

CHAPTER SIX

Translating philosophy: Vilém Flusser's practice of multiple self-translation

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Abstract: This paper deals with the multilingual self-translation practice of the Czech-Brazilian writer and philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–91). Flusser used up to four languages (Portuguese, German, English and French), systematically translating and retranslating all of his texts. He mainly used the technique of self-translation to distance himself from his texts in order to verify their inner coherence and formal qualities in a form of editorial recycling. After some general theoretical considerations about the practice of self-translation, the paper is going to focus on a particularly telling example from Flusser's work.

In this paper I would like to discuss Vilém Flusser's practice of self-translation, focusing first on its relevance within the general context of a theory and practice of self-translation and subsequently examining in detail a particularly telling example from his oeuvre.

Flusser was born in Prague in 1920 into a wealthy assimilated Jewish family and forced into exile in the spring of 1939 by the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. While he managed to flee to Brazil in 1940, his whole family was wiped out in the Nazi concentration camps. In 1972 Flusser returned to Europe and spent the last years of his life in the village of

Robion, in Southern France, though his life was cut short by a car accident in 1991 when travelling back from a conference in Prague. Flusser became famous in the early 1990s as a 'digital thinker' and author of visionary texts on photography, video art and media theory.¹

The originality of Vilém Flusser's multiple practice of self-translation

The uniqueness of Flusser's practice of self-translation lies in the fact, that he used up to four different languages (Portuguese, German, English and French), systematically translating and retranslating all of his texts, instead of rewriting them in the same language.² One can find at least a second version in another language of most of his essays and all of his books, but most of the time three or more versions. In some cases the number of versions of the same text can amount to ten or more. In this sense Flusser could be de called a 'multilingual writer', that is, someone who 'writes with competent or idiomatic skill in three or more languages' (Hokenson and Manson 14).

The second relevant aspect is that Flusser was writing as an essayist and philosopher, rather than as an author of literary texts. The practice of self-translation is relatively common among literary authors but remains an exception within philosophy or the social sciences. There are some authors of philosophical texts, like Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, to name only a few, who developed a particular sensitivity to language differences because of their interest in translation processes. And there is the German born bilingual author, Günther Gotthard, who migrated to the United States in the 1930s, where he developed a new Non-Aristotelian logic, which he called a polycontextural logic. Günther himself once stated that the very core of his work lies in the difference between his English and German publications. However, no one in the field of philosophy or social theory, as far as I know, ever made use of systematic plural self-translation the way Flusser did for over 40 years.

There is, moreover, another significant aspect to be taken into account with regard to the meticulous re-translational practice Flusser developed over the course of his writing career. Flusser's practice of an open-ended series of consecutive multilingual translations was usually followed by a final attempt at a synthesizing retranslation. In an unpublished typescript,³ *Scribere necesse est vivere non est*, Flusser summed up the fluid border between translating and rewriting with the German word '*umschreiben*', which can be both read as '*umschreiben*', or rewriting, and '*umschreiben*', meaning literally to write around a specific subject matter, circling around it, in continuously expanding, concentric multilingual spirals.

Flusser also used the technique of self-translation to distance himself from his texts in order to check their inner coherence and formal qualities. By translating his own texts he could put his point of view in phenomenological brackets, and because of the rupture introduced by language-switching he could do this in a way that simple rewriting would not permit. In fact, rewriting a text in the same language generally does not entail the same radical reconsiderations that a translation demands, even if it is a self-translation.

Writing through translation is, moreover, a strategy that aims to accumulate as many points of view as possible. Each time a text is translated into another language a new standpoint is reached from which the original thought can be viewed. This is a strategy Flusser rediscovered in the Jewish interpretative technique of the *pilpul*, relating to the writing of the commentaries in the Babylon Talmud. '[In the middle of the page]', writes Flusser, 'there is a word, or a few words, and around this kernel are drawn some concentric text-circles. [...] The circles do not only comment upon the kernel, but also comment upon each other' (my translation).⁴ They are slowly forming around the centre like the rings of a tree trunk and are written not only by different authors over long periods of time – sometimes even centuries – but also often in different languages, mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic. The original thought, the *Ein-fall* as Flusser calls it in German, that which falls *into* something like a stone thrown into a pond, expands in wavelike ripples from the epicentre. These different commentaries make up a field of circling points of view attracting and repulsing each other. The object in the middle, beleaguered 'by an inexhaustible swarm of points of view' (my translation)⁵ can be truly comprehended only when all of them have been exhausted. That is: *never*. Truth, thus, is a limit that we are striving to attain, but cannot possibly reach. The sacred word in the middle of the Talmud page always demands new attempts at interpretation and refuses at the same time to reveal its full essence. Comprehensive translation is, therefore, as Derrida put it, both necessary and impossible. In this sense the translatory movement is basically endless. It can be stopped at will or go on as long as the self-translating author wants it to.

Multiple-translation besides being a method of self-criticism is also a form of editorial recycling which depends on economic motives and publication opportunities. In the essay, *Retradução enquanto metodo de trabalho*, written in the mid-1970s in France, Flusser introduces the idea that the choice of a specific theme is dictated by its (un)translatability, that is, if it is especially well suited for the game of consecutive translations. 'The more difficult it is to translate a certain theme the bigger is the challenge it represents, because it will generate a dialectical tension between the different languages that inform me, forcing me to look for a synthesis of these contradictions' (my translation).⁶ The creative principle is therefore

activated by that which opposes itself to an easy transfer into another language, that which is not so much strictly untranslatable but which by its near untranslatability compels the translator-writer to find an original solution. Flusser uses the space in between languages to attain a new vision of his subject.

Creating palimpsests: Vilém Flusser's position within the wider field of self-translation

To better highlight Flusser's specific position within the field of self-translation in the twentieth century and the uniqueness of his writing career I would like, now, to discuss briefly some of the interpretative categories introduced by Michaël Oustinoff in his *Bilinguisme d'écriture et auto-traduction* in which Oustinoff tries to formulate a general theory of literary self-translation, setting out from the bilingual work of Julien Green, Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov. Oustinoff speaks of a palimpsestic logic of multiple overlappings, of a system of boxes within boxes, echoing Flusser's own definition of writing as a series of (re)translations. 'Pour moi', he writes in the unpublished manuscript, 'Le geste d'écrire', 'c'est ça le geste d'écrire: faire des palimpsestes' (9). To write is, therefore, to translate, in order to create a textual palimpsest.

Oustinoff distinguishes three stages of self-translation that differ only gradually from each other: the first one tries to cleanse the new text of all traces of self-translation, in an attempt to respect the purity of the original; the middle, decentering form, allows for single deviations from this rule; and the third extends this liberty to the whole text. The three forms mentioned can be associated with the work of certain bilingual authors, but can also coexist within a single text. Examples for the first, 'naturalizing' form can be met within the work of Julien Green (Guldin, 'Two Tongues' 193–214) and Joseph Conrad, both of whom also formulated a clear preference for one of their two writing languages. Beckett and Nabokov, on the other hand, represent the second, decentering type. Interestingly enough, Oustinoff does not propose any concrete examples for the third typology. Within Beckett's and Nabokov's oeuvre texts in different languages help illuminate each other, and the act of self-translation facilitates the unfolding of the still hidden potentialities of the original. Contrary to Julien Green, who painstakingly upheld a clear border between the two languages, Beckett and Nabokov moved back and forth between their two writing languages in the course of their career. This suggests that the use of different languages within single texts and the general attitude to these languages and their relationship basically correlate.

Into which of Oustinoff's categories does Vilém Flusser fit? Flusser's self-translation strategy, at least on a self-theorizing level, oscillates between a decentering and a completely free approach to the original. When it comes to the actual everyday practice of translation, however, Flusser also makes use of simple word to word translation, very much respecting the literal meaning of the original. As I have already pointed out, despite his strong sense of linguistic nuance and interlinguistic connections, Flusser is interested, above all, in systematically expanding and deepening the original thought that prompted his writing impulse. In this sense, his interest is primarily a philosophical and less a literary one. He, thus, never tries to recreate the original text, even if each writing act tries to reach back, from another point of view, to the first idea, the initial *Ein-Fall*.

In this sense, one could position him at the extreme end of Oustinoff's typology. In a way, Flusser represents a good example of a writer who radically strives to recreate each new text by amplifying and redefining it, without worrying too much about the conservation of the original content of the first version. If fidelity there is, then it is rather to the unreachable, vague, initially cloudy moment of inspiration that set the whole process in motion. '[...] Je ne traduis pas comme un traducteur normal', he writes in 'Le geste d'écrire': 'Je n'essai pas d'être fidèle au texte [...] mais de le dépasser' (9). To translate means, thus, not to be faithful to the original but to overcome it. To describe the presence of the first text *within* the second – and of all the different versions in the last synthesis, for that matter – Flusser uses the image of the palimpsest, suggesting in this way that in the empty spaces between the written lines, the intervals between the single words and letters of the new version, as well as in its overall textual arrangement, the previous texts are still living on in some sort of way. This palimpsest is 'not readily decipherable, but still in a sense effective' (Flusser, 'Gesture' 11). The new version will go beyond the older one, but between its lines persist the lines of the first text: '[...] il aura, pour ainsi dire 'entre les lignes' du texte portugais, des vestiges des lignes allemandes' ('Le geste' 9). There will be, so to speak, 'between the lines' of the Portuguese text vestiges of the German lines. The word 'vestiges', in its meaning of traces of an earlier civilization, points explicitly to the written page as a many-layered space of lines within lines within lines, which the reader is asked to dig up in an endless movement of deciphering. One has to look for the traces left by the process of translation and retranslation, the invisible plurilingual content hiding beneath the monolingual text of the last version, the different layers of the final multilingual palimpsest mirroring the manifold complexity of the original thought.

Contrary to Oustinoff's examples, Flusser never really wavered between his writing languages but used their differences throughout his writing career to fuel his productivity. In this spiralling ballet, languages can

exchange their roles, subverting the essential opposition of source and target language. Flusser imagines his (re)translations as if they were a complex involuted system of Russian dolls within dolls.

[T]he original relationship of the two codes is reversed: the object-code [the source language] becomes now a meta-code [the target language]. In other words: after the French code has swallowed part of the [...] English one, it is in turn swallowed by the English code, [...] so to speak with the English in its belly.⁷ (Flusser, 'Kommunikologie' 343; my translation)

Thus, in the course of the translation and retranslation processes, a text ingests and digests another text that is in turn feeding on a text it has previously swallowed. Each new text is an 'invitation to a dance' as Flusser puts it in 'Retradução enquanto metodo de trabalho': 'Of course such recurrent coiled retranslation can be formalized. [...] But such a formalization of the problem of retranslation would get rid of the fascination of the game' (my translation).⁸

Flusser's retranslation strategy evolved over the course of his writing career. In the beginning, through the 1950s and 1960s, it was mostly a game played with two languages only, German and Portuguese. Over time, however, he added English and, after his return to Europe, also French, such that by the mid-1970s the complexity of the game had grown considerably and what was at first an attempt to survive as a German author within a foreign linguistic context had become a way of living. A survey of the two dozen major works written by Flusser in the course of his life shows that before his return to Europe he generally produced only two versions of his books, one German and the other Portuguese. After 1972, however, he started creating three to four different versions of each new book (Guldin, *Philosophieren* 313–15).

Discussing a significant example: 'The Ground We Tread'

The text I would now like to deal with, 'The Ground We Tread', was first written in the late 1970s and then translated several times into the early 1980s, at the very apex of Flusser's multilingual self-translating career. There are altogether eleven different versions of this text: two English ('The Ground We Tread': A and B); five Portuguese ('O chão que pisamos': C, D, E, F, G); five German ('Der Boden unter den Füßen': H, I, J, K, L); and one French (*Le sol au-dessous de nos pieds*: M). Versions D and E, as well as J and L are identical, four were published (M, E, J and L), all the others are unpublished typescripts.

This short essay, dedicated to Hannah Arendt, is the first of a series of texts Flusser published in 1983 in São Paulo under the title *Pós-história*

(Post-history). This is the most extreme example of self-translation I have come across in Flusser's work. The insistence with which he kept rewriting this specific essay has certainly a lot to do with all the reasons mentioned before. But there are two other extremely significant motives to be considered: Auschwitz lies at the very existential and philosophical heart of Flusser's oeuvre. Auschwitz, according to Flusser, has changed our perception of the idea of history and progress; it has revealed the basic 'Bodenlosigkeit', that is, the groundlessness of our culture. But Auschwitz symbolizes also the beginning of Flusser's own existential groundlessness. This very coincidence of the individual and collective historical destiny may account for Flusser's obsessive rewriting of the text.

The main problem with this textual series – and all the others, for that matter – is that, generally, Flusser neither put any date on his essays nor left any indication as to their position within the sequence of self-translations. All texts look the same: densely type-written numbered pages with no indication whatsoever as to the moment of their creation. In reconstructing the sequence, my two working hypotheses are that the thematic sequencing within the single texts and the fact that Flusser always switched languages when rewriting might help to reconstruct the actual sequence of the texts.

A comparison of the macrostructure of the texts, that is, the content of the opening paragraph, the sequencing of the single paragraphs and the aspects treated therein not only allow for the creation of two distinct textual lines but also help to determine which one was most probably written first. In fact, some of the texts had actually been published at some time permitting at least a partial definition of the time succession. The first series contains one for each language: Portuguese (C), English (B), German (K) and French (M). The second series contains nine texts: one in English (A), four in Portuguese (D, E, F and G) and four in German (H, I, J and L). All texts are about four pages long.

The first essential question to be answered regards the relationship of the two sequences. Why and when, in fact, did Flusser start writing a second series at all? The subsequent questions relate to the relationship of the single texts within the two series: What sequences can be detected? What happens when a text is rewritten in a new language? What changes does this lead to?

As far as the first question is concerned, practical reasons – such as, perhaps, the dissatisfaction with the texts written so far or the impossibility of finding a publisher for the versions already produced – should be considered along with the more existential response suggested above, the telescoping of individual and collective existence. In fact, only one of the texts in the first sequence was actually published. A closer comparison of the two main series, however, suggests that the main reason for the creation of the second series most probably lies in a significant thematic shift, a textual reorientation achieved by introducing a new central issue and by reshuffling the single paragraphs. The following overview of the main content of the single paragraphs – 12 in both variants – shall clarify this.

First text-sequence

1. The steps by which humanity advances towards progress sound hollow. Something unbelievable has happened to us in the recent past: Auschwitz. How was such a thing possible? How can we go on living after Auschwitz?
2. Auschwitz expresses something absolutely fundamental about western culture.
3. This is something we must refuse. We must look for counterarguments.
4. These objections are, however, insufficient.
5. If one accepts this argumentation, however, our whole history basically leads up to Auschwitz.
6. Our idea of progress has to be radically reconsidered. Is a second Auschwitz lying ahead?
7. Those that reject their own culture end up in madness (Nietzsche). If you refuse your culture, the world loses all sense.
8. But despite this we should not deny Auschwitz. It regards us all.
9. Auschwitz is the prototype of all future instances of Auschwitz.
10. We are not the first to have lived in an abyss. The baroque preceded us.
11. We and the baroque. A comparison.
12. End of history. Embryos of Auschwitz rapidly grow around us. We try to ignore it and have a bad conscience.

Second text-sequence

1. No refined hearing is necessary to perceive the hollowness of our steps toward the future, the hollowness of our progress. There is a historical period comparable to our own, because it has numerous traits which remind us of the present situation: the baroque.
2. We and the baroque. A comparison.
3. How was such a thing possible? How can we go on living after Auschwitz?
4. Auschwitz expresses something absolutely fundamental about our culture. It is part of its program.
5. Our idea of progress has, therefore, to be radically reconsidered. Is a second Auschwitz lying ahead?
6. Auschwitz was not simply a 'crime' but the outcome of the apparatus with its resulting objectification of human life.
7. The very possibility of the existence of Auschwitz is shocking. Within apparatuses people operate merely as parts of a system.
8. Those that reject their own culture end up in madness (Nietzsche). If you refuse your culture, the world loses all sense.
9. Auschwitz is the first example of something written in our program.
10. Black Boxes rapidly grow around us. Auschwitz is the first example of a perfect apparatus. The programmers lost control.
11. The West is characterized by its ability to turn anything into an object. Apparatuses are instruments of objectification.
12. Our existential climate: hoping that the ultimate totalitarian apparatus is not going to be actuated. The game is not over yet.

The main thematic shift from the first to the second version consists in the introduction of the concept of 'apparatus', which is for Flusser a technical, cybernetic and sociological category, a complex structure transforming everything into a mere object (Guldin, 'Golem,' Ströhl 216–20). Within an apparatus people tend to become operators functioning according to a set of pre-established rules. The very possibility of an apparatus like Auschwitz is, according to Flusser, part of the cultural project of western society, an essential inherent possibility of its programming, as he calls it.

In the first series the reference to the baroque is only used at the end (paragraph 10 and 11), whereas in the second it has been moved to the very beginning (paragraphs 1 and 2). Key words of the new reinterpreted sequence are 'program', 'apparatus', 'operator', 'function'.

The first thematically coherent text-sequence (C-B-K-M) must have been written in the late 1970s. Most probably the second sequence was started at about the same time or shortly after that. The French version (M) was published in April 1980 in the issue 3.4 of the French journal *Sgraffite*. A short introduction to the text announces that it has been translated by the author himself. A comparison with the German version K shows that it has most probably been translated word for word. There are, nevertheless, several deviations as far as style and sentence structure are concerned. Five short chapter titles have been added. Some passages in the German version have been deleted, but others, intended for a French speaking reading-audience, have been added. A word-play has been partially sacrificed. The German text uses the ambivalent '*Durchbruch*', breakthrough. Literally, however, it also means the opposite: values have splintered, broken apart and collapsed. This ambivalence is central to Flusser's interpretation of the apparatus. In the French version this has been rendered with the word '*cassures*'. A closer reading of the other three versions (C, B and K) shows that the general line of argumentation was not changed. On the word and sentence level, on the other hand, quite a few modifications can be made out. Some parts were translated word for word, but others stylistically altered through additions and deletions, as well as by changing the punctuation. All in all, the three versions are so similar that the question arises, what can they actually tell us about Flusser's method of self-translation. Did he write one version after the other, and if so, how long were the actual intervals between the different versions? Did he translate his texts from memory, or did he start out from the written variant as a normal translator would do? Some changes show that most probably Flusser produced the German text (K) combining the first two texts. Does this mean that he created his translations not one after the other but by using more than one variant at a time? In most cases the first Portuguese and the second English variant are so similar that they were most probably written before the others. It is, however, not clear which one was written first.

There is, moreover, still another more essential question to be dealt with regarding the very status of translation as a motor of textual transformation: which one of the two strategies is more important in terms of changes in content and form, beginning a new series or translating single texts within a series? If one follows Flusser's own view on the subject one would have to privilege the second interpretation. For Flusser, any translation amounts to a jump over an unbridgeable abyss. A closer look at the two series and their inner progression, however, suggests another possible answer. In fact, between the first and the second series a radical reshuffling of the paragraphs and a crucial change in point of view has taken place; a change that is more radical than the smaller shifts occurring when jumping from text to text within the two textual lines. Here one can identify only a series of micro-changes touching upon sentence structure, punctuation and above all the use of specific words. This, nevertheless, confirms Flusser's own suggestion that translation is above all something taking place on the level of the word, and not so much the text. It contradicts, however, Flusser's own theoretical conviction that any change of language automatically opens up a new perspective on the central issue. This evident inner contradiction can be partially solved if one considers that the second textual line also implies a jump into another linguistic universe. It is, nonetheless, only a partial solution. In fact, an analysis of Flusser's two sequences shows that other non-linguistic factors play a determining role in self-translation.

A comparison of the two textual sequences shows one specific aspect of Flusser's strategy of self-translation. The single paragraphs are used as textual blocks that can be moved around, changing the specific thematic accentuation of the essay. Sometimes single paragraphs are broken up along content lines and redistributed across the whole text. In this particular case the comparison between modernity and the baroque has been moved from the end to the very beginning of the essay. Furthermore, the concept of apparatus that was still missing in the first series gives the whole reflection a radically mediatic turn, suggesting a disconcerting connection between the extermination camp of Auschwitz and the modern technological world. In Flusser's eyes, both are expressions of the apparatus. These changes in the macrostructure entail, of course, several alterations within the microstructure.

A comparison of the single texts of the two lines shows, for instance, that the four texts of the first line are practically identical as far as the macrostructure is concerned. But there are many smaller changes that have taken place. Even if one comes across long stretches of word for word translations, sudden changes, probably made for stylistic reasons, can be

made out: sentences have been reshuffled; punctuation has been altered; some elements have been deleted and others added. The first three versions are so similar that one wonders what method Flusser actually employed to produce them. Did he write one version after the other? How much time went by in between? Did he reproduce his texts from memory or simply rewrite them? Sometimes a later version comes back to a formulation used in a much earlier one, meaning that Flusser possibly collated different texts shifting back and forth between versions.

The second text-sequence (G-A-F-H-D/E-I-J/L) can be broken off into two major groups. In fact, the long initial paragraph of the first four texts (G-A-F-H) has been split into two smaller ones, moving the comparison with the baroque into the second section (D/E, I and J/L). These are also the versions that were finally published: *O chão que pisamos* (E) was included into *Pós-história*, whereas *Der Boden unter den Füßen* was published twice in *Nachgeschichten* (J) and in *Nachgeschichte* (L). There are, furthermore, three smaller multilingual groups to be made out suggesting that in this instance too Flusser systematically switched languages when rewriting his text, moving from Portuguese to English (G-A), to Portuguese and German (F-H) and finally to what Hokenson and Munson term its 'partner version'; and instead of differences and unbridgeable gaps, Flusser's self-translation highlights 'continuities across language versions' (Hokenson and Munson 4).

Bilingual analysis must [. . .] begin at a level more basic than current binary theoretical models of 'gaps' [. . .] One must start from a point closer to the common core of the bilingual text, that is, within the textual intersections and overlap of versions. [. . .] Again, turning the current critical practice around, to investigate the author as intercultural and textual bilinguality as interliminality, will provide new means of analysis' (Hokenson and Munson 4)

To convey an idea of what has been described so far and to allow such a 'stereoscopic reading' of the different texts I would like to quote the beginning of the first paragraph of the different versions one after the other and next to each other. This way the functional correspondences, the continuities across versions should become visible. Words in italics are to be found in all versions, words in small caps only in some of them. Finally, passages in square brackets call attention to words or sentences that were deleted in the passage from version to version.

Sequence 1: C-B-K-M:

C: O chão que pisamos B: The ground we tread M: Le sol au-dessous de nos pieds

Os passos pelos quais a humanidade avança rumo ao progresso são ocultos. [Alguns vacuados.] algum abismo que se esconde abaixo do solo que pisamos, ressoa nos nossos passos. Todos os nossos atos traem, pela vacuidade que neles reverbera, que LHE FALTA AQUELA SOLIDEZ que caracteriza todo ato fundado sobre decisão vital [...].

Unsere Schritte in Richtung FORTSCHRITT klingen hohl. Irgendein Abgrund, der sich unter dem Boden verbirgt, schwirrt in ihnen mit. Alle unsere Handlungen verraten diese Hohlheit: sie sind nicht so 'ENTSCHEIDEN', WIE SIE ES FRÜHER WAREN. LES GÉNÉRATIONS PRÉCÉDENTES.

Sequence 2: G-A-F-H-D/E-I-J/L:

G: O chão que pisamos A: The ground we tread F: O chão que pisamos

Não é necessário dispôr-se de ouvido especialmente apurado para percebermos o quanto são ocultos os nossos passos rumo ao progresso. No entanto para COMPRENDERMOS de que vacuidade se trata, qual o ABISMO que ressoa abaixo do solo, é preciso de alguma atenção mais refinada. Há VÁRIOS TIPOS DE VACUIDADE, e a nossa pode ser compreendida somente se a compararmos com outras já vivenciadas pela HUMANIDADE NO PASSADO.

No refined hearing is necessary to perceive the hollowness of our steps toward the future, the hollowness of our progress. But we need a trained ear to UNDERSTAND what sort of vacuity it is that vibrates underneath, to understand THE ABYSS we walk on. THERE ARE VARIOUS TYPES OF VACUITIES and ours can be understood only if we compare it to those which HUMANITY HAS EXPERIENCED IN THE PAST.

H: Der Boden, auf dem wir gehen I: Der Boden unter den Füßen

Es ist kein besonders geschärftes Gehör nötig, um einen hohlen Unterton aus den Schritten herauszuhören, mit denen wir uns zur Zukunft hinbewegen: aus unserem 'Fortschritt'. Hingegen ist es notwendig, aufmerksam hinzuhören, wenn man welche Art von Hohlheit es sich dabei handelt. Es gibt nämlich verschiedene Hohlheiten, und wir müssen die für uns charakteristische mit anderen Hohlheiten vergleichen.

Não é preciso de ouvido atento para descobrir-se que os passos pelos quais avançamos rumo ao futuro são ocultos. Mas é preciso concentrar o ouvido se quer DESCOBRIR DE que tipo de vacuidade se trata que ressoa no nosso progresso. Há vários tipos de vacuidade, e a nossa deve ser comparada com outras, SE A META FOR COMPREENDÊ-LA. O INCOMPARÁVEL É INCOMPRENSÍVEL.

J// L: Der Boden unter den Füßen

Kein geschärftes Gehör ist erforderlich, um einen hohlen Unterton aus den Schritten herauszuhören, mit denen wir uns der Zukunft entgegenbewegen: aus unserem Fortschritt. Hingegen ist es nötig, aufmerksam hinzuhören, wenn man feststellen will, um welche Art von Hohlheit es sich dabei handelt. Es gibt verschiedene Hohlheiten, und wir müssen die für uns charakteristische mit anderen Hohlheiten vergleichen.

WENN WIR SIE VERSTEHEN WOLLEN.

Conclusion

As the above considerations have shown, in Flusser's use of self-translation, theory and practice do not always coincide but very often openly contradict each other. Add to this the fact that there exists a whole series of strategies that are used either singularly or in a combined way and that the reasons for choosing them are dependent on a complex set of conflicting factors and

we find confirmation of Wittgenstein's verdict that there are always ways to solve translation problems but no systematic methods of solution. 'This distinction is [...] true', writes George Steiner in *After Babel*, 'not only of translation itself, but of the descriptions and judgements we can make of it' (223).

Notes

- 1 I published a book-length study on Flusser in 2005, *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen. Vilém Flussers Werk*, and co-authored with Anke Finger and Gustavo Bernardo *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction*, which appeared in 2011.
- 2 Flusser also used Czech at the beginning of his writing career, but only for his letters to friends and family.
- 3 All unpublished typescripts quoted in this essay can be consulted at the Vilém Flusser Archive, Universität der Künste, Berlin. The typescripts will soon be digitized and published at www.flusser-archive.org/.
- 4 'In der Seitenmitte steht ein Wort, oder einige wenige Worte, und um diesen Seitenkern drehen sich konzentrisch einige Textkreise. [...] Die Kreise kommentieren nicht nur den Kern, sondern auch einander. Das nennt man Pipul' ('Pipul' 144).
- 5 '[U]nerschöpflichen Schwarm von Standpunkten' ('Pipul' 144).
- 6 'Quanto mais facilmente traduzível determinado assunto, tanto mais me desafia. Porque vai provocar a tensão dialética entre as diversas línguas que me informam, e vai obrigar-me a procurar sintetizar as contradições entre elas' ('Retradução').
- 7 'Bei der Rückübersetzung dreht sich das ursprüngliche Verhältnis der beiden Codes um; der Objektcode wird nun zum Metacode. Mit anderen Worten: Nachdem der französische Code einen Teil [...] des englischen verschluckt hat, wird er seinerseits vom englischen verschluckt, [...] sozusagen mit dem englischen im Bauch'.
- 8 '[C]onvite para a dança'. 'Por certo: tal retradução recorrente em espiral é formalizável. [...] Mas tal formalização do problema da retradução levará a perder o encanto do jogo' ('Retradução').

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