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Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation

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Je voudrais, lui dit-elle, vous voir lorsque vous êtes seul.... Je ne sais, lorsque vous êtes seul, comment vous êtes, plus invisible, plus terne, sans même ces métaphores qui servent à parler du noir comme d'une couleur. Tout ce qui peut être utile pour communiquer vous manque. Les pensées-passerelles, les articulations avec le monde, toutes les sonnettes qui à chaque instant permettent à l'homme dans l'abandon d'être servi—sont bannies de votre isolement. Je rêve à ce que pourrait être le journal de ces quelques moments de votre vie. J'imagine que je découvre les cinq mots que vous ayez jamais écrits pour vous-mêmes et que vous portez sur vous.... Le seul état civil qu'il soit possible de vous attribuer est celui d'un homme qui n'existe pas. Cet homme qui est né le 30 février, dans une province où l'on parle sans accent, dans une grande ville où la nuit....

Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur* (1941)

Mon étrangeté avait pour cause tout ce qui faisait que je ne lui paraissais pas étranger.

Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur* (1950)

I will approach the question raised by my subtitle—"Otherness in Translation"—from the most literal angle. Is it a crime against literature to teach literary texts in another language from the one in which they were written? What is the cost, for literature, of their being read in translation? French departments do not hold exclusive rights to this issue. Everyone working in a foreign-language department has been or sooner or later will be led to raise this question, and without a doubt more than once.

We are dealing, then, with a matter of the most practical kind, even if the point of view I will be taking on it is not itself particularly practical. My remarks will be restricted to the level of what—

pretentiously and using the Kantian jargon—one might call the order of “pure practical reason.” Rather than offering a single, precise answer, I will explore some of the issues at stake in the debate.

The warring camps identify themselves according to an opposition between “purists” and “pragmatists.” For the latter, the object is, for the agency, to stay alive, to remain operational and, in order to do this, what matter—in the final analysis—what the contents of the curriculum might be? Only one thing counts: that the classrooms not be empty; that the students not be scared away; that one speaks their language in such a way that little by little, taken unawares, they will find themselves, to their own surprise, in a foreign territory. By reading Stendhal in translation, one fine day, without quite knowing how, they will end up feeling addressed in French.

For the purists, obviously, this pedagogical dumping is out of the question. They do not even want to hear about this cultural Agincourt: just because American English rhymes more easily with popular culture is no reason to lay down one’s arms and give up the aristocratic value of high culture. For, according to the purists, it is literature that is at stake in this war of languages, and these crusaders-of-the-original-language present themselves as literature’s knights errant.

For my part, I have never been entirely convinced by such arguments. I have never believed in the sincerity of these burning declarations of love in favor of literature. In this struggle between translation and original language, I’ve often suspected that literature was reduced to the impotent hostage of warring parties who were total strangers to it, even—if not enemies—at least false friends of it. When, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, after his grandmother’s death, Proust’s narrator meets Charlus, the latter makes fun of the young man’s mourning. Struck by the smell of cynicism emanating from certain Jeremiads over the decadence of those French departments where colleagues go so far as to teach x or y in translation, I have often felt the urge to interrupt them by adapting Charlus’s words to the situation: “Frankly, you do not even give a damn for the old literary geezer; right, little devil?”

True, there is little doubt that, in the best of all possible worlds, the issue would not come up. Never a word of English, written or spoken, would penetrate the walls of a French department. But

things being what they are, and without wanting to sing the praises, and especially not to sing them unreservedly, of the practice of literature in translation, I am not sure that reading French literary texts in English is any more damaging to the sanctity of literature than, for example, their being sponsored, in the original language, by those programs entirely devoted to the linguistic golden calf that are nowadays labeled under the rather sinister brand "business French."

Or to put it another way, if we have to deplore the loss that, from the literary point of view, reading works in translation represents, it is not translation as such that should be incriminated, but rather the fact that today one no longer seems to feel the loss associated with it or even to notice the difference between translation and original. What we have to deplore is not a loss, but the loss of a loss. Not the translations themselves, but the fact that today we read them without experiencing the feeling of linguistic separation or deprivation that constitutes—and I am speaking here of the best translations—their most specific positive aesthetic value. For the saddest paradox is probably the way in which the contemporary use of reading in translation, instead of sharpening one's awareness of the interplay of languages, ends up feeding an unlimited imaginary monolinguisism.

In any case, contrary to an often-used comparison, a translation denatures an original text far less than dubbing does for the original version of a film. There is nothing about it comparable to those lips that absurdly try to catch in flight sounds for which they are not formatted. In dubbing, filmic experience yields to a kind of phonocentric blackmail: as if, in order to speak, cinema had to speak the listener's language. The main concern is to avoid the two catastrophic consequences of subtitling: the irruption, on screen, of written signs heterogenous to the audio-visual image, and the ensuing fact that the voices in the audio-field and the sub-titles in the opto-field each speak a different language.

The shift from one language to another obeys a totally different protocol once it is no longer a matter of dubbing a sound track (or the simultaneous translation of a speech) but, as in the case of literary translation, a question of translating a written text. Literature and translation, even if each of them carries this experience according to modalities that are proper to them, both provide the linguistic experience of a language stripped of speech, of a lan-

guage snatched by means of writing from the spoken world, the world of speaking. In a certain way, literature (or language become literary) can be defined a silent, unspoken language. (Derrida, in *On Grammatology*, suggests that we grade the literary content of a text according to what, in it, escapes the phonological.) It begins, we could say, the moment one stops writing the way one speaks. Or where writing no longer follows speech's dictation (or dictatorship). The concept of literature evokes a language that, in a certain manner, would be profoundly, ontologically, mute. Or put another way, the written text, the target text of the literary translation, is already itself in something like a foreign language. This is one of the many reasons, but also one of the strongest ones, why the diligent good will of the partisans for reading-in-the-original so often seems to miss the point, i.e. the very reason for which a text would be said to be literary. For, unlike a film, a literary text has always already departed from the condition of the original, is always already in the space of translation; for a literary text, there is no original version to the extent that the so-called original text is itself, already, according to the expression Maurice Blanchot borrows from Joë Bousquet, translated from silence.

* * *

How far can one push this analogy between literature as such and translation? Up to what point could one maintain that a translation is never something that, almost unexpectedly, happens, unprogrammed, to a literary text, something that is added to it, the unpredictable promotion a text receives at the point in its career when it reaches the international waters of world literature? Up to what point could one maintain that a text is literary precisely to the extent that from the outset it is inscribed in a space open to the possibility of translation? Does the articulation of one language with another (as implemented in the practice of restricted translation) serve as the analogical model—in the Thomist sense of the term analogy—for thinking the articulation of a natural language with "its" literature or even with literature in general (the space of "general" translation)? Such an analogy would imply that foreignness—and in particular the linguistic kind of it—could be freed from the opposition between inside and outside, could be, undecidably, reversibly, internal and external. Resistance to such

a reversibility constitutes the major obstacle to the merger of the literary space and that of the translation.

A 1932 article by Maurice Blanchot, one of the very first he ever published, bears particularly eloquent witness to the defensive reaction that, in certain contexts, the prospect of this junction could elicit. It illustrates also what is at stake in the will to maintain as strictly as possible the separation between these two strangenesses, that of a foreign outside and that of a pure inside, an inside without an outside.

Blanchot was twenty-five at the time. He had just started, with the rightist newspaper, *Le Journal des débats*, a career as an editor for foreign affairs in which context his interventions quickly focused on the litigious question of Franco-German relations, a diplomatic matter which, as we know, grew daily more threatening. Given the uncertainties brought by the accelerating collapse of the Weimar Republic, Blanchot became the advocate of an intransigent French nationalism. I will not elaborate on this background, involving internal and external politics (since it has been partially evoked by Steve Ungar in his *Scandal and Aftereffect*). But it should be kept in mind. It particularly explains the (quite undiplomatic) arrogance with which Blanchot entered the debate on French identity, a debate dominated since Drieu La Rochelle's *Mesure de la France* by the question of the measuredness of France. (Is France condemned to measure or, rather, is measure condemned to mediocrity? How to measure French moderation against German's lack of it?)

Titled "La Culture française vue par un Allemand," Blanchot's article is a review of the French translation of a book that, in some respects, could be considered as a sort of *German History of French Literature*: the German scholar and translator Ernst-Robert Curtius's *Essai sur la France*. The book is if anything Francophile. But such good dispositions, such understanding, coming from a foreigner, only threw oil on the fire, only exacerbated the demurrer that Blanchot opposes to them, a refusal that leads him to dissociate, as I said, what I would describe as two modalities of foreignness, that of the stranger and that of strangeness, one foreignness for the outside and another one for the inside. It is the violence of this (partially) non-thematized dissociation that prompted me to select this article as my point of departure today. For it leads Blanchot to formulate a somehow paradoxical judgment according to which the image of France proposed by Curtius's book, even if originated

abroad and by a stranger, ends up being that of a France paradoxically devoid of any strangeness whatsoever. Being a stranger to France, Curtius was doomed to miss the strangeness of France. In this sense Blanchot's article defines, in an exemplary way, a (chiasmatic) double politics of "strangeness," the object of which is the production, isolation, and preservation of a proper, inner strangeness, a strangeness reserved to those who are not strangers, a strangeness of the inside whose experience would be inaccessible to strangers, shielded from the outside. The field of literature would thus be the theater of a test of strangeness as radical as it is paradoxical, since it would be all the more radical in that it would not require border crossings.

(The recent promotion of the category of the "Uncanny," one should reflect, might be exposed to the same risk of covering up, in the very name of strangeness, the exclusion of the so-called "empirical" outside. According to its logic, there might be no foreign place like home. One does not need actual foreigners to experience transcendental foreignness.)

Blanchot frames his debate with Curtius around the commonplace according to which clarity is the very hallmark of French culture. It is around this that Curtius (at least Blanchot's Curtius) organized his picture of French culture. Blanchot reacts violently against this Oscar—or Nobel Prize—or transparency:

When Mr. Curtius writes, moreover with the best intentions in the world: "Classicism, Romanticism, Naturalism share a common feature in France, that of being immediately accessible to the normal intelligence of the cultivated European," we feel a slight surprise. What flattering idea does he have of the average European so easily sensitive to what there is about our literature that is unique and incomparable?... These reflections by Mr. Curtius are precious: they give us an opportunity to see the dangers we run in overpraising our own clarity. This prejudice generates the astonishing but widespread opinion that wants to make us prose writers rather than poets. Our masterpieces seem clear, easy, and good company for strangers, as for many Frenchmen who are as much strangers as they, because poetry is prohibited to them and with it, all the meaning it adds to it. (364)¹

What is Blanchot reacting to in this rather energetic reply? I think we can group his resistance to clarity under three headings.

1. The first would be a politics of anti-prose.

In reality, as we will see, what Blanchot refuses is not clarity itself so much as the dematerialized clarity of a language reduced to its prosaic function of information. (In fact, what he refuses, is the identification of literature and information, its being measured according to the scale of information).² Blanchot recognizes neither his language nor his literature in Curtius's praise of a French valued for its exchange value by those who love things to be clear and who think they only are when words efface themselves before their referent, by those who love words only once usage has rendered them transparent enough for them to go unnoticed. Blanchot refuses a clarity identified with the transparency of a disposable, expendable, throwaway language.

Or in other words, Blanchot refuses a clarity reduced to the anonymous superficiality of prose, a clarity statistically established as if by universal suffrage or majority rule. He targets a series of political synonyms, such as "liberalism" and the myth of the "social contract," etc.³ If, for him, political modernity might indeed be characterized by the qualitative and quantitative progress of transparency in communication (of media, of education), aesthetic modernity is literally defined, to the contrary, by the (anti-economic) conquest of obscurity. Indeed, the modern attainment of obscurity is, for him, the most eloquent testimony to the anti-liberal aesthetic secession he sided with very early on. For Blanchot, the hermeticism of modern French literature (and especially of post-Baudelairean poetry) stakes itself on its resistance to a democratic culture of visibility, of transparency (a "glasnost" aesthetics).

The point of contention is the convertibility of literature. In his review of Curtius (a gesture of resistance to European averaging of the literary field), Blanchot draws the line between "what there is about our literature that is unique and incomparable" and what is accessible to the "average European" (364). To be authentic, communication has to occur above the averaging laws of the market, beyond the abstract economy regulated by general equivalents, it has to be not an "abstract" but a "concrete" communication, the communication *per obscurius* which puts at stake, no longer abstractions, but existential in-exchangeables, concrete "properties" (*Eigenschaften*). Communicating vessels, indeed, are those which are the best sealed. Only the secret vases, the hermetic ones

communicate, those which are, as Blanchot says, "unique and incomparable."

French culture, in a word, has everything to lose in letting itself be identified by a foreigner with a clarity that would hold it hostage to a politics of prose. It must not let itself be trapped by the supposed international (or at least European) promotion that would give it the monopoly over a transparency that, in a kind of literary common market, a kind of European Community of intellectual free exchange, would make it into the communal language, the linguistic standard of a cultural Franc zone.

2. A second line of Blanchot's 1932 argument would be opened by emphasizing the verb form of his title: "*La Culture française vue par un Allemand*." Given the essay's insistence on what Curtius has not seen (or, maybe, on what his insistence on seeing made him miss), it would not be impossible to make this wording resonate ironically with the existentialist critique of theoreticism and of the use of perceptual models—in particular the phenomenological theoreticism (primacy of consciousness, etc.)—that an Emmanuel Levinas (for one) sketched, more or less at the same moment, in *La Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, a critique of vision that moreover is fully in the line of that of the ideology of communicational transparency (both the democratic ideal and Enlightenment pedagogy). Vision is not the measure of all truth. The play of decisive differences is never decided on the grounds of a phenomenology of perception. Some forty years later, Blanchot would title one of the first chapters of *L'entretien infini*: "Parler, ce n'est pas voir."

Blanchot, in fact, never stopped declining all rights to visibility, and consequently to recognition for the writer. Since, in every recognition there is inscribed, somehow, the misrecognition of the fundamental fact that one can speak of literature only beyond the politics of visibility (the political publicity) on which democratic electoral practice depends. Literature is thus tied to a paradoxical right *not to be* recognized (which makes it one of the modes of what Roger Caillois would have called legendary psychasthenia). The only right that it is intent to have recognized is, ironically, the negative right to obscurity, to the incognito: a right to invisibility. In other words, if literature claims no right for itself, if it invokes no (no "positive") right to be recognized, it is because the very system of rights is, in itself, complicit with the electoralist visibility

of democracy. Here the difference between speech and writing reappears: democracy can invoke a right to speech; literature lays no claim to a right to writing. We know that, after the war, this motif of the "negative" right will reappear in Blanchot's work under the guise of the right to death (of which the resistance to visibility—the right to obscurity—was a first form).

3. Which leads me to Blanchot's third argument: that of a double inscription of transparency. In his debate with Curtius, transparency appears twice, a first time as a property of French culture (its trademark, its specific difference, its identifying feature), as its substantial attribute, its own property, what it has that is "unique and incomparable." But transparency appears subsequently as a relational mode, as a mode of communication, as the quality of a medium that puts a subject and an object in relation with one another. One transparency thus can always be hidden behind—even within—another: and in this way Curtius only saw one of them: elliptic transparency. He did not see the difference between substantial and relative transparency, between clarity as a unique property (*Eigenschaft*) and clarity as a common measure:

It would be better to affirm that our literature is not clear. They say it is limpid. One could just as well say that it enfolds a greater number of difficult authors than any other. Racine and La Fontaine who, for a stranger, remain the two striking names of our literary history, pile up obstacles, promote resistances to a point one cannot imagine easily overcome. They are truly incomprehensible. They yield themselves fully neither to intelligence, nor to subtlety, even less to the pure intuitions of feeling. They only cede to friendship (364).

Friendship—this is, I presume, the first appearance of this key word in a text by Blanchot—puts a (clearly Platonic) erotics of reading in place, a mode of literary communication that is subtracted from the pressures of publicity, which is another name for visibility. Friendship, in fact, is not regulated by universal suffrage or majority rule. It is the means through which I relate, not to the clarity but to the obscurity of the other.

For what Blanchot refuses, I have already suggested, is less clarity as such than a clarity constrained by an oppositional logic. Curtius's judgments on France, in fact (at least in the reading Blanchot conducts) are just one half of a diptych through which

Curtius distributes sets of opposites on either side of the Franco-German border. "A Hegel, a Schopenhauer, a Nietzsche," he writes for example, "could not exist in France" (364). Blanchot, who cites this sentence, waxes ironic over this Germanocentrism caught-in-the-act: "A German, he snares, even a far-from naive one, cannot conceive another as having the metaphysical passion whose privilege he jealously guards as his own. There is a kind of depth that will never belong to anyone but himself" (364). Blanchot cannot abide this interdiction of obscurity to French culture. And his article is, in a certain way, a manifesto to the glory of French obscurity.

For there are two versions of clarity and of obscurity. One is friendly, the other is not. And if it is only too true that there is an obscurity that, because it prevents seeing, because it is opposed to light, provokes light to counter-attack (a violence suggested by the expression "*faire la lumière sur*"), this obscurity is not the only kind. Obscurity can also connote discretion, incognito, the elusive being of what provides no purchase for sight. What is unnoticed. There is an obscurity that resists light; but there is also an obscurity that eludes it without even resisting since resisting is already letting oneself be captured by the Hegelian logic of recognition. The article on Curtius, as I said, dates from 1932. It is the year Blanchot said he started to write his novel *Thomas l'obscur*: the obscure one, the one that escapes notice. Light has no purchase on him. He is too transparent to be caught in a photograph.

There is a French obscurity and, for Blanchot, it is fundamentally classical, as we see from the names he cites, La Fontaine and Racine, two writers about whom he writes: "An apparent facility protects them against the scholarly projects of strangers and the bad judges who separate simplicity from profundity" (Blanchot 1932 364). Speaking elsewhere of what he calls La Fontaine's enigmas, Blanchot says that they "disappear behind this transparency that one is inconsolable about not being able to pierce" (Blanchot 1932 364). Classicism, here, is primarily a poetic art of transparency, but of a transparency *qui se fait écran*: that is "screened." And this in all dimensions of the phrase. Transparency, first, becomes screen, turns *itself* into a screen, making itself a screen in the sense that it interposes itself in front of something that it—transparent as it might be—prevents one from seeing; its diaphanous being, through a mysterious enchantment, trans-

formed into a leucoma at one and the same time imperceptible and impenetrable, a kind of cataract. But it is screened also in another sense: that which this (first) transparency screens against, that before which it interposes itself, that which is hidden behind it, is also transparency; or, if not transparency itself, at least its double. Transparency is simultaneously that which hides and that which is hidden. It is on both sides of the screen. Simultaneously screen and screened. Simultaneously on the surface and in depth. Fore-ground and background. At the same time figure and ground.

Transparency, in other words, functions like a *trompe-l'œil*. It is a false bottomed transparency, a coded one, with a secret lock (as one says of a *cabinet*). Its access reserved to friendship, it arranges a shelter against the indiscretions of publicity, against the violence of light. In what it shows, something stays in reserve, subtracting itself from sight. It screens a difference that is not seen, a difference entirely in reserve, the diacritical power of which is a direct function of its discretion. To adopt Gide's metaphor in *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, transparency becomes sublime when it cannot be taken at face value: the obscure object of desire is, precisely, the discrete charm of transparency.

* * *

It would be worth opening here Blanchot's file on the French 17th century. His essays on Cyrano de Bergerac ("*L'homme noir du XVIIe siècle*"), on Baroque poets ("*torches too brilliant not to throw shadows*", *Faux pas* 151), on Thierry Maulnier's Racine (*Phèdre*, he says, is "the tragedy of transparency" [*Faux pas* 81]), on Alain's portrait of Descartes ("*throughout, Descartes is nearly impenetrable,*" but he is "often seemingly clear and his language, which follows common usage, gives no warning"; *ibid.* 345). One should also mention the darkness at noon model used by Blanchot in his interpretation of Maurras's version of Mediterranean spirit. (Conversely, one should observe that, from Scève to Mallarmé and Valéry—not to mention the later Char and Ponge—, the reputedly difficult French poets are all, first and foremost, poets of light, sun, whiteness, glass, and dawn, the poets of awakening, of white mythology.)⁴

In both Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* and the commentary Boileau wrote to accompany its translation, the sublime is characterized as the result of an eclipse of the figure, a special effect

resulting in the *defiguration* (to use Barbara Johnson's phrase) of poetic language (what André Bazin calls, in his book on Renoir, a "cache-cache," in the sense however not of hide-and-peek, but of hide-and-hide): the sublime is an invisible figure, a figure gone into hiding. "How," Longinus wonders, "can the orator hide the figure he is making use of?" And this is what escapes Curtius and the propagandists of French clarity: they miss the figurative nature of clarity, the figure ingrained in transparency, which gives it its signifying power. Because everything seems clear to him, Curtius imagines that everything is—as Blanchot puts it—"immediately accessible." Faced with French, he forgets himself. He forgets his difference. The transfixed translator loses himself in the other's language. Like a viewer absorbed by the movie, he no longer sees the screen. This foreigner acts as though there is nothing between him and what he reads. French is so familiar to him that he has forgotten it is a foreign language. When nothing is lost in translation, it is the translation itself that is lost.

* * *

Which brings me back to otherness in translation.

What Blanchot called the prejudice about French clarity is neither a monopoly on the part of Curtius, nor of German philologists, nor even of foreigners (to France) in general. Blanchot himself, in fact, attributes it "to foreigners and many French who are as foreign as they" ("*La culture française*" 364). Who are these latter? They are academics (men and women of *knowledge* rather than *friendship*), and among them, probably, one could name someone like Gustave Lanson, to whom (as Blanchot notes) Curtius refers.

Lanson finished his *History of French Literature* in 1894. And if it is true that this history is, in many respects, an epic story of clarity (since Lanson systematically ignores works of obscurity, darkness, shadow, such as Scève, Sade, Nerval, etc.), the mounting obscurity that characterizes the post-Baudelairean French poetic production could only indicate that this story might be drawing to a close. High priest of secular clarity, Lanson cannot conceive that a text might be both obscure and French. The two characteristics are mutually exclusive. Obscurity is beyond the linguistic proficiency of French; it is, always and without exception, an error in French. An obscure text is, by definition, one where the French defaults. It

is out of the question, for Lanson, that French could have its own form of obscurity, a homegrown linguistic hermeticism. To become obscure is, for French, tantamount to becoming a foreign language. The obscurity of a given text merely gives a measure of the distance that separates it from French language, as we see in the judgment on Mallarmé and his school that closes the first edition of Lanson's book: after having warned against their "bizarreness" (which is another name for the "strange") and the "obscurity of their works", Lanson continues: "It is also the case that among all this good will put to the service of poetry and language, there are so many foreigners, whose prose or verse too often sound like doggedly literal translations of an already perverted English" (Lanson, 1896 1093). (In the second edition, Lanson adds a list of names in footnote: "Mockel, Maeterlinck, Rodenbach, Verhaeren, are Walloons or Flemish; Viélé-Griffin, Stuart-Merrill, Americans; Maria Krysinska, Polish; Moréas, Greek. And then Kahn, de Souza, etc. I only speak of the names, of their configuration and sound" [Lanson, 1902 1107]). Lanson embodies a deeply ingrained difficulty to make a distinction between a French that is not "clear" and bad French.

But, in any case, did Mallarmé really write French? What is the status of Mallarmé's *Unheimlichkeit*: strangeness or foreignness? linguistic or literary? Linguistic foreignness is noticeable first of all by its effects of indecidability, an indecidability that one never knows for sure from where it is coming. How to decide, for example, if the bizarreness and obscurity of symbolist poetry results from the strangeness of the tropes employed or from the fact that French is not the mother tongue of this movement's poets? Does its obscurity come from the inside or the outside? Shade or shadow? Is it a literary obscurity or a linguistic one? Faced with this undecidability, Lanson and Blanchot take opposing stands. If it is obscure, says Blanchot, that is because it is poetry; but for Lanson, that is because it is translation (no matter if, as with Mallarmé, there is not any original). At the first glimpse of the obscurity of a text, Lanson automatically denies it linguistic citizenship. According to him, Mallarmé's difficulty is not accountable to literature but to a pathology of language linked to bilingualism, while for Blanchot, French obscurity, far from evoking an imitation, conscious or not, of the awkwardness of translation, far from suggesting a literature whose original would have to be

written in a second tongue, French obscurity taps a native resource unsuspected by strangers. Unlike Lanson, Blanchot holds on to the distinction between linguistic and literary strangeness, between the strangeness of natural languages in relation to each other (Curtius) and that of literature in relation to conventional language (Mallarmé).

Blanchot's article on Curtius is an early text. But the Blanchot we know is clearly recognizable in it already. Through many of its motifs, as we have seen, this article opens onto his work to come. But rather than stressing this continuity, I would like to conclude with what changed when Blanchot's writing left the space of the newspaper for that of the book, when the articles he kept writing, emancipated from their original journalistic medium, were collected and reprinted within books.

One of the articles collected in *La part du feu* is titled "Traduit de" Written in 1946, it addresses the Parisian fashion for American novels after the Liberation. Such a passion for a translated literature gave birth to a certain disquiet among French critics. Blanchot did not share it.

To read a work in translation, it was said, is putting oneself in the position of being unable to know what one reads. Without mentioning the fact that the miracle of translation can make works that would be uninteresting in the original now seem exquisite or fascinating, the reader of a translated work is, at best, incapable of sorting out, in what he or she is reading, what belongs, respectively, to the translation and to the original.

In "Traduit de ...," Blanchot turns the argument around. Right where most people see a danger, he sees the site of literature's very opportunities. Does the reader of a translation not know what he is reading? This is precisely what makes the translator's task exemplary for literature itself. Literature, being a non-epistemological relationship to otherness, requires a reader who gives up knowing (reading itself renounces the security of "knowledge" in order to run the risks of "friendship"). Or creates a reader who, so to speak, does not know what he is reading. Far from giving access to a text that, without him, would remain sealed, closed to reading, what the translator accomplishes is described, in Blanchot's typically deceptive way, as "the exemplary literary act, the one that asks the reader to remain ignorant of the text being revealed by it" ("Traduit de ..."186). "A translated text [thus] imitates the work-

ings of creation which, starting out from current language, that in which we live and are immersed, tries to give birth to another language, similar in appearance, and yet, in relation to it, like its absence, its difference perpetually acquired and continually hidden" (187).

"Traduit de ...": the title of the article, with its three dots evoking an almost generic translation with no specification of any original language, sets forth a definition of literature as a text in a non-original tongue. A text is literary when it evokes a language to which it simultaneously denies access, against which it acts as screen. A language absent from, foreign to the sentences one reads, a hidden language, sealed off, so to speak, as if within a translation and by means of it. Each word gives the reader the unmistakable impression that it usurps the place of another, that it is there in place of another, that it represents another absent one. Each word gives the reader the impression that what one reads is not the original text. That a language has been lost, not only in translation, but in writing. There is something here in the way of a negative translation (in the sense one speaks of negative theology), something hinting at a language that could be reached or retrieved only indirectly, in translation. But the stranger is always structured like a language.

For Lanson, as we recall, Mallarmé's poetry, with its obscurity, evokes a literature written directly in translation, literature always already in and as a second language. According to the reading I suggest, the Blanchot of 1932 would have resolutely opposed this disparaging diagnostic. And his promotion of French obscurity was meant precisely to preclude such a contamination by foreign tongues. The Blanchot of 1947, however, reacts in the opposite way. He would no longer oppose the terms of Lanson's diagnostic, he would simply reverse its sign from minus to plus. While for Lanson this darkening was the equivalent of the *Dämmerung* of French literature, for Blanchot, the Mallarmean indecidability between internal and external obscurity, the radical impossibility of territorializing the origin of strangeness, is what endows the Mallarméan moment with the importance of a dawn of literature as such, of a literary space, that is, that is no longer defined in terms of national histories: yes, it smacks of translation, Blanchot might have replied to Lanson, but it is because translation is the closest empirical realization of the ideal of a literature "that wants to

remain translation in its purest state, a translation unburdened by something to translate. . . " (*La Part du feu* 174). From translation to literature there is only one step, that separating the empirical and the "pure": literature is pure translation.

I do not have the time to rehearse all the changes that intervene between these two Blanchot articles, the one of 1932 and that of 1946. But a first, decisive one, is that Blanchot never reprinted the former. As with all his production of the 1930s, he did not let it cross the frontier, Mallarméan if anything, that separates the newspaper from the Book. A second difference—which is clearly one of the explanations of the first—is that the nationalist inspiration, from which the Curtius article drew its animus, has disappeared from the postwar article (as it has in the other, later articles in which, at regular intervals, Blanchot revisits the link between literature and translation).⁵

This question of nationalism leads me to conclude on a slightly more political note. I did not choose to comment on this 1932 article by Blanchot simply, for positive reasons, because of its brilliant and paradoxical exaltation of classical obscurity. I chose it also for negative ones, because of the way it rings a xenophobic tone that manifests itself, mostly and most unpleasantly, in the violent segregation of the two obscurities, the two types of strangeness, that of the inside and that of the outside. The paradoxical result of which being that one ends up not needing translation to experience linguistic otherness: literature is enough for it.

I do not intend to enter the specifics of Blanchot's extreme rightist positions in the political and diplomatic landscape of the French thirties. I would just like to emphasize the almost palinodic reversal his 1947 posture represents, at least with regard to the limited, but potentially momentous point on which my presentation has focused. For Blanchot, now, identifies literature with the very merger between strangeness and foreignness that it was previously supposed to protect against. How can we account for such an about-face? I would like to suggest that the unblocking of his 1932 aggressive (or defensive) paralysis might be fairly adequately explained by the deletion of the nationalist reference from his mainframe. Between 1932 and 1947, Blanchot has denationalized literature's secret code, deterritorialized the motive of literature as secret society.

And so to give this deletion of the national referent a geopolitical background and conclude on a note that is at the same time more local and more welcoming, I will focus on one last difference: Blanchot's 1932 article had intervened in the scene, more strained than ever, of Franco-German relations; the second one changed continents, addressing American literature at a time when, for France and for Europe, the United States was euphorically associated with the end of World War II and Liberation. It would be erroneous, however, to see the U.S. here as simply inheriting the place of the significant other previously occupied by Germany. For, if one can speak of a succession, it is one that entails an important alteration in the topography of otherness.

While the century-long state of chronic tension between France and Germany was fueled by the physical difficulties of having to "share" a border, geography spared France and the United States the pathology of ingrained border incidents (this, of course, does not preclude a pathology of the opposite type, one linked to an experience of otherness without contact). They belong to different continents and, in order to move from one to the other, what is required is something more—and more inventive, more risky—than a step (it is no longer a question of transgressing a border). Intercontinental translation requires different technologies, different mediums, beyond the poetics of earth. One has to leap or jump into lighter, less supportive fluids, such as water or air.

Notes

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² In this regard, it would be interesting to confront the anti-transparency stand defended by Blanchot in this early article with Bourdieu's criticism of the ideology of communication in his recent best-seller *Sur la télévision* and with the way he anticipates and discards the objection of Platonician aristocratism (30).

³ Compare to Bourdieu's attack against the submission of cultural judgments ("la production et la diffusion des créations les plus hautes de l'humanité") to the market economy—even though he refuses to identify it as the "suffrage universel" (78).

⁴ See the last page of Valéry's 1929 "Propos sur le progrès," devoted to the status of light in modern physics: "La voici devenue la première

énigme du monde"; and, thus, it is responsible for the trial "qu'intente [...] l'inintelligible à l'intelligible."

⁵ Such as "Traduire" (about Walter Benjamin). Blanchot does not pay any attention to the question of empirical linguistic foreignness.

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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*

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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

