Translator's Introduction: Kant in Stereo

"Methode ist Umweg."

—Walter Benjamin

It is a truism that every text presents a translator with its own specific set of technical problems. This is certainly the case for Jean-Luc Nancy's 1976 study of Kant *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*. However, before considering some of its specific difficulties, it is perhaps necessary to state at the outset that these do not arise only from the usual and inevitable disjunctions between two languages and two idioms. The reasons for this are both historical and theoretical.

In the first place, *Logodaedalus* was written more than three decades ago, before much of what has since become known as "French theory"—to which the present work both does and does not belong in a very specific manner—had either been written or translated into English.[1] As a result, this translation may translate not only Nancy's original text, but also, on some level, something of "French theory." As his polemical Preamble suggests, *Logodaedalus* questions the recourse to many of the concepts and formulas that came to represent deconstructive thought in the Anglo-American reception of French post-structuralism, in particular its understanding of the problem of identity. Readers will have to take the measure of this challenge on their own, but I will try to sketch its basis here in terms of how Nancy's reading of Kant opens out onto the problem of translation.

However, beyond the lag between its French publication and

its translation into English, there is also a properly *critical* reason why the specific difficulties of translating *Logodaedalus* do not merely stem from the empirical differences between vocabularies and grammars. Simply put, such disjunctions are never merely empirical. As the fact that this is a book about Kant might already suggest, there is a systematic—or at least a systemic, if not quite transcendental—reason that imposes itself on translation. *Logodaedalus* takes up the question of the latter's famously difficult prose as a problem that the presentation and exposition of critical philosophy posed first of all to Kant himself. As Nancy shows, the problem of how to write philosophy goes to the heart of the attempt to establish the autonomy of reason through the delineation of its limits; and this task is, in some manner—a *manner*, in fact, that is the very subject of this book—synonymous with saying in language what these limits are.

In other words, *Logodaedalus* is concerned with a certain problem of translation that inhabits critical philosophy at its core. Despite the fact that Kant takes mathematical demonstration as an ideal of presentation, he must translate the System into language, or *as* language. Walter Benjamin's conception of translation envisaged something quite similar when he argued in "The Task of the Translator" that translation was not so much a rendering of specific linguistic contexts, but of an intention toward language as a totality, or, to echo his famous essay, "language as such": "The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original. This is a feature of translation that basically differentiates it from the poet's work, because the intention of the latter is never directed toward the specific linguistic contextual aspects."[2] The System demands a prose of thought that is not an artful, beautiful prose, but that is an "architectonic," a pure structural presentation of itself as the blueprint of reason, what Benjamin calls *reine Sprache*, or "true language."[3] This demand, a demand for a style of presentation that is a style without style, produces what Nancy calls here the "syncope." The syncope imposes the distinction between philosophical presentation, *Darstellung*, and

Dichtung, what one might translate as Poesy, or even "invention," what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has rendered in French as "œuvre d'art." The syncope of discourse, of a philosophy obliged to write itself, produces the split between "philosophy" and "literature" that defines, in Nancy's view, modern thought in Kant's wake. But if the notion of "literature" and everything it implies in the way of style, form, and surface is a by-product of the program of critical philosophy, then translation, insofar as it concerns the transfer of the "content" of one language into the "form" of another language, is for this reason a *formal* practice of language, of form *as* matter, or content. Translation is thus implicated in Kant's attempt to articulate and present the limits of thought insofar as these limits define the totality of the system.

For our purposes here, what is important to say about this is that the Kantian demand for a philosophical style—a properly infinite task, as Nancy shows—also shapes the style and manner of Nancy's *Logodaedalus*, which is by no means merely an attempt to render Kant's "bad" writing into a more lucid prose, and thus into a "good" writing that would clarify and resolve, and thus somehow decide, for once and for all, the sense of the latter's thought. Rather, Nancy sets out to repeat and thus translate the Kantian syncope "itself." Consequently, a rigorous translation of *Logodaedalus* does not fulfill its task if it rests content with reproducing and expressing the meaning of the original text and even something of its style (though this is not to say that it does not attempt to do this, too). One must recognize and understand how Nancy translates the impossible presentation—that is, Kant's *prose*—and, therefore, how he reproduces the syncope. Such a syncope, as Nancy shows, does not simply lend itself to be read and thus translated; rather, it constitutes, as any reader of Kant might tell you, and as the many citations Nancy collects in this text amply testify, an experience of reading, and thus of writing and translating, that must itself be somehow transferred and repeated. Beyond the pragmatic concerns that make up the stuff of brackets and footnotes, it is this dimension of Nancy's text, his discursive practice, that requires some accounting for here, for it is also not without its logic.

A good way to begin to gain a sense of this discursive dimension of *Logodaedalus* is to consider an obvious example Nancy offers in the first pages of the Preamble, as if to alert the reader to what lies ahead on his road: the word *mode*, which takes both genders in French. There is *la mode*, fashion, and *le mode*, which can mean form, manner, mode, and method, the *way* of doing something (*methodos*), and which points to the philosophical notion of modality. Nancy's play on the difference in gender and sense between *le* and *la* mode points to a duality that characterizes both Kant's and his own text, to the superficial, accidental, and transitory dimension of fashion in its ever-changing superficiality *and* to the manner, method, or fashion of doing something that constitutes the very substance of philosophy as a scientific enterprise (its ideal, for Kant, let us not forget, is the method of proof in mathematics). Nancy thereby alerts his reader to an entire vocabulary of fashion that runs quietly yet persistently through this text—words like *allure, tenue, elegance* usually found on the pages of *Vogue* or *Mode* and not normally associated with the upright, stolid values and edifices of philosophical discourse—and which somehow translate the stuff of these from stone into something like *clothing*,or —what is eminently Kantian—into veils. In writing and inscribing Kant's text into this double register, into both the discourse of method and into the idiom of "popular," ordinary language, Nancy, like Kant, suspends the difference between "superficial" form and "deep" content, or substance, between fashion and method.

The name Nancy gives to this suspension is the "syncope," which I have chosen to translate with its English cognate, which has the three main senses of the French, though far less colloquially. In French, *avoir une syncope* means first of all "to pass out," "faint," "lose consciousness," or "black out"; it may even mean to experience a momentary stoppage of the heart or to miss a heartbeat. Second, a *syncope* is a rhetorical term indicating the suppression of a letter in the middle of a word. Third, it is a musical term indicating an interruption of the flow of a musical line, that is, a syncopation, a form identified generally with jazz (which Adorno found, let us recall, to be the avatar of a false aesthetic realiza-

tion of subjective freedom, and thus the most insidious form of the instrumental power of the System). More colloquially, however, *avoir une syncope* also means in French "to have a heart attack," as when someone says, "I almost had a heart attack when I heard (. . .)!" This more popular and figurative usage points to the double register that constitutes the space of Nancy's discourse here, which demonstrates that the logical, grammatical, and thus normative level of language cannot be dissociated from the level of idiomatic language and the dimension of *tone (Stimmung)*. In this manner, the syncope points to the corporeality (a heart attack!) of consciousness in its linguistic expression, the dimension and moment (transcendental? empirical? empirico-transcendental?) wherein consciousness senses or feels itself "in the flesh" and does so precisely because it is there that it blacks out, perhaps in the face of a sudden shock, a powerful emotion, or an experience of sublime grandeur—or just from trying to read Kant. It names the waking unconsciousness we call "incomprehension" that forces one to read a text over and over, especially when it operates, as does Nancy's, in multiple registers. It names, in other words, the impossibility of achieving a mathematical Darstellung that takes the form of an equation stating an identity. Translation becomes, therefore, the necessary attempt to produce a philosophical discourse in the wake of the impossibility of such a mathematical presentation.

However, Nancy also uses another term for this monstrous dimension of language that reminds us that the syncope is, in its violence, always related to an aesthetic moment: the *bon mot*, the joke, or the *Witz*, which for Kant is the prerogative of wit and genius. Nancy explores this notion at length both in this work and elsewhere.[4] In some respects, the bon mot organizes the text of *Logodaedalus* insofar as it names the language of the genius whose inventive power is necessary for the presentation of the System, but whom Kant also pushes aside as being too dangerous and too *aesthetic* for the style of critical philosophy. By embracing Witz, Nancy overturns Kant's fear of it by demoting it from being a prerogative of genius and putting it to work to do the manual

labor of philosophical composition. The bon mot, in a sense, is a form of the syncope. There are several important words that recur throughout *Logodaedalus* and display and perform the work of the Witz. These include *décider*, *partager*, and *advenir*. Each of these, for its own specific reasons, went on to have a distinguished career in Nancy's later works. I have indicated where they arise, but I will restrict my comments about them to notes. However, the terms *exposé* and *exposition*, which are closely bound to Kant's German Darstellung, both deserve mention. Although Darstellung has been recently translated as "exhibition," I have chosen to remain with the more traditional translation, "presentation," and to translate exposé as "to present." In France, students make an exposé in class, that is, they make a presentation. I wanted to keep something of this everyday pedagogical meaning, for it is a motif that Nancy explicitly remarks in Kant's own comments about his writing (in his correspondence, moreover, with his translators). In addition, the notions of "ex-position" and of "being ex-posed" increasingly take center stage in Nancy's later writing, and I felt it would be important to offer readers a chance to see how they develop and emerge out of his reading of Kant and the problem of writing critical philosophy. For the French *exposition*, I have used its perfectly serviceable English cognate, though it is generally translated in English as an "exhibition." It implies a sensible manifestation and exposure. But I found it necessary to diverge from these in several instances in the name of lucidity and accuracy, and I have indicated where this is the case.

Perhaps the most important and emblematic display of Witz lies in Nancy's handling of the French idiom *tenir un discours*, which means "to speak" or to "make a speech." So much so, in fact, that one ought to hear the title *Discours de la syncope* first in the everyday sense of this expression: the *Speech of the Syncope*, or even the *Talk of the Syncope*, and only afterward in the more formal and perhaps academic sense of the English word *discourse*. Yet, tenir un discours may also mean that one "has," or "holds," a position, point of view, or idea, philosophical or ideological, in the sense that one masters and controls it, and thus upholds it, as one might

in an academic, philosophical, or political context, or in the sense of control conveyed by the word *dictate*. Nancy plays frequently on and across the tension between these senses, and there is no English equivalent able to consistently convey all of them. I have chosen to translate the title literally as the *The Discourse of the Syncope*, largely because the complexity of the French here is actually available in the English, though it remains submerged, especially in academic usage. Furthermore, the verb *tenir* is itself one of the most complex in the French language, and its use with different prepositions makes up one of the longest entries in the dictionary, as well as one of the most difficult to "hear" for a nonnative ear. As a result, I have not adopted a standard English equivalent for the many ways Nancy turns it; however, I have indicated its presence in brackets where appropriate and provided notes to give the reader a sense of the different nuances and polarities of meaning it conveys in each instance.

The tension between high and low language I have here tried to describe—and which organizes to a great extent the *discursive logic* of *Logodaedalus*—corresponds quite closely, in fact, to the distinction Heidegger makes in *Being and Time* between "idle talk" (*Gerede*), the *chatter* and preunderstood language of *das Man*, and the resolute speech (*Rede*) of Dasein in its autoappropriation. The verb *tenir* and the expression "tenir un discours" further allude to the entire register of the "hand" that Heidegger deploys in *Being and Time*, and thus to the difference he posits in the practical attitude for which things are "ready-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*) and the theoretical attitude one adopts when something is merely "present-to-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*). Nancy is dialoguing not only with the "early" Heidegger but also with the late Heidegger of *On the Way to Language* (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*) where his conception of *Saying* privileges the *way* of saying over what is being "said" and thus points to the idea of a poetic discourse that cannot be reduced to predication and the positing of concepts. By inscribing the latter's famous "ways that lead nowhere" (in French: *chemins qui mènent nulle part*) back into Kant's modes (le and la mode), by activating the colloquial, ordinary dimensions of French, and by

highlighting if not adopting a vocabulary of fashion—that quint-
essentially French artifact of the modern urban metropole—Nancy
is questioning and submitting Heidegger's claim that language is
"the house of being" to the exigency of translation. Yet he is do-
ing it on the latter's own conception of the *way*. In
this gesture, Nancy pushes Kant toward Heidegger and Heidegger
toward Kant. The implication is that the discourse of the syncope
occurs precisely between the "form" of *critique* and the "content"
of fundamental ontology.

I would like to close with a brief discussion of one last issue of
translation. In the Preamble, Nancy makes use of a prepositional
phrasing with no real English equivalent: " . . . à même le texte
de Kant." As Céline Surprenant, the translator of *The Speculative
Remark: (One of Hegel's Bon Mots)*, has noted, *à même* is related to
Hegel's "in itself" (*an sich*), which she chose to translate as "just at
the level."[5] I have chosen a perhaps less elegant, and simpler for-
mulation: "*on and in Kant's text itself*" [à même le texte de Kant],
in order to highlight the effective dimension of this inscription.
With this term, it seems, Nancy indicates that the syncope should
not be misunderstood as positing any kind of dialectical relation;
rather, à même points to a relation of sameness that does not imply
an absence of difference. The syncope and its discourse articulate
a difference of the *same* between a critical analytic philosophy and
a fundamental ontology. If Nancy leads Heidegger back to Kant's
critical methodos, and if he does so by the former's own insistence
on Saying and on the *Way*, and yet against him in a most singular
repetition of the critical gesture, the subtlety of this "method" can
only be admired. The textual syncopation of the *same* on its way,
the way upon which it attempts to constitute itself out of itself,
is a practice of repetition and translation that recasts and trans-
lates both Heidegger's late poetizing and Kant's critical philosophy
one through the other. In other words, critique translates critique
and thus demands and implies an understanding and a practice
of translation. It is for this reason that to read Nancy, one must
always read him with a dual insight, stereoscopically, to borrow
a Benjaminian notion, for that is how he conceives of Critique:
it doubles and reproduces itself, or writes in *stereo*, as it were, re-

producing itself as "literature" and turning Kant, as Nancy shows, into a character who haunts modern literature. To read Nancy, we must not only understand him, we must also listen to him as well. The reader will have to weigh to what extent an English translation of *Logodaedalus* succeeds or fails to make this possible.

Finally, a word needs to be said regarding the translations of the citations that punctuate and syncopate the text of *Logodaedalus*. Whenever available, I have tried to supply the most current existing English translation, especially of Kant's texts. Every effort has been made to provide references for even the briefest of citations; however, in a few cases, I have been unable to track down sources. I have also modified a number of existing translations in order to better convey something legible in the French and thus important to the intelligibility of Nancy's commentary, but not conveyed by the existing translation.

I have sought to produce a translation that is both "literal" and faithful to the "spirit" of this text. In this respect, I have tried whenever possible to maintain the integrity of Nancy's sentences in the interest of conveying something of the rhythm of his prose, which is highly marked and constitutes a discursive element that the English-speaking reader should be aware of. Nancy's sentences pause, digress, comment, and return upon themselves. Or they merely begin in medias res, as if out of nothing and nowhere. The *logodaedalus*, according to Kant, is a "grammarian" "who quibbles over words," but as Nancy shows us, he does not quibble only over their sense but also over their order, their periods, and their rhythm.

Saul Anton
Paris, January 2007