

# **Responding to the Enigmatic Address of the Other: A Psychoanalytical Approach to the Translator's Labour**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to begin to tease out what it means to pay attention to the affective dimensions of the translator's labour in contemporary literary translation practices. Drawing from Jean Laplanche's theory of the formation/transmission of the unconscious as a "drive to translate" triggered by the intimate dynamics of "primal seduction", the article seeks to foreground the affective and unconscious components at play in the translation process, and argues for re-articulating the question of fidelity in translation not in terms of equivalence, but in terms of the translator's response-ability towards what Laplanche calls the "enigmatic message" present in the text of the other. The article further explores how this approach can help us read the "singularities" of translators' choices in relation to the historically situated generic constraints of translation as a practice of rewriting. Specifically, it does so by looking at a Canadian feminist experiment in collaborative translation first published in 1989, which productively incorporated the question of affect and of the unconscious in translation, and in doing so also creatively modified the gendered libidinal economies of translation practice.

**KEYWORDS:** affect, enigmatic message, feminist translation, Jean Laplanche, psychoanalysis, translator's singularities.

## **Approaching the Unconscious in Translation Studies: Present Limitations and Openings**

That translation needs to be understood as a social practice of cultural production, which does not just neutrally transmit meanings between cultures but crucially contributes to building them and shaping their reciprocal boundaries, has been a tenet of translation studies at least since its so called 'cultural turn' at the beginning of the 1990s (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990). The widespread acceptance of the idea that translation really consists of what Derrida (2002:20) calls "a regulated transformation of one language into another" has shifted our critical attention from the *pre-scriptive* application of a-historical and universalizing assumptions about linguistic transfer, to the *de-scriptive* scrutiny of the socio-historical and geopolitical conditions that make such assumptions possible in the first place, thus showing how translation is a historically and geographically diversified cultural practice, whose enabling norms and procedures are embedded within specific symbolic economies and social power dynamics.

Over the past twenty years, feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist scholars have thoroughly demonstrated how the history of translation theory and practice has been articulated within a Western transcendental paradigm of (phallic) logocentrism, which has governed both the metaphors of gender hierarchies in translation – i. e. the feminization of translation as a subordinate practice of cultural reproduction meant to transparently and 'faithfully' convey the original (Chamberlain, 1992; Simon, 1996; Von Flotow, 1997) –, and the colonial inflection of its

civilizational discourse – i.e. translation as a tool for both the colonial production of knowledge about ‘inferior’ and ‘exotic’ cultures, and the force-feeding of those same cultures with ‘Western’ knowledge (Niranjana 1992; Cheyfitz 1997; Bassnett and Trivedi 1999). These theoretical and historical inquiries have certainly contributed to a reconsideration of translation as an intercultural practice of *re-writing*, and have made possible an unprecedented foregrounding of the socio-symbolic role played by translators in the process. However, within this paradigm shift, scholars have had a tendency to configure the translator either as a fully conscious agent of cultural change and/or resistance, or as a fully subjugated subject – frequently little more than a discursive effect of the many forces (patronage, the culture industry, the geopolitical relations between languages, among others) that constrain his/her work’s access to social intelligibility and to institutional and economic recognition.

On the other hand, little attention has been paid to more elusive aspects of translation, aspects which pertain to the translator’s affective engagement with the source text, and which call unconscious dynamics into play. This is partly the effect of a methodological approach that privileges an analysis of the end product of the translation process – the translated text – rather than the actuality of the translator’s labour, the vicissitudes of his/her engagement with the source text, and thus the intersubjective and procedural dynamics of translation itself. Furthermore, in studies that do focus on the translation process – generally in the area of technical, rather than literary, translation – the translator tends to be configured as a fully conscious and rational subject, a “problem-solver” (Hatim and Mason, 1990:3) whose choices depend on ‘objective’ analytical, discursive and cultural competences, and thus fall entirely within the bounds of cognitive mastery.

Despite the difference, then, both in focus and methodology, between scholars working in literary and cultural studies and scholars working in technical translation, both share a general reluctance to pay attention to aspects of the translator’s labour that fall beyond the purview of an exclusively *cognitive* and *discursive* framework of analysis. However understandable, this reluctance has had the negative effect of minimizing the role that *unconscious* and *affective* dynamics play in the practice of translation, and it is my argument here that this minimization is counterproductive if we are committed to account for the full complexity of the *embodied* dimension of the translator’s labour. Indeed, regardless of the number of more or less computerized aids a translator can have at her/his disposal, at the core of his/her work is a form of engagement – a “corps-à-corps” the French would say – with the otherness of the source text, which necessarily involves her/his *desiring self* as much as her/his *cognitive self*. And if, as many cultural theorists suggest, we understand the dynamics of desire and of the unconscious as constituting a crucial component of ideological formations, paying attention to these aspects in translation becomes of crucial importance.

In this paper I suggest that a careful psychoanalytical exploration of the role played by unconscious dynamics in the translator’s labour can help us shed some light on the *libidinal economies* of translation. It is my contention in fact that a psychoanalytical approach can not only illuminate some of the core psychic dynamics of the translator’s labour, but that it might also contribute to the implementation of more open-ended translation practices, where the complex interdependence between the translator’s subjectivity and other socio-symbolic constraints informing her/his work are more fully accounted for – and hopefully better recognized socially.

After presenting a brief overview of what translators themselves have to say about their craft, my analysis will turn to the work of Jean Laplanche, a psychoanalyst whose original articulation of the question of translation in relation to the unconscious offers helpful insights into the psychic dynamics informing the practice of translation. The final section of this paper will further probe the validity of articulating Laplanche's framework in relation to differentiated translation practices. In particular I will look at how feminist translation practices carried out in Canada in the 1980s offer a fertile ground for analyzing the socio-symbolic implications of the translator's affective engagement with the text of the other. My textual analysis will specifically concentrate on a collaborative experiment in feminist translation carried out in 1989 on the pages of the bilingual Canadian journal *Tessera* – a journal notable for having promoted a distinctive translation poetics both in Canada and internationally.

### **“The most intimate act of reading”**

There is a striking common theme underlying many literary translators' self-reflexive accounts of their own work. All seem to understand the translator's craft as involving a unique form of *intimacy* with the other. “The most intimate act of reading” is Gayatri Spivak's (1993:183) definition of translation, and she goes as far as to suggest that one should not translate until she/he feels comfortable enough to talk about “intimate things” in the language of the other (ibid). Translator David Macey (2001:4, 7) talks about the process of translating as “an intimacy bordering on the erotic”. American translator Carol Maier (2002) further confirms the importance of libidinally charged dynamics in translation in her dramatic account of the vicissitudes experienced when translating Cuban poet Armand. Maier interestingly frames her work in terms of an ambivalent love-hate relationship with the texts of her author, and her narrative is threaded with the language of affective intimacy, including moments of intense “attraction” 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. What do we make then, of this emphasis on intimacy and ambivalence in translation?

As the examples above briefly suggest, translators<sup>1</sup>, far from understanding their craft exclusively in terms of objective linguistic and cultural competence, situate the core processes of their work at a level of perception that precedes cognitive apprehension and is not necessarily conscious. More specifically, this level seems invariably to touch that sphere of inter-subjective communication that is directly connected to affect<sup>2</sup> and the unconscious: the sphere of sexuality.

Of course, in the West translation has a strong tradition of being conceptualized in terms of sexuality, whether it is George Steiner's (1975) pervasive use of (hetero)sexual metaphors in his description of the hermeneutics of translation, or more recent feminist ‘orgasmic’ theories of translation (Arrojo 1995). It is surprising to notice, however, how this tradition has inspired so few researchers<sup>3</sup> to pursue a psychoanalytical approach to translation, particularly if we consider that psychoanalysis offers important insights into the question of how sexuality affects and shapes human cultural practices. The following considerations, then, seek to improve this scanty research record<sup>4</sup>, and offer one specific psychoanalytical approach to the issue of translation, and particularly to the question of the intimate dynamics of reading/writing the other that come into play in the translator's labour.

## Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Unconscious

In order to examine the question of intimacy raised by so many literary translators, I propose here that we think of the “scene” of translation – that is, the scene of the translator sitting at his/her desk and reading through the text of the other – as a scene of seduction. This is not a particularly far-fetched analogy if we consider that literary theorists have long understood the reader’s affective engagement with the literary text in terms of seduction (see De Lauretis 1984), and that the translator is first and foremost a reader. Here however, I do not refer to a common sense notion of seduction, but to the analytical theory of the psychic dynamics of seduction proposed almost two decades ago by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche.

A student of Lacan and a careful reader of Freud, Jean Laplanche’s work is potentially relevant to the field of translation studies because he is among the few psychoanalysts to use translation as a crucial category of analysis. Furthermore, the connections he draws between seduction, translation and the unconscious are specifically relevant to the analysis pursued in this paper. Laplanche, in fact, interestingly places the question of translation within the framework of a general theory of seduction, which he posits as the “universal and originary situation . . . at the basis of the interhuman relation” (Laplanche 1992:175). This situation, whose “prototype is furnished by the adult-infant couple,” is characterized by a constitutive a-symmetry of exchange, and the psychic dynamics instantiated thereby have for Laplanche a crucial structuring role with regard to the intersubjective cultural transmission of the unconscious and its initial formation in the child. Translation comes into play precisely at this juncture. In the situation of seduction in fact, the

infant is confronted by an adult world which from the beginning sends him messages, suffused with sexual meanings, unconscious meanings, which are unconscious for the transmitter of the message himself [sic]<sup>5</sup>; messages perceived to be as enigmatic, that is as ‘to be translated’ [à traduire].<sup>6</sup> (Laplanche 1992:175)

Laplanche understands the unconscious *through* the lens of translation, which in turn is understood in dynamic terms, as a primary rather than derivative mechanism of semiosis, mediating not so much between languages, but between the unknown and the known, between language/s and the untranslated/untranslatable at play within it/them (cf. Laplanche 1992:203-204). Translation for Laplanche is inherently connected to the analytical concept of the “drive” (*pulsion de traduction* is Laplanche’s French translation of Freud’s “*Trieb zur Übersetzung*”), conceived of as a force that impels the subject, pushes him/her from within and can make its presence manifest through the subject’s choices, behaviours and symptoms.

The situation of seduction is what prompts the “implantation” – or, subsequently, the re-activation – of this drive to translate in the subject. In seduction the enigmatic message of the adult is unwittingly “implanted” in the child before s/he can make any sense of it. Laplanche draws on an early Freudian understanding of repression as a “failure of translation” in order to articulate the dynamic ‘implantation’ of the enigmatic signifier in the subject.<sup>7</sup> The enigmatic address is initially repressed in the sense that the child cannot immediately “translate” its signifiers by integrating them into / within(?) a significant context. It thus becomes 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 should be easy now to see where I'm leading: indeed one such scene of seduction with the capacity to trigger the subject's internal other (one's own "à traduire") is the scene of translation itself, the scene, that is, of radical intimacy with the other, described by translators as a crucial moment in their work.

Laplanche's configuration of the unconscious as an "à traduire", which is the effect of the asymmetrical exchange of seduction, is then of great relevance for our analysis of the translator's affective dynamics, and also potentially for understanding the singularity of his/her choices. We can in fact argue that the translator's peculiar intimacy with the text of the other structurally parallels this Laplanchian primal scene of seduction and therefore 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."

Two of Laplanche's major systemic considerations can be fruitfully applied to interlingual translation:

- For Laplanche the triggering of the subject's unconscious "à traduire" is prompted by an intersubjective situation of a-symmetrical exchange governed by the enigmatic message of the other. We should note here the emphasis both on the asymmetrical nature of the situation of seduction, and on the driving presence of an irreducible otherness traversing its communicative exchange – an otherness that pertains both to the sender and to the receiver of the enigmatic message, both to the author's text and to the translator's text-to-be.
- The triggering of the unconscious "à traduire", and the subject's eventual capacity to relate to its internal otherness, is characterized by movements of temporal *delay* and delayed apprehension, whereby the triggering force of the initial enigmatic address only becomes visible (and retrospectively attributed) through a second event that inadvertently *repeats* it and/or re-evokes it for the subject. This is the complex temporal spacing proper to trauma, which Freud identified as *Nachträglichkeit*, and Laplanche translates into English as *afterwardsness* ["après-coup"]<sup>8</sup>, and whose main mode of manifestation is repetition.

In the analytical scenario the dynamic of *afterwardsness* is conjured by the relation of transference between analyst and analysand. This relation repeats in a new context the situation of primal seduction, the analyst's words triggering in the analysand the actualization of her/his own unconscious "à traduire." The analysand is thus compelled to engage in a complex and repetitive work of de-translation of inadequate meanings already given to the internalized enigmatic "à traduire", and to eventually produce a re-translation which integrates into new significance previously repressed and "untranslatable" enigmatic signifiers present in the drive. Thus, the process of 'working-through' (which is the principal aim of analysis) comes to be configured by Laplanche as a work of translation whose temporal vectors move both towards the past (in order to undo or 'de-translate' previously repressed signifiers that could not find an adequate translation), and towards the future, in order "to allow the field to open up for a new and more inclusive translation" (Laplanche 1992:212).

These two Laplanchian points about the presence of an enigmatic unconscious address in the a-symmetrical exchange of seduction (an address which *demands* translation), and about the capacity of this address to trigger the subject's own "à traduire" through the complex temporality of afterwardsness, can be made relevant to our analysis of interlingual literary translation.

First, Laplanche's emphasis on the a-symmetrical nature of seduction and on the presence of an irreducible otherness traversing its communicative exchange can be productively mapped onto the experience of the interlingual translator. In fact there is a strong advantage to articulating the translator's relation to the source text as an a-symmetrical exchange governed by the triggering impact of the enigmatic address of the other. This articulation allows us to undo the unity and self-sameness of the 'source' text, while at the same time acknowledging its necessary chronological and symbolic anteriority. This is an important step towards negotiating what in the past ten years has been a de-facto juxtaposition between scholars (post-structuralist for the most part) who insist on translation as a radical practice of constant re-writing, but overlook the issue of the symbolic and temporal *anteriority* of the source text (see Gentzler 2002), and scholars who continue to produce analyses of translations which unwittingly rely on the assumption of the unity and stability of the "original", despite all theoretical claims to the contrary.

Second, Laplanche's insistence on the triggering effects of the enigmatic message on the subject's own unconscious can also produce some interesting theoretical and analytical openings when mapped onto the processes of interlingual translation. First of all, acknowledging that the enigmatic message of the source text has a capacity to impact the translator's own internal "à traduire" might allow us to pay closer attention to otherwise unexplained peculiarities at work in translators' choices – what Maria Paula Frota calls "singularities," i.e. "subjective verbal choices" that can strike a reader as odd, but which escape "dichotomies so as to be neither correct nor incorrect" (Frota 2004:9-10). Frota shows that these singularities can appear both amongst student translators and amongst professionals, and suggests that the introduction of a methodic probing of their significance could contribute to a better understanding – and perhaps loosening – of the complex interactions between processes of linguistic normativization and creative variation in interlingual translation practices.<sup>9</sup> For example, the introduction of Think Aloud Protocols that make use of the psychoanalytic method of free association can offer both trainers and trainees a glimpse into the affective dimensions of certain word choices and/or syntactical constructs, possibly allowing the teacher to become more aware of the normative impulses at play in the pedagogical relation with her/his students.<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Venuti's recent work (2002) offers a further example of how a methodic psychoanalytic probing of translators' singularities can yield very fruitful insights into the relation between desire and ideology in literary translation.

Apart from these productive applications, however, we should note the strong epistemic consequences that can derive from an acknowledgement of the presence of the unconscious and of the complex temporality of 'afterwardsness' in the translation process. Such an acknowledgment can, in fact, push us to move *behind* the discursive analysis of power relations in translation, and pay closer attention to the libidinal economies sustaining and/or contesting them. Paying attention to these aspects means also probing in greater detail how the unconscious in/of translation comes to be grafted onto wider socio-symbolic economies of cultural production. The following pages attempt to analyze some methodological issues related precisely to this 'grafting'.

## Approaching the Enigmatic Message

There is no question that a psychoanalytical approach to translation forces us to look at those messy and ambivalent aspects of the process that resist any clear-cut categorization, and it is probably an uncomfortable awareness of this ambivalence and messiness that makes researchers resistant towards applying psychoanalysis to translation studies. Given these premises, it becomes necessary to ask a few pointed questions about the epistemic status of the enigmatic message and its role in interlingual translation, so as to at least clear some important methodological ground. The first set of questions then would be: Given its elusive nature, how can a text's 'enigmatic message' actually be identified? And how exactly should we conceive of it? Should we understand it as containing a core of retrievable repressed signifieds, which the "author" unwittingly passes on in his/her text? Or should we rather understand it as a kernel of potential semiosis that insists at the threshold of "proper" linguistic semiosis (whatever historical language it might manifest itself in), and has the capacity to incite both the work of the author and of his/her translator, but can never be fully uncovered?

Laplanche's privileging of the "letter" over "meaning" in the unconscious (see Fletcher 1992:112) leads us to favour the second answer. This is confirmed by his further articulation of the work of analysis not in terms of a "translation of a translation, e.g. [a] pursuit of 'determinate contents . . . which ultimately can be tracked down,'" but in terms of a "de-translation, a work of dismantling and unbinding existing translations" (ibid:116). To clarify this point, Laplanche draws an explicit analogy with the field of interlingual translation, and makes reference to the work of André Chouraqui, the French translator of the New Testament, a text for which only the Greek version exists. As Fletcher puts it in his introduction to Laplanche's theories, "Chouraqui translates [the New Testament], not on the supposition of a missing Hebrew ur-text, but on the hypothesis that the authors of the New Testament were immersed in the language worlds of Hebrew and Aramaic" (ibid: 117). For Laplanche, Chouraqui's translation does not aim to recover a supposedly fully formed Hebrew original lying "under" the Greek version, but aims at de-translating "certain points, words, specific inscriptions," which through "homonyms, rhymes and resonances" can release connections with the Hebrew or the Aramaic – that is, it can offer pathways into the "à traduire" of the "original" Greek text. The enigmatic message at play in the source text should thus not be conceived as a "fully formed ur-text that could function as a ground or indisputable origin," but as a fragmentary and fragmented "sub-text, haunting and structuring the signifying chain as an absence" (ibid).

Indeed, the presence of a demanding absence or opacity at work within the language of the source text is what translators frequently point out as the most challenging and inciting aspect of their work. Italian translator Marina Camboni (2002), referring to Adrienne Rich's poems, evocatively identifies this demanding absence as the text's "energy" – an "energy", she says in an astonishingly Laplanchian description of the seductive dynamics of translation, "that the poems passed on to me and became mine through the simple act of reading, of letting it run through my body and my mind . . . . It was there and then," she continues, "that I decided to translate."

Camboni's observations lead us to a second set of issues: How does the translator deal with the unconscious material triggered by the impact of the enigmatic message of the other when the

time comes to re-produce the other's words in her own language? Can we trace, even partially, how the socio-symbolic constraints of translation affect the ways in which the translator negotiates his/her own "à traduire" in relation to the perceived "à traduire" in the text of the other? What kinds of reciprocal imbrications are at work between the libidinal economies of translation practice and the differentiated socio-symbolic constraints of translation as a genre of writing?

Although they necessarily gesture towards the unique contingencies of the individual translator's encounter with the individual text, these questions nonetheless pose a theoretical (and political) problem that impinges on the socio-symbolic regulation of translation as a practice of re-writing. No matter how broadly defined, the specific re-writing of translation – Macey (2000:8) calls it an "almost-writing" – is necessarily predicated on a regulated relation of fidelity between texts. It is the idea that we can always compare a source text to its transformation in another language that traces the outer boundaries of the translator's task, and necessarily *constrains* his/her desire to re-write with full "authorial authority", so to speak.

We cannot assume that this *generic*<sup>11</sup> constraint of fidelity in translation is a straightforward matter, and that it does not impact how the translator unconsciously negotiates her position in relation to the source text. Indeed, translators' accounts show that their (still dominant) socio-symbolic status as "almost-writers" can produce conflicting affective reactions, and that the substance of their unconscious reckoning with the text of the other is imbued with mechanisms of identification, transference and counter-transference, which become available to consciousness only belatedly and through repetition. The translators I've mentioned earlier in this paper testify to this movement of belated awareness by making reference to their obsessive return to particular clusters of words and figures whose problematic status has nothing to do with objective knowledge or cultural competence, but with the fact that they trigger the translators' *affect* in unforeseen ways. I suggest that we understand these dynamics as a mode of "iterative reworking" (Benjamin 2001:45) of the traumatic impact of the enigmatic message of the other in translation. The trauma pertains precisely to the capacity of the text of the other to "provoke the otherness in the subject of the translator" (Bush 1997:15), and thus call into play a complex temporality eventually bound to release the subject's own "à traduire."

Peter Bush echoes these considerations when he observes that the translator's engagement with the source text throws into necessary relief the tension between the opaque and nontransparent moments of the other's text and the host of "memories, emotions, scraps of language . . . private and unique resonances" that are triggered in the translator by his/her reading experience (ibid:14). Bush goes on to argue that these "private resonances" constitute the "lateral lever for meaning and a source of potential language" (ibid:15), which the translator will make use of in the process of re-writing. He rightly points out that this process works "at a level not entirely under the control of institutionalized discourse, [and] releases ingredients from the subconscious magma of language and experience" (ibid).

Bush's observations converge with what I am suggesting, and also indirectly point out the close interdependence between libidinal and political economies of translation, in that the possibility of releasing (or repressing) the "subconscious magma of language" will necessarily depend on the kinds of socio-symbolic configurations of translation's generic imperative to fidelity. Presently, despite decades of translators' struggles for symbolic recognition as independent and non-

subordinate cultural producers, the transnational industry of literary translation continues to reproduce a symbolic hierarchy between author and translator, and to reinforce the stereotypical image of the translator as a neutral and invisible conduit for the author's "original" message in another language, and it does so specifically through mechanisms of literary consecration and marketing.<sup>12</sup> We cannot expect these wider economies at work in the culture industry not to impact the translator's own process, and I believe it is important for researchers to probe into, and become more aware of the kind of affective costs attached to them.

My proposal to think translation through Laplanche's framework gestures precisely in this direction. Specifically, this is a framework that can allow us to move away from debates on "equivalence" in translation,<sup>13</sup> and to think about the constraints of fidelity within the framework of an intersubjective model of communicative exchange, whereby the *driving* presence of the *otherness* of the unconscious is acknowledged. Thus, leaving equivalence aside, we can begin to articulate the question of fidelity in terms of the translator's "response-ability"<sup>14</sup> towards the otherness in the self, triggered by the impact of the otherness at play in the text of the other – its enigmatic address. This proposal echoes Spivak's (2003:13) call for a practice of "ethical semiosis" in translation, where what is at stake is a "responsibility to the trace of the other in the self" (Spivak 1993:179), which aims not simply "to transcode, but to draw a response" (Spivak, 2003:13). Besides constituting a call for implementing more open-ended practices of translation, these considerations are also meant to encourage scholars to valorize, pedagogically, theoretically, *and* politically, past and recent practices of literary translation which self-reflexively foreground the unconscious and desire as constitutive ingredients of translation. The last section of this paper will explore precisely one such self-reflexive practice, specifically a feminist one, with the double aim, on the one hand, of showing a potential application of the Laplanchian approach exposed above, and, on the other, of highlighting the crucial political role that feminist experimental translation has played in questioning and modifying the gendered economies of *affect* regulating translation practice.

## Response-ability in Translation: A Canadian Feminist Experiment

The text I present is a multi-authored collaborative text entitled "Vers-ions Con-verse" (Godard et al.: 1994)<sup>15</sup>. It was first published in Canada in 1989 in the bilingual journal *Tessera*, at the peak of a period of intense cross-cultural dialogue and creative experimentation between Francophone and Anglophone Canadian feminist writers and translators, particularly on the issue of rearticulating women's symbolic position within and across different cultural and linguistic boundaries. Translation in this context became a crucial poetic tool for an affirmative deconstruction of patriarchal structures – a tool whose efficacy hinged on the inscription of the female desiring subject across language(s), and thus on a radical questioning and modification of the libidinal economies of phallogentric culture. "Vers-ions Con-verse" is a thorough example of this orientation in translation practice, and of its accompanying capacity to render visible, and to modify, the affective dimensions of the translator's labour. My analysis seeks to highlight, precisely, the affective aspects of this practice, both in relation to the 'singularities' (in Frota's sense) of each translator's engagement with the enigmatic address present in the text of the other (woman), and in relation to the practice's own wider political and theoretical aims.

“Vers-ions Con-verse” is a sequence of English translations of a French poem by Lola Lemire Tostevin written by the members of *Tessera*’s editorial collective (Barbara Godard, Susan Knutson, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei, Gail Scott). Tostevin’s short poem is taken from a bilingual (French and English) collection of poems entitled *’sophie* (1988). In line with the feminist debate of the period, the book tackles the issue of how the feminine may be inscribed in Western philosophical discourse away from the binarized hierarchies that have constituted its operative paradigm for centuries (mind versus body, rationality versus affect, etc.). Tostevin engages with this question through a playful and interrogative inscription of the feminine as the muted other, the underside of Western philosophy. Thus the title of the collection, *’sophie*, plays on feminizing the ‘proper’ disembodied name of “Philosophy” into the non-capitalized feminine proper name of “sophie”, which in turn playfully absents the master gaze of the masculine “Phil” through a revealing apostrophe: *’sophie*.

“Vers-ions Con-verse” can be read as a feminist collaborative meditation on the issues explored by Tostevin through a “response-able” practice of translation. The English translations of Tostevin’s poem are ordered in random sequence, and each of them is accompanied by a brief commentary, where the translator explains her own working process and decisions. All translations, as expected, provide English variations on Tostevin’s text, which both hark back to the polysemic condensations of the French poem, and produce differentiated effects in English. This brief description already signals how the very structure of this text, with its sequential ordering of multiple translations, each accompanied by a translator’s brief self-reflexive commentary, draws the reader’s attention precisely to those messy intimate moments of the translation process, which we are rarely, if ever, given access to in the dominant commercial machine of literary translation. A more detailed analysis of this piece will further explore how the translators make visible the ongoing presence of an “à traduire” between the lines of the poem and their own texts. Here is Tostevin’s poem:

espaces vers vers où?  
vers quoi  
cette rupture qui donne lieu à une syntaxe  
qui se veut peau sur laquelle se trace un  
autre sens (une sensation)  
  
à travers le silence (les pulses travaillent en silence)  
l’organisme se renseigne sur ses éléments extérieurs  
(tes yeux ta voix tes mains) la mémoire d’un toucher  
où s’inscrit l’au-delà d’une langue tout en insérant  
de nouveaux fragments oreilles neuves pour une musique  
nouvelle

The poem constitutes a complex attempt to articulate bodily intensities of perception through a language no longer bound by the traditional mind-body split of Western discourse. Inaugurating this attempt is a “rupture” that gives way to a “syntax” seeking to explore unknown spaces (“espaces”) of the signifying body, which becomes here an oriented surface of potential semiosis. A synaesthesia of touch, vision and sound conveys the fractured image of a body reaching out towards the memory of the “éléments extérieurs” [the exterior elements] of an addressed ‘you’ (“tes yeux ta voix tes mains” [your eyes your voice your hands]). The presence of this intimate addressee, staged in brackets in a text that has no apparent subject of enunciation<sup>16</sup>, signals the implanted space of the text’s own otherness, its *enigmatic message* inscribed in the “memory of

touch” propelling the poem’s quest for a renewed, more sensually integrated, cultural semiosis: “oreilles neuves pour une musique nouvelle” [new ears for a new music]. Read in this light the interrogative sentence opening the first line becomes the poem’s initial articulation of its own response to the enigma of the other. The poem’s opening question in fact not only proleptically positions the rest of the poem as a possible answer, but also constitutes, in its opaque polysemy, an *enigmatic address* for the reader/translator, here called to bear witness to the poem’s own grappling with the irreducible figure of that which propels its quest, an inaugural “rupture” leading both *back* and *out* towards an *other* – *back* towards the poem’s bracketed addressee “you”, and *out* towards the reader.

Indeed, each of the translator’s commentaries testifies to a certain awareness of the double trajectory of address inscribed in this enigmatic “rupture”. And each translator tells of her struggles with how to “responsibly” respond to it. Each commentary in fact foregrounds in its own singular way how the *affective* charge awakened by the poem’s enigmatic address is inextricably embedded in the translator’s conscious choices, and shapes the narrative of her work as a complex dialogic response steeped in repetition, and a back and forth movement between a symbolically determined commitment to convey an equivalent of the source text, and an initially unconscious drive towards inserting in the text visible traces of the translator’s own “à traduire”. Significantly, all the narratives testify to the seductive intimacy of translation, and in different ways testify to its complex temporality of “afterwardsness”. Each translator in fact emphasizes a complex temporal relation between the impact of the poem and the awareness of what drew her to specific verbal choices. Actually, the translator’s choices are not exactly “choices”, in the sense of willfully and actively sought decision processes. These choices do not come from a space of conscious will, but tend to ‘happen’ in moments of *affectively* charged attention, which precede, and to some extent displace, the translator’s conscious desire for mastery over semantic effects. More significantly, each translator gestures to one – or two at the most – crucial signifier(s), functioning as catalyst(s) for the translation as a whole. Following Frota (2004) I suggest that we consider these particular signifiers as the translator’s “singularities”, which signal the translator’s “à traduire” at play between the lines.

For Susan Knutson, the first translator,

translation – once it is pinned down to a particular set of choices – will always leave a record of misreadings which are more or less accidental. I say “more or less” because I tend to err in the direction of meanings I desire. (Godard et al., 1994:154)

Knutson finds it “embarrassing” to avow this tendency, signaling thus through her embarrassment the complex affective posture engendered by the potentially conflictual relation between desire and the constraint of fidelity in translation. Knutson recounts: “reading the first line of this poem, I thought about green, and also, eventually, about earthworms” (ibid). She then continues to write about her change of mind and her realization that a different translation would have been more appropriate. However when she comes “back to the line, [she] write[s] without hesitation, ‘green spaces tending to what / or where?’” (ibid). This choice signals how the aural resonance of “vers” (in French “vers” is pronounced exactly like “vert”, “green”, and “ver”, “worm”) had affective precedence over its semantic valence, a precedence that could only partially be resisted (in that she playfully left out “the earthworms”).

The second translator in the sequence, Kathy Mezei, finds herself instead being intrigued by “watching Lola [Lemire Tostevin] . . . seeking out her own *langue*” (ibid:155) and yet at the same time she avows: “*I can’t help myself* but my voice *insinuates* itself into Lola’s” (ibid:156, first italics added). Interestingly, the signifier “insinuate” appears in the fourth line of Mezei’s translation, and it translates Tostevin’s stanza:

cette rupture qui donne lieu à une syntaxe  
qui se veut peau sur laquelle se trace un  
autre sens (une sensation)

as:

this rupture opens up a syntax  
*insinuating* into skin over which  
is traced an other meaning / path (-pathy) (ibid:155, italics added)

Here it is as if the “insinuation” suddenly authorized the translator to dare more wordplay in the final line of the stanza, resignifying Tostevin’s play between the French “sens” and “sensation” into a different kind of wordplay in English altogether, where “sens” becomes “meaning / path” and “sensation” morphs into the medically charged connotations of the bracketed signifier “pathy”.

Daphne Marlatt’s translation imperceptibly extends into a poetic commentary, which elaborates on the issue of translation as a dialogic repetition bound to dwell in the in-between of languages. Marlatt stages the translator’s response-ability towards the source text as an ambivalent “oscillation” of a linguistically conscious will: “the target language not wanting to replace/consume the resonance of the source language oscillates in potential conversation with it” (ibid:157). In Marlatt it is the “struggle between intent and language drift” that comes to “lead” the translation:

through several drafts (drifts) the sense that French wants to spell out the syntax in a gracious offering of connection that lumbers clumsily demanding into literal English, while a ‘freer’ English tends to make it resonate all at once although it is always *leading* somewhere just as French does. (ibid)

Marlatt grafts her translation precisely on this “leading” signifier, translating the first two lines of the poem as “spaces lines *lead* where? / verse what?” (ibid:156), and then her text-with-commentary proceeds according to a logic of metonymic response to the shared ongoing ‘otherness’ of language(s), rather than within a logic of metaphoric equivalence, which privileges superimposition and substitution.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the first half of the commentary reads as an alternate version of Marlatt’s first translation, and literally performs the idea of a “potential conversation” with the source language (see quote above) by expanding the polysemic valence of Tostevin’s lines:

Commentary as extension of the reading:  
Like deferred fate those lines (in the skin dimly traced) other sense arise as alternate routes (a sixth in language more than cube?) chords of meaning found in palimpsest, the palimpsest the break (in sense) allows to surface on the page in silence in between its versions: echo scan in green depths. (ibid:156-157)

This section of the commentary is indeed both more and less than a commentary at the same time. It clearly bears the mark of Marlatt's signature poetic prose, and yet it does so by means of playfully repeating and varying the polysemic valence of Tostevin's signifiers. Thus, an "echo" of Tostevin's pun on "vers" in the first line returns at the end of Marlatt's commentary-paragraph: "echo scan in *green* depths".

In turn Barbara Godard (ibid:158-159) draws out her own affective vicissitudes in a narrative of resistance ("This was a difficult translation. I resisted setting to work on it . . . All the puns on 'vers'), indecision ("So, rather than choose. I did nothing"), and unexpected creative resolution. Like Knutson and Mezei, Godard also describes her solution not as something willfully sought out, but as something coming from an open-ended posture of meditation in which heterogeneous affective and cognitive strands of thinking constitute an inextricable backdrop against which the creative solution emerges. She recounts:

"Several weeks later in the swimming pool I am thinking about Lola's book, about how I must phone her to see if she knows where the reading will take place and if she can bring copies of her book to sell to the students who need them. *Suddenly into my mind* rushes the word "vers-ions" complete with hyphen in the middle" (ibid:159, italics added).

This narrative of the mind's meanderings into apparently minor details can be interestingly compared to the psychoanalytic method of associative thinking, which facilitates an exteriorization of the unconscious, and thus an opening towards what Laplanche calls "new and more inclusive translations" (Laplanche, 1992:212). Indeed for Godard, this creative solution comes in the wake of many other unsatisfied attempts at translating Tostevin's deceptively simple first line: "for a while" she says, "I toyed with using the archaic 'verdant' or 'versatile' to provide more variety in the repetitions of the sound" (Godard et al. 1994:159). It is important to note that, like Knutson, Godard also finds the first lines the most troubling, signaling perhaps a shared perception of them as the space where the poem's enigmatic address is most intensely felt. For Godard this is particularly because of "all the puns on 'vers' – verse, green, worm, towards" (ibid:158). Following the associative pathways opened up by sound rather than meaning, Godard then finds a way to keep the resonance of the French signifier in English while leaving a clear mark of her own intervention. And so the first lines of her translation read "spaces vers-ions converse?/ in-verse?" (ibid:157).

The last translator, Gail Scott, reflects that translation "is not so much transparent as it is evidence of another reading," and tells how her own "preoccupation with space . . . has forced an emphasis, in the translation, on the concept of space as the movement across it that is writing. A space electrified at the point where theory and the erotic touch" (ibid:160). The first lines of her translation reveal the preoccupation with space fully, and show Scott's own singularity at work: "green spaces / spacing where? // spacing what?" (ibid:159). Scott is candid about having become aware of this preoccupation only at the end of her process, "a choice made almost unconsciously in the beginning" (ibid:160). Furthermore, her emphasis on the "electrified" space of translation where "theory and the erotic touch" becomes visible in her translation of Tostevin's last lines:

où s'inscrit l'au-delà d'une langue tout en insérant  
de nouveaux fragments *oreilles neuves pour une musique*  
*nouvelle* (ibid:153)

Scott translates these lines with:

a tongue slipping into space beyond language lapping  
new fragments *new ears for new*  
*music* (ibid:159)

In her commentary Scott argues that she could “have taken a more clearly theoretical tack” (ibid:160) by translating the first line with “*where is inscribed what’s beyond language inclusive of*” (ibid). Her final choice however, beyond just being more “poetic”, as she herself admits (ibid), actually throws into full relief the ideological grafting of Scott’s own “à traduire” on a poetics of the body that deeply resonates with Tostevin’s own project, and makes visible the mutual interdependence of affective and cognitive dimensions aroused by the intimacy of translation.

Louise Von Flotow (2004:92) has recently commented on this text as an example of a feminist practice of translation that emphasizes the graphic and aural qualities of signifiers over their semantic valence in order to convey “‘l’inexprimable’ or ‘l’inédit’, i.e. whatever dominant/conventional language use can not express”. Godard (1994:158) illustrates this point eloquently by writing in her commentary: “Sounds teases out sense: the ear leads the mind in new directions”. We should note how this attention to signifiers, while not immune to the danger of being slotted within stereotyped post-structuralist categories of infinite meaning deferral, has a number of important implications if we read it in relation to Laplanchean psychoanalysis. Similar to Laplanche’s example of André Chouraqui’s translation of the New Testament, this feminist practice also insists on listening to otherwise muted paths of semiotic resonance in the word. In this particular case, what is muted is not a dead language (the Hebrew and Aramaic underlying the writing of the New Testament), but the possibility of signifying sexual difference in and through languages. Politically, in fact, this practice constitutes an attempt to lift through language the symbolic repression placed on the feminine writing body, and its historical significance lies precisely in its “drive to translate” this repression into collective cultural consciousness. This indeed is the political and historical “à traduire” at play in this case, and each of the translator’s singularities emerge from within these general parameters, which, it must be underlined, explicitly sought to loosen and rearticulate translation’s generic constraints of fidelity away from a subject-less paradigm of equivalence, and towards a more open-ended understanding of translation as an embodied activity of cultural transformation.

Significantly, this feminist practice – of which there are many more examples in Canada throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (see Gentzler 1993 and 2002) – did not just render visible but productively transformed the libidinal economies of translation practice. In the translators’ narratives the seductive intimacy of translation tends to be articulated within a positive economy of creative linguistic and prosodic shifts or “drifts” (to use Marlatt’s metaphor) that makes space for the new and the unexpected, rather than being figured within a negative economy of loss, where the translation invariably figures as an impoverished version of a polysemic potential only the source text seems to retain. It is not by chance that Barbara Godard has since theorized translation as an “art of approach”, driven by pleasure and a curiosity for the unknown (Godard 1995:81), a process of “unfolding to an outside” (Godard 1999-2000:55) whereby the workings of the unconscious no longer figure within a depth-surface model of repression, but within a molecular process of dialogic exteriorization. Read in this light, the use of a Laplanchean

vocabulary in my analysis might be criticized for still working within a depth-surface model of culture, and thus of not being appropriate for the analysis of these translation practices. I hope, however, to have shown that a Laplanchian approach is not incompatible with this theory, and can be productively applied towards tracing how each individual translator grafts her own singular intimacy with the text of the other onto historically and politically located generic constraints of translation.

## Concluding Notes

Throughout this paper I have attempted to show how integrating an analysis of the unconscious in translation studies can offer us greater insight into the intersubjective dynamics of translation. I have also argued that this approach allows us to begin asking more pointed questions about the relation between the singular intimacy with the other experienced by translators, and the wider socio-symbolic economies/constraints of translation on which such intimacy comes to be grafted. In addition, the example of feminist translation I chose for my textual analysis further intended to draw attention to translation practices that productively incorporate the question of affect and of the unconscious in their processes, and thus also creatively modify the libidinal economies of translation practice.

In these practices translation functions as a dialogical and open-ended process of response-ability towards a perceived “à traduire” rendered visible in one’s own language by the triggering impact of the “à traduire” of the language of the other. Although these kinds of inscriptions of translation have historically appeared as avant-garde and experimental – and remain to date on the margins of literary translation practice –, we should not underestimate the importance of their contribution to building alternative and resistant economies of cultural production, precisely because they hinge on alternative configurations of the translator’s affective relation to the text of the other. In addition, these practices’ inaugural recognition of the presence of a dynamically singular otherness cutting through the heart of human communicative exchanges has today an important value of cultural resistance, whose further promotion remains of vital political importance.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Other examples of translators stressing the relation of intimacy with the source text and indicating an unconscious and affective component present in their working process can be found in Weaver (quoted in Venuti 2002:214); de Lotbinière-Harwood (1995); Godard (1995); and Stratford (1982).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the essay I make use of the words “affect” and “affective” in the sense outlined by Laplanche and Pontalis in their detailed exegesis of Freud’s thought in *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (1967, English translation in 1974). ‘Affect’ is a term Freud borrows from German psychology, where it denotes a general affective state or mood. For Freud, affect is one of the registers through which instincts or drives become manifest, the other being the register of ideas or representations (Vorstellung). More precisely, “affect is the qualitative expression of the quantity of instinctual energy and of its fluctuations” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974:13), it is the subjective translation of a quantity of instinctual energy. As such it is not tied to any one particular representation or idea, although it can attach to them.

<sup>3</sup> Although some work was done in the early 90s on the role of translation in the history of psychoanalysis (see Benjamin 1989, Bass 1985), translation studies scholars have published very little on the relevance of psychoanalysis to translation. Among the few exceptions are Brazilian researcher Maria Paula Frota (2000) and Lawrence Venuti’s (2002) recent incursion in this field. A further change to this trend was recently brought about by the many psychoanalytically informed papers presented at the conference *The Subject and Translation*, which took place at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in November of 2004.

<sup>4</sup> In her presentation at the conference *The Subject and Translation*, at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in November of 2004, Frota (2004) offered a sample of the scope of this scanty record: “In the volume of *Meta* published in 1982 and dedicated to the conjunction of the fields of translation and psychoanalysis, we find only three authors specialized in translation, among them Derrida, and seventeen psychoanalysts. In the volume of *TTR*, published in 1998 and having the same subject as *Meta*’s, the eleven authors’ biodata show that only two are professionally related to translation”.

<sup>5</sup> For Laplanche, the primal and universal situation of seduction is constituted by the mother-infant couple (see Laplanche 1989:120-121, 126). Laplanche’s use of the generic masculine pronoun, however, should not be read simply as a symptom of the theorist’s allegiance to sexist writing conventions. On the contrary, it implicitly signals the extent to which Laplanche’s theory is rooted in an ongoing re-interpretation of the vicissitudes of Freudian thought with regard to his examination of the role *both* parental figures play in the emergence of the drive and of the unconscious in the child (see note 7).

<sup>6</sup> “To be translated” or “yet-to-be-translated” constitutes the most used interlingual translation of Laplanche’s expression “à traduire” (see Fletcher 1992 and Laplanche 1999). However, the translation only partially conveys the dynamic, almost imperative connotations at play in the adverbial preposition “à”, which usually indicates a necessity, something that needs or demands to be done.

<sup>7</sup> Laplanche’s theory of seduction revisits a controversial turn in Freudian thought whereby, in 1897, he abandoned his “special theory of seduction”, which attributed the aetiology of hysterical symptoms to a factual traumatic event of child abuse, in favour of postulating an innate “psychical reality” in the subject where it is impossible to distinguish between factual “truth and emotionally-charged fiction” (Freud, Letter to Fliess, 21 September 1897, quoted in Laplanche 1985:32). Laplanche argues that Freud’s abandonment of the seduction hypothesis was a “repression” of his own thought (Laplanche 1989:120), and that his later attempt to explain the origins of ‘psychic reality’ through the phylogenetic myth of the primal horde constitutes a theoretical flaw, which perpetrates an oscillation between fact and fiction, truth and fantasy in his writings. Laplanche thus returns to Freud’s ‘special theory of seduction’ not for the purpose of uncovering the factuality of child abuse in the hysteric’s life – a fact well documented by feminists and by writers such as Masson (1984) – but to show how Freud’s reference to a “psychical reality” (that is, “something which would have all the consistency of the real without, however, being verifiable in external experience”) indicates the discovery of a “structural” category at play in the adult-child relation (Laplanche 1985:33). For Laplanche, Freud could not see the ‘structural’ implications of his discovery, because of the restrictions at play in his theoretical model of the unconscious, still conceived in this early period as a pathological construct needing to be done away with through analysis. However, Laplanche notes that throughout his writings Freud insists on the “fact of seduction” in his later writings – a fact whose centre of gravity Freud moved from the “perverse father” of the hysterics to the “quasi-universal datum ... of maternal care” (Laplanche 1985:33). It is in the space opened by Freud between the early pathology of the ‘perverse father’ and the ‘quasi-universal datum of maternal care’ that Laplanche thus articulates his own general theory of primal seduction as a *normal* and *structural* – as opposed to *pathological* and *contingent* – human experience (in that the adult-infant relation is an inescapable *fact* of all societies). Laplanche’s new approach to seduction has the advantage of offering a structural and yet historically flexible anchoring-point from where to theorize the cultural transmission of the unconscious without having to take recourse to Freud’s mythical primal horde.

<sup>8</sup> Laplanche's English translation of Freud's 'Nachträglichkeit' seeks to obviate the inconsistencies in Strachey's translations of that concept in the English edition of Freud's Complete Works. Strachey alternatively translates 'Nachträglichkeit' as "retrospective attribution" and "deferred action." For Laplanche "afterwardsness" is a semantically more open term, which can allow one to retain the same word for many of the different contexts in which Freud uses 'Nachträglichkeit' (Laplanche 1999:263).

<sup>9</sup> The interaction between normalization and creativity is an aspect of the translators' behavioural patterns, which certain methodologies, typically corpus-based studies, have a tendency to glimpse over, if not altogether repress, through a dangerous tendency to over-generalise on the basis of statistically dominant linguistic choices. Dorothy Kenny (2001) is particularly eloquent in this regard: "The temptation to disregard marginal or problematic cases is related to the universalising impulse in some corpus-based translation studies" (Kenny 2001:70, see also 69-71).

<sup>10</sup> An example of this kind of 'Think Aloud Protocol' has been offered by Brazilian scholar Dulce Fabiana Mota Lima in a paper titled "Horror in Translation: Subject and Process in the Interaction with an Anglo-American Genre in Brazil", presented at the conference "The Subject and Translation" (Universitat Autònoma De Barcelona, November 12-14, 2004)

<sup>11</sup> "Generic" in the sense that fidelity inherently defines translation as a particular "genre" of re-writing.

<sup>12</sup> It is true that more and more literary prizes are beginning to appear which are specifically directed at translators worldwide. Still, publishers hardly ever market a book according to the fame of its translator.

<sup>13</sup> Although the heyday of post-structuralist polemics on the notion of equivalence may have past, it is interesting to see how the issue still lingers in a number of recent publications in translation studies – see for example Anthony Pym's (2004) chapter dedicated to "Equivalence *malgré tout*" in his latest book *The Moving Text*.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this term from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), who introduce it in their discussion of trauma and testimony.

<sup>15</sup> "Vers-ions Con-verse" first appeared on the sixth volume of the bilingual feminist journal *Tessera*, appropriately titled: "Translation in the Feminine/La traduction au féminin" (Spring 1989). The poem was later included in an anthology of *Tessera*'s first ten years of publishing, edited by Barbara Godard, *Collaborations in the Feminine* (1994). References are to this anthologized version.

<sup>16</sup> Verbs are mostly in the impersonal and reflexive voice, and their grammatical subject is either an abstract noun – "rupture", "syntaxe" "l'au-delà d'une langue" [rupture, syntax, the beyond of a language] –, or a body part or function – "pulses", "organisme", "mémoire d'un toucher" [pulses, organism, memory of touch].

<sup>17</sup> I borrow the distinction between a metonymic and a metaphoric approach to translation from Godard's theoretical essay on the English translations of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray work, titled "Translating (with) the Speculum" (1991).

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