

Finding Our Tongues

FRENCH PHILOSOPHER PAUL Ricoeur, who died in 2005 at the age of 92, was both the John Dewey and the Aristotle of post–World War II philosophy. Like Dewey, Ricoeur was a sweet-tempered and optimistic thinker who wrote important and original works well into his eighties. Like Aristotle, he sought to embrace the world as it is rather than chase after a unifying Truth or Being hiding elsewhere. Ricoeur—whose major works include *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970), *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977), the three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1984–88), and *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (2004)—wrote about everything from religion to the logic of the social sciences, working from within a hermeneutical framework that emphasized the complexity and multiplicities of this world and of the ways humans make sense of it.

The three short lectures on translation gathered in this tiny book date from 2004 and are vintage, albeit not path-breaking, Ricoeur. If philosophy begins from wonder at the fact that there is something rather than nothing, Ricoeur's great gift was to make us fully cognizant of the inspiring challenges that the imperfect somethings of the universe present to humans. Translation, he tells us, follows from two ineluctable features of the human condition: the plurality of natural languages and the non-transparency of the self to others, or even to itself.

Quite unconvincingly, Ricoeur asks us to read the biblical story of Babel not as narrating “an irremediable linguistic catastrophe,” but merely as recording, with “no recrimination, no lamentation, no accusation,” the multiplicity of languages as a fact of life. More persuasively, he recommends a practical response to this fact, a response that finds a mean between two “paralyzing” theoretical positions: one, that “translation is impossible,” and two, that we must create an ideal artificial and universal language to overcome the deficiencies of natural languages. Ricoeur calls on us to roll up our sleeves

ON TRANSLATION.

By Paul Ricoeur.
Translated by Eileen
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and do the hard work of translation, fully aware as we do so of the many forms of resistance to doing that work well. The ceaseless re-translation of the classics—Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, and the rest—testifies to “the desire to translate” despite all the obstacles and the self-conscious acknowledgment of inevitable inadequacy.

Opening ourselves to the foreign starts with abandoning all “pretensions to self-sufficiency.” We

The ceaseless translation of Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, and the rest testifies to “the desire to translate” despite all the obstacles.

must learn, against strong resistance, to hate “the mother tongue’s provincialism,” for the foreign is all too often experienced “as a threat against our own linguistic identity.” The “test of the foreign” leads us to understand

that, in a phrase Ricoeur borrows from literary critic George Steiner, “to understand is to translate.” Even within the same tribe, every utterance partakes of “correspondence without adequacy,” as each individual struggles to make itself understood. We constantly experience the frustration of not having gotten it exactly right, of feeling that we have not captured precisely in words the experience, feeling, or thought we are striving to communicate.

The possibilities of alienation (these words do not reveal the real me) and of misinterpretation (no, that’s not what I meant at all) are ever present. Our desire to translate ourselves to ourselves and to others is always shadowed by the fear of failure and by resentment of the very necessity of the task. The development of “linguistic hospitality,” the welcoming of the foreign into the privacy of the self, is the ethos Ricoeur promotes as the proper and humble response to the fact that some ideal union between a text and its translation, between our sense of self and the words with which we express that sense, and, ultimately, between the self and others, can never be achieved.

Ricoeur insisted, especially in later works such as *Oneself as Another* (1995), that the path to self-understanding lies through the detour of an encounter with the other. His essays on translation

dramatize this call to recognize in the foreign the lineaments of one’s own imperfection.

—John McGowan

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

Trading Digits

THE TRADING FLOORS OF stock and commodities exchanges have been potent symbols of financial centers such as Chicago, London, and New York for a century.

In these huge rooms, sometimes called pits, thousands of traders buy and sell their way to fortune or ruin. Now trades are often made electronically rather than through a combination of yells and gestures, and the frenzied pits are being replaced by rows of staid computer cubicles. What might this change mean for the breed of famously crass traders who have long been the lifeblood of the market?

To find out firsthand, New York University anthropologist Caitlin Zaloom worked as a clerk at the industry-leading Chicago Board of Trade and as a trader in a recently established electronic trading office in London. The result is *Out of the Pits*, an examination of the culture of futures traders. These pit denizens make money or hedge against risk, for themselves or for clients, by betting on the ups and downs of contracts whose value is linked to the future price of everything from wheat to interest rates. Traders, especially the “locals” working for themselves, may buy and sell hundreds of times a day; they make—or lose—their money on the margins between the purchase and sale prices. Their presence in the pits has ensured the market’s liquidity, which rests on the presumption that for every buyer there is a seller, and for every seller, a buyer.

Unlike pedigreed financiers, futures traders are mostly working-class men whom the pits have fashioned into a species Zaloom

OUT OF THE PITS:

Traders and Technology From Chicago to London.

By Caitlin Zaloom.
Univ. of Chicago Press.
224 pp. \$29