On the Language of Ancient Prophecy

Prophecy itself is a huge and sprawling topic, and not one that is easy to generalize about: an oracle in one text looks very different from an oracle in another text, and a prophecy in a literary text is not necessarily to be taken as representative of any kind of ‘real-life’ religious practice from the ancient worlds of either Greece or Rome. In my recent research I have been studying a few select instances of inspired prophetic speech from a handful of literary works in Greek and Latin. The prophets whose speech I am interested in are connected by certain common features: for a start they are characters who pop up in more than one work, and their function as part of a literary tradition is an important aspect of my research. They are mostly female prophets, and they are often situated outside the societies they technically serve or belong to. Their social status varies considerably, however. At one end we have figures like the Roman Sibyl at Cumae: one of the cornerstones of Roman mythology and ritual, and a prophet whose books were supposed to contain prophecies vital to the Roman state. At the other we have witch-like figures who were described as living in graveyards and whose illicit necromantic activities are socially threatening, or at least problematic.

Though I have deliberately chosen to study prophecies in a selection of texts covering a wide range of space and time, all the texts describe a process that makes explicit and investigates how people communicate, or try to communicate, across unusual linguistic boundaries. The questions that arise from these efforts are, it turns out, very similar to those people working in translation studies are engaged in answering. What this paper does is to contribute some evidence for the fact that ancient authors made an explicit link between the language of prophecy and the processes of translation, and it makes some suggestions as to how this means we may interpret prophetic speech in ancient texts.

In ancient genres that are based around mythic storylines, the issue of multilingualism is often elided, even where one would expect characters to need to translate between languages, or at least to remark on the need for translation. This is immediately obvious if we turn to a genre such as epic: in Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey heroes from all over the Mediterranean converse without any trouble in a melting pot oral dialect of Greek that comes from everywhere and nowhere. The Trojan Aeneas in Virgil’s Aeneid has no trouble settling in Africa and then in Italy, since everyone speaks Latin (though there are a couple of distinctive moments where the
possibility of linguistic confusion is alluded to). In the same way Greek tragic drama almost never alludes to the possibility of a character speaking in anything other than Greek.

But when it comes to prophecy, we are faced with a slightly different situation. Here all linguistic confusions are up for grabs. Prophecy describes an attempt to mediate between fate, or the language of the gods, and the language of the mortals who suffer in the face of this plan. It also represents the transferal of a message over time – and in a particularly odd mode. The message contained within a prophecy must ultimately become clear for an utterance to be described as truly ‘prophetic’, but the message must also remain ambiguous at the point of delivery so that the human protagonists in a narrative are not rendered impotent by knowing their actions in advance. We might already tentatively describe this prophetic process in terms of translation: the future happens in a source language, and the intelligible explication of the future happens in a target language. Negotiating a successful mediation between the two is what prophets and their petitioners are engaged in, but the process is defined by its necessarily partial success.

We should remember that the god most commonly involved in the process of prophecy, at least in literary texts, was Apollo – the same god who was most commonly appealed to as the source of literary inspiration. The cult title of Apollo that was frequently used in literary invocations was ‘Loxias’ – it means ‘elliptical’, ‘on a slant’, and is usually translated as the ‘crooked’ or ‘ambiguous’ one. My favorite appearance of the name in recent modern usage comes when it is adopted by the so-called editor of Iris Murdoch’s book The Black Prince – a certain P. Loxias enables the deceptions and the revelations of the ‘narrator’ of the novel. A brilliant explanation of Apollo’s role and the link with this ‘crookedness’ comes in what is, in fact, a parodic text: Lucian’s Jupiter Tragoedus. Here Momos, the divine personification of the critic, or blame-finder, speaks to Apollo in his role as patron of Pythian oracles:

Τοῦτο μὲν ὄρθως ἔλεξας, οὗ Ἀπόλλων, ἑπανόρθως τοὺς σαφῶς λέγοντας, εἶ καὶ μὴ πάνυ πολλαὶ τοῖς τιμημοῖς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ χριστοῦντες καὶ ἔς τῷ μετάίχμιον ἁσφαλῶς ἀπορρίπτων τὰ πολλὰ, ὡς τοὺς ἀκούοντας ἄλλου δείσαι Πυθίου πρὸς τὴν ἐξήγησιν αὐτῶν.

Lucian Jupiter Tragoedus 28

You spoke rightly, Apollo, when you praised those who speak clearly, even if you don’t exactly do the same in your prophecies, being ambiguous and riddling and tossing virtually everything firmly into no-man’s-land so that those listening to you need another oracle to explain the first.
In this wonderful mockery of Apollo, Momos describes very specifically what it is that Apollo does – he who is ‘lokos’ (ambiguous). Apollo’s oracles and their riddling nature place prophetic language in a space suspended in the middle of two armies, quite literally: ‘to metaichmion’. The meaning of an oracular response is in limbo: it invites not immediate understanding but a chain of further interpretation. This identification of the no-man’s-land inhabited by prophecies is fundamental to our reading of all sorts of prophecies inspired by Apollo.

There is another very curious moment where Apollo’s role in prophecy is given a knowing twist. The North African writer, Apuleius, who was multilingual himself, wrote in the second century CE a Latin novel called the Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass. Apuleius claims in the preface to the work to be writing in the style of what were called ‘Milesian Tales’ – short and frequently rude stories that originated in Greek – and Apuleius sets his narrative in Greece. In the middle of his novel Apuleius embeds the tale of the story of Cupid and Psyche, as it is told by an old servant woman. At one point in this story Psyche’s father is compelled by Psyche’s continued single status to request a prophecy from Apollo:

*Sic infortunatissimae filiae miserrimus pater suspectatis caelestibus odiis et irae superum metuens dei Milesii vetustissimum percontatur oraculum, et a tanto numine precibus et victimis ingratae virgini petit nuptias et maritum. Sed Apollo, quamquam Graecus et Ionicus, propter Milesiae conditorem sic Latina sorte respondit...*

Apuleius Metamorphoses 4.32

So the afflicted father of the terribly unfortunate girl, suspecting some heavenly curse and fearing the gods’ anger, consulted the ancient oracle of the Milesian god, and with prayers and sacrifices asked the powerful divinity for a marriage and a husband for the unpopular young girl. But Apollo, though Greek and from Ionia, taking into account the author of a Milesian tale, replied thus with a Latin prophecy...

After this the narrator quotes 8 lines of elegiac couplets, in Latin, like the rest of the text. The fourth wall tumbles at the moment when the prophecy is delivered, and it is at this point that Apuleius draws attention to the multiple levels of storytelling and linguistic confusion and collusion that are going on in the novel. Apollo’s oracle at Greek-speaking Miletus is clearly to be identified with the legendary origin of Greek Milesian tales. Yet Apollo recognises the claims of Apuleius, the new Latin-speaking writer of Milesian tales, by translating from his native language and into metrical Latin (although we might note that it was very rare for oracles in either Greek or Latin to be delivered in elegiac couplets – this, in itself, is a deviation from the norm of Greek hexameters). Technically the effect of this translation of Apollo’s is to increase the clarity of his oracle, and indeed the oracle he gives is not notably riddling. But indeed the
unexpected clarity offered by his delivery of a Latin oracle is the exception that proves the rule. Apollo gives his oracle to Psyche’s Greek father, the tale is told by a Greek old women, whose storytelling is narrated by a Greek who later came to learn Latin and tells his story in Latin. But actually our narrator happens to be is in the form of a donkey at this point and cannot speak in any language at all. Apollo’s oracle here cuts through the many layers of storytelling and language difficulties at the very moment when most oracles use linguistic confusion to obfuscate the truth; though of course, Apollo’s oracle here is clearly violating the norms of storytelling and of prophecy within storytelling. Apuleius is a flippant, comic writer, who, like Lucian, could be counted upon to puncture the bubble of pretentious or ridiculous literariness. But as with all good comedy, he and Lucian are basing their mockery on important and enduring realities. Prophecy, and Apollo’s prophecies in particular, play with the idea of mediated communications, and those mediations can be identified with the sort of problems that are created and tackled when moving from one language to another.

Working backwards, today (in line with the subject-matter), I will now move from the parodies to some of the possible sources of these perceptive mockeries, to a case study that predates Apuleius and Lucian by a good 700 years. This example stretches back to some of the earliest Classical texts we have: to Cassandra, the prophetess who was the daughter of the Trojan king Priam. The myth of Cassandra circles around the two crucial gifts with which she was inflicted by Apollo. One gift was her ability to predict the future truthfully. The other gift, or rather, curse, was that she was never to be believed when she tried to communicate that information. These two factors create, in Cassandra, a unique model of literary prophecy at its most tragically ironic. It also invokes quite explicitly the connection between prophecy and translation. I will be looking particularly at the way Aeschylus, one of the first composers of tragedies in Athens, treated this paradox in the Agamemnon, the first play from his trilogy the Oresteia.

Cassandra is a figure who stands as a pivot on several axes, each of which emphasizes her displacement in a different way. For a start, she is displaced temporally, in the sense that her possession by Apollo pushes her both forwards and backwards through time. She is also spatially displaced: her narrative history – that is to say, her mythological biography – already takes her from Troy in Asia Minor to Mycenae in Greece, for she is captured by Agamemnon at the end of the Trojan War and taken back to his ancestral home. Then Cassandra’s literary history matches this move westwards, for her story emerges from the tales of Homer from the Ionian coast.
through classical Greek re-tellings and on to storytellers in Alexandria and Rome and beyond. In Cassandra’s efforts to communicate across temporal, geographical and literary planes that are unimaginable to her immediate audiences, she struggles with all the linguistic and cultural conflicts that the term ‘barbarian’ implies (coming as it does from imitating the unidentifiable ‘ba ba’ noise that a foreign-speaker makes).

Cassandra’s difficulties in communicating her prophecies mean that she is identified as a foreigner wherever she lives. Indeed, she does not have to speak a foreign language to be a barbarian. Cassandra had as many problems communicating when she was back in Troy as she did when she was transported to Greece. In Troy, Cassandra spoke the language of her peers when she prophesied, but she was still misunderstood. In Greece she could be misunderstood and her audiences might assume that this is because she is speaking a foreign language. But as I mentioned above, very rarely do Classical tragedies allude to the speaking of a foreign language within the text, and even more rarely do they actually quote a foreign language. On stage in Greek tragedy, everybody speaks Greek. So because of the conventions of Greek drama, Cassandra’s appearance on stage in Greece looks no different from the scenario an audience might be expected to imagine her as inhabiting in Troy. All misunderstandings must be expressed in the same language, even if they are said to be the result of speaking different languages.

The problem with this use of one single language to describe what is effectively an attempt at translation is that it is very hard to tell at what point communication breaks down in the case of Cassandra – indeed, this is a feature of her language that authors regularly play with. If her words are comprehensible to the audience of the work, but not to the work’s internal audience, then where is the fault in the lines of communication? Cassandra problematizes the transmission of information from one sphere to another by blurring the point at which information is successfully passed on. And in doing this she also problematizes the issue of authority: who gets to decide what makes sense in a prophecy? Apollo? Cassandra? Her interlocutors? The play’s audience? Or does it reach beyond any of these characters towards the lines of narrative that are fixed by the myths whose stories the tragic dramas are telling? In the case of prophetic speech, mortals are struggling to comprehend a set of meanings beyond any human powers of articulation. The future is a language that nobody within the narrative can understand but Cassandra, and only she can try to translate it for her interlocutors. But it seems that Cassandra’s own language, in turn, proves to be beyond her immediate audience’s comprehension. There is a
double confusion as Cassandra attempts to translate the incomprehensible and consequently becomes incomprehensible herself.

Another layer of confusion is added when we take into account Cassandra’s personal involvement in her attempts to translate. One of the striking features of Cassandra’s inhuman communicative difficulties lies in the terrible stresses they place on her body. Cassandra is physically bound up in her prophecies: she is not a disinterested prophet: she is vulnerable not only because she experiences the tension between knowledge and failure to communicate, but also because she is inextricably tied to the events she foresees. Her body is as important as her voice, for she lives the narrative that she cannot explain. When Cassandra describes events to come she is not just an author telling a narrative, but an author committing themselves to living a narrative. Her relationship to her own prophetic voice is highly complex. By articulating the future she cannot but ensure that it happens: she is, of course, a true prophet, divinely inspired, so her speech is highly performative and destructive. On the other hand her efforts to communicate this information are rooted in a human desire to convey this information in such a way as should lead to efforts to avoid those future events. So Cassandra struggles with the notions of intention and authority in her own right. She means what she says, not what she knows people will think she said.

Let us now look at a few moments from Aeschylus’ play. When Cassandra first comes on stage she is seated in a chariot with the victorious Agamemnon. Agamemnon is arriving home from the Trojan War to a wife who is plotting to kill both him and the foreign woman he has brought back with him. Cassandra is famously silent throughout Agamemnon’s first reunion and conversation with his wife Clytemnestra, at the end of which he tempts fate by agreeing to walk hubristically over the red carpets Clytemnestra has laid out for him, and he disappears into the house offstage. Cassandra then remains silent as Clytemnestra turns to persuade her also to descend from the chariot and to follow Agamemnon into the house. Cassandra’s silence seems to put Clytemnestra at an immediate disadvantage. Indeed Clytemnestra’s inability to persuade Cassandra seems for a while to be a strange role-reversal, since the fate of failing to persuade people was supposed to be Cassandra’s. But Clytemnestra rises to the challenge:

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\text{ἀλλ’ εἶπεν ἐστὶ μὴ χελιδόνος δίκην, αὖ
γνώτα φωνὴν βάρβαρον κεκτημένη,
ἔσω φρενων λέγουσα πείθω νιν λόγωι.}
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Aesch. Ag. 1050-2

But if she is not, like a swallow,
Possessed of an unfamiliar foreign voice,
Speaking within her understanding I should persuade her with a word.

The problem is that in the face of Cassandra’s silence it is very difficult to know where to place the burden of interpretation. Who understands what? The swallow here represents that which makes a noise but no sense to outsiders. It has the same meaning as in the original coining of the term barbaros. The implied direction of communication, even as it fails, is from the chattering outsider, the barbaros, to the native Greek speaker. So on one level Clytemnestra seems to accept that it is her responsibility to respond to Cassandra, rather than vice versa. But as Clytemnestra continues with her speech it becomes clear that she would rather reverse the implication. She proceeds to demonstrate that her interest is not in what Cassandra can say, but what she can understand. For Clytemnestra, her power over Cassandra can be asserted only by getting inside her mind, at which point communication (and presumably persuasion) could be achieved with just one swift word or speech. The failure of this, and Cassandra’s continued association with nonsense-chattering birds, is an interpretive failure on Clytemnestra’s part. Clytemnestra rightly recognizes that Cassandra finds security in barriers put up through her assimilation to this ‘foreign’ speaking character. For the moment, as long as Cassandra can sustain this association with the foreign, the animal, she can resist attempts to lure her into the house, the new Greek story, the future. Clytemnestra already senses that Cassandra’s defiant refusal to come out of her silent mind-body and her refusal to grant Clytemnestra access to that same space makes straightforward communication impossible, makes Clytemnestra’s hope for one simple ‘word’ into a requirement for many words.

A few lines later and Clytemnestra proves increasingly frustrated by Cassandra’s silence. Here she pronounces two lines that have baffled scholars:

εἰ δὲ ἄξυνήμων σὺ δὲ χείρι.

Aesch. Ag. 1060-1

But if you are uncomprehending and you don’t grasp my meaning,
Instead of speech, communicate with your foreign hand.

There is a straightforward illogicality to this: how can Cassandra know to signal with her hand, if she cannot understand the order? We may simply argue that Cassandra’s stillness is an extension of her self-conscious silence. But these two lines implicate Clytemnestra in a particular way as well. Clytemnestra earlier saw Cassandra as a speaker of a foreign language, but she now identifies even her body signals in terms of her foreignness: it is a ‘foreign hand’ she is supposed
to communicate with. This highly unusual word, *karbanos*, is generally identified as of Persian origin. It is certainly rare enough to be striking in its use here. It seems to be the case that Clytemnestra sees Cassandra’s foreign identity as not being limited to her speech. And if this is so, we may be even more justified in arguing that Clytemnestra understands that the barriers between herself and Cassandra are more profound than those involved in happening to speak different languages. She assumes that Cassandra can understand her quite well enough to signal, and that the very signal she gave, if she were to deign to give it, would represent her foreign mentality just as clearly as her use of spoken language. Theirs is a more fundamental misunderstanding. Cassandra’s stillness and silence is a rejection that forces Clytemnestra to engage with Cassandra’s foreignness, forces her to identify it explicitly, and to dance around it in her own language which begins to use foreign terms such as *karbanos* in its attempt to comprehend her. Moreover, the word forces the audience of the play to perform its own momentary translation act. Most interestingly of all, the phrase proves that on one level Clytemnestra and Cassandra prove to be communicating quite well here. When Clytemnestra invites Cassandra to respond with a sign if she does not understand, the implication of Cassandra’s stillness is that she in fact does understand. Glimmers of understanding are transmitted and acknowledged even in these most unpropitious of exchanges.

The chorus in the play is another of Cassandra’s would-be interlocutors. The chorus is far more alert than scholars often like to think. Faced with Cassandra’s silence they suggest:

ερμηνεύως ἐοικεν ἢ ξένῃ τοροῦ
dεῖσθαι. τρόπος δὲ θηρὸς ὡς νεαιρέτου.

Aesch. Ag. 1062-3

The foreigner seems to be in need of a clear interpreter; Her manner is like that of a newly-captured wild animal.

The use of the term *hermēneus* forces us to think hard about these lines. There has to be some irony in Aeschylus’ use of a word which can refer to an interpreter of foreign languages or of oracles. Cassandra’s fame as an interpreter of oracles seems to make the chorus’ suggestion that she ‘needs an interpreter’ somewhat redundant, if not absurd. And the term *toros* – ‘clear’ or ‘shrihll’ does not help: it is used particularly often to describe the high-pitched sound of barbarian voices. So the chorus seems to have deliberately chosen to invite the services of someone who looks remarkably like the stereotype of Cassandra. Cassandra needs another Cassandra. We may recall Lucian’s description of the role of Loxias, the god who throws meaning into limbo and ends up requiring one oracle to explain another. Here in the *Agamemnon* we can see again that a
chain of interpretation and translation is being established, in which it is very hard to establish
where understanding could meaningfully be established.

Cassandra does, ultimately, open her mouth, though her first noises are scarcely speech,
but rather a stuttering cry to Apollo:

\[\text{ὀτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ· ὤπολλον ὤπολλον}\]

Aesch. Ag. 1076-7

Otototoi popoi wah
Ohpollo Ohpollo

Apollo’s name is wound almost punningly into this inarticulate babble, but aside from the sound
of Apollo’s name we are clearly in the realm of linguistic no man’s land. There have been some
intriguing responses to these lines. Perhaps the best scholarly commentator on the Agamemnon
was Eduard Fraenkel, the brilliant German scholar who spent much of his academic life in Oxford
in the middle of the twentieth century. He writes this about Cassandra’s first words:

Now, after the departure of Clytemnestra, the mute and motionless figure on the
wagon suddenly stirs, and breaks, not indeed into speech or song, but into
something between a song and those wild notes of lamentation which were
familiar to the Athenians from the ritual performances of the barbarian mourning
women from the East. What we hear are not, of course, crude and formless cries
but sounds ennobled by rhythms of Hellenic music: still, they are distinct from
articulate language.\(^1\)

Fraenkel’s use of the value-laden ‘ennobled’ to describe the form imposed on Cassandra’s first
outburst is questionable. But he cuts straight to the problem in his effort to try and identify the
odd status of Cassandra’s voice here. The text she is supposed to pronounce does indeed slide
between noise and language, and Fraenkel is keen to place it exactly on the right point between
speech, song and lament, between barbarian ritual and Athenian assimilation of it, between
Eastern mourning and (Western) Hellenic music. The fact is that Cassandra’s cry is a startling
challenge to the Greek speakers around her, who have been speculating on her language use ever
since she arrived on stage. Her outburst is neither Greek nor not-Greek, but this linguistic
confusion demands attention, further exploration. It is not surprising that Fraenkel hears
Cassandra’s voice in terms of a blurring of boundaries between the world of Hellenic control and
the barbarian East.

\(^1\) Fraenkel Aeschylus: Agamemnon (Oxford 1950) 539
Another great commentator on these lines is Virginia Woolf, in her essay ‘On Not Knowing Greek’ in *The Common Reader*. In this essay Woolf candidly discusses her inexpert knowledge of Ancient Greek and describes her approach to translating Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. It becomes clear that what she acknowledges as a problematic weakness in her knowledge of Greek also brings her, she believes, an instinctive approach to the language that is peculiarly suited to Aeschylus’ play, and to the character of Cassandra in particular. Aeschylus’ language, even without the entrance of Cassandra, is undoubtedly difficult: it is obscure and metaphorical.

Of Aeschylus’ plays Woolf says:

To understand him it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us. For words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray, and only by collecting in companies convey the meaning which each one separately is too weak to express. Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean, but could not decant that meaning afresh into any other words. There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means.

What Woolf points to, here, is her sense of the impossibility of translating the ‘meaning’ behind any of Aeschylus’ language. The work resists anything like a précis, a paraphrase, a summary of its content. All that Woolf believes is possible is for each word to be taken on its own terms and for readers to feel their way towards an instinctive understanding based on bringing the individual sense of each of those words together. Yet she also adds:

No splendour or richness of metaphor could have saved the *Agamemnon* if either images or allusions of the subtest or most decorative had got between us and the naked cry ὀτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ· / ὡπολλον ὡπολλον.

In other words, there are moments at which even this inadequate form of translation is overtaken completely. The nonsensical jabbering of Cassandra that is at its barest in the cry ὀτοτοτοῖ is not Greek, nor is it any language at all: it is at a remove from language and from translatability, transparent and naked. It is not exactly meaningless, but it is impossible to convey that meaning through any language, not even the language in which it is ostensibly written. Woolf’s reading of

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Cassandra’s speech anticipates Lecercle’s discussion of nonsense poetry in *The Violence of Language*: it is the search to find some sense among these crazy words that is what counts.\(^5\)

Woolf’s discussion of the role of translation in accessing Aeschylus’ meaning clearly resonates with Aeschylus’ own presentation of translation as it relates to Cassandra’s efforts to communicate her prophetic knowledge. What is even more striking, however, is the fact that Woolf’s writings on Cassandra also evoke something of Walter Benjamin’s writing on the role of translation. In ‘The Task of the Translator,’ written at almost exactly the same time as Woolf was writing, Benjamin argues that the translator’s unique goal and ability, is to access a pure language that exists beyond the reach of any single language. This occurs through several features of translation. I would like to draw attention to what I see as some parallels in Benjamin’s thinking on translation and aspects of the prophetic process that I have discussed today. Here is a vital passage from the work:

In the individual, unsupplemented languages, meaning is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux – until it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all the various modes of intention. Until then, it remains hidden in the languages. If, however, these languages continue to grow in this manner until the end of their time, it is translation which catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language. Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?

This, to be sure, is to admit that all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt. Indirectly, however, the growth of religions ripens the hidden seed into a higher development of language. Although translation, unlike art, cannot claim permanence for its products, its goal is undeniably a final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguistic creation. In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety. Yet, in a singularly impressive manner, at least it points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages. The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation.\(^6\)


For Benjamin, the aspects of a text that may reach into that realm of ‘pure language’ are in fact what he describes as ‘the element that does not lend itself to translation’. This resounds with Woolf’s description of Cassandra’s ‘naked cry’: the moment in the text in which Woolf identifies a direct communication that rises above translation, above language itself. Another aspect of translation that Benjamin identifies is the fact that it is just a compromise measure based on the fact that conclusively reaching some ‘pure language’ is never realistically attainable: ‘...all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt.’ Lucian described the oracle that needs a further oracle to explain its riddles: it describes an endless process in which there is no final moment of understanding – simply an ongoing relationship between the language of destiny and the different versions of mortal attempts to describe this in their language. And this ongoing struggle to make sense of a distant truth is also connected to a belief that translation is linked to a distinctive relationship with temporality. This was made beautifully clear by Emmanuelle Ertel in her talk in this series on Derrida and Benjamin, where she pointed out the need for translations to be renewed over time: in Benjamin’s words, ‘it is translation which catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language. Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?’ Prophecy is about trying to make sense of a vision of the future as time passes, and about acknowledging the (temporal and metaphysical) distance between prophetic narrative and the ‘real’ events it describes. Even after the delivery of a prophecy, interpreters are engaged in trying to fit the words to new contexts and in repeatedly guessing when the prophecy should be considered as having been fulfilled.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Benjamin encourages translation in which the practice is to abandon the effort to transmit ‘meaning’ or ‘sense’, in favour of a literal approach. One of the distinctive features not only of Cassandra’s prophecies but also of other prophets and peddlers of oracles is that their words often turn out to have been too literal: their interpreters could not see the woods for the trees. Cassandra’s perfectly accurate representations of the future turn out to provide no useful meaning for her interlocutors; she is too literally faithful to the narrative authority that guarantees events will turn out the way she describes them. And yet Cassandra’s prophecies only work because of this literal speech. If Cassandra’s meaning were to be fully comprehended, then of course her interlocutors might be expected to act in such a way
that her terrible predictions could be avoided. If this happened, her prophecies would, of course, not be true prophecies. Her performative function is tied to her inability to convince her audience. But Cassandra and her audience are tied into a process in which the vain effort to communicate is what counts. Cassandra is devoted to Apollo’s narrative authority, and her audience is devoted to trying to access this through her. It is not content or meaning that ultimately matters, but the process of battling between languages in Apollo’s no-man’s-land.

In all these different readings of prophecy and translation, critics seem to be indicating that both processes offer something beyond normal methods of communicating. They suggest that there is a bonus meaning that is to be found in what, by any other standards, would be seen as fairly ineffective communications. I’d like to end with a brief speculation on what this bonus might be. Just before Cassandra walks offstage to her grisly death, she makes, in deep frustration, what may be the most ironic and moving cry in the whole play:

καὶ μὴν ἄγαν γ’ Ἐλλην’ ἐπίσταμαι φάτιν

Aesch. Ag. 1254

For indeed I understand the Greek language only too well.

The chorus had earlier wondered if Cassandra needed an interpreter, but here we learn that Cassandra’s problem is not that she does not understand enough; rather, she understands too much. What does she mean by this? On the one hand this represents the searing clarity of her internal understanding that leaves no room for comfortable doubt. On the other it also represents an excess, a spilling over of knowledge beyond the conventional borders of understanding. The comprehension that Cassandra is burdened with cannot be shared with anyone else, for Cassandra cannot properly communicate the content of her knowledge. But she can engage in a process in which she and her less gifted readers briefly shift beyond the normal constraints of language and narrative. Prophecy offers a moment when the interpretative gears are briefly disengaged, from within the text. When Cassandra offers a vision of the future, no matter how well or badly it is understood, a moment of wild and timeless speculation is allowed that is free from the normal demands of coherence and contextual logic that are necessary to constructing or reading a ‘real’ narrative. These creative moments of prophetic translation move beyond the demands of normal interpretation for, as Woolf said of Aeschylus: ‘the meaning is just on the far side of language.’