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The Metaphor of Translation

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Denis Hollier's reflections on strangeness, and internal and external translation are singularly difficult in the way that they pursue a series of oppositions that either hold fast or collapse in Blanchot's essays: poetry and prose, clarity and obscurity, foreignness or strangeness and recognition, journalism and the Book, and, of course, original and translation. Another potential opposition, politics and literature (more or less parallel to journalism and the Book) turns out, however, not to be an opposition so much as a point of reconciliation that forms the basis for an optimistic conclusion about Blanchot's revised politics and, as I understand, about teaching in translation today in American universities. Before discussing these issues, I would like to dwell first on the discussion of literary undecidability as a form of translation, the latter a model that has served to merge linguistic and literary translation.

Analogizing the act of writing to translating a text into another language is a familiar trope. One finds it in Paul Valéry's preface to his translation of Virgil's *Eclogues*: "Writing anything at all, as soon as the act of writing requires a certain amount of thought and is not a mechanical and unbroken inscribing of spontaneous inner speech," he writes, "is a work of translation exactly comparable to that of transmuting a text from one language into another" (116-17). This preface more accurately, I think, favors the word transmutation over translation, for Valéry wished to stress the difference between changing something into another form and expressing the sense of, for example, a sentence in another language. The mutation does not presuppose so much the passage from the original to its translation, but a limited, very specific situation involving the passage of a text in which the possibility of simply rendering the meaning and rhythms of its sentences or verses is not the point or the basis for literary undecidability or obscurity. That obscurity is situated in the process of transmutation as reflection. The metaphor works therefore to the degree to which Valéry is not discussing a written text and a translation, but the reflective act of writing and the similarly reflective act of translation. Once the translation is finished it reverts to its familiar intractable oppositional mode of translation versus original. Blanchot in his 1947

essay is, however, referring to finished translations in which the debate over whether the reader knows what he or she is reading, that is, the difference between original and translation, parallels the debate between pragmatists and purists in the current context of teaching French literature in translation in the United States. It must be noted, however, that Blanchot refers less to translations as inert completed texts than to an act of reading for literariness. This act is itself a creative process; or it attempts, at least, to retrace what happens between speech and writing as two different things that share the same object, language.

Now literature defined as a language translated from an original also marks a change in Blanchot's politics without changing his faith in literary obscurity itself, whether he is talking about Mallarmé or American novels in translation. Obscurity, strangeness, or undecidability functions as a mainly literary ideal that needs a "literal" original only in theory because American novels can be translated into French without sacrificing that ideal. Still one can, perhaps, unite the linguistic and literary versions of translation as a political statement describing the passage from the external/internal nationalism of the thirties to the postwar years, the Fourth Republic, relations with the United States, and so on. A couple of obvious points need to be made concerning this change in historical circumstances. The first is that Blanchot's reformed politics reflect a lived history in which like other writers, he was influenced by his social, political context. The other point is that in so far as this is history from our standpoint today, the optimism traced in the shift from French nationalism to denationalized openness to other literatures in translation is equally open to revision depending on the politics already in place now or to come.

There is thus that other, more local politics in the timely reflections on teaching literature in translation and trends specific to French Departments in the United States such as practical courses offered in "business French." The differences between then and now, and there in France and here in America may suggest that we tend to change or alter our point of view with the times and in relation to authorities and institutions. Again what does not change for Blanchot is his commitment to literary language. When Curtius writes about French literature it elicits an understandable response from Blanchot "the nationalist" about literariness. Blanchot is obviously irked by Curtius's tired clichés

on the differences of national literatures, French literature being hailed for its seeming accessibility in translation because the language itself is the very model of clarity. But his 1947 essay does not seem to address what an American may have to say about French literature, an important difference in itself, or about what an American critic (purist or pragmatist) might think about the strange literary accessibility attributed to American novels in French translation. The essay addresses rather what translations of American novels have to say about literary language itself in French or any other language. The contemporary issue of teaching a literature in translation stands in disjunctive relation to this concern. For in Blanchot's case at least he is working in one language and by virtue of defining literature by its possibility of being open to translation he does not have to resort to the external and the internal (which is not the same as resolving the resistance to their being reconciled), but only to the "articulation of a natural language with ... literature in general." He obviates altogether the externality of foreignness by making literature a metalanguage of strangeness. Nothing can be external to it; rather it encompasses at the same time as it excludes differences, including the political, historical difference between the first and second essay, and the current politics informing teaching literature in translation. A question I have then is not how literary obscurity obviates politics but how for Blanchot at least it manages to collaborate with its times in that it seems to pass more or less unaltered from one context to the next. What does the history of the nationalist movements of the interwar years and the immediate postwar years in France have to do with the debate over teaching in translation in American academia? How can literary language resolve this latter debate when it is always already itself an ideal removed from pragmatic, institutional concerns as well as released from the contingencies and responsibilities of knowing and teaching the difference between original and translation? If we adopt Blanchot's optimistic merging of linguistic and literary translation, do we not implicitly cut off historical, political, and cultural issues from aesthetic concerns at the very moment they threaten to collide?

It is significant that Valéry could not end his aesthetic reflections on translating Virgil without "a short consideration of the poet's relations with the authorities" (125). For reasons probably

having much to do with when this preface was written—that is, during the German Occupation—Valéry was intrigued by the undecidable and altogether pragmatic conditions under which Virgil produced his works “of the first order.” These are: “submission to a despot, the acceptance of his favors, which degenerates into, or reveals itself in, expressions of gratitude and praise” (126). Virgil’s literariness does not exclude a political form of undecidability (“degenerates into, or reveals itself in”) that Valéry was no doubt thinking of in relation to his own context with its array of resistance and collaborationist writers. It sets it into relief. The outcome remained undecided at the time Valéry wrote his preface, and remains undecided as the process of translating Virgil (here reemerges the notion of translation as process, but now the process links up with a historical, political process of undecidability). What seems important is that there were and are conditions one accepts or rejects in order to produce literature, as there are in order to teach literature. This preface raises the insoluble questions that always plague retrospective considerations of the relationship of a writer’s work to his politics and time. More precisely, however, the heart of Valéry’s preface is the articulation of the poet’s “mystical” (poetical) with his or her practical existence in the present. As regrettable as that articulation may be to Valéry, he knows that poetic purity cannot entirely be disassociated from practical considerations.

The two Blanchot essays neatly lay out a discursive before and after picture of a reformed man. Clearly, that reformation, as Denis Hollier has been careful to point out, also has something to do with Blanchot’s passage from journalism to the Book. Blanchot displaces the questions concerning his career as a journalist by maintaining that literature in the original and translations of it are analogous to the degree to which they both reflect the strangeness of literary language as opposed to that quite fictive entity called ordinary or natural language. Elided here in the opposition between natural language and writing is the judgment frequently made that translating ordinary writing, say, technical or journalistic prose is relatively unproblematic whereas literature poses intractable problems because its use of language is not ordinary. As when Valéry talks about poetry as “the language of the gods” (118), literary language is different and difficult because it is not being used merely to convey information. He says elsewhere that

poetry does not cross borders in translation as prose does. The borders Blanchot refuses to cross here are those concerning the possible blurring of discourses in a single language or across them. The problem is that so-called ordinary language or speech, like literature, does not just convey mere information. There is much that simply does not translate, and becomes therefore an act of reading or interpretation, which has been analogized to translation but whose function is, I believe, to achieve a synthesis that is merely metaphoric. We recall that Valéry's analogy to translation stressed "[w]riting anything at all" ("[écrire quoi que ce soit" [116/211]; author's emphasis) as long as it is not mechanical dictation. But teaching French literature in translation necessitates a certain knowledge of French and the culture, an act of translation in order to make the differences perceptible, thereby rendering the strange possibilities Blanchot saw in uniting linguistic and literary strangenesses both a little more familiar and a question of erudition, that is, of imparting information not readily accessible. (Valéry, by the way, wittily claims to possess no erudition [120]). By referring to the "literal" original language we enact the politics of identity and difference again and again but this does not make us nationalists for alluding to an inside and an outside. We do not teach in translation for the same political, pragmatic, or aesthetic reasons Blanchot values American novels in translation. We have here rather a conflation of two values, but not the singular ideal Blanchot sought. For his idealization of translation requires a willfully ignorant reader, one who is not sitting in a classroom, a reader who reads a translation as literary language. I realize that my criticism is somewhat flat-footed (pragmatic maybe), denying as it seems to do the theoretical possibilities of a literary language promoted to a region where differences (foreignness) do not seem to matter as much as obscurity (or strangeness) does. The references to the critic's passage from journalism to the Book point perhaps to the particular negotiation he had to make with himself concerning the continuation of a career devoted to literature. The price paid, however, is exacting from literary language the right not to know, not to have to know in the name of literary language. One can proclaim a value to translations coincident with a change in political power and international relations at the same time as one can remain on an aesthetic high ground.

The success of obscurity becomes in part a matter of political expediency or reconciliation, an idea not far, so we may think, from the pragmatists who teach literature in translation out of fear of the empty classroom or like Virgil reduced, writes Valéry, "to appealing to the powers of the day and arranging for protectors" (124). But there is a fundamental difference between Blanchot and the pragmatists and that is that Blanchot looks for obscurity; the pragmatists palliate it. The pragmatists know, for example, that students in the throes of language acquisition are not as readily open to the beauties of obscurity in another language as they are in their own. Translations used in this way serve rather as an original or conventional language, not as a model of literary undecidability.

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- Paul Valéry, "Variations on the *Eclogues*." *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Drydan to Derrida*. Trans. Denise Folliot. Eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
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STATES OF IDENTITY

*Limits and Possibilities
of Writing "French"*



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Special Issue
Paroles Gelées 15.2 1997

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA
French Department Graduate Students'
Second Interdisciplinary Conference*

STATES OF IDENTITY

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

SELECTED PROCEEDINGS FROM THE UCLA FRENCH
DEPARTMENT GRADUATE STUDENTS' SECOND ANNUAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE. APRIL 25-27, 1997

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

PAROLES GELEES

Special Issue

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Introduction

When we began preparations for the Second French Graduate Student Conference at UCLA, we learned very quickly that the concept of "being late" is a phenomenon that haunted not only the Romantics. To follow an original event of any kind is a challenging task, but the successful outcome of our conference *States of Identity: Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French,"* documented by the high quality of the present proceedings, demonstrate that there can be original "seconds," as paradoxical as this might sound.

Our "Call for Papers" for a conference on "identity" in the context of 'French' writing generated national and international responses from students in different disciplines such as Art History, ESL, Philosophy, Theater, as well as French, German and Comparative Literature thus underlining the interdisciplinary appeal of this conference.

Denis Hollier's thought-provoking keynote address on the very timely and controversial question of teaching literature in translation inaugurated the three-day event. Hollier's talk was complemented by insightful responses from Janet Bergstrom and Andrea Loselle from the perspective of film and poetry. We want to thank all three of them for setting the stage for an intellectually challenging yet collegial discussion among students, faculty and the many guests from outside the academic community.

Though the papers presented by the graduate students in six panels contributed much to our knowledge regarding individual aspects of "identity" in different cultures and time periods, the subsequent discussions made it clear that attempts to reach "sameness" regarding a given problem were inevitably deferred by new questions and concerns. What remained was the realization that in spite of the plurality of opinions, we had achieved "identity" in the overarching collective gesture of intellectual

exchange. It is this discovery that justifies this conference and our work in the humanities in general.

This conference and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the generous financial support from our sponsors and we want to thank the Borchard Foundation, the French Consulate at Los Angeles, the UCLA Graduate Student Association, the Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies and the Campus Programs Committee of the Program Activities Board. Last but not least, we want to express our gratitude to the UCLA French Department and its faculty, whose continued support, encouragement and presence during the panels was much appreciated by the graduate students. A special thank you is due to Jean-Claude Carron for his introduction of the keynote speaker and tireless personal *engagement* in the organization of this conference.

Our last acknowledgment goes to the graduate students of the French Department who contributed in many ways to the successful outcome of this event and sacrificed much precious time to meetings and other organizational tasks. We hope that the success of the first two conferences will serve as motivation and inspiration to those who are currently working on next year's conference, which we are all eagerly anticipating.

The Editors

Diane Duffrin

Markus Müller

States of Identity

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA French Department
Graduate Students' Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference,
April 25-27, 1997*

Friday, April 25, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM OF SUNSET VILLAGE COMMONS

4:45 p.m. Introduction of Keynote Speaker

Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA

5:00 p.m. Keynote Address

Denis Hollier, Yale University

"Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"

Respondents

Janet Bergstrom, UCLA

Andrea Loselle, UCLA

7:00 p.m. Reception

Saturday, April 26, 1997

NORTHRIDGE ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #1

Grafting Past to Present: Hybrid Identities

Moderator: Michael Stafford

1. "Norman French, Latin and Scots English: Three versions of the *Leges inter Brettos et Scottos*," *Kristen Over (UCLA, Comp. Literature Program)*
2. "Verlan: An Expression of Beur Identity or Reversal by Inverse," *Amy Wells (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*

3. "Marcel Mauss on Nationalism: An Approach to *The Gift*,"
Luke Bresky (UCLA, Dept. of English)

10:45 a.m. Panel #2

The Politics of Pedagogy: Translating Culture in the Classroom

Moderators: Natalie Muñoz, Marcella Munson

1. "Silent Words: Language as an Obstacle to Immigrant Integration and Identity in French Society," *Katharine Harrington (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*
2. "*The Guest in the Classroom: The Voice of Camus in Multicultural Academic Discourse*," *Ajanta Dutt (Rutgers University, ESL Program)*
3. "Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France,"
Susan Purdy (University of Western Ontario, Dept. of French)

2:30 p.m. Panel #3

Bodies in Writing: Feminine Identity and the Literary Text

Moderator: Heather Howard

1. "Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. *La Sylphide*," *Regina Fletcher Sadono (UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept.)*
2. "The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le silence de la cité*," *Lorie Sauble-Otto (University of Arizona, Dept. of French and Italian)*
3. "The 'I' Which Is Not One: Dual Identity in the Case of Simone de Beauvoir's Autobiography," *Kim Carter-Cram (Idaho State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages)*

4:15 p.m. Panel #4

War and Remembrance: National Epitaphs of Self

Moderator: Stacey Meeker

1. "Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization," *John S. LaRose (Louisiana State University, Dept. of French and Italian)*
2. "The Body and the State: Fantasies of Identity in Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*," *Leslie Ann Minot (UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comp. Literature)*
3. "Ecriture et Mémoire: Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Semprun's *L'écriture ou la vie*," *Marcus Keller (California State University Long Beach, Dept. for German, Russian and Romance Languages)*

Sunday, April 27, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #5

Lieux de Mémoire: Negotiating Boundaries of Francophone Identity

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé," *Melissa McKay (University of Georgia, Dept. of Romance Languages)*
2. "Personal and National Narrative in *Une vie de crabe* by Tanella Boni," *Laura K. Reeck (New York University, Dept. of French)*

10:45 a.m. Panel #6

Representation and the Reconsideration of Identity

Moderator: Diane Duffrin

1. "Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh," *Joseph Jenkins (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*
2. "The Stage of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot," *Ben Kolstad (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

Open Discussion

Closing Statement

Markus Müller, UCLA

