

# “On the task of the translator”

## Postscript to a review

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### Preface

This polemic piece was occasioned by the review I had been asked to write of the first volume of Julia Kristeva's work on Hannah Arendt, *Le Génie féminin*. When I began to work on the text in Paris I had access only to the French edition, and only upon my return to Toronto did I begin to look at the English translation. The text below is the result of this encounter. It was rejected by several journals at the time, including *Critical Inquiry*, *Theory and Event*, *International Studies in Philosophy...* even by a journal, whose name I no longer recall, dedicated to translation issues. As the major part of the text is a factual documentation of a long series of gross errors in the translation of a major author, and by consequence, of the publisher's and editor's negligence, I cannot assume that the reason for the refusal lied in the quality of the writing.

I am grateful for *Trahir* for allowing the text to appear at last and commend its editors for bringing attention to an issue that is symptomatic of the general malaise ailing our academia, today as much as it did almost a decade ago.

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### Introduction

Julia Kristeva's *Hannah Arendt*, the first volume in the now complete trilogy *Le Génie féminin*, may not be among her strongest works.<sup>1</sup> Still, the weakness of the writing cannot account for or justify the disheartening experience of reading it in Ross Guberman's English translation,<sup>2</sup> next to and, as is required of the reviewer, with an unrelenting attention to the original.<sup>3</sup> As editors at Columbia Press apparently did not think it necessarily their task, or to borrow Benjamin's famous term already, their *Aufgabe*, to watch over just as scrupulously the transposition of Kristeva's language and style into another tongue, I do so here, belatedly. The sheer volume of errors, however, makes an exhaustive treatment impossible; therefore, I have compiled from my long series of notes a severely abbreviated list, which, for the sake of convenience, I have ordered into categories. They will appear harsh only if read without reference to the context.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Génie féminin, Hannah Arendt*, tome I, Paris: Fayard, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> The shortened title, *Hannah Arendt* (probably not the translator's decision), withholds – from protagonist and author – the original title: “feminine genius”; whereas by absenting the original designation of “tome I,” the English language edition withholds the author's promise and the publisher's commitment to future volumes to come. (*Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman, *European Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, New York: University of Columbia Press, 2001.)

<sup>3</sup> See my “The Art of Reading Hannah Arendt,” *Literary Review of Canada*, November, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> I will not discuss here the other shortcomings of the English edition – the absence of a list of abbreviations used in notes for Arendt's titles, for example, or the faulty page references to her works in the English original – all of which turn one's careful reading of the text into a tedious task and joyless experience.

### Bêtises (simple)

The *choeur* [chorus] of Greek tragedy is translated as “choir” (130/76);<sup>5</sup> *le cérémonial codé*, the *coded ceremonial* of Arendt’s clandestine rendezvous with Heidegger, as “ceremonial codes” (38/14); to put on guard (*mettre en garde*) by the contrary meaning of “downplay” (121/70), “s’opposait” and the semantically and lexically distant “demeurant en retrait” by the same though equally inadequate English phrase “stood apart” (132/76; 123/71).

The Latinized *inter-esse*, which for readers of Arendt instantly recalls her preferred notion of life as “inter homines esse,” is on the other hand needlessly translated by the English phrase “in-between” that silences in the translation every resonance Kristeva’s original neologism sets off – also with “interest,” with Kant’s prejudice against interest, against which Arendt silently posits her “inter-est” as supporting, from the reverse side, every interest (123/73). When the *philosophical* concept *singularity* – whose history ranges from Duns Scotus, who is cited in the text, to Deleuze, who is not – is rendered, variably, by the generic vocables of “uniqueness” (24), “unique features” (74), and “particularity” (14), what is effaced in and by the translation is the singularity of the *concept* itself. And then again, as the title or rank “génie féminin” [*feminine* genius] that is left out from the book’s English title is translated in the main body of the text as “the *female* genius” (ix, xiv, etc.), the unforeseen translation effect is to situate both Arendt’s “genius” and “génie” much closer, and dangerously so, to what is a mere accident of birth, her “sex.” (Together, these two transpositions amount to a double betrayal, beyond infidelity to concepts and their history. First, of Arendt, who did not think [her] sex – for *gender* is not a term of hers – was something worth thinking about, especially not as that which invisibly would provide for the possibility of her thought; then, of Kristeva, who extols the “singular realization” (rather than “particular accomplishment”) possible for each and everyone, and who herself seeks to actualize her own uniquely *feminine* singularity in the trilogy by disclosing in the writing, or indeed, by *giving* back to the world, in the writing, the gift and contribution of each of her

<sup>5</sup> The page numbers in the original are followed by corresponding numbers in the translation, throughout my text.

“*feminine* geniuses” to the “*plurality* of the world” [and not as the translator insensibly says to a “*large segment* of the world”]).

Then again, for the *action* of a “*poiesis*” that in the original *remained* subtly and ambiguously “in retreat” from the aforementioned worldly “*inter-esse*” (*demeurant en retrait de l’inter-esse*, 123/71), Guberman gives the passive and equivocal *state* of “stand[ing] apart from the in-between” – obliterating thereby both the *passage* of *poésie*’s retreat and its negative *object*: not the neutral space of an “in-between” (for why withdraw from it then?) but precisely the “*inter-esse*” that is transfused with worldly interest. Then, for the action of the Socratic school – that “opposed itself,” or as is also implied by “*s’opposait*”, constituted itself by opposing itself to the political and action – he again provides the same, philosophically meaningless “stood apart” (132/76). And whereas Kristeva would ask how this poetic language can “appear” or “manifest itself” (*se manifester*) in the polis “so as to *reveal* (*pour révéler*) the virtuosity of its heroes” (123) – her translator speaks in her stead of the “*émergence*” of poetic language, which he then relegates to the secondary role of *description* (“how this poetic language is able to *emerge* so that it might *describe* the virtuosity of its heroes,” 71) – suppressing thereby precisely the kinship that Kristeva’s language intimates between the action of “*révéler*” and of “*poiesis*” as discourse that engenders what it brings to light.

And so on. In light of these infidelities, the rendering of Arendt’s “fidelity” (to Heidegger’s teaching) as “loyalty” (123/71) seems a minor blemish, hardly worth mentioning. (And yet, whereas loyalty to another measures moral character – especially when tested by the unfaithfulness of the other – faithfulness to impersonal ideas solicits the other faculties of intellectual courage and fortitude.)

But I must stop here, even though I could go on; the more I pursue the ramifications of these imbecilities, the more I undermine the category, that is, their “simplicity.”

### Vulgarization

In the course of Guberman’s transposition, something happens to Kristeva’s writing, its style, in Deleuze’s strong sense of the term; the

economy of the means of its formulations is supplanted and supplemented by happy phrases and easy turns that serve to mask precisely the *translation*: the fact that Guberman's text speaks in place of another, in the tongue of another. ("Discordance" is thus rendered by the ugly neologism "disconnect" [73], and in place of Kristeva's brief "Notons la nouvelle définition de la vie" [65], *noting* the new formulation of life, we are given to read: "This new definition of life is *worthy of our attention*" [34]).

But rather than taking my example from the main body of Kristeva's text, I prefer to cite here a letter by Heidegger, whose translation, from the French one presumes, does not escape either the linguistic drive to trivialize. "Cette fois toute parole m'abandonne" opens an early missive of Heidegger to Arendt (37). Literally: "This time all speech abandons me." The translation, "This time I am at loss for words" (14), offends twice against the original, or rather, the French translation of the German original. (In the space of these short notes there is time only to ask the only properly theoretical question: How to translate the *translation*? Heidegger's German, but more importantly, Arendt's English translated to French in Kristeva's *original*? Can the simple return to the original English word or phrase – which is often this translator's choice – do justice to *Kristeva's* writing?) The first offense of Guberman is to put a "spin" (if I may also risk a fashionable idiom) on the opening line, suggesting – subtly but unnecessarily – that "this time" it is *Heidegger* and not Arendt, for example, who is at loss for words. His second offense is to substitute for "all speech abandons me" a common idiomatic phrase – something Arendt did not much care for, and now we can see why. The idiom's referent by definition is an all too *common* experience, in this case, the experience of being "lost for words," of a *being* lost for words, rather than the exceptional occurrence of a *philosopher*, Heidegger, being *abandoned* by words.

"Et je ne peux que pleurer, pleurer encore," Heidegger continues in his letter. Literally: "And I can only cry, cry again," or "cry still more." This is freely rendered by Guberman as "All I can do is cry, and I find it hard to stop" (but pray, where does Heidegger suggest the desire to *stop*? Is he not looking instead for the *why*, the "pourquoi," of his tears?). "Le pourquoi aussi n'a pas de réponse, et – en attendant en vain – il disparaît dans l'expression de la gratitude et de la foi," the

letter continues. "The why also has no response and – waiting in vain – it disappears in the expression of gratitude and faith." By now the translator's unbridled creativity has taken over Heidegger's writing, which it rewrites as "I cannot tell *you* [?] why – and while waiting hopelessly to understand, the reason for my tears disappears in the expression of *your* [?] gratitude and *your* [?] faith." With this, the banalization – of meaning and language, of meaning by language – is complete. The happy idiom ("I cannot tell you why") makes everything clear in that it reduces the said to the most common of all experiences – the cliché. But this last can only falsify the *event* that inspires the letter: the enigma that befalls Heidegger and remains outside comprehension – since it *disappears* in faith and gratitude. *His* and *not* Arendt's.

### Reductive simplifications

In the crucial section on narration, Kristeva turns to the *techné* or the art of narrative. It resides, she says, "dans le pouvoir de condenser l'action en un intervalle exemplaire, de l'extraire du flux continu, et de révéler un 'qui'" (126), in other words, "in the power to condense the action into an exemplary interval, to extract it from the continuous flux, and to reveal a 'who.'" In Guberman's version – the "exemplary interval," in the order of *time*, becomes "exemplary *space*," the "*continuous* flux," the "*general* flow of events," and, by the most curious of all the supplements, "revelation" is replaced by "drawing attention to" (73). And if this dilution of Kristeva's precise language were not enough, the translation also attacks the closing thought of the same passage, Kristeva's summation of the essence of "beautiful" (and not *great*) narration: "C'est Achille, et l'exploit est bref – voilà ce que dit en substance une belle narration" or "This is Achilles, and the exploit is brief – that is what in substance a beautiful narration says." This is rendered by the nonsensical statement that no respectable undergraduate student would commit to paper: "We can turn to *Achilles*, whose exploits were short lived, for an *example of great narration*" (73/74).

With reference to Augustine's notion of God as "*summum esse*" – which sets off yet another series of echoes lost in the translation between "beings," their "esse," and their interest – Kristeva proposes

that for the subject, “jouissance” is possible to the extent that it “renvoie sa béatitude à un dehors où Dieu est (63), or return, perhaps even project, its/his beatitude to an *outside* where God is. In Guberman’s version the subject would merely “place” his beatitude, as if it were a thing, “in an outside *world*,” as if it were a container (33). But “Outside,” as we know, is yet another term with a history; Foucault, who pays homage to Blanchot, gives both to his essay and to the master’s work the same *title: The Thought from Outside*. (Essay and title, both, will also be scandalously mistranslated in the second volume of the English edition of his posthumously published *Dits et écrits*. To this faulty transposition I will shortly return.) But even if Guberman were unaware of the concept’s multiple affiliations, were he *reading* the text he is in the course of translating, he would notice – for the text itself instructs him – that this “outside” is not another *world*, not even *a world*, but an “absolute exteriority” in and of *time*, outside every order of time: “Ce dehors n’est autre que l’*avenir* inséparable du *passé*.”

On pages 77-78 of the translation, one reads that the “Socratic school stood apart from politics and action and *occupied* the world of the *prepolitical*.” By now our impatience has begun to turn to irritation, directed at first, unjustly, at Kristeva. For in Arendt’s language the “prepolitical” stands for the household, the domain ruled by tradition, patriarchy, arbitrary rule, force and violence. And although Kristeva herself borders on violating this usage and her reading of Arendt on this point is almost as imprecise as her translator’s,<sup>6</sup> her text says here something quite different: *not* that the school “stood apart” but that, as was already mentioned under the first category of errors, it “s’opposait” – that is, constituted itself in opposition – *not* to *politics*, but “à la *politique*” – a phrase that especially after Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe must be translated as “to the *political*”; and lastly, Kristeva says *not* that the Socratic school “occupied” anything but that it “revenait à” – meaning either that it *returned to* or *took up*

<sup>6</sup> In *The Human Condition*, Arendt says that “the Socratic school [...] turned to these activities [of law making and city building], which to the Greeks were prepolitical, because they wished to turn against politics and action” (195).

*again* – not a “world” as the translation would have it but rather “des activités prépolitiques,” that is, prepolitical *activities*” (132).

Our (im)patience in fact would have been tested on page 69 already, in the second paragraph of the same key section on narration. There we are given to read the exhortation, apparently by Kristeva herself: “We must tell the story of our life, then, before we can ascribe meaning to it.” If familiar with Arendt’s work, we would note right away the fundamental error and contradiction; if not, we would soon learn from Kristeva herself that, according to Arendt, we cannot tell “our story,” which belongs to another, a narrator, historian or poet, whose “récit” completes it – after the fact, at the cost of death. Indeed, Kristeva’s original simply and faultlessly says: “Raconter sa vie serait en somme l’acte essentiel pour lui donner un sens”(120), or “To narrate *her* life would be, in fact, the act essential for giving it meaning” – referring not to “us” or to a generalized other as “one,” but very specifically to Rahel Varhagen, whose life story and unsuccessful endeavor to be the witness and narrator of her own life Arendt herself *recounts* in her biography, *Rahel Varhagen*.

### Bêtises (complex)

If the complex variety, space allows but for one extended example. I begin with the translation:

Arendt’s reading of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* in *The Human Condition* causes her to distinguish *poiesis*, the activity of production, from *praxis*, the activity of action. Arendt *downplays* [my emphasis] the limitations inherent in the production of works of *art* [my emphasis]: ‘works’ or ‘products’ ‘reify’ the fluidity of human experience into ‘objects’ that are ‘used’ as a means to an ‘end’. Reification and utilitarianism already play a role in a *poiesis* understood as such. On the other hand [...] (etc., 70).

The reader is only into the fourth paragraph of the same section on narration, and already lost for the second time, twice in this short segment alone. After the colon in the second sentence, she expects to learn more about how Arendt *downplays* the limitations inherent in *poiesis*, but is given instead the *crudest* reduction of poetry –

attributed to Arendt – to the reified *utility of work and product*. And then, in the sentence that follows she is left with this semantically insufficient statement: “Reification and utilitarianism *already* [?] play a role in *a* (but why ‘a’?) poetry understood *as such* (?.)”

Turning to the original for clarification, one immediately discovers several minor deviations in the translation. “Sa lecture de l’*Éthique à Nicomaque*” (121) is given as “her reading of **Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics**. A perhaps insignificant, non-signifying addition to the original. Yet, one wonders nonetheless why the translator thinks *he* needs to provide this bit of additional information, as it were, behind the author’s back? Then, still in the same sentence, one learns that Arendt’s reading of the *Nichomachean Ethics* “lui fait distinguer, dans *La condition de l’homme moderne*, la *poiésis*,” in other words, that her reading of the *Nichomachean Ethics* – wherever/whenever – makes her distinguish in *The Human Condition*, and *not*, as the translation says, that her reading in *The Human Condition* makes her distinguish . . .

As for the initial problem, the contradiction is at least partially resolved when we discover that in Kristeva’s original Arendt is said not to “downplay” but on the contrary to *put [us] on guard against* (met en garde contre) the “limitations internal to” or “inherent in” poetry. Yet even after this restoration of literal sense, a sense of cognitive dissonance remains: the *severity* of the reduction attributed to Arendt regarding poetry as a work of art is still incongruous with her merely “putting [us] on guard against” its limitations. Another quick reference to the original takes care of this problem as well: the limitations there are said to be internal *not*, as the translation would have it, to the production of works of *art*, but simply to the production of “works” (which may or may not be works of art): “les limitations internes à la production **d’œuvres**: les ‘œuvres’ ou ‘produits’ ‘réifient’ la fluidité de l’expérience humaine dans des ‘objets’ qu’on ‘utilise’ comme des ‘moyens’ en vue d’un ‘but’” (121-22). It is the *production* of works (which may be works of art), in other words, “works” and “products” (and not poetry *as such*) that “reify the fluidity of human experience *in* objects that one ‘utilizes’ as ‘means’ in view of an ‘end.’” By way of this series of extensions from *products* to *objects* which then get *utilized* (by others) as means *in view of* – this last extension is altogether left out

from the translation, yet it is important, as it introduces yet another deferral, in time, and into the future – Kristeva inserts several intervals, progressively separating “utility” from the original “work” that will not have been produced in view of utility as product.

With this last correction made, we could say at last that we have been *warned* or “put on guard” against something: a possibility, a potential danger. Now only our last question regarding poetry “understood as such” remains. Once again, the translation muddles up everything: first, it needlessly contracts the original, which instead of ending with a period continues the same, long line of thought after a semicolon: “Arendt met en garde contre les limitations internes à la production d’œuvres: les ‘œuvres’ ou ‘produits’ ‘réifient’ la ‘fluidité’ de l’expérience humaine dans des ‘objets’ qu’on ‘utilise’ comme des ‘moyens’ en vue d’un ‘but’; la réification et l’utilitarisme auxquels succombe la condition humaine sont déjà en germe dans la *poiésis* ainsi comprise” (121-22). Then, as we can already see, the translation withholds a crucial portion of the original text. So that what the translator gives as the troublesome “Reification and utilitarianism already play a role in a *poiesis* understood as such” reads in the French as “la réification et l’utilitarisme **auxquels succombe la condition humaine sont déjà en germe dans la poiésis** ainsi comprise.” The part in bold is altogether left out from the translation. And while the meaning of “ainsi comprise” is still quite opaque, the discourse is on something in *potentia* (“en germe”); it speaks of a *danger* to poetry whose origin lies *already* in the human condition itself and not in poetry as such; it is “as such” – inescapable – that reification is present as *danger*, as *germinating* possibility, in poetry as such, *insofar as* it is – as it cannot not be – a *work*, a *product*.

The next time the reader is forced to consult the original, in connection with this same long passage, is on the next page when the solution just found is contradicted by Kristeva herself, in both French and English. (In fact, in the course of an integral reading problems posed by the writing and by the translation often become inseparable.) This time, I begin with the French text:

Fidèle à l’enseignement de Heidegger, Arendt insiste sur le fait que la poésie, dont le matériau est le langage, constitue *pour cela même* l’‘art le plus humain,’ et qu’elle se tient à proximité

de la pensée qui l'inspire. De ce fait, la poésie ne se réifie pas en objet utilitaire. 'Condensée,' tournée vers le 'souvenir,' elle actualise l'essence du langage [...] (123).

Apparently contradicting the passage just clarified on the inherent limitations of poetry, we now learn from Kristeva herself that Arendt *insists* that poetry – still “human, most human” – does not reify itself into an object of utility. On the contrary, it “actualizes the essence of language.” The translation finds a curious and ingenuous way out of this cognitive contradiction: It inserts an ellipsis in two places so as to say only that “Loyal (instead of faithful) to Heidegger’s teaching, Arendt insists that poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps “the most human [...] of the arts” [...] [both ellipses are the translator’s own!] ‘Condensed’ and transformed into ‘memory’ poetry actualizes the essence of language” (71). Crucial bits of the original are missing here: that poetry constitutes “pour cela même” the most human art; that “it keeps close to or stays in the proximity of the thought which inspires it”; and that “by virtue of this fact poetry does not reify itself into object of utility.” And if these omissions were not enough, the translator’s version also converts “turning toward memory” into “transformed into memory.”

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While simultaneously reading and translating Benjamin’s famous text on “The Task of the Translator,” Paul de Man observed, now almost three decades ago, “translation is like history” – derived, incomplete, an aborted failure.<sup>7</sup> It never gives back the original; it gives not a lesser object but something other than the original object. It is, however, in an entirely different manner that Guberman’s work *fails*, infinitely and, in failing, comes to resemble history. Like history which, according to another famous saying by a German thinker, repeats itself as a “farce,” Guberman’s translation returns to us the great question of Benjamin – as enfeebled, divested of its enigmatic

<sup>7</sup> “Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

pleasures, its ambiguity, its (im)possibility. All of which translation owes to other texts, to literary and philosophical (af)filialities, to writings such as those of Paul de Man or Benjamin. Or perhaps not. Or not entirely. For the *question* of translation cannot be derived; its question cannot be counted among the debts the translation owes to another text or texts. As Benjamin is quoted saying in the same text by Paul de Man, translation resembles philosophy; more than any original, it is like criticism, like a theory of literature (82). Which makes Guberman’s crude and vulgar failure – regarding not Kristeva’s text but the question itself – even greater. For despite the writing’s content, despite the original’s affinity with literature, theory, and philosophy – the translation silences precisely the philosophical, critical dimension of its own action, and in so doing, enfeebles, silences – buries the question of Benjamin. This I will propose is its greatest injustice.

Doubtless, the scandalously careless and incompetent transposition harms – and harms greatly – Kristeva’s writing, whose language it trivializes, whose missives it infects with thoughtless imbecility. Or to go even further, it abuses the structural relation – of dependency and debt – that precedes every act of translation. For, as Derrida told us, the original is always already situated as a petitioner, as writing that is lacking, in need of and pleading for translation, to which it would be indebted in advance. And whether this plea does come from the original, whether as writing this last is “deserving,” in need of translation – or not – is not the question. Kristeva’s own text may not be entirely immune this time to the logic of the same apparatus that has produced the translation – the writing machine or industry – but this will not have absolved the translation from what it *owes* to the original. For every *act* of translation appeals to this plea and owing it its possibility, it itself is indebted to it (even if it should only ab-use it).

But beyond this local and very localizable damage to any one particular text – and I have no time to enter this dimension of the question here, but I believe that Lyotard’s distinction between “damage” and “wrong” may well be applicable here – the translation also “wrongs” *us* in that it returns *us* to the question, or rather, returns to us the *question* and hands over the *Aufgabe* – in an infinitely reduced, impoverished, atrophied form. And as it delivers

the question as deprived and the "Aufgabe" as "given up" in advance, the translation also delivers *us* to a deprived, in fact, maddeningly imbecile task: the bitter "criticism" of the translator's work, its negligence, its technico-professional (in)competence.

In other words, the question of Benjamin is returned also with its most recent history effaced or *defaced* (as one would say of a beautiful picture). For this farce or misadventure we should not forget follows the great meditations of Paul de Man and Derrida (this last, who wrote on translation on innumerable occasions, had confessed in 2001 the insolvency of his debt, not to Benjamin's *Aufgabe*, the text and the task, but to the *question* itself);<sup>8</sup> this farcical diminution, asphyxiation of a great question comes after a series of magnificent *writings* – not only by Paul de Man and Derrida but also by Shoshana Felman and Umberto Eco, and even before them, by Borges; writings which have invested the question with great depth and ambiguity, and which – moving closer to the limit – converted the impossible or, shall I rather say, *translated* the impossibility into more and richer writing: a writing relation, a relation to the limit in and by writing.

Is the memory of these texts strong enough to ward off despair? Or on the contrary, it is their memory that will be the cause if we lose our faith? (In the manner of Dostoyevsky's hero, whose cry – "Why some people may lose their faith" – in the face of Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ* Kristeva cites elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>) To delay if not to keep despair indefinitely at bay, I open here a parenthesis for an autobiographical note and reflection: I come to the *practical* question and task by way of a detour, following the theoretical path of Derrida, but also of Shoshana Felman, who in turn both turn to read Paul de Man, himself simultaneously translating and reflecting on Benjamin's great text, itself an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire's verses. It is these great texts that taught me to listen to language with a different ear, for the presence of another tongue

<sup>8</sup> "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" *Critical Inquiry*, 27:2, Winter 2001.

<sup>9</sup> "Why, some people may lose their faith by looking at that picture!" "Holbein's Dead Christ," *Black Sun*, trans. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989, 107.

that, while not quite succeeding to speak within my own, is not entirely silenced by it either. It is also these writings, touching on the limit, converting the im/possible into a unique form of writing, which showed me how no translation could ever suffice to speak in the place and the name of an original. And if I struggled without success to recover, as if from a disease, from my less than rudimentary French, it was in order to better understand the *translations* of Derrida by glimpsing at the irreducible distance of the interval separating me, reading the translation, from the original: its polyphony, its deliberately idiomatic French – as much part of the "philosophy" as the plurality of meanings it simultaneously transports. At the same time, my inept attempts to translate never came into conflict with an almost blind respect for and faith in the work of the translator, such as Peggy Kamuf, on whose guidance they continued to depend.

Suspicion began to spread like a contagion, from a single point, in what is in effect an anonymous re-translation – by "Robert Hurley and others" – of Foucault's great essay, already mentioned, "La pensée du dehors."<sup>10</sup> The error in question concerns not the title (rendered by the same Hurley & Co. as "The Thought of the Outside," faultily I believe, since a thought, especially the thought *of* the Outside, arrives *from* Outside). The flaw that shatters faith in translation itself is one that succeeds with great economy – by changing a comma for a period and removing two "minor" typographical marks – to damage the entire essay, whose first and key sentence the translators gives as: "In ancient times, this simple assertion was enough to shake the foundation of Greek truth: 'I lie, I speak,' on the other hand, puts the whole of modern fiction to the test" (147).

This is not the kind or order of error from which one recovers without aide from the original, which – as Brian Massumi's perfectly

<sup>10</sup> "La pensée du dehors," first published in *Critique*, No. 229, juin 1966, 523-546. The faulty re-translation – whose authors are given only as "Robert Hurley and Others" – appears in the second volume of the *Essential Works of Foucault* – published, under the questionable guardianship of James F. Faubion as editor and Paul Rabinow as series editor, by the Free Press (New York, 1998).

fine translation shows (but what juridico-economic reasons could have justified the editors' decision, not to ignore, but even more scandalously, to "amend" Massumi's faultless translation?)<sup>11</sup> – also uses the power of punctuation to designate, again with great economy, the point in language where language itself bifurcates. It says: "In ancient times, this simple assertion was enough to shake the foundation of Greek truth: 'I lie.' 'I speak,' on the other hand, puts the whole of modern fiction to the test."<sup>12</sup> (As stupid the error may be, it nonetheless gives a rare insight into the dark workshop in which writing is made ready to toe the line, to con-form. For responsibility for the crime, one suspects, lies with a zealous (copy) editor, who, deeming the punctuation – two single quotation marks separated by a period – unorthodox, must have ruled against it to make it conform to one or another guideline – was it MLA? or Chicago? – without once looking back at the destruction left in the decision's wake.)

Closing the parenthesis here, I return to Ross Guberman, who as we have known from the start is not the first, is not alone. For this reason alone, it would be an error to assign him any significant agency, responsibility – in other words, an author-ity. For this same reason, it would also be an error to write *about* him in order to defame him or publicly embarrass him (even though, as we learn from Kristeva's Arendt here, the only embarrassment is *public*.) To limit the question to Guberman's case would be to accept from him the *Aufgabe* in the same – asphyxiated, pitiful, joyless – *form* that he hands it back to us. Yet, the *form*, precisely, that is, the *genre* of the maltreatment of Kristeva's writing, is not something Guberman himself and alone could author; nor is it self-generating, but depends instead on a complex apparatus (itself irreducible to the collective decisions and operations of general, series, acquisition, managing, marketing, and copy editors). In other words, the "author" is a dispositif. And it turns out not only translations but writing; indeed,

<sup>11</sup> As unbelievable as it may sound, the editor's note commits the further injustice of attributing the translation to Brian Massumi himself, adding that it "has been slightly amended" (147).

<sup>12</sup> I am citing here Massumi's original and unamended translation, *The Thought from Outside*, Zone Books, 1987, 9.

it itself is commissioning, commanding, perhaps even, producing writing.

Naturally, the most invisible side of the machine pertains to the writing that we will not see, whether in original or in translation. As Deleuze says, you will not notice that what you don't know about is not there. And one must already feel reasonably at home in another tongue before being able to ask, with some intelligence: what writing is (un)translated? The parochialization or "barbarization" (to use Rousseau's strong formulation of barbarism as staying close to and enclosed by the familiar) of culture, of political, intellectual, but also academic life and discourse, in one language, is visible only when looked at from inside another. (And yet, is this vantage point not also in retreat? Disappearing? Have we not learnt not to notice that in the cinema today every other tongue speaks, or is rather *signed*, by an accented English, mastered at great cost of effort by Hollywood actors, who expect to be admired for it? Are we not also in the process of learning not to notice the absence of thought arriving from such "other tongues" as Arabic, Croatian, Portuguese, modern Greek, or God forbid, Danish? But why go so far away? When so much of Habermas, Carl Schmidt, most of Celan, and even some of Heidegger is still impossible to read in English?) Yet, this inevitable and irremediable myopia, as I have said, can at least be made partially visible to and from a vantage point situated on the outside. French is still a great window to a world closed to monolingual readers of English only. But that other blindness, to that which we cannot and will not read, in any language – is almost absolute. But by aiming our questions at a "who" (who are those who decide about the content of our journals and of our libraries of the future, virtual and material?), or at a "what" (by virtue of what politics, qualifications, affiliations or competence, and in the service of what – politico-economic – interest?), we would only miss the mark, formulate them poorly. (The "Sokal affair," a symptom of our great malaise, should not have been allowed to become a "scandal," that is, to be re-appropriated by the same machine of writing that does not [know how to] read.) For missing from the sight and aim of such questioning would be the *machine* – for which then one writes or translates. For as writers, we may hope for the best, but we know more or less about the machine (which is sometimes quite a lot). In so far as we write (in order to be read), we cannot not know about



its habits, the writing it will feed on or not. Hence it has been wrong for me to propose just now that our blindness in this respect is almost absolute. As unprecedented the *scale* of Guberman's negligence and incompetence combined may be, it does not tell us anything unheard of; we must have suspected that much of the "dark workshop" – to borrow once again Nietzsche's phrase – from which writing emerges *ready-made*, without its body showing the marks of cuts, justifications, adjustments, manipulations by hands other than the writer's.<sup>13</sup>

But if it is not a translator who forgets his debt, but a writing machine that takes hold of an original and, cutting it off from the translation, separates it from its future, deprives it of sur-vival, its "afterlife"; and conversely, if it is the machine that detaches the translation from its origin and, treating it as product, grants it independence, frees it from its debt – then would this new condition not alter, radically, the *Aufgabe* that is *ours*, today? So that the concern and responsibility for the translation could not be left with another text or writer but would have to become task and concern for the *original*. In other words, simply a writing problem. In which case the *Aufgabe* that is uniquely for us today is not to rescue the question from its pitiful state of reduction, to resuscitate it, to restore it to its former splendor, but rather to develop, instead, *writing* strategies that would resist the apparatus, choke it, as it were, with writing that is untranslatable, inappropriable. (But then is not Derrida *already* producing such writing? Is his not precisely

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<sup>13</sup> Ought one be surprised to learn that, when he writes, not even Derrida is free of the machine? That as writer and in writing, not even a figure like him would be free from the logic and calculations of the apparatus? Indeed, is there another economy and drive – other than that of death – at work, animating his *own* very prodigious writing machine? Is he *driven* by another – another logic and calculation – to write? In one of his works translated, we learn from his interlocutor, Vattimo, that "The book we did together in Capri on 'Religion,' to give another example, stemmed from a *publishing initiative*, but there was a *break* between the publisher's *economic and practical idea* and the choice of the theme" (emphases mine, Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferrari, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, 78).

such a writing strategy? At once untranslatable and always already a translation, addressing the reader and its translator, addressing the reader as if she were a translator, thematizing and preparing for – sur-veilling, watching over – its own translation?)

In truth, we have known for some time what and how the machine writes (that it dislikes footnotes, for example; or that it cares not if only 20 percent of the books sold are actually read, and even those not fully). And we would have known it, even if Deleuze did not alert us a while ago, warning that what happens to everything else, to the political, to discourse on and of the political, to the news, to the cinema, to journalism – is also happening to the university and academia, to books, to literature.<sup>14</sup> I therefore close this brief and personal missive by recalling in both languages the words of Deleuze, who, in an interview with Christian Descamps, in 1988 already told us what to expect from the future:

CD: Aujourd'hui, le livre en général – le livre de philosophie en particulier – se trouve dans une situation étrange. D'un côté les tam-tams de la gloire célèbrent les non-livres bâtis de l'air du temps; de l'autre, on assiste à une sorte de refus d'analyser le travail au nom d'une molle notion d'expression...

GD: [...] Il faudrait donc savoir quelle est la place, le rôle éventuel de ce genre de livre, actuellement. Plus généralement,

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<sup>14</sup> A small news item in the French literary magazine *La Quinzaine Littéraire* (Aug 16-Sept. 30 2001, No. 815) reports that in the middle of the last book published by the Italian novelist Luigi Malerba, the reader finds a photograph of the fashion model Megan Gale, selling over 12 pages the glory of the telephone company, Omnitel. Justifying the innovation, the representative of the publisher Mondadori, of the Berlusconi group, appealed to the radical sentiments first made fashionable by academia, calling it a new way of "desacralizing" the book. In truth – as is always the case – this "first" has at least one other predecessor. Fay Weldon, the feminist author, has recently produced a new kind of text. Called "product writing," her book promotes products in the same manner as does Hollywood cinema – by putting into the picture a car, a soft drink, or, as many people know it so well in far away corners of the world, American culture itself, itself a giant product.

il faudrait savoir ce qui se passe actuellement dans le domaine des livres. Nous vivons depuis quelques années une période de réaction dans tous les domaines. Il n'y a pas de raison qu'elle épargne les livres. On est en train de nous fabriquer un espace littéraire, autant qu'un espace judiciaire, un espace économique, politique, complètement réactionnaires, préfabriqués et écrasants. Il y a là je crois une entreprise systématique [...].<sup>15</sup>

CD: Today, the book in general – and the philosophy book in particular – is in a strange position. On the one hand, the tam-tams of glory celebrate non-books concocted from the thin air of fashion; on the other hand, one sees a sort of refusal to analyze people's work, in the name of a hazy notion of expression.

GD: [...] One should thus know what is the place and eventual role of this kind of book in actual reality. More generally, one should know what is currently happening in the domain of books. For several years we have been living (in) a period of reaction in all domains. There is no reason why it should spare books. Some are in the process of fabricating for us a literary space, as much as a judiciary space, an economic and political space – completely reactionary, artificial, and crushing.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Entretien sur *Mille Plateaux*," in *Pourparlers*, Paris: Minuit, 1990, 40-41.

<sup>16</sup> "On *A Thousand Plateaus*," *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 26-27, translation altered.