Invisible Appearing: Translating the Philosophical Interiority of Fiction

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Abstract: Translating philosophy and translating literary fiction present discrepant conceptual and stylistic challenges. But how might the translation of fiction written by a philosopher be informed by the conceptual determinations of his or her philosophical texts? Taking up this question through a case study—work toward a translation the novel *Le jeune officier*, by French phenomenologist Michel Henry—this essay considers subtle lexical, syntactical, and tonal decisions informed by Henry's philosophical concepts. The essay argues that such considerations illuminate the work of translation as a practice of *reading* not only across languages but also across disciplines.

Keywords: Philosophical fiction, Michel Henry, phenomenology, translation, close reading

Considering the relationship between philosophy and literature might mean determining a position at the outset – from where does one arrive, and from which side will the analysis begin? If it starts with a choice between philosophy or literature, as competing disciplinary frameworks, we may already be starting with the wrong question. The elasticity of translation might enable another approach, as I will come to argue, one in which close reading, analysis, and interpretation discreetly inhere. Arising from my present work toward a translation of a novel, *Le jeune officier*, by French phenomenologist Michel Henry, this essay is an examination of how translation might foreground the moments where a literary work is underpinned by a philosophical system. To what extent are philosophical concepts legible in a literary work and how might translational decisions support the philosophical agency of a text?

One might argue that a philosopher produces a literary work as an address to those who are not philosophically trained, and as such, it is therefore unimportant or even a hindrance to commence one's interpretation of a novel with a philosophical frame in mind. Here, I determine instances in a work of fiction where the broader conceptual apparatus of the writer comes into effect, and I offer an explication of the translational decisions that ensue.

Henry wrote *Le jeune officier* in 1948, following the completion of his master's thesis on Baruch Spinoza. Henry had been a member of the French resistance, where he was given the code name "Kant," after the copy of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* found in his backpack when he presented himself to volunteer.

The novel's plot hinges on extermination, and considering the period of its composition, one might expect the novel to engage themes related to World War II. No doubt it does engage with that history, but in the form of a drastically reduced terrain, and through the ruminations of a single being. Importantly, the work does not permit the reader to effortlessly determine where one ought to stand with respect to the hero of the story and his endeavor; one cannot simply situate the story within an unambiguous historical or moral frame. Clearly the story is allegorical, but it depicts an allegorical situation that is not immediately legible.

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 48, No. 2 (Suppl.), Summer 2025 [108-115]

A sketch of the plot allows us to consider the allegorical elements as material that supports Henry's philosophical investigations. In brief, a young officer is engaged on a colonial aviso in the French navy. Soon after embarking, he is called to the office of the Commandant (the commanding officer of a battalion in the French navy). The Commandant tells the young officer that, despite his youth and inexperience, he has been chosen for a task of paramount importance that none before him have managed to accomplish: to rid the ship of rats, absolutely. To this end, all the resources and the crew on board will be placed under his orders. After a period of inquiry followed by a period of solitary rumination, the young officer commits the crew to a plan.

The plan is to deprive the rats of food, water, and freedom for a certain time, then, to allow them to escape to a port where they could improve their situation on another ship. The plan succeeds. Learning of the success of this heretofore impossible task, an admiral awards the young officer with a medal. Following the award ceremony, the admiral decides to check the quality of new provisions being brought on board the ship. He opens a bag of white flour, reaches in – and to his horror, he discovers a large litter of baby rats. The story ends there.

The epigraph at the beginning of the novel, "*the failure and perhaps also the salvation*" (23), points to an enigma that refuses an evident resolution. Thus, the reader must work through the ethical import of the young officer's position vis-à-vis the rats without a clear sign from the author as to whether our hero is on the path of heroism, failure, salvation, or none (or all) of the above. The novel demands that we go through the paces of the problem; this demand is one sign of the systematicity that characterizes philosophy, and translating this work requires attention to syntax and a certain patience. One must understand that something intentional and precise is happening at the level of exposition – which is where the prose carefully unfolds into a problem. Reading across Henry's work on phenomenology, Christianity, and art further complicates the work and allows us to access various levels of the thought upon which the novel is built.

For Henry, "The concept most lacking in Western philosophy is… that of *immanence*" ("Those Within Me," 65). Henry takes the side of immanence over transcendence. He critiques Western metaphysics on the grounds that it reproduces dualism even when it explicitly tries to exclude it. Western philosophy has posited a subject that is separate from being, and it errs on the side of equating consciousness with representation. This inscribes vision, and light, as the model for consciousness, and consciousness as the site of being. "Traditional thought understands phenomenality as light – whether it is natural light, the light of reason, of the world, or this world itself" ("The Four Principles of Phenomenology," 10). Phenomenology, broadly speaking, is a philosophy of the appearance of phenomena to consciousness. For Henry, there are two modes of appearing, interior and exterior. The first is invisible, unrepresentable, and unintentional; he calls this auto-affection, a state of pure immanence that does not posit itself as an object for consciousness, but passively suffers, or endures [*éprouver*] the pathos of a life it did not create. This unrepresented substrate is the ground from which the second mode of appearance springs; this is the consciousness that posits, represents, and cognizes – it "sees" itself. In Henry's view, phenomenology, by recognizing consciousness as intention (Edmund Husserl) or ek-sistence, being outside of oneself (Martin Heidegger), loses its basis in life by being directed to an exterior, which risks objectifying the subject as a thing amongst other things of the world.

This rudimentary outline of Henry's intervention into phenomenology leads to an important social critique that runs through his work. The division of consciousness from the ground of life is fundamental to the development of science and technology. As a result, modern culture – which Henry understands as an exteriorization of life's excess force, and as dominated by "scientism" – has become forgetful, or even contemptuous, of life. By relegating life to observable and quantifiable phenomena we have delivered it to scientism, which, for Henry, can say nothing of that ground of life which is invisible and unmeasurable. There must be a concept of life that gives and takes nothing from the natural sciences, just as there must be a concept of the body that has nothing to do with

biology. Art can make manifest what life, apart from the deadening effects of scientism, might be – realms of possibility not restricted to what is already known. This idea of art as a manifestation of life that is not founded on the observable, regardless of whether it is "visual art" or not, gives an indication of why Henry has pared down the world of *Le jeune officier* to a few allegorical components:

> Reality, then, is not reduced to things, but there are unsuspected dimensions of being, and it is man's task to live in these new fields. Art would be one of them, and the artist would throw beyond the world of habitual facticity this dimension of being that is an absolutely specific domain. In short, art would define an original region that does not have its source in a ready-made existing, in a kind of substantial, real world, but that would probably refer us to much more fundamental potentialities, which would not be foreign to this world, but which would be like a horizon in which this world is possible. (Henry qtd. in Seyler)

Henry creates a world that is not surreal, or irreal, but one instead that is devoid of naturalism, even positioned explicitly against it, as if the usual details that go into creating a sense of place and character in a novel are, in this case, superfluous.

The importance of the visible/invisible distinction for Henry offers a clue to as to the allegorical function of the rats in his novel. The rats are manifest primarily by their effects: chewed bags and barrels, droppings, the wound on the end of a sailor's nose. When dead, the odor of their corpses drifts from secret, inaccessible crevices causing nausea and ill ease. Alive, they are mostly heard in the night as they go about the ship seeking what the medical officer calls "genital adventures" (45). When they finally leave *en masse*, the hero of the story does not see them but rather hears and *feels* them leave as they rush out in the dead of night.

We might read, I suggest, the rats as a complex allegorical figure of the mode of invisible appearing Henry refers to in his philosophy: "This other domain of appearing has no face at all, no conceivable visage, but is the non-visage of the invisible essence of life" ("The Four Principles of Phenomenology," 16). Not only are the rats rarely visible, and never described in detail, but we do not have access to the narrator's thoughts about them. The whole story revolves around his deep meditations on the problem of the rats, but we are not given the content of those meditations, despite the fact that most of the story is told through his internal reflections on other questions.

Prior to the young officer's long speech to the crew, which marks the decision he has made on what course of action to take, there are several passages in which the reader "sees" him thinking about the rats, as he stands alone on the deck, gazing at the sea. Significantly, this is a moment where an *image* of thinking is intentionally given in lieu of the thought itself. This instance in which the reader is barred access to the young officer's thought is another indication that we are being asked to consider consciousness outside of representation; the thought process around which the whole story turns is not represented for the reader, and, beyond that, there is the suggestion that a thought can remain obscure even to the thinker who has it. The first indication of this idea is offered in the opening interview with the Commandant, who tells the young officer, "I know it's possible to work while appearing to do nothing and without fixing one's attention on any object. I'm even convinced that it is primarily by working in this way that one has any chance of obtaining a result" (30). He puts his faith precisely in the young officer's inexperience, tendency to daydream, and even "a certain laziness" (30). We might go so far as to read this embrace of "laziness" as a humorous parrying of Husserl's equation of consciousness with intentionality.

Though there is no one-to-one equivalence between concepts and characters, and although literature, like dreams, has the power to freely accrete associations in a way philosophy does not, an inquiry into Michel Henry's critique of phenomenology suggests that the figure of the Commandant serves as an echo of Martin Heidegger's work on question of being. The Commandant is a serious man, who stands alone in his burning preoccupation with a task whose importance is such that he believes nothing else can truly be achieved before it is accomplished. He is surrounded by people who don't take the problem as seriously as he does, who accommodate themselves to the

problem being unsolvable, who forget about the problem, or who trivialize it. This characterization of the rat problem seems to reflect Heidegger's concern at the beginning of *Being and Time*:

> At the beginning of our investigation, it is not possible to give a detailed account of the presuppositions and prejudices which are constantly reimplanting and fostering the belief that an inquiry into Being is unnecessary. They are rooted in ancient ontology itself, and it will not be possible to interpret that ontology adequately until the question of being has been clarified and answered and taken as a clue – at least, if we are to have a regard for the soil from which the basic ontological concepts developed, and if we are to see whether the categories have been demonstrated in a way that is appropriate and complete. (22)

Returning to Henry's novel, the Commandant warns the young officer, "…you will see that not all Commandants share my point of view and that for many among them rats are no more than a mildly amusing afterthought. I dare say those are false Commandants…" (27). He then offers the hero of the story a manual that describes all the methods accumulated over time by the most prestigious and skilled officers, about which he says: "…you will be seduced as much by the impressive quantity of methods that we have at our disposal as by the rigor and the skill that went into each of these techniques of combat; it's a read that assures a certain amount of pleasure to the mind, a certain pleasure in the coherence and the logic of its developments" (29).

The Commandant gives the manual to the young officer because he is required to, but he advises against reading it. Again, this resonates with moments in *Being and Time*:

> And although research may always lean towards this positive approach, its real progress comes not so much from collecting results and storing them away in 'manuals' as from inquiring into the ways in which each particular area is basically constituted [*Grundverfassungan*] – an inquiry to which we have been driven mostly by reacting against just such an increase in information. (Heidegger 29)

For Henry, the answer to the question being overlooked by Heidegger and Husserl, among others, is the immanence of auto-affection: the unrepresentable, indivisible substrate of being, and the real, inescapable oscillations between suffering and joy that he calls life. One might read the rats as Henry's response to the Commandant, whose desire to resolve the rat problem analogizes what Henry sees as a problem of Western metaphysics, which posits being through an outwardly directed subject. In this reading, the return of the rats at the end of *Le jeune officier* is the affirmation that life cannot get out of itself, it must endure [*éprouver*]. As Henry writes in *Barbarism*:

> Life is discovered as an unauthorized [*sauvage*] principle within oneself that has to do with a knowledge that one does not have. To the extent that one can know what it is, it obeys different laws from those that one seeks to teach the philosopher in the treatises of the positive sciences. It does not contrast with them through vague ambitions and dreams but through reality pure and simple. (21)

Henry would agree with Heidegger here, that we must not forget the question of being; hence, he is against the forgetting, the accommodation, vulgarization, and naturalization of the question. For this reason, the Commandant remains a heroic, if faintly comic figure of the novel.

In her Preface to three of his novels, Anne Henry (spouse of Michel) suggests that Henry was influenced by Kafka at the time of writing *Le jeune officier*, and she notes that "in every one of Kafka's characters Michel Henry recognized the mark of Kierkegaard, whose work he knew extremely well" (14, my translation). This reference to Kierkegaard offers a clue as to a possible reading of the scene that follows the young officer's interview with the Commandant. After listening to all the Commandant has to say and then being dismissed by him, the hero goes to the deck to lean upon the rail and contemplate the ocean as he reflects on the import of his assignment. The crux of the matter for him is to discern what sort of disposition to take toward the task. He suspects it is all a ruse, a joke being played at the expense of a novice for the amusement of the crew. He wonders whether he should engage in the task, but with a spirit of irony, as if knowing it is a joke that he accepts with good humor. After a long series of considerations on the possible outcomes of engaging the task

either sincerely or ironically, he decides that his only hope of success, and the glory that would attend it, is to give himself heart and soul to the effort, even if it makes him ridiculous in the eyes of the other officers and sailors.

Knowing that Henry wrote extensively on Christianity, one might suggest a connection between this scene and Pascal's wager, which deploys a gambling metaphor to interrogate faith from the perspective of reason. The outcome is that, considering what can be either won or lost through a decision to believe in God, it is reasonable to choose faith, and thus to wager on winning the infinite and risk losing one's standing in the world, which by the end of his argument Pascal counts as nothing. Given Anne Henry's suggestion of Kierkegaard's importance for Henry, we might further pursue this correspondence in a section of *Either/Or*, which offers a kind of modernized, granular meditation on Pascal's wager.

Decision, for Kierkegaard, is central to becoming; it is the path by which one wins or loses oneself: "the act of choosing is a literal and strict expression of the ethical. Wherever it is a matter of an either/or in a stricter sense, one can always be sure that the ethical is involved. The only absolute either/or is the choice between good and evil, but it is also absolutely ethical" (485). As the young officer muses on the stakes of positioning himself ironically toward his assignment as if it is all pretense, he realizes that "no matter how skillful the ruse, it's unlikely one could commit to it eternally. A moment would come when I would have to choose and make it known to everyone whether I had given myself body and soul to the task entrusted to me or whether I had only feigned belief in its importance" (34). After considering every possible outcome, he reasons: "Can I accept making my final decision based on the fear of what others will say or think of me? The more I thought, the more I felt that in my depths I was resolved to take the problem of deratization extremely seriously and to mount an implacable and merciless assault against the rodents" (35). This passage might be read as the young officer taking the reader through the paces of Kierkegaard's concept of decision via the young officer's fear that the assignment of the task of deratization might be a joke at his expense, and his realization that only with an ethical disposition toward the task can he prevail, and thus "win himself" by deciding to approach the question in sincerity and good faith.

Henry's texts on aesthetics show that he explicitly eschews naturalism in his view of art. The aim of the artist is to construct a world that is believable *not* because of the familiar objects or language of the world it presents, but because of its intrinsic consistency. Thus, in some phrases where commonly used words might lead to more fluid prose, I choose adherence to concepts over naturalism. Anne Henry's mention of the influence of Kafka, and a further suggestion she makes that the entire scene of the novel might not be "real," supports the idea that the story intends to bring out an underlying conceptual structure rather than to locate the reader in a realism verified by language and visual cues. Since these considerations also bear upon the tone of the novel, I have approached diction in the hope of offering recognition for those who are familiar with Henry's philosophical work.

Technically, the writing of *Le jeune officier* does not offer any great resistance to translation. Many of the difficulties one might encounter in a novel — word play, slang, vernacular, accents, unfamiliar objects that find no correspondence, a highly detailed world-conception that demands to be in a very specific time and place - none of these pose a problem apart from an occasional idiomatic expression. It is more challenging to find the correct nautical vocabulary, but, with military terms, there is frequently a historical precedent that tends to retain international usage (with Commandant and aviso being two obvious examples from the novel). The primary challenge of translating the novel is to stay within the rhythm of the thought being explicated, whether in forms of interiority of the young officer or speech. Both the style of speech and the interior monologue of the narrator eschew naturalism without, however, embracing novelty or experimentation. The novel is written in unusually long paragraphs, consisting of sentences that extend, argue, reconcile, and reach again, before drawing to a close. This poses a certain a difficulty because "good writing" in English is often understood to mean a kind of terse prose that operates through rapid, even cinematic, cuts and

surprising shifts in tone. In the interest of respecting what is more than just a difference in French and English prose styles, I exercise a light hand when shortening sentences or inserting commas and paragraph length is mostly retained. It requires some patience and discipline to not render the prose into contemporary English, where we rarely follow a single phrase through a series of divagations.

A notable stylistic quality of Henry's novel is a kind of "minimalism" that may seem paradoxical, since we associate literary minimalism with such writers as Nathalie Sarraute, who tend to write short phrases with acute concision. In Henry's case, it is not the prose itself but rather the elements of the novel that are pared down to such a degree that you might easily count them; the young officer, the Commandant, the ship doctor, the commissaire, the sea, the equator, the ship, the rats, the community of sailors… these few elements comprise almost the entire world of the story. Part of the challenge of rendering this discourse in translation is arriving at an understanding of, or perhaps a "feel" for, the implicitly allegorical dimensions of the novel – which is aided by an engagement with Henry's oeuvre. Having drawn attention to some passages illuminated by an inquiry into Henry's philosophical work and influences, let me point to some of the translational choices that ensue.

Examining the text in closer detail, we see that where one might translate the first sentence of the book, *Le Commandant me fit appeler* as "The Commandant sent for me" (23), attention to Henry's debt to Heidegger suggests the possibility of translating *me fit appeler* as "called for me" rather than "sent for me." "The call to being" is a phrase that would be familiar to readers of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and it is important for Henry's critique of phenomenology: "The call of being is the name for the phenomenality of ek-static truth. It is precisely because it finds its phenomenological foundation in ek-static truth that Heideggerian being can and must be subject to critique. There is a sense of 'excepting' from being" (Henry, "The Four Principles of Phenomenology," 10). In a passage that describes the relationship of the young officer to the Commandant, "leadership" or "guidance" are natural sounding choices for the French *direction*, but I maintain the English cognate since it is a word used in both French and English to describe the supervision of a doctorate. Henry would have "embarked" on his philosophical inquiries "under the direction" of a supervisor, and I sustain this hint of an analogy with the Commandant's role in the story.

The term *obscurs rongeurs* (26), used to designate the rats, immediately suggests "lowly" or "insignificant," but when considering the importance of visibility and obscurity for Henry it becomes necessary the keep the cognate "obscure" in English, so that the phrase refers to "obscure rodents." In general, I assume that where Henry refers to sight, appearance, or presentation it is with the intention to support the central concepts of his work, and I hew closely to his conceptual terminology. In a passage where *objet de nos pensées* (27) might be translated as "focus of our attention" for the sake of naturalism, I choose the more literal "object of our thoughts," because the positing of subjects and objects is central to the understanding of cognition in the field of phenomenology. In the same scene, one might translate *brochure* (28) as "pamphlet" or the cognate "brochure," but the word "manual" corresponds with the import of the passage from Heidegger's *Being and Time* cited above.

The following passage from my translation shows how choices might be made with the intention of supporting the philosophical commitments that are latent in a text:

> The moment would come when I would have to choose and make it known to everyone whether I had given myself body and soul to the task entrusted to me or whether I had only feigned to believe in its importance. And even supposing I could dissimulate my true thoughts indefinitely and comport myself in such a way that each of my acts was susceptible to different interpretations, such a strategy, regardless of its apparent advantages, would inevitably result in a payback of unpleasant consequences that I would be wise to anticipate: it was obvious, in fact, that if I did engage my combat against the rats with the sole idea of presenting it as a comedic exercise, the chance of exterminating the rodents would be considerably diminished as my attention would no longer be on the object in question; or rather I would have lost faith in it, and it's doubtful that one can struggle forcefully while believing that the end result is devoid of meaning. It is necessary then, either to sacrifice one's reputation and run the risk of appearing extremely naïve, and maybe even an imbecile, or renounce all hope of a true

> victory. If I wager what I might win or lose deep inside myself, and in the eyes of others, if I decide to believe or not to believe, I ought not harbor doubt in my spirit about what position to take. (34)

In this passage, which begins auspiciously with the colloquial reference to *corps et âme* or, "body and soul," the young officer is ruminating on what disposition to take with respect to his task. I translate *esprit* with "spirit," whereas the word "mind" is arguably closer to how the word is understood in English. In English, the word spirit rarely falls clear of a "spiritual" connotation, while in French it can mean wit, mind, mood, or liveliness. English lacks an equally rich yet secular equivalent for *esprit*, but in this instance, the theological intimation that clings to the word spirit invites a resonance with Henry's interest in Christianity. For the same reason, the phrase *cessé de croire* suggests "ceased to believe," but is translated here as "lost faith." Likewise, "doubtful" is chosen to translate *peu probable* instead of the more obvious "unlikely," and *mets en balance* is translated by "wager," whereas a more obvious choice might be "consider." The proximity of faith, belief, doubt, and wager make a clear case for reading this passage across "Pascal's Wager" while the longer section of the novel from which this passage is taken points to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or,* wherein a young man deeply questions his own attitude toward ethics, sincerity, and decision – all of these connotations underscore nascent concerns that will lead to Michel Henry's later philosophical investigations on the subject of Christian theology.

While attention to Michel Henry's philosophical concepts, influences, and interventions might not be *necessary* to translate the text in a manner that would be pleasing to read, attention to the agency of the philosophical system does reorient one's approach, leading to minor but important alterations in both diction and tone. Furthermore, an approach to translation that "listens" for the underlying philosophical material will lead the translator to precise moments in a work where the philosophical and the literary touch. These moments are easily missed if one is not primed and invested in the minutiae of reading and writing in the way that translation requires. We can see, in the examples offered here, that it is important to recognize that cognates across languages are common to philosophical writing and might therefore be important to maintain in a work of fiction. Likewise, this effort shows that the kind of naturalism that tends to be intuitively, and often explicitly, valorized for the translation of a novel must bear greater scrutiny when one is considering how much weight to give to the concepts that are latent in a literary text.

This commentary on the implications of Henry's philosophy for translating *Le jeune officier* develops a notion of translation as a method not only for carrying meaning from one language system to another, but as a form of attention with implications for the work of analysis and interpretation. If we approach translation as a *practice* on the side of reading, rather than a product on the side of writing, we can see how it might enable a method that is suited to the work of foregrounding connections between philosophical systems and the kinds of details that appear at the level of syntax, tone, and diction – the very details that comprise the medium whereby literature differentiates itself from philosophy.

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