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Listening to Language

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VIEWS upon TRUTH and LANGUAGE

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Listening to Language: the Possibility of Translation

Abstract. This essay examines the itinerary of the word in translation. How does the process of translation unfold? When a work is translated, what is lost, what is gained, what is left behind, and what is carried forward? Is there some quality peculiar to poetic language that makes translation more difficult – or easier? In this essay I articulate the stages that I go through when translating a poem. The work is heuristic in part, but rooted in Heidegger's essays on Hölderlin and Rilke.

Keywords: translation; Heidegger; Rilke; language; poetry; listening; mythos.

I. The itinerary of a word that goes nowhere

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger maintains that human being must always be thought of (and always thinks) in relation to death; that the thought of death provides one (though not the only) defining boundary for what it means to be human. This is what Heidegger calls „being toward death." In like manner, I feel that language must always be thought of (and always thinks) in relation to meaning: language is always approaching meaning, or even simply turned toward meaning. Just as death provides one defining boundary for human being, meaning provides a defining boundary for language, a boundary that is also a path. Meaning is discovered whenever the fullness of what-is reveals itself to or in human being. Translation is one way of turning towards meaning, and so preparing to move in the direction of meaning.

Whether we say something or translate something, it is never a matter, really, of saying it, but rather of moving towards it. The movement begins with taking a stance of openness, opening ourselves to the possibility of meaning, coming to a place where meaning might be discovered. Through language, we seek to define the space between

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ourself and the others that make up our world, in order to find meaning. In our fear of finding nothing in that space, too often we close ourselves off to openness: we look to language not to discover, but to invent meaning. Instead of seeking an open space, we use words to create an enclosed, defined area. Perhaps listening to language in translation can show us the way towards meaning.

What *is* translation? Is it something that is said, or is it something that (more or less) repeats what has already been said, but in a new way? Does it, as the Latin-rooted English word (*trans-latum*, from *trans-ferre*, to carry across) suggests, carry something over from one place or time to another place or time? What is this thing? From where to where is it going, who takes it, what is carried, and what is left behind? And why does this occur?

Poetic language can be particularly helpful in the task of turning ourselves towards meaning. The *vers* within „verse" implies both turn and proximity.[1] Poetic language, in its fluidity and instability, in its delineation and description of the totality of what-is, helps to turn our focus outward, and so bring us closer to immersion in that fullness. Within language as a whole, poetic language has a unique trajectory. The path of its flight unfolds as the poem listens to an event which it describes. In this way, the language of poetry illuminates the way language „as such" consists of both speaking and listening. Poetic language is already a form of translation. To paraphrase Rilke's first Orphic sonnet: poetic language is what rises to the ear, what comes forward to be heard, the revelation of what is already present, what lies waiting in the experience of everyday to be heard, to be unconcealed and brought into presence.

Translation is also a form of poetic language: poetic speaking and poetic listening. It is about remaining in the space between: between one and other, between what exists in the fullness of what-is and what is not. The act or activity of translation is not about having an origin, neither is it about having a destination, *per se*. It is not about becoming, or being about to exist, as if some linearity is thereby implied. Rather, it is about the fact that in relation to language and meaning, we remain always in the open space between what has been said and what is about to be heard.

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[1] See Marc Froment-Meurice, *That is to Say: Heidegger"s Poetics.* (Trans. Jan Plug, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1998), p. 7.

Or perhaps: between what has been thought and what is about to thought. Or perhaps: between what has been and what is about to be. One cannot properly call this condition becoming, because that implies a *telos*, an endpoint, and a point of intention.

According to this understanding, translation is a different way of conceiving the philosophy of language, one that comes through language and pulls language along with it. Listening calls on language to bring the fullness of what-is out of concealment; the listening demanded by translation brings *both* what is concealed in language *and* language itself into view, into manifestation. This type of listening is poetic in that it explores the fullness of what-is in order to bring it into presence in an utterly new way.

Translation is not about arriving anywhere; it is simply about listening. What does this statement mean, in the context of metaphysical thought about language? The whole line of metaphysics from Plato to Hegel conceived of discovering an eventual *telos* for human being: not only discovering it, but subjugating it, and then perhaps transcending it. After „the end of metaphysics" proclaimed by Hegel, what can be gained from the concept of translation as listening to language? If modernity is centered around the idea of the subject, and post-modernity around the fracture or de-centering of the subject, what standpoint is left for one who would simply listen to language?

Following the end of metaphysics it no longer makes sense to conceive of meaning as contained only within abstractions or within a teleological framework. Perhaps translation can help us to move beyond the end of metaphysics in a new trajectory towards meaning. For perhaps what is lost in translation is the understanding of a text as having only one, subjective, abstract and limiting identity. Perhaps what is gained by reflecting on translation is the understanding of a text as having a multifaceted, objective, eternal identity as a concrete thing that always waits to arise into new presence.

The effort of listening required by translation begins with such a shift in understanding the subject as the one who speaks, an expansion of that point of view. When I propose listening as the central activity in or of language, my focus is no longer only on the one who speaks. Now, I am looking at a range of subjects in a colloquy: the one who speaks, and also the one who hears, and also what is said and what is heard. This expansion of subjects, the fragmentation of an illusory „one" into

several, breaks open the notion that „what is said" is either abstract or teleological. In the context of listening, it is easier to see that we are not dealing with an Idea that is stated once and for all; rather, we ourselves are part of an ongoing and never-ending process of meaning as it comes to be present in language, not in a teleological fashion, but from time to time, throughout time.

Similarly, in the process of translation, the „subject" of the text is radically altered (turned), and then replaced. Perhaps „the subject" refers to the speaker. But then again, perhaps the word which is spoken comes to take the central place, and becomes the subject of the text. Perhaps the true subject of the text is the relationship which develops between the speaker and what is spoken or heard. Translation calls for the de(con)struction of the original idea of the text, in order for what is new to come forward. Along the way, the ideal of an Idea that perdures through change without being affected and yet marches forward toward some goal is dissolved by the more fluid concept of an open-ended word that comes into presence. This process occurs in every act of language as listening. But it is readily apparent in the process of translation.

In the context of language as listening, what remains of the original essence of the word? The Idea is lost as abstraction; what remains is the manifestation of the idea within the totality of what is. What remains is both remainder and essence. Perhaps what is left is just a trace of the totality of what is, as it is experienced by our individual particularity: the Open, manifested in the clearing which listening provides. This trace is very important.[2]

The traces of what-is that are apparent as we listen to language serve to remind us of our own manifestation within what is. Listening to the traces of what is that are made manifest in language, we wonder how we ourselves are made manifest, how we appear within the totality of what is, and how language might help us come to fuller manifestation. In this

[2] Heidegger's reaction to the Greek island of Delos is an example of the notion that manifestation through language is a form of destiny; in a way, Heidegger implies, manifestation **is** destiny. In language, what-is participates in destiny by coming into appearance, into presence. *„The island is named Delos: [which means]the Manifest, the Appearing, that which gathers everything together in its Open, that by its appearing conceals everything again in one present."* Heidegger, *Aufenthalte.* Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, p. 19. See also C. Day Lewis, „The Lions of Delos", and his essay on translation, „On Translating Poetry", Abbey Press, Abingdon, 1970.

way, we turn towards listening for meaning. The original Idea of the word is less necessary to us than continuing to work through language towards our destiny, towards being made manifest.

Understood as an exercise in listening to language, the process of translation teaches us that the condition under which "to be" is possible is a condition of sheer indeterminacy that stands outside of, otherwise than, linear time. Translation cannot be spoken of in terms of linear time. There is no end to the process of translation; even the word „process" is somewhat misleading. There is no end, just as there was no beginning. There is no perfect original, of which the translator makes a more or less faithful copy. Rather, there is the performance of the original, and the performance of this original translation, its interpretation and interior translation by the reader, and so on and on. To continue to expect a *telos* is to miss the point. To continue to expect a perfect translation is equally absurd. The analogy of music is never far away from poetry: translation is as ephemeral as the performance of a piece of music, equally only a glimpse, a snapshot, of the idea of the music, equally out of time.

The activity of listening to language is not a dance of many veils, wherein meaning will eventually be revealed in its full and naked splendor. Rather, flashes of splendor, of fullness occur - sometimes through the original, sometimes through a translation. One does not begin with an original text. (In a way, it cannot even be said that an original exists - it exists only to be heard, only as a point of departure for the colloquy with the other subjects. Thus an original exists only in the same way as a translation exists: as a performative moment.) Because of the non-linear nature of the process, one cannot even say that one begins. The revelation of meaning takes place outside of linear time. It occurs, comes briefly into manifestation, and then it is gone again. Translation is a state of being, an attitude, that simply has no reference to linear time. The *movement* of the fullness of what-is as it is revealed by translation cannot be contained within the constructs of linear time.

Translation shows us two ways in which the fullness of what-is reveals and manifests itself. First, it reveals itself apophatically (from *apophatikos,* negative). That is, what is revealed is only what the thing is not. Revealing the space around the thing is a way of clearly defining the parameters and shape of the thing. (The term comes from early Christian theology, which sought to provide a definition for an invisible and

essentially unknowable God by eliminating attributes which God could be proven not to have.)

In this respect, language in translation shares an essential characteristic with poetic language. The poetic character of translation manifests itself around a promise of what cannot be contained in what is immediately present. The poetic character of translation is contained in the moment of the *caesura*, the moment before the word is spoken and heard. Through the silent space of the *caesura*, the parameters of what is said and heard are clearly defined. Understood as the science of the *caesura*, translation is essential to the process of communication. The loss that occurs in translation defines the negative silhouette by which the essence of a text is revealed in greater clarity. By revealing what the thing is not, the space around it which falls away in translation defines more closely the parameters and shape of the thing.

In addition, translation shows us that the fullness of what-is reveals itself kairologically. This term is also borrowed from early Christian (Patristic) theology. *Kairos* (meaning „right" or „proper") is the ripening of manifestation within its own good time; the most apt and fortuitous moment for an event, for the performance of an action, or for the coming into being of a new state. It is the moment of the fulfillment of hope. In translation, the fullness of what-is manifests itself only kairologically, as and when it will, in response to the openness of the listener.

As one listens to language, the recognition grows that translation is nothing but a promise, nothing but exchange, nothing but hope. As such, it becomes the epitome of language: language that does nothing but present the essence of what comes to be manifested, in terms of what is not made manifest. (One could say that it is *Dasein* that manifests itself in terms of absence.) I have suggested, and in the following chapters will attempt to prove, that the non-linear, open-ended trajectory of poetic language is critical to this movement and manifestation.

Because of these two qualities – the apophatic and kairological characteristics whereby what-is may be revealed in language – it would not be going too far to say that through translation we can discover what lies hidden in language. Translation neither gives birth to meaning nor mirrors a pre-existent meaning. There is no point of origin or point of departure for translation, but only what-is. The movement of translation carries what-is forward and across dichotomies, polarities, and gaps, to new presence.

Translation reveals the absurdity of the concepts of linear time and teleology, because what-is manifests itself so clearly, in its own way, in its own time, and often by means of silence – not according to reason, not in any metaphysical line, but as response to openness.[3] What translation offers is a non-linear proof (or trace) of the fullness of what-is: as *remainder* – what is always left over in the course of a linguistic exchange or manifestation – and as *essence* – what is always left over. Since the whole is itself non-linear, one cannot expect it to manifest in linear fashion. A hidden, indeterminable trace of its essence is left behind, but its essence as hope remains always to be discovered anew.

The indeterminable condition of translation does not imply blurriness, but rather a state of discovering what-is in concealment: hidden presence rather than utter absence. Similarly, the existence of translation outside of time does not imply suspension. The movement of fullness which is elucidated, brought to light, by translation is absolutely not a state of suspended animation. It is not about the suspension of a state of being; rather, about its opposite: perpetual fluidity. Translation, as promise, as hope, re-presents the fluid motion of language as it moves towards meaning. This is a movement that can never find stasis, as meaning is always being recreated in newness, manifesting itself ever and again in response to openness.

As listening, translation may seem to be a bridge, but it is not a bridge between two fixed points. Rather, the bridge itself *is* the destination, the place of meaning. Yet it is not a place either; it cannot be located in place anymore than in time. It is a clearing, a space that is pure openness, an opening into the Open.

Translation is always on the verge of withdrawal – from the original, from sense, from the translator. It is always slipping away. Thus we do not find our way to meaning with a particular translation: rather, all of a sudden, meaning looms out of the text. But equally, it is not a matter of teleology, because we can never come to the end of meaning. There is always more. There is always a remainder of meaning that is, truly, essentially untranslatable and mysterious.

[3] To borrow another term from Christian theology, one could say this was a response of grace.

II. *Mythos* and *logos*

Translation is poetic in that it occurs prior to or outside of rational thought – certainly outside of rational speech. It is a form of poetic listening to language. Translation is also poetic in that it does not have a distinct, fixed, and immovable destination. In this way, translation is always about the word as *mythos* rather than as *logos*: about the word as it tells the story of the fullness of what-is, rather than as an explanation of that fullness in human terms.

Here I must present a disclaimer of sorts. It should be clear, in what follows, that I am using the term *logos* in a very specialized sense, to represent the type of language that occurs within the structure of linear time and rational discourse. From the Fourth Gospel to Heidegger, we are told that "In the beginning was the *Logos*," and my argument is not intended to overturn or challenge that august tradition. My inquiry has a much more narrow and circumscribed focus: the exploration of some possible points of intersection between language as such, poetic language, and language in translation. Within that well-defined grid, my concentration leads me to posit the *mythos* as interior harbinger to the *logos*. I want to argue that poetic language takes shape in a form of language that foreshadows the discursivity of the *logos* (this fore-shadowing, however, occurs in a non-linear way, a way that is outside of, otherwise than, lineality). By the word of *mythos*, the poem brings to presence raw material for the *logos*, and thus enables human being to use the word of *logos* to come closer to meaning.

> *By a gradual loosening or transcendence of its own forms, the poem strives to escape from the linear, denotative, logically determined bonds of linguistic syntax into what the poet takes to be the simultaneities, immediacies, and free play of musical form...the poet hopes to find the paradox resolved of an act of creation singular to the creator, bearing the shape of his own spirit, yet infinitely renewed in each listener.*[4]

Only after this interior shape has been formed is the listener ready to engage in discourse: to speak the word of *logos*. The word of *mythos* prepares the ground for *logos*, locating the speaker in a particular context or configuration of meaning, yet in a way that is utterly open, looking outward. Thus, while *mythos* recurs at any point, it has both a more

[4] Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966*. Faber and Faber, London, 1967, p. 43.

interior and a more transcendent trajectory. *Mythos* is a necessary step on the way towards meaning because of the freedom, the quality of openness, and the forward vision which it engenders within the listener. *Mythos*, the word of the poet, is always the word of the seer, who looks beyond what merely is in the here-and-now towards what (ever) is possible.

It might be helpful here to more clearly delineate the distinction between *mythos* and meaning, as well as between *mythos* and *logos*. Myth (*mythos*) is "a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena."[5] A myth exists to embody, in one specific place and time, the fullness of meaning, to make it present, to re-present it.

Logos, on the other hand, is the word of discourse or reason. The word in the form of *logos* is connected to the world of human being without necessarily implying consideration of the fullness of what-is. *Logos* is not primarily about the revelation of the fullness of meaning, but about the social or rational ramifications of what has come into presence. Thus the concept of *logos* is rooted in linear time. Also, *logos* is entirely self-referential, it expresses only reflexive thoughts about human being. *Mythos* speaks within the individual, from the individual's consciousness about what it means to be human (i.e., finite, limited) within the totality of what is.

Of course both the word of *mythos* and the word of *logos* are directly related to meaning, but in different ways. While *logos* is language which is moving towards meaning by seeking to define and so encapsulate meaning, *mythos* is language in which meaning already resides, but in an indeterminate, pregnant way: meaning that has yet to be determined. *Mythos* is perhaps closer to meaning, in that it does not seek to enclose or capture meaning, but merely carries meaning from one manifestation to the next.

Mythos is also language which points towards the transcendence of the *logos*.

> *The sensibility of the poet descends deep into the realm of the unsayable, where there is such an unmediated relationship between things that a language of mutual comprehension, such as humans have, is unnecessary. The muteness of*

[5] OED, 1993.

> *the fish* [in Sonnet II, 20] *is a symbol for relationships which do not require words in the sense of the* Logos.[6]

Mythos provides a bridge for those of us who are still on the way - to transcendence, or even to language. The Italian psychoanalyst and philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara locates *mythos* as the point of origin of thought and inquiry: in short, as the *terminus a quo* of philosophy. "Our community memory," she says,

> *...often reveals itself only in a mythological form. Myths in most traditions refer to the dynamic core of „human nature"...the truth value placed upon certain myths does not derive from their antiquity. Their long history is probably due to their knowledge-enhancing quality. In our work the truth value of a myth may come across to us in the form of a listening „instrument"...*[7]

Corradi Fiumara suggests that *mythos* comes from the essential human need to know. *Mythos* provides a path, not back into the „original" text, but forward towards an encounter with some essential truth about ourselves. But we cannot know what is concealed until it reveals itself, by being said and heard.

Where is the word of *mythos* at the moment of its saying? It dwells in the ear of the hearer, at the intersection of the hearer's own being with Being, with the totality of what is. It exists at the edge of that fullness, and also at the edge of language, at the edge of the Open. It is at the edge of what lies between: between speaker and hearer, between what has been and will be said, and what has been and will be heard.

Having been said and heard, where does the word of *mythos* go? What motive force propels it to be repeated, to be translated from one here-and-now into the next? Perhaps it needs no motive force. Perhaps the lack of *telos* guarantees to poetic language freedom of movement that even includes freedom from motive. Perhaps the movement of *mythos* tells us something else about the fullness of what-is: that it needs no

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[6] „Das Gefühl des Dichters sinkt in den Raum des Unsagbaren, wo ein solch unmittelbarer Bezug zwischen den Dingen herrscht, daß eineVerständigungssprache menschlicher Art nicht nötig ist: Die Stummheit der Fische gilt als Chiffre für Bezüge, die des Wortes im Sinne von «Logos» nicht bedürfen." (Karl Heinz Fingerhut, *Das Kreatürliche im Werke R.M. Rilkes. Untersuchungen zur Figur des Tieres.* H. Bouvier u. Co., Bonn, 1970, p. 146.

[7] Corradi Fiumara, The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening. Routledge, London, 1990, p.79.

motive force to move, it simply is movement itself. Perhaps, impelled merely by its own nature as movement, it goes to another hearer, to be heard anew. Indeed, unlike the linear *logos*, which having been said once is completed, fulfilled, and finds its place along a timeline, the nature of *mythos* is to be repeated ever and again, to be brought back into presence again, as meaning manifests over and over again its destiny of being present (presencing). No matter how many times it is heard, the word of *mythos* – the bearer of meaning – is never exhausted.

In a discussion of translation and disclosure in his lectures on Parmenides, Heidegger suggests:

> *The poetry of a poet or the treatise of a thinker stands within its own proper unique word. It compels us to perceive this word again and again as if we were hearing it for the first time. These newborn words transpose us in every case to a new shore.*[8]

The *mythos* stands within itself, or within the culture, waiting (if such a concept can be thought without falling into the trap of linear thinking) for a re-presentation when it is discovered by the poet-translator. The *mythos* stands within itself because it has no anxiety about presenting or representing content; rather, "its own proper unique word" is the promise of the event of presence. The new shore, like the *mythos*, is completely indeterminate; it neither can nor need be designated. It too is part of the Open; its trajectory is never fixed.

As the *mythos* carries meaning, so translation carries the *mythos* to its new hearers. But in the process of translation, what precisely is it that is carried, and what is left behind? What is carried is the promise of language, which contains both the remainder and the essence of the „original." In the word to be translated, worlds of meaning and possibility arise, are considered, contemplated, and discarded, or perhaps chosen for a time and then reconsidered. The word of *mythos* on its way to being translated does not exist in any stable form. Rather, it is put down as a mark of what is possible. It is not forced down onto the text, but laid down upon it as possibility.[9] It exists only as promise. But in fact

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[8] *Parmenides*, 12; GA54, pp. 17-18.

[9] Cf. the discussion of the root of *logos*, *legein*, in Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*. Translated by David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi, Harper & Row New York, 1975, pp. 60-62.

this is true of any word, which exists only as the promise of the possibility of communication with an other across an unbridgeable gap.

The difference in poetry translation is a matter of intention. In poetry, neither the speaker nor the translator has any intention of laying down meaning, in terms of *logos*. Rather, as I said earlier, a colloquy begins between the speaker, the translator, the hearer, and even what is said or heard (as active subjects). Within this exchange there arise suggestions about the possibility of meaning. Again, however, it is important to stress that this notion of „possibility" does not imply a linear, or eventual, revelation or development. Rather, I am speaking about possibility as an occurrence by which the word breaks through (time, being, subjectivity, identity) into the otherness of the other, and discovers something new about the self in the process. What is carried over is the promise that meaning is possible; that, as unlikely as it seems, if we stay with it long enough in an attitude of contemplation and openness, something may happen, some meaning may manifest, and we may be part of that manifestation.[10]

What is left behind in the translation? It is tempting to say that what is left behind in the original was inessential to it, but of course there must have been some meaning specific to the original also - or at least some promise? So what is left behind? It is here that the process of translation becomes almost poignant. For what cannot be carried over in translation is the intense and intimate bond of the poet to the word, the unique relationship between that poet and that word. The reasons that underlie a poet's choice of word can be studied from a rational standpoint, dissected, even explained or justified by the poet, but never fully known, not even by the poet. For even the poet does not know why, in a certain moment, that particular word and no other insisted itself into the poem. Poetry is, essentially, indeterminable. So one thing left behind in the process of translation is the primary link with that particular poet's identity. The act of listening demands fragmentation, and the first thing to go is the relation of the original poet's self to the original poet's word.

[10] But if there is no *telos*, how can we speak of intent? In fact it is impossible to speak of human activity, as of human being, without some sense of teleology creeping in. For we are notoriously creatures of desire; we merge the notions of desire and meaning. The challenge for the poet, and even more so for the translator, is to keep language from becoming trapped in monologue; to remember that the *mythos* is free of the limitations imposed by the individual ego, and to seek to align our desire for meaning with the fullness of what-is, in its non-teleological nature as movement.

In moving away from the poet, the word moves one step closer to utter indeterminacy, closer to what Heidegger might call *Lichtung* (the illuminative clearing within which thought or meaning can occur) and to what Rilke might call „the Open." In this way, the listening stance of translation brings language into presence, into fulfillment in the fullness of time.

III. Reproduction and remainder

A second set of questions must be addressed here, in the context of what is left behind. For in a discussion of translation, I cannot dismiss or ignore the notion of cultural dissonance. What happens, as the poem is carried across to the new culture, to the gaps (dissonances) between the past of the poem and the world into which it is brought? Or the gaps between the culture in which the poem was written and those of the world which it enters? (Here is it not merely a question of translating the poem to a different language and a different time, but to different cultural mores, through layers of meaning.) Finally, what about the dissonances between the culture in which the poem was written and the translator's own culture?

In my view, the apparent dissonances and disjunctures between cultures do not affect the integral essence of the poem. Clearly they must be addressed, by the translator, from the standpoint of a thorough knowledge of and meticulous attention to both „worlds".[11] Just as clearly, both what is carried across and what is left behind will contain elements of both worlds. But the essence of the poem, its unique identity as a moment of *mythos*, is borne across all these gaps, into the clearing where a new hearing may take place.

What is undoubtedly left behind in the process of translation is an original defining set of cultural and historical associations with the poem's origin. In "The Work of Art in an Age of Technical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin lays out this problem succinctly:

[11] In working on the Sonnets, I used a German-English dictionary published in Berlin in 1936, ten years after the Sonnets first appeared in print. (One from the 1920"s would perhaps have been more ideal, but I was unable to locate one.) I felt that it was essential to use a dictionary that predated the Holocaust, since that event has so radically changed all language, especially the German language.

> *Even in the most perfect reproduction, something is lost: the „here-and-now" of the work of art - its unique „occurrence and presence"* (Dasein) *in the place in which it came to be. Its history is effected by its unique manifestation* (Dasein) *in that time and place, and by nothing else. The „here-and-now" of the original constitutes its genuine Idea. Technical – and of course not only technical – reproducibility removes it entirely from the province of its own genuineness. The genuineness of a thing includes everything, from the moment of its conception to its ability to be translated, from its material duration right up to and including the witness of its manifestations in history.* [12]

Now here I have translated this paragraph into English for you, the reader, to bring Benjamin's concern to your attention.[13] In the course of translating the text, several things of note have occurred. First, I have translated the word „*Dasein*" in two different ways, first as „occurrence and presence" and then as „manifestation in that time and place." In so doing, I am taking into account, with a certain amount of fear and trembling, the legions of Heidegger scholars who have spent entire careers exploring this word, yet knowing that for an isolated passage to make sense, it must carry some of the weight of its Heideggerian meaning, as well as some of the meaning it held for Benjamin (as I understand it), and finally its meaning for me in the course of this building argument for the possibilities inherent in translated language. I could have substituted „being there" or even „Being there," but to do so would open the text too far: it would slip from indeterminacy to blurriness. I could not insert a discussion of the meaning(s) of *Dasein* into the flow of the translation; instead I had to choose a meaning for the word which would carry Benjamin's point without discussion, in order to allow the point to emerge as clearly and cleanly as possible. I faced a similar dilemma in the repeated use of the English word

[12] „The Work of Art in an Age of Technical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, published in Frankfurt in 1977, „Noch bei der höchstvollendeten Reproduktion fällt eines aus: das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks – sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet. An diesem einmaligen Dasein aber und an nichts sonst vollzog sich die Geschichte. Das Hier und Jetzt des Originals macht den Begriff seiner Echtheit aus. Der gesamte Bereich seiner Echtheit entzieht sich der technischen – und natürlich nicht nur der technischen – Reproduzierbarkeit. Die Echtheit einer Sache ist der Inbegriff alles von Ursprung her an ihr Tradierbaren, von ihrer materiellen Dauer bis zu ihrer geschichtlichen Zeugenschaft."

[13] Admittedly, this is not a matter of poetry translation, but of a piece of philosophical prose. But the principle, I think, remains the same.

„manifestation" as a translation for two different words in German; first, as part of the explanation of *Dasein*, and then in its evidentiary form for *Zeugenschaft*. The use of this word also contains a link back to my own argument about manifestation. Thus each choice had several layers of meaning encoded within it, all of which needed to be brought along into the new translation, yet without breaking or breaking into the flow of Benjamin's argument.

Despite the wide range of possibilities and dilemmas, the fact remains that the text lay before me in German and I reproduced it in English. What was lost? Benjamin wants to argue that what is lost is far more than the author's identity: part of the identity of the text is lost as well, the here-and-now-ness that constitutes its idea. Reproducing this text (and translating it) simultaneously proves and disproves Benjamin's argument. Clearly neither I the translator nor you the reader have the same relationship to the words that Benjamin had in the here-and-now-ness of writing them, nor in the here-and-now-ness that I had in rendering them into English, in Massachusetts in the early 21st century. Their history, he says, is *effected*, brought to completion, by their here-and-now. Yet a moment later he also says that their history includes their *Tradierbaren*, their ability to be translated and to perdure over time.

Which of these two statements is true? If we take the view of linear time, the two statements contradict one another. If however we consider the view that meaning manifests itself according to its own time, a measure of sense evolves: they are effected in the moment of their utterance, for without utterance they would not be. But their utterance is not contained by linear time; it subsumes the entire scope of linear time. Whenever they are said and heard in their essence, their history is effected.

What about Benjamin's idea of *Echtheit*, genuineness? Again, reproduction and translation of this thought both prove and disprove the thought itself. If what Benjamin said can be heard by means of my translation, the idea of its genuineness must therefore include both what was said by Benjamin in German and my English version. While the genuineness of a thing (as a thing which truly comes into presence) must be constituted by its here-and-now-ness, genuineness must equally always include its ability to be translated without becoming less genuine, less present: without losing its meaning, without losing any of its original value, the value of its *Dasein*, the value of its origin in a unique time and

place. All of that must – to be truly part of, genuine to the thing – be capable of being translated, either in words or in the phenomenological evidence (*Zeugenschaft*) of history.[14]

What, then, is a "good" translation? Along the lines of the example given above, a good translation is one which provides the clearing and illumination (*Lichtung*) in which a new here-and-now-ness can come into presence, into manifestation, for this thought. The intent seems clear enough. But we have yet to discover how this is to be achieved, or how it might bring us further along on the way towards meaning.

IV. Stages of Listening, Stages of Translation

For me, poetry translation is not only a way of listening for meaning, but a form of hermeneutics: a way of seeking and interpreting meaning. Corradi Fiumara believes that listening is the starting point of hermeneutics. Corradi Fiumara follows Plato's metaphor, from the *Theaetetus*, of the philosopher as the midwife of meaning, with language as the birth canal. The term „maieutic" (from the Greek word for „midwife") refers "*to the Socratic process of assisting a person to bring out into clear consciousness conceptions previously latent in his mind."*[15]

Corradi Fiumara sees an explicit and express link between the processes of listening for and interpreting meaning.[16] Further, she shows how the

[14] The quote from Eudo Mason which appears at the beginning of my introduction is a stunning encapsulation of this idea: Everything that can be thought...has already undergone, in the Sonnets, a sort of musical liquefaction, without thereby losing any of its value in the process. That is, the thought which emerges from Rilke"s poetry finds a musical and fluid presencing in history through the Sonnets. Mason, Lebenhandlung und Symbolik bei R.M.Rilke. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971, p. XIII.

[15] Oxford English Dictionary.

[16] „One of the most important aspects of listening is in fact discernible when cognitive frontiers are opened up without any 'frontal" attack, but only in relation to our availability to listen rigorously; as if our determination to go forward tentatively without knowing exactly our direction, but sustained by the readiness to listen...were exactly what opens the way for the birth of thought. In the readiness to understand there is precisely an effort to follow up the inner consequentiality of someone"s expressions: the disposition which gives life to a 'listening event." The thing experienced itself becomes capable of utterance insofar as the interlocutor adheres to a rationality which is capable not only of saying, but above all of listening, and insofar as the interlocutor opens himself to the strength of thought springing to life in the other, free from the cognitive claims provided by his own interpretative parameters." Corradi Fiumara, *op.cit.*, p. 143ff.

notion of hermeneutic listening suggested by Heidegger and Gadamer is, in fact, Rilke's goal and method also:

> *The message from the other will not attain its expressive potential except in the context of a relationship through which the listening interlocutor actually becomes a participant in the nascent thought of the person who is talking. But a listener can only „enter" in a way which is at once paradoxical and committing: by „taking leave", by standing aside and making room. The type of listening which can be transmuted into a process of birth and growth may perhaps find expression in the language of Rilke: „If you want to make a tree grow, surround it with the interior space which you have in yourself...Only in your own renunciation can it take form and become truly a tree."*[17]

For Corradi Fiumara, this type of attention brings the long-ignored „other half' of language (listening) into sharp relief, and so can bring us a long way towards re-balancing the moribund and perverted activity of discourse – on the way back towards true communication. Corradi Fiumara professes to be astounded by the lack of genuine listening encountered in the activity of hermeneutics. She cites both Heidegger and Gadamer as exhorting us repeatedly to greater attentiveness, noting that in post-modern philosophy the dialectic has devolved into a series of tightly concentric self-referential critical questions.

> *In the dizzy affirmation of our* logos *there is hardly any „logical" space left for the „hidden" but essential tradition of listening. It is, in any case, unthinkable that listening be revealed as a philosophical dimension, since it is, by now, too alien to the tradition based on expressive language.*[18]

But expressive language, she avers, is empty as long as there is no one to receive it. The essence of what is to be said cannot be reached unless it is heard.[19]

In this regard, Corradi Fiumara takes her cue from Heidegger, who proposes that an attitude of listening precedes and leads into the disposition of questioning at the outset of the hermeneutical journey.

> *Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, may help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first. Language beckons us, at first and then again at the end, toward a thing's nature...But the responding*

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 144ff.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[19] Perhaps, in fact, this is the meaning of „the ungranted core."

> *in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language is that which speaks in the element of poetry. The more poetic a poet is – the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying - the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening, and the further what he says is from the mere propositional statement that is dealt with solely in regard to its correctness or incorrectness.*[20]

Corradi Fiumara also draws on Ricoeur's suggestion that we can establish a right relationship of the will towards the other through listening:

> *We should start out from a point of view in which the autonomy of our will is rooted in a dependency...which is not contaminated by accusation, prohibition or sanction. Listening itself creates such a pre-ethical situation; it is a way of being which is not yet a way of doing, and because of this it escapes from the alternative of submission or revolt.*[21]

Precisely this attitude is the stance from which to begin a translation.

I began thinking about these matters several years ago when, as part of a doctoral dissertation, I translated Rilke's *Sonnetten an Orpheus* into English in sonnet form. This is a fiercely difficult undertaking, given the tight and often constricting form of the sonnet. The very difficulty of the task helped me to think about the process. Along the way, I isolated nine stages involved in the way I go about listening to and translating a poem. Each step is also a stage of listening.

1) Approaching with an attitude of „being towards"
2) Entering the poem (leaving ego behind)
3) Breathing the rhythm of the poem
4) Being filled with the essence of the poem
5) Hearing the words of the original
6) Searching for the name
7) Apprehending the whole: „Being with" the poem
8) Being pushed away
9) Returning to a new place (in the poem and in myself)

These same steps are, I believe, common to any creative process, or indeed, to any philosophical inquiry into meaning.

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[20] Heidegger, *„...Poetically Man Dwells..."* (Hereinafter PLT), Trans. Walter Kauffmann, Harper Perennial, New York, 1976, p. 216.
[21] Paul Ricoeur, quoted in Corradi Fiumara, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

1) Approaching with an attitude of „being towards"

To begin with, I have a neutral standpoint: I simply approach the text in an attitude of being open towards it. I wait to see what might be hidden within it. As I move through the process, I must continue to keep myself receptive, without seeking to make any premature cognitive links. If I wait for the text to come to me, Corradi Fiumara promises, something new will occur, an act of creation brought about by the act of listening.

> *The symbolic fruition of the message...allows for the emergence of something authentically and unthinkably interesting* [inter-esse, among and in the midst of things, at the center of a thing] *that is not to be found* already *waiting in the object - text or message: it is disclosed because radical and dedicated listening engenders the resonances, recombinations and developments that only derive from a condition of germinal acceptance.*[22]

The attitude of open receptivity draws forth newness, makes the clearing. This begins neither as a matter of knowledge or perception, but simply as a matter of being towards. The translator approaches the poem with the intention to bring it to new life in a new language, to turn it in a new version, a new moment of presence.

But there are risks involved in the attitude of openness required by listening. Looking into any text means letting it confront me, and perhaps confound me.

> *Wishing to pursue the „objectively correct" teaching of Heraclitus means refusing to run the salutary risk of being confounded by the truth of a thinking.*[23]

To translate effectively I must be willing to run that risk; to be open to the challenges to my usual definition of the world which the poem may present.

2) Entering the poem. The Italian philosopher Michele Sciacca wrote: "*To communicate is to enter the other, while watching ourselves carefully, to enter without usurping...*"[24] This description of communication holds true for my

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[22] Corradi Fiumara, *op.cit.*, 171. The idea of interest as central is Heidegger"s, not mine. See *What is Called Thinking?*, part I, 5.

[23] Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* Trans. J. Glenn Gray. Harper and Row, New York:, 1968, pp. 238-239.

[24] Michele Federico Sciacca, *Como si vince a Waterloo.* Marzorati,Milan, 1963, p. 60.

efforts at translation; the difference is that my "other" is not a person, but a text, a poem.

Entering the text, entering into relationship with the text places me in a position of responsibility towards it: the text becomes (to borrow a term from Levinas) a face to whom I must respond: by my listening presence with(in) the text, I make a commitment to bring the text back into presence. The whole process bespeaks an ethical reciprocity. Listening leads to being with. "Being-with others develops in listening to one another."[25] The imaginal space in which new meaning can come forward is the space vacated, left free, by the ego.

3) Breathing the rhythm. The next necessary step is to breathe the rhythm of the poem. This stage moves me from the interactive realm of the ethical into a place that is at once closer to the center of the poem and to my own center. Now the poem is not a face, but a breath which sustains me, a current on which I am carried deeper into the poem's essence. In this breath I begin to understand the concept of *Weltinnenraum*, the notion of infinite interior space which was so important to Rilke as he moved towards writing the *Sonnets*. I begin to sense the *Weltinnenraum* of the poem as both a separate entity and a shareable space, a space in which I too can participate. (The first Sonnet of the second book is particularly relevant to this discussion, as is I, 3.[26]) I cannot name the breath which blows in and through the poem: is it "a divine afflatus" or merely the sighing of wind through emptiness? In either case, as I continue to breathe the poem's rhythm, the poignancy of the link almost overwhelms me. How fragile and tenuous the hold of the poem on presence. And mine. Breathing in the rhythm of the poem, I feel the invitation extended by the poem to the translator to enter its world. It is an invitation at once public and intimate, an invitation without words and yet made up of the words of the poem. This is more than the invitation to read; it is an invitation to become a part of the poetic itself, to enter the being of the poem.

4) Being filled. In the third phase, the self of the translator drops away as the poem completely fills the interior space. It is as though I have

[25] Heidegger, *Being and Time.* Trans. Joan Stambaugh. SUNY Press, New York, 1996, p. 206.
[26] *Nota bene:* For the purposes of this paper, I have not quoted the Sonnets, but it might be useful to read them alongside this discussion.

entered a room, and closing the door behind me, discovered myself underwater, completely submerged in the poem. Nothing exists but the world named by the poem. In the process of being named, the poem stakes its claim on the translator, engulfs the translator in the disclosure of the poem's being present. Being filled with the poem's essence, with the poem as essence, means self-forgetfulness. Immersing self in the world of the poem, I lose the sense of where the poem's edges end and mine begin. The sensation is very close to that of meditation or prayer. It is not a matter of will. It is a matter of completely dropping out of oneself into the other; in this case, into the poem. One does not accomplish this by an act of will; rather, one is compelled, and one surrenders.[27] What occurs is a quiet and instantly impenetrable immediacy, a unity of identity that is both fluid and potentially drowning, under the spell of which the translator's identity no longer seems to signify.[28] It is swift, sudden, and total. One is swept in prereflectively. Opening myself to being swept away, I am instantly in the rhythm and sway of the poem, swimming in the struggle to make it right, as right in translation as it is in its first language.

The intense act of listening in which the translator is engaged has a profound effect on both translator and translated. In her account of learning to live in a second language, Eva Hoffman describes a similar experience in translating poetry. She writes:

> *...that's what it's like to play the piano, in those moments when I can no longer tell whether I'm playing the music or the music is playing me...I have only the vaguest idea, and by the time I look up these words in a dictionary and accomplish the translation from the sounds to their definition, it's hard to reinsert them into the flow of the lines, the seamless sequence of musical meaning. I concentrate intensely, too intensely, and the lines come out straight and square, though I intuit a meaning that's only an inflection away. And so I struggle harder to enter the stanza, like a frustrated lover whose hunger is fed by the inaccessible proximity of her object.*[29]

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[27] See Sonnet I, 5.

[28] In *Through the Looking Glass*, (111-112) Alice has a similar experience. When she enters the wood where things have no names, she forgets her own. As long as she remains there, she is able to remain at one with a fawn, communing peaceably. As soon as they reach the edge of the wood, the fawn remembers both her name and its own, and bounds away in fear. The name of the translator must be forgotten. (Norton, New York, 1990).

[29] Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*. E. P. Dutton, New York, 1989, p. 180.

Her experience, she says, is that of language speaking "from the cells," the words at first seeming to refer only to themselves, then gradually becoming more and more translucent, even as her own identity dissolves into the translation.

5) Hearing the words. At length I am ready to hear the words of the original poem. Through those words, a world must first be named, the world which the poet constructed in the poem. As the translator struggles under the yoke with the poem, to draw the world of the poem into the translator's own world, names emerge. In each case, it is a very particular name, a name that can apply only here-and-nowhere else, partaking of and at the same time constituting the here-and-now of both the original and the translation. Even a very common word (for example, the word „and") or a space (a rhythmic beat) can emerge as a name for a particular moment within the poem, and immediately becomes a part of the movement that is bringing the poem to the new shore. This name does not substitute for the previous, „original" word; it does not stand for or stand in for it. It re-presents it, in terms of bringing the word of the poem into presence in the here-and-now of the translator, and if it is the „right" name, its own name, it will bring the poem into presence in the here-and-now of the reader.

6) Searching for the name. At length the search for the name engages the conscious mind of the translator: the bridging knowledge of both languages; the desire to bring the word into presence in a new way. After all this making-ready, I can finally use all my linguistic skills and knowledge. This activity begins as anything but transparency: it begins as apprehension of a brightly-colored and carefully-crafted tapestry from which the translator must isolate each thread of thought without disturbing or disfiguring the whole. Any pulling on the weave is immediately apparent; its rough edges seem to catch on my skin.

To change metaphors, on the one side is the smooth brilliance of the poem itself: an organized composition of color, shade, and light, a still life. This side of the text is like the mirror-surface reflecting the world in which the poem was originally produced. On the other side of the poem, the translator stacks neat and equally color-rich reserves of information and imagery, knowledge of poetic syntax, awareness of the poet's affinities, influences, style, mannerisms. But from where does the translation appear, and how does all this color, all this accumulated

„stuff" become translucent? The answer emerges in the next phase, when the translator moves from isolating the threads within the poem back to the apprehension of the poem as a whole.

7) Apprehending the whole: being with the poem. The shift which began to occur through listening prepared a blankness within the translator. Now this negative space in the translator becomes (or rather, is) the diaphanous canvas onto which the translation emerges. As the translation comes into presence, each particular name (word or beat) transfers itself from the original to the translation, through the unresisting agency of the translator. That is, in fact, all the translator has to do: not resist the movement that brings the original poem into the here-and-now of the translation, in the fullness of time, into the fullness of what-is. To be with the poem, in its presence.

Such inactivity, of course, is extremely difficult, as anyone who has attempted any form of contemplative prayer will recognize. „All" that is required is that the ego drop away into the clear stream of what-is that is constantly flowing by. In the process of translation, the translator listens not only (one might almost say, „not ever") to the poem as a whole, but rather to each particular word and beat within the poem. Each one must first be evaluated as a name, weighted, assayed for individual fidelity and value, and then listened to again in relation to the phrase or line. This procedure happens with each and every word and beat. First one, then two or a small group; gradually the pieces that are listened to together become larger and larger. Only at the very end of the procedure does one step back and hear the whole, as one would hear a piece of music, because it is only then that it exists as "to-be-heard."

8) Being pushed away. The translator listens to the translated poem over and over again until no rough edges remain, and the poem begins to push the translator away.[30] At this point the translation is no longer something either poet or translator is saying, not something to-be-said or to-be-heard, but simply something that *is* heard. At that point, the poem exists independently in the here-and-now of the hearer. When I go back to a translation, there comes a moment when I feel as though I am

[30] This movement of pushing away reminds me of the Fort-Da game noted by Freud and Klein, wherein the toddler pushes away from the mother in order to celebrate both its autonomy and its ability to reconnect with the mother at will.

viewing it from a remove, through a screen. I am no longer a part of it. It is detached and gone from me. I can still appreciate the pull of its beauty, but the invitation is no longer there to enter it in the same way. In fact, it resists me. From this vantage point I have no idea how the translation was accomplished; I only know that I once stood inside the poem, and now it has no further use for me. This does not mean that I have produced "the" perfect translation. What it means is that I have been dismissed; there appears to be nothing more that I can do at that moment. Over time, more nuances and errors appear, and then the poem lets me back in for further work. But the uncanny feeling that I am at the poem's disposal is very strong.

9) Returning to a new place. An overquoted stanza from T.S. Eliot is too apt to disregard here; it completely encapsulates the feeling of having completed a translation:

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*[31]

Having left the poem, I return to myself, and find that through the agency of the poem I have discovered a new and expanded definition of myself. In the course of the translation, both the poem and the translator have become translucent. The poem has become translucent, in that through the light that the poem sheds on or towards meaning, the barriers of language have been overcome. The translator becomes translucent too, striving not to block the light of meaning from shining through the poem, struggling to „be" in relation to the poem *only* as the canvas on which its new shape takes form. Not as creator, not even as co-creator, but merely as conduit, canvas, receiver. In this way, the translator comes to be as much the raw material, the „stuff" of which the translation is composed, as is the original text itself.[32] The translator is completely self-transcendent in the moment of the translation. There is no room for self; the entire self of the translator is given over to the task of listening. Yet in the process the translator is not annihilated. Rather,

[31] T.S.Eliot, „Little Gidding" in *Four Quartets*. Faber and Faber, London, 1942, lines 245ff.

[32] In fact, I think that this same process occurs in any artistic endeavor.

the negative spaces left by the process of translation contribute to the formation of a new and expanded self-understanding.

It is in this stage that I more clearly apprehend how the event of translation points the way towards human transcendence of finitude. Translating language is a vehicle (one might almost say a metaphor) for the possibility of transcendence. As language translates the experiences of beings in the world, the act of translation reveals the fundamental truth of the human experience, which includes both our finitude and our capacity for transcendence. At the same time, the act of translation reveals something important about what-is. The fullness of what-is cannot be contained within a constructed set of finite factors and variables; both its form and its content are infinitely vast and constantly shifting, free of such constraints as reason, time, and death. We, as finite beings, finding ourselves in the midst of this free and seemingly random movement, struggle to find or establish meaning in our particular circumstances. The search for meaning inserts us into the greater context of what-is, and so serves to guarantee meaning. The act of translation reveals some of this struggle and this state of affairs, by providing moments wherein the fullness of what-is manifests and reveals itself.