

Prolegomenon to Poetics : Deconstruction, Translation, and *Écriture féminine*

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Deconstructionists contend that there exist many codes upon which the reader relies during the reading of the literary text, and that the understanding obtained from these codes seems definitive but is, in fact, subject to future interpretation. In other words, they argue that there exists no criterion or system of reference to guide the reading of the literary text, that the procedure is an arbitrary judgment-call based not upon an *a priori* understanding but rather upon an *a posteriori* interpretation. The implication of this upon translation is staggering; if the reader does not know how to read the literary text, how is the translator supposed to translate it? Apparently, translation presupposes an understanding not only of the literary text but also of translation itself.

Derrida gleefully deconstructs these presuppositions when he asks how plurality or, in his terminology, *différance*, is rendered in translation. He answers his own question by stating that the literary text *commands* to be read, deciphered, and translated, because it contains its own possibilities (228). Moreover, he contends that the translation of the literary text is, at best, an anticipation, a prophetic announcement, and an affirmation of what is not translated (230).

Obviously, *différance* is nothing new for the translator. Perfect examples appear in such texts as the *Socratic Dialogues* and *Finnegan's Wake*, most noticeably in Plato's use of the term *pharmakon* and Joyce's use of the term *war*. Barbara Johnson takes into consideration the problems *différance* poses for the translation of the literary text when she states that,

If the original text is already a translatory battle in which what is being translated is ultimately the very impossibility of translation, then peacemaking gestures such as scrupulous adherence to the signifier are just as unfaithful to the energy of the conflict as the tyranny of the swell-footed signified (147).

If women's writing, specifically literary texts that constitute the body of what is generally considered *écriture féminine*, distinguishes itself from traditional forms of writing, it seems reasonable to assume that theories and methods of

translation for it distinguish themselves from other theories and methods of translation. Because *écriture féminine* strives to comprise a new language and compose a new literature, no literary criteria exist by which these texts can be read, understood, or translated. Accordingly, the problems that *différance* poses for their translation are unique.

One such problem is the categorization of genre, as a brief consideration of Irigary's *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* suggests. The various sections of this text can be read as psychological analyses, poems to a lover, social manifestos, and philosophical treatises. Moreover, the abrupt change in voices in each section suggests the absence of any overall categorization by genre. This is a serious problem because genre forces expectations on the part of the reader by which he or she is able to respond to the text.

The absence of genre is one of many problems the reader and translator of *écriture féminine* must confront. Whereas a translation of *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* must take into account the abrupt change in voices and the absence of an overall genre, a translation of Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* must take into account an intrinsic bond between writer, body and text. Here, more than twenty pages list the various parts of the female body, creating a text that is purely autobiographical in the sense that it unites the concepts "auto" ("self"), "bio" ("body") and "graphy" ("writing"). In other words, Wittig creates a corpus that is a body of the text and a text of the body. The translation of such an autobiography, as a writing twice removed (and in this case, from the female body), must be rendered in such a way that the bond between writer, body and text remains unbroken. If not, the autobiography axiomatically becomes a biography, the writing of the body by *another*.

Texts of *écriture féminine* exhibit codes of *différance* not only in genre but also in language. They often reject traditional semantic and linguistic codes such as rhetoric (rhyme and metaphor) and grammatical constructs (subject-verb agreement and subordinating conjunctions), and replace them with codes of *différance*. For example, the recurrent use of the term *lierre* (traditionally translated as *ivy*), as it appears throughout Cixous's *Tombe*, opens itself to such connotations as *l'hier* (yesterday) and *lit/erre* (bed/wander). These connotations enrich the text, adding texture to the themes of mortality (seen in the title), of sexual desire, and of fidelity. Similarly, the recurrent use of the term *amante* (lover) suggests *lamentation* and *testament*, the two principles of creation for *Tombe*.

It is through such codes of *différance* that texts of *écriture féminine* explore the possibilities of female sexuality and expression, of what Carolyn Burke refers to as "the senses and sense", and render a language and literature multiple in

meanings (Higgins, 13). In this way, texts of *écriture féminine* create themselves anew with each reading, affirming a principle of creation through their codes of *différance*.

However, it is this same principle that causes what initially appear to be insurmountable problems for the translator. Translation implies closure, and closure precludes codes of *différance*. Because translation forces a definitive reading affixed to the literary text, such expressions as *lierre* and *amante* as well as the concept *autobiography* cannot be rendered in translation without difficulty. In other words, the possibilities of *différance* become threatened when texts of *écriture féminine* are shackled in definitive meaning.

There are several options available to translators. They can decide that such texts are "untranslatable", and resign themselves to rendering literal translations, attempting quasi-effective, conciliatory compensations for the loss of *différance* through such devices as the use of footnotes. On the other hand, they can attempt translations that are personal responses to the texts and are expressions of *écriture féminine* in their own right. Such translations would not be *repetitions as copies of originals* but rather *re-petitions as askings-again*. They would be the product of an interrogative process in which translators address not only the texts but also themselves.

If the process of translation for texts of *écriture féminine* is based upon a process of interrogation, translators must place the texts within their own literary tradition and poetic comprehension, asking questions of the texts and of themselves. In this way, the *différance* of texts and of translations becomes one, binding the process in unending creation. The final result is that the questions and answers constantly change, whereas the *différance* of the texts and of their translations remains the same.

Because the *différance* of the texts and of their translations remains the same, the principle of openness is affirmed. Accordingly, no translation of *écriture féminine* can be considered definitive or final. The process of interrogation is open-ended, allowing the reader and translator to create a language and literature which remain open, created through and self-creating in *différance*. Even the theory of translation suggested here cannot be considered definitive or final; the discourse of translation theory is similar to the discourse of *écriture féminine*, because both affirm the open-ended possibilities of creativity and expression. The *différance* of *écriture féminine* is created anew in translation and also in theory of translation.

Works Cited

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