

THE ENOWNING OF TRANSLATION

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the meaning of translation (*Über-setzung*) in Heidegger's late work. The German prefix *über-* suggests a „jump” from one field of experience to another, thus implying a duality of the „own” and the „other”. This seminal duality will be examined by studying the etymology of the English word „translation”, which will bring to the fore the key role played by the verb „to bear”, understood as an essential enabling of the „other” to stand on its own in the horizon of the „own”. The paper will then focus on the significance of „enabling” as the very sense of translation and will discuss the rendering of the central Heideggerian term *Ereignis* as „enowning” by the American translators P. Emad & K. Maly in 1999.

Keywords: Heidegger, translation, transposition, *transfero*, to bear, to enable, ownness, otherness, *Ereignis*, enowning

In the following I would like to focus on the central sense of translation in Martin Heidegger's later works. I will start with one of his last lectures and make some comments on a few lines regarding the sense of translation. I will then try to translate on my own the English word “translation” and show how its etymology yields some surprising results. The sense of translation will reveal itself as an essential act of one's own, namely to enable the other to stand on its own. I will then bring into account the term *Ereignis*, which Heidegger regards as the central word of his later work and see how it summarizes the very essence of translation. Finally, I will make some short comments on the excellent English translation of *Ereignis* as “enowning” by Parvis Emad & Kenneth Maly in their translation of the seminal work of Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Contributions to Philosophy)*, translated in 1999).

Let us now deal with the first aspect, namely: what does translation (*Übersetzung*) mean for the later Heidegger? Eleven years ago I had the chance to translate into Romanian one of Heidegger's last Freiburg lectures, called *Parmenides*, dating from 1943.¹ At the beginning of

¹ Heidegger, M.: *Parmenides*, GA 54. Frankfurt a.M., V. Klostermann, 1992.

this lecture dedicated to Pre-Socratic philosophy, Heidegger speaks about the difficulty of translating the Greek word *aletheia* simply as “truth”. Instead, his proposal sounds totally different from the tradition, namely: “unconcealment”, *Unverborgenheit*. The criterion by which we know that this second translation is a “better” one is the fact that the word “unconcealment” attempts at *transposing* us (*uns übersetzt*) into the originary Greek field of experiencing the *aletheia*.² To translate therefore means to transpose the reader into another field or zone of experience (*Erfahrungsbereich*). Instead of speaking of a better “understanding” of a Greek word by way of translation and thus employing philosophical termini pertaining to the activity of the intellect and of the mind, Heidegger chooses a more simple and *spatial* way of describing the translational act. Germans call “translation” *Übersetzung*, which means literally “trans-posing”, moving from one point to another. The German prefix *über-* (*trans-*) suggests the crossing over to..., the journey between at least *two* spaces or fields. Thus, Heidegger works with a very simple and intuitive duality between my *own* field and another, more *strange* field of experience.

He then adds a most important idea: translating does not take place, at first, between two languages, i.e. between my own native language and a foreign one. The act of translating is already at work in any dialogue between two speakers of the same language – and even in any dialogue one has with himself.³ Being an introduction to a lecture, the text doesn’t elaborate very much on this special phenomenon of translation as a constant movement. But according to the Heidegger from *Being and Time* (especially §§ 31-32), we know that this essential movement happens because man understands by way of *projecting* himself to a certain field or horizon. And this project takes as a base for its jump an *already* existing horizon into which man is “thrown” by his facticity (e.g. place of birth, parents, native language, etc.) We have here an essential *duality* of man’s being.⁴ The *Parmenides*-lecture assumes tacitly these facts when Heidegger argues that we only understand when the things that are to be understood “*trans-pose* themselves to another truth, clarity or even questionability”⁵. Thus, the duality of the “own” and the “other” field or horizon is constituent of every act of thinking, understanding or learning, be it expressed

² Ibid., p. 16.

³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴ In his course from the summer semester 1923, *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)*, GA 63, Heidegger calls this duality „hermeneutics of facticity”, thus employing a double genitive (i.e. a subjective and an objective one) in order to render the circular movement contained in the human being: that of projecting and of being-thrown.

⁵ Heidegger, M.: *Parmenides*, p. 18.

by words or done in silence. Man is always on the way to the “other” and only through such a journey does man have access to that what he or she calls “self”, or “own”. The access to my “own” is thus primarily a question of translation.

Heidegger then speaks about great poets and thinkers, who have the exceptional capacity of “trans-posing us to a different riverside”.⁶ What this foreign riverside means, Heidegger tells us by reiterating the word “field” or “zone” (*Bereich*) he had already mentioned. It is “the field of a transformed truth” (*Bereich einer gewandelten Wahrheit*). Speaking formally, this new riverside is the field into which, by way of reading, learning or understanding the words of great poets or thinkers, man transposes himself. Through this journey, man stabilizes *himself* anew, after becoming slightly *different* of the man he used to be. Poets and thinkers are masters of the interplay between the “own” and the “other”.

Before leaving this lecture from 1943, let me notice a last but most important aspect. At a certain point, Heidegger uses two different ways of writing the same German word for “translation”, namely *Übersetzen*. This happens when he argues that the mere fact of *establishing* the equivalents of foreign words in my own language by way of the “so-called translation” (“das sogenannte *Übersetzen*”) is only possible when our essence has undergone a previous *trans*-lation or *trans*-position (“*Übersetzen*”) to “the field of a transformed truth”. What does Heidegger mean by this different accentuation of the composing parts of the word *Über*-*setzen*? He privileges the prefix *über*-, *trans*-, because he wants to stress the moving and itinerant part of any translation, i.e. the journey by which the “own” and the “other” begin to emerge as two different parts which are intimately connected, whereas the need to establish a clear-cut equivalent for foreign words is in danger of suppressing the always itinerant and fertile process of understanding and learning.

Let us now examine the English word “translation”, and let us translate it ourselves to a different riverside. This means that we will have to settle down in a field of experience quite alien to the trivial way of understanding the translational act. Heidegger’s favourite way of transposing his academic audience to another riverside is to examine the etymology or history of the terms he has begun to use in an apparently innocent manner. Let us imitate Heidegger. “Translation” derives from the Latin verb *trans-fero*. We have already noticed the journeying character of the

⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

prefix *trans-*, but what does *fero* mean? Etymologically, *fero* belongs to the same Indo-European family as the Greek *phero*, the German *bringen* and the English *to bring*. To the same family belong the German *gebären*, “to give birth”, and the English *birth* and *to bear*. We could therefore translate the Latin word *fero* as *to bring* and *to bear*. But is this rendering of *fero* of any help for our effort to understand the deeper sense of translation? Let us take a closer look at those two English verbs, *to bring* and, especially, *to bear*. We all know the expression “a woman bears a child”, which means that she gives birth to a child, i.e. she bears inside of herself a child to the point where this child can subsist in the world by itself. The verb “to subsist by itself” includes also the fact of *being able to* receive food in order to survive in the world. The “itself” is here very important, because “being born” means exactly *to be able to stand on its own* as an entity capable of living, feeding, growing and even dying by itself. We can see now that the “own” and its stability needs a previous *enabling*⁷ by an “other” in order to be that “own” that it is. The “own” is brought and borne into being by the “other”, whereas the “other” constitutes itself as other only in relation to this “own” which is being borne by him. Both “own” and “other” are necessary constituents of a deep relation of enabling and being enabled.

What does this “enabling” exactly mean? To which horizon of understanding does it belong? In the end, enabling is a rather mysterious relation for mankind, insofar as we are accustomed to assign it to “nature” and to natural processes like giving birth. But what is nature? Since the Greeks, nature (*physis*) has been understood by way of dichotomies: nature and art, nature and spirit, nature and history, nature and divine grace, etc. Heidegger has shown in numerous lectures that the combination of Greek philosophy and Christian theology has brought to the fore a *productive* or *poietic* interpretation of nature: everything that is is an *ens creatum* by an *ens increatum*, i.e. God. This Greek model of being as *making and being made* (*poiesis*) perpetuates itself today and constitutes the basis of *technology* and of the impressive productivity of things. Science and scientific theory are dominated by the *causal* way of seeing nature and

⁷ I owe this term to Parvis Emad & Kenneth Maly, who use it in their explanation of the translation of the Heideggerian term *Ereignis* as “enowning”. Cf. Emad, P. & Maly, K.: *Translators’ Foreword*. In: Heidegger, M.: *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999. I will discuss further below the significance of this translation.

natural processes.⁸ The very fact that we tend to understand translation as an *establishing* act, by way of dictionaries, of equivalents of foreign words or texts is a distant consequence of the same technical and productive way of understanding human processes and nature in general.

But what if we attempt to recuperate this mysterious and enabling act of giving birth and being borne? Throughout his whole work, Heidegger is interested exactly in the recuperation of the *enabling* and in the necessary critique and deconstruction of the *making*, i.e. of the strictly causal-productive-technological way of being. It could be that mysterious processes like speaking, understanding, learning, translating, etc. belong rather to the enabling experience of life itself, like being born and giving birth, and therefore cannot be established, i.e. systematized, reproduced or re-made without losing their very essence. What is then the deeper sense of translation? Let us make use of the new “riverside” that has emerged: I mean the space of birth and bearing. True translation is not the establishing of firm and reproductive equivalents for a foreign word, proposition or text, but *the enabling of a foreign entity by letting it be born in my own element*. By this process, I constitute myself as a “field“ (*Bereich*) or as an element that can let the foreign *be* foreign, i.e. give birth to it in my dimension. The “other” becomes my own “other”, it starts a life as “other” within the limits of my element. Simultaneously, the “other” alters my “own” by its presence and lets my “own” become aware of its own-ness. It is like parents becoming aware of their parenthood only by giving birth to a child. It is the pure and irreducible presence of the child that makes the parents aware of their parenthood and no other experience.

On a few occasions⁹, Heidegger notices the difference that German language makes between “being equivalent” (*das Gleiche*) and being one-and-the-same (*das Selbe*). The first is a purely indifferent relation, based on equality between related things and on the assumption that each entity is identical with itself, whereas the second *brings* together totally different things and unites them in a unity that never assumes a totalitarian regime. On the contrary, it is this very kind of unity that *lets free* and *enables* each constituent to be the thing that it is. The unity is for

⁸ On this topic, cf. Heidegger, M.: “Wissenschaft und Besinnung”. In Heidegger, M.: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, GA 7. Frankfurt a.M., V. Klostermann, 2000, especially pp. 42-45.

⁹ Take for example the conference “»...dichterisch wohnt der Mensch...«”, in: Heidegger, M.: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, GA 7. Frankfurt a.M., V. Klostermann, 2000, pp. 196-197.

the sake of its constituents, so that each of them emphasizes to the full its particularity and difference, i.e. the “own”-ness and the reciprocal “other”-ness.

The word “difference” has also a nice story to tell, if we look at its etymology. The “difference” derives ultimately from the Latin *differentia* and is akin to the Greek *diaphora*. We recognize the same Latin verb *fero* and the Greek *phero*. In Greek, the prefix *dia-* has a double sense: 1. “through”, “across”; and 2. “to the full”, “from one end to the other”. Whereas the first sense implies a mere separation due to the cutting-through, the second sense implies the more profound differentiation due to the completion of the bearing process. The Greek expression *gastros onkon diapherein* means “to bear to the end the child in the womb”, i.e. to bear a child till the very end, when the child will “differentiate” itself totally from its mother. The unity of mother and child is for the sake of letting be and of enabling the child to be on its own.

We have now enough elements to grasp the deep and original sense of the duality constituted by the “own” and the “other” implied in any true translation. This exceptional and mutual enabling duality has been named by Heidegger *Ereignis* and has been translated into English as “enowning”. Let us briefly turn our attention to this central word of Heidegger’s later writings, because it summarizes all experiences I have brought into discussion so far. As I mentioned at the beginning, I favour the English translation of this word as “enowning” such as it has been proposed by the two translators P. Emad & K. Maly, and disagree with common translations like “event” or “appropriation”. Such translations are mechanical and technical equivalences but no real enablings of the sense Heidegger has bestowed on the German word *Ereignis*. In the *Translators’ Foreword* of the translation of Heidegger’s later work *Contributions to Philosophy* Emad & Maly explain why they have chosen to translate *Ereignis* with “enowning”. I will simply quote a few lines from their text that explain the ability of the English prefix *en-* to render the German prefix *er-* from *Ereignis*:

We found a good approximation to *Ereignis* in the word *enowning*. Above all it is the prefix *en-* in this word that opens the possibility for approximating *Ereignis*, insofar as this prefix conveys the sense of “enabling”, “bringing into condition of”, or “welling up of”. Thus, in conjunction with *owning*, this prefix is capable of getting across a sense of an “owning” that is not an “owning of something”. We can think this owning as an un-

possessive owning, because the prefix *en-* has this unique capability. In this sense owning does not have an appropriatable content.¹⁰

At another point in their defence of the word “enowning”, Emad & Maly reject the translation of *Ereignis* as “appropriation”. I will again quote a few illuminating lines:

First, “appropriation” is more static than the German *Ereignis* in Heidegger. This English word conveys a sense of stability that is foreign to the vibrancy of *Ereignis*. Second, and most important, “appropriation” brings to mind the act of seizing something without negotiating, which would misconstrue *Ereignis* as an active agent, as one highly bent on ruling and dominating. “Appropriation” proved not to be a viable option because it strengthens the misconception of *Ereignis* as agency of seizing, ruling and hegemony.¹¹

Let us resume the main arguments of the two translators and see how they converge on the same spot as ours, or, to put it otherwise, how they move in the same field of experience as that we have been describing before. Although Emad & Maly don’t mention it expressly, I presume that the thoughtful *experience of “enabling”* has suggested to them the idea of translating *Ereignis* as “enowning”. This means that they have *previously* understood the word *Ereignis*, as it has been thought by Heidegger, in the light of the enabling, conditioning, letting-be experience as such that we have described before. By understanding *Ereignis* as enabling, they have accomplished the *main* step of translating this German word into English. It must then have been reasonably easy to detect the generally enabling power of the prefix *en-* in English, to find in it a valuable translation for the German prefix *er-*, to add the idea of “owning” which is suggested by the noun *Eignis* and thus to coin the new but highly usable term “enowning”.

By doing so, the translators avoided two main dangers: 1) They didn’t simply look in the dictionary in order to find that *Ereignis* normally means “event” – a sense that Heidegger *never* assigns to his understanding of *Ereignis*. If they had done so, they would have only *established* an English *equivalent* for a German word. 2) Due to their truly philosophical and thoughtful understanding of enabling as a mysterious and deeply original experience of life itself, Emad & Maly avoided the temptation to simply equate *Er-eignis* with “appropriation”. As they put it in

¹⁰ Emad, P. & Maly, K.: *Translators’ Foreword*. In: Heidegger, M.: *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, p. xx.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

their defence, appropriation means seizing something without negotiating, thus implying a purely active, ruling, dominating and hegemonic experience. Appropriation is not translation and hence doesn't imply that truly liberating and freeing act of bearing and giving birth to an "other". On the contrary, to appropriate means to pull something to oneself in order *to enforce* the stability and identity. Appropriation serves to enforce the establishment, the stability, the rule, the domination, the hegemony. As I said before, there are two types of unity: 1. a "good" one, i.e. a unity for the sake of the pure and maximal differentiation of its constituents within the limits of that unity, thus preserving a benefic tension between them – it is, as Emad & Maly call it, "an unpossessive owning". 2. a "bad" unity, i.e. a unity that accumulates constituents simply by summing up more and more individuals, in order to enforce *its* rule and domination. This latter unity is implied by "appropriation". That's why the translation of *Ereignis* by "appropriation" is not only a wrong translation as many other, but it goes *against* the sense conveyed by Heidegger to *Ereignis*.

One can see that translation is a highly dangerous act. Translation of philosophical texts is more dangerous than other because it implies an awareness of the meaning of translation as such, namely translation as a mutual enabling of the translator and of the text translated. But translation of Heidegger's texts is even more dangerous, because it implies an acute awareness of the profound sense he has attributed to translation and to *enabling as such*: this verb points to the main essence of human understanding, reading, speaking, learning and, of course, living and giving birth as a relation between "own"-ness and "other"-ness.

Let me close with some further remarks on the experience of translation. One could ask why Heidegger has never translated himself anything. If we remember what translation originally means, then few persons have translated more Greek, Latin, German or French philosophers into German as Heidegger has done. One could say without exaggeration that his whole work is composed only of translations of other philosophers or of own writings about the sense of translation as enowning. Why did Heidegger do that? Why didn't he develop his *own* philosophical ideas into some kind of system? In the light of things said before, it has become clear that "own"-ness receives a totally new sense in Heidegger: namely, as that state of being characterized by the extreme openness to "other"-ness. The self, the "own" can be arrived at only

by opening the *widest* field and by traversing the *broadest* element available to mankind. What this field and element is, Heidegger has said it incessantly in over 100 volumes: it is “being”. By discussing with other philosophers and other languages Heidegger discloses his own ideas and the powers of his own language. If one looks at Heidegger’s long lasting translation of the Pre-Socratics, one understands a simple but essential fact: by translating the Greeks into German, Heidegger does two things simultaneously: 1. he *enables* the obscure Greek texts of Anaximander, Parmenides and Heraclitus to speak from within their Greek world but in the element of the German language; 2. he *enables* his own German philosophical language to become “more German” than it already is.

The Greeks *per se* don’t exist any more – but they can be enabled to be within a *new* field or element, namely ours. We, on the other side, have to become what we are – and thus must be enabled to be within an *old* field or element, namely the Greek world, which constitutes our oldest heritage. The newest present and the oldest past belong together as the two constituents of the essential movement of translation as enowning. Our “own” is their “other” and vice versa. All what we have to do is to keep true translation on the move and not to let it become an establishment.