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Translating, Moving, Caring, Creating

A minor activity

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From my all too brief visit to the *Translate* workshop held in Paris[1], I learned that, since French is not a global or world language, it could not be used to pose or even deal with the problem of translation, i.e. the problem of post-national life. A world language would, in the wake of the languages of empire, translate the diversity of existing cultures into itself in order to appropriate, absorb and destroy them. It seems that English, as a world language, operates like the imperial languages vis-à-vis former colonized peoples; and, by winning their independence and developing an autonomous existence, it seems that those peoples in return are creating in the language of Empire, English, the critical space in which to express otherness. This is all no doubt true. So, from my perspective, disqualified in two respects and undermining an already minor position, I propose to take up again some of the points I raised in the workshop.

I come from Brittany, a region conquered by France in 1492. I am descended from an ethnic minority with Mongol origins, known as

the *bigouden*, who somehow or other arrived in this area (with the Huns, maybe?). My views on the question of language are the very opposite of global; mine is a completely minor point of view, that of an ex-colonized subject. In traditional Brittany, the *bigouden* did not have the right to own or work the land; so they made their living as skilled craftspeople or worked as maids, cooks, launderers, teachers, postmen, etc ... The *bigouden* women were only allowed to wear a single embroidered lace round on the middle of their heads, (other Breton women typically wore this head-dress on weekdays), while the real Bretons wore a Sunday head-dress with two lace rounds on either side of their heads. *Bigouden* and Breton, it seems that they all spoke the Breton language and, from 1492 to 1882, only a small urban or aristocratic élite spoke French, in Brittany as in every other region in France.

This small élite in particular played a leading role in the revolution of 1879: aristocrats, clerks and members of the middle class, all were united against the liberal laws on the trade in cereals and campaigned for certain reforms. The revolution turned out to be even more liberal than the latter years of the *ancien régime*; as a result, they became its enemies. This revolution however appeared to be a good thing for everyone. Its supporters were keen to introduce to people everywhere the revolutionary constitution which had been granted to the republic. From their assembly in Paris, deputies knew that, in the provinces, the great majority of citizens spoke little or no French. They decided to have the constitution translated into the local dialects. A team, led by *Abbé Grégoire*, was dispatched by the constituent assembly to the *département* of the Midi-Pyrénées, a region at the opposite end of the linguistic spectrum from Paris, since it was an Occitan-speaking stronghold. Their mission was to find out which dialects the constitution needed to be translated into, so that all citizens

would be able to read it. The team returned to Paris, appalled: each village claimed to speak a different dialect and, for a single *département*, more than a thousand translations were required! This was clearly a joke, like the ones specially reserved for the government agents in charge of taking the census or drawing up the land register. Nonetheless, the situation served as an excuse to declare French, the language spoken by the court of France, as the national language. Already standardized by Malherbe in the 17th century, French was a direct descendent from Latin and Greek, free from any dialectal or Anglo-Saxon contamination, free too from all potential for change, monitored and guaranteed as it was by the French Academy, which was founded in 1666. The constitution was drafted in French, and the French language was constitutionally established as the basis for national unity.

In 1870 France lost the war against Prussia; a besieged Paris was defended by its citizenry in revolt against the defeatist national government which organized the suppression of the Paris Commune from its refuge in Bordeaux. Paris was besieged by loyalist troops made up of, among others, French soldiers and officers released by the Prussians for this specific purpose. On 27 May 1871, the Commune was defeated and its premonitory social reforms were abolished. This politico-military upheaval led the élites to an awareness of the absence of any real sense of national unity, of the multiplicity of "*terroirs*" or local regions, each one with its own distinct dialect.[2] Ten years later, in 1882, the education system became non-paying, secular and compulsory. It was officially charged with the task of imposing a homogeneous structure on the country as a whole, and obliging every single individual to speak the same language, the French of the court. Dialects, called *patois* from then onwards, were banned even in the school playground. Children caught speaking Breton were forced to

wear their clogs strung around their necks; this punishment was called a “symbol”. In every public place, signs reading “No spitting or speaking Breton” were posted. The local language, the distinctive accent became badges of shame. This shame was cleverly managed in the system governing the grading and posting of employees in the public service, starting with the teaching profession, whose role it was to drive forward the movement to promote a national identity. Much of what I describe in the Breton case applies to France as a whole, and particularly to what we know today as the overseas *départements* and territories.

In this school with its pediment emblazoned with the words “Liberty, Fraternity, Equality”, however, *bigouden* children suddenly found themselves on an equal footing with Breton children, and those formerly on the fringes were now on the same level socially as the more well-to-do. The loss of one’s land, a stigma in rural society, became the incentive to acquire knowledge in the more urban educational structure, especially in those places which, historically, had always enjoyed a collective, communal life. Those who for want of better options intermarried became good students and then civil servants in the following generation; in the generation after that, they became senior civil servants. The *Centre national de la recherche scientifique** carried out an in-depth study of this phenomenon in the 1960s in the village of Plozévet, a community with a large *bigouden* population.[3] Dispersed and promoted throughout the country, the *bigouden* became French and proud of it. Staunch defenders of the language which had selected them and of the standards of excellence which had been entrusted to them, they were also potentially future oppressors of people who, were they to acquire the same advantages, might well devalue positions which had been gained at great cost. The

nationalism of the "integrated" French population is rooted in this history.

French, a language of emancipation, is becoming a language of repression, of distinction, of selection and exclusion: the social mechanisms by which it operates causes it to tarnish all the languages with which it comes in contact. It is difficult to teach French to a child, to a non-native, to all those who are distanced from the power of words. To learn French is to learn how to use power not so much to communicate as to dominate and control. In this French, this imperial language, translation is a process of acculturation, monopolization, possession, association with a legitimated, national body of knowledge. And the French person views English or any other language in the same light. It is a war of languages, with translation being used as a weapon and the translator in the role of a double agent.

The minor (and undermining) perspective on this history is the point of view held by the enormous and largely unconscious grouping of those left over, the remainder created by this purification of the language and its transformation into an instrument of domination. "We are all in the dark", said the anthropologist Colette Pétonnet writing about the *banlieue*, the socially deprived suburbs of French cities.[4] We are all in the dark, in a blur, lost among the particles which make up this shapeless remainder. In French, the word *mineur* also means miner, the one who digs holes below ground in search of valuable ore or precious metals; in the army, the *mineur* is even the sapper who digs holes for the mines that blow up the ground to be captured. In the animal world, it is the burrowing mole so dear to Karl Marx; or the rat with which our underground existence is so closely associated, and which in times past allowed the plague described by Albert Camus to decimate us.[5]

What I now propose to do is to analyse some acts of translation from this minor, underground perspective, marginalized on three counts within the world language, yet erecting bridges and digging tunnels between the lower case and the capital. I will examine the act of translation as movement, as care, as creation.

Movement through translation

The English word *translation* carries the dual meaning of linguistic transfer and movement from one place to another. In French, however, *traduction* denotes a similar transfer from one language to another as far as sense is concerned, but *translation* signifies the transfer of an object, of property and more particularly of the remains of a deceased person from one place to another or from one person to another, according to the *Petit Robert* dictionary, the bible of self-taught intellectuals and printing workers. The translator operates this transition from one language to the other but, as the word *translation* (in its mathematical sense) implies, he/she does so according to an oriented translation vector of fixed value, i.e. the translator's personal assessment of the gap between the two languages, he/she being located at some intervening point between the two. The position is not the translator's own; it is rather a position marked by the time and the context of which he/she is a part. It is in fact the position of the editor who has selected the translator to do the work. No doubt the editor's position between the two languages is different again. Neither the editor nor the translator will read the source text in exactly the same way; they will never wholly agree on the most meaningful words for successive presentations to the booksellers, then the press release, followed by the critical reception, and finally the public response. Translation and publication are stages in a test which of necessity involves some degree of transfer, of betrayal: *traddutori traditori*

['translators are traitors'] as the Italian saying goes. But if thinking is translation and therefore betrayal as Heidegger says, quoting the Italian phrase in *Qu'appelle-t-on penser ?*[6], it is because thinking involves a shifting of references. It means calling up different references in the dominant language, the only language capable of paying the translators well enough to claim all forms of thought for itself. Yet it also involves levering open the cracks between these references, destabilizing certainties, causing them to waver, mining under and undermining the dominant referent.

The minor, undermining art of translation sometimes operates within the same language. The French language, now a language of power cut off from its traditional oral and poetic functions, has changed enormously since the Middle Ages. Andrée May's study "Le discours de la servitude volontaire d'Etienne de la Boétie"[7] is a good example of this. First, she analyses the four translations into French of the short story *Bartleby* by Melville, in particular the translation of the famous phrase "I prefer not to", and notes how each translator chooses a different register. Each of the four translations is different, opening up as many very different horizons for the reader. In each case, the Bartleby character is interpreted in a different way and translated (in a mathematical sense) to the translator's universe; Gilles Deleuze, for instance, doesn't translate the character at all in his preface to the last edition of the short story.

La Boétie's text was written in the mid-16th century, a period that saw the establishment of a court society that, in a matter of a century, would nurture the official, republican French language we know today. In his text, La Boétie wonders what leads people to willingly become slaves in court society, and what makes them want to leave their local regions in order to become, at their own

expense, tiny cogs in the machinery of power. “La Boétie’s rhetorical strategy is characterized by a reduplication of questions, a reduplication of answers, by the stubborn quest for the word to express the indefinable and the resultant abundance of names, none of which is the final word.”[8] The first translation into “modern French” was written during the Restoration in the 19th century, just after the revolutionary and Bonapartist period. By the translator’s own admission, the text was adapted to the taste of the contemporary reader who was fond of denouncing all forms of power and especially the restored monarchy. But the rhythm has been changed, the repetitions excised, original words have simply been “translated” to the 19th century, when the translation was written; for instance, the word *mirmidon* (taken from a song of the period) is replaced by *hommeau* (which in the 20th century would be translated as “little man”). The text has been reduced to a lampoon, historicized, appropriated and, later, will be illegible in another context. While the original text represents a questioning of the self using the first person singular, the interrogatory plural ‘you’ that is used to address the reader in the translation, takes the desire for servitude as a relentless driver for an alleged compromise of the reader’s principles; or else it feeds the reader’s scorn for others by using the vague, cowardly pronoun ‘*one*’. The quest for liberty has become a populist accusation.

New interpretations appeared after July 1830, which shifted the emphasis from an analysis of the desire for servitude towards a description of universal methods of domination: the equality and liberty granted by nature were too weak to withstand enslavement by these methods. Once again, La Boétie was betrayed. Subsequent translations did not conceal the problem of enslavement but tried to explain it by postulating a desire for national and social unity, when La Boétie had specifically aimed his text directly “against one

man", a fact underlined in a pirate edition by the Calvinists of the original text which appeared shortly after the first publication. The socialists, and subsequently the anthropologist Pierre Clastres, saw the text as dramatizing the need to fight against the formation of the modern State, an inevitable outcome nevertheless given the divisions inherent in society. According to them, La Boétie described the emergence of the despot. A new and recent interpreter, Jean-Michel Rey, stresses that power, as the ultimate representative of our own individual desire for domination, has its very basis in our willingness to concede everything to it. To obey in order to be obeyed, the chains of enslavement are reproduced, but with the support of psychoanalysis, in an imaginary world, in an illusion. For La Boétie, however, the question was real: how do you avoid being like everyone else?

The translator has moved with the times, translating the text from one context to another. As he/she selects the words to insert the text into his/her own context, the translator produces a second representation and then sets the results of both processes face to face: the interrogative force of the original text, able to stand the test of time and the transient fragility of a context-bound readership and a voracious conjunction of circumstances. The text is quite literally different, losing as always in translation; it is an equivalent, it moves and is ready to begin again.

Caring through translation

Establishing a relationship between different cultural contexts also shapes the foreign community, migrant workers in the main. The violence of the former colonial relationship reappears in the (French) national territory in the form of degrading prejudices. These are articulated in the mechanisms of the workplace and the

courts, in practical, financial concerns, and in an entire apparatus of segregation and categorization. In what may even be considered an unconscious reflex, the new arrivals are consigned to the lowest level by every available means, especially when they come from the former colonies. Norbert Elias has shown in *Logiques de l'exclusion* that, even outside of any racially-motivated context, the instinct to defend oneself against the other is almost animal-like and highly sophisticated[9]. Self-defence in turn acts as a mirror and, by fending off prejudice, actually legitimizes it. The work of Erving Goffman[10] in the United States and John Gumperz[11] in Britain has critically dismantled these interactions, which are not just a playing out of the mechanisms of domination, but reveal the real capacity to shape social reality in line with the dominant expectations of the moment. Distance from the norm leads – translates - offenders into the offices of the specialists in mediation, the social workers, the legal advisors or the doctors. The manner in which language is used in these official contexts reigns supreme, while the silent interaction of the streets allows greater scope for freedom, including unfortunately the freedom to act aggressively. Tobie Nathan, and the Georges Devereux centre have specialized in the care of migrants with mental health problems. Here, the translator's role involves using the patients' own language to re-interpret the doctor's questions, ideas and suggestions for them. Tobie Nathan, analysing his own professional experience, puts forward the idea that a person can only be treated in the way that person's mother, or perhaps father, has been treated; it is the only form of treatment that people have faith in. [12] Now therapy is a matter of faith. So, like many other psychiatrists, he strives to acquire information about traditional therapies, to find out how they are used, and to use them if necessary. The act of translation goes beyond language towards a

recreation of life in the old country, at least here in the place where the patients are cared for, which is offered as a transitional space.

This experience contrasts with all the adaptive theories of psychiatric practice. According to these, mental health problems are either physical deficiencies that can be minimized by the surgical interventions and medical treatments which have become increasingly available through the advances in science, or they are cultural deficiencies stemming from a lack of the basic references typically enjoyed by members of the "host" society, i.e. the dominant one. This second hypothesis is all the more unacceptable as the migrants' level of early education increases and as the problems of social adjustment being referred to the mental health services also affect the "second generation". My experience of teaching at a university in the *banlieue* and my involvement with these young people has shown me the gap that exists between different representations of the same material and social environment: life in the "housing project" is like village life, a space where people interconnect and get to know each other, under local control, whereas the teacher sees it only as an anonymous space. The entrance to the housing project is the only public space where the outsider is assessed and left alone if he seems harmless, or where he is turned away if he is perceived as a threat; but the teacher sees it as a checkpoint. Between the two representations, two lines of flight confront each other, not just one: the changes which this encounter will bring to two life stories are tenuous. Translation here is unilateral and major, the acceptance of one person into the space of the other is not reciprocated, but inscribed in a relationship of teaching, translation, integration.

The last revolt in the French suburbs in November 2005 was said to be mute, voiceless: there were no watchwords, no leaders, no explanations, just burning cars or sometimes a school, a gym, a

theatre in flames, “something we gave them”, “something we did for them”. The words, the interpretation, came from across the divide, from those looking on, whose solution was to allow a few individuals to cross that divide, to come and join those who had properly integrated, to become part of the republican elite by leaving their housing projects, just like the people who, a century earlier, had left their local regions. The solution was not to lift the community out of its subaltern status, or to translate its aspirations into the language of the masters, but to leave that community behind. Some of those who will ultimately fail in this career towards integration may well become translators ...

Creating through translation

The French Caribbean poet Edouard Glissant[13] and the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz[14] offer another perspective: our world is undergoing a process of creolization, becoming a language-production factory where, it is true, a great many languages are being lost as UNESCO reminds us, but where languages are also multiplying and distinguishing themselves even more. Language is less of an interface between a community and the natural world; it has become an expressive material which people can use to compose their own score, draw up their own existential itinerary, draw their own line and play their own card. In an era where the work of art is technically reproducible[15], translation transfers inherited materials into another context and makes them available for assembly within the framework of a relational aesthetic.[16]

[1] “Polture and Culitics. On Political Prospects of Cultural Translation”, 13-14 October 2006, Maison de l’Europe de Paris; in collaboration with *Transeuropéennes* and the Collège international de philosophie.

[2] Weber E., *La fin des terroirs*, Editions Recherches, Paris, 1984.

* or *CNRS*, the national institution for scientific research in France.

[3] Morin E., *Commune de France, La métamorphose de Plozévet*, LGF (new edition), Paris, 1984.

[4] Pétonnet C., *On est tous dans le brouillard* Editions du CTHS (re-edition), Paris, 2002.

[5] Camus A., *La peste*, Gallimard (re-edition), Paris, 1996.

[6] Heidegger M., *Qu’appelle-t-on penser ?*, translated from German, (re-edition), Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1998.

[7] A. May, „Le discours de la servitude volontaire d'Étienne de La Boétie et ses traductions comme palimpseste“, in: *Chimères*, n° 45, winter 2003.

[8] Ibid., p. 126.

[9] Elias N. / Scotson J. L., *The Established and the Outsiders*, London: Sage 1965.

[10] Goffman E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday 1959.

[11] Gumperz J., *Engager la conversation*, translated from English (anthology), Minuit, paris, 1989.

[12] Nathan T., *Nous ne sommes pas seuls au monde*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 2001.

[13] Glissant E., *Esthétique 1, Une nouvelle région du monde*, Gallimard, Paris, 2001.

[14] Hannerz U., *Explorer la ville*, translated from English, Minuit, Paris, 1983.

[15] Benjamin W., *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, translated from German, re-edition, Allia, Paris, 2003.

[16] Bourriaud N., *Esthétique relationnelle*, Presses du réel, Dijon, 2001.