

How to Translate the Speechless Other?

An Eco-rhythmological Experiment

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Abstract:

This paper reveals the contribution of practice-oriented physics and eco-rhythmology to the philosophy of translation with the help of a case study. This approach does not consider verbal transformations as the only relevant phenomena in translation, but it is focused on the search for any common kinetic space in contact-making. Methodologically, the investigation is based on interdisciplinary research revealing affinities and resonances between the string theory of contemporary physics, the search for remote galaxies with space telescopes and the search for connections by artistic practices. This kind of investigation does not reveal photographs, but rather rhythms or galaxies of rhythms that can be followed through the gestural resonances of attention. Poems and arts offer such recordings.

The author investigates literary approaches to fellow creatures who cannot talk. He reads Philip Gross' collection of poems, entitled *Deep Field* (2011) – a lyrical story about his old father who has lost all his five languages in aphasia – in comparison with the poetic translation of animals and „lifeless” materials, performed by the same poet (*The Water Table*, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize 2009) or by other experimenters like Craig Foster, the human protagonist in an Oscar winning documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). Such experiments of getting in-between reveals translation as gesture-resonance with the Other in shared kinetic spaces. By the art of learning, poetic language ceases to be a conventional medium of symbolic exchange (alone), it becomes refined and very intensive gestures of attention that make possible inversions in the teaching process between teacher and student, human and animal or human and material environment. At the end, the author draws conclusions concerning the possibilities of gesture translation beyond metaphoric reduction. In the gaps of culturally dominant or scientifically paradigmatic spaces, artistic practices (as rhythm-telescopes) help us to access the deep field of occurrences with many different rhythms and consequently different temporalities. In the company of the non-speech-

ker, for example or when we access the happenings of our non-human environment.

Keywords: Gesture-translation, Aphasia, *Deep Field*, Non-human, Temporalities

This paper reveals the contribution of practice-oriented physics (Berszán, 2016, 2019, 2022) and eco-rhythmology (Berszán, 2012, 2018) to the philosophy of translation with the help of a case study. This approach does not consider verbal transformations as the only relevant phenomena in translation, but it is focused on the search for any common kinetic space in contact-making. Methodologically, the investigation is based on interdisciplinary research revealing affinities and resonances between the string theory of contemporary physics, the search for remote galaxies with space telescopes and the search for connections by artistic practices. I have been researching the rhythmic dimensions of literary reading and writing for 22 years, not only in theoretical and applied studies, but also in experimental Land-Rover Book camps. Eco-rhythmology is an applied version of this practice-oriented physics proposing to (re)learn our connectedness with the non-human environment by artistic practices. If geology reveals how to manage with a geologist's hammer, a loop and some hydrochloric acid to read different terrain-chapters of geo-history, eco-rhythmology as a practical orientation approach attempts to get us in the company of the nonhuman other, rather than entering its place defined by geographical coordinates.

As global environmental crisis revealed, it is not enough to scientifically examine, economically exploit or geo-culturally shape our environment, we also need keeping friends with it. The ecosphere to which we belong is our home (Greek *oikos*) in the most concrete sense, this is where the prefix eco- comes from in ecology, ecocriticism or eco-rhythmology. We know that a home where family members are not in good terms with each other, maybe chronically, causes a lot of suffering, misery and often disasters. Eco-rhythmology is a kind of experimental therapy developed through conc-

rete practical experiments to help us be in good terms with our human and non-human family members in our shared planetary *oikos*. The question “how to Translate the Speechless Other?” raises such a practical problem. And in grappling with such problems, every usable answer counts, regardless of whether it comes from the area of the humanities, physics, or any other field of study. It is time to make even the academic community like an *oikos*, where the disciplines and their practitioners get along well with each other.

Some theories of translation are outlined in recent ecocriticism as well: Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1993, 2014) connects the redistribution of agency with mediation as opposed to mere connection in order to offer a better and more sustainable translation of the world than the “Modern Constitution”. For Timothy Morton, being ecological means an interdependence between things that cannot be included in any single context. An approximate translation of them could be hyper-objects drawing together many different things on multiple scales in space and time (Morton, 2018, pp. 54-77). According to Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, the peculiarity of aesthetic experience compared to knowledge is that, instead of certain translations or appearances it confronts us with the untranslatable (Harman, 2017, p. 69).

But translation has not only many theories but also interesting practices. In my case study I will investigate Philip Gross's collection of poems *Deep Field* (2011) addressed to his old father, a wartime refugee from Estonia to Great Britain, who began to lose his five spoken languages, first to deafness, then to profound aphasia. This is a second attempt of the poet to translate the speechless other: in 2009, he was awarded the T.S. Eliot prize for his collection *The Water Table* (2009), dedicated to the estuary of the Severn river in South-Wales. In his most subtle verses Philip Gross attempts to think together with liquid materials like fresh and salt water or the semiliquid mud of the ebb-tide. This time we will focus on a poem from the *Deep Field* collection to realize how the poetic experiment on aphasia is connected to the translation of the other:

I've lost you, way back,

several crumbling sentences ago,
A dead end... – eeee –

one long wince of a vowel.

You've posed,
as at a locked gate
you might once have climbed.
Ich...habe...nicht...you've said, then
S-, or sch-, or z-? And ends in -l...

Seele? Soul? I trace
the definition. No, ziel? Purpose?
Yes, you are nodding: end;
objective; point... And so

much hangs on who's defining:
some sage wrestling manhood from the hard
thin Alp-air of abstractions... or
some bully with a few insignia

and the right to tell
this shamble of Ostlanders (not Aryan
but not slav-subhuman) what purpose
they serve. The word looks on,

beyond translation. *Ziel (neuter):*
purpose;
target;
finish;
destination;
home.

(Gross, 2011.53)

“Deep field” is an astronomical term referring to a tiny and nearly empty patch of sky, a gap in the traditional sky map near the Big Dipper, at which the Hubble telescope stared in 1995 as a module in orbit, and gathering all the light it could it has finally built a picture.¹ This is what we can see on the cover of Philip Gross’s poem collection. What does aphasia or poetry have to do with interstellar space and distant galaxies? Can they be in good terms with each other? Can they be translated into each other? This is what we are looking for in this case study. We have a poem describing the situation when someone whom we have known closely for a lifetime (i.e. the father) gets lost, and we have to look for him beyond the verbal map of human existence if we want to be in his company, because proper conversation – due to deep aphasia – is no longer an option.

Not only language-encoded or language-based messages can be translated and it is not only the understanding or the description of the other that makes translation inevitable. Our gestural answers to the other’s gestures are also translations inasmuch as they decide what they answer and how. We know, there are good translations and bad ones, and sometimes we cannot distinguish between good and bad translations – this is what makes a difficult choice how to translate the speechless other. In fact, the question is: what should we answer and how?

In his nineties, the hardly speaking father is stuck again. His son loses him in his crumbling English sentences, then words also disappear in a long-lasting vowel. After a while a German syntagm pops up, but its relevant noun is damaged. What has remained is an initial blurred fricative consonant, an S-, sch- or z- and a discernible -l at the end. The increasingly gappy fragments of his speech need to be translated because we don’t understand what the father is saying. Or, more precisely we must translate everything that appears in these gaps during the attentive experimental examination. In other words, poetic practice adjusts our contact-seeking Hubble telescope to these gaps. Not only the inferred word itself but its definition also depends, beside language or languages, on who translates it. According to the poem, life or death, dignity or disgrace, good or bad destiny hangs on the translator, as well as who this person becomes by his translation.

¹ For a short description of the project see NASA (2023); for an astrophysical description of the *Deep Field* see Beckwith at al. (2006).

The noun ‘das Ziel’ is neuter in German and here it appears as such even in comparison with its definitions. It’s astonishing that even a word that means ‘purpose’, ‘chosen direction’ or ‘aiming at a point’, can be neuter and thus with many different definitions. Translation of a neuter, fragmentary or absent word – not to mention a voice, gesture or occurrence – also needs a definition by possible lack and deficiency of another language or person. Is it possible to translate something not clarified or eroded: is it possible to translate the blur? This question was put very seriously by Károly Balázs, a concordant Bible translator, the author of *Újszövetségi Szómutató Szótár* [Hungarian Concordant Dictionary of the New Testament] (1998). He had to cope with me, an adversary in the colors of Hungarian sentences in order to finish a readable concordant translation of Saint Paul’s epistles (2004) which was supposed to be as concordant as possible, without any compromise. My job was to avoid forcing the Hungarian text to turn into ancient Greek because an absolute concordant Hungarian version would have been completely unreadable. My friend replied with the critique of my crystalized Hungarian sentences with definite meanings. Where the Holy Scripture is blurred, he said, it is dangerous to decide in our translation what is undecided in it.

I agree that it is dangerous, but the decision is unavoidable. Even if I try to translate the blur itself, I must decide how. As for me, I would translate this problem of translation into the following theses: practical orientation is unavoidable in any response. And so much hangs on how we respond to the other and for the other. The poem reveals how different (translational) responses are possible to the enunciation “Ich habe nicht Ziel”. One can answer from the “hard thin Alp-air of abstractions” (say from the position of Swiss neutrality) or from the perspective of a bully of Imperial Nazism endowing himself with distinguished rights. It is not decided whether the enlisted translational possibilities at the end of the poem are following the same direction (Ziel = purpose = target = finish = destination = home) or draw attention to decisions made on multiple levels.

Physicists will reply that this is why they would never be masters of arts: in humanities almost everything can be translated into almost everything. At the other side, masters of arts don’t like it when physicists simplify responsibility in such outbursts. Because yes, I can translate the other almost any way I want, but I am responsible for all my decisions. In other words, it does matter how I translate him/her/it. I have good news for physicists and

the humanities: although it is problematic back and forth the way they translate each other, and the suspicion of aphasia arises back and forth – according to physicists, the humanities do not have reliable terms; according to the humanities, physicists can only talk about a poem in acoustic terms – it is not hopeless. I was convinced of this by Philip Gross' *Deep Field*.

If somebody wants at any cost to guess or figure out what the aphasic other needs, he/she does not only speak but try out all available options that can replace the lost language. In such attempts of translation the helper is clinging on the help of the other in the same way as his/her fellow who cannot tell what he needs. Maybe they write, draw pictures or point a finger at something paying attention to the other's confirmatory approval or negative warning to determine whether the search is going in the right direction or not. This interdependence is similar to a pantomime Barkochba (guessing game). Both participants try to mime such recognizable forms, gestures, occurrences that helps the other to guess the unsaid or unsayable. Such experimenting with channels, modes and spaces still available or accessible, equates one who is able to speak with his aphasic partner: "Who looking/ in the window now could say// which of us was the one deprived of speech?" (*I wish I could say*, Gross 2011, p. 27). We can only translate the non-speaker if (or when) we can be confused with him/her/it, i.e. if we learn to be with him/her/it, to relate to him/her/it in the way he/she/it requires and teaches us how to do it.

As we already discovered in this poem, a good translator must first translate himself/herself into what he/she wants to translate. If we are interested in translation it is worth to follow the Oscar Prize winner documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (Pippa & Reed, 2020) in which a human (the filmmaker Craig Foster) is learning how to translate himself in the company of an ancient creature of the sea: an octopus (<https://filmehd.to/filme/my-octopus-teacher-2020/>). Here again there is a shift between human and animal: the animal becomes the teacher of man, although usually we assume the opposite. Craig Foster learns day by day, for months how to translate himself for the octopus: he manages to stay underwater more and more, to swim in three dimensions, to orient himself in the kelp forest. In short to become amphibian. (This is a good definition for the translator, isn't it?) Step by step he learns to recognize the tracks of an octopus on the seabed, to get acquainted with her lifestyle: her hunting, playing methods, her strategies against predators. And in the meantime, he learns to move forward sensitively and

steadily in the course of the development of the relationship: to restrain himself in what scares the octopus, to notice its confidential gestures (e.g. when she comes out from her den in the presence of a human or when she wants to touch him with her suckers). These refined interactions made possible to swim side by side or play with each other as sweet potatoes.

Craig Foster managed to show and translate so much of the octopus's life, intelligence and affection for a human because he devoted himself to the octopus's world, actions and communication initiatives beyond all expectations. Wouldn't it be worth the effort to make friends with a physicist in this way, or for the physicist with the humanities? Of course, a way must be found this time as well.

Aphasia also makes relations and the other "something like the sea" (there are three cycles with this title in the *Deep Field* collection). It's "a dissolution business" (Gross, 2011, p. 11) calling for solutions; it creates cross-words not only without black squares (Gross, 2011, p. 9) but without the words themselves. The multifaceted lack, however stimulates interaction. This type of crossword is compared to the scry of the oracle (Gross, 2011, p. 9) which has a depth beyond the surface: we have to peer into the word as into the non-speaking other. It is mentioned with the help of the inquisitive gaze of seasoned card players reading the pauses of the punters's questions.

Philip Gross performs the task of looking into the crystal ball of language most profoundly in the *Vocable* cycle (Gross, 2011, pp. 38-51). We call depth what we cannot grasp the surface of: the interstellar space of the sky map (what is translated by the term "deep field" in astronomy), the restless, unstable surface of the sea, the companion of an aphasic other or the language itself when it is no longer readable on its surface. The *Deep Field* collection shows us what we can discover if we succeed in peering into the sub-semantic depth of human speech. Not the material but the body of language: living breath and sounds.

Following Philip Gross's diving we get comparably astonishing experiences of the life of breath and sounds as in the documentary about the octopus. A poet, the master of language becomes the student of his aphasic father for the sake of breaths and voices and, through his long-term study and experimentation he explores what is opened as the deep field of speech in the pauses, distances and gaps between words. Lévinas talks about the (visible) face concerning the encounter or "proximity" with the Other (Lévinas, 1979, pp. 187-204). In Philip Gross's collection the closeness of the

other is given in the breath. When we hear a speech the other's breath touches us "in the stiffening air" (Vocable, 5, Gross, 2011, p. 40). In the *Vocable* cycle we find amazingly rich versions of these breaths and sounds. This time, words become important in their living body, especially with reference to their form rather than meaning. The most relevant feature of them is that they can be voiced. One of them "shivers like a soul/ that wants its body. Like some old/ want of the world/, irrevocable, hungry only for our breath/ to make it whole" (Vocable, 20, Gross, 2011, p. 51)

The starting point in the research of (or hunting for) breath and voice is the non-linguistic cry or roar which seems to be the royal road of translation (if not its master) between homo sapiens and (other) animals. To investigate this, Philip Gross recommends the following experiment: "*Say Aaah...*" – then he shows what is happening in the spaces of the body and with the spaces of our voice:

each vowel a held
space: breath and will
detained a moment on their way from world
to world; emerging, changing space
around them.
(*Vocable 2*, Gross, 2011, p. 38)

The vowel, just like "breath and will", is able to connect the regions of our body like the chest, oral cavity and brain and it can translate between them by forming spaces and formed by spaces. And again, it is impossible to decide who is the master and who is the student.

Beginning with the "open-ended vowel" of a two weeks old baby we follow the exciting adventures of the voice, first "traveling naked, not yet dressed in a word", then entering "the rage of the audible" and crossing "the sound horizon" until the big surprise when instead of a clear message from beyond as we expected, it turns out to be itself a question like us. A voice may ask: "who will give me breath?" Or, in a more philosophical translation: how are the roar of beasts of the cave paintings and the voice of their dead painters animated "on the wall of our breath" (Vocable, 15, Gross, 2011, p. 47). The voicing breath is inseparable from life: "you feel the vowel shift, physically,/ like a ripple of wind// across the surface where we form and live" (Vocable, 9, Gross, 2011, p. 43). The sacredness of breath made the Hebrew

scribes leaving its place free out of respect/sensitivity and record only its consonant obstacles, like e.g. in the name YHWH. According to the 14th sequence of the *Vocable* cycle without the sacred breath “the most hallowed rank of script/ becomes calligraphised barbed wire,/ a wall” (Vocable 14, Gross, 2011, p. 47). Such obstacles are interesting only if breath fights them and itself into sounds by bumping into them and wrestling them. The liveliness of breath also carries the timber of the son’s voice in the phone as “the naked/ information, all we need to know” (Vocable, 15, Gross, 2011, p. 47). As we get old, the „meaningless” and involuntary vowel-stream becomes irresistible and reveals our inner secrets.

Even the sound of a groan could be „the vowel of the Prayer/ of the Heart, of the heart in the toils/ of the body, the body/ itself: the tired animal/ shifts in its stall” (Vocable 17, Gross, 2011, p. 48). We can notice here how the animated voice connects the epistemically separated realms of the ecosystem. After all, this poetic research of aphasia seizes a previously unimagined opportunity: it turns the lack of language into world literature. And, this time, the concept of world literature is not limited to the Western culture or some common languages, nor is it limited to humans. This kind of world literature truly deserves its name being open to animals, plants, rocks, seas, stars and even God’s “perfect, unexhausted listening” or Him as “perfect, unexhausted listening” (Vocable, 17, Gross, 2011, p. 48).

In this conception, literature is a constitutive part of the world and, in the same time a translation of it as a whole what is more than the fact that everybody translates the world becoming its co-author, as Jacques Rancière teaches (Rancière, 2009, Chapter 1, p. 10-11). We need to include also our great responsibility in translating the speaking or speechless world. The brilliant abstraction is not enough, nor are creative ideas – we also need gestural resonances in order to answer to what we translate. It is impossible to sustain the postmodern claim (because it is ecologically unsustainable) that the world is nothing but an infinite number of its translations and anything goes as its translation. If a global environmental catastrophe may depend on how we translate the world, the infinite possibilities of translation must be complemented with our ethical responsiveness and extended towards the gestures of contact making. The *Deep Field* collection reveals that even aphasia can open phantastic dimensions for life, encounters and responsibilities.

The Hubble telescope discovered 3000 galaxies in the “dark” interstellar region and due to the time lag, the picture makes accessible what happened

10 billion years earlier in the remote parts of the universe. The recorded galaxies are of different sizes, shapes and colors because they reveal the life stages of galaxies almost from the beginning of their formation according to their distance from our solar system. My research on complementary rhythmic dimensions inspired by string theory is focused on the “deep field” of practice beyond the paradigmatic extended dimensions of our culture, such as social, political, economic or technologic processes. In this approach literature is not considered a corpus of text, nor projected to its contextual relations but reveals refined and intensive attentive practices in the time(s) of literary reading and writing. I organize Land Roving Book Camps for students in order to experimentally research the kinetic spaces of this rhythmic orientation by gestural resonances. We chose a mountain area not only to have a decorative environment but also to learn to pay attention in many different ways with the help of that place. We involve local entities as equal participants in the literary writing and reading, which is only possible if our literary writing and reading exercises are involved as an equal participant in the occurrences of that environment (Lakatos, 2016).

As a result of these investigation including the present study we can draw several conclusions:

1. To really read a poem means to enter those refined and intensive gestures of attention which are practiced in the kinetic space of that art of writing – while searching for the aphasic father, for example. This kind of investigation does not reveal photographs, but rather rhythms or galaxies of rhythms that can be followed through the gestural resonances of attention. Poems offer such recordings.

2. In the gaps of culturally dominant or scientifically paradigmatic spaces, artistic practices (as rhythm-telescopes) help us to access the deep field of occurrences with many different rhythms and consequently different temporalities. In the company of the non-speaker, for example or when we access the happenings of our non-human environment.

3. The main thesis of my case study is that the attentive practices of Philip Gross in his *Deep Field* are such experiments comparable to the space telescope project of physicists. Zoltán Nédá, a theoretical physicist would say: they are “cleverly designed experiments” (Nédá, 2019, p. 14) as well. Let this be my last translation proposal in this paper.

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