

Anna Tebelius

Centre for Intercultural Studies  
University College London  
[annatebelius@hotmail.com](mailto:annatebelius@hotmail.com)

## The many tongues of Polyphemus – Translating Willy Kyrklund’s *Polyfem Förvandlad*

My current research focuses on the Finland-Swedish writer Willy Kyrklund and in particular on my own proposed translation of his 1964 novel *Polyfem förvandlad – Polyphemus Metamorphosed*.<sup>1</sup> I am interested in looking at how the novel’s hybrid nature could pose problems for its translation, at the same time as being a text that seems to be about the problem of communication. I therefore want to examine what kind of strategies need to be developed in order for this novel to be translated.

Some of the questions I will try and deal with are:

1. How can the complex thematic, structure and narrative style of this book be related to translation theory?
2. What sort of practical problems will the translator of the text be faced with?
3. What could an analysis of this text through translation and communication theory add to the already existing work done on Kyrklund’s output and on *Polyfem förvandlad* in particular?

*Polyfem förvandlad* is a book which sits at the mid-point of the author’s oeuvre, and contains a selection of fragments that at first glance might appear unrelated in their variety of sources and style but which on closer inspection reveal a tightly knitted web of not only recurring leitmotifs and imagery but also ideas and themes that seem to investigate repeatedly the same issues: the possibility/ impossibility of communication and the limits of language, humankind’s hopeless and sometimes tragicomic struggle faced with these constraints, and the relationships forged with him/herself, with his/her fellows and with his/her gods. Kyrklund’s prose in *Polyfem förvandlad* is characterised by an experimental and intertextual nature, mixing references from

mythological, literary, religious and cultural sources with high and low language, philosophical enquiries, and a playfulness and sharp irony. These themes and the particularity of the author's style have been identified and discussed in several published texts on Kyrklund, such as Gunnar Arrias' *Jaget, Friheten och Tystnaden hos Willy Kyrklund*,<sup>2</sup> Paul Norlén's "*Textens villkor*": *a study of Willy Kyrklund's prose fiction*<sup>3</sup> and in particular in Olle Widhe's *Främlingskap – Etik och form i Willy Kyrklunds tidiga prosa*.<sup>4</sup>

My approach to *Polyfem förvandlad* is to analyse the novel through the strategies of its translation. I would like to examine the relationship between this text being difficult to translate and the notion that the text itself investigates the very possibility for communication.

The subject of this paper focuses on one aspect of this relationship. It will look at how *Polyfem förvandlad* invokes myth, something already referred to in its title; how through these references to myth it appears that the book is saying something about communication and the limits of language and finally how this might have an impact on translation.

I will on one hand examine these issues from the perspective of Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myth as essentially transferable and therefore translatable, and on the other hand with Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist perspective that sees translation as undecidability.

To begin with I will study a few quotations from the book that I believe exemplify this polemical relationship (the translations of these quotations are very literal, raw translations, forming the first stage of their translation process and do not yet take into consideration the intertextual qualities or specific metre of the fragment they are drawn from).

The first fragment that begins *Polyfem förvandlad* re-works the story of the Cyclops Polyphemus, whose name we are introduced to in the title, and whom we know from the *Odyssey*<sup>5</sup> as well as later in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>6</sup>. At the end of this fragment Kyrklund's narrator observes:

Efterhand, äntligen, någon gång förvandlades Polyphemos och uppgick i klippan. Akis blev förvandlad till en flod.<sup>7</sup>

*(Later, at last, at some point Polyphemus metamorphosed and became part of the cliff. Acis was transformed into a river.)*

The narrator finds Polyphemus wronged, exiled on a cliff waiting for the return of Ulysses. His heart has been broken by a sea nymph, Galatea, who preferred the love of Acis whom Polyphemus subsequently kills

with a block of stone. In Kyrklund's text he is, as Widhe describes him, a Job-like character crying out for his God to answer him.<sup>8</sup>

The character of Polyphemus, waiting for revenge, is in these few lines finally allowed to metamorphose and become part of the cliff, whilst the character of Acis is transformed into a river. Arrias points to the comparison here between the stillness of the cliff and the movement of the river and its connection to the concept of Nirvana as a state devoid of all movement, a state of negation, while life on the other hand is constant movement.<sup>9</sup> Polyphemus' transformation from a state of movement, which is life, to a state of stillness then alludes to a possibility to transcend life.

The image of the transformation or the metamorphosis as a negation of the self returns throughout Kyrklund's text but the possibility of this negation is continuously juxtaposed, as I will try to show, with its impossibility. It is within this dynamic I would like to examine the problems of communication and translation.

Another example of this concept of negation can be found I think in one of the fragments belonging to a group of fragments situated within a framework of references to Persian and Middle-Eastern culture and religion. Here we meet a narrative voice reminiscent of *Arabian Nights'* Scheherazade and an echo of not only the framework of the 'stories within a story' but also their moralising and allegorical structure.<sup>10</sup> Once again Kyrklund is reworking an already existing text, in this case part of the famous didactic Sufi poem *The Mathnawi* by Rumi,<sup>11</sup> when the narrator writes:

Och han gick sin väg och gjorde en pilgrimsvandring och återvände till den älskades port och smekte dörrposten och klamrade sig fast vid ringen och tryckte pannan mot dörrplankorna och ropade med sitt hjärta på sin älskade utan ett ljud. Frågades inifrån: "Vem där?" Han viskade "Jag." Svarades: "Gå din väg!" Och han gick sin väg och gjorde en pilgrimsvandring och återvände till den älskades dörr och bultade på dörren och ropade: "Öppna!" Frågades inifrån: "Vem där?" Svarades: "Du" Svarades: "Älskade. Vad bråkar du för? älskade. Här finns ingen dörr."<sup>12</sup>

*(And he left and went his way and made a pilgrimage and returned to the door of the beloved and caressed the doorknob and clung to the door ring and pressed his forehead against the slabs of the door and cried with all his heart for his beloved without uttering a word. Asked from inside: "Who's there?" He whispered "Me." Replied: "Go away!" And he left and went his way and made a pilgrimage and returned to the door of the beloved and knocked loudly on the door and shouted: "Open!" Asked from inside: "Who's there?" Replied: "You" Replied: "Beloved. What are you arguing for? beloved. There is no door here.")*

Widhe discusses how in Rumi's poem the pilgrim is not allowed through the door until he reaches the realization that he is completely without identity and a part of God.<sup>13</sup> Kyrklund's lover/pilgrim is only allowed through when he realises that there is no door, in the negation of his own particular identity. Only in that transformation will he be able to access his God/lover.

As I have just mentioned, this image of the possibility of transformation, seen in both of the previous quotations, seems to be denied throughout several other fragments in the text. For instance when the narrator describes the walls of a city in the same fragment that deals with the Sufi poem he/she writes:

Över skärvor, över krossade speglar och sjunkna murar, reser sig muren på nytt, på samma ställe, eller något flyttad, eller vinkelrätt mot sin gamla riktning, lika hård, lika ogenomtränglig, med en ny fördelning av gråt och böner.<sup>14</sup>

*(Across shards, across broken mirrors and sunken walls, the wall rises anew, at the same place, or somewhat moved, or perpendicular to its old direction, equally hard, equally impenetrable, with a new division of tears and prayers.)*

Or further along in a fragment structured as a dialogue between two (or perhaps more) voices, that of an unknown narrator and a 'Herr Lundström', where the unknown narrator says:

Bilderna vandrar igenom oss som vågor genom vatten, fogar sig samman och löser upp sig, formar oss och glider bort ur oss, samma delar i nya mönster, samma mönster dolt i nya bilder, ständigt vandrande vidare.<sup>15</sup>

*(The images travelling through us like waves across water, coming together and dissolving, shaping us and sliding away from us, same parts in new patterns, same patterns hidden in new images, continuously travelling on.)*

Both of these quotations are in contrast marked by a sense of perpetual movement. The wall in the first quotation relates the labyrinthine structure of middle-eastern, Arabic cities, the city's structure becoming a metaphor for an unknown process of constant restructuring.

Whereas in the first two examples it appeared that a metamorphosis was possible in the stillness or the negation of the self, these quotations see movement as that which conditions life, but here the constant movement always appears slightly differently, as a reshuffling, a re-ordering of a pre-destined pattern.

As invocations of myth the examples that we have looked at stretch

from Greek and Roman mythology through to the Middle East and Sufi poetry. To add another layer of referentiality and yet another geographical setting I would also like to include a reference Kyrklund makes to the epic poem of the *Kalevala*.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the *Kalevala* Kyrklund utilises not only the milieu, but also its particular metre, the runometer, in a fragment where, as a summer's night is getting lighter and lighter, a shaman sings:

Falken red på dunkla fålen, öppnade sitt mörka gap. Träden ryggade av skräck, ekorn gömde sig. Björnen kom med skänker, hjorten kom med skänker av silver och guld, järven räckte fram sin gåva, vargen räckte fram sin gåva, fiskarn räckte fram sitt lilla barn. Starren spelade, videt dansade, bävern kom ej.<sup>17</sup>

*(The falcon rode the dusky steed, opened up its dark mouth. The trees shrugged in terror, the squirrel hid. The bear arrived with offerings, the deer arrived with offerings of silver and gold, the wolverine handed over its gift, the wolf handed over its gift, the fisherman handed over his little child. The sedge played, the willow danced, the beaver did not come.)*

What Kyrklund does in his re-workings of these myths is to draw on their common philosophical ideas. These similarities are what connect the fragments but also what distinguish them as mythical.

How do these references to myth then engage with a discussion on communication and the limits of language?

For instance in the first example, as we have seen, there is an opposition which occurs throughout the book, between stillness and movement, and which is synthesised in the idea of transformation. On the other hand there is also the recurring image of movement as perpetual. It seems to me that it is in this tension between a possibility and an impossibility that on one hand Kyrklund examines communication and on the other where these ideas can begin to be connected with translation theory.

In these examples Kyrklund contrasts how humankind is conditioned by language and situations – how it is impossible to communicate anything – with the possibility of transformation that the religious, mythical and philosophical intertexts propose. The impossibility of communication then comes to represent the impossibility of escaping from a pattern that remains the same, only slightly differently ordered. The possibility of communication is represented by the idea that transformation presents the possibility to reach an essence or a higher being.

The problem of translation theory in trying to understand and overcome the gaps between one set of language and another mirrors

the problematic nature of communication that Kyrklund establishes in this text. Translation theory asks if a translation is possible in the same way as Kyrklund asks if communication is.

I will now look at this issue from two different theoretical perspectives, the structural view of Lévi-Strauss and the post-structural view of Derrida.

In 'The Story of Asdiwal'<sup>18</sup> Lévi-Strauss writes that a myth, despite differences in languages and cultures, retains a precision that remains transferable. From the perspective of translation theory this then assumes the possibility for translation in that however a text is reworked or changed in the new language it will be able to transmit its original meaning. If one considers Kyrklund's text to be an assemblage of mythic references, does this translatability remain or is its intertextuality compromised? Furthermore could one consider the whole novel as a new myth or meta-myth and in this case what does one stand to lose in a translation that does not take into account its unique qualities?

If on the other hand one considers the idea of the failure of communication, as in the non-response to Polyphemus' plight, and in the perpetual movement of the walls and the images, could it be that one is closer to accessing the novel through a post-structuralist perspective that sees a breaking free from the constraints of language and communication as an impossibility, and which, as Derrida suggests, means that the only thing possible is to continue this chain of constant significations, of perpetual movement. Sarah Kofman identifies in *Ecarts: Quatre essais a propos de Jacques Derrida*,<sup>19</sup> Derrida's notion of the process of translation as "undecidability". For Derrida the act of translation shows the insecurity of language, but also that it must still be done. He gives the image of the Tower of Babel as an analogy for the impossibility of translation. Essential to this analogy is the paradoxical nature of translation: that the same thing cannot be said in another language, yet the attempt to do so must nonetheless be made. Derrida uses "The Task of the Translator"<sup>20</sup> by Walter Benjamin and the idea that what survives in translation modifies and supplements the 'original', and extends its life beyond that of the author.

With these contrasting views the complexity in finding strategies for translating literature that does not follow a linear narrative but which contains a mixture of references, dialects or sociolects becomes apparent.

*Polyfem förvandlad* is an example of a book whose essential ideas connect it to translation theory but which because of this poses a set of interconnected practical and theoretical problems for its translator.

An added difficulty lies in how the different references operate with-

in the book. Direct quotes are mixed with dialects or references that are accessed through a mythical character or a geographical setting.

There is also reference to the *Kalevala* and scattered allusions to a Swedish post-war social democratic protestant ‘folkhem’ that prove particularly difficult as they are both references that a Swedish reader would notice (and in the case of the *Kalevala* only if they are familiar with it in its Swedish translation) but which, like so many of its intertextual subtleties, are not necessary for the understanding of the novel itself.

In conclusion, the complexity of Kyrklund’s *Polyfem förvandlad* and the way that the text deals with its themes can, I believe, be related to ideas in translation theory and in addition to the practical problems a translator is faced with.

The way myth is invoked in *Polyfem förvandlad* also situates it within a discussion on translatability. This in turn opens up the further question of what kinds of strategies are required for the translation of this kind of literature. The complexity of the book means that its translation will remain as problematic and as fragmented as the novel itself, but also that a translation has the potential to enrich the text on its own unique terms.

#### Noter

<sup>1</sup> Willy Kyrklund, *Polyfem förvandlad*, Stockholm 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Gunnar Arrias, *Jaget, Friheten och Tystnaden hos Willy Kyrklund*, Göteborg 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Norlén, “*Textens villkor*”: a study of Willy Kyrklund’s prose fiction, Stockholm 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Olle Widhe, *Främlingskap, Etik och form i Willy Kyrklunds tidiga prosa*, Lund 2005

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles, Bath 1996, Book Nine, p. 211–229.

<sup>6</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary M. Innes, London 1955, Book XIII, p. 305–309.

<sup>7</sup> Kyrklund 1964, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Widhe 2005, p. 194.

<sup>9</sup> Arrias 1981, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Widhe 2005, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> Jalalu’ddin Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, London 1925–1940.

<sup>12</sup> Kyrklund 1964, p. 44–45.

<sup>13</sup> Widhe 2005, p. 248.

<sup>14</sup> Kyrklund 1964, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Kyrklund 1964, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> *Kalevala*: Efter andra originalupplagan övers. av K. Collan, translated to Swedish by Karl Collan, Stockholm 1922.

<sup>17</sup> Kyrklund 1964, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Story of Asdiwal', in Edmund Leach, *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, London 2004, p. 42–43.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Kofman, 'Un Philosophe "Unheimlich"', in *Ecart: Quatre Essais à propos de Jacques Derrida*, Paris 1973.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' in *Illuminations*, London 1999.