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Hölderlin's Red Word

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La littérature, c'est la contestation de la philologie.
Michel Foucault

Around Easter 1804, Johann Heinrich Voss, who had gained renown with his German translations of *The Odyssey* (1781) and *The Iliad* (1793), wrote to a friend:

What do you say of Hölderlin's Sophocles? Is the man really crazy or does he only pretend to be . . . The other night while I was having supper with Schiller and Goethe at Goethe's house, I regaled both poets with the question. Read for instance the fourth chorus from his *Antigone*. You should have seen the way Schiller laughed; or *Antigone*, line 21: 'Was ists? du scheinst ein rotes Wort zu färben.' (What's happening? you seem to colour a red word.) I offered this passage to Goethe as a contribution to his *Optics*.²

In July of the same year, the philosopher Schelling wrote to Hegel about these translations and their author, who was a mutual friend: 'His translation of Sophocles shows he is a complete degenerate.'³

One of the most laughable products of pedantry.

Had Sophocles spoken to his Athenians in so stiff, so drawling and so un-Greek a fashion as these translations are un-German, his audience would have left the theatre at a run!

In every respect, Mr. Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles' two plays must be included among the worst.

It's up to the reader to guess whether Mr. Hölderlin has undergone metamorphosis, or whether he wished by a veiled satire to appeal to the public's depraved taste.⁴

In these terms—as a subject of scorn or as evidence of insanity—the Swabian poet's contemporaries denounced his translations of Sophocles. And if Hölderlin was to survive by around thirty years this lack of comprehension by his peers, he was also pushed by it towards a long period of madness; this he was to spend at Tübingen, in a small room with a view on the Neckar, referring to himself as 'Mr. Librarian' or 'Scardanelli', composing fragmentary poems⁵, fingering a piano whose strings he had cut, and bearing in mind

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right up to the end, to the very year of his death, those slandered translations of the Greek tragedian. ('I have tried to translate Oedipus, but the bookseller was a . . . !'⁶, wrote the poet in the winter of 1842–43; it was the carelessness of his publisher that accounted for the typographical mistakes which added to, and perhaps aggravated the contempt with which the work was received.) Three years before the First World War, Norbert von Hellingrath, a member of Stefan Georg's circle, undertook his own re-edition of Hölderlin. Re-evaluating the unjustly treated poet's activities as a translator, von Hellingrath categorically affirmed:

For the first time the linguistic form of Greek poetry was clearly understood and transposed into living language in a new form suited to it, without suffering, in the transition, adulteration from that which was foreign to it, such as is introduced by other translators when they have recourse to traditional forms, whether of the national poetry, or of Latin poetry. The historic place of these translations corresponds to their significance for the present: to those whose knowledge of Greek is not sufficient for a total blossoming of the original, they are the only means of access to the Greek words and images. The next best translations by German translators follow them at a great distance: Humboldt's *Agamemnon* and Voss's *Homer*.⁷

In 1923, in his famous essay 'The Task of the Translator' (more than a mere *physics*, a veritable *metaphysics* of translation) Walter Benjamin did not hesitate to say of Hölderlin's versions:

In them the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind. Hölderlin's translations are prototypes of their kind; they are to even the most perfect renderings of their texts as a prototype is to a model. (. . .). For this very reason Hölderlin's translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence. Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.⁸

In the winter of 1947–48, upon returning to Europe, Bertolt Brecht took upon himself to prepare a version of Sophocles' *Antigone*. He used as a source, deliberately, Hölderlin's text, simplifying it and adapting it to the exigencies of the scenic oralization. And he recorded in the margin of his attempt: 'The language of Hölderlin's *Antigone* deserves a closer study than I can presently give it. It is admirably radical.'⁹

The bibliographic fate of Hölderlin's translations is, as can be seen, exemplary. From the supercilious mockery or stigma of madness with which his contemporaries received them, to the awed recognition and reverence of modern criticism, their path illustrates a

fundamental break: with these translations, and unbeknown to those who were eyewitnesses to the fact, an entire concept of literature was suddenly quashed, and poetic modernity was founded. Schiller's amused laughter, in the illustrious company of Goethe and Voss, was in truth the ironic epitaph (in the sense that it blithely failed to recognize itself as an epitaph) of a certain vision of poetry and artistic *decorum*. The same translations which the German nineteenth century branded as monstrous in the words of its most recognized and representative authors, the twentieth century would revive as ideal landmarks of their genre.

But what was so strange about these works? Wolfgang Schadewaldt, allying his competence as a Hellenist and philologist with the acuity of one who brings sensitivity to bear on the aesthetic aspects of a problem, clarifies this for us. Hölderlin's knowledge of Greek was quite limited, even when one considers the state of research in this field during his time. For that reason he fell into frequent mistakes in reading and interpreting the original text. Moreover, the poet relied on a little recommended text of Sophocles, and to cap it all, the printing of the translations, as has been mentioned, was tainted by typographical errors. (Hölderlin prepared an *errata* for *Oedipus the King* and, in succeeding editions, various passages had to be reconstructed by means of conjecture.) Notwithstanding all of that, and after having painstakingly enumerated the semantic and syntactic errors of Hölderlin's translations with reference to the Greek text, Schadewaldt refers us to the words with which von Hellingrath describes these translations in the following quotation:

. . . a strange mixture of familiarity with the Greek language and a keen understanding of its beauty and character, combined with ignorance of its simplest rules and a complete lack of grammatical precision . . . Scarcely could the dead language be more congenial and alive while Greek grammar and all of its philological apparatus remained unfamiliar to one and the same person.¹⁰

And Schadewaldt adds, after stressing that the sum of Hölderlin's errors signifies neither the first nor the last word about his creations:

When as a translator he blazed his own trail through completely unexplored territory, he took some false steps and stumbled. Nevertheless, he was thus able to avoid the beaten paths of conventional translation and treat with originality Sophocles' original word (. . .). Hölderlin as a translator of Sophocles, metaphorically speaking, can be compared to those excavators of the Greek soil, who, without formal training or method, set to work on their own, their hearts full of enthusiasm, and guided by great instinct: they went about it violently many times and destroyed many things, however, they also managed to get to the depths and in this way indicated the path of discovery to their successors.¹¹

Hölderlin's mistakes, given his existential predisposition to his task,

his privileged syntony with the essence of tragedy, were *creative errors*:

The larger part of Hölderlin's linguistic errors is made up of creative errors, errors which are due to peculiarities of the text, behind which, notwithstanding, there is a general truth, whatever it may be, be it that the translation error led to a new and peculiar verbal vision, or that Hölderlin's mistakes were from the outset guided toward a creative goal.¹²

In addition to *common understanding*, which goes from the particular to the general, and surely and by degrees arrives at the *essence*, there exists another, *genial-anticipatory understanding*, which, proceeding from 'a minimum of facts, penetrates directly to the centre and with an objective capacity for premonition grasps the essential'. This type of understanding, Schadewaldt concludes, was Hölderlin's.

At this point one is tempted to establish a comparison between Hölderlin and that other supreme poet-translator, Ezra Pound. Hölderlin is an 'exegetic' translator, performing a kind of liturgical translation, transubstantiating the language of the original into the language of the translation like the hermeneutical officiant of a sacred rite who attempts to conjure the primordial word (and this is why in his *Hyperion*, before Mallarmé, the Swabian poet 'reads' the stars like letters, through which 'the name of the books of heroes is written in the sky'). Pound, on the other hand, is a pragmatic, 'laic' translator, performing his translation in the fashion of a lesson, as a critico-creative re-invention of a tradition. Both Hölderlin and Pound resemble one another in respect of the results which, by their different paths, they finally achieve.¹³ *Translating the form* is for both a basic criterion. Pound (among whose translations from various languages the most serious scholars never tired of gleaning mis-translations) proposed to draw forth from Chinese ideograms, through a return to the pictographic elements composing them, the original vibrations, which had been smothered by the routine of repetitions; thus, compensating almost by some kind of empathy, of revealing intuition, for his deficiencies as a Sinologist and his resultant reading mistakes, he managed to confer on his re-creations a strength and beauty which the versions of the most notable orientalist did not come close to possessing ('Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time,' Eliot *dixit*.)

H. G. Porteus ('E.P. and his Chinese Character: a Radical Examination') explains for us this process of 'elective affinity' which occurs between Pound's mind and the Chinese text:

What is remarkable about Pound's Chinese translations is that so often they do contrive to capture the spirit of their originals, even when, as quite often happens, they funk or fumble the letter. (. . .) His pseudo-sinology releases his latent clairvoyance, just as the pseudo-sciences of the ancients sometimes gave them a supernatural insight.¹⁴

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With reference to Hölderlin, a characteristic of his method of translation is his stressed literalness, a literalness as regards the form (not merely the content) of the original. It is a matter of 'superliteralism' in Schadewaldt's expression (it is worth remembering that Brazil's own Mario de Andrade spoke of 'supertranslation', to conceptualize a form of translation in which the 'order of dynamogeneity' of the words of the original was captured). Thus, for example, that *red word*—that *speech which is turbid with red*—which Hölderlin's divinatory instinct wrenched from the Greek text to the glee of Goethe's dining companions. (Voss, let it be remembered, offered it to the master of Weimar as a contribution to his *Farbenlehre* . . .) appears, in the University edition of *Antigone* published by Les Belles Lettres, simply as: 'quelque propos te tourmente'. The Bailly dictionary explains that the verb *kalkhaino* means in Greek: 'to have the dark color of purple' and that in the figurative sense (a meaning which the lexicographer notes expressly for the Sophoclean passage in question), it means: 'to be sombre, to be immersed in thought, reflection, to meditate something profoundly, deeply'. Schadenwaldt adds: 'The Greek expression would sound in a literal imitation: "you purple a word". To purple (. . .) proceeds here from the dark red color that the sea assumes when a tempest is approaching.' Hölderlin scandalized his contemporaries (including the poets . . .) because he preferred to the pallid convention of the translated sense the concrete force of the original metaphor (in the same way as Pound, who, in his turn, made emerge from the lexicalized ideograms, for example, according to the method of his master, Fenollosa, the abbreviated paintings of the *sun* and *moon* together where the linguist would see only the noun 'Brightness', or the adjective 'Bright', or the verb 'to shine').¹⁵ There is no doubt that the sense (denotative content) of the original in that fashion rarefies itself and thus hermeticizes itself; but the poetic compulsion of language, by contrast, increases considerably. Recall, for example, the tactile concreteness of those 'parole di colore oscuro', inscribed on the portico of Dante's *Inferno*.

According to Walter Benjamin, next to the Notes for Goethe's *Westöstlicher Divan*, the best material in German on the theory of translation is this passage by Rudolf Pannwitz:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be, instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.¹⁶

Hölderlin (and Pound, with his versions of the Chinese, for exam-

ple, where the exploration of the pictographic strata of the ideograms is stressed together with the syntactic propensity of the English language for the isolating kind of sentence) did not commit this fundamental error, whatever may be the imperfections of 'content' of his recreations of Sophocles. In the translation of a poem the essential is not the reconstitution of the message, but the reconstitution of the system of signs in which this message is incorporated, of the *aesthetic information*, not of the merely semantic information. For this reason, Walter Benjamin holds that a bad translation (of a work of verbal art, be it understood) is characterized by being a mere transmission of the message of the original, or in his own words, 'the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content'.¹⁷

Goethe, in the Notes quoted by Benjamin, understood this problem profoundly, from the theoretical viewpoint. So much so that he admits to the existence of three types of translation and describes the highest and last type or stage as being that in which one would like to make the translation identical to the original, so that the former would not merely approximately replace the original, but would in actuality assume its very place. Nor did the effect of 'estrangement', so to speak, which occurs in this phase, escape him, when the translator broadens the frontiers of his own language and subverts its dogmas to the influx of the foreign syntax and morphology; in that sense, he writes (Pannwitz, using other terms, touched upon the same point, as can easily be seen):

This method encounters at the outset the most vigorous opposition, for the translator who clings closely to the original is up to a certain point renouncing the originality of his own nation, whence comes a third term to which the taste of the public must begin to adapt itself.¹⁸

Notwithstanding, Goethe, paradoxically, and Voss (who, for the author of *Faust*, would be the ideal of that type of translator), did not understand Hölderlin's translations, which took to the most radical extremes this same basic methodological assumption.

This lack of comprehension, by its very proportions, is extremely significant, and should warn us against the non-critical repetition of the clichés of historiographic evaluation, against the automatic reiteration of judgments without appeal, with which certain authors were once and for all labelled and forgotten in the more or less immutable sepulchre of the anthologies and literary histories. Hölderlin's *red word* may be considered as a paradigm case for the type of historical poetics based on successive synchronic approaches envisaged by Roman Jakobson.

Translated by Albert G. Bork.