

In the Company of Beckett: Gadamer, Benjamin, Levinas and the Ethics of (Self-)Translation

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The ethical paradoxes of silence and self-translation in the works of Samuel Beckett are addressed from within the theoretical vocabularies of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Walter Benjamin, and Emmanuel Levinas. Among Beckett's works, particular attention is paid to "Three Dialogues," "Imagination Dead Imagine," and *Company*; in other words, the ethico-formal questions discussed in this essay preoccupied Beckett over his entire career. The Gadamerian concepts of "aesthetic differentiation" [ästhetische Unterscheidung] and "highlighting" [Überhellung], together with the Benjaminian concepts of "ripening" [nachreifen] and "afterlife" [fortleben], and the Levinasian concept of "retroversion" (chez Jill Robbins) increasingly clarify the ethical stakes of Beckett's project.

It is time to address the second half of an implicit question in Beckett's oeuvre: if Beckett is so preoccupied with composing "silent" texts, why does he then feel compelled to translate them? That Beckett regarded translation as drudgery is well-documented in several letters he wrote: notably to Thomas McGreevy wherein he writes, "Sick and tired I am of translation and what a losing battle it always is. Wish I had the courage to wash my hands of it all;"¹ and even more famously to Alan Schneider, "I have nothing but wastes and wilds of self-translation before me for many miserable months to come."² Such pronouncements seem very far indeed from the kinds of solipsistic/narcissistic pleasure Beckett's critics often refer to when describing his work; Beckett's own words suggest that his composition/translation process was more on the order of compulsion or obligation. And yet at least

1. July 30, 1957, qtd. in Deirdre Bair's *Samuel Beckett* 410.

2. April 30, 1957. *Disjecta*, 108.

as early as 1951, Beckett made it a practice to translate his works, whatever the original language of composition, into the other language. What made him endure the “wastes and wilds”? The injunction to “fail again” doesn’t quite explain why he should fail in another language, nor does the injunction to “fail better,” unless one adopts an ad hoc definition of the latter term.

The appearance in 1951 of *Molloy* in French marks the shift in Beckett away from English as a language of composition (though he returns to it on quite a few occasions, notably for *Company* and *Worstward Ho*, deemed untranslatable) and much critical ink has been spilt accounting for this shift: some addressing it as a case of abandonment (of English) in the face of creative and philosophical impotence, some as an adoption (of French) in the face of creative and philosophical possibilities. Some critics attempt to achieve a middle-ground, among them Harry Cockerham who suggests that in Beckett “[we] are not faced with a writer who abandoned one language for another (a not infrequent occurrence), but with the possibly unique phenomenon of one who, throughout his career, has divided his efforts and his interests between two languages.”³ The question therefore isn’t so much “Which language?” nor “Which language first?” as “Why that language first?” Beckett’s own (partial) response to the last question - “Because in French it is easier to write without style”⁴ - doesn’t necessarily explain why he should bother with self-translation at all or the effect self-translation had on his English compositions, on their style and structure. The more satisfying answer seems to be bound up more in what is now called “the task of the translator,” as shorthand for a whole set of issues, hermeneutical, aesthetical, historical, and ethical.

As an example of a chapter in a hypothetical book on the subject of Beckett’s bilingualism, Raymond Federman raises what is at first a “minor question[. . .]: the way he translates his titles and thus launches the new text in a different direction in the other language.”⁵ Federman then provides a parallel list of titles in the original and translated versions, some with quite stunning shifts, sleights, and mutations,⁶ followed by an anecdote related by E.-M. Cioran on the question of bilingual titles:

3. “Bilingual Playwright,” 143. The position is a bit overstated, to say the least, as the Middle Ages and Renaissance abound with writers regularly working in multiple languages; multilingual writers include Charles D’Orleans, Du Bellay, and to a lesser extent Cowper and Marvell. The modern period has Beckford, Wilde, and Nabokov, to name a few.

4. *Ibid* (qtd.), 156.

5. “The Writer as Self-Translator,” 10.

6. The passage from Federman:

“*La dernière bande* (for) *Krapp’s Last Tape* (where is Krapp? Shouldn’t it have been *La*

The French text *Sans* is called *Lessness* in English, a word coined by Beckett like its German equivalent *Losigkeit*. Fascinated by this word lessness (as unfathomable as Boehme's *Ungrund*), I told Beckett one evening that I would not go to bed before finding an honorable equivalent for it in French.... Together we had considered all possible forms suggested by *sans* and *moindre*. None of them seemed to us to come near the inexhaustible *lessness*, a blend of loss and infinitude, and emptiness synonymous with apotheosis. We parted company, somewhat disappointed. Back at home, I kept on turning that poor *sans* over and over in my mind. Just as I was about to give up, the idea came to me that I ought to try some derivation of the Latin *sine*. The next day I wrote to Beckett that *sinéité* seemed to me to be the yearned-for word. He replied that he too had thought of it, perhaps at the same moment. Our lucky find, however, it must be admitted, was not one. We finally agreed that we ought to give up the search, that there was no noun in French capable of expressing absence in itself, pure unadulterated absence, and that we had to resign ourselves to the metaphysical poverty of a preposition.⁷

I would like to make of this anecdote a parable whereby to triangulate three different theoretical approaches to (self-)translation - Gadamer's, Benjamin's, and Levinas' - attuned to corresponding key phrases in the excerpt: "an honorable equivalent," "some derivation," and "the metaphysical poverty of a preposition."

The notion of "an honorable equivalent" in translation may be thought to have its roots in the art/science of hermeneutics as the ideal that must be quickly betrayed. The hermeneutic ideal of translation as articulated by

derniere bande de Krapp?)

Tout ceux qui tombent (for) *All that Fall*

Oh les beaux jours (for) *Happy Days* (Oh!...what is this little Oh?)

Comédie (for) *Play* (has the humor disappeared in English or merely been replaced by playfulness?)

Pas (for) *Footfall*

Berceuse (for) *Rockaby* (that's a tricky one)

Ping (for) *Bing* - or *Bing* (for) *Ping* (or is it *Ping* for *Hop*?)

The Lost Ones (for) *Le dépeupler* (where did Lamartine go?)

No's Knife (for) *Têtes-mortes* (an interesting shift of metaphors)

Fizzles (for) *Foirades* (has the rich excremental quality of the French title been lost in the English? Not at all, it has simply been reduced to a silent fart)" (10).

7. Ibid. 10-11; originally appeared in *Le Cahier de l'Herne: Samuel Beckett* and subsequently in Federman's English translation in *Partisan Review*. Cioran's anecdote can also be found in his short reminiscence of Beckett in *Anathemas and Admirations*, 131-132.

Schleiermacher defines the translator as the one who fashions the work as the author would have done had she written it in the second language.⁸ This notion is already a bit uncharacteristic of “typical” hermeneutics preoccupied with methods by which the reader can close the gap (grammatical, psychological, historical, philosophical) between herself and the text at hand; rather, with translation, it is the text which must conform to the expectations of the reader (or more properly, the reader’s language). As in Cioran’s anecdote, the search for an “honorable equivalent” is quickly abandoned by Schleiermacher because questions of the originality or intent of an author can only occur with regard to the “mother tongue.” Clearly, self-translation, at least of the sort Beckett practiced, presents something of a problem to this way of thinking. First of all, Beckett’s translations would have to be considered functionally indistinguishable from anyone else’s. Second, Beckett’s French texts, even if he wrote them first, would be considered secondary to their real or “imaginary” English counterparts without taking into account how the foreknowledge of either language affected/effectuated the composition in the other. One might say that Beckett’s English texts have a premonition of their French translations and vice-versa, the effect being the gradual production of a virtual or interstitial language idiosyncratic to be sure, but devoid of the idiosyncrasies of its “source languages” - something akin to a computer- or machine language.

Wolfgang Iser begins to show a way out of these problems by conceiving translation not as the systematic search for “an honorable equivalent,” but as difference “evinced by the division between the subject matter to be interpreted and the register brought to bear” (5). The difference evinced by the register he calls a “liminal space” because it belongs neither to the register nor the text to be translated. The liminal space itself - and the particular exigencies that may arise from it - forestalls the possibility of the interpretation (which was long the brass ring of “scientific” hermeneutics up to Dilthey): a situation, it is assumed, on the whole salutary (for reasons much clearer in Gadamer). But at the same time, the liminal space is still treated as something to be “coped with.” In other words, *understanding* is still the sine qua non of translation. Iser’s conception of translation suffers because he cannot abandon the idea of narrowing the constitutive gap between the subject matter and the register brought to bear; the allegiance is still to an ideal or fantasmatic scenario in which the register “harmonizes” with the

8. See Schleiermacher’s essay (paraphrased here), “On the Different Methods of Translating,” in Andre Lefevere, *Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 67-89.

subject matter so as virtually to eliminate the liminal space. This scenario is antithetical to nearly all of Beckett's stated claims. Hermeneutics as conceived by Iser, it would seem, insofar as constituted by the gesture of "[p]enetrating behind what is given in order to recuperate what is lost,"(8) is incapable of describing the phenomenon Beckett presents (though in most other regards Iser is among the most insightful and interesting of Beckett's readers).

At first blush Gadamer's hermeneutics, which similarly defines understanding as *nicht hintergebar* [un-go-behind-able], does not commend itself any more than Iser's, and yet it rests at the threshold of a fundamentally different conception of translation. In part, Gadamer's increased amenability is a result of his conviction that certain experiences of truth (particularly those associated with apprehensions of the artwork) are not only independent of method but allergic to it (hence the disjunctive "and" in *Truth and Method*). In terms of the parable/anecdote above, Gadamer's hermeneutics would place little or no stress on "equivalent" and a great deal on the possibilities of "honorable." What "honorable" might mean to Gadamer involves a process of "aesthetic differentiation" [*ästhetische Unterscheidung*] or "abstraction that selects on the basis of aesthetic quality as such" (85-87). The aesthetic differentiation, therefore, disregards both the original context of the work (i.e., there is no effort to recuperate an historical understanding of it - religious, political, philological, or otherwise) and its current context in order to apprehend it in its "purity" and "simultaneity." The artwork is "honored" to the extent that it is considered solely for itself, irrespective of the world. The artwork is considered mimetic not because it *reproduces* the world, but because in it *appears* what is represented - not as a *copy*, but as a representation inseparable from the work. The artwork doesn't represent truths of reality; truths of reality *appear* in the representation.

What does this mean in the case of translation? Gadamer tends to vacillate somewhat between classicism (with its rhetoric of meaning-restitution) and modernism (with its rhetoric of fragmentation, distortion, and finitude). His classicism manifests itself in the insistence that it is *meaning* that is translated (however incompletely); his modernism manifests itself in his fascination with the rupture of understanding presented by translation. Again, though, *understanding* is the default term and the compromises and difficulties of translation, an interesting breakdown or limit-situation. In straddling classicism and modernism, Gadamer must make theoretical concessions to each: to classicism he cedes the notion of meaning-restitution, but the price of that restitution is no less than the recontextualization of the work. What maybe draws us nearer to Beckett is Gadamer's treatment of

translation as “highlighting” [*überhellung*] (386). Highlighting certainly seems a useful way of looking at, for example, the way Beckett translated his titles (see footnote 42), particularly in terms of the excisions, additions, etc. But while highlighting presumably produces a clearer text (because the manifold meanings of the original have been filtered through a single consciousness), it necessarily flattens the text as well. Gadamer writes of unclear, borderline cases in which the translator “must resign himself. He must state clearly how he understands. But since he is always in the position of not really being able to express all the dimensions of his text, he must make a constant renunciation” (386). Certainly Beckett found himself in a state of perpetual resignation as he assayed to translate his works, but he never states clearly how he understands, rather he shows how he *doesn't* understand, how there is *no* understanding. In the end, Gadamer is still too loyal to positive and metaphysical terms like originality and understanding; and there is furthermore not a sufficiently nuanced account of translation to include Beckett's self-translation.

The move away from an “honorable equivalent” to “some derivation” therefore involves abandoning the telos of understanding, in its positivity - Benjamin, for example, considered the transmission of information and communication inessential to translation - in favor of more abstract terms like “essence” and “spirit.”⁹ In part I mean this last term as a pun, for Benjamin treated translation not as the reproduction or recontextualization of an original text, but rather as the expression of the text's “afterlife,” its way of surviving death. Against the exactitude and imitation associated with “equivalent,” “derivation” connotes descent, kinship [*Verwandtschaft*], and above all, *change*. It goes without saying that translation modeled on derivation involves what Benjamin called a “ripening” or “maturing process” [*Nachreife*]:

For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. The obvious tendentiousness of a writer's literary style may in time whither away, only to give rise to immanent tendencies in the literary creation. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound archaic. (*Selected Writings* vol. 1, 256; *Illuminations*, 73)

9. The master-term in Lessing's theory of translation, it will be recalled. We must therefore take a step back before we take one forward.

Translation is therefore not only a hedge against the vicissitudes of fashion, but perhaps more than that, it represents the extension of a text's inherent possibilities. At any rate, translations are not judged according to criteria of similitude for Benjamin, but rather in the way they reenact the intention or spirit or echo of the original. From this fairly conventional notion, Benjamin begins to increase the distance toward his own radicality, refusing all aesthetics of reception contra Iser and Gadamer; but where he really begins to diverge from Gadamer is in his metaphorization of the translation vis-à-vis the source text:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (*Selected Writings* vol. 1, 260; *Illuminations*, 78)¹⁰

What translation accomplishes, then, is the instauration of kinship between languages (not of "senses" but "ways of meaning"), and the ripening of the "greater language." That this presents a radical departure from the classical or hermeneutic models of meaning-restitution goes without saying; to fail at this type of translation clearly means something quite other than in Gadamer's model. If this were the sort of activity Beckett had in mind, his translation practice would be both utopic and apocalyptic - depending on how one feels about the notion of pure language with its "expressionless word" (Sallis 110).

What is important first of all is to divest oneself of any notion of the text "saying" something (here we begin to see a consonance with Beckett more pronounced), though we need to distinguish between inessential *information* which "does not survive the moment in which it was new" and a story which "preserves its strength" indefinitely (*Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 148; *Illuminations*, 90). Next we must realize that "[t]ranslation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability." Does this imply that to self-translate is to reveal the laws to oneself? The essence? The essence is now collocated with translatability

10. Were there space, it would be interesting to interject here some commentary on de Man's "retranslation" of this passage in *The Resistance to Theory*, pp. 73-105 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986).

itself, not translatability of meaning, but of language. The intention of translation? An articulation of the kinship between languages.

It seems reasonable to consider Beckett's self-translations not as procedures intended to transpose meaning, and it further seems reasonable to consider them not as procedures intended to close a gap between two languages. "Derivation" comes closer to mark, though Beckett seems not at all interested in extending the afterlives of his texts, nor in mourning their passing or any other gesture that will keep them a moment longer from oblivion (they are, in a sense, already in oblivion). As an image, resignation, in this case to the "metaphysical poverty of a preposition," is intuitively more appropriate, and who but Levinas might better complement such austerity? He is also a practitioner, in his own right, of a form of self-translation - not between languages, but between discourses, philosophical and talmudic - which for Levinas presents "the continual unfolding of the ethical order."¹¹ Or as Jill Robbins puts it, "The question of the ethical is posed (and dissimulated) there before it becomes congealed in the tradition, before it reposes in its derivative form" (*Prodigal* 105). Robbins places Levinas in a tradition of Jewish philosophizing that "translates" Judaism into philosophical terms and vice-versa. Levinas himself refers to his Talmudic readings as "translations" into a "modern idiom" and further, into "Greek" (which is his shorthand for "philosophy") (Levinas, *Nine* 9).

His properly philosophical texts only allude discreetly to the prospect of translation, through references to Odysseus and Abraham, say. And yet this figuration of his translation project is central in his philosophy: Odysseus as the Greek, philosophical, hermeneutical figure whose sojourn represents the giant circle of the Same returning from whence it came and incorporating all within its arc unto itself; Abraham as the Jewish, talmudic, ethical figure whose sojourn represents the spontaneous response (*Hineni*) to the call of the Other, a radical departure that never returns. The figuration reduces Odysseus and Abraham to two symbolic itineraries which are made to intersect in the act of translation, and what's more this intersection allows Levinas to address (even if only indirectly) the problem presented by his *own* texts, which cannot embody true alterity in philosophical language, but only stage a dissimulation. The dissimulation being staged, not just *between* Levinas' philosophical and talmudic texts but *within* the philosophical texts themselves, the dissimulation metaphorized in Odysseus/Abraham, is that of the (ontological) Said, which according to Ewa Ziarek "represents the unity and systematicity of propositional discourse, aiming at synchronizing

11. *Difficult Freedom*, 6.

and establishing relations between different terms,” and the (ethical) Saying, which “interrupts and transcends the order of the Said, preserves the ethical relation of alterity, the non-thematizable exposure of the subject to the other.”¹² In other words, Levinas must always translate - and in the act of translating, betray - his ethical Saying into the ontological Said, into the language of philosophy, of epistemology, of identity, but in so doing must find a way to allow the Saying to emerge, either as a residue or interruption. What can't be translated, what is left behind, effaced, or erased is both the spontaneous directed-ness of the utterance (an acknowledgment of the other that remains only as a trace) and the ideational surfeit of alterity itself. These excesses under erasure are not merely the *result* of translation but its precondition. In Edith Wyschogrod's succinct formulation, “In order for there to be translation, there must be a pre-existent store of concepts, a speculative language without which translation could not come about, yet one that is disrupted by the more, the exorbitance, of an alterity that is beyond it.”¹³

It is by virtue of this “speculative language” conditioned and disrupted by alterity, with all its resonances with Beckett's “virtual” or “interstitial” language, that Robbins defines Levinas' translations as “retroversions” (*Prodigal* 126-127). Just as translations of extant (biblical and apocryphal) texts are retroverted to “discover” their missing or non-extant originals, Levinas' texts are retroverted - reverse translated - from Greek to Hebrew, from the Said to the Saying, from ontology to ethics, and back again. The talmudic texts translated *into* the ontological “Greek” of philosophy *from* the incommensurable “Hebrew” of ethics are simultaneously retroverted *from* a Greek in which they appear as discourse *into* a fantasmatic Hebrew from which they emerge conceptually:

when Levinas reads the Talmud, he translates it *forward*, projects Greek conceptual structures onto a Hebrew which he hears *as* Greek, and translates it *back*, retroverts it to “Hebrew,” a “Hebrew” that he in turns translates again, renders explicit, renders philosophical, renders into Greek. (*Prodigal* 128)

Retroversion as a motif of vacillation, of affirmation and negation, within not the liminal space to be closed or bridged between two languages but the space of a speculative language conditioned by their difference, seems closest to describing what Beckett's self-translation “accomplishes,” with one excep-

12. *The Rhetoric of Failure*, 86-87.

13. “Language and Alterity in the thought of Levinas,” *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 188.

tion: even as Beckett's texts, retroverted from either a French or English fully aware of its posterior/anterior other, re-say each other perpetually, highlighting some missed or missing or impossible nuance of the other. At the same time they seem to be emptying each other, invalidating each other, foreclosing on possible meanings.

The more positive side of this formulation is expressed by critics like Anthony Uhlmann who aligns the position of the translator with justice: "the desire to understand by taking difference (precisely those things which are not identical to me) seriously, by attempting to preserve rather than efface difference" (149). The other side of this formulation suggests that in Beckett difference is not preserved in the name of possibility or polysemy, but to effect a weakening of meaning and the kinds of false epistemological mastery that inhibit alterity. An example of this double-action can be found in Beckett's translation of a key phrase in *Company*: "Devised deviser devising it all for company."¹⁴ Read in the usual solipsistic register, the passage simply states the condition of the self-deluded and - invented individual trapped within the confines of stifling self-knowledge, resorting to the faculty of imagination to (virtually and vainly) lessen the loneliness. In the etymology of the speculative language in which he wrote, Beckett likely saw the "deviser" as an image of negativity, a "de-visioner," an emptier of vision. Or possibly as an "un-aspirer," to play on the French verb *viser*. Or again, as one "devisaged" or "faceless" (need we here reinvoké Levinas' formulation of the face as the ethical locus of singularity?), incapable of a vis-à-vis. Whether this negativity, this anti-phenomenology, proposes an ethics it rests not so much on the rich possibilities of the noun "deviser," but perhaps more on the modest potential of the preposition "for."

In the canonical, solipsistic reading, "for" means "in order to have or effectuate." The (self-)alienated deviser conjures virtual others to populate the mind, to give the illusion of company. But the flexibility of the preposition allows for other readings as well, among them the idea that "for" signifies "on behalf of," or in other words that the devising is intended as a present or presentation to the other, the way a gift is *for* someone: "devising it all for company" becomes something like an ethical credo. The act of devising, with whatever negativity it signifies or fails to signify, is not something undertaken for the *self*, for its mastery or solace - after all, in the end, like Beckett's narrator, one necessarily remains "Alone" - but for *company*, for the other who calls to one in the dark, who commands one to imagine.¹⁵

14. In *Nohow On*, 33.

The metaphysical poverty of the preposition becomes a strength and richness which must in turn be impoverished, if not silenced, by the reflexive verb employed in the French translation: "*Imaginant imaginé imaginant le tout pour se tenir compagnie.*"¹⁶ Beckett shows us how he "understood" the original passage (an understanding which necessarily reduces or contracts), or how understanding fails the original passage by not accommodating its resonances, or how there is no understanding the original passage: the reflexive verb *se tenir* appears to utterly underscore the solipsistic reading to the exclusion of the ethical one. Likewise, not only is the true etymology of "devise" - closer to "division" and "difference" - foreclosed in the French, but the speculative etymologies as well, replaced once again by the *image* that was emptied, replaced etymologically by imitation that was denied, by similarity that was negated.¹⁷ Where the ethical re-emerges is surprisingly *not* in a return to the original utterance but in the silent residue that is left between translations, or in other words the residue or trace *of* translation. Beckett's ethics, which truly was never to be found constatively or propositionally, is in a perpetual state of precipitation or (re)saying within the translation or "mis-saying" of the Said.

Clearly, my emphasis is not therefore on the discrepancies, elisions, or absences between Beckett's texts per se (though these are interesting in their own right), but on what remains at all times explicitly unacknowledged in the "force field" between them.¹⁸ Nor am I particularly preoccupied with the interpretation or understanding of the original presented by the translation, its ability to "quintessentialize" the original - in fact, my contention thus far has been that Beckett's translations present for him the failure of an understanding. In the case of his translations into French, this failure is signaled in a flattening and contraction of the language; contrarily, in the case of translations into English, this failure is signaled by a reinvestment, rhythmicization, and poeticization of originally flat or moribund language.¹⁹ In both cases the compensations afforded in the "other" language of translation come at the price of whatever gains the "original" offered. I am more

15. Q.v. the first line of *Company*.

16. *Compagnie*, 63.

17. *Imago* being akin to *imitari*.

18. At any rate, Brian Fitch already has written convincingly on the thematic impact of alterations and deletions between *Company/Compagnie*: see especially his article "The Relationship Between *Compagnie* and *Company*: One Work, Two Texts, Two Fictive Universes," in *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*, pp. 25-35.

19. See for example Marjorie Perloff's essay "Une Voix pas la mienne: French/English Beckett and the French/English Reader" in the same volume as n. 31, pp. 36-48.

interested here in the formal question of translation, specifically self-translation, as an apophatic technique of addressing alterity in a re-saying without at once thematizing it. Beckett's habit of self-translation is linked not only to Gadamer's notion of highlighting, Benjamin's irreducible distinction between the "meaning of the original" and its "mode of signification,"²⁰ but to Levinas' conception of "resaying" (via Robbins' "retroversion") which draws an irreducible distinction between silent ethical and silencing onto-theological discourse. The twin themes of silence and self-translation are therefore considered as similar manifestations of Beckett's ethical impulse.

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20. *Illuminations*, 78. Translated as "sense of the original" and "the original's way of meaning" in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 260.