Introduction

World Literature, as a disciplinary rallying point of literary criticism and the academic humanities, became increasingly prominent from the mid-1990s on. Between 1991 and 1997, under the editorial stewardship of Djelal Kadir, the journal *World Literature Today* cast World Literature as a hosting ground to literary postcolonialism. Pascale Casanova’s watershed book *La République mondiale des lettres* sparked renewed interest in World Literature in France after it appeared in 1999 despite an opening salvo that sounded anxieties over whether it was even legitimate to speak of World Literature. In its second life in English as *The World Republic of Letters* (published in 2004 in the series “Convergences: Inventories of the Present” edited by Edward Said), the book became a flashpoint in literary and cultural studies, especially with respect to allegations that it preserved a Eurocentric (and more specifically Francocentric) perspective in its reliance on the metropole-periphery distinction and Europe-generated criteria of cultural legitimation. *Debating World Literature*, a collection of essays edited by Christopher Prendergast in 2004, assessed the impact of Casanova’s book as well as Franco Moretti’s influential essay “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000) as it set out to rescue the “literature” half of the World Literature configuration from the de-aestheticizing
jaws of globalization. A conference held at Istanbul Bilgi University in December 2008 titled “World Literature in Between,” which kicked off with a conversation between David Damrosch and the Nobel Prize–winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, served as prelude to the launch of the The Institute of World Literature, spearheaded by David Damrosch at Harvard University. The Institute held its inaugural session at Peking University, Beijing in 2011 and on the same occasion marked The First Congress of the World Literature Association with a special focus on “The Rise of World Literatures.” As anthologies, volumes of critical essays and specialized studies with a world literary focus propagate—some emphasizing networks and systems oriented around Marx’s hypothetical of a literary International, others emphasizing a Goethean lineage adjusted to an era of global finance capital—the disciplinary construct that is here designated with upper case has secured its foothold in both the university institution and mainstream publishing. It stands in contrast to lowercase “world literature,” which may be considered a descriptive catch-all for the sum of all forms of literary expression in all the world’s languages.

In titling this book Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability, an interrogation shadows the provocation of the fore-title: if one is against the revival of World Literature in some of its new institutional guises, then what is one for? Certainly, as this book will make clear, I endorse World Literature’s deprovincialization of the canon and the way in which, at its best, it draws on translation to deliver surprising cognitive landscapes hailing from inaccessible linguistic folds (what R. A. Judy, citing the eleventh-century Islamic philosopher ibn Sina, refers to as the “arousal” and “wonder” [takhyil] sparked by poetic syllogisms). However, I do harbor serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement
of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded “differences” that have been niche-marketed as commercialized “identities.” As Simon During states convincingly: “The interest in world literature obviously follows the recent rapid extension of cross-border flows of tourists and cultural goods around the world, including literary fiction.” During gleans “a complex dynamic between literature’s increased participation in the genteel leisure industry and the relative decline of literary writing’s importance both in the education system and in the market.”

I have been left uneasy in the face of the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world’s cultural resources, as evinced in projects sponsored by some proponents of World Literature. Studies of broad ambition like the richly synthetic volume *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2012), whose programmatic reach covers “the disciplinary relationship of World Literature to areas such as philology, translation, globalization and diaspora studies,” fall prey inevitably to the tendency to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground. In a counter-move, I invoke untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors.

A primary argument of this book is that many recent efforts to revive World Literature rely on a translatability assumption. As a result, incommensurability and what has been called the Untranslatable are insufficiently built into the literary heuristic. Drawing on philosophies of translation developed by Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samuel Weber, Barbara Johnson, Abdelfattah Kilito and Édouard Glissant, as well as on the way in which the Untranslatable is given substance in the context of Barbara
Cassin’s *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (whose English translation I supervised with co-editors Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood), the aim is to activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature with bearing on approaches to world literatures, literary world-systems and literary history, the politics of periodization, the translation of philosophy and theory, the relation between sovereign and linguistic borders at the checkpoint, the bounds of non-secular proscription and cultural sanction, free versus privatized authorial property, the poetics of translational difference, as well as ethical, cosmological and theological dimensions of worldliness. Though the book is divided into chapters, it is conceived as a long essay in which the problematics unfold with reference to a central thesis about the interest of an approach to literary comparatism that recognizes the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability.

Translation studies’ particular appeal derived from its ability to respond to a planetary remit without sacrificing engagement with the world’s languages. The number of publications, books, book series, articles in journals about, and journals devoted to the practices and theory of translation spiked from 2000–2012, attesting to the combination of excitement and disaggregation characteristic of the emerging discipline.\(^3\) Translation studies gained traction in the humanities because it was interdisciplinary without diluting a disciplinary formation in comparative literature. It drew on the tradition of *translatio studii* in Renaissance humanism (so important to comparative literature’s foundation as a discipline), reworking it for a contemporary global education. Among the substantive issues that transferred most obviously from early periods to the present, I would mention knowledge transmission; philosophies of “world,” “humanity” and
“human rights”; the idea of a “classic”; aesthetic judgment and its critique; vernacularization and linguistic ethnocentrism in tension with cosmopolitan culture. Such topics go to the heart of what is of direct concern to graduate students preparing to teach subjects in the humanities at a difficult juncture in the economy of education. As teachers in training, graduate students have an obvious stake not only in acquiring pedagogies (competence in the translation practicum and the related subfield of translation theory), they also need to identify problems and topics that clearly communicate why the humanities matter in contemporary society. Translation remains one of those areas that relates to a larger public without sacrificing intellectual nuance. It is also the kind of paradigm—the translational humanities—whose global relevance has just begun to be understood in relation to public policy, legal theories of authorship and intellectual property, and international security, and whose implications as a language technology for media theory ask to be more fully explored. Finally, as a practice that lends itself to collaborative pedagogy, translation opens up questions of how to teach literature in the humanities now, especially when there is a need to ford the divisions between World Literature and Theory that have led to unproductive rifts.

As momentum increased in translation studies, Weltliteratur—with its Euro-Romantic, neo-Hegelian, Marxist and humanist pedigree, from Goethe to Lukács, Auerbach to Said—also gained renewed attention. Franco Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” induced a non-apologetic swerve away from close reading toward distant reading. Another essay, “Evolution, World-Systems, Weltliteratur” (2006), after noting the dearth of viable concepts and hypotheses in the study of World Literature, proposed using evolutionary theory and world-system analysis in the name of a unitary perspective that reveals (as it does with the
In France, the resurgence of engagement with World Literature had a lot to do with the impact of Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* (1999). The book projected a new model of World Literature by assailing the old universalist form. The author showed how France’s success in defining the World Literature canon in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries guaranteed its national prestige and its dominance as a geographic axis of cultural capital. Casanova also underscored the role of translation in assigning national authors and literary works a place in the world literary system of publication, distribution and critical review (despite failing to account for the “re-arrangement of world literary space in philological work on classical languages of the East prior to Herder’s writings on language in the 1770s,” as Aamir Mufti has argued).  

Though no utopian program of a retrofitted World Literature was explicitly promulgated, the book pointed implicitly in the direction of a galaxy of micro-mondes in translation, in which the role of hegemonic societies in the management and mediation of literature was curtailed. More recent work in France, all of which bear Bourdieu’s imprint, focused on the migration of ideas and the displacement and re-formation of intellectual networks (Laurent Jeanpierre, Yves Chevrel) the sociology of translation (Gisèle Sapiro, Blaise Wilfert) and the genealogy of *Weltliteratur* as a Goethean “situated universalism” with prophetic resonance for contemporary translation studies (i.e., François Xavier Landrin’s “La sémantique historique de la Weltliteratur: genèse conceptuelle et usages savants”). In 2012 Jérôme David’s *Spectres de Goethe. Les métamorphoses de la “littérature mondiale”* [Specters of Goethe: The Metamorphoses of “World Literature”]—a tour de force of critical ventriloquism in the manner of Goethe’s conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann—attested to *Weltliteratur*’s renewed piquancy as a literary paradigm.
Both translation studies and World Literature extended the promise of worldly criticism, politicized cosmopolitanism, comparability aesthetics galvanized by a deprovincialized Europe, an academically redistributed area studies and a redrawn map of language geopolitics. Partnered, they could deliver still more: translation theory as Weltliteratur would challenge flaccid globalisms that paid lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal “big tent” syllabi taught in English.

Unfortunately though, translation studies and World Literature, even in their renewed and best-intentioned guises, inevitably fell short of such objectives. Their institutional forms could not escape being too pluralistic, too ecumenical, insufficiently hard-line in the face of appropriation by universities seeking to justify the downsizing of national literature departments or the cutting of “foreign” language instruction. A course in translation—carrying a distinguished imprimatur as a professional training that could even produce measurable “outcomes”—was often deployed as a patch for “humanities lite” and for literary education that was politically appauvri in its amenability to soft diplomacy and its default to models of oneworldedness freighted with the psychopolitical burden of delusional democracy. Here, the psychopolitics of planetary dysphoria were itself definable as the depression of the globe or the thymotic frustration of the world.

Both fields, moreover, were unable to rework literary history through planetary cartographies and temporalities despite their recourse to world-systems theory. Shaped by classical genre theory, Renaissance humanism, Hegelian historical consciousness, Goethean Weltliteratur, Diltheyan Geistesgeschichte and the Marxist ideal of an “International of letters,” literary history has been beset by what Christopher Prendergast, following Arjun Appadurai, calls the “Eurochronology problem.” This is a problem arising
from the fact that critical traditions and disciplines founded in the Western academy contain inbuilt typologies—“epic,” “classicism,” “Renaissance,” “realism,” “the avant-garde,” “the postmodern”—adduced from Western literary examples.

In addition to giving short shrift to temporality and periodization, translation studies and World Literature ignored problems more internal to their theoretical premises. With translation assumed to be a good thing *en soi*—under the assumption that it is a critical praxis enabling communication across languages, cultures, time periods and disciplines—the right to the Untranslatable was blindsided. In a parallel way, at its very core World Literature seemed oblivious to the Untranslatable—as shown by its unqueried inclusion of the word “world.” World was famously interrogated by Heidegger alongside “finitude” and “individuation” in his *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. It was defined as that which humans (as opposed to animals or stones) richly “have.” In having World—that is to say, in having the capacity for World made possible by language and subjective accessibility—beings become human. The concept of World, Heidegger affirms, “means the accessibility of beings as such rather than beings in themselves.” Aside from the dichotomies of animal/human or living/non-living—they are juggernauts of critical theory at the current pass—the philosophization of World remains a fundamental problem demanding the rephilosophization of literary history through the history of translation. “The history of philosophy,” as Abdelfattah Kilito reminds us with reference to the historic importance of Averroës’s translation and exegesis of Aristotle, “is at its core the history of translation.” The expression “history of translation” from my perspective implies a decided emphasis on when and where translation happens, and, especially, on how and why it fails.
Translation failure—one of Walter Benjamin’s obsessions and a concept whose richness has been plumbed by translation studies far less than his famously enigmatic notion of *reine Sprache* (pure or transparent language)—invites elaboration alongside other iterations of the non-translatable: “lost in translation,” the mistranslated, unreliable translation and the *contresens*, an impassive condition that would seem to nest in language; sometimes discernible as a pull away from language norming. We see this last effect in Kilito’s characterization of cases in which the target language refuses to cooperate with the translator, especially where devilishly difficult phrases in Arabic like *amma ba’ad* (roughly, “so now,” “as to what follows,” “that said”) and *layta chi’ari* (“if only my knowledge,” “if only I knew”) are concerned. Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues—or language that bars access to translation—represents yet another form of translation failure. What we have in this instance, as Daniel Heller-Roazen points out, is speech that preserves only the envelope of semantic intention. “Glossolalia,” he recalls, “is a technical expression referring to a variety of speech act whose name derives from the Greek term for speaking in tongues” ... Giorgio Agamben has commented that such speech consists not so much in the “pure uttering of inarticulate sounds” as in a “‘speaking in gloss’; that is, in words whose meaning one does not know.” “To hear such sounds is to know they mean something without knowing exactly what such a ‘something’ might be; in other words, it is to discern an intention to signify that cannot be identified with any particular signification.” For Heller-Roazen, glossolalia posits a non-signifying model of communicability against the grain of language’s inherent profit motive. The conventional economic ends of communication—transactions, deals, exchanges, investment returns—are put
out of action and, in their stead, we find a pure language that plays off disinterested communicative gestures.

Glossolalia is interestingly compared to Wittgenstein’s nonsense, with its attendant lexicon of das Unsagbare (the Unsayable), and das Unaussprechliche (the Inexpressible) encountered in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. These terms demarcate where logic fails; where propositions that lack sense (sinnlos) and direction must be identified; where inexpressible things put pressure on speech; or where the nonsense of mysticism and metaphysics prevails. The idea that nonsense is the result of the “failure to understand the logic of our language” implies that language can make sense of a proposition like “Green is green,” as long as humans grasp the logic of the sentence (as long, that is, as “green” is understood as the proper name of an individual who has turned green due to sickness, a skin condition or the inebriation of the beholder).  

For Wittgenstein, translation is the mechanism by which language logic is tested. And, in translation studies, the limits of sayability and expressibility are increasingly a focus, conjugating logic and philology, with the latter understood in Werner Hamacher’s ascription as an “inclination” (or disinclination) to that which is “said and not said.” Wittgenstein’s understanding of nonsense (unsinn, bedeutsungslos)—qualified as gibberish or as pseudo-propositions about the world—holds further potential for analyzing poetic opacity: he defines it as the outer edge of intelligibility in language; the limitrophe of a discrete tongue; or inflections of madness, schizo-language and autism. From here, it is but a short step to translation theory filtered through Saul Kripke’s Wittgensteinian “private language argument” (Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language) or Nelson Goodman’s “new riddle of induction” (Fact, Fiction, and Forecast), which argues that, with time factored, a given object could meaningfully be grue or bleen.
Where the Untranslatable in language philosophy directs one to the logic of grammar, the limits of reference, the outer reach of thinkability or the difference between meaningful and meaningless propositions, in semiology it connotes grand abstractions—Logos, God, Truth, Marx’s General Equivalent—nouns, in short, at their greatest distance from material referents. These transcendental signifieds emphasize how questions of untranslatability are rooted in theology, hermeticism, hermeneutics and epigraphy, which associate them with such notions as alêtheia (hidden being, truth), “glossolalia” (speaking in tongues), gnomic or apodictic utterances, the differend, the nonpareil, the sublime, the exception and the sovereign. Foregrounded here are questions concerning the theological grounding of “language as such” posed by early Benjamin, as he countered Kantian pure reason through recourse to Hamann’s theory of creation that suggests it to be the physical imprint of the divine word.¹¹ Of parallel importance is the last seminar given by Derrida in 2002 organized around the theme of “The Beast and the Sovereign.” Derrida designated Christ the master translator of the Logos, and, from thence, of “man as a zoon, as a living animal possessed of logos who gives rise to an entire tradition of rational man” as the “calculating animal.” He attributes the logocentrism of monotheistic religions to “forced translations” that form the basis of “sovereign hegemony.” Located, then, at the core of political theology, translation carries with it this weight of coercion.

Another history of forcing is tangible in legislation against blasphemy or historic prohibitions on the vernacularization of sacred texts.¹² So we have the Latin Bible proscribed in English in the early Middle Ages; the German Bible, translated by Luther, initially condemned as a travesty; and Arabic-only strictures applied to the Qur’an. The theological ban on the portage of holy words from one language to
another extends, in secular contexts, to a *force de frappe*. This is evinced in the injunction issued (albeit somewhat ironically) by Kilito: “Thou Shalt Not Translate Me!” Kilito’s fables of translational impropriety add density to recent efforts by Naomi Seidman (in *Faithful Renderings*), Daniel Heller-Roazen (in a prospective project on “secret language” and idiolects that are off-limits to tourists and travelers) and Saba Mahmood (in *Politics of Piety*) to rethink secular criticism in terms of theologies of translation. Kilito is no anti-secularist, but he refuses to delegitimate the force of translational interdiction in sacred language by dismissing it as dogma or traditionalism or subordinating it to culturalist accounts of divine authority. Mahmood, by contrast, adopts a culturalist approach, arguing that piety is always already a politics, situationally localized and personally negotiated. Glossing Talal Asad, she notes:

> Asad shifts from an understanding of scripture as a corpus of authoritatively inscribed opinions that stand for religious truth, to one in which divine texts are one of the central elements in a discursive field of relations of power *through which* truth is established.

Judith Butler, for her part, circumvents the impasse between religious absolutism and cultural relativism by transforming the critique of judgment into the problem of adjudicating translatability. For Butler, cultural translation as a practice

> would be a condition of such judgment, and that what is being judged is not only whether the question of whether a given action is injurious but also whether, if it is, legal remedies are the best way to approach the issue, and what other ways of acknowledging and repairing injury are available.¹³

Cultural translation, in these terms, shifts the politics of offense, blasphemy, moral injury, dogma, religious truth and the culture of belief from the obdurately dichotomized framework dividing piety and secularism (mired in ongoing wars of religion as well as the intractable Western/non-Western culture wars) to one of law and language. Butler
has recourse to translation to explicate how scriptural and legal truths become grounded in universals, legally sanctioned or situationally overdetermined. There is a pragmatics of translatability built into this approach but therein lies its limitations; for in proposing just “to translate” the translational interdiction as part of a larger grammar of linguistic judgment calls, the boundaries of untranslatability are perforce traduced and sacral untranslatability as such is no longer taken seriously. The difficulty remains concerning how to take sacral untranslatability at its word without secularist condescension. I make no pretense of resolving the issue, only to ensuring that it be recognized as a major heuristic challenge for the interpretive humanities.

Theological untranslatability—a property of non-controversion vested in “theological onomasiology” (God-naming), and associated historically with the way polytheistic, intercultural translations of the gods’ proper names gave way to Judeo-Christian strictures that held any translation of God’s name to be apostasy—often functions as an adhesive of bonded community and the hegemony of monotheistic religions. But François Noudelmann provides the grounds for thinking untranslatability in the guise of “disruptive kinship,” where elective as opposed to genetically ordained affinities are the rule. Disruptive kinship implies an *air de famille* minus the *lien de parenté*: it refers to blood ties that have been broken, thwarted orders of nature, queer families, subcultures, soulmates, monsters, the progeny of Virgin birth, spirits born of metempsychosis, or in the case of language, Untranslatables that stand outside of language families. Derrida initiated thinking along these lines in “Des Tours de Babel,” with reference to the breakdown of kinship models in nineteenth-century historical linguistics:

The allusion to the maturation of a seed could resemble a vitalist or geneticist metaphor; it would come, then, in support of the genealogical and parental code which seems to dominate this text. In fact it seems
necessary here to invert this order and recognize what I have elsewhere proposed to call the “metaphoric catastrophe”: far from knowing first what “life” or “family” mean whenever we use these familiar values to talk about language and translation; it is rather starting from the notion of a language and its “sur-vival” in translation that we could have access to the notion of what life and family mean. This reversal is operated expressly by Benjamin.14

Sundered filiation leads to orphaned, dispossessed literary properties, which is the unifying idea in the book’s last section, “Who Owns My Translation?” Building on Derrida’s articulation of linguistic dispropriation in Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin (“I speak only one language and it is not my own”), I conjecture that one reason why literary studies falls short as anti-capitalist critique is because it insufficiently questions what it means to “have” a literature or to lay claim to aesthetic property. Literary communities are gated: according to Western law and international statute, authors have texts, publishers have a universal right to translate (as long as they pay), and nations own literary patrimony as cultural inheritance. Translation, seen as authorized plagiarism, emerges as a form of creative property that belongs fully to no one. As a model of deowned literature, it stands against the swell of corporate privatization in the arts, with its awards given to individual genius and bias against collective authorship. A translational author—shorn of a singular signature—is the natural complement, in my view, to World Literature understood as an experiment in national sublation that signs itself as collective, terrestrial property.

If the conditions of property-value and economic privatization underwriting contemporary literary world-systems are crucial to analyzing literature’s material assets, they also inflect the economy of comparison. The Hellenist Marcel Detienne, whose Comparer l’incomparable (2000) engages with the heuristics of the Untranslatable in the comparative human sciences, takes us in this direction
when he examines the comparatist’s art de monnayer—the ability to traffic in differential civilities, in “incomparable” sacred and patrimonial objects. Incomparables and Untranslatables are thus set about in a world in which mobile social placing and terrestrial property-lines both affirm and trump national heritage claims. Disputes over art restitution or access to archaeological sites, seen in this light, provide insight into the material stakes of “having” something culturally unique, nationally branding, or personally self-defining, and I have experimented with looking at these topics in relation to literary property.

Against World Literature is obviously not a “how-to” book for teaching world literature in translation. Nor is it a comprehensive census-taking of the field of World Literature with pretenses to regional coverage and equitable language distribution. There are few close encounters with individual texts and the texts that are analyzed have been selected because they illuminate a problem and not because they are representative texts of world literatures. If there is a scene of instruction in play, it is an oblique one, which is to say, an array of loosely affiliated topoi—one-worldedness, literary world-systems, terrestrial humanism, checkpoints, theologies of translation, the translational interdiction, pedagogy, authorial deownership, possessive collectivism. These topoi—hardly exhaustive—provide so many ways of looking at how untranslatability plays out in literary studies. Hardly programmatic, they nonetheless imply a politics of literature critical of global literary management within corporate education.

Against World Literature tests the hypothesis that translation and untranslatability are constitutive of world forms of literature. Consider, for instance, how Tolstoy gained admission to the precinct of the “world novel” by opening War and Peace in French. This gambit may look paradoxical—to attain greatness as a Russian novelist, write
The book opens in French—not with a few words of French (as in those English versions that do not eliminate the French altogether), but with a whole paragraph of French, with only a few phrases of Russian at the end. This mixing of French and Russian goes on for another five chapters or more, and occurs frequently throughout the rest of the book. There are also some long letters entirely in French, as well as official dispatches, and quotations from the French historian Adolphe Thiers. There are passages in German as well. For all of them, Tolstoy supplied his own translations in footnotes, as we do. But that made the question still more problematic, because Tolstoy’s translations are occasionally inaccurate, perhaps deliberately so. The amount of French in the text is smaller than some early critics asserted—not a third, but only about two percent. But there is a great deal of gallicized Russian, either implying that the speaker is speaking in French, or showing that upper-class ladies like Julie Karagin are unable to write correctly in their own language.15

Tolstoy arguably trademarked the world novel as a chronicle of political instability and crisis by leaning heavily on untranslatability, whether in the guise of non-translated passages in French and German, Russian-inflected French, or unreliable translations of textual segments earmarked for translation in the notes. Pevear implies that the Untranslatable performs a metafunction in the novel, tormenting its would-be translator with the impossibility of the task at hand; demonstrating, with a certain realism, how language-savvy aristocratic society lives in a world in which blunted comprehension and linguistic subterfuge are the norm; and contributing to an effect that Pevear suggests occurs throughout, namely a compositional heterogeneity that “disrupts the fictional continuum.”

The “invasion” of French onto the territory of the Russian language in War and Peace reiterates the plot structure, which devolves around the Napoleonic incursion and its consequent shake-up of the old social order. It may not be
too great a stretch to say that Tolstoy’s heteroglossic micro-society, with its subterranean revolutionary urges multilingually channeled, foreshadows *The Communist Manifesto* circulating the world over in multiple translations. This idea of a translational International leads us to a free translation of World Literature as “screwed-up literature” based on a passage of *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels wrote:

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property ... and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

Jonathan Arac notes:

So much of the business of this passage is condensed in the single word translated “intercourse”: German *Verkehr*. A standard dictionary lists the meanings for this word in sequence as: traffic, transportation, communication, commerce, intercourse in its sexual as well as other senses, and communion. It is all but communism (in German, *Kommunismus*), for which Marx and Engels required recourse to a Latin, rather than a Germanic, derivation, perhaps to signal the movement’s internationalism. The related verb, *verkehren*, means to turn over, with the usual off-key sense carried by the prefix *ver-*, so to put it colloquially, to screw up. *Die verkehrte Welt* is the world turned upside down, which in the metahistory of Marx and Engels is just what the bourgeoisie does by means of its *Verkehr.*

*Verkehrte Welilitet*, or screwed-up literature, has precisely the right impertinent coding. For in standing the world on its head, it encourages the literatures of the world to mess with World Literature, turning it into a process of translating untranslatably. It beckons one to run the experiment of imagining what a literary studies contoured around untranslatability might be.

It may seem counter-intuitive to argue for untranslatability in the era of a translational turn. Certainly there are critics who consider such a move to be unconvincing, if not downright folly. In his *Is That a Fish in
Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything (2011), the critic and accomplished translator David Bellos insists that nothing is untranslatable. “The circulation of novels,” he writes,

among all the vehicular languages of the world and their incontestable conversations with one another demonstrate without a shadow of doubt that style does survive translation ... In sum, the widespread notion that style is untranslatable is just a variant of the folkish nostrum that a translation is no substitute for the original.

Bellos treats the idea that certain contents are ineffable or ungraspable with similar skepticism, arguing with clever reverse logic, that “the ineffable is [not] a problem for translation, but translation is one big problem for the ineffable.” Here, he is positioning himself contra Jerrold Katz’s Wittgensteinian axiom of ineffability (which states that “What cannot be expressed in any human language ... lies outside the boundaries of translation and ... outside the field of language too”). For Bellos, “One of the truths that translation teaches us—is that everything is effable.” In this sense, the view that everything is effable implies a faith in the limitless capabilities of rationalism to appropriate (aligned with what Heidegger would insist is the capacity to turn the earth into a world). Such a categorical statement about the conditions of optimal cognizability does not in itself necessarily offer a disproof of linguistic ineffability or untranslatability. It would seem that Bellos’ opposition to untranslatability is guided by his role as a professional translator having to overcome difficult hurdles. Thus a joke visiting card signed “Adolf Hitler—Fourreur,” encountered in a shop by a character from Perec’s novel Life: A User’s Manual, is translated by Bellos as “Adolf Hitler—German Lieder.” The match here works off the French term for “furrier,” homonymically close to a French pronunciation of führer (leader), and the German word for “songs” (lieder), whose English pronunciation sounds out the English “leader.” Bellos comments: “It may well be not the only or
the best possible translation of Perec’s joke visiting card, but it matches well enough in the dimensions that matter ... It doesn’t preserve all dimensions of the original—what ever does?—but matches enough of them, in my honest but not very humble opinion, to count as a satisfactory translation of a self-referring, metalinguistic, and interlingual joke.”  

While this maximal translation may be justified under the special constraints imposed by humor, in dismissing the untranslated as a “dimension that doesn’t matter,” Bellos leaves hanging the question of what matters.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to understand the Untranslatable, not as pure difference in opposition to the always translatable (rightly suspect as just another non-coeval form of the romantic Absolute, or fetish of the Other, or myth of hermeneutic inaccessibility) but as a linguistic form of creative failure with homeopathic uses.

Alain Badiou’s opposition to philosophical untranslatability proves harder to contend with, coming as it does from a philosopher recently turned translator whose ideas have been much with me during the course of writing this book. Badiou’s “hypertranslation” of Plato’s Republic (La République de Platon, 2012) is a true adventure in philosophy. He theatricalizes the mise-en-scène of Platonic discourse (in a cross between Brecht and Beckett). He introduces French slang and he takes liberties with Plato’s content to the point of inventing a new female character. Throughout, there is an attempt to stage an encounter with “the real” through recourse to colloquial diction; a diction contributing to the translation’s political intention. Badiou valorizes equality (rather than liberty or freedom of expression, associated with “the politics of appearance and opinion”) alongside the text’s potential for a contemporary politics of justice. According to him, “I turned to the Republic, the masterwork of the Master, precisely dedicated to the concept of Justice, to allow its power to scintillate the
present.”19 As Susan Spitzer, the translator of the text into American English, intimates, Badiou’s Republic may be seen as an exercise in “communist” translation whose “fidelity” to the Greek original should be gauged in political terms:

“Hypertranslation” is the word Alain Badiou has used, in The Communist Hypothesis and elsewhere, to describe his treatment of Plato’s Republic. Not a “simple” translation into French of the Greek original, then, and still less a scholarly critique of it, Badiou’s text transforms the Republic into something startlingly new by expanding, reducing, updating and dramatizing it, leavening it with humor and revitalizing its language with his own philosophical lexicon. Yet, for all the plasticity of the hypertranslation, its freewheeling appropriation of the source text, it still remains an adaptation based firmly on his painstaking translation of Plato’s language into modern French.20

Badiou’s approach to translating involves “absolute comprehending”: “I start by trying to comprehend the text, absolutely, in its own language.” He broke this process down by doing line readings of the original Greek, consulting three (standard but very dated) French translations, and making notes on specific passages, some dating back to the earliest years of his philosophical education. A series of procedures that avoid excessive recourse to scholarly tools allowed him to channel Plato directly. The result, he avows, is not a “translation” in the strict sense of that term but a faithful philosophical transcription; a translation that militantly refuses “capitulation” to editorial normalization in the name of staying constant to the text’s “eternity.” Badiou modernizes images (the cave becomes a moviehouse) and adds anachronistic references (to the Paris Commune, World War I, Freud, AIDS, Jean-François Lyotard, etc.). This “faithful” infidelity, jarring though it may be, supports the creation of “Badiou-Plato”: a sublation or philosophical event referring to a politics of Truths and an ontology of the Subject. It is this construct that authorizes Badiou’s strong translation of Plato’s “Idea of the Good” (Idée du Bien) as “Truth” (Vérité); “soul” (âme) as “Subject” (Sujet); “God” (Dieu) as “Big Other” or “Other” (grand Autre, Autre); and
“Republic” (République)—a notoriously difficult Untranslatable going back to the Greek Politeia, commonly construed as “constitution”—as “State” (État) or “politics” (politique). Kenneth Reinhard associates this pattern of over-translation with a unique form of sublimation that he poses as

a sublime—hyselos—place of new topological proximities, unmappable according to the conventional metrics of history and geography. The hyper-space opened up by Badiou’s translation is a realm of ideas, but it is no heavenly empyrean; Badiou’s Republic is neither a philosophical purification nor a literary modernization of Plato in the sense of being an attempt to reduce historical distance for the sake of making an ancient text more familiar, a part of our world. On the contrary, Badiou’s “hyper”translation sublimates Plato’s text, in Lacan’s sense of sublimation as “the elevation of an object to the status of a Thing,” which is precisely to de-familiarize it, to bring out its strangeness—at least from the perspective of current opinion about Plato and Platonism.

Badiou’s translational practice marshals Plato’s opposition to sophistics in the service of his own. He groups lines 336b–357 from Book 1, for example, into a chapter captioned “Reduce the Sophist to Silence” to emphasize Socrates’s relentless smack-down of the Sophist Thrasymachus (a vain pugilist and champion of “Might makes right”). Bruno Bosteels links this aspect of Badiou’s Platonism to his general refusal of the linguistic turn in philosophy:

For Badiou, subordinating the doctrine of being to the logic of the signifier or to a linguistic anthropology amounts to reducing philosophy to sophistics—ontology then becomes what Barbara Cassin, following Novalis, calls “logology.” Aside from his polemics against the great modern sophists that would include everyone from the second Wittgenstein to the late Lyotard, the fact remains that there is a rather glaring absence of any theory of language in Badiou’s philosophy of the event... 

Badiou also never indulges in play on etymologies and alleged untranslatables, nor does he in any way privilege the aura of the original, mostly Greek or German texts of philosophy, as has become customary in much post-Heideggerian thinking. For Badiou, the French language would be utterly foreign to such auratic philosophical uses...

Cassin’s overarching aim in recognizing the protagonism of sophistics is to give the history of philosophy a different beginning by reverting the
decision of sense away from the principle of univocity and back to linguistic equivocation.

Cassin herself wishes to avoid reductive dichotomies: “Anti-Platonism seems like such an outdated notion! But anti-sophistics, too, seems so outdated!” Acknowledging that Badiou is committed to a form of Platonism that refuses to “recognize the constitutive character of the linguistic variation,” Cassin suggests that he nonetheless retains the structural function of the sophist idea of Truth as an empty set within his own definition of Truth as a void in the situation, as “withdrawal” from the authority of language. 22

Badiou may recognize that sophistics makes philosophy stronger, but his anti-sophistic elevation of univocity over equivocation, of idea over language, of transparency over opacity, of transmission over hermeneutics, results in the subordination of translation to philosophy. This explains why he could rely without apology on an old mimeographed copy of Étienne Balibar’s “teaching” translation of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* when writing his book on *Wittgenstein’s Antiphilosophy* rather than on published scholarly editions in French and English. The translation’s quality is not at issue, it is the communication of the Idea that counts. The “Communist Idea,” as evental form, is contingent on furthering access to philosophy to the non-initiate. In this respect, Badiou’s democratic and demotic translation targets a point of pride held dear by the academic guild: expertise in reading works of philosophy in the original. According to Badiou:

Specialists from all disciplines love to seek shelter behind the old destroyed Babel. Who has not heard the objection that, not knowing the language—from Greek to formal logic via German or Hebrew—they could not hope to understand anything whatever of what was said therein? Only to be followed by organizing an interdisciplinary conference on translation, without in any way moving the lines. 23
If there is a philosophy of untranslatability in Badiou, it has little to do with language. It derives from an incommensurability at the heart of mathematical Platonism. To cite Kenneth Reinhard’s introduction to Badiou’s Republic yet once more, at issue is

a subjective construction that begins with the thesis that there is something incommensurable about all existing measures, something similar to the irrational relation between a diagonal and the sides of a square. But, unlike the exponents of mystical Platonism, Badiou insists that it is incumbent on us to determine this non-relation, to construct a new measure for the immeasurable.24

Arguably, between Badiou’s example as a translator of Plato and his philosophical commitment to a Platonic mathematical ontology that activates the incommensurable, one can posit a philosophical Untranslatable. It may be identified with a sublime gesture of hypertranslation—convertible into a matheme—that denominates a subjective “inexistent.” It might also be thought of (after Graham Harman) as an action of “vicarious causation” that makes the Idea appear when contiguous but non-communicating objects, qualia and ontic states are brought into relation.25 Badiou’s philosophical translation, indifferent to language and sworn to mathematical ontology (in which the Subject lines up structurally with Parmenides’ suprasensible form of the One), sits at the antipode of Cassin’s “philosophizing in languages,” where the politics of linguistic difference is availed to unhorse language nationalisms.26 As I have already intimated, Cassin’s dictionary of Untranslatables constitutes a venture in sophistical philosophizing with and in translation as its heuristic of choice.

Cassin’s practice of untranslatability in the Vocabulaire has deepened more recently into a theory of equivocal symptoms in language; historically stigmatized as the mark of radical evil in translation. In “Homonymy and Amphiboly, or Radical Evil in Translation,” she has argued that
Homonymy destabilizes language in its very structure. Noting that we are used to viewing homonymy as an accident of language, or one of those tricks that language plays on the translator, similar to “false friends” (faux amis; words or expressions that sound the same across languages but that have very different significations), Cassin recognizes that it nonetheless expresses something about language’s very essence. For Aristotle, she notes, it served as a paradigm of the transcendental illusion; an evil that could be temporarily neutralized but that would continuously return. She suggests that for Aristotle the evil of homonymy is compounded by amphiboly: a form of ambivalent syntax that normalizes the expression of logical fallacies and grammatical anomalies. An oft-cited example in English hails from Groucho Marx in Animal Crackers: “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I will never know.” Here, semantic ambiguity and humorous effect are produced by the phrase “in my pajamas,” which modifies both the subject of the sentence, “I,” and the elephant. For Cassin, verbs and expressions in Greek signifying “to be” or “being”—ontós on, to ti én einai—reveal this troubling aspect of the amphiboly. The fact that the Greek word esti produces a grammatical sentence without a verb yields a host of ontological brain-teasers typically found in Gorgias’s treatise On Non-Being and Parmenides’ Poem. Such formulations may not qualify as amphibolous in the strict syntactic sense (as in Cassin’s French translation of line 3 of fragment 2 of Parmenides’ poem: “l’une que est et que n’est pas ne pas être” [roughly, the one that it is and that it is not not to be]), but they produce the same effect of intelligibility within nonsense that one finds, say, in the phrase “Helicopter powered by human flies” or in this line from Molière’s Mélicerte, “Et de même qu’à vous je ne lui suis pas chère,” [literally something like, And I am not dear to him, the same way I am to you] which I would be tempted to render very freely
as: “I am cheap because I’m not his dear.” What we experience here is the shock of a logical economy that permits a “twofer” (two for the price of one); itself a kind of double-bind or state of exception in syntax and semantics. Amphiboly, as Cassin intimates, makes an error of meaning acceptable even as it arouses conscious suspicion of something off-kilter or terribly wrong within language. It is not by chance that from Aristotle to Kant, amphiboly has been treated with suspicion. In *The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection*, Kant would cast amphiboly as an obstruction to the apprehension of things in themselves, a grand deception of phenomena. In Lalande’s gloss on Kant, the imputation of conceptual predicates to sensible phenomena results in ignorance of the conditions proper to the sensible.” \(^{27}\) Though stigmatized by the philosophers, Cassin wants to recuperate homonymy and amphiboly as strong forms of equivocity for a fully performative sophistics whose ultimate goal—following a path leading from Gorgias to Lacan and J. L. Austin—is a “consequential relativism.”

I have been faced with the difficult prospect of trying to conjugate Cassin *with* Badiou; which is to say, linguistic relativism with subjective truth; logology with matheme; the unconscious with logics of worlds; deterritorialized languages with the genius of language in one tongue. For literary studies more broadly, this endeavor has involved an effort to relate linguistic pluralism (inherent in translation as a liberal art) to a practice of *Weltliteratur* that takes full measure of linguistic constraints and truth conditions in the investigation of singular modes of existing in the world’s languages.


3 Works like The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies (Jeremy Munday, 2009); Key Terms in Translation Studies (Giuseppe Palumbo, 2009); Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications (Munday, 2008); The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies (Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 2008); Translation and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies (Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella, 2008); A Companion To Translation Studies (Piotr Kuhlczak and Karin Littau, 2007); The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature (Emily Apter, 2005); Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation (Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, 2005); The Translation Studies Reader (Lawrence Venuti, 2004); and Translation Studies (Susan Bassnett, 2002) built on earlier collections, including Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice (Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, 1999); Gender in Translation (Sherry Simon, 1996); and Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond (Gideon Toury, 1995).

4 Revathi Krishnaswamy, “Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization,” Comparative Literature 62: 4, Fall 2010, 399, 400. Krishnaswamy is one of many to note that the field of “world literary theory” or “non-Western literary theory before European colonialism” is paltry. Even work on classical non-Western languages coming out of comparative poetics tends to have little influence on the critical projects associated with theory.

5 Mufti’s criticism of Casanova relies on “a rather obvious historical claim but one that has been rigorously present in a great deal of contemporary critical discussion, namely, that the deep encounter between English and the other Western languages and the languages of the global periphery as media of literary expression did not take place for the first time in the postcolonial era, let alone in the supposedly transnational transactions of the period of high globalization but, especially, at the dawn of the modern era itself and fundamentally transformed both cultural formations involved in the encounter.” See Aamir Mufti, “Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures,” Critical Inquiry 36, Spring 2010, 461.


7 Ibid. My thanks to Omar Berrada for his help with the approximative translations of amma ba’ad and layta chi’ari.


10 Werner Hamacher, “From 95 Theses on Philology,” PMLA 125: 4, October 2010, 997. Thesis 57 states: “What belongs to philology—besides the inclination to that which is said—is the courage for what is not said.”

11 Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles develop this point in their summary of Benjamin’s anti-Kantianism. They note: “In the essay ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man’ (c. 1916), Benjamin offers a theological conception of language which draws on Hamann’s discussion of creation as the physical imprint of the divine Word of God, to claim that there ‘is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language.’” Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913–1926, Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 62–3.


See Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” in *Collapse* 2, May 2007, 190. Harman writes: “Vicarious causation, of which science so far knows nothing, is closer to what is called formal cause. To say that formal cause operates vicariously means that forms do not touch one another directly, but somehow melt, fuse, and decompress in a shared common space from which all are partly absent. My claim is that two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact. In this sense, the theory of vicarious causation is a theory of the molten inner core of objects—a sort of plate tectonics of ontology.”

As a pendant to Cassin’s return to sophistics, see Pascal Quignard’s *Rhétorique spéculative* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), which seeks to rehabilitate the Sophist position against neoplatonic tendencies of mathematization.