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Hegel and/in/on Translation

Edited by Saša Hrnjez and Elena Nardelli

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3. HEGEL TRANSLATED

IN CONVERSATION WITH HEGEL: A TRANSLATOR'S STORY

by George di Giovanni*

Abstract. *Moving from the author's personal experience with translations into English of some of Hegel's and Jacobi's texts, the article reflects on the nature of philosophical translations and the nature of Hegel's philosophical language itself. In that regard, central in the article is the author's translation of Hegel's* Science of Logic*, which is approached as a double conversation: a conversation with ordinary language and a conversation with the classical metaphysics. The author argues that Hegel's* Logic *itself is a work of translation from the historical discourse into the norms of objective presence. To render the conversational character of* Logic *in English is to find the right logical rhythm of its translation.*

Keywords. *Translation; Logic; Conversation; Rhythm; Language*

hèn tò sophón, epístasthai gnómen, hotée ekubérnese pánta dià pánton
Heraclitus, Fragment 41[1]

Since this is a story, I must chronicle some facts first. Albeit *romanzata*, the story is still *storia*. At the 1978 meeting of the Hegel Society of America held at Pennsylvania State University, John Burbidge of Trent University (Peterborough, Ontario), like me a sometime student of Emil Fackenheim in Toronto, called a meeting of all interested in Hegel but dispersed in the many colleges and universities in Ontario. I was from Montréal, Québec, but attended

* McGill University

[1] «Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things».

the meeting just the same. At the meeting Burbidge pointed out that there were quite a number of students and professors interested in German Idealism in general and Hegel in particular but, because of geography, seldom had a chance to get together and discuss issues of common interest. He suggested that all interested set up regular meetings at some agreed upon place, precisely in order to engage in philosophical conversation. He also proposed that, as catalyst for the meetings and ensuing discussions, we undertake the translation into English of some text of Hegel. This was a capital idea that was received with enthusiasm. Publication of the eventual product was not in the cards at that point – only translation as dialogical exercise. We met for the first time at Trinity College in the University of Toronto, hosted by Kenneth Schmitz, a native of Saskatchewan who had flown a full complement of missions over Europe for the Canadian Royal Air Force during the war and was then senior professor of philosophy at the College. Trinity College became our regular meeting place for many subsequent years. The text that we chose was Hegel's unpublished Jena System of 1804-5 (there was a recent critical edition of the text[2]). The intention at first was to translate only the Logic part, but, as we got through it, the logical rhythm of the text naturally led to the Metaphysics[3]. When that too was completed, since we had a carefully worked out translation at hand, we decided to make it available to all interested. It was published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 1986 with the financial support of both Trent and McGill Universities[4].

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Jenaer Systementwürfe II*. Vol. 7, ed. by R.-P. Horstmann and J.H. Trede, Hamburg, Meiner, 1971.

[3] We used as occasional control the French translation that became available in 1980 (G.W.F. Hegel, *Logique et Metaphysique (Jena 1804-1805)*, translated with introduction and notes by D. Souche-Dagues, commentary by A. Kaan, Paris, Gallimard, 1980). The Italian translation by a team under the direction of Franco Chiereghin unfortunately came to our notice only too late: *Logica e metafisica di Hegel (1804/05)*, Trento, Verifiche, 1982.

[4] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Jena System, 1804-5: Logic and Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. by J.W.

Of all the participants, H.S. Harris was the academically most prominent. In the course of our many translation meetings, in incidental conversations with him, I realized that we were both frustrated by the lack in English translation of such post-Kantians as Reinhold, Maimon, Schulze, and Beck. These authors might be of limited philosophical interest *per se*. Nonetheless, post-Kantian developments would not have been the same without them. We agreed to cooperate in the production of an anthology that would include representative excerpts of their works. The anthology was eventually published in 1985 and still is in wide use in North America[5].

More significant is that in the production of this work I became aware of Jacobi's affinity, but at great distance, with Hegel. Jacobi was at the time an author little known in the English world except as the object of criticism by Kant and other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment figures. But the main interest in this is that the new challenge that Jacobi's texts presented led me to reflect on the nature of language itself with consequences, as I shall explain, that bore on Hegel's Logic. From the Trinity College experience I had drawn rules that stayed with me in all other translation projects. For instance, one should never translate two German words with distinctive meanings with the same English word[6]. On the

Burbidge and G. di Giovanni, with Introduction by H.S. Harris, Kingston-Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986.

[5] *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism,* translated with critical notes and introductory studies by G. di Giovanni and H.S. Harris (originally published, 1985); new revised edition, ed. by G. di Giovanni, Indianapolis-Cambridge, Hackett, 2000.

[6] *Beziehung* and *Verhältnis* were the most significant case in the *Jena Logic/Metaphysics*. They are regularly rendered in English both as 'relation'. But this is wrong, at least so far as Hegel is concerned, for at issue in *Beziehung* is a relation between two terms that nonetheless retain a distinct content of their own that makes the relation external to them. In *Verhältnis*, on the other hand, the terms are absorbed into the relation itself with no remainder. Despite their being related, the two terms must therefore be kept in English visibly distinct. In the *Jena Logic/Metaphysics*, the shift by Hegel from one term to the other

other hand, it is legitimate to render one German word with several in English when there is no single English one that would convey all the nuances of the German, provided however that the chosen English words have a family meaning affinity with the German original and between themselves. This was one rule. There is also the fact that English does not support the long and intricate sentence structures possible in German. Another rule is that it is indeed legitimate, even necessary for the sake of accurate rhetorical resonance between the two languages, to break up single German sentences into several in English. But it is equally imperative that the resulting fragmentary sentences be so knit together rhetorically as to deliver the same thrust as the single German sentence. If this is not properly done, the original meaning becomes diffused, at time even obscured.

These, and other, were useful rules. But there was more at stake in Jacobi's prose that presented a new challenge. It was not just a matter of dealing with the usual difficulties of parsing sprawling German sentences and controlling a complex, at times idiomatic and not always internally consistent vocabulary. For the translator of Jacobi the challenge was to find the right language rhythm that would have him indeed be heard conversing in English, but as intervening in a conversation still audibly German. Schelling has the right formula for what makes conversational style essentially *conversational*. As he said, speaking of dialogues, «the end of a philosophical dialogue lies in itself: it can never serve a purpose

marked indeed a significant shift from one level of categories to another. We settled on 'connection' for *Beziehung* and 'relation' for *Verhältnis*. A reviewer of the eventually published translation criticized the translators for not having adopted a more idiomatic English, offering a possible alternative translation of a passage to illustrate his criticism. The irony is that the chosen passage was precisely the one in which Hegel was shifting from *Beziehung* to *Verhältnis*, a point that the reviewer totally obscured by rendering both with the same 'relation'. *Gegenstand* and *Objekt*, both normally translated into English as 'object', were another case in point.

outside itself»[7]. This explained the difference between Jacobi's style and that of some of his contemporaries I had translated. Unlike Jacobi, these were all academic philosophers, Reinhold being the primary example. The purpose of their language lay in a system of thought that transcended it, and which they intended as self-justifying independently of the medium in which it was presented. The purpose of Jacobi's, on the contrary, lay in its effectiveness at dismantling his opponents' positions by confronting them at a personal level, making the issue of truth itself a personal affair. This was an effectiveness demonstrated historically, at the level of actual discourse.

Whether I succeeded at crafting the right language rhythm for Jacobi in English is not of concern here. More to the point is that years later, after I contributed to the Cambridge edition of works of Kant in English[8] (an author whose style is definitely non-conversational), and when I thought that translation labour had ended for me, I was asked to retranslate Hegel's Greater Logic for Cambridge University Press, and, on a day when the gods were obviously not on my side, I agreed. Hegel is the concern. I have already repeatedly alluded to him by the use of the word 'rhythm' which he himself used to describe the movement of his logical discourse[9]. Unlike most of his contemporaries in philosophy Hegel's imagery is musical rather than spatial[10]. What was the style most appropriate to him?

[7] In *Philosophie und Religion*. I suspect this is why Schelling's *Bruno*, while written in dialogue format, is in no way 'conversational'.

[8] I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology,* vol. VI of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, translated and edited by A.W. Wood and G. di Giovanni. Included is my translation with introduction of *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* and *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[9] *Wissenschaft der Logik* (1832), GA 21.38.

[10] He was an opera buff. Cfr. J. Reid, *Language and System in Hegel*, Toronto, University Press, 2007 (Chapter 7: Music and Monosyllables: The Language of Pleasure and Necessity).

This brought me back to Jacobi. I earlier mentioned his affinity at great distance with Hegel[11]. It lies in that Hegel's philosophical language, like Jacobi's is also discursive[12]. Whether at a more historical mode in the Phenomenology, or strictly at the conceptual in the Logic, Hegel seeks the truth by reflecting upon a conversation regarding what it means to be human (in effect, what it means to be rational) that has been going on *ab origine*, picking it up at around 1807 and offering his own take on it. This, I must stress, is quite different from what Reinhold had been doing earlier, taking his clue from Kant's Dialectic of Reason. Reinhold was simply pitting opposing philosophical positions against each other in order to uncover the one that would comprehend both; finally, the one that comprehend them all and would thus put an end to the process of dialectical opposition leading up to its discovery. Still in the spirit of classical metaphysics, Reinhold was seeking the one truth that would bring to conclusion any conversation about it by transcending conversation altogether. Hegel's contribution to the historical/conceptual conversation he was reflecting on was rather to add self-comprehension to it without however ever transcending it *as conversation*. Self-comprehension was the goal. And this was a point that brought me back, earlier than the Jacobi translation, to the Jena Logic/Metaphysics where the two, Logic *and* Metaphysics, had begun (but only *begun* in that text) to run into one another. What did that mean?

I am divagating from a story about translation to a story about understanding Hegel. But translation work is philosophical work.

[11] But note what Jacobi had to say regarding Hegel at the end of his life: «He [Hegel] may well be right, and I would dearly love to undertake with him, once more, a thorough research into what the power of thought can yield itself, were not the head of the old man too weak for the job» (*Letter to Johann Neeb, 30 May 1847*, in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's auslesener Briefwechsel*, ed. by F. Roth, vol II, Leipzig, Verlag Fleischer, 1825-1827, pp. 467-468).

[12] I deliberately avoid the term 'dialectical' which, although perfectly legitimate in itself, is laden with what I believe are misleading conceptual assumptions, mostly the product of Marxist ideology.

I shall say in a moment that, in an extended sense, Hegel's Logic is itself a work of translation. The modal categories are at issue. Even in my earliest doctoral study in Toronto on the category of contingency in Hegel I realized that the key difference between Hegel's metaphysics and classical metaphysics lies precisely in the role that modality plays in each. Modal categories are of course the warp and woof of ordinary language. We could not discourse without them. But in day-to-day talk, or for that matter, also in the sciences, the objects of discourse are particularized, and the discourse itself is constrained by immediate, yet accepted contexts. In the absence of these, the discourse remains diffused and ultimately confused. Nonetheless, there is continuity between contexts, between object and object, discourse and discourse, because of the common social/historical space within which they take place – common despite internal differences due to fundamental but still only more or less reflective commitments to what counts as real. The science of Metaphysics, as contrasted with other sciences, reflects on precisely such commitments, and it can well be the case that in so doing it makes commitments of its own that set it at odds with ordinary language praxis.

The second Book of Hegel's Greater Logic is significant precisely in this context[13]. At issue are the categories that govern our common language about things, that it, the basic norms of thought we have to abide by in order to let their presence and their doings with each other to be intelligible – in brief, in order to define them. In that Book Hegel is actually carrying on a double conversation. One is with ordinary language. Its intent is to demonstrate reflectively (in effect, by an analysis of the meaning of the categories that for Hegel go under the general title of «Of Essence») what ordinary language already knows at the level of actual discourse. Namely, determination on the basis of such categories fails to render the presence of an object intelligible precisely as a thing *in itself*. The

[13] This is also the case of Book I; indeed, the whole Objective Logic. The counterparts in the Phenomenology are Sections I-III.

experience of the object thus remains affected by an element of immediacy, its presence itself a fact that repeatedly calls for further elucidation and more reflective determination only to yield, however, ever more pervasive immediacy. For ordinary discourse this immediacy is, of course, no problem. On the contrary, it is at the source of the variety of explanatory idioms, even the variety of sciences and the transactions between them, that make for its richness.

The other conversation is with the metaphysics I have been calling 'classical'. Here the intent is quite different, for its commitment is to objectify the 'thing' *in itself*, in effect to contain without remainder the moment of facticity which is irreducible in historical experience. In Kant's terminology, this is to respond to the universalizing interests of reason relying, however, on the exclusively explanatory categories of the understanding. And the conversation's intent, just like that of Kant's Critique of Reason, is to disabuse metaphysics of the possibility of precisely this commitment. For the attempt at realizing it leads to the introduction of the language of the Absolute which, on the face of it, seems indeed to bring objective determination to completion but in fact reintroduces immediacy in the most pervasive and insidious manner. For in the Absolute the modal distinctions, just because no longer taken in their adequate particular contexts, are relativized. As Hegel puts it, the necessary is just as well the contingent; the actual, the possible. The modal distinctions lose objective validity[14]. But since they are of the very texture of ordinary discourse, so does the latter. Discourse is precipitated into the *Abgrund der Vernunft* – the philosophers' *Vernunft*, of course. For this reason, classical metaphysics, when it does not lapse into scepticism, must do away with words and ultimately rely for its validation on intuition. It inevitably becomes dogmatic.

Here is where Hegel made his move that explains why for him Metaphysics can be such only as Logic. The key word for the move

[14] Indeed, for both Spinoza and Kant the modal categories have no objective validity.

is Spirit. It is a matter of revisiting and expressing reflectively the attitude towards reality that motivates ordinary language at root. The mistake of dogmatism is to believe that being is *all-there-at-once*, like a well-rounded sphere; that the currency of truth, in Lessing's words that Hegel repeats, is a 'ready-made coin'. In fact, as ordinary language attests in practice and in the Logic is already expressed at the beginning, being is intelligible only as *determined*; yet it is *whatever* it is only by becoming *it*, i.e., only by way of achievement. The Logic systematically details the modalities of precisely this process of determination, the effect of which is to bring to achieved being ever greater self-containedness of becoming and consequent stabler identity of being. But the crucial point is that only in the medium of typically human existence, that is, in the medium of language and as the object of the sciences, does *being* achieve the kind of self-containedness, the kind of intelligibility, that classical metaphysics attributed to it as ready-made at the beginning[15]. This is why the second Book of Hegel's Logic culminates with the language of the Absolute, but only in order to supercede it and give place to that of Spirit. Only in the Word is being rendered intelligible. Hegel's Logic is indeed *logic*, in the sense that it is a reflection on the rhythm that holds discourse together. But it is this rhythm that generates the intelligible space within which *being* – I mean, 'things' in general – can become the object of particularized discovery, i.e., the object of the sciences. In this sense, and in this sense alone, Hegel's Logic, *as logic*, equally is *theory of being*, Metaphysics.

With this I am back to the theme of translation. I still have to make good on the claim that Hegel's Logic is itself translation. Hegel, who once said that translation is the greatest gift that can

[15] Since this is only a 'story', I am conflating Logic and Phenomenology, admittedly only gesturing at precision of language without actually delivering it. Regarding the *Science of Logic*, I welcome Robert Pippin's recent *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysic in* The Science of Logic, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019, in my opinion a truly masterful work.

be bestowed on a people[16], says of the Logic that it is the realm of shadows. Indeed it is, for its language is a discourse that has itself as object. Its subject-matter are the norms of objective presence by which ordinary language abides instinctively as it seeks in actual praxis to retain unity and openness of discourse, but only as abstracted in themselves, as products of reflective art and therefore only the shadows of historical discourse. Yet, in its shadowy ways the Logic's discourse is nonetheless concrete; it has a content, for it translates the historical discourse, which is about actual things, into one which, as just said, is about norms of objective presence – about the possibility, therefore, of any discourse as such. Unlike historical discourse it is, therefore, complete and self-contained, the only one that can be totally so. It is in this sense that the Logic is a work of translation. To be engaged in it is like exercising a new dexterity. It is not a matter of being able to apply its categories to historical discourse but to contemplate rather what it means to be discursive, that is, to be rational. To play on an image of Hegel, it is the language we speak on speculative Sunday to take a break from the work-day of the week.

These are the considerations I had in mind when trying to envisage the appropriate style to give Hegel's Logic in English. The main preoccupation was to make it sound like the treatise on language that it is rather than the onto-theological treatise that it has traditionally been taken to be but is not. Whether I succeeded is of no concern here[17]. This has been only a translator's story. At any rate, much theorizing has already been done about translation in

[16] In a letter to J.H. Voss, the translator of Homer, Hegel says that just as Luther made the Bible speak in German, he, Voss, had made Homer do the same, and this is «das größte Geschenk das einem Volk gemacht werden kann». We have only the sketch of the letter. *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. by J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg, Meiner, 1952, pp. 99-100 (n. 55, May 1805).

[17] I have made mistakes which I have publicized so far in *The Owl of Minerva* and intend to continue publicizing as I further become aware of them.

general, on occasion even illuminating[18]. For my part, in my long involvement with it – an involvement, incidentally, that always came by the way, as a side interest dictated by circumstances – I have always preferred to cast it in Biblical imagery. I see translation as a work of making amends. Adam and Eve sinned by wanting to be like God, and in their pride they first saw themselves naked. They saw their finitude. Their descendants sinned again at Babel. I like to believe that in their pride they first heard themselves speak in tongues that set them apart, for they had wanted to build a tower that reached out to the heavens and from there proclaim the truth of things in one Word, like God. But they discovered that they were bound to finite sounds. There, I like to believe, the work of translation began, which is the wage of pride. It is difficult, even painful work, no doubt, but there is satisfaction to it, for it is after all possible to be like God. It's just a matter of being humble about it.

[18] Jonathan Rée's *The Translation of Philosophy* is a very readable and informative study of the practice of translation. It shows how translation norms have historically changed; how translating philosophy is an art all its own, giving examples of the difficulties specific to the translation of different languages as well as instances of notorious mistakes (J. Rée, *The Translation of Philosophy*, «New Literary History», XXXII (2), 2001, pp. 223-257). For another interesting study that shows how translation can be influenced by the political climate of the day, using Terry Pinkard's recent translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a case in point, see D. Charlston, *The politics of Pinkard's translation of Hegel's Phenomenology*, «Radical Philosophy», CLXXXVI, 2014: http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/translatorial-hexis.

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