

# THE ETHICAL ENCOUNTER AS TRANSLATION OF OTHERNESS IN DEBORAH LEVY'S *HOT MILK* (2016)<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The notion of translation has been defined along history many times. Roman Jakobson's famous distinction of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation (1959: 232) paved the way for different understandings of the term. According to Long (2013), since Jakobson, three essential paradigms (linguistic, cultural, and social/psychological) have consolidated, which allows us to study translation in very varied ways. He concludes that from the linguistic perspective, translation means equivalence, whereas in the cultural and social/psychological paradigms, translation is more open to subjectivity and mutual understanding (2013: 114). Colina has a similar view, given that she explains that in spite of the traditional distinction between translation and interpretation regarding whether the message is written or not, "Translation with a capital 'T' can be used to refer to both translation and interpreting as forms of mediation" (2015: 3-4). It is this view on translation that I will endorse in this article, taking translation as the metaphorical and factual means of human comprehension. Language itself is an essential part of one's identity, cultural standpoint, and relationship with others. In that sense, translation brings people together, allows communication and enhances human connection.

Emmanuel Levinas's ethical encounter with alterity is also based on human connection, that is, how the self overcomes prejudices against the unknown and is able to have an ethical approach with the other. Critics like Judith Butler have seen in this ethical connection a linguistic correspondence. In fact, in the ethical exchange with alterity, there are many elements that may complicate or facilitate the encounter, and Paul Ricoeur's notion of linguistic hospitality demonstrates that language is one of them. This is why in this article, my first aim is to explore whether the ethical encounter with alterity can be understood as an act of linguistic translation.

Once I explore that possibility, my second aim is to examine whether those ethical encounters have changed in contemporary culture. As Zygmunt Bauman illustrates in most of his oeuvre, and in his last writings in particular, today's western societies are strongly marked by constant change, individualism, capitalism and other forces that have radically changed the way we live and how we interact with others. In that scenario, it is important to find new forms to become ethically engaged with other members of society, to rethink how we communicate, and how and why we approach others. With that

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purpose, I will rely on the aforementioned authors, as well as on Bauman's notion of "cross-cultural translation" (1999: xlviii), which seems essential in the globalised and multicultural societies we are living in nowadays.

Contemporary works of British fiction portray more and more often stories that highlight the necessity to become ethically engaged with those around us. Thus, literature is the perfect field to approach translation under this ethical light. Therefore, my last aim in this paper is to analyse the ethical encounter among the characters of Deborah Levy's *Hot milk* (2016). This novel presents a protagonist who struggles to come to terms with her family, her own sense of self, and her place in society. In her strive, she has significant encounters with others that make her reflect on how culture, human connection, and language in particular are fundamental elements to survive in contemporary societies. My contention is that translation is a key tool in the ethical arena. Reading, analysing and translating literature can help societies to become more ethically engaged.

## 2. Ethical translation

Many critics of Emmanuel Levinas's work have already noted that his comprehension of both language and translation is an essential part of his writing. For instance, Ziarek explains that Levinas's idea of language is primarily "an ethical burden of responsibility...is in its essence an opening towards the other" (1989: 214). This view is aligned with Edith Wyschogrod, who defines the philosopher's whole work as "an invocation, an effort at translating incommensurables" (2012: 188). To her, Levinas's "conceptual language" (2012: 188) allows us to understand the complex affective and ethical relations that exist among human beings. In her view, Levinas has:

A language that is prior to speech, one that is always already ethical ... Language is not defined as the transposition of words into referents or by the formalism of the relation of signifiers to one another but as an ethical relation, a responsibility to the other person, 'a semantics of proximity'. (2012:190 quoting Levinas's *Outside the Subject* 1993:93)

Therefore, Levinas's idea of language is undeniably ethical. This ethical force of the Levinasian language is materialised in the conceptualisation of the ethical encounter with alterity. Throughout his work, Levinas explores how the self encounters the other, the one that is different, alien to the self. It seems significant that in "The Trace of the other" Levinas makes clear that the self must take into account the other's complexity and cultural background to understand him/her, and he compares the other to a text whose context we must understand first if we want to discover its meaning (1986: 351). That is, the other is similar to words that have to be understood, written in a language that the self, at the beginning, does not fully master.

In this way, Levinas's ethical encounter can be said to be closely related to language and therefore, to our idea of translation. For the philosopher "the comprehension of the other is thus a hermeneutics and exegesis" (1986: 351), in other words, an act of interpretation, or translation. In fact, for Yebra, the recognition of the other's face by the self is "primarily a linguistic event" (2018: 40). The author bases this idea on Judith Butler's analysis of the Levinasian ethics of alterity in *Precarious life* (2006). In that work, Butler recurs several times to the idea of language to explain the Levinasian self and other ethical dynamics. To her, the ethical encounter is a *linguistic* ethical encounter:

When we recognize another, or when we *ask* for recognition for ourselves, we are not *asking* for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the *asking*, in the *petition*, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by

virtue of the *address*, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in *language* in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. (2006: 44 my italics)

Thus, all individuals and all ethical encounters cannot be separated from language. If there is no form of language, the ethical encounter is unlikely to happen, and, according to Butler, the opposite also occurs: “If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside of the conditions of address” (2006: 139). Thus, Levinasian ethics of alterity cannot be separated from the study of language, which makes the comparison between the ethical encounter and translation possible.

In that view, Levinas’s ethical encounter can be also connected to Paul Ricoeur’s definition of translation as “linguistic hospitality” (2006: 10), which he defines as “a correspondence without inadequacy” (2006:10), welcoming the other’s language into one’s own. Godin summarises Ricoeur’s linguistic hospitality as “the space of meeting and openness to the textual worlds of other languages” (2013: 157), a definition that encompasses otherness as well. Similar to Levinas, for Ricoeur, translation is closely intertwined with ethics. To him, translation “sets us not only intellectual work, theoretical or practical, but also an ethical problem” (2006: 23), a problem that resides in neither betraying the addresser, nor the addressee. According to Ricoeur, linguistic hospitality makes that possible and can serve not only in the written translation of one language to another. On the contrary, it is a model that can be applied to “other forms of hospitality” (2016: 23), such as people belonging to different religions, confessions, languages in the broad sense, that is, ethical encounters with those that are different to us. All this points at an understanding of the ethical encounter as a moment of linguistic understanding.

It is important to note that according to Levinas, the ethical encounter is never an appropriation of the other. This is also true in Translation, where “there is always the risk of domination instead of hospitality” (Godin, 2013: 159) because no two languages are perfectly interchangeable, and therefore, we must allow certain differences and avoid imposing one language over the other. In the same way, the self cannot fully transform the other into a knowledgeable subject, because the other, to remain other, must always keep his/her alterity. Instead, the ethical encounter allows us to see the other as a familiar subject, with whom the self can empathise even if s/he does not fully comprehend the other. For Shapiro, the welcoming of the other’s language that Ricoeur describes requires a mutual approach between the self and the other in the same way that “when we translate we are both host and guest: we simultaneously inhabit the other’s words in their linguistic home even as we receive the other’s words into our own” (2010: 142).

In fact, the objective of translation “is not to naturalize the words of the other, but to make them creditably accessible in their very strangeness, which in turn will sensitize us to the strangeness and limitations of our own mother tongue” (Shapiro 2010: 142). This is again aligned with Levinas’s ethical encounter, because as translation always affects two languages, in the ethical encounter, both the self and the other are positively affected by it. In this way, in an ethical model of translation, the translator is a kind of mediator, the one who enables the ethical exchange. According to Davidson, in the ethical encounter, “the translator stands at the vestibule of his or her own language and offers a word of welcome to a language that is foreign” (2012: 11).

We cannot forget that ethical encounters do not occur simply at a purely abstract linguistic level. On the contrary, they usually take place between two individuals that at the same time, are members of a bigger society. As seen above, Levinas spoke of the necessity to take into account the other’s environment to success at the ethical level (1986: 351) and hence, in the study of the ethical encounter, it is indispensable to contemplate how society has changed the way we interact with others. No author has defined this better than Zygmunt Bauman. He envisaged the idea of liquidity, which has been essential

in his last reflections. To him, fluidity is “the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era” (2000: 2). As he develops in his writings, that fluidity affects every dimension of modern life. It is the state of today’s power, time, space, identity and social bonds. The liquid modernity is the result of the unstoppable rhythm of modern life, its immediacy, superficiality and consumerism that complicates human encounters.

To Bauman, the uncertainty that characterises contemporary society results in “the wilting and waning of the art of dialogue” (2000: 109). However, Schmiedel demonstrates that, to Bauman, translation is what makes the relationship between self and other possible in this era (2017: 142). Amidst these changing times, translation is a permanent event. It is what he calls “cross-cultural translation”, which he defines as:

a continuous process which *serves* as much as *constitutes* the cohabitation of people who can afford neither occupying the same space nor mapping that common space in their own, separate ways. No act of translation leaves either of the partners intact. Both emerge from their encounter changed, different at the end of act from what they were at its beginning —and so with the translation left behind the moment it has been completed, in need of ‘another go’—and that reciprocal change is the work of translation. (1999: xlviii emphasis in original)

This shows how in our “liquid” societies where languages, nationalities and identities are intermingled in everyday situations, translation becomes an essential tool in the quest of human bonding. It is translation that allows connection, understanding and what makes possible, in short, the existence of society. In that sense, the ethical potential of translation is undeniable and it must be manifested in multiple ways. Bauman understood culture “as praxis”, therefore I believe it is relevant to observe cultural manifestations and how they represent this ethical potential of translation. In what follows, I propose to observe the portrayal of the ethical translation in a contemporary work of British fiction that clearly depicts a society very similar to the one Bauman imagined.

### 3. Ethical translation in Deborah Levy’s *Hot milk*

With the previous theoretical background, I will now focus on the perusal of Deborah Levy’s *Hot milk*. The novel was originally published in 2016 in English; it was translated into Spanish by Cecilia Ceriani and published by Anagrama as *Leche caliente* two years later. The novel portrays the complex relationship between Sofia, a twenty-five year old woman and those around her. In particular, her mother, Rose, who suffers from several unspecified illnesses that affect her capacity to walk among many other ailments. Both of them decide to leave London and look for an alternative treatment for Rose in the south of Spain, in Almería.

The novel is focalised from Sofia’s perspective, allowing the reader to see her as the protagonist, and “the self” in the story as well as in the ethical encounters she will later experience. The novel is mostly written in the first person, which gives the reader a feeling of proximity and empathy towards Sofia from the beginning, as her writing is deeply personal and visceral. At times, it seems as if one were reading a personal diary, not only because of this intimate voice, but also because of the episodic rhythm that the novel follows.

This choice of breaking up time and space in the novel seems to me essential in the context of study of this article, given that all the spatial and temporal elements that Levy designs in the novel perfectly fit Bauman’s idea of the modern society and the effects it has for its inhabitants. For him, “the result is the *fragmentation* of time into *episodes*, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self closed and self-contained. Time is no more a river, but a collection of ponds and pools” (1995: 91

emphasis in original). Levy follows this conception of time, as characters are placed in a situation completely different from the one you may find in the next chapter, unable to know what has happened in between, creating a feeling of disorientation the protagonist is also aware of: “I confess that I am often lost in the dimensions of time, that the past sometimes feels nearer than the present and I often fear the future has already happened” (Levy, 2016: 188).

The setting is also worth exploring. On the first pages of the novel, Sofia and Rose are introduced as pilgrims who have abandoned Britain eager to find a cure for Rose’s legs in Dr. Gomez’s clinic: “We had begun the long journey to find a healer...we had begun a new chapter in the history of my mother’s legs and it had taken us to the semi-desert of southern Spain” (Levy, 2016: 11). The representation of the main characters as pilgrims in the desert at the beginning of the novel also sets the scene for the difficult encounters and internal problems they will later experience and it is almost identical to the image Bauman envisages in one of his reflections on contemporary life:

the world is not hospitable to pilgrims any more. They lost their battle by winning it. They made the world into a desert, but then found out that the desert, though comfortingly featureless for those who seek to make their mark, does not hold features well. The easier it is to impress a footprint, the easier it is to efface it. A great wind will do. And deserts are windy places. (1995: 88)

The desert setting where it is hard to live and fit in is completed in the novel with half-built houses and hotels “hacked into the mountains like a murder” (Levy, 2016: 23), or what is the same, the consequences of the collapse of the European capitalism that gave way to the crisis of the 2008 and the following years, when the novel is set. The crisis is mirrored in Sofia’s whole characterisation. For example she says that her lips are cracked “like the economies of Europe. Like financial institutions everywhere” (Levy, 2016:135). She constantly worries about money too. They have mortgaged their house to pay for the expensive treatment in Almería, her father does not help them economically and she often refers to her mother as “her creditor”, to whom she pays with her assistance (Levy, 2016: 25).

The choice of those words is not accidental. Sofia is a careful user and observer of the mechanisms of language, its possibilities and limitations. Deborah Levy explains in an interview that “it is so hard to say the things we want and the things we feel, all my writing circles that idea. I want to make a space for the difficulty of language, which we all experience every single day” (Smith, 2016: para. 3). This linguistic complexity in the modern era is clearly seen in Sofia’s experience of the world, which is strongly marked by language. She constantly reflects on the meaning and sound of words, how people’s accents change, how words vary from one language to another, provoking particular feelings, as we can see in the following example:

I have always wanted to go to Trieste because it sounds like tristesse, which is a light-hearted word, even though in French it means sadness. In Spanish it is tristeza, which is heavier than French sadness, more of a groan than a whisper. (Levy, 2016: 3)

This ability to contemplate how languages operate transforms her into a kind of translator, because she is able to feel the ethical power of language and apply it in her ethical relationships. Sofia experiences language physically “the word Beloved is like a wound. It hurts. In this sense, Beloved is not so different from Beheaded” (Levy: 2016: 153). She uses her approach to language to try to build bridges with those around her, not only from the already outside position of the self, but also that of the speaker of a particular language to others who speak a language that is alien to her. The presence of different languages in the novel (English, Greek, Spanish, German, and Italian) portray the multicultural and

globalised societies of the west world in contemporary times, showing that language is an essential part of a community, and that it is key to reconstruct one's sense of cultural identity nowadays. Therefore, it is safe to say that Sofia can be seen as the personification of the Levinasian self and of Bauman's cross-cultural translator: her own sense of cultural identity is fragmented and she will have to reconstruct it through ethical encounters with others in which language will be essential.

Actually, according to Levy, "Sofia's first problem is cultural identity...she has to carry an identity she knows very little about" (Smith, 2016: para. 3). The cultural fragmentation is due to several reasons, also connected to language. Sofia and her mother are living in Spain, and none of them speaks Spanish. Rose is from Yorkshire and her attitude is of a person who clearly wants to show and protect her nationality: she constantly compares other places with her unequalled Britain and carries boxes of Yorkshire teabags wherever she goes. Sofia is from London, but she does not share her mother's sense of nationality, which might be because she has Greek roots. Her estranged father, who abandoned them when she was five, is Greek and lives now in Athens with a woman forty years younger than he and Sofia's half-sister, a baby she has never met.

Sofia has only vague memories associated to the Greek language, and they are mostly negative and even traumatic recollections from her childhood. However, her surname is Papastergiadis, so her own name carries a cultural background she does not identify with. This provokes a sense of permanent displacement, as she feels she does not fully belong anywhere, she is not part of any community. The feeling aggravates when she has personal encounters with others, particularly when she introduces herself to new people who do not have English as first language. For example when she meets Juan, who will become her lover, the encounter is told through cultural experience and language:

He looked at my surname on the form... 'You are Greek, aren't you?...I recite the usual: my father is Greek, my mother is English, I was born in Britain... And then he spoke a whole sentence to me in Greek and seemed surprised when I told him that I do not speak Greek. It is a constant embarrassment to have a surname like Papastergiadis and not speak the language of my father. 'My mother is English'. 'Yes,' he said in his perfect English. 'I have only been to Skiathos in Greece once but I managed to pick up a few phrases.' It was as if he was mildly insulting me for not being Greek enough. (Levy, 2016: 4-5)

As we can see in the quote, Greek becomes "the language of my father", which, as she later explains, carries a traumatic baggage she cannot forget: "it would take me a while for me not to think of the Greek language as the father who walked out on me" (Levy, 2016: 162). For that reason, Sofia comments that her mother decided not to speak Greek anymore at home "to punish my father" (Levy, 2016: 196). In that way, her father, as well as the Greek language, become "the other" for Sofia. At the beginning she is unable to understand the language as much as she cannot empathise with her father and her own Greek identity.

In an attempt to do so, she travels to Athens to see her father twelve years after he abandoned her. Before she arrives, Sofia, who always refers to both her mother and father by their first names, decides to attempt a first ethical approach through language, by calling him "Papa" instead of Christos: "I'm not sure I can do that but if I write it down I'll see what it looks like" she says, (Levy, 2016: 131). This clearly shows that she is fully aware of the power language has in the ethical connection with others. However, when she arrives to the house her father now has with his new wife, Alexandra, and their daughter, Sofia becomes the outsider, as there is no ethical translation in the encounter:

he said something to Alexandra in Greek, and she answered him back in Greek and I didn't understand a word...Alexandra asked me why I did not speak Greek.

My father replied on my behalf in English. “Well, Sofia does not have much of an ear for languages”. (Levy, 2016: 134)

As we know, this is not true, but Sofia is placed outside the ethical translation, any “linguistic hospitality” is denied to her, so that every attempt at communication with her father fails. By not translating his conversation and by answering on Sofia’s behalf, Christos neglects Sofia’s otherness, he steals her voice. In other words, he “appropriates the other”, annuls her, and therefore, she is unable to ethically engage with him. This feeling aggravates, because Sofia feels constantly compared to her half-sister, who will be fluent in three languages: “Yes, we have the same eyes, but she will speak three languages. Greek, Italian, English (Levy, 2016: 168), “She will learn to say ‘Papa’ from an early age and mean it” (Levy, 2016: 135), Sofia repeats to herself, also confessing to the reader that her attempt to force the possible ethical power of language has failed.

There is a successful ethical encounter nonetheless. Sofia engages in fruitful conversations with Alexandra, they approach each other ethically and are able to overcome the linguistic barrier they had at the beginning. They understand that in spite of their initial mutually negative impression about each other, they are very similar: they both come from broken families, both have a fragmented sense of cultural and personal identity, and both are trying to find their place in a society that they do not quite understand.

It is also significant the way Levy chooses for them to remain close in the distance. As a farewell before Sofia goes back to Spain, Alexandra suggests her to teach her Greek through an exchange of emails. Alexandra becomes her pen friend and in that way Sofia reconciles with her Greek origins and starts remembering all the Greek she had previously repressed: “I had worked very hard to erase a whole language, yet it would not hush itself...it had been in conversation with me every day since my father had left the family house” (Levy, 2016: 196). Keeping in contact with that other part of her family allows her to overcome the limitations of her own self and her own mother tongue. In that way she regains the agency she had previously lost, she reconstructs her sense of identity and is able to approach others in more ethical ways. This is also materialised through language when at the end, Sofia translates Alexandra’s Greek emails to Juan. To use Ricoeur’s terms, Sofia is able to welcome the other’s language into her own home.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In conclusion, as I hope to have shown with this analysis, the act of translation is open to be understood in multiple ways. If we consider translation in a broad sense, taking into account its ethical potential, translation is not that different from the ethical encounter with otherness. As we have seen, we cannot undertake a study of Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of alterity without considering the ethical power of language. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur’s take on the matter offers a reading of translation that is very close to the ethical connection.

We have also seen that contemporary societies are in need of more ethical encounters. As Zygmunt Bauman has clearly portrayed in his oeuvre, contemporary societies are strongly marked by their rapid change and its superficiality when it comes to human connection. The cultural and temporal fragmentation that characterises today’s society results in individuals with complex identities who find difficult to approach others in profound, ethical ways.

In that scenario, language rises as a fundamental tool for possible connection. Translation, understood in a holistic sense, becomes the materialisation of that ethical encounter, what allows human connection and understanding in an era where human

bonds have become less frequent. In that way, both the ethical encounter with otherness and what I have referred to in this article as ethical translation grant an approach between two *a priori* different beings.

Both translation and the ethical encounter are articulated around the common respect for the other, not trying to impose one of the parts—or one of the languages involved—over the other. Hence, the ethical encounter can be seen as an act of translation, but also, translation can be considered to have an ethical component that we can exploit to improve how we interact with those who are different in our societies.

As the analysis of Deborah Levy's *Hot milk* demonstrates, ethical problems in the era of Bauman's "liquid modernity" are clearly represented in contemporary works of fiction. We can find useful examples of how societies have changed and how their inhabitants are affected by it. Authors make readers reflect on how we regard others and interact with them through characters who struggle to find their sense of identity and belonging to a society. In other words, contemporary literature, which can be widely spread to any place thanks to translation, has the ability to stop time in the pages of a book, to create a pause in that fast "liquidity" in which we are immersed and create moments of ethical connection. Literature and its translations give us the clues to become more ethically concerned, but it is still our task to move from fiction to reality.

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