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An Experiment in Subjectivity

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"*Thought about thought, an entire tradition wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority. Speech about speech leads us to the outside in which the speaking subject disappears. No doubt, that is why Western thought took so long to think the being of language: as if it had a premonition of the danger that the naked experience of language poses for the self-evidence of the 'I think'".*

The Oulipo, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, or workshop for potential literature, founded in France in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, was a group of writers who applied strict formulae to their production. Inspired by mathematics, or a form of arithmomania, Oulipo members imposed rules on their writing, which they saw as scaffolding and in which the content, the subject, of their literature would be built. This scaffolding could take a variety of forms, equations, a chess board, crosswords, lipogramms, style variations, rhyme conventions, narrative modes. However, these structures or strictures, or "public games", should never be obvious and often no trace of them can be discerned in their texts. There is a myriad of complex layers of self-imposed strictures in Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, and yet the plot is never fragmented, the characters never forced, the settings hardly alien. Queneau's *The Bark Tree*

was a translation of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, but nowhere can this reference be seen. Queneau said of the scaffolding, "it would be dreadful if it showed."

A defected surrealist, Queneau once described the Oulipo members as "rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape." This, they believed, would spur creativity, or a special kind of creativity, one that was as committed to a given form as it was to content, if not more. They experimented with limits as the potential for transgression, as exercises in the discovery of rules that may govern exceptions. Against surrealist "automatic writing", they saw no key to poetic revelation in the unconscious. Language was a system, an impossible one, and OULIPO writers were gaming the system because, for them, creation could only occur within the combinatory possibilities language allowed.

What happens when the constraints lie in the content rather than its form? What if the rules governing the text in advance were set by its very meaning and the story it tells? What if the subject of the text was the scaffolding rather than the building? Here one would approach the conditions under which translation works. To most, the idea of translation as a creative act is unconvincing. Translators are secretarial workers, linguistic technicians, machine operators, and as such they are recognised by professional bodies, government census, publishers' contracts and the wage form. But in fact, this second class citizenship, this constrained creativity, affords it the possibility of experimenting with subjectivity. And this is what is most interesting about it, and pleasurable. How so?

The anonymity of the translation act bids defiance to the authority of authorship, individual genius and authenticity. As a work of recreation and repetition, it exposes the sociality of discourse. The invisibility of the translation act makes the text the real protagonist

and creates language as its persona. Undetectable and unobtrusive, the language that translation produces is a mask that must fit without adjustments: the translator is a tailor and a needle worker, not of garments but of skins. The subjectivity produced by and through translation is anonymous and invisible, but also non-identitarian, set transversally, if not beyond, the linguistic communities that are often the currency of exchange of nation states and the glue of their imagined identity. And yet the "cultures" that languages might demarcate are but one aspect that the translation act needs to address; one constraint, but a negligible one. By the very possibility of entertaining two "cultures", or "identities", in the form of two languages in one's head at any one time, the translator actually proves how feeble this strategic alliance and alignment of language with culture and identity really is, how arbitrary, artificial and potentially redundant their cherished and overprotected correspondences ultimately are.

And yet to describe the subjectivity involved in translation acts one recurs to the metaphors and heuristics of home and foreignness. But no matter the extent to which the translator is boxed-in by the labour market and its education industry through labels of nativity, originality, motherhood and source; though branded at birth, the translator is in fact an orphan, at home only when foreign. Foreign to the text, foreign to its author, foreign to the imagined readers across borders either of them might potentially touch. Anything short of this foreignness, anything short of this openness, anything that subsumes the text to predictions of success or failure, will visibly strike you as a translation. It would be dreadful if it showed. Translation is an act of disloyalty and infidelity to the task of nation-building. To the translator, foreignness is both familiar and familial. And whilst a symbiotic relation to the text is necessary, this intellectual intimacy involves a

form of distance without detachment, an affinity without endorsement or signature: in the anonymous rendering of the text in another language, the translator is not involved in becoming the author in an act of ventriloquism, but rather in treating the untranslated text as a character in search of an author, striving to make it speak for itself.

The translation act is fundamentally inauthentic but involves no betrayal. One can only speak of betrayal if authenticity entails truth as representation. Without indulging in arguments over whether truth exists at all, whether it does as representation, or whether it can exist exclusively as that, in translation, at the level of the relationship between text and authorship, truth can never represent. Language destroys this possibility and translation only makes this more evident. So the subjectivity produced in the translation act is also fundamentally ambiguous. We have ambiguity when "alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading", and translation involves a sort of linguistic anamorphosis. One is forced to question, in translation, the possibility of authenticity and betrayals thereof. But this level of inauthenticity is also negligible. More importantly, perhaps, what the translation act is inauthentic about is the authenticity one understands as a transparency and translucency of consciousness, as a form of being-true-to-one-self, where the term translation throws into disarray here, much more than "true" or "self", is "one". "To forget one's self is to be actualized by myriad things." Because the subjectivity involved in the translation act is multitudinally projected, where multitude is not merely a collectivity of some selves, a whole as a sum of its parts be they individual or singular, but a collectivity within a self, an implosion of the self as non-identical or anti-identical, undermining identity at the level of the possibility of its desire. Against self-sameness in

space and time, translation spatially expands the text, placing it geographically elsewhere, and throws it in a different time, as a second birth, in another present. Heterotopia.

The subjectivity at play in the translation act is anonymous, invisible, foreign, inauthentic, ambiguous, multitudinal, heterotopian and perhaps, as an experiment in subjectivity, translation belongs to pataphysics, the science of imaginary solutions.

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