

# THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR, OR, HOW TO SPEAK TO MARTIN HEIDEGGER'S TEXTS

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There's no muse of philosophy; and there's no muse of translation, either.

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

Why are Martin Heidegger's texts so difficult to translate? Several complicated answers might be given to this simple-seeming question. (1) Because Martin Heidegger's texts employ a quirky, highly eccentric, idiosyncratic German dialect (*Swabian? Friesian? Or maybe just Heideggerian?*) that can't easily be imitated (without risk of travesty or parody) in a comparable English dialect. (2) Because Martin Heidegger's texts frequently rely on elaborate etymological word-play and elusive esoteric punning on Old High German words (*Wahren, Walten, Wesen*, etc.) or even contemporary German expressions (like the quintessentially Heideggerian *Dasein/das Sein/das Sein des Seienden*, etc.) which can't be duplicated in the English lexicon. (3) Because Martin Heidegger's texts frequently proceed by breaking down ("de-construct-ing," *ab-bauen*) even the simplest German words (for example: *bauen*: Old High German *buan, buri, buren, beuren, beuron*, etc.)<sup>1</sup> and twisting and distorting them (the essential meaning of one of Martin Heidegger's favorite verbs: *verwinden*) to make them disclose strange meanings and obscure, unfamiliar senses previously un-heard of in those German words.

After the controversy surrounding Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly's notoriously unreadable translation of the *Beiträge zur Philosophie*,<sup>2</sup> the contemporary translator might do well to contemplate these difficulties before embarking on the task of translating Martin's Heidegger's difficult texts. But the simple answer is: Martin Heidegger's texts are difficult to translate *because they're difficult*

*texts!* even in the twentieth century German original in which they are written (which is obviously not Goethe's German! *natürlich!*). And an English translation of Martin Heidegger's difficult texts is bound to be as challenging, as difficult (and, sometimes, as obscure) as Martin Heidegger's texts themselves. Which doesn't mean that the contemporary translator should simply give up on the difficult texts as incomprehensible or un-translatable. But the translator should realize, in translating these difficult texts, it's probably not possible to reduce them to a simple, straightforward, unequivocal translation; to a simple-minded crib or definitive gloss; or to what's called, in the Western tradition of "Great Authors," *an authorized translation*; even when that translation is authorized by the twentieth century's Greatest Philosopher: Martin Heidegger himself.

And so, because Martin Heidegger's texts are difficult (beyond most texts) to translate, it's maybe uncharitable to find fault with Andrew J. Mitchell's translation of Martin Heidegger's *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*.<sup>3</sup> This is one of Heidegger's most difficult collections because it contains some of his most inscrutable, elusive texts (like "Das Ding") which carry his cryptical, elliptical word-play to strange heights (or depths?) of paradoxical simplicity and abstrusity (simple example: *Das Ding dingt*: the thing things)<sup>4</sup> and, at the same time, also contains some of Martin Heidegger's most directly political texts (like "Die Gefahr"), wherein Martin Heidegger (for maybe the only time after his brief controversial endorsement of the German National Socialist Party and its Führer, Adolf Hitler, in 1933) discusses diffi-

cult issues like the Nazi holocaust and the Jewish Shoah (“the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps”) which he’s frequently been accused, by French and American critics like Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Francois Lyotard, or Jacques Derrida, during “The Heidegger Controversy” of the 1980s, of disguising, repressing, ignoring, or evading altogether.<sup>5</sup> And it’s that strange combination of esoteric, almost mystical texts (like “Die Kehre”) with scathingly direct political texts (like “Das Gestell”) that makes *Einblick in das, was ist* (along with, say, “Überwindung der Metaphysik” and “Zur Seinsfrage”) among the most important (and most neglected) of Martin Heidegger’s post-*Kehre* texts. And also among the most difficult to translate.

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Translations prove untranslatable not because of the difficulty, but because of the all-too-great fleetingness of the sense that clings to them . . .

Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”

In this respect, it’s difficult to find fault with Andrew J. Mitchell’s translation of, for example, “Das Ding”<sup>6</sup> which is a model of simplicity and clarity even when tracking Martin Heidegger’s attempts to pin down “the thingliness of the thing” (*Das Dinghafte des Dinges, das Dingliche am Ding*, etc.), through the Old High German, Greek, Latin, and Indo-Germanic languages; and thus to disclose, behind the scientific observation or objective representation of the thing, the Neo-Kantian “thing-in-itself” (*das Ding an sich*).<sup>7</sup> The critic might quibble, for example, with Mitchell’s translation of “*ein Stellen*” (“a placement, presentation, positioning,” etc.) as “a posing”<sup>8</sup> but that’s a minor point. And certainly, Andrew J. Mitchell’s translation of “Die Kehre”<sup>9</sup> compares favorably, for simplicity and clarity, with its previous translation by William Lovitt as “The Turning”<sup>10</sup> which is admittedly prone to that convoluted language (characterized by an excessively clotted style and multiply-hyphen-

ated portmanteau words) that provokes accusations, among Martin Heidegger’s critics, of persiflage and obscurantism; and probably causes many neophyte readers to simply throw up their hands (and throw down the book!) in despair of ever penetrating the superficially impenetrable jargon. For example: “In-flashing is the disclosing coming-to-pass within Being itself. Disclosing coming-to-pass (*Ereignis*) is bringing to sight that brings into its own (*eignende Eraugnis*)” (24 English words).<sup>11</sup> Which translates: “*Einblitz ist Ereignis im Sein selbst. Ereignis ist eignende Eraugnis*” (10 German words).<sup>12</sup> Andrew J. Mitchell disposes of this passage as follows: “Flashing entry is the event of appropriation in beyng itself” (10 English words!).<sup>13</sup> Whether something gets glossed over or lost in translation here is a further question that might still be asked. Still, the translation is, by comparison, clarity and simplicity itself.

But, as has been said of T. W. Adorno’s dialectical style in some of his more difficult texts, what Fredric Jameson calls “the practice of style” is often crucial to the text itself; and its difficulty and density essential to whatever “sense” or “meaning” the diligent reader might extract from it. And if the diligent reader takes time to study the Mitchell translation and the Lovitt translation of “The Turn” or “The Turning” and to compare them with Martin Heidegger’s German text of “Die Kehre,” the scrupulous reader will probably notice that something *does* get lost in reducing the German text to a simple, straightforward English translation; and that, sometimes, the off-putting style of the Lovitt translation is actually *to be preferred* to the Mitchell version (despite or even *because of* its difficulty); because it more closely approximates the difficulty of Martin Heidegger’s original text. Or maybe (better yet!), the reader might conclude, *a third translation!* (or a fourth? or a fifth? etc.) might still be necessary before Martin Heidegger’s text has been made accessible in an English vernacular that neither *distracts from* the text by its excessively complicated jargon; nor *detracts from* the text by reducing it to a decep-

tively simple, straightforward translation, at the cost of diminishing “the essential more-than-meaningfulness” (*die wesenhafte Mehrdeutigkeit*)<sup>14</sup> of the multiplicitous, polysemous German original.

For example, the critic might compare the opening paragraphs of William Lovett’s “The Turning” and Andrew J. Mitchell’s “The Turn” with the first paragraph of Martin Heidegger’s “Die Kehre” and ask whether either of the available translations really captures the complexity and economy of the original German text, which, despite its difficulty, really says much more with fewer words than either of the English versions. First, the Lovitt:

The essence of Enframing is that setting-upon gathered into itself which entraps the truth of its own coming to presence with oblivion. This entrapping disguises itself, in that it develops into the setting in order of everything that presences as standing-reserve, establishes itself in the standing reserve and rules as that standing reserve. (55 words)<sup>15</sup>

The critic might be forgiven for remarking that, absent some gloss or crib that explains certain key words and phrases (“Enframing,” “setting-upon gathered into itself,” “coming to presence,” “standing reserve,” etc.), even the fairly erudite reader might find this passage well-nigh incomprehensible. And, in fact, William Lovett (probably anticipating this difficulty) does supply a somewhat lengthy footnote that again translates the passage *back into German!* (For example: *Wesen* = “coming to presence”; *das Ge-Stell* = “Enframing”; *Stellen* = “challenging setting-upon,” etc.); and still another footnote that translates “oblivion” both into *German* (*Vergessenheit*) and into *Greek!* (*aletheia*). Which finally leaves the diligent reader floundering in difficulties which are not in the original text; but actually represent the translator’s attempts to impose an interpretation on it that may (or may not?) correspond to “the author’s intention” or “the authoritative interpretation,” as discerned by a sympathetic reading of the German original.

And now the Mitchell:

The essence of positionality is the collected positioning that pursues its own essential truth with forgetfulness, a pursuit disguised in that it unfolds in the requisitioning of everything that presences as standing reserve, establishing itself in this and ruling as this. (41 words)<sup>16</sup>

Well, now! The Mitchell version is obviously simpler, clearer, and more economical than the Lovitt! (Isn’t it?) And yet, is it really any more comprehensible? Whether to the astute critic or to the common reader? And is there any less necessity for a gloss or crib to explain the obscure words (“positionality,” “collected positioning,” “requisitioning,” “standing reserve” etc.),<sup>17</sup> which, however simple and clear, appear somehow disconnected from their context and disjointed from their “sense” and “meaning”: like words floating in a void of abstraction and indeterminacy. If “Enframing” was vague, “positionality” is even vaguer. (At least “Enframing” was vivid and active! And also menacing . . .) And although “requisitioning” is a strong verb that somehow connects with “standing reserve,” it’s still not clear what’s being “requisitioned” (“everything that presences?”). Or what a “standing reserve” might be (a sanctuary for bystanders and loiterers?). Again, the critic might object, that, absent extensive background and further explication (which, to be fair, are also supplied by other essays in the collection), this passage too, borders on incomprehensibility. And, as the opening paragraph of a difficult essay, it leaves the scrupulous reader adrift and struggling to find his moorings; or simply clueless as to exactly *what* this difficult essay might actually be *about* . . .

And now, Martin Heidegger’s admittedly difficult German text:

Das Wesen des Gestells ist das in sich gesammelte Stellen, das seiner eigen Wesenswahrheit mit der Vergessenheit nachstellt, welches Nachstellen sich dadurch verstellt das es sich in das Bestellen alles Anwesenden als dem Bestand entfaltet, sich in diesem einrichtet und als dieser herrscht.<sup>18</sup>

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And, yes, the German text is difficult, too! (If not quite incomprehensible . . .) Even to a “native” German speaker! Because Martin Heidegger uses a whole string of German words (*das Gestell, Stellen, Nachstellen, Bestellen, Bestand*, etc.) in abstruse senses often distant from their basic dictionary definitions, which demand interpretation by the critic or reader. But, still, the German (or English?) reader who pays close attention to the German text immediately notices that these difficult words form semantic links in a signifying chain (as nominalized forms of the German verb *stellen*: “to set, place, position,” etc.), which guides the reader through the passage and provides clues to its “sense” or “meaning.” (E.g.: It’s about something that’s “set” or “placed” [*stellen*] or maybe “installed” [*einrichtet*] within existent beings [*Anwesenden*, “presences”] which somehow “pursues” [*nachstellt*] them and yet “disguises itself” [*sich . . . verstellt*] in “forgetfulness” [*Vergessenheit*] even as it “dominates” [*herrscht*] them. And so on . . .) And if the diligent bilingual reader is able to follow the elaborate twists and turns (tropes) of this signifying chain through the various slippages and slidings of its significations, the sympathetic reader can finally discern a coherent “meaning” (even a surplus or excess of “meaning”!) within the German text; which actually emerges from the text itself, instead of being imposed or extrapolated from the text by the translator or reader. Or so *this* translator and interpreter might like to think . . .

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A white flash! A white flash sparkled!  
Tatsuichiro Akizuki, *Concentric Circles of Death*<sup>19</sup>

The turning of the danger happens (*ereignet*) suddenly. In the turning, the lighting of the essence of being lights up. This sudden lighting-up is the lightning-flash (*das Blitzen*). When it lights up, it brings its own brightness with it. When the truth of being flashes in the turning of the danger, the essence of being lights up. Then the truth of the essence of being turns in . . .

When insight happens by itself (*sich ereignet*), the human being is stricken in essence by the flash of being. Human beings are caught in the flash of insight . . . (Heidegger, “*Die Kehre*”)<sup>20</sup>

But is the “sense” and “meaning” of this difficult passage really accessible to the reader (or translatable by the translator) without reference to Martin Heidegger’s contemporaneous texts? And without reference to its world-historical context? *Probably not . . .* Because, whatever Martin Heidegger’s attempts to make the text accessible to contemporary readers (or, maybe, by contrast, to make it inscrutable and inaccessible to certain readers . . .); and whatever the efforts of contemporary readers to sympathetically hermeneutically recover the “authoritative meaning” of the pristine “original” text; Heidegger’s essay, “*Die Kehre*,” like the entire text of *Einblick in das, was ist*; and like the closely related texts, “*Überwindung der Metaphysik*” and “*Zur Seinsfrage*,” is (in addition to being a strictly philosophical text) a cleverly coded political commentary (that is, what’s called an “Aesopian allegory”), which cryptically, elliptically, obliquely (but sometimes scathingly directly) refers to the horrifying political events of the World War II and Post War/Cold War era; with certain crucially placed references (like, for example, the references, in “*Das Ding*,” to “*der Explosion der Atombombe*” and “*einen Wasserstoffbombe*” as “the greatest horror” [*das Entsetzliche*]<sup>21</sup> to contemporary humanity), which key the attentive reader in (in characteristically cryptic Heideggerian fashion) to the scarcely “dis-concealed” (*un-verborgene*) or “un-veiled” (*ent-hüllt*) subtext behind the superficial text. Which is also, I’d argue, what’s behind the apparent obliquity and incomprehensibility of this first paragraph from “*Die Kehre*.” And the cryptic key to this particular Aesopian allegory is contained within that simple-seeming (but actually most difficult) quintessentially Heideggerian word: *Das Gestell* or *Das Gestell . . .*

When Martin Heidegger elsewhere refers to

*Das Gestell* (in, for example, “Zur Seinsfrage”), he’s describing what he calls “the subjectivity of the subject” or “the subjectivity (not subjectivity) of the essence of man”<sup>22</sup> that’s “in-stalled” or “im-planted” (by a species of Althusserian interpellation) within contemporary human beings as an effect of their “im-place-ment” (“en-framing”) within gridworks and networks of technological surveillance and control, which view all present existences and all human beings as simply disposable, expendable (human?) resources for use in what Ernst Junger (Martin Heidegger’s correspondent in “Zur Seinsfrage”) calls the “total mobilization” (*Totale Mobilmachung*)<sup>23</sup> of the World War II (and subsequent Post-War/Cold War) militarization effort. In this dystopian world (Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, etc.), “Western technology” as “completed metaphysics” or “completed nihilism” has so completely replaced what previously was called “nature” (φύσις) and “culture” (νόμος) and even what Martin Heidegger calls “being” (*das Sein*) that it has effectively become “being” for contemporary humanity;<sup>24</sup> and so completely dominates contemporary human beings that it appears as a “destiny” or “fate” (*Geschick*)<sup>25</sup> which compels human beings (through what Martin Heidegger, in “Überwindung der Metaphysik” calls the “will to will”)<sup>26</sup> without their being aware of this profoundly subconscious compulsion. What William Lovitt translates as “Enframing” and Andrew J. Mitchell as “positionality” (that is, *das Gestell*) is this terrible compulsion exerted upon contemporary human beings by the out-of-control technology of the Stalinist Communist state or the Nazi military regime and its Post-World War II counterparts; which is why it presents itself as what Martin Heidegger (citing Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Patmos”) calls “the danger” (*die Gefahr*) to contemporary humanity.

What does it mean, then, to say that for Martin Heidegger, Western technology “installs itself” or “implants itself” in contemporary humanity? It means that, in Martin Heidegger’s post-*Kehre* texts, Western technology as “*das*

*Gestell*” or “*das Ge-Stell*” so completely changes the way contemporary human beings perceive themselves as subjects/objects that it supersedes and replaces their wholistic human configuration (*die Gestalt*) with a technological simulacrum of the human type (*das Gestell*),<sup>27</sup> which is “the most extreme [*äußerste*] subjectivity that comes forth in the fulfillment of modern metaphysics”;<sup>28</sup> and which is *in-stalled* or *im-planted* within the brain, nerves, and body of the human being at such a profoundly subconscious or unconscious level that it becomes something like a technological prosthesis within the physical body of contemporary humanity. “Western technology” then also becomes something like a congenital disease or post-traumatic disorder within the biological and metaphysical human organism (the Cartesian *animal rationale*),<sup>29</sup> which can’t be simply “overcome” (*überwinden*) by contemporary human beings, but must be somehow “recuperated” (from) or “gotten over” (*verwinden*) in that “confrontation between technology and modern man” whose final result exceeds human knowledge or control. “Does this mean,” Martin Heidegger asks, “that the human [being] is powerless against technology and delivered over to it for better or worse? No,” he immediately answers; “it says the exact opposite.”<sup>30</sup> And yet, in a difficult passage whose “more-than-meaning-fullness” (or simply ambiguity?) causes problems for translators and interpreters, Martin Heidegger goes on to contradict himself again by insisting that “Technology, whose essence is being itself, can never be overcome [*überwunden*] by the human [being]. That would indeed mean that the human [being] would be the master of being.”<sup>31</sup> So how can it be (the translator or interpreter must ask) that technology can’t be “overcome” (*überwinden*): “conquered, mastered, surmounted,” etc.) by man, but still must be brought “spiritually in hand” (*geistig in die Hand*)<sup>32</sup> by human beings? As Martin Heidegger explains in this crucially difficult passage from “*Die Kehre*” (as translated by Andrew J. Mitchell):

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Thereby technology is not humanly overcome; much to the contrary, the essence of technology is converted [?] into its still-concealed truth. This conversion is similar to what occurs when, in the human realm, a pain is converted.<sup>33</sup>

The astute reader is here left asking: *Converted?* How can “a pain” be “converted”? Fortunately, William Lovitt’s translation gets closer to capturing the “sense” or “meaning” of this difficult passage; as follows:

technology will not be overcome (*überwunden*) by men. On the contrary, the coming to presence of technology will be surmounted (*verwunden*) in a way that restores it into its yet concealed truth. This restoring surmounting is similar to what happens when, in the human realm, one gets over grief or pain.<sup>34</sup>

The parenthetical note conveys to the critical reader that the key to this difficult passage is a correct translation of that favorite Heideggerian verb: *verwinden*. Unfortunately, this translation still obscures the simple, plain “meaning” of this crucially important passage by misconstruing that crucial verb (whose “meaning” is admittedly ambiguous even in the German original). But it also allows the diligent reader to arrive at a workable translation, which only requires changing a single key word (*verwunden*: recuperated!); as follows:

Technology will not be overcome by human beings. After all, that would mean human beings were the masters of being. . . . Technology will not be overcome by human beings. Instead, the essence of technology will be recuperated in a way that restores it to its still hidden truth. This recuperation is similar to what happens when a human being “gets over” grief or pain.

This translation is, hopefully, simpler, clearer, and more comprehensible than the previously available translations. (And, besides that, it even *makes sense!*). There’s still no substitute for old-fashioned “close reading” to catch the subtleties and nuances of certain key words (especially the *überwinden/verwinden* coupling) and compare them to other, equally difficult (but, finally, more accessible) pas-

sages in comparable texts; when sometimes a single key-word or catch-phrase (*verwunden!*) will make the translation “work” and open the text to a whole different interpretation. These simple guidelines for translators and interpreters of Martin Heidegger’s difficult texts might then also help the interpreter and translator to arrive at a simpler, clearer, and more accessible translation of the first paragraph from “Die Kehre”; as follows:

The essence of the in-stall-ation (*Das Gestell*) is the emplacement which gathers within itself and implants its own truth within forgetting. But this emplacement disguises itself in that it unfolds within the requisitioning of all present existences for stockpiling as standing reserves, installs itself within them and dominates them.

Well, okay. Yes, the passage is still obscure! But maybe not quite incomprehensible. Especially if the diligent reader remembers that the *in-stall-ation* or *im-plant-ation* (*das Ge-stell*) within “the subjectivity of the [human] subject,” which installs the human subject within technocratic gridworks and computer networks of surveillance and control, is also what allows “all present existences” (beings, things) to be tracked and traced through their “requisitioning” by the military-corporate authorities; and stockpiled in stockyards and warehouses (or in slave labor camps and concentration camps?) as simply expendable war-materials and disposable human resources for employment in the “total mobilization” of the technological military-industrial state. This is what Martin Heidegger, in “Überwindung der Metaphysik,” calls “the consumption of beings for the manufacturing of technology” (*der Verbrauch des Seienden für das Machen der Technik*);<sup>35</sup> which culminates in the reduction of the metaphysical human being (the Cartesian *animal rationale*) to “the most important raw material” (*der wichtigste Rohstoff*), “the subject of all consumption” (*das Subjekt alles Vernutzen*)<sup>36</sup>; or simply to “a laboring animal” (*arbeitenden Tier*)<sup>37</sup> in the Stalinist slave labor camps and the Nazi concentration camps of World War II.

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Martin Heidegger's "Die Kehre," then, besides being a difficult philosophical text, also proves to be a cleverly allegorically coded analysis of the technological infrastructure (surveillance systems and computer networks, etc.) of the contemporary totalitarian state and their effects on human subjects; which can be translated and interpreted ("read") as a prescient critique, not only of the Stalinist Soviet Communist state or the German National Socialist military regime; but of the Post War/Cold War national security state and its contemporary counterparts in the twenty-first century Post-Cold War world. To translate and interpret this text, it's helpful to have some background both in Martin Heidegger's contemporaneous works ("Überwindung der Metaphysik," "Zur Seinsfrage," etc.); and in the world-historical context of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany and the Post World War II/Cold War world. Because Martin Heidegger's texts (like all texts?) are not just scholarly, academic texts; but *political texts-in-the world*; whose "sense" and "meaning" is inescapably caught up in the cataclysmic events of their world-historical situation. Martin Heidegger's texts are "worldly" and "histori[c]al" texts, both in their own world and ours. But Martin Heidegger's texts (again, like all texts) are also subject to those catastrophic irruptions of contemporary events (World War II, the Nazi Holocaust and Jewish Shoah, or the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki)<sup>38</sup> into our mortal human lives; which inexplicable events subtend the "sense" and "meaning" of that most difficult (and most un-translatable?) Heideggerian word: *Ereignis* . . .

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The task of the translator consists in finding, in the peculiar intention of the translated language, something in which an echo of the original is awakened . . .

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

What, then, is the task of the translator? Is it simply to supply a simple, clear, and accessible translation of the foreign text that's as eas-

ily readable as possible? Or is it, instead, to be completely faithful to the subtleties and nuances of the pristine, original text? And to spare no circumlocution or multi-hyphenated word, to eschew no excess verbiage (and to fear no criticism or parody!), to bring the difficult text into the contemporary vernacular, as completely whole and intact as possible? Although there's probably no simple, straightforward answer to this simple question; nonetheless, two preliminary points might be tentatively made before simply giving up on Martin Heidegger's more difficult texts. Or before finally settling for contemporary translations, which (despite the best intentions) often obscure and occlude (instead of clarifying) the complex, multifaceted "meaning(s)" of the difficult text.

(1) Given that Saussurean linguistics and French post-structuralist criticism have established that there's no straightforward, one-to-one correspondence between "signifier" and "signified" (or "signifier" and "referent") in a particular language; much less between different words (even etymologically related words) in diverse different languages; the old-fashioned ideal of a straightforward, one-to-one translation of even a comparatively simple "original" text into a "foreign" language is essentially (thankfully!) obsolete (whether it ever was really practicable or workable, or not). *And yet* . . .

(2) It's still probably preferable to strive, wherever possible, for a simple, clear, and direct translation; to avoid confusing the reader with unreadable circumlocutions; to avoid projecting or imposing a "foreign" interpretation on the text; and, especially, to seek, whenever possible, the best word (*le mot juste*) for each "original" word (which isn't always the same word, every time!); since sometimes a single word or simple phrase can make the difference between rendering the whole passage incomprehensible; or suddenly disclosing its cryptic, allegorically coded "meaning," its profoundly multifaceted "sense," in that brief lightning-like moment of "clearing" or "lighting" ("the lightning-flash of the truth of be-

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ing”)<sup>39</sup> which is one of the greatest pleasures of Martin Heidegger’s texts.

If the contemporary translator were to follow Martin Heidegger’s own example in translating, for example, Pre-Socratic Greek texts (“Der Spruch des Anaximander,” or the Heraclitus fragments) into that peculiar dialect of German metaphysics sometimes called “Heideggerian” (or “Heidegger-ese”?), the contemporary translator might well decide that the most obscure, esoteric, abstruse, and verbose translation was the best translation possible; since Martin Heidegger seldom employs simply *one* German word for *one* Greek word where *three or four!* might be (arguably?) better. But the Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly translation of the *Contributions to Philosophy (Of Enowning)* has made contemporary translators wary (and with good reason!) of excessive devotion to “the master’s” elaborate word-play and abstruse neologisms, his complex portmanteau words and multi-hyphenations; which may finally render a text, not simply difficult, but finally un-readable, whether in English translation or in the German original.

In “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” Walter Benjamin argues (if I read him aright) that the translatability or un-translatability (*Übersetzbarkeit* or *Un-Übersetzbarkeit*) of an “original” text depends not just upon whether it finds its sympathetic reader or perfect translator in future generations; and whether it lets itself (*or demands to?*) be translated; but also upon whether it “speaks to” the reader in the translated language. Because, despite what Benjamin believes is a certain seed (*Kern*,

*Samen*) of “pure speech” (*reine Sprache*) or “true speech” (*wahre Sprache*) in every language that allows their kinship (*Verwandtschaft*) and convergence (*Konvergenz*) in a perfect transparency and internal coherency of mystical intention: which is “*what they want to say*” (*was sie wollen sagen*) . . . Still, every text is always *changed in translation*; and there’s never a strict one-to-one correspondence (what Benjamin calls *Ahnlichkeit*) between the words and phrases of the original text; and the corresponding words and phrases in the translation.<sup>40</sup>

It could even be said that all texts (whether simple or difficult) are *simply untranslatable*; because it’s never possible to write or speak (“say”) exactly the same thing in a different language. And especially with difficult texts, it’s impossible to duplicate, in translation, the complicated etymological word-play and morphological and phonetic changes worked by the difficult text in the original language. But, still, in the final analysis, the proof of the success (or un-success?) of the translation is not whether it’s “faithful to” or “identical with” the original; but whether it “works” in the translated language; whether it “speaks to” the reader; and whether it awakens in the reader an echo of the original text, despite being translated into a strange, “foreign” language.

Which isn’t to say that translation and interpretation are a matter of mystical illumination, as Walter Benjamin (and Martin Heidegger?) sometime seem to suggest. The task of the translator is still *work*. But when *it works*, it should still *feel like* mystical illumination. Both to the translator; and to the reader.

## NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Basic Works* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 324–25.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
3. Martin Heidegger’s *Einblick in das, was ist (Insight Into What Is)* was first delivered as a cycle of four lectures at the Bremen Club in 1949. At that time, Martin Heidegger was still recuperating from the Post-War de-Nazification hearings and was barred from teaching at university. For the circumstances behind the lectures, see “*Ruckfall ins Gestell*,” *Der Spiegel*

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- 14 (June 4, 1950). [www.spiegel.de/print/d-44447837.html](http://www.spiegel.de/print/d-44447837.html).
4. German text from Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Gunter Neske Pfullingen, 1954), 172; English translation: *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, trans. Andrew J. Mitchell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 12.
  5. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Doing Wrong," in *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 34; Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews,"* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); and Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). "The Heidegger Controversy" has recently been revived by publication of Emmanuel Faye's *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For responses to Faye, see Carlin Romano, "Heil Heidegger!" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 18, 2009) (<http://chronicle.com/article/Heil-Heidegger-/48806/>); Peter E. Gordon's review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (March 13, 2010) (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24316/>); Gregory Fried, "A Letter to Emmanuel Faye," *Philosophy Today* 55 (Fall 2011): 219–52; Johannes Fritsche, "Heidegger's *Being and Time* and National Socialism," *Philosophy Today* 59 (Fall 2012): 255–84; and "Braucht die Philosophie den Nazi Heidegger?" *Die Welt* (December 15, 2009) (<http://www.welt.de/kultur/article5528827>).
  6. Translated as "The Thing," *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 5–22.
  7. Martin Heidegger, "Das Ding," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Gunter Neske Pfullingen, 1954), 165, 166; English translation in Mitchell, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 6.
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. "The Turn," *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 64–73.
  10. Martin Heidegger, "The Turning," trans. William Lovitt, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 36–49.
  11. *Ibid.*, 45.
  12. Heidegger, "Die Kehre," 44.
  13. Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 70.
  14. Martin Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (New Haven: College and University Press, 1958), 104.
  15. "The Turning," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 36–37.
  16. Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 64.
  17. In fact, Mitchell's translation of *The Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* does contain a "Translators's Foreword," an "Editor's Afterword," and both a "German-English Glossary" and an "English-German Glossary." But besides wondering if this "dangerous supplement" doesn't unnecessarily impose a translator's interpretation on the reader, the critic might also question whether the Heideggerian lexicon can be "nailed down" by the strict one-to-one correspondence between German and English words Mitchell's textual apparatus prescribes for it. For example, the German word, "*Verwindung*," which Mitchell translates as "conversion," can mean "surmounting" (Lovitt), "restoration" (Kluback and Wilde), "distortion" (*Langenschiedt's Dictionary*), "recuperation" (my translation), or "to get over" (*Klett's Dictionary*), and other things, besides! depending on subtleties and nuances of context.
  18. *Die Technik und die Kehre*, (Tübingen: Gunter Neske Pfullingen, 1962), 37.
  19. Cited in Galway Kinnell, "The Fundamental Project of Technology," in *The Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 47.
  20. Martin Heidegger, "Die Kehre," in *Die Technik und Die Kehre*, 43, 45. Translation mine.
  21. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 164. This passage is deleted from the Mitchell translation.
  22. *The Question of Being*, 55.
  23. *Ibid.*, 40, 41.
  24. Cf. "The Turning," 44; "The Turn," 68–69.
  25. Cp. "The Turning," 37 and n. 3; "The Turn," 64–65. Martin Heidegger's employment of the German words, *Geschick* (sometimes translated "destiny") or *Schicksal* ("fate") is often criticized for the fatalistic ("Nazi"?) implications of those words. See, for example, Fritsche, "Heidegger's *Being and Time* and National Socialism," 255, 269. I'd argue, by contrast, that by repeatedly twisting and bending the semantic "meaning" of those words, Martin Heidegger is actually trying to wrestle them out of their "Nazi" context and employ them in entirely different senses. But I'm not sure that's made clear by Mitchell's "dispensation."

## THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR

26. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 87–89.
27. Cf. *The Question of Being*, 31–69; esp. 63.
28. *Ibid.*, 55.
29. Cf. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 75–76.
30. “The Turn,” 64.
31. *Ibid.*, 65.
32. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 5; “Die Frage nach der Technik,” in *Die Technik und die Kehre*, 7.
33. “The Turn,” 45.
34. “The Turning,” 37.
35. “Overcoming Metaphysics,” in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 103; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 91.
36. “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 86, 104; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 72, 90.
37. *Ibid.*, 72.
38. This is not the place to discuss the irruptions of contemporary events into Martin Heidegger’s texts, which I comment on at greater length in my forthcoming book, *Questioning Martin Heidegger: On Western Metaphysics, Buddhist Ethics, and the Fate of the Sentient Earth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013). It suffices to observe that the *Der Spiegel* reporter who attended Martin Heidegger’s first presentation of the lecture “Die Kehre” noted that: “*Er [Heidegger] vergaß nicht die Atombombe zu erwähnen als einen Gestell, in dem sich alle Dämonie des Technischen zusammendrängt.*” On the current reception of Martin Heidegger’s “*Die Kehre*” in the German anti-nuclear movement, see “*Heidegger’s ‘Kehre’ und die Gefahren der Atomkraft,*” *Die Welt* (June 3, 2011). <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article-13405347>.
39. “The Turn,” 70.
40. Walter Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), 56–69. Translations mine.

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