

### Everything is Translation (Including the Art of Making New Boots out of the Old Ones)

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## EVERYTHING IS TRANSLATION (Including the Art of Making New Boots out of the Old Ones)

*Gunnar Olsson*\*

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**Abstract:** »*Alles ist Übersetzung (einschließlich der Kunst, aus alten Stiefeln neue zu machen)*«. Presented here is a map that does not look like a map but as a sculpture, a glass tetrahedron sunk into a square slab of granite, three gold threads and a red ruby; nothing less than an attempt to capture what it means to be human. A creation epic of our own time, a pictured story of how the semiotic animal – a species blessed with the faculty of imagination – sacrifices an original difference by turning into a set of alternative identities. All told, the intricacies of power-and-knowledge captured by the interplay of the Peircean signs of symbol, icon and index, the paradigmatic lines of power (*/*, *-*, *=*) embracing each other in a perpetual *ménage à trois*. Everything cast onto the culturally prepared projection screens of religion (ideology), the arts and the sciences. Ethics and aesthetics two sides of the same coin, the tetrahedron the most beautiful of all geometric forms.

**Keywords:** Imagination, geography and geometry, identity and difference.

Man dansar däruppe – klarvaket  
är huset fast klockan är tolv.  
Då slår det mej plötsligt att taket,  
mitt tak, är en annans golv.  
*Nils Ferlin, "Infall"*

Every modeler knows that the entrance to Plato's Academy was adorned with a well-wrought sign, at the same time inviting and forbidding. Not, as in the case of Auschwitz, *Arbeit macht frei*, but **HERE NOBODY ENTERS WHO DOES NOT KNOW HIS GEOMETRY**. The message was, of course, that the rules of geometry and the rules of thought are one and the same, the implication that whoever holds the keys to the former automatically knows the way also to the latter. Likewise, critics of cartographic reason believe not only that geography is best defined as a geometry with names, but that the Academy had both a public entrance and a secret exit. And next to that worm-eaten door was a penciled note: **HERE NOBODY LEAVES WHO DOES NOT KNOW HER GEOGRAPHY**.

Easier said than done. For whereas naming the cornered points is daily business, baptizing the lines (the relations between the points) is like chasing a chameleon, capturing the planes (the taken-for-granted projection screens onto

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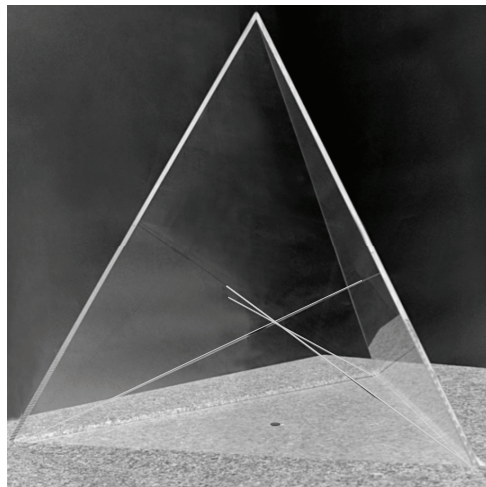
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which the points and lines are cast) nothing less than a struggle with Gödel's impossibility theorem.

The roots reach deeply into the issue of what it means to be human, hence not only into Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's laws of thought but into the Ten Commandments as well. One could go crazy for less, especially as tragedy teaches that whatever fate there is we bring onto ourselves. To do otherwise would therefore be to be dishonest to one self, to break the rules of one's own game, to be utterly lost. In the long run that is impossible, for everyone is one with his own map, the indicative and the imperative thoroughly entangled. Beware, though, for just as geometry is a form of rhetoric, so geography is a form of imagination. No wonder that the map is such a power-filled creation, a flying carpet, the contraband par excellence.

And for that reason I must now briefly return to the sculpture *Mappa Mundi Universalis* (Olsson 2007, 412-437; Jensen 2012), in the same expression a mapping of power-and-knowledge and a self-referential presentation of the fix-points, sight lines, and projection planes of understanding, in every respect the joint effort of myself and my friend and former student Ole Michael Jensen. So close was in fact our cooperation that in the end we reported our findings not with our individual names but under the amalgamated imprint of Gunnael Jensson. Seemingly not a map at all, just a tetrahedron of transparent glass grown out of a square slab of granite.

**Figure 1:** Gunnael Jensson, *Mappa Mundi Universalis*. Glass Tetrahedron on Granite Base, 25 ' 25 ' 19¼ in. Mixed Media (Kalmar Granite, Weissglass, Gold, Ruby)



Source: Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala. First Exhibited in the Uppsala Cathedral, September, 2000. Photo by the Artist.

Not much, yet enough to last us for a lifetime.

To understand why, imagine how a long time ago a drama was set in motion. The stage-floor is a flat rock that gently slopes into the sea, the actors some strange creatures emerging out of nowhere, aimlessly spreading across the homogeneous plain. A foot gets stuck in a crevice and for the first time ever there is a difference different enough to make a difference. The others notice, they point and they mutter, every gesture an attempt to force the bothering difference into graspable identity. An event of tremendous consequences, for what we are now about to witness is the very first sacrifice, *the* act through which the indefinable creatures are eventually changed into human beings, a species whose individuals are held together and kept apart by their use of signs, every sign an ironic expression of Signifier and signified merged into one (Olsson 1993; Jensen 1993).

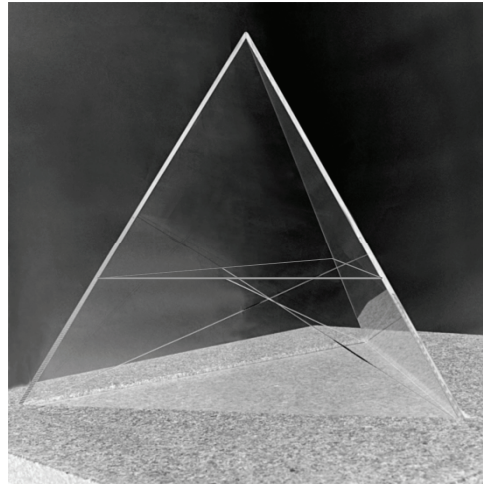
When the difference is pulled out of the rock, a well of blood springs up, a constant reminder of what happened when the original deviance was turned into a non-willing scapegoat, the baring of the navel of what it means to be human. In the materialized version of Jensson's sculpture the place of this remarkable event is marked by a red ruby, a godly symbol which in the accompanying text is called **A**. Not because it *is* **A** but because as semiotic animals we must call it something.

In the definitional struggle that now follows, the mute difference is transformed into a set of communicable identities, like every translation an act of violence. More precisely, the foot in the crevice splits into a trinity of reformulations, a set of provisional reincarnations that in the chaos of mimetic desire find their positions in the corners of an equilateral triangle. Each of these aliases is then given a name that reflects the pain with which it was born: the shadowy **a**; the tautological **a=a** alternatively the perfect sign  $\frac{a}{a}$ ; the informative **a=b**.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rephrased, the unknown **THIS** is captured in one of the alternative nets of **this**, **this is this**, and **this is that**, the **this** closely related to the slanted line of dialectics (*/*), the **this is this** to the horizontal line of the Saussurean Bar (*--*), the **this is that** to the parallel lines of the equal sign (*=*).

**Figure 2:** Mappa Mundi Universalis with the Prophets' Ceiling and the Peoples' Floor



As the initial difference is sacrificed, atoms of understanding are captured in a mushroom cloud of perpetual fission.

When the tension reaches its limit, the rock bursts and out of the lava grows a glass tetrahedron, a crystal palace sometimes known as the crucible of man, sometimes as the prison house of language. The floor and the three walls of this enchanting structure are all built as equal-sized equilateral triangles, the walls transparent, the foundation sunk into the granite ground, the ruby-covered well at its center. In a twist of cultural survival, the three reformulations ( $\mathbf{a}$ ,  $\frac{\mathbf{a}}{\mathbf{a}}$ ,  $\mathbf{a}=\mathbf{b}$ ) now rise from the base, stretch upwards and meet again at the tetrahedron's top, the multitudes of Greek polytheism converging in the singularity of Abrahamic monotheism. Like every mapping, also this one is a triangulation, the  $\mathbf{A}$  and its three restatements coming together in the vanishing point of the pinnacle, the locus of a tautological entity that by definition is what it is –  $[(\mathbf{a}) / (\frac{\mathbf{a}}{\mathbf{a}}) / (\mathbf{a}=\mathbf{b})]$  – not merely a contradictory condensation of Aristotle's difference and identity, but a transcendence of the law of the excluded middle, in its totality nothing less than a rephrasing of God's name (*if a name it is*). And from its inception this Absolute speaks. *Let there be!* And there is. A universe flowing out of the creator's mouth, in James Joyce's conception a commodious vicus of (p)recirculation.

In the coolness of the evening, the utterer (also known under the tautological pseudonym  $\mathbf{A}=\mathbf{A}$ ) listens back to what he has heard his tongue say, claiming first that it is very good, then that he alone has the right to judge. Tolerating neither idols nor false prophets, he declares that all usurpers will be killed and that every critique will be censored. Hereafter, there shall be neither pictures

nor stories, hence no maps either. Impressed by his own achievements, he then proclaims a day of rest, a Sabbath without work, twenty-four hours devoted to the glorification of himself and his faithful. Mandatory presence, no excuse accepted.

Such is the subjection of subjects. Such is the structure of power. Such are the techniques by which we are made so obedient and so predictable. The three (or is it four) words of Moses' first stone tablet (*the* prototype of constitutional law) in its eternal context.

The crystal palace is a well-guarded castle, its ruling resident the tyrant of tyrants. Admittedly a rhetorical exaggeration, for no Absolute is absolutely absolute, no crook crooked enough to live on forever.

But the palace is also a marvelous movie theater, one projector in each of the basement corners, golden rays carrying the alternative translations from the machine rooms to the screens of the opposite walls: the limestone wall of Plato's cave; the wood panel of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*; the glass of Marcel Duchamp's *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*; all found again in the *mappa* of cartographic reason. And when the projections of the imagined identities hit the sheets of glass they miraculously change into a set of Peircean signs, no longer the private fantasies of their inventor but communicable bits in an evolving discourse. To be technical, the **a** becomes the symbol of *a*, the **a=a** the icon of  $\frac{a}{a}$ , the **a=b** the index of  $a=b$ . But just as the painter's canvas must be properly prepared for the paint not to crack or run off, so must our minds be indoctrinated to ensure that all that is solid does not melt into air. Three grand institutions have risen to the task: religion (the / with its belief in the *a* of shared conventions), art (the — with its  $\frac{a}{a}$  striving for perfect resemblance), science (the = with its  $a=b$ , the as-if of provisional truth). Each mode of understanding entrenched within its own self-supporting power structures, rules, and regulations.

If these rituals could be perfectly performed, then the projection lines would strike the screening planes at 90o angles, every message going straight back to the cornered restatement it came from, nothing learned in the process. But even though the Saussurean/Lacanian sign is steeped in mimetic desire, the diverse ontologies of Signifier and signified guarantee that this perpetual urge can never be satisfied. Hence the fortunate consequence that no translation can ever be perfect. It follows that in actuality the inclination of the (en)lightening rays is never *right on* and that the projections, instead of returning to the original identities unchanged, start bouncing between the walls. In turn, this slight deflection means that whatever I happen to think, say and do is never pure and simple but always a non-dissolvable blend of religion, art and science. And suddenly I see where the trigger of tragedy lies: in the purifying spirit of the right angle, in the hatred of the other which is built into the desire of every identity formulation – the iconoclastic controversy, Hitler's *Lebensraum*, Stalin's *Gulag*, Rwanda, Srebrenica – all variations on the same theme of

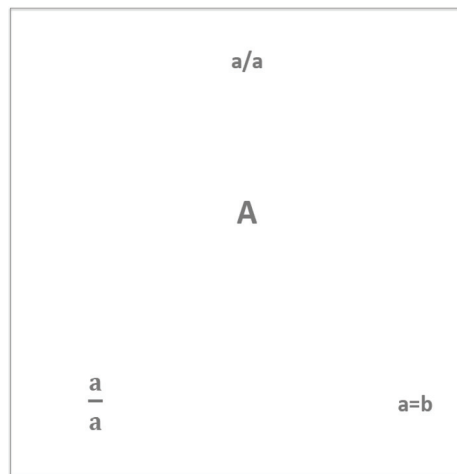
translation. Out of bounds. Murderous is our history, murky the connections between Signifier and signified, knowledge and action,

In turn, this is why tragedy for forty years has occupied such an important place in my own conception of what it means to be human, indeed why I take it to be the most insightful of all available conceptions of thought-in-action and action-in-thought. The original setting is crucial, for Sophocles – a Janus-like figure who with one eye was scanning the old, with another imagining the future – lived his long life in the abyss between the *mythos* of Homer and the *logos* of Plato. What he then discovered was that the greatest tension of his time lay in the attitudes to predicament, for while the archaic poets had taken a person's social standing to reflect his or her ability to handle contradiction, the new philosophers defined paradox as the greatest threat to the cohesion of human reason, an enemy to be fought by all means. As Wittgenstein ([1921] 1961) later put it, “without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries” (4.112). But in Sophocles' eyes religion was itself nothing but a human invention designed to keep people in place, like other laws issued by the humans of the polis rather than the gods of Olympus.

In my mind this pre-Christian circumstance explains both why the tragedians assigned such a crucial role to the chorus and why the recurring convulsions of the last centuries are essentially a political crisis, an orgy in promises that cannot be kept and therefore should never be given, the election results bought with junk bonds issued in the voters' own names. Whereas the problem for the tragedians was the exact drawing of the boundary between the humans and the gods, the problem for the post-democrats is that although all animals are equal, some pigs are more equal than the others.

In my reading it is exactly these relations between religion, arts, and science that are brought to life in the imaginary space of Jensson's Prophets' Hall, its floor located on the same level as the intersection of the right-angled projection rays and its ceiling supported by the Peircean signs of symbol ( $a$ ), icon ( $\frac{a}{a}$ ) and index ( $a=b$ ).

Figure 3: Traces of the first sacrifice



A most remarkable event, for without these signs there would never be a semiotic animal blessed with the faculty of imagination, by definition the ability to make the absent present and the present absent – nothing less than the birth of what it means to be human, the blood-stained embryos from the original sacrifice cast onto the reflecting walls, the Hall itself (a fusion of Plato's cave and the Sistine Chapel) turned into a picture gallery, a staff of prophets serving as expert guides – Pope Francis and Karl Marx, Albert Einstein and Alan Turing, Paul Cézanne and Marcel Duchamp presently foremost among them.<sup>2</sup>

And what do the prophets tell me? That for my own sanity I should leave this echo chamber where I do not belong and proceed to the next floor of the Plotinian house, a hypostatis where I might better understand what it is to be human. Accordingly I now find myself in an enchanting Hall of Mirrors, a

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<sup>2</sup> Fastened to the wall of religion, but like the other paintings flowing over to the nearby ceiling, are Mark Rothko's large canvases, thin layers of red upon red, many appropriately titled *Untitled*, by all indications the artist's way of capturing the breathing *a*, his subsequent suicide a foregone conclusion. Moving on to the wall of art we are then directed to a ceiling of orthodox icons (including Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* and his *Suprematist Composition White on White*); to the non-initiate a set of mysterious pictures of the holy, to the believer something holy in and of itself, hence the very essence of the tautological  $a=a$  and the Saussurean *aa* Finally the wall of science and the Peircean index  $a=b$ , in the ceiling shown as a montage of the expression  $E=mc^2$  flipping first into the atom bomb and then into the double helix declaring that I am what I am, uniquely different from everyone else, the original sacrifice in reverse. And at the nave of it all are Michelangelo's nine scenes from the Book of Genesis, *The Creation of Adam* the most famous among them.



place better known as *The Peoples' Ball Room*, its floor tiles made of solid oak fetched from the Kantian Island of Truth, its ceiling one with the upper limit of language. Centrally placed in that room (its architecture a blend of the stately Versailles and a folksy amusement park) is a platform with a throne reserved for the ruling ruler and a stage set aside for the entertainers, the sommeliers, dance bands, clowns and jugglers, all of them cogs in the propaganda machine – bread and circuses, panem et circenses. And even though the children in the gutter keep shouting that the emperor is naked, the lackeys continue to carry the trail that does not exist.

Much can be said about the Ball Room happenings, not least about the dialectics of one and many, truth and trust, knowing and believing, power and submission, law and order, terror and unpredictability, touchable things and untouchable relations, the five senses of the body and the sixth sense of culture – every conversation a medley of mixed metaphors, every exchange an exercise in translation. Looking back at my own work I can now see that I have been spending half a century in this fascinating space, an epistemological adventure well captured by the titles of the three books *Birds in Egg/Eggs in Bird* (1980 [1975]), *Lines of Power/Limits of Language* (1991), and *Abysmal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason* (2007). In the present context there is little to add except that already the preface of the *Abysmal* (ix) confesses that "the present volume may be read as a record of the silent conversations I have subsequently had with [the Jenson sculpture], this material expression of desires non-suppressed." Yet I am astonished to see how the once lonely Ball Room is getting crowded with a group of trend setters, Giorgio Agamben, René Girard, Bruno Latour, Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek presently most noticeable among them. So tell me now, you mirrors on the wall, who's the fairest of us all?

Searching for an answer I lift my eyes. And when I do, I see that above the Hall of Mirrors there is a mezzanine, by no coincidence located exactly midway between the well in the granite basement and a replica of the Nicaea palace at the tetrahedron's top. A crawling space filled with the implements of ontological transformations, including not only the glue of the copula (usually symbolized by the parallel lines of the equal sign), but also the paper-thin wands of the Divided Line of Plato's *Republic*, the Bar of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* and the coolers of Duchamp's *La mariée mis à nu par ses célibataires, même* (the clothesline on which the bride hangs her white garment and the artist his uncolored self-portrait); the paradigmatic lines of power ( $/$ ,  $-$ ,  $=$ ) embracing each other in a fascinating *ménage à trois*.

Stuck in that in-between space, a place that feels more like an attic than a balcony, I am overwhelmed by the roar of thunder and hammering of heavy rain, everything accompanied by the music and stomping feet of a fiddler on

the roof.<sup>3</sup> Nothing less than the third Commandment confirming itself, six days of work and one day for honoring whoever broke your chains and brought thee out of Egypt (Deutoronomy 5, 12-5). Serious business, for most exegetes agree that the Sabbath was as unique an invention as Israel's worship of one single god, hence a crucial part of the socialization processes through which we are made so obedient and predictable. As the musical has it, "like the drip, drip, drip of the raindrops, when the summer shower's through, so a voice within me keeps repeating you, you, you. Night and day you are the one, only you beneath the moon and under the sun" (Porter 1932).

Fiddling is the fiddler as untouchable ideology is stirred into a concoction of material things and social relations. Abrakadabra, simsalabim! Pogroms in the making.

In the history of *longue durée*, these musings deserve little but a footnote. Yet they too spring from the tension of trust and verification that lies at the heart of European culture, perhaps of all cultures, the tales about Oedipus' foot and Odysseus' scar pulling in one direction, the paragraphs of Moses' first stone tablet in the other (Auerbach 1953). In the cleft in-between hides the *interesse* of everything inter-esting, including the scientist's testable theory and operationalized model, in the same breath a reified deification and a deified reification, the potentially informative **a=b** turning into the tautological **I am who I am**. In that context the lawmakers' grasp of human action as a magic game of ontological transformations is truly remarkable:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them (Exodus 20, 4-5; Deuteronomy 5, 8-9).

Well decreed. For in the empirical now-here of the utopian No-where, nothing is more inhibiting than our inability to be abstract enough, presently a threat to our very survival. As Abraham responded on his way to the *akedah* (Genesis 22, 1): "Here I am." And the two went on together, world literature's most pregnant silence, translation at the edge. H.C. Earwicker (also known as "Here

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<sup>3</sup> To my astonishment I also notice that the roof is leaking, the water almost certainly coming from the point where the invisible pillar that stretches from the **A** in the palace basement to the **A=A** of the godly penthouse breaks through the Ball Room ceiling. At issue is the alternative interpretations of this hol(e)y place, in the *Mappa Mundi Universalis* baptized **A=B**, by some congregations revered as "Mohammed" by some others as "Jesus Christ", the former a reporter of what he has heard, the latter the incarnation of what he has been seen to be. A universe left to explore, a *Mappa Mundi Nicaenum* on its way to the drawing board. For just as mapping is triangulation, so triangulation is a geometry of power. And just as the geometry of power is the practice of cartographic reason, so the practice of cartographic reason is the critique of mapping (Olsson, 2007, p. 434). And so it is that the Nicene Creed is a codification of a belief system as power-filled as anything ever chiseled onto the first stone tablet, as logical as anything ever uttered in the Greek Academy. Astonishing is the richness of the tetrahedron, often called the most beautiful of all geometric forms.

Comes Everybody” and “Haveth Children Everywhere”) in search of himself, the cobbler as well (Joyce 1939).

Boot for boot, difference for difference. And Babble’s walls come trumping down.

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## Discussion

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### *My Answers to Claas Lattmann’s Questions*

In his insightful discussion Claas Lattmann noted the connections between my *Mappa Mundi Universalis* and Plato’s *Republic*. His remarks were highly appropriate, for while in my mind Plato’s dialog is in fact a map, its overriding purpose to charter the way to the good life in the good city, my crystal palace is an attempt to grasp how the semiotic animal straddles the abyss between identity and difference. In both cases an illustration of how we are relying on the faculty of imagination to make sense of the world.

To be more precise, the connections to the allegory of the Cave are striking, even though my attention focuses more on the cave wall than on the performing puppeteers or the chained prisoners. The reason is, of course, that without the projection screen of the wall, there are no shadows either; in the *Mappa Mundi* the three screens of religion (/), art (—), and science (=), serve exactly the same purpose. Even more immediate, though, are the parallels to the Plato’s Divided Line, in my case often symbolized by the fraction line of the Saussurean Bar, the latter nothing less than the magic wand of human action: Let there be! And there is. The Swedish epigram speaks for itself, here literally and without the rhymes: They’re dancing upstairs / wide awake is the house. / Then it suddenly strikes me: / my ceiling is someone else’s floor.

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