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Existentialism – or Kierkegaard Lost in Translation

I

Let me begin with a few lines from Claus Bjørn's book *1848*: "Det er velkendt, at det næsten er en umulig opgave at oversætte Grundtvig til tysk, uden at der meget let anslås meget ubehagelige toner – de eksisterer blot ikke for os, når vi synger hans 'Langt høiere Bjerge' eller 'Velkommen igen, Guds Engle smaa.'"¹ This case of a towering nineteenth-century Danish Romantic getting lost in German translation can well be read as a cautionary tale about the heavy toll leveled whenever writing in one language crosses the border to another. But there are other ways of getting lost in translation, and Søren Kierkegaard's (SK's) case typifies one of them. When this other pivotal man of nineteenth-century Danish letters, who appeared in German too (not to mention in a host of other languages), was lost in translation, he was not primarily lost in this or that target language. Rather, I argue, his "untranslatability" was a translatability – signifying *translation within his own language and idiom* and causing his work to be lost into an Other named existentialism.

To drive this point home, I turn for starters to Paul de Man. His last Messenger lecture at Cornell in March of 1983, printed as "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'" in de Man's posthumous *The Resistance to Theory*, concluded with a discussion between Meyer Abrams and the lecturer about the tenor of the latter's presentation. The following exchange will suffice to sketch their respective positions:

Abrams: So we end up with a scene in which language, which you say is something opposed to the human and opposed to meaning, is the most human of things, and makes its meanings, to which it cannot be opposed ... Now it seems to me that in doing so you are making a move that falls into the trap of some of the people you oppose, in which somehow meaning exists independently of language as it tries to make meaning. Is there a paradox there? ... at any rate, all I want to do is to present the humanistic perspective, as an alternative, an optional alternative, which appeals to me.

De Man: Well, it appeals to me also, greatly ... There is no question that language means, ...[but] Benjamin is not talking of the ordinary use of language. [...] He's speaking of the very peculiar, unusual, and uncommon element in language called translation: something that language allows one to do, which is translation within language. Translation, which presupposes meaning, and which presupposes a circulation of meaning ... There is a difficulty inherent in translation. ... Let's transpose it within the historical scheme which you bring up: the notion of the definition of man by his language. Man is the animal that speaks, the speaking animal. That is the historical topos which comes back ... and that is to some extent Benjamin's concern here—'at the beginning was the word.' Language is not human, it is God-given: it is the logos, as that which God gives to man. Not specifically to man, but God gives, as such. ... Philosophy originates in this difficulty about the nature of language ... which is a difficulty about the definition of the human ...²

Moreover, on Benjamin's view, "the poet has some relationship to meaning, to a statement that is not purely within the realm of language," whereas "translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning."³ Altogether, de Man's Benjamin treats us to a series of paradoxes: a notion of translation within language which is in defiance of meaning but whose external Other trades in meaning; a God-given logos devoid of human development, which has both human changes and growth as its historical implications; translations, which instead of resembling the original, offer the perspectives from which to understand the original;⁴ translations that are transfers and mean metaphors, yet are not metaphors of the original, or metaphors at all;⁵ and translational activities like critical philosophy, literary theory, history, which are all dissimilar to that from which they are derived. "They disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated," as de Man puts it.⁶ Hence, translation is the site of articulation *and* disarticulation of meaning; of my expatriation from my own language as I enter the process of engaging it;⁷ and of philosophy as humanistic existence comes to the fore as an irresolvable and inescapable problem.

Key to the paradoxical complex is "growth," as Derrida explains in *his* take on Benjamin: "says Benjamin, the translator must neither reproduce, represent, nor copy the original, not even, essentially, care about *communicating* the meaning of the original. Translation has nothing to do with reception or communication or information. ... the translator must assure the survival, *which is to say the growth*, of the original. Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and grow."⁸ An

original that grows in the hands of its translator may be called *found* in translation. Conversely, an original *lost* in translation is one whose growth is stunted in the process, as it happens to SK in the hands of leading existentialists. Mary Rose, in her preface to a SK volume by David Swenson, SK's first American scholarly critic and translator, seizes upon "the willingness to follow Sartre in defining existentialism in terms of rejection of essentialism, even though SK is at pains to elucidate the existential import of Christian essentialism – that is, of the import in Christian spirituality of the 'universally human,' as Swenson puts it. In fact, the irreducible differences between atheistic existentialism and that of SK are particularly clear in respect to their views on essentialism."⁹ While the merit of Rose's critique may be debatable, her point is clear: existentialism à la Sartre obtains its distinction by aborting essentialism, allegedly an essential feature of SK's work; SK is lost in Sartre's translation. I turn now to a probing of the nature and implications of this transaction.

II

Steven Earnshaw, in his recent *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, addresses the Sartrean departure from SK in slightly different terms: "... it can certainly be argued, especially in the Sartrean line of thought, that 'to exist' is 'to act,' is to be engaged in a manner with the world and others and is therefore not like SK's view of existence as a deepening inwardness which has the result of removing the individual from the public realm."¹⁰ Inwardness is here in concert with the essential in SK, which Sartrean existentialists transmute into outward action in the public and worldly arena. Earnshaw later compares *Fear and Trembling's* "leap of faith" toward God with atheist existentialism's self-overcoming superman or Nietzschean overman.¹¹ Both venues privilege subjective truth and indirect communication – in Sartre's case: "mutual guarantees of freedom" between writer and reader¹² – over "a wholly logical discourse" with all its existence-adverse abstraction,¹³ and both are said to foreclose foreclosure of existential possibilities. Yet what they rather share are "the difficulties of 'translation' ... foregrounded ... in *Fear and Trembling*."¹⁴ Earnshaw concludes his chapter on SK thus: "The incompatibility of an idea which claims truth as an incommunicable subjectivity, but which must be expressed through language and the pre-existing categories that language embodies, is one that can be borne in mind when looking at those thinkers after SK."¹⁵ Those thinkers being the existentialists.

As for this translational bridge between the older thinker and his successors, Earnshaw's formulations may remind us of Barbara

Johnson's claim that "it is quite often by finding the pressure points previously lost in translation that Derrida rearticulates philosophy with itself."¹⁶ In other words:

Translation is a bridge that creates out of itself the two fields of battle it separates ... The bridge of translation, which paradoxically releases within each text the subversive forces of its own foreignness, thus reinscribes those forces in the tensile strength of a new neighborhood of otherness. Yet all travelers on that bridge are answering a summons that repulses them at every step ... 'You who are crossing over this bridge, don't get to the other side.'¹⁷

For it's on the other side you'll, once again, get lost in translation! We might also, with Charles Guignon, in his *On Being Authentic* (2004), call it trapped in inauthenticity: "When we try to unpack the language of existentialism, it begins to sound more like an exercise in futility than a path to achieving a meaningful and fulfilling life."¹⁸

In fact, it is SK lost in translation. In *Either/Or, Part II*, Judge William puts it well:

By now you have easily seen that in this life the ethical individual goes through the stages we previously set forth as separate stages. He is going to develop in his life the personal, the civic, the religious virtues, and his life advances through *his continually translating himself* from one stage to another. As soon as a person thinks that one of these stages is adequate and that he dares to concentrate on it one-sidedly, he has not chosen himself ethically but has failed to see the significance of either isolation or continuity and above all has not grasped that the truth lies in the identity of these two.¹⁹

What de Man on behalf of Benjamin deemed the necessity of "translation within language", SK's Judge in no uncertain terms translates into the very conditions of possibility for existential authenticity. The problem with the Judge's pronouncement, as intimated by Thomas Flynn, is that its vision of a "continual translation" between the stages – or spheres – of existence "implies either a Hegelian 'synthesis' ... or an 'overlap' ... In either case, the guiding theme of individuating 'choice' is seriously compromised".²⁰ As an antidote for the translational dexterity envisioned by the Judge, we are well advised to heed Barbara Johnson's admonition that we look for "the pressure points previously lost in translation" and remember the importance of crossing the bridge of translation while avoiding getting to the other side! And so, when Flynn claims that "SK's 'truth' as subjectivity is the forerunner to what Sartre will call 'commitment' (*l'engagement*) in the next century,"²¹

the connectivity implied by “forerunner” is not a smooth transition/translation. Even if existential selfhood in SK is understood socially, its essentialist imprint – “The Judge is articulating the general existentialist thesis that choice is self-constituting and liberating,” as Flynn puts it²² – is lost in Sartre’s translation into “l’engagement.” And even if we were to grant, in Flynn’s words, that “Sartre also echoes SK’s relation of choice to self-constitution when he adds that, for human reality, to be is to choose oneself,”²³ it’s beyond discussion that once “SK’s relation” has made the leap beyond ethical bounds, its echo is as lost in Sartre’s translation as the “commitment” of this French existentialist is confined to the ethical sphere.

A different restriction applies to SK’s translation into Heidegger’s idiom. Patricia Huntington writes about Heidegger’s reading of SK that

by ontologizing SK’s existential categories, Heidegger depletes the latter’s thought of its ethical import, central to the focus on personal edification. For this reason, I believe *Being and Time* constitutes not a development and extension of SK’s thought but rather a significant *transmutation*. . . . Heidegger’s embroilment in decisionism emerges from collapsing SK’s sharp distinction between ethical inwardness (sincerity of motives) and morality (justification of a course of action).²⁴

Later she adds that “. . . [Heidegger] abandons rather than in-corporates the Kierkegaardian quest for personal edification. Without the stages of interior growth in critical awareness, Heideggerian authenticity becomes limited to an abstract, *cognitive* achievement as opposed to *attitudinal* transformation,”²⁵ to which in turn she yokes an explanatory note: “Heidegger’s method of *Wiederholung* splits away from SK’s concept of repetition, since the latter delivers me to the life of inwardness.”²⁶

While Heidegger indeed “splits away” from the cardinal Kierkegaardian category of “repetition,” it is especially worth noting how the absence of “growth,” ever since we extracted the term from de Man’s disquisition on Benjamin, has *repeated* itself as a sure indication of the manner in which existentialist thinking emerges as the bird Phoenix from the thinking of SK lost in translation. This connection between lost and found in translation even extends beyond existentialist readings of SK. My final comments are devoted to this extension.

III

In an essay about “Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology,” Habermas picks up where Heidegger left off. His English translators comment:

To the extent that Heidegger can be said to translate SK's self-choice into a beyond of the rhetoric of fate and deliverance, Habermas considers Heidegger's discourse and any other 'postmodern' radicalization of this move not as philosophical but as quasi-theological. Against this rhetoric, Habermas translates radical self-choice, to be distinguished from Christian contents of choosing, into a performative-existential transcendence that speakers effect ontically towards one another about something on this side of the world.²⁷

An even closer reading of this transformation of the Kierkegaardian impulse is given by Martin Matušík, who writes:

In his recent returns to SK, Habermas makes two innovative moves: First, he harnesses the category of the individual into what he calls post-metaphysical thinking. Habermas depicts existential positionality under the rubric of the performative claim to identity. In the latter term, he finds an opening for translating the Kierkegaardian verticality or inwardness into the horizontal or the publicly available linguistic forum of communication. Second, he adopts a Kierkegaardian self-reflexive attitude in order to evaluate those traditions that have become morally and socio-politically problematic. Habermas's originality lies in translating the existential either/or, typical for radical self choice, into public debates on our choices of the vital elements in our inherited traditions. But in both ways of translating the individual back into the universal, I argue, Habermas nonetheless collapses a Kierkegaardian transgressive attitude into local narratives about the good life: he invents a hybrid concept of existential-communitarian discourse and subsumes it under the normative questions of the moral right. ... [altogether] a category mistake. ... from the formal pragmatic structure of communicative ethics Habermas proceeds to translate the Kierkegaardian self-reflexive attitude toward tradition into deliberative democracy.²⁸

Not only do the final words in this quote make no bones about the formative role of SK lost in translation, they also identify the site of "lost and found" involved and spell out that what is found in SK's stead are properties of democratic culture. This brings us to the role of translation in inter-cultural understanding more broadly. Referring to Clifford Geertz and *his* notion of alterity as a potential source of growth, Mary Louise Pratt in an essay about "The Traffic in Meaning: Translation, Contagion, Infiltration" muses how helpful it is "to treat as translation those processes that involve the purposeful creation of nonequivalence." It's a matter of reconversion with which "the translation again produces something nonequivalent to the original, yet in some sense it reproduces the original. ... The idea of cultural translation bears the unresolvable contradiction that in naming itself it preserves the distances it works

to overcome. ... Translation is a deep but incomplete metaphor for the traffic in meaning.”²⁹

The parallel between SK lost in translation and the processes defining cultural translation is strikingly evident. An impulse that is lost is retrieved – as a distance – in the same gesture; a metaphor of translation prevails, though barely as a metaphor of the original, or as a metaphor at all; and a bridge of translation is being crossed, albeit merely halfway.

IV

How far is it possible to stretch this parallel between existentialist translations of SK's (social) inwardness and cultural communications and translations generally? Between originals lost and found in translation? Instead of an answer, I'll try to digest the few morsels of food for thought I dished up in my conference abstract.

Sartre describes in his 1966 *Kierkegaard vivant* essay how SK's words become the silent basis for translation – *our* translation of *his* words. Our knowledge is limited by this silence, and so SK gets *lost in translation*. As "subjektivitetens ridder" his loss is apparent to Sartre.³⁰ An existential historian, SK resists transformation from living subject into historical object. Translation's speaking silence underscores his resistance.

In an essay about Existence and Ethics in SK, Lévinas even suggests that silence speaks an unspeakable secret – about the subject's intimate, ever-searching dialogue with God and about the limit that separates faith from philosophy.³¹ In Blanchot's words about SK (in *Faux pas* [1943]): "der er kun kommunikation, hvis det, som er sagt, fremstår som tegn på det, som må skjules."³² Authenticity is duplicitous; truth-telling involves concealment.³³ In fact, as Lévinas points out, God's face is barely traceable in the human face; more an absence than a presence.³⁴ If existentialism sur-faces as SK lost in translation, so humanism appears to be an image of God lost in translation (into the human). Hence, SK the humanist is lost in translation *twofold*.

On the last point, Thomas Flynn, whom I cited earlier, conjectures a reversal of fortunes as part of the translational game between SK and the existentialists, whereby Sartrean existentialism may end up recast as nineteenth-century modernism and humanism over against SK as a twenty-first-century postmodernist and anti-humanist.³⁵ Will the vertical genesis of the human who "gains – if he actually does gain – *his soul from God, away from the world, through himself*" (*Four Upbuilding Discourses*, 1843)³⁶ be so lost in translation to horizontality, if not to decenteredness, that unlike the humanist position, "language 'speaks'

us rather than the converse”³⁷ Or will SK lost and existentialism found in translation come out even – and together hit both ways, as Flynn surmises: meeting “the postmodern requirement of being unmetaphysical,” while remaining “modernist’ in [their] commitment to a humanism but to one of [their] own fashioning”³⁸ I personally have my doubts.

Notes

¹ Claus Bjørn, *1848. Borgerkrig og revolution*, København: Gyldendal 1998, s 258.

² Paul de Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” in his *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986, s 99–101.

³ de Man 1986, s 81–82.

⁴ de Man 1986, s 83.

⁵ de Man 1986, s 83.

⁶ de Man 1986, s 84.

⁷ de Man 1986, s 84.

⁸ Jacques Derrida et al., *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation. Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, Eng. edition ed. by Christie McDonald (1985), Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press 1988, s 122.

⁹ Mary Carmen Rose, “Foreword to Rose Edition,” in David F. Swenson, *Something About Kierkegaard*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, s xviii.

¹⁰ Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York: MJF Books 2006, s 12.

¹¹ Earnshaw 2006, s 17.

¹² Earnshaw 2006, s 27.

¹³ Earnshaw 2006, s 26, 44.

¹⁴ Earnshaw 2006, s 44.

¹⁵ Earnshaw 2006, s 45.

¹⁶ Barbara Johnson, “Taking Fidelity Philosophically,” in Joseph F. Graham (ed.), *Difference in Translation*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press 1985, s 145.

¹⁷ Johnson 1985, s 148.

¹⁸ Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, London & New York: Routledge 2004, s 25.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, Part II*, Eng.tr. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987 (Kierkegaard’s Writings, IV), s 262 (emphasis added).

- ²⁰ Thomas Flynn, *Existentialism* (2006), New York & London: Sterling 2009, s 46 f.
- ²¹ Flynn 2009, s 16.
- ²² Flynn 2009, s 40.
- ²³ Flynn 2009, s 40.
- ²⁴ Patricia J. Huntington, "Heidegger's Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited: From Ontological Abstraction to Ethical Concretion," in Martin J. Matustik & Merold Westphal (eds.), *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, s 44 (emphasis added).
- ²⁵ Huntington 1995, s 47.
- ²⁶ Huntington 1995, s 64.
- ²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology," Eng. tr. M.J. Matustik & P. Huntington, in Martin J. Matuščík & Merold Westphal (eds.), *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, s 198 (translators' note).
- ²⁸ Martin J. Matuščík, "Kierkegaard's Radical Existential Praxis, or Why the Individual Defies Liberal, Communitarian, and Postmodern Categories," in Martin J. Matustik & Merold Westphal (eds.), *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, s 245–246.
- ²⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, "The Traffic in Meaning: Translation, Contagion, Infiltration," *Profession* 2002, s 33–35.
- ³⁰ See Jean Paul Sartre, "Det enkelte 'almene'" (1966), in Finn Frandsen & Ole Morsing (eds.), *Denne slyngelagtige eftertid, Bind I*, Århus: Slagmarks Skyttegravsserie 1995, s 31–33 et passim (33–64).
- ³¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, "Kierkegaard: Eksistens og etik" (1963; 1976), in Finn Frandsen & Ole Morsing (eds.), *Denne slyngelagtige eftertid, Bind I*, Århus: Slagmarks Skyttegravsserie 1995, s 87–97.
- ³² Maurice Blanchot, "Kierkegaards 'Dagbog'" (1943), in Finn Frandsen & Ole Morsing (eds.), *Denne slyngelagtige eftertid, Bind I*, Århus: Slagmarks Skyttegravsserie 1995, s 26.
- ³³ Blanchot 1995, s 26–27.
- ³⁴ Bernhard Waldenfels, "Lévinas and the face of the other," in Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lévinas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, s 67.
- ³⁵ Flynn 2009, s 145.
- ³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, Eng. tr. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992 (Kierkegaard's Writings, V), s 167.
- ³⁷ Flynn 2009, s 137.
- ³⁸ Flynn 2009, s 155.