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ROSMARIE WALDROP AND THEORIES OF TRANSLATION

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Recommended citation || DUFFY, Nikolai (2012): "Rosmarie Waldrop and Theories of Translation" [online article], *452°F. Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 7, 24-39, [Consulted on: dd/mm/aa], < http://www.452f.com/pdf/numero07/07_452f-mono-nikolai-duffy-orgnl.pdf>

Illustration || Gabriella d'Alessandro

Article || Received on: 19/12/2011 | International Advisory Board's suitability: 30/04/2012 | Published on: 07/2012

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Summary || Since the 1960s, the German-born US-American poet, Rosmarie Waldrop, has translated over 40 different works, largely from French and German, including 14 volumes by the Jewish French-language writer, Edmond Jabès (Jabès was expelled from Egypt in 1956 during the Suez Crisis). In 2003, Waldrop was made a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government, and in 2008 she received the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation in 2008, for her translation of Ulf Stolterfoht's book, *Lingos I-IX*. As well as practising translation, however, Waldrop has also written several significant essays which reflect on different theories of translation and their implications for practice. Much of these considerations are taken up with the question of the relation between translation and writing, of thinking the ways in which theories of writing might suggest the lines for developing a specific form of poetic practice.

This essay provides an overview of Waldrop's central thoughts on translation and contextualises these in relation to some of the major theories of literary translation. In the latter part of the essay, these ideas are developed in specific relation to Waldrop's translations of the work of Edmond Jabès and to the notion of writing practice it suggests.

Keywords || Rosmarie Waldrop | Translation | Difference | Strangeness | Poetic practice.

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh
the shell, that we may eat the kernell; that putteth aside the curtain, that
we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the
well, that we may come by the water.

“Preface to the Reader,” King James Translators

The German-born contemporary US-American poet Rosmarie Waldrop begins the “Translation” section of her volume of collected essays, *Dissonance*, with an epigraph drawn from Anne Carson’s poem which reads, “the space between two languages is a space like no other” (Waldrop, 2005: 135). The translator of over 40 works from French and German, it is this “no other” which is particularly relevant to understanding Waldrop’s theory and practice of translation. For Waldrop, that is to say, translation is non-equivalent. As she puts it in interview, “what matters”, Waldrop writes, “is not things but what happens between them. Or if you take the linguistic model, it is not the phoneme but the connection of phonemes that makes language, the differences in the sequence [...] The gaps keep the questions in relation” (Retallack: 349).

“Between” also happens to be the title of one of Waldrop’s earliest poems written in English and, perhaps more than any other, it is the word that best characterises Waldrop’s distinctive and highly influential approach to both poetic practice and translation over the last four decades. Hers is a writing of between, of crossings, of differences and relations. “I enter at a skewed angle,” Waldrop writes in the notebook, *The Ground is the Only Figure*, “through the fissures, the slight difference” (Waldrop, 2005: 223). As the speaker of that early poem comments, “I’m not quite at home / on either side of the Atlantic” because “to change your country / doesn’t make you / grow”:

it doesn’t make you change so much
you can’t remember
I remember
things are much the same
so much the same the
differences are barbed (Waldrop, 1972: 16).

Since the beginning Waldrop has been careful to caution against any simple conflation of writing with biography, remarking on one occasion that “it is not just a matter of my personal situation between countries and cultures. Our reality is no longer substances, but systems of relations” (Waldrop, 2005: 265). But then, of course, neither is it easy to maintain life and work at a permanent distance from one another. The proper relation is one of cross-tracing, a subtle and always shifting contour weaving itself between life and writing and back again. The same applies to the work of translation. As another of Waldrop’s early poems, “For Harriet”, has it:

you can't pick out
a thing all by itself
each weaves together
with the next
inside and outside (Waldrop, 1972: 43).

In a different register, just as no author stands alone so no text exists independently of the various lives of its author(s). So it is that, for Waldrop, translation is frequently turned in at least two directions at once. No doubt these directions are in part primarily geographical, the result of Waldrop's relocation from Germany to America in the late 1950s. As Waldrop puts it, "as an immigrant to the United States, I came to a point where I could not go on writing poems in German while "living" in English. Translating (from English to German, at that time) was the natural substitute" (Waldrop, 2005: 137). Yet as Waldrop goes on to add, writing in her adopted language of English "came before translating into it, so that even my particular state as a person between languages cannot altogether account for any persistence in this seemingly unrewarding, nearly impossible activity" (Waldrop, 2005: 137).

Developing these notions with specific reference to the practice of translation, Waldrop goes on to specify how translation does not aim at simple transmission of content, but rather opens a rift between word and meaning, a discord which, in its opening, draws attention to a strangeness at the heart of language, a restlessness which does something else, something other than simply render a work from one language to another. As Edwin Gentzler points out, etymologically "translate" is derived from the Latin word *translatus*, meaning "carried over", and *translatus* is the past participle of *transferre*, whereby:

the Latin *ferre* means "to carry" or "to transport" as in carrying a shield, and was often used to mean to bear or convey with the notion of motion (Homer), as in ships borne by the forces of wind. It also meant to endure, to suffer, as in to bear a mental burden, and survives in expressions such as "you're not faring well" [...] translation refers to the sense of roads or ways that lead to a place, as in a door leading to a garden, or a road leading to a city, conveying a sense of stretching or extension toward (Gentzler, 2001: 166).

In her essay from 1984, "The Joy of the Demiurge", Waldrop wonders about the reasons for engaging so fully in such an activity. "I have often asked myself why I go on translating," Waldrop comments, "instead of concentrating exclusively on writing my own poetry. The woes of the translator are all too well known: little thanks, poor pay, and plenty of abuse" (Waldrop, 2005: 137). Add to this, Waldrop continues, the reluctance of US-American publishers to add non-commissioned translations to their lists, and the sheer persistence of Waldrop's enterprise seems perhaps even more idiosyncratic. Occasionally,

Waldrop writes, the process and discipline of translation has helped refocus her own writing when it was stalled. Similarly, at least in part her interest in translation stems from an interest in assuming the role of “mediator” between languages, although as Waldrop also adds, if that really was one of the central motivations behind her work as a translator, she would have served readers better simply by “teaching them the language” (Waldrop, 2005: 137).

As might be expected from these comments, Waldrop locates the main reasons for her ongoing engagement in the work of translation somewhere else, that elusive other world of the elsewhere which, as it turns out, always somehow manages to evade both definition and appropriation, and which carries with it the unsettling yet not uncommon reverberations of the uncanny. “As I read the original work,” Waldrop writes, “I admire it. I am overwhelmed. I would like to have written it. Clearly, I am envious – envious enough to make it mine at all cost, at the cost of destroying it. Work, I take pleasure in destroying the work exactly because it means making it mine. And I assuage what guilt I might feel by promising that I will make reparation, that I will labor to restore the destroyed beauty in my language – also, of course, by the knowledge that *I do not actually touch the original within its own language*” (Waldrop, 2005: 138). Like every reader, the translator reads through their own experience. As Alberto Manguel puts it, “beyond the literal sense and the literary meaning, the text we read acquires the projection of our own experience, the shadow, as it were, of who we are” (Manguel, 1996: 267).

This is a view which is widespread across translation studies. Christopher Middleton, for instance, himself published by Burning Deck in 1970, echoes this notion of the importance of engagement between the translator and the work, commenting in interview how “it is necessary to know as much as you can about the whole work of the author. Not necessarily about his life and epoch, but to be receptive to the stratagems of his mind, his kind of sentence, and the kind of syntactical behaviour his language shows” (Honig, 1976: 1592). Even in the context of such theories of translation, however, Waldrop’s last statement here is striking in its sense of translation as leaving the original work well alone. For John Johnston such a view corresponds to a sense of translation as a simulacrum whereby, in contradistinction of the Platonic model which privileges similitude and self-identity and construes the simulacrum as bad in respect of its difference to the Idea, the simulacrum is that which simultaneously produces and maintains difference, which de-centres and diverges, and as such opens out into other resonances. Rather than faithfully reproducing meanings of a text, then, Johnston argues translations “forge a new language in which both languages “are present as two diverging but resonant series of words. In a reversal of the relationship between “original” and “imitation,” the translations propose themselves as the

“origin” of a new set of meanings sometimes indistinguishable from a-signifying verbal intensities” (Johnston, 1992: 49). In this sense, translation does not so much alter the original work as simultaneously preserve its language and recast it into something else, something beyond resemblance. As Johnston continues:

the Latin *ferre* means “to carry” or “to transport” as in carrying a shield, and was often used to mean to bear or convey with the notion of motion (Homer), as in ships borne by the forces of wind. It also meant to endure, to suffer, as in to bear a mental burden, and survives in expressions such as “you’re not faring well” [...] translation refers to the sense of roads or ways that lead to a place, as in a door leading to a garden, or a road leading to a city, conveying a sense of stretching or extension toward (Gentzler, 2001: 166).

Indeed, is precisely the implications of such an argument that underpins Waldrop’s notion of translation as what she terms “irreducible strangeness”. For Waldrop translation is an act of exploration or what Waldrop terms a “double exploration” because “the translator must not only explore the original, but also search the target language for an idiom, a language within language” (Waldrop, 2002: 7). As Walter Benjamin writes in his essay, “The Task of the Translator,” translation should aim to “expand and deepen [...] language by means of the foreign language,” to sound “some strangeness in the proportion”, “a trace of the foreign in the translation” (Benjamin, 1968: 74). For Benjamin, that is to say, the “transmission” or “carrying of one to another” of translation is centred on notions of contiguity rather than similitude. Every translator, Benjamin suggests, “lives by the difference of languages; every translation is founded upon this difference” (Benjamin, 1968: 79). Thus, it is not so much that a translation seeks to resemble the work to be translated, but rather, as Blanchot notes, that translation raises “a question of an identity on the basis of alterity: the same work in two languages, both because of their foreignness and by making visible, in their foreignness, what makes this work such that it will always be *other*” (Blanchot, 1997: 59-60). The translated work, in other words, is never at home¹.

As a result of this alterity, Benjamin continues, “translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense” (Benjamin, 1968: 81). Here Benjamin echoes the hugely influential ideas on translation set out by the German Romantic Friedrich Schleiermacher’s concept of “foreignisation” and of bringing the reader to the foreign text, that is, of aiming “to give the reader, through the translation, the impression he would have received as a German reading the work in the original language” (Schleiermacher, 2004: 50). Or as Wilhelm von Humboldt put it a year later in his introduction to his translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in 1816, it is important to give “the translation a certain tinge of foreignness” (Humboldt, 1997: 240). Yet while one of Benjamin’s

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1 | For more on the ‘unhomeliness’ of translation, see Andrew Benjamin, ‘Translating Origins: Psychoanalysis and Philosophy,’ in Venuti (1992): 18-41.

main critical aims was to conceive a practice of translation which does not attempt to sound as if it were written in the host language, Benjamin's ultimate and increasingly influential hermeneutic notion of "translatability" or "pure language" marks the point at which Benjamin's and Waldrop's conceptions of translation diverge most significantly. For Benjamin, that is to say, translation aims both for a kind of illumination and liberation, one currently forgotten but which precedes the attempt to build the tower of Babel when, according to the Book of Genesis, before the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech" and which the Kabbalists believed was also the language of paradise. "Seen thus," George Steiner writes, "translation is a teleological imperative, a stubborn searching out of all the apertures, translucencies, sluice-gates through which the divided streams of human speech pursue their destined return to a single sea" (Steiner, 1975: 244).

Yet it is a form of illumination and liberation which also remains faithful to Saint Paul's excursus on *pneuma* in I Corinthians 14 which instantiates an irresolvable differentiation between letter and spirit and which prohibits the translation of "spirit", "authentic speech" and understands the words of Christ to be beyond the scope of human discourse, unspeakable, what St Paul terms, in an interesting echo of the above sense of foreignisation, "arcana verba", a language of tongues, inassimilable, always already non-equivalent, foreign, otherwise, those noumena which, in Kant's phrase, "mark the limits of our sensible knowledge" and which "leave open a space which we can fill neither through possible experience nor through pure understanding" (Kant, 1929: A289/B343). Translation, St Paul goes on to elucidate in II Corinthians 12:4, would be blasphemy, or at the very least that form of translation which does not simultaneously erase itself in the face of its tracing of the foreign, translating the untranslatable *as untranslatable*. As Christopher Middleton puts it, "one of the simplest and most creative ways of considering the act of translation is to regard it as a minimal, perhaps vestigial, but still exemplary encounter with 'the other'" (Honig, 1976: 1602). Translation is exemplary precisely because it registers difference *qua* difference, because it is not quite equivalent, because it leaves a space open for disagreement and disappearance, Heraclitus's one differing in itself, *hen diapheron heautoi*, where *diapherein* is based on the root *diaphero* which means "to carry from one to the other, to carry across," but which in Heraclitus also carries the metaphorical meaning "to toss about, to be disrupted" and which Derrida, in *Margins of Difference*, goes on to term the "play of traces" or *difference* (Derrida, 1980: 15; Liddell, 1925: 417). The absent text, Middleton continues, "is the one we are helped to conceive of by the existence of the text before us" (Honig, 1976: 1602). Or as the contemporary US-American poet, Forrest Gander, puts it, "in a good translation, the original may be veiled, but it doesn't disappear" (Gander, 2000:

88). Walter Benjamin: good translation does “not cover the original, does not black its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully” (Benjamin: 1968: 72).

Waldrop’s reading of Benjamin’s sense of “pure language” is both more pragmatic and more material. For Waldrop, in other words, “pure language” is premised first and foremost on the assumption of a “central relationship between languages”, the possibility of which is confirmed by the fact that translation is considered possible at all (Waldrop, 2005: 139). Waldrop’s critical difference here stems from her sense that translation does not progress towards some kind of abstraction but, on the contrary, “toward another embodiment in a concrete, particular language” (Waldrop, 2005: 139). In this, Waldrop suggests, the task of the translator is not to try to render the original work *as it is* in another language but to approximate its “‘figures’ of thought”, in Cicero’s famous phrase, Nietzsche’s “the movement of style”, to give some kind of sense of its form, its rhythm, its tonal structure, its grammar and its contexts, all the while emphasising both the failure of equivalence and the establishment of something, if not new, then different (Cicero, 1960: 364). As Ezra Pound put it when introducing his translations of Cavalcanti, “it is conceivable the poetry of a far-off time or place requires a translation not only of word and of spirit, but of “accompaniment” (Pound, 1983: 12). As Waldrop continues, the notion of translation as accompaniment holds also for contemporary works. “We must understand,” Waldrop writes, “what Walter Benjamin has described as the intentionality of a work, the ways in which it relates to its language and culture” (Waldrop, 2002: 55).

Translation is approximation rather than duplication. A re-giving of form. I’ve sometimes described it as trying to get down to the genetic code of a work [...] And from that “genetic code,” you rebuild it in the other language, but having the instructions that a code would have (Foster, 1994: 149).

Translations “are woven into a textual history that is always transforming terms, translating other terms” (Gentzler, 2001: 171).

Waldrop here is close to Derrida’s recasting of Benjamin’s abstracted sense of “pure language” as the constantly turning, detouring turn of phrase, *difference*². As a result, and in a manner similar to that which underpins her sense of the book rather than the individual poem or line as the primary compositional measure, Waldrop writes how “the *unit* of translation is the whole work rather than the single sentence or line – let alone the single word” (Waldrop, 2005: 139). Waldrop’s choice of language here underscores her sense of translation as something which, while being related to the original work, is also

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2 | See Derrida, J., ‘Des Tours de Babel’ in J.F. Graham (1985): 165-207.

particular, distinctive, different; it is related yet otherwise, the space of the between. Thus, while agreeing with Benjamin's sense that translation, at its best, "does not cover the original, does not block its light" (Benjamin, 1968: 70) Waldrop specifies how, rather than moving toward the Hegelian abstraction of Benjamin's "pure language", the translated work undergoes "something more like erosion. It is weathered by the passage of time" (Waldrop, 2005: 142). "A translation that can suggest the lost beauty of the original," Waldrop goes on to say, "is preferable to a smooth replica that pretends to be the original itself" (Waldrop, 2005: 143). No translation is transparent; "even the most faithful of translations will bear the mark of the translator, of her time, of her cultural background," and the cracks upon which the text rests and depends, into which perhaps translation might itself inevitably, clunkily fall, while not being directly visible, might still be felt, and sometimes even more acutely. As Christopher Middleton puts it, such a view of translation enables you "to look over the edges of the conventions of your own language" (Honig, 1976: 1596). Indeed, it is precisely from the perspective of this effect that Waldrop comments on the ways in which the locus of translation conjures "new ground somewhere between the two languages, stretching the border of the target language beyond where it was before" (Waldrop, 2005: 156). Or as Vincent Broqua puts it, Waldrop writes "between languages, in the slit, on the edge or in the "doorway" where one language becomes other." It is "in this infinitesimal site," Broqua continues, that Waldrop plays out the exchange of very particular idioms (Broqua, 2007).

Elsewhere Waldrop goes on to align the irreducibly strange work of translation with Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the "third dimension" of a work of literature, that zone where:

Nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid. Every assertion is motivated, that is, one can sensibly ask of everything that is said, "Why do you say that?" And only when what is not said is understood along with what is said is an assertion understandable.

As Waldrop puts it, "it takes words to make things visible" (Waldrop, 2005: 149). Here silence becomes a space "for the utterance rather than an ultimate limit" and "a space," Waldrop writes, no matter how transitive, "can be explored, even this space of the unsaid" (Waldrop, 2005: 150-1).

Within the contexts of these theoretical perspectives, and following a tradition of translation practice stretching back to Dryden and Goethe but being perhaps developed most significantly in Roman Jakobson's sense of the translation process consisting of the intralingual, the interlingual and the intersemiotic³, Waldrop's practice of translation

goes through three main stages. The first stage, Waldrop notes, involves an intense period of reading in tandem with an initial and very loose drafting process. As Waldrop puts it, during this process she is not after simply what the work says but rather both an understanding of and engagement with its very creative process, its procedures, methods, and idiosyncrasies, formal or otherwise. In the second stage Waldrop disregards the original entirely, treating what she calls “the mess of the first draft (which is not quite English, often makes no sense at all) as if it were a draft of my own” and attempts to make a work of her own out of it. Waldrop refers to this stage as “the stage of separation” (Waldrop, 2005: 159). In the third stage, Waldrop returns to the original text and tries to “wrestle the English as close to the original language as possible” (Waldrop: 2005: 158). Often the main work involved in this final stage revolves around syntax and rhythm, around letting the shape and flow of the translation approach those in the original text, around letting the translated work exist in the space of the between, in the space of open form, which however open is still a form, still contains bounds; or as Goethe formulated it, letting it be known that the translated text does not exist “instead of the other but in its place” (Steiner, 1975: 258). George Steiner, in his hugely influential outline of the history of translation, *After Babel*, argues for the vital and expressive importance of this unresolved space of the between, writing how:

Good translation [...] can be defined as that in which the dialectic of impenetrability and ingress, of intractable alienness and felt “at-homeness” remains unresolved, but expressive. Out of the tension of resistance and affinity, a tension directly proportional to the proximity of the two languages and historical communities, grows the elucidative strangeness of the great translation (Steiner, 1975: 413).

As Waldrop puts it, and as with her poetics more generally, “translation’s ultimate task may be to bear witness to the *essentially* irreducible strangeness between languages – but its immediate task is exactly to explore this space,” the shape of thinking a text makes (Waldrop, 2005: 159). In this, Waldrop argues, translation is a process of “dialogue and collaboration” (Waldrop, 2002: 63). Indeed, this is precisely why Maurice Blanchot holds that translation “is the sheer play of difference: it constantly makes allusion to difference, dissimulates difference, but by occasionally revealing and often accentuating it, translation becomes the very life of this difference” (Blanchot, 1997: 58). “Not resemblance,” Blanchot goes on to develop, “but identity on the basis of otherness” (Blanchot, 1997: 58). Alberto Manguel puts it in the following terms:

As we read a text in our own language, the text itself becomes a barrier. We can go into it as far as its words allow, embracing all their possible definitions; we can bring other texts to bear upon it and to reflect it, as in a hall of mirrors; we can construct another, critical text that will extend

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3 | If for a brief overview of Jakobson’s theory, see Munday (2001): 37-8.

and illuminate the one we are reading; but we cannot escape the fact that its language is the limit of our universe. Translation proposes a sort of parallel universe, another space and time in which the text reveals other, extraordinary possible meanings. For these meanings, however, there are no words, since they exist in the intuitive no man's land between the language of the original and the language of the translator (Manguel, 1996: 276).

When the text that is to be translated is itself already linguistically difficult the theoretical and practical problems of translation becomes even more acute. As Forrest Gander asks, "how are we to deal with an original text that is itself syntactically innovative? If the literal-syntax translator translates a conventional word order (in the original language) into an unconventional order (in the target language), how can work that is unconventional in the first place be given its due?" (Gander, 2000: 118).

Given the particular type of avant-garde work Waldrop usually translates, it is a question which inevitably preoccupies much of Waldrop's practical work as a translator, but perhaps nowhere more acutely than in her landmark translations of Edmond Jabès, on which she has been engaged for four decades and which has also played one of the most pivotal roles in the development of Waldrop's own poetics.

Waldrop first came across Jabès's work when she and Keith came across a copy of Jabès's early collected poems, *Je bâtis ma demeure*, in a bookshop in Aix-en-Provence in 1957. Returning to Paris in 1966, Waldrop purchased a copy of the recently published first volume of Jabès's monumental *Le Livre des Questions*. As Waldrop describes it, "it was an overwhelming experience for me to read this first volume. It was a *coup de foudre*" (Foster, 1994: 140). By 1969 Waldrop had translated around fifty pages of *The Book of Questions* but had been unsuccessful in finding a publisher. All twenty of the publishers she approached rejected the manuscript on the basis that, while Jabès's work was interesting, the publication of translations was not profitable (Waldrop. 2002: 5). As a result, Waldrop temporarily shelved the project, deciding instead to concentrate, at least for a time, on her own writing. Yet Waldrop still travelled with a copy of *Le Livre des Questions* when she and Keith were to spend the year 1970-71 on fellowship in Paris, taking Jabès's text as a "back-up project" in case her own work stuttered to take hold. In January 1970 the US-American poet, George Tysh, organised a series of poetry readings at the Waldrop's apartment, to which the French poet, Claude Royet-Journoud comes and notices a copy of Jabès's *Le Livre des Questions* on the bookshelf. The next afternoon, Royet-Journoud brings Jabès to meet Waldrop. As Waldrop recalls, Jabès was a "slight" figure, "a deeply lined face, extraordinary blue eyes. Eyes that seem to be moving outward, toward me. Searching. A

sense of gentleness, decorum and warmth. I give him what I have translated. A few days later he recognizes himself in the rhythm” (Waldrop, 2002: 5).

This friendship has sustained and deepened her encounter with his highly individual, idiosyncratic writing. In point of fact, the matter of Jabès’s influence on the development and shape of Waldrop’s own poetics is complex, frequently personal and intuitive, and built up slowly over a long period of study, attention, and friendship. Waldrop credits Jabès with pushing her to think in terms of books as poetic unit, as space, ground, vessel within which to work, its layerings, increments, spacings. Indeed, as Waldrop puts it, it is “specifically “Jabès’s insistence on the book on the one hand (as the writer’s only place, as Mallarmé’s “spiritual instrument”) and fragmentation on the other, that focuses my own contradictory impulses toward flow and fragment” (Waldrop, 2002: 75). What really stands out from Jabès’s project for Waldrop is the way in which Jabès makes transparent “the structure of language, of signification. He makes us aware of the imaginary line between signifier and signified by constantly crossing it. And the line between symbol and index. So that at the limits of signification language is made to *show* itself” (Waldrop, 2002: 87). Or again:

Edmond Jabès writes a text over which he claims no authorial power, a text which he claims only to copy, make legible. This is a remarkable claim in itself [...] everything in his work – the shifting voices and perspectives, the breaks of mode, tautologies, alogical sequences and contradictory metaphors, the stress on uncertainty (the constant subjunctive) – all combine to subvert the authority we expect in a book. Authority of statement, of closure and linearity, the confidence in a narrative thread, continuity of temporal and causal sequence. And most of all, the authority of the author (Waldrop, 2002: 142-3).

As Rimmon-Kenan explains, “holes or gaps are so central in narrative fiction because the materials the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 127). But those holes are also the condition of the world itself, its stutter, its ground, its experience. Thus, for Hank Lazer, “the qualities of exile, of otherness, of removal, of being beside that recur in Jabès’s writing have their foundation (in addition to Jabès’s personal, biographical experience) in Jewish history and in Kabbalistic interpretation” (Lazer, 2003).

Edmond Jabès has commented how “we always start out from a written text and come back to the text to be written, from the sea to the sea, from the page to the page” (Jabès, 1993: 40). “In the beginning is hermeneutics,” repeats Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 2001, 81)⁴. There always emerges on the page before us a blank spot, a *blindsight*, that experience where, according to the neuroscientist,

Antonio R. Damasio, a person actually sees more than they are consciously aware. It is how that blindsight is read that counts.

The notion that all writing is, in one form or another, a process of re-writing has a long history, stretching back at least as far back as Moses's breaking of the tablets or the Kabbalistic tradition of the breaking of the Vessels, where, according to Luria, God's light proved too much for the vessels meant to contain it and the vessels displaced or shattered. In both cases, the world, here and now, is out of place, composed of the shards of this broken light, these shattered words. As Waldrop notes, according to the Zohar, "in every word shine multiple lights." Similarly, as Susan Handelman develops: "Thus in Kabbalah, it is not only the tablets of the law that are broken. The universe itself has undergone a primordial shattering; God has withdrawn; the Vessels are broken; the divine sparks are lost in the material world. As Scholem reads it, Kabbalah is a great myth of exile" (Handelman, 1985: 21).

Here the practice of translation, like the art of reading well, involves being out of place, unsure, unsteady; it entails equivocation. It is to set off, to wander, to go looking, but to find myself travelling in circles, further away, elsewhere. In so doing, it necessitates that such reading be counter-intuitive, that it proceed in fits and starts, with questions and effacements, in manners always turning, always bouncing against the limit of what it is has not been quite possible to say: blindsights, pieces. Thus, as Waldrop puts it, "the spark given off by the edges of the shards, the fragments, is stronger the more abrupt the cut, the more strongly it makes us feel the lack of transition, the more disparate the surrounding texts" (Waldrop, 2002: 21).

Attempts to adhere as closely as possible to Jabès's French, the effect of his linguistic play, slippage, punning, sound, complexity, trying to reproduce his syntax, lexicon and typography, which involves trying to come up with comparable effects, often twisting English into strange new forms. Waldrop wants, she says, to "write" Jabès in English, "write à l'écoute de Jabès, write listening to his French" (Waldrop, 2002: 27). The methodological question at issue here concerns the criteria for determining the basis for a comparison, and this is a moot point. As Philip Lewis has noted, this is "the strong, forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or pluralivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own" (Lewis, 1992: 261).

"The translator's task is precisely to render the source text, the original author's interpretation of a given theme expressed in a number of variations, accessible to readers not familiar with these variations, by replacing the original author's variation with their equivalents in a different language, time, place, and tradition. Particular emphasis

NOTES

4 | For more on Jabès, see, among others: Caws (1988), Derrida (2001), Israel-Pelletier (2008), Mole (1997), and Motte (1990).

must be given to the fact that the translator has to replace *all* the variations contained in the source text by their equivalents” (Lefevre, 1975: 99). When specific word play is lost in the process of translation, Waldrop prefers to leave the section in French, accompanied by a more literal but less literary translation. It is, Waldrop writes, an “awkward” solution but as well as illustrating the manner and mode of the original text, it is a solution which has the added advantage of allowing “difference, foreignness to come to the fore.” It makes us aware, Waldrop writes, “of the space *between* the languages where translation lives” and the way in which the path from one language to another is neither straight nor symmetrical, but curved, a language where the question of language itself is at stake (Waldrop, 2002: 71).

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