim a deep and broad understanding of one's own intellectual history is vital for understanding current movements in thought regardless of one's field. Now the questions as to what comprises "one's own intellectual history" is worth discussing, but will be set aside today in order to address more directly the question of: "What is Liberal Education for?"<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately I will claim that Liberal Education is for understanding where we stand at the moment, for developing humility, and for encouraging courageous effort. Furthermore, that these three are connected to each other. I am indebted to Ortega y Gasset for these thoughts which in a way are but an echo of his own, which in turn are also a kind of re-sounding. It is both the content of "The Misery and Splendor of Translation" (which I will call MST) and its relation to another text, a sort of invisible interlocutor, which has brought me here today--both figuratively and literally.

**Where we stand**

The silent partner in the conversation this text is having is Plato's *Meno*. And common elements in the two texts will be examined in order to illustrate the claim about a liberal education allowing us to know where we stand. These are both exquisitely rich texts and in 20 minutes, I will only be able to give the broadest outline of what is happening here. Out of curiosity, how many of you have read Plato's *Meno*? And how many the MST?

To give a tiny bit of background, MST first appeared in a daily newspaper in Argentina in 1937. I encountered it last fall in a course called "Translating India" along side articles on the difficulties of translating Sanskrit into Burmese, double meanings in Tamil poetry, and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

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<sup>1</sup> Liberal Education is neither narrow, nor strictly vocational and utilitarian.

Set in this context of secondary literature in the field of translation studies, I was perhaps slower to pick up on its fictiveness than had I encountered it in another setting. It opens in a plausibly academic manner, presenting itself as a retelling of a conversation at a colloquium, much like our gathering here today. There are philologists, scientists and art historians, and Ortega himself seems to be speaking. Yet given that the piece waxes fictive, I will call him the narrator to remind ourselves that the opinions spoken by him may or may not entirely represent this author's point of view.

Probably the place the fictiveness is strongest is near the end of the piece when a reportedly great linguist has just been talking. We get a bit of narrator comment here, Ortega y Gasset writing: "The linguist stopped talking and stood with his sharply pointed nose tilted up to a vague quadrant in the heavens. In the corners of his mouth was the hint of a possible smile" (not an impossible smile.) I have the feeling this smile is for us, and it points toward the playful almost mocking tone which weaves in and out between a more earnest almost clinical inquisitiveness.

This *great* linguist gives puzzling and, at times, seemingly contradictory advice about translation. And it is his voice which dominates the last about 20% of the article. One bit of advice, for example, is on the proper style for translation, saying "I imagine, then, a form of translation that is ugly, as science has always been; that does not intend to wear literary garb." What it means for the speaker who is in the most literary garb to say translation ought not dress itself in literary garb is a question worth asking. This section of the work has puzzled a number of translators such as Selby who have wondered how to read him.

What has not been noticed, either by scholars in the field of translation studies or those concerning themselves with Ortega y Gasset in the realm of philosophy, is the pulse of Plato underlying this work. In structure, tone, and content MST invokes the *Meno*. Even Orringer who gleaned Ortega y Gasset's life work for references to Plato in service of understanding the Spaniard's philosophy, misses this work—in spite of the fact that Plato's name appears directly, again, in the mouth of the linguist who says only in using his style of translation can a reader, quote, "transmigrate within poor Plato." Perhaps because this piece is ostensibly about translation, it was ignored. Here we see (likely) evidence, therefore, of a narrow, discipline bound view obstructing our ability to understand the work. The past is left out of the picture, and this is simply read as an original and independent work. The statement by this character about the Greeks no longer being able to function as models in any kind of positive sense probably also throws one off the trail.

Turning now to some of the commonalities of MST and *Meno*, we see both open with and revolve around a question in the format of "Can *x* be *y*-ed?" In the *Meno*, of course, the question is "Can virtue be taught?" whereas the action of concern in the other work is, not unexpectedly, translation-- with an ultimate question of "Can *anything* be

translated?" but appearing in initially as whether "certain German philosophers" can be. Admittedly these questions are rather different and could be argued as coincidence; nevertheless, here virtue slides in by the 7<sup>th</sup> sentence where the narrator, speaking to his colleagues, takes a jab at their morals, saying both are impossible in their very essence--translating or being virtuous. Humility and courage make their appearance a bit further on.

Both Socrates and the narrator of MST try valiantly to keep the question at hand in its most broad and overarching form, and both meet resistance from those with whom they speak. In the famous example of the bees, Socrates teases Meno saying "while I am looking for one virtue, I have found you to have a whole swarm of them." The hornet's nest in the MST is math and science, with someone from the later field claiming his type of writing *can* be translated. After giving a sort of qualified agreement that in the sense that it exists as a language shared by scientists who happen to be living in various countries, it can be read by each. He points out that this has to do with the fact that these people speak the same technical language, so it is not, in this case, really translation at all. To reverse and eliminate the idea that math and science form an exception, he brings in Set Theory, describing it as "the branch of mathematics most in vogue in the last quarter century," and indeed it was. Only two years after MST is published, Bourbaki's work on the subject, *Elements de Mathematic* comes out and is called a "monumental work" in a review in the Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society, illustrating its reception in the field.

What is Set Theory? Most of us have encountered it in the form of overlapping circles in the first or second grade which illustrate members shared between the two, or not shared as the case may be. But here again we are coming in in the middle a conversation, and we glimpse it through the MST. When Ortega y Gasset writes his piece, Set Theory is well establish, but its acceptance some 60 years prior was, at best, mixed. Some critics said it was not math at all, rather philosophy. Ferreiros in his recent publication, *Labyrith of Thought: A History of Set Theory and its Role in Modern Mathematics*, describes what's at stake as Cantor's use of the "actual infinite" versus the "implicit infinite." An open problem is the associated Continuum Theory which proposes that real numbers (ie, the continuum) is a larger infinity than the infinity of counting numbers. One does not need to be a great mathematician to get the sense of why some folks might be uncomfortable with the idea talking about one infinity being bigger than another infinity.

Ortega y Gasset uses "continuum" in regard to language and translation and its impossibility, but what is most relevant here is his complaint that *Menge*, a term from Set Theory, has, quote, "no possibility of being translated into our language." This is a complaint that mathematicians of his time were in actuality voicing, so here the fictiveness of the piece wanes. For Ortega y Gasset this complaint is used as a way to draw math and science back into the fold of the general question of translatability,

putting them along with everything else into the category of the impossible. Impossibility for Ortega is what can never be reached, just as the end of an infinite series. The narrator warns, that if you divide writing into two categories, “those that can be translated and those that cannot” that what happens is, quote, “we close the door on the real problem every translation presents.” What that real problem is is still an open question, though I have a hunch which I will come to later if there is time<sup>2</sup>

But to come back to Liberal Education and now see where we stand, one could say we stand midstream, for the echoes of the *Meno* point to the importance of the past for understanding the present, but glimpses of an ongoing conversation in the field of mathematics shows that interchange is not over. We are just one point along a way that continues around us and before us. With too narrow a focus we miss out. A Liberal Education allows us to see where we stand by being both broad and deep, and where we stand is first and foremost in relation. This moves us towards humility and courage.

### **Humility and Courage**

Now the kind of Mathematics, so to speak, most in vogue in Socrates time was geometry. It plays a role in the *Meno*, but not the same role as Set Theory in MST. Actually, Set Theory can help us visualize the overlap of these two texts. They hold in common several elements already mentioned and others as well: A central question and attempts at holding it in a general form, discussions of virtue, talk of being in a muddled, speechless state, the importance of effort, a math of the day, the importance of coming to know you don't know, and true opinion<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, the relationship between the texts is not a simple one. Neither do these shared elements appear in the same sequence, nor do they necessarily function the same way in the dialogues. Where Ortega y Gasset uses the Math as a unifier, Socrates uses the Geometry to illustrate the value of, one, reaching a muddle and, two, of learning that you don't know what you might have thought you did. *Meno* complains that Socrates has made him numb and dumbstruck, and Socrates says he himself is so as well. In addition, the slave boy used to work through the geometry problem, giving *Meno* a chance to see the process with some distance, is also said to become “perplexed and numb” in the process of moving from thinking he knows to understanding he does not. It is just this discovery that gives him the impetus to search further for an answer.

In the MST we run into a muddle as well and the cause is again the presumption that we know when we do not. Ortega y Gasset writes, “infected by the entrenched prejudice that through speech we understand each other, we make our remarks and listen in such good faith that we inevitably misunderstand each other much more than if we had remained silent and guessed.” The confusion described here is a kind of

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<sup>2</sup> The hunch is that translating is trying to make commensurate to different infinite sets, just as in the continuum theory. This is why you get the double exposure.

<sup>3</sup> Some of which we do not have time to discuss more fully

paralysis that leaves one speechless. There is not time here to go further into Ortega's thoughts on silence, but it does strike me that it may well be meaningful that the *Meno* is a *silent* partner in this conversation. What is important is that in *this* dialogue we, like the slave boy in the other, might come to see that we do not know what we assumed we did.

The linguist suggests that, quote, "we need to approach the Greek and Roman again, but not as models –on the contrary, as exemplary errors," claiming that: "to acquire a historical consciousness of oneself and to learn to see oneself as an error are the same thing."<sup>4</sup> This is another way of expressing that we keep discovering, in retrospect, that we didn't know all we thought we did. A Liberal Education, in so far as it gives us a "historical consciousness," therefore offers us this knowledge that we do not know all that we think we do. Acceptance of this is tantamount to taking on humility, a trait which the narrator in MST finds translators to have in abundance. Our state of being in ignorance is driven home by the narrator who focuses on the past as progenitor. He says: "Modern man is too proud of the sciences he has created. Certainly through them the world takes on a new shape. But, relatively speaking, this innovation is not very profound. Its substance is a delicate film stretched over other shapes developed in other ages of humanity, which we project as our innovation. We draw from this gigantic wealth at every opportunity, but we don't realize it, because we haven't produced it; rather we have inherited it."<sup>5</sup> Again, a Liberal Education allows us to view ourselves in the present in relation to wider thought and in relation to our inheritances from the past. The MST begins to look a bit like this delicate film stretched over shapes developed in other ages, for the past pokes through here and there bearing a shape reminiscent of the *Meno*. But as previously intimated, it is not quite the same shape. If it were a face, the nose would be moved to the place of the ear, and the ear tucked under the chin. Where are we left?

Ortega y Gasset describes synonyms across languages as being like a blurred photo, saying: "The shapes of the meanings of the two fail to coincide as do those of a person in a doubled-exposed photograph." He goes on to speak of the dizzying consternation of the person trying to bring the two into focus. We have a similar problem, it seems, in trying to bring the common elements in these two texts into some kind of clear focus where everything lines up smoothly. This brings us to effort.

### **Courageous Effort**

My final claim for Liberal Education is that it encourages courageous effort as a result of having shown us where we stand which is followed by a realization of our ignorance. I would also suggest that this is the ultimate port of arrival in the two texts we have been examining. Not ultimate in the sense of the final item in a sequence, but as in the

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<sup>4</sup> MST 110

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 105

highest aspiration or result. This only became clear to me reading these two texts side by side because they each reach this destination coming from entirely opposite directions.

Another function of the Geometry in the Meno brings us to the question of the possibility or impossibility of finding any answers at all. Meno expresses doubts about the possibility, and Socrates says insistently: "We must, {...}, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle-- and **fainthearted** men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them **energetic** and **keen on the search**."<sup>6</sup> So learning is not for the cowardly. It is an act here linked to courage and to effort. Learning is tied to virtue. However, while for Socrates, on the one hand, possibility is absolutely necessary for stimulating effort, for the narrator of MST, on the other, it is precisely impossibility which encourages it. He argues that achieving something that was categorized as possible would make you feel that you had achieved nothing at all. He argues in regard to translation that:

*because* it would be desirable to free men from the divisions imposed by languages, there is little probability that it can be attained; therefore, it can only be achieved to an approximate measure. But this approximation can be greater or lesser, to an infinite degree, and the **efforts** at execution are not limited, for there always exists the possibility of bettering, refining, perfecting.

He goes on to say that all human activities are like this.

But what makes this effort courageous? In the MST, courage is initially tied into the definition of good writing and is said to be what translators lack. The narrator defines good writing thus: "To write well is to make continual incursions into grammar, into established usage, and into accepted linguistic norms. It is an act of permanent rebellion."

For Ortega y Gasset, true opinion, which in his work has no finite, attainable, counterpart in firm knowledge, is set in opposition to public opinion. Given that true opinion is as close as one can get to Truth and squarely stands in opposition to the public, hence wrong opinion, it acts as a key when the narrator, in the last few words in the dialogue, agrees with the linguist that his style of translation is just what the public wishes. It puts the linguist's suggestion of a style of translation that is "ugly, as science has always been" rather squarely in the wrong camp.

In summary, Liberal Education shows us where we stand by showing us to be in relation. By assuming connections across time and across fields, it encourages us to look for those relations rather taking things at face value. Because we do not settle on a face value reading, we are nudged to look more, to keep looking, yielding a more a

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<sup>6</sup> M 81e. p. 14

nuanced picture. In order to wish to look beyond what is simply at hand, an understanding that we do not already know all there is to know is necessary –and that grows out of seeing ourselves in relation. Effort is always laced with courage as it means moving away the pool of general, unreflective thought and the gesturing toward authorities for confirmation; it brings one rather to stand on one's own feet.

To me “The Misery and Splendor of Translation” looks like a brave and humble attempt which allow us to “transmigrate” into the mind Plato, at the same time as being much more than just that. It is anything but secondary literature.