Thinking through Translation

Nishitani and Ueda on Words, Concepts, and Images

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> Thinking is much more than just concocting thoughts. Thinking discovers the real, and by this uncovering we shape reality by participating in its rhythm, by "listening" to it, and by being obedient (*ob-audire*) to it.
>
> — Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*

> The dream: to know a foreign (strange) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication, or vulgarity.
>
> — Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes*

Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) and Ueda Shizuteru (1926–) are recognized as major figures in contemporary Japanese philosophy. Both have been studied from a variety of perspectives, mainly having to do with their philosophical insights, their role in the Kyoto School, and their engagement in cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue with the West. My aim here is to consider their work from the viewpoint of language, in particular, the problem of translation. What I have to say derives in large part from reflections on rendering their writings into Spanish. I discovered that, in a cer-

tain sense, the translator who begins from a European language has to retrace the steps on the path these philosophers took.

Nishitani and Ueda were both trained in Western philosophy at Kyoto University, spent time in Germany, and read philosophical works in several European languages. This accounts for the fact that there writing, like other philosophical texts of the post-Meji period, frequently cite terms and sources in the original language (mainly English and German, but also Greek and Latin). These words, whether in *katakana* or Roman script stand out from the text and remind the reader of the enormous efforts undertaken from the Meiji period by Japanese intellectuals to introduce, understand, translate, and create new terminology with which to interact with the West in every academic discipline,[1] not unlike efforts made in the past to adapt to Chinese language and thought.[2] In fact, it is in large part due to them that Japanese today are not only familiar with Western cultures, traditions, and ideas but have gained competence in the English language. As Raimon Panikkar notes in his preface to James W. Heisig's *Filósofos*

1. A solid examination of this process can be found HOWLAND 2002.

2. "The history of Japanese culture overall can be characterized by a tendency to renew itself by implicating *and* appropriating a malleable 'other world.' The nationalization of alien cultures that have entered Japanese culture every few centuries has been a source of renewal. From antiquity until the Middle Ages, this other-world lay in China. Since the modern era, the 'West' came to be a new other-world." ŌHASHI 2002, 34–5.

It is also interesting to observe that the introduction of neologisms into the Japanese language has made use not only of Chinese glyphs but also of the Japanese *katakana* syllabary: "The coexistence of two languages in Japanese literature [native literature composed in Chinese—*kanbun*—and in the native syllabary—*kana*] survived until the Meiji Restoration....Obviously, the usefulness of Chinese words had long been absorbed into the Japanese language by the time of Meiji Restoration and afterwards when the Japanese were under pressure to introduce Western concepts into their language. The ability to use such Chinese terms to translate Western words into Japanese is in marked contrast to the situation in most non-Western cultures where such words had to be adopted in the language of origin without being translated." KATO, 1981, 7. Only from the twentieth century, in the creation of new words, the number of English words is increasing in comparison with the number of Chinese words. A survey in 1966 revealed that in the ordinary language Japanese people used 38 percent Japanese words and 62 percent foreign words, fifty percent of them of Chinese origin and twelve percent of Western origin. See GARNIER 2004, 51.

de la nada, their Western counterparts have yet to appropriate Eastern cultural and intellectual achievements to the same degree.[3] Nevertheless, significant steps have been taken in that direction and the pressure to do more may be read as a sign of our times.[4] To give an example from a European country, in the universities of Spain, where Asian Studies at the undergraduate and graduate levels is still a relatively recent addition, the number of young people studying Chinese and Japanese increases year by year.

Increasing contact among idioms and forms of writing allows us to characterize this age of the Internet, global trade, and mobility not only as multilingual but also as "multigraphic." It seems to be easier today than ever before for growing numbers of people to familiarize themselves with multiple systems of speaking and writing. Just as the Japanese have become accustomed to Western scripts, the foreign student of Japanese can use a Latin keyboard to input Japanese words, translating sounds (and their meanings) from the Roman alphabet into Japanese glyphs. Something similar must be at work in the complex mental process of translation and mediation involved in attempts to speak or understand a foreign language, not to mention the need to train one's voice and body language to achieve correct pronunciation or to recognize and reproduce the proper intonation.

When it comes to reading and writing, it takes time to gain expertise and overcome the initial strangeness of another language, all of which is aggravated when a different writing system is involved. Those approaching Japanese from a Western language have to begin like children, from square one, to learn how to draw and decipher the written signs and eventually relate them to what they already know and are still learning. Suffice it to remark how difficult the adjustment is for one coming from a romance language that is alphabetical, written horizontally and read from left to right, in which the words are separated with

3. Panikkar 2012, 26–7.
4. Pasqualotto 2012, 7.

blank spaces, and where printed books are opened from right to left. Before even attempting to understand what a text means, one has correctly to identify the sentences with the phrases and words that make them up. But this initial strangeness also opens out into a new space for reflection.

When learning Japanese writing, one is always aware of the traditional art of calligraphy; one cannot but feel like an artist using a pen instead of brush and ink. In a most beautiful and nostalgic work, *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō imagines what might have happened had a Japanese or Chinese invented the pen:

> Foreign ink and pens would not be as popular as they are; the talk of discarding our system of writing for Roman letters would be less noisy; people would still feel an affection for the old system. But more than that: our thought and our literature might not be imitating the West as they are, but might have pushed forward into new regions quite on their own. An insignificant little piece of writing equipment, when one thinks of it, has had a vast, almost boundless, influence on our culture.[5]

As improbable as it may sound, even the smallest detail can reveal a crucial cultural trait. Think of how the Japanese create words. To the foreign eye, words composed of Chinese characters, or *kanji*, look like pictures even when the glyphs are not strictly speaking pictographic. This evokes an appreciation of the beauty and aesthetic value of the *kanji* that accompanies their ability to express meaning in a more plastic, concrete, and direct way without forfeiting their capacity to express nuance. As a matter for philosophical reflection, there is nothing new here. As early as Plotinus we find an attempt to confront Egyptian writing with the Greek alphabet and to consider what this meant for thinking.[6] In modern philosophy the question frequently arises of how to use Sino-Japanese glyphs to render the abstractness of Western philosophical terminology. Heidegger's view that philos-

5. Tanizaki 1991, 18.
6. Plotinus 1988, 1–9.

ophizing was possible only in German and Greek is often cited in this connection. While avoiding ethnocentric prejudices and essentialist views, it is worthwhile to explore the ways in which particularities of a language affect ways of thinking in that language. For instance, in his introduction to Japanese literature Katō Shūichi asserts that the Japanese language displays any number of characteristic features that affect the nature of literary works produced in Japan. For example, he notes that written Japanese shows a tendency to remain rooted to situations of everyday life where a developed idiom of respect reflects the social relationship of speaker to listener and where not infrequently the context permits the omission of personal pronouns to identify the subject of a sentence. Another feature is the lack of emphasis on the universal validity of written statements. We see this, for instance, in the preference of Japanese writers for "abbreviated forms of literature, as brief and pithy descriptions of particular objects and thoughts. *Haiku* and *waka* are a case in point. Katō also alludes to Japanese sentence order, which begins with specific details and builds up to the whole, as a reflection of the Japanese sense of cultural order.[7]

In the same vein, Roland Barthes reminds us in *L'empire des signes* that the main concepts in Aristotelian philosophy have been shaped in line with the articulation of the Greek language.[8] Thus the close link among language, writing, and identity, complicates the challenge of translating or thinking through translation in order to facilitate understanding and cooperation among people from different cultures. As James W. Heisig warns "The mere fact of a society conscious of itself as *multicultural* or *multilingual* does not ensure that it even recognizes the reality of peripheral modes of thought, let alone their primacy for cultural interchange."[9] Whether or not we choose to refuse the name "philosophy" to any but the intellectual tradition of the Greeks and

7. Kato 1981, 8–9.
8. Barthes 1970, 9.
9. Heisig 2013, 124.

its development in Western history,[10] and quite apart from the universality of the concepts that philosophers pursue, the fact is that human thinking has been cultivated in many different languages, cultures, and historical epochs. To illustrate the extraordinary role of translation, we need only mention Buddhist writings carried over at the beginning of the common era from Sanskrit into Chinese and then later into Japanese. In reviewing the spread of Buddhism, we see how the adaptation of the teachings to different cultural and linguistic contexts transformed, broadened, and enriched a variety of Buddhist traditions. Similarly, in light of the remarkable role that Greek philosophical language played in shaping Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought, it is only natural to expect that once Western philosophical language seems to have been introduced into academia around the world, it might constitute a common ground for dialogue among different traditions of thought. From this point of view, it is easy to understand the remarkable reception in the West of traditional Asian ideas as presented by Kyoto School scholars well-versed in Western philosophy. Of course, the process is not one-sided and there is no neutral platform from which to speak. On the contrary, it is interesting to observe how Western philosophical language is enriched by the infusion of other languages. The exchange of different experiences of thought is always mutually beneficial, and even "Western philosophy" itself is not a monolithic construction but a mix of many different traditions flowing in and out of one another. Each such encounter creates anew languages.

On the other side, all translators recognize that not everything can be carried over from one language to another. We all know what it is to feel at a loss for words. How much more should we not feel the limitations of language when trying to express in another language a saying familiar to us in our own. To be sure, different people have different ways of thinking and each language has its own peculiarities.

10. See Heisig 2005a; Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo 2011.

Whatever the skills of the translator, something is always lost. This is more evident in the case of poetry, where the rhythm, resonance, and connotations of words are so crucial. The risks of misunderstanding or severely reducing the plurality of nuances behind a word or a character are even higher when translating from an Indo-European language into an idiom belonging to another linguistic family. As Nakagawa Hisayasu observes, in straddling linguistic contexts of different cultures, there is always room for error for the simple reason that one cannot help but deform a language in order to transpose it into a different linguistic system.[11] That said, to the extent that one is aware of the deformation, translation can also have a beneficial effect. By realizing the difference between a native and a foreign language, by facing up to the limitations of our own language, we can "dissolve what is 'real' for us by submitting it to other subdivisions, other syntaxes; we can uncover unknown positions of the subject in the enunciation and dislocate its topology."[12] Somehow we gain a perspective to think "anew" or think differently. New horizons are opened, horizons closed off to the reader whose mother tongue is that of the original text and who has not passed through "the mirror of translations, a mirror which, because of its deformations, reflects a new reading."[13]

As the translation of Buddhist texts across cultures shows, the only way to overcome "monoculturalism" and cultural colonialism is risk adopting more than one culture as a point of reference, in other words, to recognize the "other" not as a mere *object* of understanding but as a *source* of understanding. "Every authentic word" writes Panikkar "is the crystallization of a collective experience, sometimes millennia of condensed human wisdom."[14] He thus encourages his readers to regard every foreign word or source included in his texts as a window inviting them to glimpse the richness of other traditions. Looking through this

11. Nakagawa 2005, 15.
12. Nakagawa 2005, 9.
13. Nakagawa 2005, 15.
14. Panikkar 2012, 26.

lens, let us examine the cross-cultural background of Nishitani and Ueda that allows them to combine sources from Eastern and Western traditions in their thinking; and, further, let us see how their writings contain a reflection on the nature of language, its philosophical use, and its potential for expressing our experience of reality.

Nishitani on concepts and images

> Definition is limitation. The beauty of a cloud or a flower lies in its unconscious unfolding of itself, and the silent eloquence of the masterpieces of each epoch must tell their story better than any epitome of necessary half-truths.
>
> — Okakura Kakuzō, *The Ideals of the East*

Thomas P. Kasulis has argued that since Nishida Kitarō's primary goal was to write philosophy in modern Japanese for the first time, "he probably thought that Japanese philosophical texts should be read more like a Western (usually German) philosophical text translated into Japanese than a native Japanese text."[15] Nishitani Keiji, in contrast, was not constrained by the rhetorical limits his mentor had imposed on his own writing. After Nishida no one any longer questioned whether philosophy could be written in Japanese, and this left Nishitani free to find his own voice. This may help explain, I would add, why Nishitani did not hold back from introducing Buddhist terminology and citing Japanese sources in the course of a philosophical argument. For the Western reader, this no doubt makes it more difficult to follow his line of reasoning, but at the same time we may see this choice as a decisive step on the bidirectional path that Panikkar insists on.

As is well-known, Nishitani Keiji once defined himself as a Buddhist becoming Christian and a Christian becoming Buddhist.[16] This

15. Kasulis 2013, xii.

16. Nishitani expressed himself here with the German words *ein werdender geworden-*

sort of "double belonging," understood not as a fix identity but as a process, also hold true for the blend of Eastern and Western sources in the background of his thinking and his deep assimilation of the cultural traditions he studied in the course of his academic career.[17] We begin with some relevant biographical remarks.

Nishitani began learning German at age eighteen and advanced to the point that he could Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Strindberg in that language.[18] He also knew English, which enabled him to read central-European and Russian literature, particularly Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, in English translation. These linguistic skills opened him to a dialogue with different Western authors on their own ground:

> This intimate familiarity, moreover, was not a rule derived from translations or secondary commentaries. It was, rather, the result primarily of his own close reading and study of original texts in their original languages. Nor was this learning or knowledge confined to non-fictional philosophical or religious writings. It extended as well to works of fiction, both prose and poetry. Furthermore, not only did he read fluently in German, French, and English, among other languages, he could also speak quite fluently in them—although, tending to be somewhat shy as well as modest, he was usually reluctant to do so.[19]

From autobiographical accounts, we know that the authors most influential in the development of his thought included Emerson, Carlyle, the Bible, Francis of Assisi, Augustine, and Meister Eckhart. The full range of thinkers he engages in his work is much wider, from Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Heidegger, and Bultmann. Certain Japanese authors were also important for him, in particular Buddhist masters like Hakuin, Takuan, Dōgen, and Shinran, contemporary authors like Natsume

er Buddhist and *win werdender (nicht gewordener) Christ*. See Waldenfels 1980, 63.

17. For Nishitani's background in Western philosophical traditions, see Isaac 2007.

18. As Hans Waldenfels recalls, Nishitani knew by heart mystical texts from Tauler and Eckhart in Middle High-German (Waldenfels 1992, 144).

19. DeMartino 1992, 21.

Sōseki, Abe Jirō, and Watsuji Tetsurō, and, of course, his mentor Nishida Kitarō.

Nishitani's original intention was to study in France with Bergson, but he ended up staying in Freiburg from 1937 and 1938 and attending Heidegger's seminars. He reflects on his experience in Germany in autobiographical writings such as "The Experience of Eating Rice," and "Ikebana."[20] He was later to lecture in Europe and the United States and take in numerous dialogues with Western philosophers and theologians. He also assisted translators in adapting his writings to a Western audience, most notably Jan Van Bragt, who has this to say regarding the translation of *Religion and Nothingness:*

> During the roughly twelve year period of incubation, from the first to the final manuscript, there was one preoccupation on Nishitani's mind: that Western people were not going to understand him. Therefore he always wanted to revise particular points of translation, or to add some more words of explanation to difficult passages. That is the real reason why the publication of this translation in book form came so late and why the English text has sentences and even paragraphs not to be found in the Japanese original.[21]

Given his strong commitment to the encounter of East and West, concern with translation was a constant in Nishitani's academic career. According to Ueda, "Nishitani pioneered the translation of the classics of Western philosophy into Japanese, and many that he did are still regarded as the best translations available."[22] At age twenty-six, he translated Schelling's *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809).[23] Nishitani's contribution to the

20. "Meshi o kutta keiken" 飯を食った経験, and "Ikebana ni tsuite" 生花について, both in NKC 20.

21. Van Bragt 1990, 10–11. For other testimonies of his translators, see Fischer-Barnicol 1992 and Parkes 1992.

22. Ueda 1992, 4.

23. *Jiyū ishi ron* 『自由意志論』 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1927), volume 4 of *Tetsugaku koten sōsho*, initiated in 1924 with Aristotle's *Poetics* (*Shigaku* 詩学) and including works of Leibniz, Hobbes, Plato, Schiller, and Fichte. Later Nishitani's translation of Schelling

spread of Schelling's ideas in Japan included several of his own essays. His earliest discussion of Schelling appears in the second volume of his *Collected Writings* under the title "Schelling's Philosophy of Identity and the Will: The Real and the Ideal."[24] He also devoted his graduation thesis to a comparison of Schelling and Bergson, "Schelling's Absolute Idealism and Bergson's Pure Duration."[25] According to Hanaoka Eiko, "It was Schelling who first aroused Nishitani's philosophical interest in the problem of evil and difference."[26] She argues that from his careful study of Schelling Nishitani came to see that the problem of evil can only be solved from a religious point of view, "and that the problem of difference requires an inquiry into the self, which tries to live in oneness with the non-ground *(Ungrund)* of the absolute."[27] Nishitani acknowledged Schelling's contribution to philosophy as the belief that absolute identity is the ground of the phenomenal world, but he was also critical of the way Schelling considered evil an abstraction from the real. At the same time, as Hanaoka explains, Schelling's idea that the natural world had arisen as the first creation through the birth of light or spirit, and that the historical world had arisen as the second creation through the birth of mind *(Geist)*, led Nishitani to his view of selfness as "self nature" *(jitai)*, where "selfness" would be the "true self"—the core of his philosophy of emptiness. Although Nietzsche and Meister Eckhart aided Nishitani further to elaborate the standpoint of selfness or self-nature as the immediacy of life, we must not overlook this important initial stimulus received from Schelling.

As another concrete example of how a philosopher's thinking develops through translation, we may consider Kierkegaard's impact

was published under the title *Ningenteki jiyū no honshitsu* 『人間的自由の本質』 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1951).

24. *Sheringu no dōitsutetsugaku to ishi* シェリングの同一哲学と意志, NKC 2.

25. *Sheringu no zettaiteki kannenron to Berukson no junsui jizoku* シェリングの絶対的観念論とベルグソンの純粋持続, NKC 13; *Tetsugaku ronkō* 『テツガク ロンコウ』 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1987).

26. Hanaoka 2005, 244

27. Hanaoka 2005, 242.

on Nishitani. Ueda reminds us that at the time Nishitani was engaged in translation, any number of German terms lacked Japanese equivalents and required the invention of new terms, many of which were later to become standard in Japanese philosophy and even pass over into colloquial usage. As an example of his philosophical creativity, Ueda refers to the neologism *shutaisei* 主体性 that Nishitani incorporated from Kierkegaard into Japanese philosophical vocabulary.[28] Usually rendered as "subjectivity," the term is also translated currently as "individuality" or "identity," "independence of will," or "selfhood." The term is pivotal in Nishitani's early writings where he discusses "original," "elemental," or "fundamental" (*kongenteki* 根源的) subjectivity.[29]

It was probably Watsuji Tetsurō's book on Kierkegaard, "the first original Kierkegaard research in Japan,"[30] that attracted Nishitani to the Danish philosopher, but other major thinkers of the Kyoto School like Miki Kiyoshi, Nishida, and Tanabe had also shown an interest. Nishitani's encounter with Kierkegaard led him to develop the latter's idea of "appropriation" or "apprehension" (Danish *Tilegnelse*, German *Aneignung*) into the notion of "realization," a key term that Nishitani employs in English even in the original Japanese version of his major work, *Religion and Nothingness:*

> It should, however, be noted that realization here does not mean only a philosophical cognition, but also has the meaning of actualization.... In analyzing the structure of this appropriation (Japanese *mi ni tsuku*, which also means embodiment), Nishitani makes use of Kierkegaard's existential analysis of human beings in *The Sickness unto Death*. He also uses this idea of appropriation in the explanation of Nishida's concept of "pure experience."[31]

Nishitani wanted to retain the double-meaning of actualization

28. Ueda 1992, 4.

29. Cf. Mori 1997.

30. Masugata 2008, 42.

31. Masugata 2008, 48. Concerning Nishitani's use of "appropriation" to explain Nishida's *pure experience*, see, for instance, Nishitani 2016, 116 and 117, n. 7.

and understanding contained in the English term *realization*, that is to combine the sense of seeing, perceiving, or becoming aware with the making something come true, establishing a reality.[32] Here "understanding" does not refer to philosophical cognition or theoretical knowledge but to a genuine "appropriation," in the Kierkegaardian sense, to something that embraces the whole person, mind as well as body.

As the dialogue with Kierkegaard's ideas shows,[33] Nishitani's own philosophical language was born of a keen attention to the terminology used in Western philosophy, ancient as well as modern. Yusa Michiko reports that in a discussion with Nishitani she was told that it was more important to grasp the philosophical content of thinkers than to be able to read their writings in the original language.[34] Like Heidegger and other twentieth-century philosophers, language was more than a mere instrument for Nishitani. At the same time, Yusa adds, he was committed to accurate and precise expression, a fact attested to by every key notion in his work. He reflected deeply on the meaning of words borrowed from other languages, always with an eye to rethinking critical philosophical problems not merely for their theoretical content but as matters of existential and historical concern:

> We consider it necessary for our philosophical inquiry to maintain a fundamental religious attitude that accords with the spirit of free and critical thought of philosophy.... The age-old questions, What is religion?, What is philosophy?, need to be posed anew in our times.[35]

32. Nishitani 1982, 5.

33. Heisig (2002, 314) refers to another Kiekegaardian expression borrowed by Nishitani "seeing through."

34. Yusa 1992, 150.

35. Nishitani 1980, v.

Expressing the inexpressible

In connection with Nishitani's views on language let us now briefly consider his view of concepts and images. In one sense, his starting-point is similar to the later Heidegger's reflections on the poetical use of language. As it is well known, for Heidegger language not only communicates but brings being to word and appearance: the true being that is already there is brought to the light of expression. This idea is also found in the Heideggerian conception of art, in particular, poetry, as the revelation of being through language. Poetry is capable of revealing truth that is otherwise rendered ineffable by the narrowness of concepts, which tend to conceal things.

Scattered references to this question appear in Nishitani's writings and in more eloquent prose. To begin with, consider the following passage:

> A discussion... of speech "speaking" as a particular mode of man's being will necessarily involve the question of that which transcends every kind of speaking—that which is in its very nature unspeakable.
>
> In the history of Western philosophy and theological thought, it is not uncommon to find an emphasis on such as "unspeakableness" of the absolute being or the ultimate truth, for example, the Platonic Idea of the Good, or the Christian concept of God as *ens realissimum*, which are said to be inexpressible in the *via positiva*, except as expressed allegorically, metaphorically, symbolically, or by analogy.... The only way open to man is the *via negativa*, that is to talk about what is *not*....
>
> Contrary to that mystical way, philosophy and its thinking have never ceased from being restless; rather, man has devoted all his abilities and faculties to satisfy his propensity to thinking.[36]

In another passage from the same lecture, Nishitani cites Heidegger's experience of thinking, *Ehrfahrung des Denkens*, as an exception in Western philosophy. Heidegger and the mystical tradition aside, Nishitani levels a general criticism against metaphysics for the one-

36. Nishitani 1970, 29.

to-one correspondence between things and ideas it inherited from Western epistemology. At one extreme, reality is taken to be a thing-in-itself, a substance, according to the Aristotelian model. At the other extreme, following Kant, reality is conceived as a representation of the subject. In both cases, a dualistic view based on the subject-object dichotomy has prevailed in the approach to reality. What is more, both materialistic and idealistic or subjectivist views of reality attempt to explain the world on the ground of nihility, that is to say, by simply denying things and the self as objects of cognition and rendering them incomprehensible as they are in themselves:

> Logos is in its fullest sense primarily on the home-ground of that *Existenz*. And the logos of speculative reason or discursive understanding develops from this primary point to the dimensions of reason or understanding. Insofar as it is seen only on those dimensions, logos is no longer a revelation of the suchness of things.[37]

Speculative reason and discursive understanding articulate by means of representational or *descriptive* language. Descriptive language, far from being a faithful representation of reality, is only a rational and linguistic construct, and consequently separates us from reality. But there is an original mode of being of things as they are in themselves and as they in fact actually exist, a way in which they express themselves. It is neither phenomenal, as what appears to us; nor is it *noumenal*, as what is unknowable to us. It is the "realization" of reality itself, the simultaneous "manifestation" and "apprehension" of the thing itself (*genjō soku etoku* 現成即会得), before reality is apprehended either by sensation or by reason. As Yagi Seiichi notes, the immediate experience of attaining reality as it is can be communicated only by *expressive* language.[38] To exemplify the expressiveness of Nishitani's language, we may draw out a few examples from his major work *Religion and Nothingness*.

37. Nishitani 1982, 197.
38. Yagi 1998, 68.

With rational and logical consistency Nishitani develops rhetorical strategies to avoid rendering his axial notion "emptiness" into a concept:

> ... the self shows a constant tendency to comprehend itself representationally as some "thing" that is called "I".... Therefore it marks a great step forward when the standpoint of *Existenz*-in-ecstasy, held suspended in nothingness, appears as a standpoint or truly subjective self-existence. Nonetheless, traces of the representation of nothingness as the positing of some "thing" that is nothingness are still to be seen here. The standpoint of śūnyatā is absolutely non-objectifiable, since transcends this subjectivistic nihility to a point more on the near side than the subjectivity of existential nihilism.
>
> .....
>
> In this sense, just as nihility is an abyss for anything that exists, emptiness must be said to be an abyss even for that abyss of nihility. As a valley unfathomably deep may be imagined set within an endless expanse of sky, so it is with nihility and emptiness.
>
> .....
>
> Just as we overlook the cosmic sky that envelops us while we move and have our being within it, and stare only at the patch of sky overhead, so too we fail to realize that we stand more to the near side of ourselves in emptiness than we do in self-consciousness.[39]

What is essentially inexpressible because it is the origin of all expression can only be intimated. Since reflection tends to objectification, Nishitani appeals to *Existenz*, that is, to the existential experience of one's encounter with nihility, to consider the problem and its possible solution:

> Our life runs up against death at its every step; we keep one foot planted in the vale of death at all times.
>
> .....
>
> Nihility refers to that which renders meaningless the meaning of life. When we become a question to ourselves and when the problem

39. Yagi 1998, 98.

> of why we exist arises, this means that nihility has emerged from the ground of our existence and that our very existence has turned into a question mark.[40]

Moreover, in order to avoid problems arising from an abstract logical way of thinking, Nishitani adopts the affirmation-in-negation, negation-in-affirmation logic of *soku hi* 即非 (in expressions such as "birth-*sive*-death" 生即死 *sei soku shi* or "being-*sive*-nothingness" 有即無 *u soku mu*) and a negative language abundantly ("personally impersonal"人格的な即人格性 *jinkakuteki na hijinkakusei*, "knowing of non-knowing" 無知の知 *muchi no chi*, "action of non-action" 無作の作 *musa no sa*):

> No sooner has the attitude of objective representation come on the scene than "Form," as something outside of the self, is generated.
> .....
> On the field when observance is truly observance, the man moving his limbs, the clouds floating across the sky, the water flowing, the leaves falling, and the blossoms scattering are all non-Form. Their Form is a Form of non-Form [無相の相 *musō no sō*].[41]

By means of the "nonduality," "immediacy," or "sameness" indicated by *soku* and the type of construction that correlated affirmation with negation, Nishitani attempts to develop a language for speaking of a self-identity that includes at the same time its own negation. The man "moving" his limbs, the clouds "floating," the water "flowing," the leaves "falling," and the blossoms "scattering" shows Nishitani using poetic language to denote action and vitality rather than fixed substances.

Similarly, in his discussion on being and nothingness he follows the Heideggerian proposal of employing verbal nouns to denote a dynamic state rather than a reified thing. Like Heidegger's *das Welt weltet* (rendered in Japanese with the neologism 世界する *sekai suru*),

40. Nishitani 1982, 4.
41. Nishitani 1982, 200.

Nishida speaks of "nullification" *(Nichtung)* 無化 *muka* and "beification" 有化 *uka*.

Nishitani does not hesitate to borrow Buddhist language freely, on occasion giving new meaning to traditional terms, as is the case with "being-samādhi" 定在 *jōzai*.[42] Perhaps most characteristic of his prose is its at times poetic tone, reinforced when he pauses in the middle of an argument to cite a poem or literary work, Western and Japanese, or to recalls the expression of a Zen Master. In the following passage, for example, "coming home with empty hands" is an allusion to the words of Zen Master Dōgen referred to earlier:

> In short, *Existenz* as a "coming home with empty hands" and a birth-*sive*-unbirth [生即不生 *shōfushō*] is *Existenz* on the field of *śūnyatā* as samsara-*sive*-nirvana [生死即涅槃 *shōji sokuhi nehan*], the field of the birthplace that is self-identical with the unbirthplace.[43]

After *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani devoted the bulk of his writing to Zen Buddhism and poetry, turning his attention to how emptiness manifests itself in the world of the senses, images, emotions, and feelings. In treating the problem of imagination, he took up questions of the body and the earth.[44] An essay from this period entitled "Emptiness and Sameness" (*Kū to soku* 空と即) is a valuable resource for understanding Nishitani's view of imagery and conceptualization. In brief, Nishitani presents images as "attempts to express things at the original source where the thing is given and manifested to us."[45] The formless transcendent principle of emptiness reveals itself as image in the world we live. A thing, mediated by image and without ceasing to be itself, comes out from within itself and "from the perspective of its relationship with the world, enters into a circumincessional relation-

42. See Maraldo 1992.
43. Maraldo 1992, 192.
44. Cf. Hase 1997 and Horio 1997.
45. Nishitani 1999, 195.

ship with other things."[46] In this way, Nishitani seeks to unfold the inner landscape hidden within being. He explain this unfolding as a transfer "from an actual existing thing to its image," as "making being transparent " (*u no tōmeika* 有の透明化) and "imaging emptiness" (*kū no imējika* 空のイメージ化).

On one hand, being is made transparent when one thing expresses itself in another; on the other hand, emptiness is made into an image when each particular thing finds its proper place in the world.[47] Thus, making being transparent is necessary to overcome the separation of one thing from every other thing by virtue of its distinctive, absolutely unique existence. Such self-enclosure and concealment is broken through in the locus of emptiness situated in the "here and now" where a thing manifest itself as a thing and is experienced through sensation. In ontological terms, as Hosoya Masashi explains, the poetic expression in which "images mutually overlap and mutually resonate" corresponds to the "circumincessional network" (*egoteki renkan* 回互的連関), which for Nishitani is the basic structure of the world. In this interrelated world that comes into existence through images, all things "freely create a series of images to express themselves and may even develop into poetry."[48]

Of course, these two concepts, "making being transparent" and "imaging emptiness," can only be grasped existentially in relation to "emptiness in sentiment" *(jōi no uchi no kū* 情意の内の空). Accordingly, poetry and religion, in virtue of their proximity to the innermost feelings of the human being, have something in common that philosophical concepts cannot grasp:

> Poetry differs completely from the tendency in philosophy of stopping at a cognition that objectifies everyday experience, or at objectifying cognition, searching for it in the realm of "knowledge" as cognition.

46. Nishitani 1999, 203.
47. Hosoya 2008, 197.
48. Ono 2008, 219.

> This poetic approach implies a course of inquiry that never departs from experience but penetrates the source of experience. Such a course shares the same standpoint with religion.[49]

Ueda on words and silence

> Quand je sarai pour moi-même perdue et divisée à l'abîme infini.... Vous referez mon nom et mon image... Vive unité sans nom et sans visage.
>
> — Catharine Pozzi

In a certain sense Ueda Shizuteru may be said to have continued the work that Nishitani began. To demonstrate this continuity, I would like briefly to examine what he has to say about the role of translation in the development of his thinking. Like Nishitani, Ueda also studied in Germany where he obtained his doctorate in philosophy under the direction of Ernst Benz with a dissertation on Meister Eckhart. Like D. T. Suzuki, Nishida, and Nishitani before him, Ueda had been attracted to Eckhart's work, and during his time abroad he turned his attention to the German works that were coming out in a new edition at the time. In terms of language, this is interesting for at least for two reasons.

First of all, the content of Eckhart's Latin works differs from those written in the vernacular works. When Eckhart preached in German, he was free of the constraints of scholastic jargon. Given the lack of a literary tradition in medieval German to address the questions that interested him, Eckhart was forced to devise a new vocabulary.

Secondly, Eckhart was an exponent of European mysticism understood, in the definition of Thomas Aquinas, as cognition *Dei experimentalis*. A central aspect of this tradition was reflection on the status of knowledge gained through personal experience and the limitations

49. Nishitani 1999, 186.

of language in communicating this experience to others. Indeed, mysticism itself has been considered a linguistic phenomenon. According to Michel de Certeau, to call a language mystical is tautological because "mysticism itself is a *modus loquendi*, a language.[50]

Hence, it is not surprising that after completing doctoral studies Ueda shifted his attention to the similarities between Eckhart's modes of expression and those of Zen Masters. Through careful consideration of language he explored the diversity of contexts and worldviews that underlay verbal similarities. His comparison of Zen and mysticism was in part motivated by the concern in German academic circles with Zen Buddhism. It also helped him to deepen his understanding of the nature of language. Thus, together with Nishida's philosophy, mysticism, and Zen laid the foundations of Ueda's philosophical thinking. Thus, while his writings continue in the Kyoto School tradition, under the influence of German philosophy and in particular Martin Heidegger, they opened it to further reflection on language.

Let us now look at two ideas of Ueda having to do with translation. First, in presenting Nishida's philosophy, Ueda notes the Japanese propensity to avoid the word "I":

> When we speak in Japanese, we naturally say, "The sound of the bell can be heard" (*kane no oto ga kikoeru)*. In most languages this same phenomenon would be expressed differently; in English we would say, "I hear the sound of the bell." In this case, the logical subject "I" can be said to immediately *emerge* or *issue* from the experience—a pattern in which the experience is reconstructed from the "I." In the Japanese mode of speech, however, becoming consciousness is simply a matter of the bell's resounding and its resounding becoming manifest.[51]

Ueda makes it clear that he does not intend to suggest that the Japanese are more in touch with original reality, that is, with the form that originates when the hearer becomes one with the hearing of the

50. Certeau 2003, 117.
51. Ueda 1994, 31.

sound of the bell and expresses that moment from the side of the "I" (an example of what Nishida calls the self-identity of contradictories).[52] At the same time, he insists that the structure of language has much to teach us about ways of thinking that can shed light on aspects of our relation with reality otherwise concealed.[53]

Secondly, Ueda's reflections on language are connected with his interest in the experience of reality particular to mysticism and Zen. In this regard he explains the conversion to the true self implied in mystical experience and Zen awakening as a "word event" *(Wort-Ereignis)*.[54] In short, he speaks of "a movement of liberation from language toward language." He resists the idea that our understanding of the self and the world is linguistically constituted. Rather, we have to recognize that language opens a world as a cognitive horizon as the same time as it determines and limits that world. "Only in this way can we emancipate ourselves from the danger of language and turn our speaking into a creativity activity."[55] By using language creatively, a new quality of language emerges whereby we forge a world. We live language inside and out:

> It is not just true that there exists somewhere and somehow some unspeakable reality. What is real is the event that stirs us into moving from language to language.[56]

Only when language collapses can the proper words appear and the "word event" take place.

To illustrate this Ueda typically refers to Zen's use of language and

52. For a further development of the argument, see Elberfeld 2011, 275.

53. As Heisig observes that "writing in German and in Japanese cleared things up for him in different ways." He cites Ueda's own words to that effect: "What became clear in German and what became clear in Japanese was not entirely the same.... Faint traces of the different contexts lingered in the gaps, echoing off one another and even changing places with one another" (Heisig 2005, 386–8).

54. See especially Ueda 1982a, 1990, 1991.

55. Ueda 1985 (1995), 2.

56. Ueda 1985 (1995), 7.

Japanese *haiku*, but he also finds Western examples in the Baroque writer Johannes Scheffler, also known under the pseudonym Angelus Silesius, and in the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. More than the limits of language and the presence of an ineffable reality beyond words, Ueda is concerned with finding a way back to the fundamental level of articulation that comes after the negation of words.

Drawing attention to the different words Japanese uses to render the single German word *Schweigen* (黙る *damaru*, 沈黙 *chinmoku*, 黙 *moku*), he makes the following connections:

> We differentiate between (1) silence as non-speaking; (2) the pensive silence that, without speaking, lapses into a deeper silence; and (3) the reaching of the absolute silence of the infinite world through uttering worlds. These three kinds of silence correspond to our humanity as being in *Doppelerschlossenheit* [double-opening]: (1) silence in the world, (2) silence in the world of infinite openness, and (3) silence in the infinite openness within which the world is to be found.[57]

For Ueda, silence is always bound to words and thus remains within the horizon of finite, human, articulated discourse. When language lapses into silence, silence expresses itself, and this opens language to ontology.

As Heidegger argued, human existence is basically constituted by the fact of being-in-the-world. The world becomes the comprehensive space of meaning, the context for significant connections, that is, our horizon of meaning. According to Ueda this world, our world, lies within an infinite openness that encompasses it. This invisible, infinitely open openness can also be thought of as the realm of absolute silence. It is the realm of infinite stillness undisturbed by speech and yet endowing speech with a depth of meaning. It is not a mere quietistic state but a primordial event that drives us to express that experience in words. The words emerging from these depths constitute the free and spontaneous event of self-expression. Language of this kind is

57. Ueda 1985 (1995), 11.

always creative because it is open to an infinite variety of articulation without ever exhausting the deep source from which it flows.

To avoid remaining at the abstract level, Ueda often intertwines his argument with an interpretation of imagery.[58] He is best known for his reading of the illustrated Zen Buddhist story known as the "Oxherding Pictures." The appeal to images has served him well over the years in giving his audience a more concrete and direct grasp of his ideas, particularly in the case of Westerners unfamiliar with the Zen culture and terminology.

Conclusion: meontology and apophatism

By way of summary we may compare Nishitani and Ueda on four main points. To begin with, both are attentive to the importance of "apophatism" as a via negativa or an application of zange or metanoetics (in Tanabe's sense of the word) to the abuse and overuse of words and the narrowness of conceptualization. This is not to say they stop at declaring the inadequacy of language to express reality. They are both aware of the positive use of language and the potential for expression that comes from silence. Particularly in the case of Nishitani, this allows for a creative use of philosophical language that does not compromise the logic and rigor proper to philosophical discourse.

Secondly, what these two thinkers have to say about language is related to an ontological (or meontological) thinking aimed at overcoming a dualistic and representational standpoint. Both are committed to relating their philosophies to their own experience and the conduct of everyday life. Their existential approach does a long way toward alleviating the addiction to the abstract often associated with philosophical argumentation. Frequent references to Zen to evoke the

58. He states, for instance: "Conceptualization if supposed to lead to clarity, of course, but at times it ends up misleading if the requisite preliminary understanding is lacking. This is specially so when one has to do with things from another culture.... In such circumstances having a kind of picture book to refer to as a basic text may help" (Ueda 1982b, 10).

practical and concrete dimension of life reflect the unavoidable tension between the universality pursued by philosophy and the particularity of their own culturally and historically conditioned ideas. Language and speech, as a medium of expression, are a performance and as such entail gestures and bodily action, which in turn imply interaction with others.[59] It has been through encounters with people from different places, literatures, and language—in which the task of translation are always involved— that Nishitani and Ueda have been able to enrich our view of the world and our way of talking about it. Their philosophies oblige us to pay attention to the role that translation plays in mediating cross-cultural interchanges and advancing the encounter among different peoples. Indeed, one might even think of the practice of translation as a kind of self-cultivation or spiritual exercise in which one need to empty oneself in order to give voice to an otherness speaking through the words of another. The discovery of the truth that perfect, definitive translations do not exist gives new meaning to the selflessness of which both philosophers talk have so much to say in their writings. In this sense, translation may be said to be an occasion for developing one's identity to incorporate the "other."

In the third place, Nishitani and Ueda have devoted considerable attention in their writings to arguing the importance of poetry and certain religious uses of language as a privileged way to approach experience. As we have seen, they demonstrate how every utterance has the potential to be regarded as an experience of translating feelings into images, emotions into words, the ineffable into an open-ended and nonrestrictive kind of speech. The discipline of translating Western philosophical terminology into Japanese seems to have led Nishitani and Ueda to reshape their own assumptions in the search for precise

59. In George Steiner's words: "Translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication.... To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate. Thus the essential structure and executive means and problems of the act of translation are fully present in acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding in any given language" (Steiner 1992, xii).

equivalents to given meanings. The role of language in experience was perhaps still clearer to them in the case of poetry, with its freedom to *articulate* reality in the double sense of expressing it verbally and being joined to it. The literal meaning of the Latin root *translatio* captures this well*:* in the creative process of articulation one is transported from one place to another.

Finally, we come to a an aspect of the question that opens our entire discussion out into a second meaning of the phrase "thinking through translation." In the attempt to think the process of translation through to its consequences for philosophy, we become aware of the extent to which the discipline of translating generates its own ideas and modes of thought. No doubt approaching the translation of philosophical texts as an exegetical task that pursues meaning in texts by focusing on the terminology and raising critical questions has proved a valuable tool for scholarship. Nonetheless, the kind of creative reading of Western and Eastern texts we find in Nishitani and Ueda, not only brings to light truths contained in those texts but open them up to alternative modes of thought often far removed from the reasoning of their original context.

This kind of "thinking through translation" runs the risk of mistakes, misunderstandings, and oversights. The ambiguities, connotations, and visual concreteness inherent in Japanese language remind us of this fact all too well. But rather than shrink from the dangers, keeping them in mind can lead us to look at the text with fresh eyes. As Marcello Ghilardi suggests, insofar as translation offers a paradigm for intercultural praxis it can take on "ethical dimension."[60] It obliges us to rethink our own linguistic categories, to reflect on ourselves at the same time as we reflect on others. The existential-philosohical paths of Nishitani and Ueda shows us how reason and sentiment, experience and comprehension, philosophy and religion, and even Eastern

60. Ghilardi 2012, 112.

and Western languages and worldviews can be made to illumine one another.

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Abbreviations

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