



Jaspers in English Erudition, Exactitude, and Measure

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Abstract: This review of the first complete English translations of Karl Jaspers' *Introduction to The Great Philosophers*, the *Preface* to the original edition, and of Jaspers' *Preface* to the American edition assesses the communicative merits of the translators' re-examination of his analysis of "greatness." The method is to compare the translators' objective approach to their task with Hannah Arendt's editorial abridgement and Ralph Manheim's literary translation of sections of Jaspers' book. Their consistent work consolidates the myriad details of former translations to promote a better understanding of Jaspers' thinking for both expert and potentially new readers.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; Jaspers, Karl; Mannheim, Ralph; Burch, Ruth A.; Hild, Florian; Wautischer, Helmut; *Introduction to The Great Philosophers*; literary translation; translation method; communication; interpretation; existence; existential; greatness.

In his commendation of the comprehensive new edition of Karl Jaspers' collected writings, Thomas Meyer speculated in *Die Zeit* about possible reasons for Jaspers' modest standing among his contemporaries: "The Left criticized him for 'jargon,' the Right swore by the philosophy of Being, while modern readers aspired to pragmatism, analytical philosophy, and positivism. Jaspers' sound fell by the wayside."¹ Any decline in an author's popularity can be seen as a function of the prevailing intellectual fashion or perhaps as a failure to engage fully with an author's insights and life experience. The potential for the failure to appreciate Jaspers in English perplexed Charles Wallraff and

Adolph Lichtigfeld.² Wallraff previously complained of the inadequate English translations, which apparently rendered Jaspers' ideas "incommunicado," while Lichtigfeld accentuated the importance of interpretative acumen. Their arguments set out the parameters of the balancing act that imposes on translators and readers a shared responsibility to strive for a better appreciation of an author whose texts continue to challenge us today.

Ruth Burch, Florian Hild, and Helmut Wautischer, the translators of the first complete English translation of Jaspers' *Introduction to The Great Philosophers* (and Burch's and Wautischer's retranslations of the *Preface* to

¹ Thomas Meyer, "Karl Jaspers: Mit leichter Hand," *Die Zeit* 07/2017 (27 February): "Die Linke warf ihm 'Jargon' vor, die Rechte schwor auf das Seinsdenken, die Modernen strebten zu Pragmatismus, analytischer Philosophie und Positivismus. Da blieb Jaspers' Sound auf der Strecke."

² See Charles F. Wallraff, "Jaspers in English: A Failure of Communication," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 37/4 (June 1977), pp. 537-548. See also Adolph Lichtigfeld, "Jaspers in English: A Failure not of Communication but Rather of Interpretation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 41/1-2 (September-December 1980), pp. 216-222.

The Great Philosophers and the *Preface* to the American English edition of *Die grossen Philosophen*) have clearly faced up to this responsibility.³ Their work presents Jaspers' specific lucidity for experienced experts and potentially for new readers of Jaspers' texts as well.

Hild's commentary "Why Translate the *Einleitung*?" traces the post-war context in which Jaspers initially argued for the publication of a shortened English version of his introduction to *Die Großen Philosophen*.⁴ Jaspers deferred to Hannah Arendt's decision to publish an abridged version of his book in association with Ralph Manheim as translator and the publisher Kurt Wolff, and so his lengthy German introduction was withheld from American readers. Back then, Arendt's argument was, "It would be a kind of transposition and not merely a translation."⁵ The approach suited her editorial strategy of presenting a new American audience with a more palatable version—what she called "picking up the pace" (C 321)—of Jaspers' book on the great philosophers.

Ralph Manheim's translations of Jaspers' *Preface to the Original Edition* and the *Foreword for the American Reader* show that his erudite literary style was perfectly attuned to Arendt's technique of transposition.⁶ A

characteristic example from Manheim's rendition of the *Foreword for the American Reader*, as compared with the new translation by Burch and Wautischer, demonstrates the poetic license of Arendt's and Manheim's undertaking as follows:

In philosophizing, the logical argument characteristic of the sciences does not disappear altogether, but it is overshadowed by a *struggle between different existential potentialities*, in the course of which struggle philosophical reason fulfills itself and is communicated in its manifoldness. In scientific discussion we achieve knowledge; philosophical communication clarifies and shows us who we ourselves are. [*GPF* xii-xiii]

My emphasis here in italics highlights Manheim's subtle transposition of Jaspers' text into a more stylized, literary version of the existential theme that underpins this section. This contrast of literary transposition versus the search for consistent equivalence becomes clear in comparison with the translators' new rendition as follows:

The rational discussion in the sciences (a discussion that also does not disappear in philosophizing) is replaced by the *conflict of the forces*, in which the multifariousness of communication of philosophical reason takes place. The results of knowledge in scientific discussion are substituted in philosophical communication by the elucidation of one's existence. [*PA* 7]

On the one hand, Manheim more explicitly connects Jaspers' phrase "Kampf der Mächte" with his suggested allusion to existential elucidation that forms the subject of Jaspers' following phrase on philosophical communication. On the other hand, the comparatively neutral equivalent for the same phrase ("conflict of the forces") presented by Burch and Wautischer dispenses with Manheim's literary association—here, almost acting as an interlocutor—for the existential theme.⁷

One consequence of the different emphasis is that the reader of the translations to hand may follow his or her personal appreciation of the existential context as it was originally composed. In "Translating Karl Jaspers on Greatness," Burch and Wautischer indeed state that they aim to return to Jaspers' source text (*TKJ* 5). Another positive outcome of their decision is that their

³ Karl Jaspers, "Introduction to The Great Philosophers," transl. Ruth Burch, Florian Hild, and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 13-49. [Henceforth cited as *IGP*]; Karl Jaspers, "Preface to the American Edition," transl. Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 6-8. [Henceforth cited as *PA*]; and Karl Jaspers, "Preface to The Great Philosophers," transl. Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 9-12. [Henceforth cited as *PGP*] The translators note that Jaspers' German *Vorwort* for the American reader will be published in the forthcoming volume 15.2 of the *Karl Jaspers Gesamtausgabe*, Basel, Schwabe Verlag, in 2020.

⁴ Florian Hild, "A Short Introduction to Jaspers' *Einleitung* to The Great Philosophers," *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 50-52, here pp. 50-1.

⁵ Hannah Arendt letter to Karl Jaspers, 16 September 1957, in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1992, p. 322. [Henceforth cited as *C*]

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers. The Foundations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Karl Manheim. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962. [Henceforth cited as *GPF*]

⁷ This is a good example of Manheim's view of the translator's role as one who is "to impersonate his author." See Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer, "Translating Karl Jaspers on Greatness," *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 1-5, here p. 5. [Henceforth cited as *TKJ*]

re-examination of Jaspers' language invites the reader to make informed opinions about his ideas and thus promotes a better understanding of Jaspers' original German compositions.

This focus on exactitude also allows us to consider some typical facets of Jaspers' compositional style that were arguably obscured by this earlier transpositional approach. For instance, the translator team now reveals some of the intrinsic off-key or disruptive notes that emerge in Jaspers' writing and make an encounter with his ideas seem often frustrating. A repeated example at least of this quixotic style in English occurs in the *Introduction* where Jaspers gives his lengthy explanation about his particular grouping of the philosophers and refers to them as being within a "Reich der Großen":

Yet the question remains whether with such means a structure of the starry world of *the great ones* can shine through which remains fact-related regarding personal matters while simultaneously showing connectedness plainly through originality. Will these originally unrelated stars as it were form constellations, which turn out to be the groupings that enable the representation of philosophers with a lucidity that could not be achieved otherwise? Can this form a *realm of the great ones* beyond history in which to behold our perceptive orientation? Can the encompassing historicity in the *realm of the great ones* be felt and objectified by means of their group relatedness within the enduring multiplex historicity of the great philosophers? [IGP 24, emphasis added]

In a subsequent part of the *Introduction* on the dialogue of minds, Jaspers refers to engaging with the philosophers:

Dialogue amongst the living takes place in question and answer form, out of the strength of authenticity, mutually bringing itself to itself. Thereto is an analogy in the communication with the dead one. Through dialogue, so to speak, I bring him back to life. [IGP 28]

The section echoes Jaspers' observation in the original German foreword to his book on philosophizing as a "Kampf der Geister," which the translators deal with as follows:

I become conscious of the range of "powers," a struggle of minds by means of philosophizing, without an end in time, pretending to come to an end in great and unifying systems, as it breaks through them again to present itself in new shapes. Since I cannot obtain a standpoint outside of it, I see myself struggling within, based on my interpretation of the powers and points of contention. [PGP 10]

In Manheim's version of the preface to the original edition such references to "the great ones" are treated by substituting it with the nouns "great men" or "man," or by reverting to the longhand version of "the great philosophers." Equally, this interpretation of the idiosyncratic quality of Jaspers' composition contrasts with other elements of Manheim's translation where he also adheres literally to Jaspers' original version:

I perceive the "field of forces" where philosophy gives rise to a battle of minds which can never be concluded in time, which seems to culminate in great comprehensive systems, only to break through them and appear in new forms. Because I can gain no vantage point outside, I witness my own self fighting within, and this also because of the way in which I interpret the forces and fronts. [GPF viii]

The translator team again confirms faithfulness to Jaspers' original text by their use of the conventional translations for Jaspers' main concepts: E. B. Ashton's translation of "boundary situation" (*Grenzsituation*) is retained; the tried and tested rendition of *Existenz* is continued as in Hannah Arendt's essay "What is Existenz Philosophy?"⁸ Similarly, "Transcendence" and "the Encompassing" (*das Umgreifende*) are accurately rendered, so guiding the reader through Jaspers' nuanced concepts. Furthermore, the translators diligently consolidate the work of Edith and Leonard Ehrlich's and George Pepper's *Basic Philosophical Writings* that includes brief extracts of Jaspers' *Introduction*.⁹ Their translation of "Where there is greatness, there is strength, but strength is not yet greatness" contrasts with the newly updated version, "Where greatness is, there is strength; but strength is not yet greatness" (IGP 14).¹⁰

The meticulous scrutiny of detail, which is reflected in the translators' refreshing acknowledgement of the accomplishment of eminent predecessors, greatly endears these English versions of Jaspers' work to the reader. Each nuanced word or meaningful turn of phrase in the new translations appears as the

⁸ Hannah Arendt, "What is Existenz Philosophy?," *Partisan Review* 13/1 (Winter 1946), 34-56.

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. and transl. Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press 1986, "Greatness in Philosophy" (excerpts from *Die grossen Philosophen, Erster Band*) pp. 212-22, here p. 213.

¹⁰ "Wo Größe ist, da ist Kraft, aber Kraft ist noch nicht Größe" (GPF 33).

outcome of careful deliberation. There is scope, too, for an occasional and surprising innovation such as: "The presumption of lesser philosophers who believe to have done extraordinary things and who believe to be above all other humans is the peculiar *flip side* [*Kehrseite*] of the possibility of greatness" (*JGP* 19, emphasis added).

In conclusion, these well-measured translations freely exhibit the deep resonances as well as the

intriguing dissonances of Jaspers' prose; his extensive speculative expositions are matched by the surprising staccato of his considered phrases. Jaspers' "sound" (C 324) is clearly discernible even down to the formatting layout, which includes Jaspers' offset sections of text in small print, to condense his different themes into more manageable sections or to punctuate his accomplished thought trains.