

## On Translating and Being Translated

(December 05, 2015)



Held in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute, NYU Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò and the Center for Fiction. Reading and conversation on *On Translating and Being Translated, (Other People's Trades)* Ann Goldstein (editor of Primo Levi's Complete Works) and Esther Allen (Baruch College)

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"To Translate and Be Translated" from: Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*, and was translated by Anthony Shugaar

According to Genesis, the first humans had only one language: this made them so ambitious and so dexterous that they set about building a tower that reached as high as the sky. God was offended at their audacity, and he punished them in a subtle manner: not with a thunderbolt but by confounding their speech, which made it impossible for them to continue their blasphemous work. This episode has parallels, surely no accident, with the story of original sin, a story that comes shortly before this



one in the bible and which was punished with expulsion from Paradise; we can conclude that linguistic differences were perceived from the earliest times as a curse.

And a curse they have remained, as anyone knows who has been forced to live, or, even worse, forced to work, in a country where he doesn't speak the language, or anyone who has been obliged to hammer a foreign language into his head as an adult, when the mysterious material in which memories are engraved becomes more refractory. Further, for many people, at a more or less conscious level, anyone who speaks another language is a foreigner by definition, an outsider, a "stranger," and different from me; and someone different is a potential enemy or, at least, a barbarian—that is to say, etymologically speaking, a stutterer, someone who cannot speak, a quasi-non-human. Thus, linguistic friction tends to become racial and political friction, yet another curse that afflicts us.

It ought to follow that those who practice the trade of translator or interpreter should be honored, inasmuch as they strive to limit the damage done by the curse of Babel. [...]

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NYU Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, 21 West 12 Street

Free admission

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