

## Translation, Self-Translation, Retranslation: exploring Vilém Flusser's multilingual writing-practice

„Pour moi c'est ça le geste d'écrire: faire des palimpsestes.“

Vilém Flusser, *Le geste d'écrire*

1. “I believe that the only ‘true’ translation is the one attempted by the author of the text to be translated” writes Vilém Flusser in the unpublished English version of *The gesture of writing*. Why should a self-translated text be truer than any other translated text? What happens when translation becomes self-translation, when the writer and the translator are one and the same person? When a bilingual or multilingual writer translates his own texts the relationship between original and translation changes profoundly. Since the translator is also the author of the text, he is both closer to the original intention, in fact, he is as close to the original writer’s intention as anyone will ever be, and at the same time he can take liberties that an ordinary translator would never dare to take, as the text he is working with, is not his own. In this sense, self-translation is ‘truer’ than simple translation, or as Jeffrey M. Green puts it, commenting upon the bilingual work of Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov: “The bilingual writer translating his own work would be more likely to produce a parallel version of that work in the second language rather than a strict translation – and this raises the question of whether or not such a parallel work is a true translation (or better than a translation). If it is a true translation, then all translators should aspire to produce work of that kind.”<sup>1</sup>

The uniqueness of Flusser’s practice of self-translation lies in the fact, that he is not using two, but four different languages and that he is writing as a ‘philosopher’, not an author of ‘literary texts’. But there is still another aspect to be taken into account: the use of consecutive multilingual translation followed by a final synthesising retranslation. Flusser uses the

concept of re-translation in view of the German word *Rückübersetzung*, interpreting the prefix in the sense of ‘again’ *and* ‘back’.

In translation practice this procedure is used to illustrate and comment upon the ultimate impossibility of reconciling the fidelity to the original with the necessities of the context of the new language. As the single translators taking part in the experiment are not allowed a standpoint from which to overview the whole process, each further translation tends to widen the already existing gap. When the text, after having been translated several times, gets finally back to the original language the overall changes it has gone through, while circulating from one hand to the other, become apparent.

Flusser, however, used this technique as the basic structure of his multilingual practice transforming the impossibility of translation, that is, the basic untranslatability of languages, into the very precondition for his own writing. Instead of looking for an underlying unity in difference, he turned difference into a creative principle. Instead of many translators working on a text that someone else has written, we have now a single translator-writer producing a series of new versions of an initial text he has written himself. Being in charge of the whole operation, he has a notion of where the text is going, enabling him to steer or counter-steer when needed.

This specific choice changes the concept of translation, blurring the borderline between translating, paraphrasing and rewriting and re-directing thus the aim of the overall process. Translation theory tries to separate as clearly as possible these three different instances, well knowing that it is practically an impossible task, because every form of translation implies an act of interpretation. Since translation is now subordinated to the needs of writing, the dialectical relationship existing between the fidelity to the original and the necessities of the translation are placed in a completely changed context. Instead of fidelity to the meaning of the original one would now have to talk of fidelity to the idea that has led to the initial text being written in the first place.

The shift from translating to rewriting has several other consequences. The discrepancies between the different languages are turned into a creative moment. It is no longer the inevi-

table loss or change of semantic content and the possible structural disarray caused by translation that are at the centre of attention, but the innovative power of difference opening up new horizons and allowing for provocative insights. Even the function of retranslation has been changed drastically. It still leads the text back to its origins to be checked for mistakes and undue alterations, but its main function now is to establish a final version that incorporates the richness accumulated in all the previous ones.

Flusser uses the technique of self-translation to distance himself from his text in order to check its inner coherence and formal qualities. By translating his texts he can put his point of view in phenomenological brackets and because of the radical break introduced by language-switching he can do this in a way simple rewriting would not permit. In this sense translation can be considered a form of *epoché*. Through self-translation he also introduces the principle of plurality into the unity of the writing subject, de-centring this way the position of the author. This compels him to redefine constantly his criteria of fidelity to the original thought. In short: it forces him to become untrue to himself.

2. Writing through translation is a strategy that aims at accumulating as many points of view as possible. Each time a text gets translated into another language a new standpoint is reached from which the original thought can be viewed under a different angle. This is a strategy that Flusser discovered not only in the gesture of the photographer<sup>2</sup> jumping from position to position, but also in the Jewish interpretative technique of *pilpul*.<sup>3</sup> I would like to use the latter as a model for Flusser's multilingual writing-practice as it is presented in this paper.

When we think in circles we tend to move around our subject. When we switch to thinking in lines we tend to move away from it. The *pilpul* is a talmudic method that combines both. "In the middle of the page 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 each other."<sup>4</sup> They are slowly forming around the centre like the rings of a tree trunk and are written not only by different authors, but also very 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 a 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 surrounded by a “inexhaustible swarm of discrete perspectives”<sup>5</sup> can be truly comprehended only when all of them have been exhausted. That is: *never*. Truth then is a limit that we are striving to attain, but can not 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. Please keep this in mind for the following considerations.

3. In his lectures on *Kommunikologie* that he held in the late seventies in the University of Marseille-Luminy Flusser defines the relationship between original and translation in terms of object-language and meta-language. This implies that the language of departure is always subordinate to the language of arrival. But in the game of translation and retranslation the relationship between languages can always be reversed. I can translate a French text into an English one and back again into French or I can simply invert the procedure. Because of this structural reversibility the translator-writer does not possess a privileged meta-standpoint associated with a particular language from which he can dominate all other languages. There exists no privileged language to which all others can be reduced. Each meta-language can become the object of another meta-language which in turn will be the object-language of still another meta-language.

The relationship established in the process of translation thus leads to one language being dominated by another. The object-language is forced into a meta-language, which can in turn be swallowed by a second meta-language. ”In the case of retranslation the original relationship of the two codes is reversed: the object-code becomes now a meta-code. In other words: after the French code has *swallowed* part of the English one, he is in turn *swallowed* by the English code, so to speak with the English *in his belly*.<sup>6</sup> In the course of translation processes, then, a text swallows up and digests another text, that is in turn feed-

ing on a text he has previously ingested. The final version will end up having the structure of a Russian doll, each doll containing the previous one which in turn would contain all the others, with the difference that all of them would be dissimilar. In case of retranslation the structure would get even more complicated because a particular version could contain an earlier version of itself contained within still another version.

4. Flusser commented on several occasions upon his multilingual writing-practice choosing each time a slightly different version, as far as the succession of the different languages used is concerned. In an unpublished letter to Mira Schendel of the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1974 he writes: “I translate systematically. I write everything in German first, the language that pulses strongest in my centre. I then translate into Portuguese, the language that best articulates the social reality I am engaged in. I then translate into English, the language that most articulates our historical situation and possesses the richest repertoire. In the end I translate into the language in which I want my text to be published or I write a new English version.” Multiple translation besides being a method of self-criticism is also a form of editorial recycling depending on economic motives and publication opportunities.

In the essay *Retradução enquanto metodo de trabalho*, written in the early seventies 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. It causes a dialectical tension between the different languages that inform me, forcing me to look for a synthesis of these contradictions.” The creative principle is therefore activated by that which opposes itself to an easy transfer in another language, not so much the strictly untranslatable but that 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.

The choice of the language of each version depends on a series of reflections that vary greatly in range and significance. In the case of the present essay he chooses Portuguese as

the language for the first *and* last version, because the text is conceived for the Brazilian magazine *Tradução e Comunicação*. The second will be English because the subject has to do with some American publications he was reading at the time. The text will be “re-written” in French because it could also be used in one of the University courses Flusser was giving at the time. The text will then be translated into German to test the validity of its argumentation. In the very end it will be rewritten into Portuguese and handed over to the redaction of the magazine. Notice how Flusser is using here the terms ‘rewrite’ and ‘translate’ as synonyms. “I do not know at this moment how much this second (Portuguese) version will differ from the one I am writing right now, but I know it will be quite different.”

The text will be translated again and again until the inner coherence fits more or less the expectations of the writer and a publisher is willing to get it into print. If this is not the case he will rewrite it in French for *Langages et Communication* and if this does not work either in German for *Mercur*, or still in English for some other magazine. But the dance does not stop here. If all previous attempts have failed he will retranslate the last English version into Portuguese – the *third* one in this language so far. If the text still results unsatisfying the dance of consecutive translations and retranslations begins anew. In the course of this ballet the overall form of the text will have changed several times and, in some instances, hardly be recognisable in the end.

We have two possible forms of retranslation: one used to establish the final synthesis turning a straight line into a circle, and the other to create smaller circles, that is epicycles within the greater circle. “This spiralling recursive retranslation can of course be formalised.”

In an interview given to the German magazine *Spuren* in the November of 1990 Flusser proposes still another chronology of the different languages employed in translation. “I was born between languages, a polyglot. This gives me this strange feeling of an abyss opening beneath me, over which I am constantly jumping. (...) translation (*Übersetzung*) is a ‘jumping across’ (*Über-Springen*) (...). How do I write? There are problems. And I am trained to let problems articulate themselves in words (...) since I live between languages I am confront-

ed with a pre-problem: in what language? And here it becomes evident that each language expresses the phenomenon in another word. (...) Mostly I take Portuguese (first) for reasons I do not want to go into now. (...) I then go from Portuguese into English. And here the problem starts assuming a very precise outline. Then I go into French and then into German. So I have four versions now (...) and I have to choose which of them I want to publish. Unfortunately this means mostly English or German as I am publishing very little in Brazil and am having some difficulties in France. So America or Germany. Then I write the last version by summarising all the previous ones.”<sup>7</sup>

If one compares the three different versions given by Flusser one might accuse him of inconsistency but these varying interpretations prove in fact something quite different. They show that the choice of a specific language and the definition of their succession is dependent on a plurality of conflicting factors and that the determining moment is always the concrete practice of translation and writing.

5. Flusser’s specific way of approaching reality is an attempt to reach a synthesis out of the disparate but complementary tendencies articulated in each of the languages he is using. “Every time I want to give things a name I feel forced to give each thing different names, according to the repertoire of the languages that inform me. The problem I have to deal with is that these names are adequate to the thing but not congruent with each other. It is not important for me then to adjust the name to the thing, but to look for congruence between the different names in order to fit these adjustments to the thing itself. I love this play with words because it allows the thing to show its different facets and I hate it because it can be so fascinating that the thing disappears behind it. This play with words is my vocation and the reason for the choice of a certain subject matter.”<sup>8</sup>

Writing means translating and retranslating, that is jumping from universe to universe, from language to language, from word to word. Each time the writer does this he is opening up himself to the abyss of nothingness, the still unreleased and unrealised plurilingual potentialities lying in between. He controls the languages he is using, picking his way among

them, choosing the words he is going to type into his type-writer, but he is at the same time possessed by these languages and the different words which demand to be admitted to the empty space of the white page. A word can conjure up a whole chain of other words, words of the same language or words of other languages, a stream into which the writer is tempted to merge. He has to resist this urge trying not to lose the potential hidden in the still unwritten words. He has to give access to as many of the voices calling out for his attention as possible, without being completely submerged by them. He has to give himself over to the magic power of words keeping at the same time the necessary control over his gesture. He has to choose a strategy that allows him to move from one to the other, bridging the gap in between. The practice of translation is the *very* technique that makes this possible. To illustrate this procedure I would like to compare two parallel unpublished versions of a text, in which Flusser deals in a very personal way with his own use of translation and retranslation in the writing-practice. Let me start with the English version first.

6. Being programmed for a series of languages does not mean that one is completely free to choose among them. The different languages stored in the memory do not coincide, even though they overlap and compenetrates each other and can therefore not be exchanged one for the other. “The result of this discrepancy between the languages in my memory”, explains Flusser in *The gesture of writing*, “is the fact that some of my thoughts are better expressed in one of those languages, and some other thoughts in some other language. (...) I tend to think some thoughts in one of those languages, and some other thoughts in some other language. But this very discrepancy of the languages in my memory suggests a specific strategy for my writing praxis. Let me describe it. There are some thoughts which begin to take a very nebulous shape within me. (...) the shape is a tendency toward one of the languages at my disposal.” These manifestations, as Flusser points out, are without a clear form, they are still pure potentiality emerging from nothingness. But they already contain in themselves the tendency to get articulated in one particular language rather than another. It is only by taking up the shape of a particular language that they become audible to the writ-



er who is now urged to type them into his type-writer. “As a rule, that language is German, but very often it may be Portuguese or English. I have learned to distinguish my thoughts according to the language they tend to. Although I cannot state this criterion of distinction, it has no doubt to do with the structure of the language the various proto-thoughts tend to.”<sup>9</sup>

This means that each language is programmed to allow as well as to prevent specific types of thoughts constituting through this what we would call a discourse universe.<sup>10</sup> “For a start I accept the tendency of the thought which presses toward its specific language to be articulated. I formulate it silently in that language. It then provokes a whole chain of thoughts, as is characteristic of linear thinking.” This linear thought development tends at the same time to an unchecked associative branching out while the thought tree is growing and expanding rapidly within the writer. “To stop the tendency toward a tree, I must take a typewriter (...). I must type my silent formulation, if I want to achieve a linear thought sentence. Which is to show that writing is (...) a diachronisation of the synchronicity of the tree thought.” The single letters typed in a line on the white surface of the page have the function of reducing and cutting down the wildly rhizomatic growth of associative thinking.

“As I type the sequence of thoughts in the language which is ‘appropriate’ to them, I make a series of negative choices. I eliminate word and thought associations as they press against my surface. Which shows again that writing is more akin to sculpture than to drawing: it consists of constant chopping.” Once thoughts have condensed into the medium of a specific language they show a strong tendency to run in circles and to shoot out in different directions. Writing, then, is a gesture that gives these random thoughts a specific orientation. One writes in order to discipline and redirect one’s thoughts into a clear cut mould.

The first draft is set in one particular language and articulates because of this only one particular thought universe. The shapeless thought possesses now a recognisable, that, is a readable form, consisting in a series of letters, words, sentences, lines and paragraphs to produce a text covering the paper surface of a white page. The language in question has taken possession of the original formless thought. The many clamouring voices of the dif-

ferent potentialities awakened by the original thought have been silenced and the circles straightened out in lines.

The limitations of this first German draft have to do with the fact that it articulates a very specific point of view on the theme in question, excluding at the same time all other possible points of view. “I need not submit to such a limitation. I may translate the text into a different language.” To translate means here to reformulate the German text into the silent spoken language, that is, the inner monologue of a second language. The first act of translation, here intended in a metaphorical way, consists in a linearization of circling thought associations into the lines of a text. The second stage consists in a reshaping of the written text into the spoken words of a different language. In this specific case it is Portuguese. Since the basic material of Portuguese and the resistance it opposes to writing are quite different “the thought not only changes, but also (...) provokes entirely different associations. Although in a sense it is still the ‘same’ thought, in a different sense it means a situation within a universe quite unlike the first one. (I am convinced that the problem of translation is the central epistemological problem).” The new onrush of associations generated by the silent reformulation of the first text into the spoken words of the second language requires a similar writing strategy as we had in the first stage. Again some of the outgrowths of thinking have to be chopped away by recasting the original thought in written words.

7. The first German text has, as Flusser himself puts it, the function of “a system of reference”, this meaning probably that he uses it as a sort of back-up for his memory while writing the second version. This can lead in some cases to a word for word translation, in others to paraphrasing and still in others to a radical redefinition of the overall structure of the original text. The interesting aspect of such a process of reformulating and rewriting is that one must “take recourse to the almost shapeless thought which originally provoked (the) writing.” The second writing, then, has a double source: the first written text, that serves as a sort of model, and a recourse to the richness of the original thought associations, a hark-

ing back to the lost echoes of the first calling. It is this precisely this second condition that necessitates in Flusser's eyes the use of translation in the writing-process.

The shortcomings of the writing-practice and the limitations of thinking in one language only, can both be superseded by the process of translation which allows the manifold original thought to slowly unfold, showing in each development a new and unexpected aspect. The process of translating a text from one language to the other, as well as from the written to the spoken word and back, should make the original thought reveal more and more of its various dimensions, like an onion peeling off one layer after the other.<sup>11</sup>

But there is still another side to this. The practice of multiple consecutive translation can in fact be used as a model of interpretation for all writing-processes. In *Le geste d'écrire*, the French version of *The gesture of writing*, Flusser comments upon this aspect. "(...) le geste d'écrire est le mouvement de traduction et retraduction des textes (comme il l'est dans ma praxis d'une manière explicite, et très probablement dans la praxis de tout écrivain d'une manière implicite) (...)." <sup>12</sup> Whenever we rewrite a text we translate it into another context. We do this even if we are not fully aware of it. But if we do it by switching to another language the process itself becomes visible, allowing us to step back from what we are doing to reflect upon the choices we are making while writing.

8. In the course of the second writing-stage "the thought not only assumes a different shape", writes Flusser in *The gesture of writing*, "it may even take a different direction, because the associations chopped away during the first writing may now be taken up again in a different context." Translating means therefore recontextualising the original thought. Not only. The associations of the second language start interfering with the associations of the first language and vice versa – as in the case of *pilpul* –, leading to new fruitful combinations of ideas that will in part become explicit in the new text. This second text will be written in Portuguese and be therefore quite different from the first German text, "but the German text and the German associations eliminated from that text will somehow be hidden within it." To describe the presence of the first text *within* the second 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 Portuguese version, as well as in its overall textual arrangement, the German one is still living on in some sort of way. This palimpsest is “not readily decipherable, but still in a sense effective.”<sup>13</sup>

In *Le geste d'écrire* Flusser has developed this aspect from a slightly different point of view. Even if my thinking flows in the riverbed of more than one language, it is actually impossible to write in two or more languages at the same time. But there is a way to overcome this difficulty. “Le texte portugais que je tape est une traduction du texte allemand, c'est à dire: le texte allemand est son système de référence. Mais je ne traduis pas comme un ‘traducteur normal’. Le texte allemand n'est pas le ‘meta-texte’, mais le ‘prè-texte’ de mon texte portugais. *Je n'essai pas d'être fidèle au texte allemand, mais de le dépasser* [italics mine].” The first text can not be considered a meta-text because it does not dictate how the second version is going to be written. When translation becomes self-translation the original turns into a pretext for further creative writing.

The Portuguese version will go beyond the German one, but between its lines the lines of the first text will still be present: “(...) il aura, pour ainsi dire ‘entre les lignes’ du texte portugais, des vestiges des lignes allemandes.” The word “vestiges”, in its meaning of traces of an earlier civilisation, points explicitly to the written page as a many-layered space of lines within lines within lines, that the reader is asked to dig up in an endless movement of deciphering. He will have 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.

This method recalls a specific practice of the Jewish cabbala which consists in a vertical interpretation exploring endlessly receding spaces of boxes within boxes, or to use an architectural allegory, rooms within rooms.<sup>14</sup> Flusser is using here an archaeological metaphor describing the final text in terms of one stratum overlying the other, implying through this that beneath each of the single strata another underlying layer can be glimpsed<sup>15</sup>, the very

last of them opening up onto the nothingness from which the original thought has emerged.<sup>16</sup>

After having translated the text several times from one language into the other the process stops to lead us back full swing to the very beginning. “But what is even more intriguing is the possibility of re-translation. Let us suppose that I have translated the thought from Portuguese into English, and from English into French, and that I now try to translate back into German. I shall find that my second German text will differ radically from the first one, although *the thought expressed in both texts is still the same thought*. One reason of course is the fact that in the second text all the other languages at my disposal are somehow present, and thus confer it a depth which is lacking in the first text.[italics added]”<sup>17</sup> Each translation adds another dimension to the complexity of a multi-layered text constantly growing and constantly being reshaped. This text has to be written in the language of the first text out of fidelity to the original revelation of the thought with its tendency towards a specific language. But also in order for the last retranslating movement to be a critical assessment of the whole procedure.

9. Another function of the last version is to accumulate as many points of view as possible onto the same object: the original thought. This way the plurality of the different languages finds its way into the complex unity of a common subject matter.

How is this unity of plurality to be understood? And why should the last text try to harmonise the multiplicity of meaning revealed by the different steps of translation? We have already come across two different answers so far: the final text incorporates all previous ones, that is, it has assimilated and duly digested them, and it is a multi-layered palimpsest in which the older versions show imperceptibly through the newer ones. But there is another possible explanation. Flusser’s game of translating and retranslating the original thought can be viewed as an attempt to project its multiple but hidden meanings onto a series of different canvases. Harmony is not attained through a recovery of an original pre-linguistic complexity, it is rather something that is created in the process of writing. In phenomenological

terms a *Sinn-gebung*, literally a ‘giving’ of sense. Or to be more accurate: a series of consecutive acts of *Sinngebung*. The harmonisation of languages is therefore not a re-elaboration of lost unity, but a utopian possibility. This is aimed at by the construction of textual palimpsests which the reader will have to dissect and unfold in order to get at the many truths concealed in them.

In his work on Walter Benjamin’s Essay *The Task of the Translator* Andrew Benjamin quotes a passage from Gershom Scholem’s *Kabbalah* in which the concept of *tikkun* is introduced. This Lurianic myth postulates the re-establishment of a harmonious condition of the world, a re-constitution that is to be understood as an “initial constitution.” This plan does not imply the idea of “the retrieval of the past, but rather a futural projection.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of espousing the Biblical view of an initial language fragmented in many individual languages after the fall of the tower of Babel, the cabbala posits the idea of a basic multiplicity of languages, claiming that it is not the result of a sinful action. The translation process envisaged by Walter Benjamin gestures at a language, which would reunite the multiplicity of languages into the assembled fragments of a broken vessel. The fragmentation of this vessel does not refer to the lost original unity of a sound initial vessel. It points rather to “the possibility of unity and totality in which the parts of the vessel remain as parts but within a generalised belonging together. Fundamental to such a totality is the presence of difference (involving) a harmony which is the *belonging together of differences*.”<sup>19</sup>

This remark holds also true for Flusser’s own vision of translation. Both the idea of texts being swallowed up by other texts and of a palimpsest suggest in fact the co-presence of differing elements within a whole, alluding to the fact that translation is basically a *mise en abyme* of the first text and all its consecutive versions. But contrary to Benjamin Flusser tries to attain this difference in unity not by one single passage from original to translation but by a chain of consecutive translation acts which are all in the end carried back to the beginning. Although the two texts are written in the same language, the original and the final translation are two different texts.

10. The translating process goes on as long as there are further dimensions of the original thought to be revealed. The aim of translating then is to bring out in the open as many of the hidden potentialities of the original thought as possible. This is achieved by defining each new act of translation as a showing forth of a new hitherto unknown because still unperceived facet of the original thought. This process could go on interminably as it seems to find no apparent conclusion in itself “a situation typical of all infinite regression.” The idea of *regressus ad infinitum*, of mirrors mirroring each other, recalls the conception of the text as a many-layered structure of self-referentiality. “Theoretically I could go on translating and re-translating ‘ad nauseam’ or to my *exhaustion*. But practically I find that the chain of thoughts is *exhausted* in the process long before I myself am *exhausted*. Thus the process of translation and re-translation (itself) provides a criterion for the wealth of the thought to be written”, a criterion which is at the same time an admission of defeat on the part of the writer, who gets caught up between two equally unsatisfying solutions: “the sooner the process *exhausts* the thought, (the sooner it falls into repetition), the less (it) is worth while to be written. Which is a somewhat melancholy discovery: if I can stop writing within a reasonable span of time, it is not worth while doing it, and if to write is worth while, it takes an unreasonably long time to do it. Still: I knew even before I started that to write is not a reasonable endeavour. The process of re-translation only confirms that knowledge. [italics added]”

Please notice the way Flusser deliberately plays with the different meanings of the English word ‘exhaust’. In German he achieves this effect by using *schöpfen* and its derivations *aus-schöpfen* and *er-schöpfen*. One can hear the echo of the German word, used perhaps in an earlier version of the same text, resonate in the use of the English ‘exhaust’. And from an even more remote distance at the back of the text one can hear the Portuguese *esgotar*, alluding to the many drops that drip, one after the other, and the French *épuiser* suggesting the idea of a completely dried up well.<sup>20</sup>

*Schöpfen* means to create and at the same time to scoop up liquid with a ladle. *Aus-schöpfen* means to exhaust by scooping up all liquid available and in a metaphoric way also to reach a

thorough understanding of a certain subject-matter. *Er-schöpfen*, finally, can be used in the sense of being left without any energy and to reach the point where everything has been said about a certain theme. Writing between translation and retranslation is for Flusser a constant *ausschöpfen* of the original thought till it has been completely emptied and is therefore *erschöpft*. This stage is arrived at when any further attempt at *ausschöpfen* falls into repetition, because it is not bringing forth any new information about the original thought.

The inner richness of the original thought is given time to manifest itself in the multifarious fragmenting experience of the consecutive translations processes. These break up the light into its spectral components, compare them to each other and reunite them again in the final act of retranslating. This magical procedure assumes its true significance if we read it in view of the cabbalistic concept of nothingness. In the cabbala nothingness is a living presence, not a threshold that has been overcome once and for all through creation, but a reservoir of strength from which we can draw new energies whenever need arises. In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Ben Schalonn from Barcelona defines creation as an opening up to nothingness: “in each transformation of reality, each change of form, each passage of a thing from one status to another this abyss of nothingness is crossed anew (...) opening up itself in a mystical moment (...).”<sup>21</sup>

11. The choice of the publication language is not an essential condition of the writing-practice itself. It is determined by social and economic factors which are nonetheless tied up in a complex net of reciprocal relationships operating on numerous levels. It is however “curious (and somehow disappointing), to have to admit that this last formulation of the thought in the language of its publication is strictly speaking ‘my gesture of writing’. (...) during the writing of that last text of mine I am no longer really concentrated upon the material resistance to my thought, (which I have absorbed and exhausted in the previous texts), but am somewhat distracted by external publishing considerations. (...) Thus, paradoxically, my ultimate gesture of writing is no longer true writing at all, (...) but a kind of editing and revising. But then: the sensation of disappointment accompanies every final



stage of every act, and is nothing but a symptom of imperfection. It is part of (the) human condition that the gesture of writing should end in defeat, namely in a gesture that is no longer true writing.”<sup>22</sup>

In the French version we find a different view of the problem, an interpretation that could not have been achieved in the English text, because it is dictated by the use of the language in which the text was written. The choice of the last language, he writes there, is imposed by the social situation in which the writer happens to live. “Cela pose un problème dont je me rend compte y il a quelques années seulement. Car cette dernière langue a été, pour moi, pendant des années, le portugais, et exceptionnellement, l’anglais. Deux langues dont j’ai la maîtrise. Mais dernièrement la langue dans laquelle je suis obligé à publier est devenu (...) le français, une langue que je ne domine pas.” By being suddenly compelled to write a definitive and final text in French, a language he did not control, Flusser came to realise that in fact all his previous writing had been structured by this division: on the one hand the actual gesture of writing and on the other the editing and revising work in view of a publication. “Tout écrivain rédige son texte définitif dans son “français” à lui. C’est à dire: dans une langue qui ne lui appartient pas, mais appartient aux autres.” This final language is a foreign language for every writer, an idiom in which he can never be truly at home. The necessity of publication forces the author to become untrue to his gesture of writing by transforming the complex experience of translating and retranslating into a single text written in one language only so that it becomes understandable for a potential reader. Once again Flusser uses the experience of translation as a model in order to attain new insight into his writing-practice.

12. To conclude let me summarise briefly some of the points this paper has been dealing with. The rhizomatic growth of associative thinking is triggered off by a transformation of the first nebulous appearance of the original thought that gets transmuted into the word-body of a specific language. Writing consists in a linearization and diachronisation of the synchronicity of the associative thought-tree. This is achieved by blocking out certain words

and giving access to others, that is by chopping off and pruning away the superfluous branches. Each further version entails a return to the original thought and the magic power of the still unreleased and unrealised words emerging from nothingness. The final retranslation tries to create a synthesis out of the different versions that does not exclude difference but considers totality to be a belonging together of differences. The choice of the final language is dictated by the needs of publication and by the fact that it is impractical to write in two or more languages at the same time. One way out of this is the construction of textual palimpsests. The writing-practice oscillates between translation and retranslation, constantly turning circles into lines and lines back into circles, it is, to use Flusser's own definition, *Umschreiben*: a rewriting of the original thought (*Um-schreiben*) by writing around it (*Um-schreiben*). Each language allows a new perspective. These different points of view, as we have seen in the practice of *pilpul*, comment upon the original thought *and* each other.

Writing is an attempt to show the truth of a language in the mirror of another. Flusser's different versions are then like a series of mirrors mirroring each other in a baroque *theatrum catoptricum*, each revealing a different truth. "The gesture of writing is a very specific way to convey sense (*Sinn-gebung*); it questions itself, in such a way that this questioning, written on a sheet of paper, can itself be questioned. In other words: it is a speculation about something external to it and about itself, which allows itself to be speculated. Writing is like a mirror-labyrinth that one is building up while losing oneself in it."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. M. Green, *Thinking through translation*, Athens UP 2001, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen 1983, as well as 'Die Geste des Fotografierens', in: Vilém Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p.100-118.

<sup>3</sup> *Pilpul*, also *pilpel* means 'pepper' in Hebrew. It represents a dialectical method of Talmudic study consisting in examining all the arguments pro and con in order to find a logical argument for the application of the law and at the same time to sharpen the wits of the students.

<sup>4</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Jude sein*, Mannheim 1995, p.144.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem p.150.

<sup>6</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie*, Mannheim 1996, p. 341f.

<sup>7</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Zwiegespräche, Interviews 1967-1991*, Göttingen 1996, p. 146f.

<sup>8</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Retradução enquanto metodo de trabalho* (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>9</sup> In the French version of the text *Le geste d'écrire* he is more specific: "Je dirai, (sans y vouloir insister trop), que mes pensées 'philosophiques' tendent vers l'allemand, les pensées 'politiques' vers le portugais, et mes pensées 'scientifiques' vers l'anglais. (Mes pensées 'sentimentales' tendent vers le tchèque, qui est ma langue maternelle, mais j'ai perdu la maîtrise de cette langue." (p. 7)

<sup>10</sup> Another important aspect is the specific role Flusser attributes to each language. German, for instance, challenges a writer to look for clarity because of its depth and obscurity. French on the other hand invites to stylistic brilliance, which calls for a curtailing of its tendency to linguistic virtuosity. "If the 'spirit' of the German language seduces to merge, and the French to do a pirouette, the 'spirit' of the Portuguese language leads one to shoot off tangentially. Portuguese is the language of 'excursus', of so called free associations." The challenge consists here in achieving the necessary formal rigor. "Although it is difficult to describe the experience of the English language, combining at the same time depth, clarity and plasticity, it is easy to tell in what consists its specific challenge to thinking: to summarise the subject using a maximum of economy. To prune the German depth, the French brilliance and the Portuguese geniality, reducing the text to the essential." Even though the idea of the 'spirit' of a particular language represents in itself an oversimplification it leads to the definition of a specific writing strategy for each language. And this is what count here. Flusser who on several occasions has stressed the basically contradictory and open-ended nature of language-systems uses the word 'spirit' in an ironical way: it defines a model of interpretation that is questioned the very moment it is put forward. The 'spirit' of a language has not to be realised but subverted in the act of writing. Writing means going against the 'spirit' of a certain language by having it express something it usually does not, as well as using one language to counteract the ingrained tendency of another.

<sup>11</sup> Flusser articulates here the idea that although all thinking is in a certain sense strictly linguistic it is basically to be considered a meta-linguistic activity. It is not pre-linguistic in the sense that it precedes language in a temporal sense. It transcends language by representing the realm of shapeless potentiality out of which all possible forms may grow. It is only by entering the realm of a specific language that a thought takes on a particular shape of its own. In Flusser's phenomenological view of language there are no words without objects and no objects without words. They presuppose each other. Words intend objects and objects are intended by words because of the basically intentional nature of their relationship.

<sup>12</sup> *Le geste d'écrire*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Palimpsests, from the Greek *palin* = back and *psestos* = scraped – in Latin *codex rescriptus* –, are texts written on top of each other. The original text was washed, soaked in milk or scraped away with a knife to be replaced by another. This was done especially in the early middle-ages by monks out of economic considerations, because of the extreme scarcity and the expensive character of writing material. Although some precious texts have been irremediably lost this way, one has been able to retrace many others in fragmentary form thanks to infrared photography.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Andreas Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma*, Stuttgart / Weimar 1998, p. 34f.)

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<sup>15</sup> Green uses the same spatial metaphor (*Thinking through translation*, p. 18).

<sup>16</sup> What happens when the second Portuguese text gets translated into a third text? Flusser does not answer this question, but if we continue along the lines he has sketched so far, most probably the passage from the second to the third text will activate a double recourse to the chopped off potentialities released both by the first *and* the second thought associations. And the two previous texts as well as their relationship form a new hybrid system of reference.

<sup>17</sup> Vilém Flusser, *The Gesture of Writing*, p. 10-12. (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy*, London 1989, p. 98. See also Paul de Man, The Conclusion: Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* in: Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis 1989.

<sup>19</sup> *ibidem* p. 101-102.

<sup>20</sup> If we compare the corresponding passage in the French version with the English one quoted above, we again come across a different point of view. Flusser writes there, that most of the original ideas that incessantly beleaguer his mind are quickly exhausted, that is transposed into texts which are either thrown away or sent to friends in form of letters. "Une petite minorité de mes idées résiste à la méthode de traduction et retraduction pendant quelques jours, ou même des semaines. Ce sont les textes que je publie. Et il y a deux ou trois idées (par exemple précisément l'idée par rapport au problème de la traduction), que je ne parviens pas à épuiser, malgré mes efforts qui durent des années déjà."

<sup>21</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 237.

<sup>22</sup> *The Gesture of Writing*, p.12. This feeling of failure is profoundly related to the disappointment ensuing from the impossibility to exhaust all the hidden meanings of the original thought. Both of them however lay the ground for further attempts at writing and translating.

<sup>23</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Briefe an Alex Bloch*, Göttingen 2000, p. 130.