Disapparition II:

Derrida's (Impossible) Intercultural Dialogue in Japan

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ABSTRACT: Derrida's famous letter to a Japanese friend is an echo of Martin Heidegger's many letters and interactions with Japanese scholars over five decades. Derrida's "deconstruction" (stimulated by Heidegger's *Abbau* as dismantling) speaks to a constellation of absences, silences, and secrets. Through his discussion of deconstruction, the act of translating his work into a Japanese idiom replaces the act of translation as an activity centrally located within the sphere of language, offering pause for reflection on perennial questions of transmissibility and the economy of substitutions of signs in the spacing, gaps, losses and accumulations of divergent meanings. "Disapparition" denotes the simultaneous *vanishing* and *appearance* of the figure of the sign within the act of translation as a metaphor. Derrida's not-merely deconstructive theory is offered in tandem with an example from Japanese author Kōbō Abe 安部公房, who similarly investigates linguistic and cultural absences, excesses, disappearances. Firstly, I trace the discussion in Derrida's "Letter to a Japanese Friend," its problematic, and its relationship to exchanges with Japanese scholars. Secondly, I contextualize his textual *oeuvre* with a shift from the presence of the "sign" to the trace of the text as disapparition following the trajectory of esteemed professor Jay Goulding in his interaction with Jacques Derrida and their dialogues on Japan and East Asian philosophy. Thirdly, I outline how this shift can be thematically situated in proximity to a Japanese linguistic and cultural milieu through a parallel reading of Abe's famous *The Woman in the Dunes*.

Introduction[1]

Particularly under these conditions, we've gathered to celebrate a secret strength *in absentia*. No ritual can guide us. What we are witnessing bears no precedent, but still, we invoke the desire for continuity, even from afar. Invocations of a tradition rely on the hope that, in calling out the same names and performing the same rights, we might be able, also, to make *reappear* an *old spirit*. But now, we face a crisis. A new *apparition* emerges. The old invocations may not protect us anymore. We're confronting a global pandemic.[2] And so, what a strange time

[1] The following work is an extension of a panel series that took place on 17 October 2020. It was co-organized by Prof. Jay Goulding on Japanese Philosophy alongside the co-ordinators of the 33rd annual conference of the *Japan Studies Association of Canada*. My gratitude to them for such a rich and meaningful opportunity to share and discuss.

[2] At the time of writing this, the municipal government of Toronto has been in what seems like a perpetual lockdown, now extended to the province of Ontario (as of Boxing Day, 26 December 2020) in response to ever-increasing numbers of case of COVID-19.

to announce these words, which will *not* attempt to provide solace in our assured old ways, but to propose that we observe closely their disappearance, and hold only *in secret* what small things can be preserved within them *outside of them*. Here, already, we bear witness to what is oft called 'deconstruction.' Rather than a continuation, we witness a *transition*; rather than the familiarity of origins, we witness a *primordial translation*. The time is out of joint, and we will not attempt to set it back in place, as if we could at all.

Ostensibly, my task is to share an analysis of a document, French-Jewish-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida's "Letter to a Japanese Friend," and the problematic he outlines, which is both of specific importance—on the translation of the term, *deconstruction*, into Japanese—and a *general problem of the question of translatability*. In this way, we can pose for ourselves a few questions: what are the conditions of translatability, and what is translation? What is *language* such that 'a language' is translatable? What is culture that it can be considered the *object* of translation, that which is *signified* in original, and *transported* to new conditions?

We begin, also, with our own linguistic and cultural translation. Our own esteemed Dr. Jay Goulding offers for us in the context of East-West interculture, and specifically of Japan, the phrase "every translation is a transportation" (forthcoming). So, we must prepare for a *journey of origins*, one we undertake not without unease, one we undertake not without trepidation. I seek for us to explore the possibility of an impossible foundation of culture and language in the primacy of translation to bind a global interculture. In doing so, we are asking a question about translation, a fundamental question; however, we are not asking how the 'most Japanese' of Japanese customs relate to the 'most Algerian' of Algerian customs or the 'most French' of French customs, even the 'most Canadian' of Canadian customs—not to forget ourselves, and our site. Instead, we are asking how certain specific instances of cultural production, and their

linguistic forms, bring a culture to its own *margin* and away from its *center* such that cultures *interminably place themselves in crisis already*. To demonstrate this, I stress the *inter* of *intercultural exchange* and ask whether a *crisis* or tension does not *constitute its very essential structure*, a *grand risk of going outside of itself*, and one that is representative of both *the possibility to lose oneself or one's culture, and the fact of translation as centrally-in-between* cultures, as the very *essence of language*.

So, here we are. Let's begin!

The Letter[3]

Derrida's letter to Professor Izutsu is both complex and far-reaching. In it, he outlines the context the term 'deconstruction' broadly construed so as to render the term possible to be translated. As we will see, this not only proves difficult, but this difficulty is the very crux (the hinge [*la brisure*][4]) of a 'theme' or 'object' that is supposed to be placed under analysis in Derrida's texts. Allow us to map out the field of this letter: First, Derrida's introductory gestures consolidate around the assertion that deconstruction is *not* the central element of his *corpus in general*. In fact, as he continues, Derrida mentions that this term was *already a translation* of a certain exchange taking place in the texts of Martin Heidegger—his notions of *Abbau* and *Destruktion*—and that of Nietzschean 'demolition.' In this way, he relies on a term, 'deconstruction,' which would not necessarily elicit to mind the image of an *annihilation* but

[3] The version of the letter used in translation, all page citations, are drawn from the second volume of the collection *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (2008) edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg.
[4] See Derrida's discussion of *la brisure* in *Of Grammatology* (1997 [1967]).

would instead offer a ‘mechanical’ and ‘technical’ metaphor of the *disassembly for transport elsewhere* of a machine (pp. 1-2).

Second, and in following, a discussion of deconstruction, rather than being *fixed* to the name of Jacques Derrida, should be restricted to *its* context, which is *not* the context of a linguistic regime (French) but to the *text itself from which this discussion arises*. The context of *this* discussion involves many scholars and texts *across* national-linguistic borders. Derrida mentions an inseparable ‘French’ context of concern for ‘structure’ in linguistics drawn from Saussure, simultaneous to an ‘American’ context, wherein a conversation around a ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy and as a multi-disciplinary site is also taking place (p. 3). This context includes a diverse array of scholars, French and Belgian (Derrida and his friend Paul De Man), as well as Japanese (Kojin Karatani for example) converge around the American institution of Yale University. In fact, to uphold the primacy of a national-linguistic distinction increasingly *occludes what is taking place*. Its context leaps *beyond* the nationally delineated units of imagined language-communities.[5]

Third, Derrida enumerates what deconstruction should not be presumed to be. He says that deconstruction is neither a form of *analysis* (a regression of elements to a simple and indecomposable origin—precisely what is *in question*), nor is it strictly a *critique* (insofar as *krisis* and *krinein* as a decisive moment is its central theme or ‘object’). Further, it would seem that the ‘tendency’ of deconstruction is *passive*; whatever movement that deconstruction abides by is embedded in its *inscription*. Moreover, it is also, itself, deconstructible: *it deconstructs*

[5] See Anderson (2016 [1983]) for further discussion of nations as ‘imagined communities.’

itself and more importantly *it loses its construction* in *disassembly, transport*, a passive movement *elsewhere* (p. 4).

Fourth, the tenor of Derrida's letter shifts from the avowal of a specificity of context to the specificity of a historical 'epoch.' Ours is an *epoch* whose very *being* is in a *mode of losing itself*. Deconstruction is less subsumed under the name of a specific 'Derrida,' and more so relates to a temporal and historical phenomenon at the limit of thinking. It is not a term bearing an *interiority of meaning*, but instead a *member to a historically constituted chain*, one that *marks the place of unmeaning*, the possibility of a limit and a disaster (to use Maurice Blanchot's [1995/1980] terminology) (p. 5). There is a *horror* evoked in this term toward its epoch: an epoch of technological advancement; of Western colonial domination; the global exportation of capitalism; nationalism, sovereignty and the nation-state; their culmination in the Second World War, the invention and use of the atomic bomb, the Holocaust. This epoch now glimpses a terrifying exterior, the possibility that it bears no grounds beyond this limit.

Fifth, Derrida re-places this historical discussion within a framework of the opening of analytical possibilities—possibilities that remain, even if dormant, *suffused through the structure of an epochal and global history*. That is, in the *very fabric of language itself*, of *any* language *as such*, there exists the *persistent* problem of definition and translation. Deconstruction, its epoch, seems to demonstrate *from the beginning* or *always-already* what has remained in language *even preceding the origin of the West and well outside of its spatial boundaries*, that the elements of language (all languages) are *deconstructible* (ibid.). Linguistic deconstructibility is derived from the *iterability* of linguistic elements *outside* of their situation in a context; the presentation and representation of context *in light of a novel chain of substitutable* or *replaceable* terms; the fact that a *historically* defined conception of 'a' language *translated* through a 'national' context,

remains wildly indeterminate, what we could call *displacement*. Between *iterability, replaceability* and *displacement*—between *disassembly, transport* and *elsewhere*—we *bear witness* to deconstruction *specifically as a sort of linguistic economy*. We witness translation precede language in its deconstructibility, in the free exchange of terms, in the equal possibility that one will be reiterated or replaced by another. For a language to exist, it must already undergo an 'originary' act of translation.[6]

Finally, I'd like to summarize what has been said and how it corresponds to the work to follow. Perhaps beginning with a culminating statement on the letter, Derrida notes, "I do not think that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text. And, as I have just said, "deconstruction" is a word that is essentially replaceable in a chain of substitutions" (p. 6). With this, we can see the thrust of our concern, the problematic and the *impossible hope* for such a project, its implications cutting across language(s), posing problems to a structure of establishment for language, a pressing need for languages to be *fixed*, which, although posed in light of a *horror* of crisis—an impending *disaster*—is just as much an opening upon an *elsewhere*.

The Problematic: Derrida, Heidegger, Japanese Interlocutors

Let me attempt to clarify what I've been saying and to consider the context of the letter in terms of the expression of an intercultural exchange, one that binds French-Algeria to Japan. In order to begin, we should in a sense, *take a step back*. Derrida's deconstruction being a

[6] See both Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon* (2011 [1967]) and "Des Tours de Babel" (in English, 2002) for further discussion.

translation of Martin Heidegger's *Abbau*, it might also be pertinent to consider Heidegger's writings on translation, for which Dr. Goulding provides us with elaboration. He states, "Heidegger explains the task as "translating the untranslatable"… Translation is a trans-portation within and between languages as is Dōgen's task within Japanese and between Chinese and Japanese texts" (pp. 7-8). We will return to Dr. Goulding's context—of a multi-intercultural translational activity particularly taking place between German 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger and 13th century Japanese Zen master, Dōgen. For now, it is important to emphasize this fundamental—philosophical—stance toward translation which takes place *between* languages. In this way, the marking-out or assertion of this position also already implies that *a* language exists, that translation is an activity of a second order. This is something, certainly, that resonates for us—I know *my* language in a way that, even if I were bilingual, would *not* know *another*. Even if, technically, *my* language is comprised of a sort of border-hopping mélange of terms always transcending national idiom, I still intuitively situate myself within the borders of *one* language coded in terms of a nation or community of shared speakers. So even if I know an English term (say "thank you") and a French equivalent ("Merci") and a Japanese ("Arigatō"), only one of the three I assert to *possess*, to *know as my own*.

In hopes that we might add to this in the meantime, I would like to present the *problem* of translation slightly differently. We might coin a term, *disapparition*, to capture how specific focus on the linguistic-cultural object is liable to find it 'bobbing' in and out of existence, how it *appears* one moment and *disappears* the next, much like a *ghost* or *phantom*. If our concern is with an object or objective—say, of 'deconstruction' and its translation—we are prone to be confused when that object seems to appear and disappear. Derrida uses the term in the *Grammatology* (1997 [1967]) only sporadically, and in other works even less. Deconstruction is

not his project while at the same time being *translated as the central object of his thought*. Thus, we might consider the play of appearance and disappearance as a *structure of disapparition*. Here, we should remember Heidegger's (2008 [1947]) famous words, "language is the house of being" (p. 217), not referring to an *object* but the *structuring of a place for dwelling*. However, *disapparition* is a *problem of translation*, one which threatens the internal structure of this house.

I should stress the *inter* of our intercultural framework, which, sitting on the border of the possibility of the *interiority* of a national language, and the possibility of *traversing a threshold of language*, refutes a primary presumption; of *language*—and by extension, culture—*as, itself, an object*. Treating the *inter itself*—giving greater credence to *translation* over a *national idiom*—this contention, this *aporia*, between *on the one hand* the 'pure' interiority of a nationally delineated *language-as-object*, and *on the other hand* the traversal of languages, we find a fluidity of structure *in between* languages and cultures. Languages *themselves*—as structures of disapparition—are *not* foreign to one another: they are, in fact, 'inter-'; intergenetic, interstructural, intercultural. They are, by their very nature, *translatable*. We find or invent a Japanese parallel to Derrida's deconstruction. Kojin Karatani (1995) who, citing Yujiro Nakamura, mentions the Japanese direct translation Datsu Kōchiku (脱構築). I would argue, however, that rather than attempt to affix a single term, we might, instead, offer a reading of Kōbō Abe's works to provide for ourselves a restatement in parallel to the problematic we've outlined—one uttered in an entirely different idiom, and yet bearing such apparent resonances with the implications of translation as a *first order* activity within the sphere of language.

The Question of Literature: Culture and Communication

Consider how easily we can draw out of Abe's work, *The Woman in the Dunes* (1992 [1962]), a reading of comparable concerns as what we've said of Derrida, concerns regarding a particular sort of *economy*. An economy, here, is the *chain of substitutions compiled and circulating that comprises the intertext of language*, the ever-present possibility to *repeat* or *replace* a sign. This economy is not exclusively of the exchange of commodities, but a much less tangible and entangled structuring of the complex workings of cultures and societies. What makes this economy is the maintenance of an *oikos* (the household, the dwelling place) through the assertion and maintenance of *nomos* (laws). What *propels* this economy is the metabolic activity of actors who do the *work* of its maintenance whether through physical labour, communication, reproduction, or personal-spiritual investment.

Abe's book revolves around the generally unnamed protagonist (whose name is revealed for us in government documents bookending the novel as Niki Jumpei). He ventures on a bug-catching trip along the seashores of Japan and as a sort of flight from city-life but is met with perilous capture when the members of a small village overrun with giant sand dunes place him in one of their homes—each dwelling sunk into a pit amongst the waves of sand—belonging to a widowed woman for what he thinks will be a night. Unwittingly held prisoner, the protagonist is tacitly expected to care for his new housemate and partner, and to contribute to the many chores of keeping the sand at bay. The protagonist refuses, seeking always his freedom in a dynamic of refusal, reassertion, bewilderment and despair. He attempts escape but is met with failure. He berates his housemate, but she seems to be unwilling or unable to comprehend the absurdity of spending every night digging their makeshift dwelling out of interminably encroaching sand dunes.

Just as Derrida will continue to remind us of the work, the presence of *displacement*, Abe *demands* we *reckon* with the protagonist as existentially alienated from this economy *alongside* the looming threat of the absurd physics of the titular 'dunes.' The sand, the sandscape, represents an *incapacity* to stabilize the *nomos* of this *topos* that *shifts*—to stabilize the house, or maintain the interiority of the dwelling. Sand sprinkles in, through seemingly infinitesimal crevices in the ceiling and walls. Abe's protagonist is as restless and *cannot* contribute to this economic activity at the same time as the sand persistently threatens it. The protagonist—refusing to dig, putting up a fight, contributing nothing and demanding everything—is an *intruder* as much as the sand is. However, where the sand can be pushed away in a repeated practice of this economy—a ritual of *banishment*, both necessary and constituting its *work*—he has somehow—like a single speck of sand—made his way *inside while remaining an outsider-other*, his own *translation* into the pit of this dwelling is uneasily already under way. Where the amorphous sand presents itself as a single totalizing threat that allows us to delineate the boundary of what is inside the house, this infiltrator-other cannot merely be *banished*. Instead, this economy must respond to him as a threat by displacing him (even if this is by kidnapping and *holding him inside*, as a prisoner).

How could we render this, Abe's protagonist, his narrative, his writing into a cultural object prepared for economic circulation when the text mounts a fundamental *refusal* to it? Abe's protagonist resembles the *inter* of interculture and the threatening possibility of translation, which constitutes and threatens the possibility of self-delineation as a culture—one that takes place *at the limit* and *not near the center*. The village only becomes what it is—one can only utter "this is just who we are" or "this is just the way we do things in our village"—when the outsider encounters it, contends with it, questions the way things 'just' are. Niki Jumpei is the

threatening ground of a (global) inter-culture that holds *nothing* in common. It is not the *positing* of specific qualities in comparison that determines the possibility of this interculture—and of culture itself—of a commodified diversity, where culture is an object for consumption. It would instead be a dual *disruption*, from *inside* to *between*, from inside to *outside*, that Abe inaugurates for us and that Niki Jumpei represents.

Here I'd like to offer a further example. Dr. Goulding (2019) has intriguingly rendered a central relation between the works of Martin Heidegger and the 13th century Japanese (Soto) Zen Monk and poet, Dōgen Zenji, on the ground of a sympathetic constellation of terms—where Dōgen's *taiho* (退歩） compares favourably with Heidegger's *schritt züruck* (both translated as the 'step back'). This sympathy is best characterized by two examples. First, the step out of thinking and *into being*, a body-phenomenology he has already argued is central to intercultural dialogue (see: Goulding 2008). Second, where there is found no vanishing point (as prescribed in Western Euclidean geometry) but instead the possibility of, "disappear[ing] within the trace—where the…sage disappears like a cartoon character Bugs Bunny vanishing into a hole that he pulls from his pocket" (Goulding 2019, p. 11). In Dr. Goulding's rich work, we can see already an inter-linguistic and intercultural problematic we've attempted to tease out here.

I'd like to contribute only one small addition, a supplement to this rendering aligned with the reading of Kōbō Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes* we've already given; that the step back is *meaningfully* a step *into the void*, the nothing, a *rich* emptiness either outside or between being(s). Because the economy of the inside determines *all that can appear*, and insofar as the maintenance of the inside in opposition to that which is estranged, a banished other, *finding ourselves* outside is to be finding ourselves as absent, as *having-disappeared*, as *without-place*. In this way, a language that avails itself to us is no longer straight-forwardly the language of

Being *but instead the language of an absence and an estrangement*, of a *crisis*. No doubt, East Asian cultures—from Daoist to Zen Buddhist thought—have had better success *contending* with the non-conceptual ground of *nothingness*. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to stare into the void, the emptied phenomenon of an experiential absence, as *disapparition*. In any case, between Derrida and Professor Izutsu, Kōbō Abe, Heidegger, Dōgen and Dr Goulding—that is to say, from Canada to Germany, Algeria to Japan, a worldwide interculture—there is a trace of a language that says what it means under *this* heading, the heading of a primary translation.

Conclusion

I have attempted, here, to outline a problematic regarding the notion of translation as encountered from a radically different vantage point from the conventional presumption of stable languages and their communities in contact with one another. No longer inside of *a* language, but *already* between languages, I find that relying on the 'inter' of interlinguistic and intercultural exchange gives rise to a meaningful and new starting point for thinking about the very notion of language as primarily already engaged in a practice of translation. Luckily, two models have already presented themselves as important objects, and as sites, for inaugurating this new way of thinking about translation—both of which render translation as a *first* rather than second order activity within the sphere of language, and in relation to the presumptions of a national idiom:

1. In the first model, Jacques Derrida outlines the difficulties of translating the notion of 'deconstruction,' *not* because it is fixed to a national idiom (which would be French, in this case), but because it is situated within a socio-historical context that places it outside of the bounds of *a* language as a structured interior—one that includes English and Japanese linguistic

signs, and a multicultural group of scholarly interlocutors, and which further speaks to a historical *epoch* characterized by the existential crisis of meaning. This context threatens the stable edifice on which the national idiom 'stands' as an internally coherent construct. In turn, he notes—and we've attended as closely as we could to this fact—that the term 'deconstruction' uncovers the movements of languages *in general* as bearing the open possibility to be *repeated* (iterated) or *replaced* (supplemented) within an economy of signification.

2. Given that the question of translation is posed specifically as the transportation of a French term into Japanese, it is to our benefit that we can rely on a second model in Kōbō Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*, which is often perceived as a *specifically Japanese* 'cultural product.' Abe's work dramatizes the exteriority of cultural production, the encounter between a stranger and a strange land, the *economies* of signifying practices which bring in particular relief the dialectic at play between appearance and disappearance. This is the other aspect of a theory of translation as a first order linguistic activity where it contends directly with the attempt to maintain the interiority of the stable edifice of a language through the banishment of an outsider. Thus, like Derrida's "Letter to a Japanese Friend," Abe's work speaks both to the fact of translation as well as to the insecurities of the national idiom which attempts to do away with it, an insight that suggests on a meta-textual level that the reappropriation of such a text as a specifically national-cultural object overlooks its strange place as already in translation, much like the term 'deconstruction' is.

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