

## ***Fiction plurilingue and Monolingual Criticism***

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What language should I write this essay in? Or: In which language should I write it? *Dans quelle langue? In quale lingua?* Not being a migrant, not having grown up in a multilingual community, and not being a very gifted linguist, though having done my best at school and university, there are only three that I might choose; of these, English is the obvious one for me – it is my everyday tongue, the medium in which my thoughts most readily find articulation. But which English? Knowing that language well, I know that I do not really know it, for it is many languages, varying according to nation and region (Indian, American, Yorkshire), to genre (literary academic, medical, legal), to class, to style, each blurring into the next, just as this congeries of languages called English (many of which I cannot speak, though I am said to be a speaker of ‘English’) blurs into the congeries of languages called by other names, for instance French. So, to choose to write in English is inevitably to choose to write in a kind of English; and the obvious kind, these days, is what is developing into a Standard International Academic English, the idiom of ever more colloquia and journals. Yet, in a session at the conference on ‘Nouveaux mondes, nouveaux romans?’<sup>1</sup>, Françoise Lavocat lamented the growing necessity for all academics, whatever their home language, to write in this professionalised tongue. In it, she said, ‘*je n’ai plus mon style*’; and many users of language, including everyday speakers of ‘English’, might well feel the same. So I am going to try to write, not in a generalised international acadamese, but in a style which recognises the circumstances of its production: my own circumstances as someone employed by a faculty of ‘English Language and Literature’ in Oxford, though one whose research is in the areas of ‘English and Comparative Literature’ or ‘English and Translation Studies’, as well as the structures that are hosting me: the Centre d’Etudes du Roman et du Romanesque (CERCLL), and the SFLGC website. I want to allow my English to feel the pressure of the French that I am choosing not to try to write: to recognise, for instance, that *roman* and *romanesque* are ways of organising the literary field which do not carry over into English, where ‘Romanesque’ is only a style of architecture, and where ‘romance’ and ‘novel’ are typically defined in opposition to one another; while also recognising that when I write the word *fiction* you cannot tell (and perhaps I cannot either) which language I am using.

I have been prompted to draw attention to the possible languages of criticism by the new attention that has been given, in recent years, to the multiple languages of literature. Literature has always been multilingual, of course; but in the new global, planetary, world, or world-like literary field that academics, publishers and the internet are bringing into being, multilingual literature, and the multilingualism of literature, are becoming newly prominent. No doubt the particularities of that prominence vary from place to place; but the same structures that nourish multilingualism mean that awareness of it crosses languages too, so that (for example) I learn of the multilingual practice of Yoko Tawada, the Japanese-German writer, via the trans-lingual practice of American and Canadian translators and publishers. This is part of what is

1 Round table on “Comparatims and globalization”, XLth SFLGC Congress, 11.27.2015.

*nouveau* about the new *nouveaux romans* addressed by this publication.

But what about our language practice as literary critics? Our way with words? Should this new visibility of the many languages of literature provoke new attention to the languages of our own critical discourse, or discourses? One powerful strand of recent scholarship turns away from language to focus on forms, both of narrative and of circulation: the phenomenon of world literature requires the whole world of literature to be scanned via ‘distant reading’.<sup>2</sup> But should there also be, could there also be, a new mode of *critique plurilingue* to match the plurilingualism of literature? Do the new new novels require a *nouvelle nouvelle critique*? If so, what might it be like?

## Two types of multilingualism

The first type of multilingualism in literature is obvious and well known. It consists of texts that themselves include multiple languages or mix languages. Obviously there are many examples we could point to beyond the work of Tawada: Bruno Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, or Isabel del Río’s stories *Cero negativo / Zero negative*; or many Indian English texts by Rushdie and others; or Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* which mingles Jamaican creoles and standard English and which recently won the Booker prize in the UK. And of course this is not only a contemporary phenomenon. One brilliant and *brillant* example is Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Between* from 1968. In the following extract, the protagonist, who works as a simultaneous translator in Europe, and therefore inhabits a multilingual world, is negotiating with a Catholic Priest in Rome to obtain a divorce. She is giving an account of her worldly goods, and they are using French as a common language:

- Un cottage? Que voulez-vous dire, un cottage?
- Hé bien, mon père, une toute petite maison, à la campagne.
- Un cottage.* The pale fat priest-interpreter looks over his half-spectacles made for reading the sheafs of notes before him. *Un piccolo chalet. Va bene così? Un piccolo chalet?*
- Va bene. Un piccolo chalet in Wiltshire.<sup>3</sup>

*Nous allons revenir sur the réitération and transformation of meaning as ‘cottage’ becomes ‘toute petite maison, à la campagne’ which becomes the crazily dislocated ‘piccolo chalet in Wiltshire.’*

Here are a few random other multi-lingual novels: G. V. Desani *All about H. Hatterr*, 1948; the enormous, anomalous instance of *Finnegans Wake*; Tolstoy, *Guerre et Paix*; Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*; Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Multilingualism has long been present in the fictions of Europe – or, as I now, alas, am forced to write, the fictions of Europe and of the United Kingdom. And, of course, multilingualism is not confined to novels. Brooke-Rose took inspiration from Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Poetry has always made room for the mingling of languages. There are many trans-linguistic *calembours* in Byron. The *maccheronee* of Teofilo Folengo bring *diverse lingue* together *nello stesso verso*.

My second type of multilingualism consists of texts that become multilingual through translation, *du fait de la traduction*. This is not usually thought of as a form of multilingualism; but the conditions of cultural circulation that promote multilingualism within texts also promote translation; and multilingualism within texts often stages translational processes – as when, in Brooke-Rose, the ‘cottage’ is translated

<sup>2</sup> Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London, Verso, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *Between* (1968), in *The Brooke-Rose Omnibus*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1986, pp. 417-8.

into a ‘toute petite maison à la campagne’, *qui est ensuite traduit par* ‘un piccolo chalet in Wiltshire’. So there are grounds for thinking about multilingualism within texts, and texts within multilingualism, together.

In theory, any text could enter into multilingualism *du fait de la traduction*. But in practice only some do; there are factors including critical and commercial success in the home market, and suitability for critical and commercial success trans-nationally. One recent strand of critique is hostile to the kind of writing that tends to become successful globally through translation. Here is Tim Parks, in *Translating Style*:

The international market for fiction is altering the attitudes of some authors towards their use of language and choice of material.<sup>4</sup>

Scandinavian crime writers, he notes ‘choose names for their characters that will not challenge readers of a British translation’. The Anglo-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro, author of *The Remains of the Day*, writes with an eye to being translated: ‘his rigidly austere prose’ – as Ishiguro himself asserts – is ‘partly the result of his attentiveness to eventual translations.’ For Parks, this pressure on writing style is wholly a bad thing. ‘Style’, he says ‘is predicated on a strict relationship to a specific readership and the more that readership is diluted or extended, particularly if it includes foreign-language readers, the more difficult it is for a text of any stylistic density to be successful.’<sup>5</sup> According to this argument, style involves working with a language that is very intensely and narrowly known. Style relates to complex norms: if you do not know those norms intimately then it is hard to gauge a subtle stylistic effect. In many respects this is certainly true. I have more confidence in describing the stylistic strangeness of, say, Beckett’s English than Beckett’s French, simply because I know the language better. This is, in general, the reason why close reading is inevitably problematic for comparative literature.

Parks concludes that novels like Ishiguro’s which are written in order to be successful in translation have inevitably lost something. And he thinks the same is true of global anglophone novels that are written with an eye to being read in the many different anglophone communities across the world: in India, Africa, America, the UK and so on. Stylistically, the ‘new global novel’, he thinks, must be ‘dull’. If Shakespeare had been writing for a global audience, Parks says, ‘he would have eased off the puns’.<sup>6</sup> This is where the argument becomes problematic. No doubt there are many global novels that are stylistically dull. But there are also many novels written for all sorts of audiences that are dull. Large numbers of novels written for Parks’s prized ‘specific readership’ are dull. So there is a misfit between Parks’s astute observation and his gloomy, categorical conclusion; and this leaves room for more optimistic ways of thinking about translation and global literary circulation.

One such way of thinking simply reverses Tim Parks’s assumptions. Perhaps what matters most in a writer’s style is not what inevitably gets lost in translation. Perhaps what matters most is what can survive translation. This is what Ishiguro himself thinks:

I have to really ask myself, “Does the line have substance? It’s not just a clever line, is it? Does its value survive translation?”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Tim Parks, *Translating Style*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Abingdon, Routledge, 2007, p. 245.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Parks, ‘Literature Without Style’, *New York Review Blog*, 7 Nov 2013; accessed 7<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Parks, ‘The Dull New Global Novel’, *New York Review Blog*, 9 Feb 2010, accessed 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia W. Wong (eds), *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, New Orleans, University Press of Mississippi, 2008, p. 180.

Ezra Pound thought something similar. This is from a letter to William Carlos Williams:

Your 'representative American' verse will be that which can be translated in foreign languages without appearing ridiculous to us after it has been 'accepted'.<sup>8</sup>

So what counts as the strongest American poetry is not – as we might expect – that which is most difficult to translate but rather that which best survives translation.

An example of novelistic writing where the style is both distinctive and able to survive translation is the recent widespread critical and popular success by Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*, *My Brilliant Friend*, *L'amie prodigieuse*. This series of novels is rooted in Naples but aims to make that context transparent to an Italian national audience: for instance, conversations said to happen in dialect are presented on the page in Standard Italian. It is, then, possible to take issue with the verbal texture of the books (and Parks has done so); but the most arresting aspect of Ferrante's style is a matter, not of word-choice, but of the structure of her paragraphs. This is able to span languages via translation – as in the following passage which I quote *nel Italiano di Ferrante*, the English of Ann Goldstein *et le français de Elsa Damien*:

Ho aperto i miei cassetti, le scatole di metallo dove  
I opened my drawers, the metal boxes where  
J'ai ouvert mes tiroirs et les boîtes en métal dans lesquelles

conservo cose di ogni genere. Poche.  
I keep all kinds of things. Not much there.  
je conserve des souvenirs de toutes sortes – bien peu de chose.

Ho buttato via tanta roba, in particolare ciò che la riguardava.  
I've thrown away a lot of stuff, especially anything that had to do with her,  
J'ai jeté beaucoup d'affaires, en particulier la concernant,

E lei lo sa. Ho scoperto che non ho niente di suo, non un'immagine,  
and she knows it. I discovered that I have nothing of hers, not a picture,  
et elle le sait. J'ai découvert que je n'ai rien d'elle, pas une photo,

non un biglietto, non un regalino. Mi sono sorpresa io stessa.  
not a note, not a little gift. I was surprised myself.  
pas un message, pas un petit cadeau. Je m'en suis étonnée moi-même.

Possibile che in tutti questi anni non mi abbia lasciato niente di sé  
Is it possible that in all those years she left me nothing of herself,  
Est-il possible qu'en tant d'années elle ne m'ait rien laissé d'elle,

o, peggio, io non abbia voluto conservare alcunché di lei? Possibile.  
or, worse, that I didn't want to keep anything of her? It is.  
ou pis encore, que je n'aie jamais voulu garder quelque chose d'elle ? Oui, c'est bien possible.<sup>9</sup>

What is distinctive here is the sudden emotional revelation in among ordinary simple sentences. 'J'ai jeté beaucoup d'affaires, en particulier la concernant, et elle le sait'; 'and she knows it'; 'E lei lo sa' – It is that switch from the descriptive to the emotional which is most characteristic of Ferrante. *Et ce n'est pas difficile à traduire*. This shows that the Tim Parks argument is too simple. Style comes in different kinds, each of which has several aspects. Some are more readily translatable than others; and

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters 1907-41*, ed. D. D. Paige, London, Faber, 1971, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Elena Ferrante, *L'Amica geniale*, Roma, Edizioni e/o, 2011, p. 17; *My Brilliant Friend*, tr. Ann Goldstein, New York, Europa Editions, 2012, p. 21; *L'amie prodigieuse*, tr. Elsa Damien, Paris, Folio, 2016, p. 19.

there is no straightforward equation between 'translatable' and 'dull' or 'unsuccessful'. Different ideas of audience, and different modes of circulation, create different conditions for writing; and any set of conditions can become a medium for successful (as well as unsuccessful) expression.

The second of my more optimistic arguments is that when a text is stylistically particular, and therefore a challenge to translate, that does not stop people from trying to translate it. On the contrary, it provokes them. The translations that result may differ from the source text more than the translations of Elena Ferrante do; and they are likely to generate stylistic innovation in the target languages. Recent anglophone examples of this in fiction might include the translations into English of the Turkish of Orhan Pamuk by Maureen Freely; of the Spanish of Javier Marias by Margaret Jull Costa, or of the German of W. G. Sebald by Michael Hulse and Anthea Bell. A great deal of poetry translation and drama translation has always responded to provocation in this way. Tim Parks says that if Shakespeare had worried about translation he would have gone easy on the puns. But of course he did not go easy on the puns; and that has not stopped him being massively and brilliantly translated into very many languages.

If we see translation as a form of multilingualism it helps us to register and understand the linguistic shifts that translation necessarily introduces. In the text by Brooke-Rose, we are invited to enjoy the slippages in implied architecture and landscape between 'cottage', 'toute petite maison, à la campagne' and 'piccolo chalet'. In each case, it is hard to think of a closer translation; and yet the changes in meaning are as substantial as the continuities. In the translations of Ferrante, there is something of a similar disjunction between 'regalino', 'petit cadeau' and 'little gift', and between 'mi sono sorpresa me stessa', 'je m'en suis étonnée moi-même' and 'I was surprised myself' (even though here there is an obvious closer translation: 'I surprised myself'). In each case, the Italian is idiomatic, everyday Standard Italian; whereas the translated phrases are a little bit odd in context. For instance, if we imagine the passage having been written in English first it would probably just say 'not a gift' rather than 'not a little gift' (or give a different culmination to the list, for instance 'nothing'); and the following phrase would most likely be 'even I was surprised', or 'I was astonished'. But of course the book was not written in English first; it is throughout shadowed by Italian, and it is possible to relish the continual slight strangenesses of English which result. Translingual modes of writing are not inevitably 'dull'; they do not inevitably erase style. Rather, they create different possibilities for expression which can be handled with greater or lesser stylistic sensitivity and *panache*.

### ***A new nouvelle critique***

Let me now return to the questions with which I began. What of our use of language as scholars, critics or theorists, writing works of scholarship, criticism or theory? Should our own use of language change in response to the novelties in the world literary arena which we think about, teach about and write about? Does *littérature mondiale* / world literature *exige un' espèce de critique mondiale*, world criticism, and what might that be like? The title of this publication conjures up one revenant, *le nouveau roman*. Should we also be thinking about another revenant, *la nouvelle critique*? Does the new *nouveau roman* call for a new *nouvelle critique*?

In 1966 Barthes described criticism, in a phrase that has some affinity to the translational practices of multilingual writing, as a doubled language, *une parole dédoublée*. He went on to denounce the institutional discipline to which it was subjected :

[...] ce qui n'est pas toléré, c'est que le langage puisse parler du langage. La parole dédoublée fait l'objet d'une vigilance spéciale de la part des institutions, qui la maintiennent ordinairement sous un code étroit ... dans l'État littéraire, la critique doit être aussi « tenue » qu'une police : libérer l'une serait aussi « dangereux » que de populariser l'autre : ce serait mettre en cause le pouvoir du pouvoir, le langage du langage.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt all of us can point to this sort of control from our universities or other institutions. Yet it is also the case that we make, and impose upon ourselves, our own disciplinary choices, for instance when we take it for granted that a scholarly, critical communication should choose one language and *s'y tenir*. In our texts, we isolate other language in the inverted commas which mark quotations, or the italics which *signalent les mots étrangers*. And we take it for granted that that single language, chosen by the critic, should be used according to standardised, national rules. When we publish with national publishers that is certainly the case. And when, as is happening more and more frequently, English is used as a transnational medium of scholarly communication, there is still the assumption that this should be a standardised, Anglo-American version of English. We don't revel in peculiarities of Italiano-English, Singapore English, Yorkshire English, Delhi-English, *Français* – even though that is something that happens, and can be celebrated, in literary writing.

This is so even when a critical text explore, or celebrate, transcultural shifts and multilingual writing. Take, for instance, Franco Moretti's enormous collaborative enterprise *Il romanzo, The Novel*. It is a rich and varied book, produced by contributors with many different languages, published first in Italian and only later in English. But this complex linguistic genesis has left little if any trace, *nessuna traccia*, on the standard transatlantic English of the American version. The volume studies the creative changes, *le trasformazioni creative*, that happen to literary forms as they cross, *attraversano*, languages and cultures, *lingue e culture*. But it conceals the fact that it itself has emerged from similar cross-linguistic and cross-cultural *processi*. Another such publication *paradoxe* is Rebecca Walkowitz's recent *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. It chronicles and praises texts that come into being in a multilingual, translational environment, foregrounding the shifts and clashes *entre les langues*. And yet its own language exhibits no multiplicity or fractures, nothing to disrupt the smooth progress of its standardised, academic American English.

Of course, neither of these publications is unusual. Many academic books follow the same conventions (including some written by me – *j'en ai fait autant*). Part of the definition of academic literary criticism is to use standard language to describe non-standard language; to take multilingual writing and turn it into monolingual writing; to take polyglossic writing and translate it into monoglossic writing; to take performative language and translate it into a language of statement; to take language that is in the service of experience and translate it into language that serves knowledge and thought. There is a necessary difference, *même un conflit*, between the languages *de la littérature* and the language of criticism.

The question is how wide should the distance be? How sharp the conflict? Here, developments in the theory and practice of translation might come to our aid – for notice how I slipped into using the word 'translate' to describe the work of criticism in the paragraph I have just written. *Comme l'a dit Antoine Berman, la traduction doit:*

[...] féconder le Propre par la médiation de l'Étranger ... l'essence de la traduction est d'être ouverture, dialogue, métissage, décentrement. Elle est mise en rapport, ou elle n'est rien.<sup>11</sup>

10 Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 13.

11 Antoine Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*, Paris, Seuil, 1984, p. 16

The means for establishing *ouverture*, *dialogue*, *métissage*, *décentrement* include the disruption of the translated text with foreign non-standard usages, so as to make visible its situatedness and *son rôle médiateur*.

As it seemed to Barthes, criticism was quite different from translation:

Le critique ne peut prétendre « traduire » l'œuvre, notamment en plus clair, car il n'y a rien de plus clair que l'œuvre ... Le critique dédouble les sens, il fait flotter au-dessus du premier langage de l'œuvre un second langage ... Il s'agit en somme d'une sorte d'anamorphose ... une transformation surveillée, soumises à des contraintes optiques: de ce qu'elle réfléchit, elle doit tout transformer ...<sup>12</sup>

But Barthes had a narrower idea of translation than we have today, after the work of Berman and others in the field of translation studies, *la traductologie*. Certainly, for me, translation is *une anamorphose*, *un dédoublement de sens*, the creation of un second langage *qui flotte au-dessus du premier*. In fact, it would be good summary of developments in translation studies over the last two or three decades to say that it has recognised that translation too, like criticism, is *une transformation surveillée*, subjected to certain optical constraints, *qui doit tout transformer*.

So perhaps translation, understood in this way, can help us to think about the relation between literature and critical texts; and especially about the relation between multilingual literature and criticism which is necessarily a more monologic mode of writing.

### The critic in the text

If criticism is a mode of translation, a *dédoublement de sens*, where does the translating or the doubling start? In the Brooke-Rose text, the Roman priest interprets and translates the francophone English protagonist; in the passage from Ferrante the narrator interprets and translates herself – ‘Possibile che in tutti questi anni .... io non abbia voluto conservare alcunché di lei? Possibile’ – before being in her turn interpreted and translated by Ann Goldstein and Elsa Damien. Characters are inevitably interpreters; both critics and translators begin their work among them, in the text, before continuing it into other writing.

One of the most powerful critics within any text is Iago, in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

At one point, fairly near the beginning, he is chatting, almost flirting, with Desdemona:

DESDEMONA — What would'st write of me, if thou should'st praise me?  
IAGO. — Oh, gentle Lady, do not put me to 't, For I am nothing, if not critical.<sup>13</sup>

In the Italian libretto for Verdi's opera *Otello*, the writer Arrigo Boito adjusts this to ‘non sono ch'un critico’ – I am only a critic – and Verdi gives the new phrase a charming little floating melody.

In the rest of this scene, Iago carries on joking, or pretend-joking with Desdemona; and he also hatches his plan for attacking Cassio. The plan starts from the critical perception of an interpretive possibility. Iago sees Desdemona and Cassio being intimate together: Cassio takes Desdemona's hand and Iago perceives that this sign of friendship can be misinterpreted – by critical and translational activity – as a sign of adultery:

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *Critique et vérité*, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2.1.131-3. Folgerdigitaltexts.org. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2017.

He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper. With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as *Cassio*.<sup>14</sup>

So Iago sets out on his critical career. He acts within the play as a strong misreader (to adopt Harold Bloom's phrase), generating and propagating misinterpretation.

One way in which he does this is by drawing attention to the ambiguity of particular words, especially the word 'honest'. Here is an example. Othello is saying that Cassio knew Desdemona before he and Desdemona were married; and Iago asks 'Indeed?'

OTHELLO — Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou ought in that?  
Is he not honest?  
IAGO — Honest, my Lord?  
OTHELLO — Ay, honest.<sup>15</sup>

This critical tactic of Iago's, inseparably repetitive and translational, was taken up by the twentieth-century English critic William Empson, who wrote a brilliant essay, 'Honest in Othello' which is part of his book, *The Structure of Complex Words*. The essay takes up Iago's question: 'honest'? - are you sure you know what you mean by that?' and sees the ambiguity of the word as being at the root of the conflicts in the play. As he makes this argument, Empson quotes and translates Iago; quotes and translates Iago who is quoting and translating Othello:

OTHELLO — Is he not honest? (Faithful, etc.)  
IAGO — Honest, my lord? (Not stealing, etc. Shocked)  
OTHELLO — Ay, honest, ('Why repeat? The word is clear enough.')16

So Iago, the critic within the text, asks good questions, and prompts literary critics who have entered the text to ask similar questions but pursue them to different ends. Like Iago, each critic translates the many voices of the play into his or her own critical voice, own language, which has its place, its role, among the many voices of the play itself, and also among the many critical voices which have emerged from it. If we understand that criticism begins in participation, and continues via translational reiteration and transformation, we can begin to see how the *parole dédoublée* might adopt strategies of *ouverture*, *dialogue*, *métissage*, *décentrement*, in order to situate its own claims, and make visible the transformations which necessarily occur as it opens the texts it is discussing into new contexts and new readers. *Pourquoi répéter? Because the word is never clear enough.*

In particular, this line of thought helps us to reframe the account of the relation between criticism and literary writing given by Paul de Man back in the 1980s. De Man too was interested in the processes of re-writing by which literary texts give rise to critical texts; but, as is well known, he configured the relationship as a matter of inevitable failure. The critical text and the literary text never match; but the erroneous interpretation is valuable, paradoxically, because it fails. Its failure can prompt us to look at the source text in a new way: one critic's blindness can produce insight in another, which then turns out to be a new blindness, which produces a new insight, and so on:

The work can be used repeatedly to show where and how the critic diverged from it, but in the process of showing this our understanding of the work is modified and the faulty vision shown to be productive.<sup>17</sup>

14 *Othello*, 2. 1. 182-3.

15 *Othello*, 3. 3. 114-5.

16 William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), London, Penguin, 1995, p. 221.

17 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Abingdon, Routledge, p. 109.



Like me, de Man is modelling criticism on translation. But his idea of translation is the common-sensical (though mistaken) idea, the idea attacked by Berman – as by Walter Benjamin before him – that translation aims at identity with the source text, in which ambition it inevitably falls short. According to this model, any difference between translation and source counts as a failure; and since translations are always entirely different from their source texts (that is why they are translations) they always fail.

Just as with this model of translation, de Man separates and solidifies the material he is describing. What he is in fact faced with is a literary text, and a critical/translational text which has been generated by the critic/translator in collaboration with the source text (and with many other texts), and which he, de Man, is now reading and critiquing/translating in his turn. He says ‘the critic’ rather than ‘the critical text’ because he needs to conceal the interpretive work that he is doing on the critical text in order to read it in that way. Both the relation between the critical text and the source text, and the relation between those texts and the text de Man writes about them, writes over them, is more interactive, more dynamic, than his assertion makes it seem. Divergences occur, not between ‘the critic’ and ‘the work’ but between the critical-text-as-read-and-translated-by-de Man and the literary-text-as-read-and-translated-by-de Man; and my account of him inseparably reads-and-diverges in its turn, just as your impression of this text will do. Like translation, criticism rewrites a text in a new language and a new context, for a new readership and new purposes. It makes a second language float *au-dessus du premier langage*. For criticism, just as for translation, this is not failure but *ouverture, dialogue, métissage, décentrement*.

### **Plurilinguisme and criticism**

No critic can dominate world literature, *maîtriser la littérature mondiale*. *Nous sommes tous situés dans nos contextes intellectuels et institutionnels, et dans nos compétences linguistiques, nécessairement limitées* (so let me translate myself more fully for a moment now into the second of the two contexts for this utterance of mine, *le contexte français*, and into a language that is, for me, more limited). *Nous sommes entourés par un paysage littéraire plurilingue, dans les deux sens que j’ai évoqués (et en réalité dans d’autres sens aussi)*.

*Face à ce nouveau monde/ ces nouveaux mondes, il ne s’agit pas de dire que notre écriture doit devenir aussi plurilingue que la littérature que nous étudions. La critique diffère de la création : il y a des continuités mais il y a aussi des différences qu’il faut marquer. La critique est nécessairement plus monolingue que la littérature.*

*Mais en même temps Il ne faut pas nécessairement voir ces différences comme le signe d’un défaut ou d’un échec.- il n’est pas nécessaire d’adopter la rhétorique de Man. Le changement, la transformation sont constitutifs de l’écriture critique, comme ils le sont de la traduction.*

*Comme on l’a vu, la traductologie aujourd’hui ne vise plus à la transparence dans la communication, ne vise plus à dissimuler son processus. Et il me semble que nous, auteurs de critique, pourrions en faire autant maintenant que nous sommes confrontés au plurilinguisme de notre nouveau monde littéraire et culturel. C’est ce que l’on pourrait faire quand on traduit le texte littéraire dans le langage de la critique; et c’est ce que l’on pourrait faire aussi quand nous discutons entre nous.* If we really value what *la comparée* is I think fundamentally about – the value of the encounter with otherness, including crucially linguistic otherness – then we need to keep on finding ways of making this happen in our own linguistic environment.

What I am envisaging already happens to some extent. Of course comparative critical discussion already has ways of doing justice to the linguistic richness of the texts that it discusses. Partly this is a matter of how we quote, how we describe; how we bring the experience of the texts we are talking about into the room or onto the page. Perhaps there are more ways of doing this – more ways of staging our sense of the texts we are describing, or sharing our imagining of its rhythms and sonorities.

It is also a matter of recognising our situatedness, each of our different situatednesses, in relation to the texts that we discuss – the way we are each of us a little bit like Iago, translating texts into our own languages for our own purposes. And therefore it is a matter of being interested in the translatability or otherwise of the critical languages that we ourselves use when we talk to one another. Perhaps we can do more of that: perhaps we can *jouer* with languages a bit more in our thinking and *écriture*, so as to foreground, *souligner*, the problems of translation that arise when we communicate with one another.

How these practices evolve, what new practices we might invent, remains to be discovered: *on verra ce qui marche et ce qui ne marche pas*. I hope that the theoretical considerations I have outlined (and the little *jeu linguistique* I have indulged in) might help these developments to happen, whatever they turn out to be.