February 8 2013: On Translation I – Schleiermacher

From Megan Robb

Our text for our first meeting was Friedrich Schleiermacher’s “On the Different Methods of Translating” (1813), translated by Susan Bernofsky. In our discussion we first depended very strongly on the texts themselves, looking at how Schleiermacher approached the project of translating, using two of the three categories that John Dryden identified: Metaphrase, and Paraphrase. Intriguingly, Schleiermacher left out Dryden’s third category, that of imitation. We embarked on a discussion of the particularly German approach to translating, which focuses on hermeneutics, characterized by concerns of accuracy and specificity; this stands in contrast to, for instance, the French method of translating which focuses on eliding cultural specificities in the service of elegance. We reached a consensus that Schleiermacher’s article talks more about what practices should not be an aspect of translation, rather than building an active theory of translation. We then used the text as a jumping-off point to talk about specific challenges in the art of translating, including the difficulty of translating cultural ideals along with language. Theorists who surfaced in the conversation included Eugene Nida, who distinguished between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence (or the effect that the text has on its audience). Dynamic equivalence takes into account many considerations outside of the text itself, including modes of transmission. This insight led us to question the reader and interpreter’s ability to capture the author’s original intention, particularly if the reader is coming to the text as a “foreigner.” While Schleiermacher’s approach emphasizes the importance of approaching the author, we found ourselves repeatedly returning to the question of how and why that struggle exists. How do we capture the ideal of purity in the target language, while acknowledging the hybridity of texts and traditions? Some of us agreed that at a practical level, including words or phrases from the original language in the translation nods to this struggle for balance between loyalty to original text and the task of the translator. Even better, some attested, are parallel texts which set translation and original side by side. In this first meeting, we began the process of exposing the bones of the translation and interpretation process, agreeing that it is crucial to examine the process and acknowledge the responsibility that both translator and interpreters of those translations hold.