

THE MOST INTIMATE ACT OF READING: AFFECTIVE VICISSITUDES IN THE TRANSLATOR'S LABOUR

Elena Basile
York University
Canada

Over the last 20 years, the field of translation studies has witnessed an unprecedented foregrounding of the translator's subjectivity in both translation practice and theory. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon has gone hand-in-hand with the epistemic and political changes brought about especially by feminist and post-colonial critical analyses of the geopolitics of intercultural exchange through translation. The translator, once the invisible agent of consolidation of national literatures (Woodsworth) and of colonial cultural hegemony (Cheyfitz), has more recently become a self-conscious agent of cultural change, thoroughly aware of his/her political responsibilities and ideological positionings *vis-à-vis* both source and target languages.

This newfound awareness has spearheaded extensive discussions on the matter of the ethico-political situatedness of translation's communicative process. Within these debates, most of the attention has been drawn to the *visible* signs of the translator's conscious intervention in the text of the other, such as para-textual apparatuses (introductions, afterwords and notes) and textual strategies of "abusive fidelity", such as strategies for foreignizing and introducing gender difference in the translated text, etc. Understandably concerned with wresting the translator away from her traditional invisibility, many theorists have emphasized the translator as a *conscious* agent of "subversion" of the "original" source text, rarely, however, paying attention to the more elusive and less visible aspects of the translation process, aspects which resist being readily slotted within one or another of the translator's consciously assumed ideological stances. I'm thinking here in particular about aspects that bring into relief the *process* of translation, rather than its textual crystallizations. Paying attention to these aspects means shifting our attention from reading translation as an ideologically saturated textual *product*, to exploring its dimension as *event* — specifically an "a-symmetrical" communicative *event* governed by an inaugural *otherness* at play in the source language's textual *address*, and mediated by what I will argue is the *traumatic temporality* of the transla-

tor's defining acts of (re)reading and (re)writing the *message of the other* in an *other* language/culture.

The complex and multifaceted relations of alterity instantiated by this understanding of translation have long been pointed out by translation theorists (Bergman, Steiner and many others). Surprisingly few, however, have ventured to explore the complex affective vicissitudes of seduction, transference and identification through which the translator negotiates her relation both to the alterity of the text of the other, and to the alterity of her own text-to-be. This is so despite the fact that many literary translators' self-reflexive accounts of their own work bear witness to the crucial role that *affect* and the *unconscious* play in their working process. In this paper, I suggest that a careful psychoanalytical exploration of the role played by unconscious dynamics in translation can help us shed some light on the *libidinal economies* of translation, thus allowing us to articulate further the details of that paradigm shift initiated by feminist and post-colonial analyses roughly twenty years ago, whereby translation began to be thought no longer in terms of a disembodied process of abstraction of semantic equivalents between discrete linguistic formations, but in terms of an embodied process of dialogic transformation of cultures, whose boundaries are neither stable or discrete, but constantly negotiated (and transgressed) through complex relations of ruling mediated by symbolic and imaginary domains. But let us return now to the translators and their work.

There is a striking common theme uniting many contemporary translators' self-reflexive accounts of their own work. All seem to understand the translator's craft as involving a form of unique *intimacy* with the other. "The most intimate act of reading" is, for example, Gayatri Spivak's definition of translation, and she even suggests that one should not translate until she/he feels comfortable enough to talk about "intimate things" in the language of the other. Translator David Macey talks about the process of translating as "an intimacy bordering on the erotic" (2001). As these two quotes briefly suggest, translators, far from understanding their work in exclusively technical terms of objective linguistic competence, situate the core processes of their work within the context of a structural *intimacy* between self and other inscribed in the scene of translation. Such intimacy implies a fully *embodied* activity, whose most meaningful space of articulation seems invariably to touch that sphere of inter-subjective communication that is directly connected to affect and the unconscious: the sphere of sexuality.

The weight and particular dynamics of such a sphere are further con-

firmed by American translator Carol Maier, whose dramatic account of her own translations of Cuban poet Armand is interestingly framed in terms of an ambivalent love-hate relationship with the texts of her author. Maier's description is saturated by the sexual language of intimacy, including moments of intense "seduction" experienced in the reading of Armand's text, but also moments of "ambivalence" and "unease" provoked by the difficult task of mediating his work in another language. Maier specifically highlights her compulsion to move back-and-forth between (re)reading and (re)writing, repetitively returning to specific clusters of meaning present in the other's text, clusters whose opaque address would trigger in her reactions of affective ambivalence. Specifically Maier shows a heightened awareness of how such ambivalence stems from a conflict between the intensity of the libidinal energies triggered in her by Armand's address, and the weight inscribed in the imperative of her symbolic role as inter-cultural mediator, ideally just a neutral and invisible "conduit" of the message of the other in another language. On the one hand, the intense seduction of Armand's address triggers in her an identification conducive to a desire to rewrite the other. On the other hand, the imperative to simply *convey* the message of the other without subjective interference, an imperative inscribed in the symbolic configuration of her role as translator, demands from her a repression of the desire triggered by the experience of seduction. Maier's narrative of the difficult negotiation of this conflict, characterized by moments of repetition and delayed awareness of her own affective detours, clearly points towards the presence of a *traumatic temporality* in her process. My suggestion is that we connect this traumatic temporality to the inaugural "intimacy" with the other which characterizes the scene of translation as a scene of seduction.

I have chosen my words carefully: my reference to the *scene* of translation as a scene of *seduction* is meant to evoke the work of psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, whose original linking of translation, seduction and the unconscious, illuminates for us some of these crucial moments in the translator's working process. Laplanche, in fact, interestingly posits the question of translation within the framework of a general theory of seduction as the primordial situation of human signifying exchange. Drawing on an early Freudian understanding of repression as a "failure of translation", Laplanche argues for understanding the formation/transmission of the unconscious in terms of a "drive to translate" (an "*à traduire*") triggered by the dynamics of "primal seduction" (Fletcher and Stanton, 1992; Laplanche, 1999). Primal seduction refers to the intense experience of a-symmetrical intersubjective exchange between a child and a nursing adult, where the adult's actions and

words, beyond the physical act of nursing, pass on to the child an "enigmatic message" — enigmatic both for the adult who sends it, in that it is sent unconsciously, and for the child who receives it, in that it exceeds her immediate capacity for understanding.

For Laplanche, the passing-on of this "enigmatic message" in seduction constitutes the core mechanism of what is at once the formation and the transmission of the unconscious, and the dynamics of its coming into being are explicitly traumatic. That is, the enigmatic message of the adult is unwittingly "implanted" in the child before s/he can make any sense of it, thus becoming an "internal other" that addresses the subject from within, and remains charged with a drive "to be translated" ("*à traduire*"), which can unexpectedly pull the subject within its gravitational field whenever a similar scene of seduction triggers it. It is not hard at this point to see where I'm leading: indeed one such scene of seduction with the capacity of triggering the subject's internal other (one's own "*à traduire*") is the scene of translation itself, the scene, that is, of radical of intimacy with the other, described by translators as a crucial moment in their work.

Laplanche's configuration of the unconscious as an "*à traduire*", a "drive to be translated" which is for the subject the internalised effect of the a-symmetrical exchange of seduction is of extreme relevance for our analysis of the translator's affective dynamics. Indeed, my argument is that the peculiar intimacy with the text of the other, which translators describe as so central to their work, structurally parallels this Laplanchean primal scene of seduction, and as such its communicative dynamic is replete with the passing-on (and the triggering of) unconscious enigmatic messages, messages that are "*à traduire*", that demand "to be translated". As Carol Mayer's story shows, the inscription of this "*à traduire*" in the translated text cannot be contained within the parameters of an exclusively cognitive search for equivalents among languages, but calls into play the translator's affective capacity to respond to that enigmatic message present in the text of the other, which triggers the translator's own internal other, her own "*à traduire*". The affective work of the translator thus becomes akin to a process of "working through" trauma, specifically, of working through the traumatic effects of that scene of seduction, which constitutes the translator's inaugural mode of engagement with the other's text.

In my final pages I turn to a *fictional* example to illustrate this point. The text I will briefly present very clearly stages the possible theoretical (and political) implications of acknowledging the role of seduction in translation, and consequently, of giving the translator's affective vicissitudes their

due epistemic weight. The text is *Le désert mauve*, a novel, or more precisely a "fiction-theorique", written by Quebecois writer Nicole Brossard in 1987, at the peak of a period of intense feminist theorizing on translation in Canada. It is a book composed of three connected texts. It includes an initial novel (also titled *Le désert mauve* and written by a fictional author, Laure Angstelle), a middle section titled "Un livre à traduire" ("A Book to Translate"), which recounts the affective, cognitive and creative processes which a fictive translator (Maude Laures) goes through in order to translate the book; and finally, a third section, which is Maude Laures's own translation, titled *Mauve l'horizon*.

The book has been widely acknowledged as a text that brings into relief the "dialogic" and embodied dimensions of translation as a transformative cultural practice, sustained by a conscious inscription of desire among women engaged in a reciprocal process of rereading and rewriting each other. Indeed, the text offers a careful phenomenology of the translator's affective vicissitudes, but for our purposes and time constraints I will just analyse a brief passage that indicates how translation can become a process of "working through" the "à traduire" triggered in the translator by the seductive appeal of the source text's inaugural enigmatic message. This is a passage from the middle section of the book, specifically from a scene in which the translator imagines herself having a direct conversation with the author, and directly confronting her on her narrative choices. Laures is in particular distressed at Angstelle's choice to abruptly end her story by having one of the main protagonists, Angela Parkins, be inexplicably shot to death on a Motel dance floor, where she was dancing with the novel's teenage heroine, Mélanie. This traumatic ending predictably constitutes the major source of distress for Maude Laures, in that it heightens the translator's awareness of the seduction the text exercised on her by means of directly frustrating her readerly expectations of a happy (lesbian) ending.

Laures's imaginary conversation with the author crucially foregrounds the particular constraints of re-writing inscribed in the translator's symbolic function as conveyor of the meaning of the other. Let us conclude by looking at it briefly. After having conjured Angela Parkins herself to ask the author why she had been killed, Laures tells Angstelle, "Reading you gives me every right", to which Angstelle responds:

—But as a translator you have none. You've chosen the difficult task of reading backwards in your language what in mine flows from the source... How can you understand me if you read me in one language and simultaneously trans-

pose into another what cannot adequately find its place in it? How am I to believe for a single moment that the landscapes in you won't erase those in me? —Because true landscapes loosen the tongue in us, flow over the edge of our thought-frame. They settle into us.

—I remember one day buying a geology book in which I found a [love] letter.. I used the letter as a bookmark. For me that letter was a landscape, an enigma entered with each reading... It was during that time that I started writing the book you want to translate. Yes, you're right there are true landscapes that pry us from the edge and force us onto the scene. (Brossard, p. 133. Translation by Lotbinière-Harwood).

Notice the trajectory of this conversation: against the author's distrust of the translator's capacity to be faithful to her "original meaning," and her fear of being erased and substituted, the translator responds by shifting her attention to "true landscapes" that "loosen the tongue in us." This shift to a spatial metaphor is crucial, in that it allows the translator to stir away from the task of invisibly reproducing an apparently unified authorial intention, and to draw attention to a *space* in-between, a space whose "truth" lies not in any one particular content but in the space's own lingering presence as a plane of potential semiosis, indeed an unknown but intensely perceptible space that enables the subject to speak (to loosen her tongue), but which is in itself enigmatic, it is an "*à traduire*", a "yet-to-be translated". The author's following sentence confirms this reading when in response to Laures's suggestion, she is compelled to tell the story of the "enigmatic message" [the love letter found in a geology book], whose inaugural seduction had first moved her to write the story Laures wants to translate.

Thus, the conversation moves from the translator's initial desire to "have every right" over the text of the other, and thus to be free to rewrite her story altogether, to a shared acknowledgement of the presence of an inaugural and ongoing "enigmatic otherness" at play in the communicative process of translation. And the translator, more than anything else, is called to be faithful or "response-able" towards what of this "enigmatic message" of the other keeps signifying within herself, beyond the other's stated intentions.

By providing a careful phenomenology of the translator's affective vicissitudes, *Le désert mauve* shows what it can mean to think of the translator as a "response-able" reader/rewriter of what, in the process of passing-on from the otherness of the other to the otherness of the self, remains a core of "*à traduire*" — a yet-to-be-known, yet-to-be-translated

"landscape" of potential semiosis. The *translation* of this potentiality into symbolic intelligibility is neither given nor predictable, but on the contrary, it is constantly negotiated on that shifting boundary between the unconscious of the text and its given meanings, a boundary which is directly negotiated on the *translator's own thinking body*. Indeed always, one way or another, "forcing her on to the scene".

Bibliography

- Brossard, Nicole, *Le désert mauve*, Montréal, L'Hexagone, 1987. Translated in English as *Mauve Desert* (translator Susanne De Lotbinière-Harwood, McLelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1989).
- Cheyfitz, Eric, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1997.
- Fletcher, John and Martin Stanton (eds.), *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1992.
- Laplanche, Jean, *Essays on Otherness*, Routledge, London/New York, 1999.
- Macey, David, "Beginning The Translation", *Parallax*, 6, (1), 2000, pp. 2-12.
- Maier, Carol, "Translation, Depaysement and their Figuration", in Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko (eds.), *Translation and Power*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst MA, 2002, pp. 184-194.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "The Politics of Translation", in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, London/New York, 1993.
- Woodworth, Judith, "Translators and the Emergence of National Literatures", in Mary Snell-Hornby, Franz Pochhammer and Franz Kaindl (eds.), *Translation Studies. An Interdiscipline*, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 1994.