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# TRANSLATION IN CONCEPTUAL WRITING

CAROLINA MARTES

*After reading an anthology of translation theories spanning from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, from Latin American to European traditions, I noticed a dearth of theory that engages with the in-betweens. The theories in this anthology deal instead with dichotomies: the original and the translation, the writer and the translator, one language and another. This seemed especially problematic to me as a twenty-first century reader considering the current increasingly diasporic, migrational, and flux-driven modes of literary and cultural distribution. This project proposes a praxis (rather than a more static and abstract theory) of translation that responds precisely to these contemporary needs. Conceptual writing here serves as an appropriate case study since it already is performing many of the acts that our praxis provides: breaks from the dichotomies of the translation past. These dichotomies operate within hierarchies (i.e., the writer-genius and translator-imitator), and consequently entail an almost inescapable linear power structure of submission: the translator must receive orders from the master creator; if the creator is masterful enough, there will be a translator to operate under the stipulations of the original.*

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from the master creator, and if the creator is masterful enough, there will be a translator to operate under the stipulations of the original.

Let's uproot translation and enter the rhizome. Building a collage of Gilles Deleuze, Craig Dworkin, Marjorie Perloff, and others, this work will attempt to find a way out from the translation cloister. It does not suppose itself to be an original theory, but rather a reconfiguration of past theories into a contemporary practice. We will investigate the translation of Oulipian, experimental, and conceptual texts as an inquiry into how to translate the "untranslatable." Since this untranslatability is dictated by the texts' break from many of the dichotomies under which translations operate, it will be interesting to see how translators react to this different environment. Will they reign the texts back in to the old dichotomies? Will they be inspired to emancipate themselves from the yoke of the original—to escape the monotony of mimesis? Whatever combinations of answers we find (for they will surely vary), they will serve to better construct emancipating practices in translation.

## Translation Theories

*To translate is to conquer. A true translation must preserve a sense of foreignness. A translation should read fluently. A translator must bring the text closer to the reader. A translation must bring the reader closer to the text. A translation must be faithful to the original. Nothing is translatable. Everything is translatable.*

Translation theories can be compiled into a mess of universal political statements. The contemporary translator finds no right answers in condensed anthologies of translation theory. Overwhelmed by the *embarras de choix*, she opts to set these theories aside as a tool box from which to extract any particular theory that the text demands<sup>1</sup>, making the appropriate choice(s) with the help of her bilingual instinct. Yet even instinct finds itself at an impasse—the translator’s attention is divided in three. She asks: How do I establish a balance between a fidelity to the metaphor (word for word equivalence), the paraphrase (equivalence in meaning), and imitation (equivalence in style and general effect)<sup>2</sup>?

Our theorists offer no response. In fact, our anthology clearly outlines ways in which each one of these three approaches fails as an

individual methodology of translation, for they all inevitably reflect and even exacerbate the intrinsic semantic and syntactical differences of each language/idiom/pidgin, thus making equivalence impossible and analogy difficult. From the seventeenth century onwards, theorists such as Hugo Friedrich felt impelled to offer the resolution: “[...] the art of translation will always have to cope with the reality of untranslatability from one language to another” (Schulte and Biguenet 11). Yet in reality, although one language can portray concepts and words that do not exist in another, the language one speaks does not act as a mental straightjacket limiting content and modes of thinking<sup>3</sup>. As a result, one can speak of the inverse theory, “everything is translatable,” by summoning the universality of human experience manifest through the unlimited transmissibility of thought. Translators (in spite of any theory against it) translate; Friedrich’s (and others’) theory remains in its abstract realm while translators define their field through their practices. But how do these translators act between the everything and the nothing (is translatable)? How do they divide their attention into three methods—all treacherous when practiced in isolation? They do not only divide

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that a text can contain within it the means for its own interpretation/translation. This notion is commonly embraced by deconstruction. Gayatri Spivak, in *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present*, writes: “The challenge of deconstruction is not to excuse but to suspend accusation to examine with painstaking care if the protocols of the text contains a moment that can produce something that will generate a new and useful reading” (98).

<sup>2</sup> From Dryden, John. “On Translation.” Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. *Theories of Translation: an Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Evidence supporting this claim can be found in psychological experiments done by Li & Gleitman, 2002, in which speakers of Tzetzal (a Mayan language with no terms to signify “to the left of” and “to the right of”; they speak instead of cardinal directions) were asked to memorize the order of objects on a table and then to recall them after a 180 degree rotation of the table. The results indicate that Tzetzal speakers are as competent as English speakers at reconstructing the objects taking a left-right perspective, in spite of the absence of corresponding terminology in their language.

their attention; they divide themselves. A set of diagnosis criteria for DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) may help us understand the nature of the translator's division:

- (1) The presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self).
- (2) At least two of these identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person's behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Like the DID patient, the translator struggles to identify a persistent identity in the constant switching between alters developed to suit each original author. Indeed, since the translator's job has been described as the quest towards a transparent (transparency here refers to the hiding of the translator's self in order to allow for the clear visibility of the author's identity) and faithful imitation of the author, the translator is constantly asked to repress herself in order to mimic well (represent as proxy: a becoming-another). Walter Benjamin, in his seminal piece (often read as foundational in Translation Studies), *The Task of the Translator*, elucidates this job description:

Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooden ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one [...] The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. (Schulte and Biguenet 77)

For Benjamin, the translator cannot construct a proper identity; she must echo the author's instead. The "echo" spoken of here resembles an alter-identity built so convincingly ("perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self" like the disassociated

individual) that it becomes real for the creator—yet its falsity is confirmed by the alien setting in which it must remain; the "echo" must be outside the space in which real identities are crafted: creative language, or Benjamin's "language forest." The translator is thus placed on the periphery.

The echoing translator never wins. If the translation strays far from the original, if the translator calls from a spot other than that from where Benjamin's echo gives, the translator must apologize for what is lost in translation. If, instead, the translator manages to utter a perfect echo, she becomes invisible. In a panel on translation, a conversation between Norma Cole and translator Eliot Weinberger invokes this unfavorable situation:

NORMA COLE: But were you not mentioned?  
That is supposed to be a good sign because that means that you haven't intruded on the book.  
ELIOT WEINBERGER: Yeah. But I mean— (Mantis 85)

Weinberger understands the merit of not intruding—yet he hesitates. The quick reply "But I Mean—" recalls a sort of frustration stemming from a lack of recognition. Norma Cole understands his unspoken words and responds: "They don't get that you actually *wrote* the book."

Weinberger seeks to insert his own identity (manifest even literally through his short and impulsive "but I" interjection), yet his translation inhibits it. His transparency paradoxically shows both the efficacy of his translation (in Benjamin's terms) and the undoing of his "I." It seems, then, that to translate well a translator must resist the natural impulse to insert the self into her work, leaving her psychological state close to that of the disassociated patient.

Fortunately, advocacy against this policy of non-intrusion has recently appeared in literary theory. Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translator's*

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<sup>4</sup> "Dissociative Disorders." *DSM-IV-TR® Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Web.

*Invisibility*, observes how preference for transparency in translation has led to a domestication (and an invisible one at that) of all kinds of literary works. He notes how contemporary criticism of English-language translations tends to focus on the degree of fluency of a work, i.e., how idiomatic, uniform, and unawkward it reads. This coveted fluency, Venuti argues, obfuscates the translation process, hiding the “original’s” cultural nuances as it inscribes domestic values into the texts. Venuti asserts that the translator must be visible<sup>5</sup>.

Parallel to this problematic invisibility is the view of translators as actors, who, in order to represent their author accurately, must repress their own personality. This type of translation is “like a pane of glass. You only notice that it’s there when there are little imperfections—scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any. [A translation] should never call attention to itself” (Shapiro, qtd. in Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*). Therefore, the translator’s personality as well as her authorial capacities are repressed; translators are dissociated from their own identities. How, then, do we allow the translator to attain a visible personal identity? How do we cure the dissociated translator?

### **Associating Identities: Curing the Translator**

Conceptualism already proposes some solutions. Conceptualism in art has been defined as a radical movement in which the artist shifts her focus from physical representation to the idea behind a work. Here, we will investigate particular instances of conceptualism that inform the movement as a whole, thus broadening and localizing the definition simultaneously. We will consider conceptualist works that reject representational art, act as spaces for authorial equity, and serve as exercises in translation.

Conceptual art begins by placing the artist at an oblique distance from the work of art. In many cases, the author does not produce a material work of art, instead, she (re)produces the means of the work’s production, i.e., she sets up a concept-machine that possesses the potential for myriad material creations. In other words, contrary to Realist tradition, in conceptualism there is no one-to-one correspondence between the concept and the object. Instead, a sole concept presents itself, giving no limit to the material objects (or even alternate concepts) that can be produced from it. The concept-machine contains within itself all possible pairings of objects and concepts.

This particular mode of production (the concept-machine) establishes the possibility of conceptualism as a democratic space (a place where artist, spectator, and translator can converse since they all share the knowledge of the means of the work’s reproduction). The

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<sup>5</sup> A clear instance of a translator’s visibility appears in John Lee’s translation of *La Disparition*, an Oulipian work by Georges Perec, as analyzed by Alison James in *The Maltese and the Mustard Fields: Oulipian Translation*. Given the impossibility of translating both conceptually and semantically Perec’s re-creation (eliminating the letter “e”) of a common French pangram “Portons dix bons whiskys à l’avocat goujat qui fumait au zoo” Lee opts to translate semantically to preserve the narrative content. Yet immediately after, he inserts his authorial presence by adding a common English pangram with a note: “(viz. a quick brown fox jumps at this lazy dog, as any typist will know, but such a translation would play havoc with our story, wouldn’t it?).”

concept-machine asserts its democracy through its distribution of knowledge: not even the author can exhaust all the possibilities of objects/alternate concepts that can be produced; the author/the reader/the translator can all know the concept equally.

This democratic opening, in turn, permits translators to regain an authorial power in which they can affirm their own identity and *re-present*<sup>6</sup> others simultaneously, an act now made possible thanks to the transformation of the old dynamics of submission and repression into a co-habitation of peers. Within this restructuring of authorial authority, the translator can *re-present* and cease to echo. This opening then raises the question: how do translators *re-present*? Conceptualism can offer an interesting vantage point.

Since in conceptualism the idea is a self-sufficient form, the normal dynamics of representation (invoking a lineal and unambiguous correspondence between sign and object) need not apply. Representational art functions as the pairing of an idea with a subject whereas conceptual art eliminates the need for a meaning-carrying subject. In other words, conceptual art can redirect the arrow that points from concept to subject, leading the concept to refer back to itself. A clear example of this is Robert Barry's piece:

This work has been and continues to be refined since 1969:

It is whole, determined, sufficient, individual, known, complete, revealed, accessible, manifest, effected, effectual, directed, dependent, distinct, planned, controlled, unified, delineated, isolated, confined, confirmed, systematic, established, predictable, explainable, apprehendable, noticeable, evident, understandable, allowable, natural, harmonious, particular, varied, interpretable, discovered, persistent, diverse, composed, orderly, flexible, divisible, extendible, influential, public, reasoned, repeatable, comprehensible, impractical, findable, actual, interrelated, active, describable, situated, recognizable, analysable, limited, avoidable, sustained, changeable, defined, provable, consistent, durable, realized, organized, unique, complex, specific, established, rational, regulated, revealed, conditioned, uniform, solitary, given, improvable, involved, maintained, particular, coherent, arranged, restricted, and presented.

This work engages in an endless and performative loop of recursion (the piece refers to itself exclusively through direct descriptive language; the conceptual language alone builds the piece), thereby preventing the concept from

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<sup>6</sup> A hyphen is here use to distinguish re-present from represent. "Re-present" here denotes another (a second, third) presentation rather than a "representation" which acts as a substitute. Later, the differences between *vertreten* and *darstellen* will be considered.

referring to anything other than the concept. If a material referent were to be constructed from the concept of this work (i.e., a work that does not literally describe itself, but rather enacts its description through signs or figurative language) the artist, spectator, and translator would all have the same authorial power to create it.

Through works like Barry's, readers are released from the representational ties in which individuals are forced to pair the subject in the representational work with the ideologies that interpellate them. These are the dynamics of *darstellen*<sup>7</sup> — the rhetoric of representation as a portrait that corresponds to a reality.

Conceptualism appears as a possible tactic of diversion from *darstellen* and the consequent clichés that might arise from the coupling of metaphors with realities. In proto-conceptual Oulipian works, for example, the constraint is employed as precisely an escape from the ideological clichés of representational art. While it is true that through constraints, authors must repress their egos, the author here is also in charge of this repression; the author wills it. As Jan Baetens explains, the authors [/translators] systematically restrain their emotions in order to set themselves free from the implicit ideologies that inhibit their creativity. In other words, through constraints, authors are forced to not say what they would want to say — automatic regurgitations of the familiar ideologies that inhabit them.

Through constraints and non-representational art, the author/translator refuses

the marketing tautology of the "I" —the "I am that I am" of the healthy person with a static and unique identity. Constraint provide alternative authorial selves<sup>8</sup>, non-representational art refuses homogenizing metaphors that conglomerate identities into bulk categories. Thus, identities can multiply. Indeed, the "I" does not need to verify itself as a hypochondriac would (to perpetually ask and confirm that it is still the same "I"), it can metamorphose and have multiple personalities, but it must be free to author itself, to speak through both the body and utterances. The author/translator must be free to be itself as it represents others.

Before even beginning to represent another, the author/translator's identity already inhabits multiple and multilingual spaces. Luis Camnitzer, a migrant translator, writes: "En mi propio caso, pensando en el Uruguay pero viviendo en Nueva York, las alternativas fueron bastante dolorosas. No sabía en qué idioma trabajar y muchas veces hice obras en ambos idiomas, no sabiendo al final si, en términos legales, estaba produciendo una edición de dos, o dos originales<sup>9</sup>" (Camnitzer 56). Camnitzer explains his pain as a conflict between the "legal terms" necessary to define his production and the inherently hybrid nature of his work. The pre-established divisions of literature by different languages (here, Spanish and English) enforced by publishing houses recall the author to the need to provide an unitary identity of his that does not really exist.

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<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Spivak, in her seminal work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, differentiates between *darstellen* (re-presenting, painting a portrait) and *vertreten* (acting as a proxy) and warns us of the dangers of conflating the two terms.

<sup>8</sup> For an example of a multiplication of authorial personalities through constraints see Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style*.

<sup>9</sup> "In my own case, thinking of Uruguay, but living in New York, the options were pretty painful. I did not know in which language to work, and many times I did works in both languages, not knowing in the end if, I was producing one edition of two, or two originals." (My own translation)

The author/translator need not be frustrated of her in-betweenness. She is by definition exilic, diasporic, and global. Translators can transverse and move across iterations of identities and live outside convenient language categories. This translator is by no means part of an avant-garde movement; she just repeats what is already evident. The translator announces a need for adaptation to the uncategorizable literary spaces (languages, genres, etc.) of the present, and a mutualistic co-habitation between these spaces and the author/translator.

The author and the translator are one. A conceptual work by Adrian Piper titled *Here and Now* materializes this statement by democratizing the spatio-temporal moment of creation. It seeks to distance the ego and present a re-creatable moment of authorship.

		HERE: the square where I am 3rd row from bottom, 3rd from right side.					

The timeless quality of a creative work is here juxtaposed with the *Now* moment when the reader situates herself in a square between squares. There is the precise space where author and reader land—a shared private space. Again, as with Barry’s piece, a non-representational recursive indexicality appears in which a moment

and a place are signified through their conceptual framing (the situation that makes the words true), while the descriptive language allows for its own indexicality (the words that make the concept true). Conceptualism provides information about information and, in this case, Piper points to the moment of the creative act, granting the spectator/author an intellectual tool of authorship rather than a consequential display of emotion. Piper asserts: “the work as such is nonexistent except when it functions as a medium of change between the artist and the viewer<sup>10</sup>.” Indeed, there is no *Here* and *Now* without an author/reader reciprocity, for every time a *Now* is experienced, it refers to the seer’s *Now*, which is inexorably in conversation with (yet not circumscribed by) the author’s trace. Much like Robert Barry’s piece, Piper’s *Here and Now* distributes her authorial power—her cubicle of creation or personal temple—to every single spectator for them to experience and author their own *Here* and *Now* (sometimes starting from the bottom, sometimes from the right).

Here we can start to argue: even if there is an equitable distribution of authorial power, isn’t there a root? Isn’t there an intrinsic value to the original that is confirmed by its chronological primacy?

Marjorie Perloff opened up a new realm of conceptualist criticism by introducing the notion of “unoriginal genius.” After Perloff, “originality” takes a back seat in artistic practice — the advent of the Web and the age of hyper-information have already announced that everyone is potentially an author. In Perloff’s *Unoriginal genius: poetry by other means in the new century*, plagiarism, repetition, and appropriation are given their due place as creative acts. A permutation of the “original” can easily produce another “original.” Likewise, a

<sup>10</sup> Steinmetz, Julia. "The Power of Now: Adrian Piper's Indexical Present." *Art21 Blog*. Web. 27 Nov. 2011. <<http://blog.art21.org/2009/05/07/the-power-of-now-adrian-pipers-indexical-present/>>.



translation can be an original. Acts of dichotomizing and hierarchizing the “original” and the “translation” are no longer relevant. The creative genius of the “original” can be equally present in the “translation,” thereby making appropriation an art form in itself.

We must pause here to note that Perloff’s work posits all unoriginal works to be translations wherein genius can be observed through the process of appropriation (the *translatio*) from one space to another. The work of the “unoriginal artist,” like that of the translator, can be seen in the process rather than in a set of results—since the results are by definition not original. It is not uncommon to see artists, such as Kenneth Goldsmith, who translate text from one space (a twenty-four hour cycle of traffic reports from the radio station 1010WINS) to the other (his conceptualist piece: Traffic) with virtually no manipulation of the “original’s” language. This piece—for the concerns of publishing houses and literary critics, Goldsmith, and the confused reader—is written by Goldsmith, not 1010WINS. Thus, the move enacted by appropriation can be one of a simple (yet critical) intent. 1010WINS says: Only ALL NEWS, ALL THE TIME; Goldsmith asserts: this is art. The intent in Goldsmith, however, is frequently followed by a physical effort: Goldsmith sits down and arduously (as the book is written so it is read) transcribes everything he hears. He physically moves the reports, handles them thoroughly enough to merit the coveted title of author and after, he can announce himself as such. Although Goldsmith comments on how conceptualism is influenced by the advent of the Web to the point that it recreates our predisposition to mimic computers and quickly copy and paste—there seems to be an inescapable arduous physical component to his work. Goldsmith’s body is involved in a long winding process—interestingly slow and tedious in contrast to a copy/paste instantaneity—that

makes the process his own and verifies his intent: “I am the author.”

Perloff’s work affirms the geniality of this appropriative process. Her work artfully overthrows the dominating status of the ‘original;’ she interrogates ‘originality’ and ends up dismissing its dominion in literary criticism. Yet the equally problematic term ‘genius’ seems to pass by unexamined—or else, it is held closely as a nostalgic mnemonic of the old literary regime of the creative and unique genius in a sort of justification of the new with the language of the old. If conceptual writing rejects authorship and seeks to place the artist at a distance from the work, how can we consider the author as “a quasi-mythological personification of an immaterial virtue (genius, in the OED)?” The concept in conceptual art resists a singular personification. Further, the unique place of the genius would be problematic. Will there be many genii, multiplying as each translation takes place? Or will the first, the so-called original rise above again as the genius? To truly escape the old hierarchies, we must discard the imposition of original. We must eliminate the tree structure with one root that vertically produces the whole. The rhizome offers us a more adequate panorama. The rhizome is non-linear, non-hierarchical; it possesses no pre-established paths, and is not reducible to either the one or the all. *Translatio*, even in its etymological origins, constitutes a process, not a result. Real translation consists in entering the rhizome and navigating it. To rhizōō, or to cause to strike root like the rhizome is to open a new path in the Benjaminian forest of authorship.

## **Permutating**

We permute like the rhizome. “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and

social struggles” (Deleuze 7). A permutator (visibly) navigates these connections, organizations, and circumstances, observes them critically, and then makes them evident (again) through creative authorship (which can be as creative as the “original”<sup>11</sup>). We choose *permutation* as a signifier that maintains the transformative quality of movement in *translatio* but also qualifies any transformation as one possibility among many, all holding ties among them but relating to no engendering source. Like the rhizome, a permutation can revert orders and spontaneously burst out alternative (semiotic or literary) paths. Permutating is rearranging horizontally instead of transporting vertically. Permutations always remain critical; they show the process of permutating through their materiality. They reject the normative rules of mechanical translation that designate the distinction between “good” and “bad” translations and embrace permutations as a more free aesthetic practice.

Permutation can occur quietly and unnoticed, as small acts of liberation from the prescribed Benjaminian task of the echoing-translator. Beverley Charles Rowe’s translation of Queneau’s *Cent Mille Millard de Poèmes* is an example of a slip of permutation. This particular oeuvre presents a challenge: it is a work of gargantuan proportions, an unreadable mammoth of 10<sup>14</sup> sonnets. Charles Rowe places it in a felicitous setting: the web. Finally, an infinite number of poems can all occupy the same space, with no imposing sense of hierarchy. The reader can instantaneously manipulate the creative machine (now part of an actual machine) thanks to the possibilities of the web.

Charles Rowe distinguishes himself from the efforts of other translators of Queneau by inserting his own constraints into the poems.

Rowe writes: “More controversially, I have added two extra poems of my own to the set. Their themes are global warming and fashion. This is, of course, entirely optional and you may include or omit the extra poems at any time.” By saying this, the divide between Queneau and Rowe is created by Rowe himself; he prescribes: our conversation will be vertical (the author of the original imposes rules for the translator to follow; the conversation occurs from top to bottom). The new poems are added only tangentially, as an optional setting. The format makes their lack of belonging obvious: two columns are presented side by side: one in English, one in French—Rowe’s creations leave one side abruptly empty.

Why does Rowe strive to aggrandize the author/translator divide? Another passage in the introduction offers some clues: “The difficult line 1 of sonnet 9, which didn’t fit with any of the second lines, I have replaced with a new invention of my own (very arrogant).” Rowe restrains himself from assuming that his texts are more than a translation—that his lines could be seamlessly integrated into Queneau’s. Indeed, the tone is apologetic: “There is a new feature that may not please some but it is quite optional.” He candidly (and maybe even humorously) answers the foreseen indictment: “how dare he compare himself to the great Oulipian artist Queneau?”

The translation strategies used in Rowe’s sonnets reflect the peculiarity of this poet/translator relationship. Firstly, Rowe transforms the sonnets from an Occitanian structure into a Shakespearean one (since the Shakespearean sonnet, he proposes, sounds more natural in English). Yet, the rhyme scheme (abab abab cce dde) and the rhyming sounds are kept in the original. So, we have a complete mélange of an English pentameter with an Occitanian rhyme

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that creative authorship, as we have learned from Perloff, can be demonstrated through uncreative acts.

scheme and English homophones for French rhyme-endings. To make the rhyme scheme of his translation work, he must impose a very strict constraint—his words must reproduce the sound of French phonemes in English (a notably difficult feat that Rowe’s fellow translators avoided). What we can see here is a battle of constraints. Rowe cannot let go of Queneau’s very French constraints, even when it inconveniences his own project—for after all he is *translating*.

An interesting translation strategy used by Rowe is the use of French to translate French (possibly partly due to the aforementioned rhyming difficulties). Rowe translates from Queneau:

*Le cheval Parthénon frissonnait sous la bise du  
climat londonien où s'ébattent les beaux  
il grelottait le pauvre au bord de la Tamise  
quand les grêlons fin mars mitraillent les  
bateaux*

*The Parthenon horse is shivering in the bise  
benumbing London's dandies as they beau  
the flanks protected by chevaux de frise  
when March's hailstones batter the batteau*

The usage of French vocabulary (under the constraint that it appear in an English dictionary, albeit in majority through archaisms) in Rowe is worth noticing, for it surprisingly shies away from repeating Queneau. Instead, Rowe strangely shuffles words and their syntactic functions; French nouns become English verbs and back again. These strategies imbue Rowe’s text with difficulties in lexical comprehension that are also present in Queneau, though in a different way. Indeed, the movement of this “translation” is not unilateral: “les beaux” turns into “dandies” but then reappears in the strange verb “beau.” Words are not moved from one place to another in a straight line but are allowed

instead to dance freely for a while in the space between.

The River Thames poetically transforms into wooden medieval defense obstacles (chevaux de frise) without Queneau’s permission.

Here, in these small moments of un-Queneauian movement, while he ignores what is said in his foreword, Rowe does not apologize: he permutes. He sets up an autonomous concept-machine inspired by—rather than derived from—Queneau’s own; unlike a tree growing vertically from the original concept, Rowe’s concept(s) horizontally sends out shoots which can spread out freely in multiple directions. Mimicking—or mimicked by—this spatial distribution of reproduction; Rowe himself does not situate his authorial capacity below Queneau’s. His “very arrogant” insertion of his “I,” his poems on fashion and global warming, sets him horizontally next to Queneau as an author (/permutator)—a feat impossible for a translator to accomplish.

Then, how do these unapologetic moments in Rowe relate to Queneau’s project? Jan Baetens, in his piece *Free Writing, Constrained Writing: The Ideology of Form*, asserts the importance of the visibility of the constraint (here, the interchangeable sonnet form) in the effort to decrease the separation between reader and writer. The hiding of the constraints represents for Baetens a particular ideology: “an authoritarian strategy, which attempts implicitly to save the dominant role of the author—no longer as the romantic genius of romantic outpouring or impressions, but as the creator of fixed rules” (Baetens 10). Indeed, an Oulipian text does not participate in this authoritarian ideology; it clearly exposes its constraints, and in Queneau’s seminal 10<sup>14</sup> poems the constraints are very transparent. In Baetens terms, this means that Queneau is inviting the reader/translator to assume his own position. Queneau has made possible for a permutator to assume his place as a

creator/explorer of potentials, and to become the writer of one hundred thousand million poems more. In Venuti's terms, Rowe is not invisible. Yet Rowe takes this visibility one step further and establishes himself as both a visible translator and a visible author.

It might seem that allowing the translator the same poetic license that the original carried would result in a misunderstanding, a sort of bastardization of the original. It might also seem that allowing free permutation would devalue Queneau's work to the point of being a mere gimmick — the simple idea of writing a set of interchangeable lines to create an impossible amount of sonnets. However, the permutator, even in his creative independence, does not cease to be a critic. The obsolescent practice of close reading is not dead; it evolves here as a multifaceted exercise: figuratively speaking, one eye roams individually through all the parts of a work while the other is fixed on the originating concept/constraint. Each eye informs the other, and together they create a starting space, a sort of canvas for the permutator. In other words, the canvas for the permutator's creation is a traditional reading that pays close attention to individual words, syntax, structure, space as well as to the productive concept—one giving feedback to the other. Craig Dworkin proposes that there is only one possible base idea, thus, a canvas can only be set upon the retrieval of the idea. Baetens sees the idea as the scaffold of a work that can either be left either obvious to the reader (ideally) or remain hidden. Dworkin says: "In conceptual poetry, the text and its conception are uniquely linked: only one initial scheme could have resulted in the final poem (Against Expression xxxvii). So, according to the

intersection between Dworkin and Baetens, in good conceptual writing the idea will be visible and unique.

This may be so, but are all concepts so easily retrievable? Are they summoned up as an intact unit every single time? Perec's *La Disparition* provides proof to the contrary; the work is built by a variety of concepts. Constraints are placed within constraints (pangrams are developed inside lipograms) in a manner so complex that only a reading that uses both eyes (one watching for the concept and the other reading closely each line of the text) can retrieve them all. A failure in such a reading process can result in a *misinterpretation* of the text, i.e., errors in the retrieval of the text-producing concept and consequently either a "bad translation" or an exercise in neither translation nor permutation. However, such oversights should not be confused with the very different process of *disagreement*. Jacques Rancière defines disagreement as "a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying<sup>12</sup>." Rancière's disagreement opens an authorial space for the translator since she "is less concerned with arguing than with what can be argued, the presence or absence of a common object between X and Y. It concerns the tangible presence of this common object, the very capacity of the interlocutors to present it<sup>13</sup>." A permutation that disagrees is one in which the permutator engages in a conversation with the author as an equal, announcing both a shared knowledge of the concept and divergent authorial propositions on dealing with the former. All permutations by definition disagree to some degree (for with the

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<sup>12</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999. Print.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

reawakening of the permutator's authorial capacity, a shift is made from invisible monologue to visible dialogue. The bipartite observation of the concept allows its complication and permutation).

### **The politics of permutation**

The manipulation of the words of others often results in complex and sometimes problematic distortions in the politics of literature. Conceptual writing's position as a meta-critical process informs the politics of permutation. Historically, with the boom of the illegible, absurd, and conceptual in literature, a need for a criticism to explain and justify this very literature appeared (to make non-representational art more easily representable). This criticism remained close to the art and became part of the art itself, much like a museum's exhibit labels. One must note however, that these justifications and explanations can sometimes annul the breaks from representational art that a work enacts, and become exactly what the work has purposefully left silent. Translation theory has proposed similar excavations of silence: Schleiermacher urged the translator "to leave the writer in peace and move the reader toward the writer<sup>14</sup>." To move the reader toward the writer means to engage in either explication or criticism. Schleiermacher, however, didn't warn us of the potential distortion that this movement allows. Indeed, explication and criticism must be exercised with caution since they can serve to insert radical literatures into the hegemony of mainstream art (an expressly political act that must be acknowledged as such). Perloff's criticism of the unoriginal genius, for example, justifies unoriginality through the creativity of "the genius," an uncontested and

conventional figure in classical literary criticism which clashes against the acclaimed radical and new "poetry by other means."

Despite its potential distortion, literary criticism is ubiquitous within conceptual writing. If, as argued by Perloff, "unoriginal" conceptual writing is direct appropriation with a twist (a new location suffices), isn't that twist often a study, evaluation, and interpretation of the work that it accompanies: in other words, a critique? Indeed, literary criticism is always within "unoriginal" conceptual writing. In fact, the "unoriginal" work sometimes already does the work of the critic, that is: the work explains itself intellectually (directly, rather than metaphorically). In sum, conceptual works direct our ways of reading and exhaust interpretative possibilities through their exposition of unlimited potentials.

In politics, translating can be immensely deceiving. We have recognized the difficulties of moving culturally charged signs in between different cultural spaces and have made a linguistic distinction between "translation" and "adaptation". The problem here is that "adaptation" has made its way back inconspicuously into our "translation" by the name of "cultural translation." Contemporary business consulting firms and translation services assure us that their competitors are lacking, they boast catch-phrases along the lines of: "the others only translate words, but we translate culture." They fall into the trap of homogenization under the guise of corporate accessibility.

While permutations create new "originals," adaptations will always be bound to a convolution of the metaphrase and paraphrase in the source text. Adaptation compromises the politics of the source ("the original") as it inserts another set of politics (Venuti's domestication). While a permutation might not bring to the

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<sup>14</sup> See Hugo Friedrich, *On the Art of Translation*. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. *Theories of Translation: an Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992. Print.

forefront the same politics to which its base text is devoted (because it either creates its own politics or preserves the foreignness or obscurity of the base text's politics) it does not run the risk that adaptation does in manipulating the politics without transparently announcing its own process.

Permutators need not adapt, that is, perform heterogeneous activities within the same identity. In conceptual writing, permutators can resist the beckoning of adaptation through the creation of alternate concepts. An example of such a break in adaptation can be found in the Spanish a-less version (*El secuestro*) of George Perec's e-less *La disparition*. As Perec inserts Rimbaud into his narrative, the writers of *El Secuestro* add "Rimbó"—a homophonic (and of course, a-less) alter ego of the French writer. Rimbaud is not adapted into an equivalent author for the Spanish; instead, he becomes a figment of the in-between—a French man spelled in Spanish. Through this act, the writers of *El Secuestro* refuse an imperialist appropriation. They reject adaptation as they create new and harmonious politics that do not convolute and are not convoluted.

"Rimbó" only exists in between borders. Permutators cross borders until they are rendered obsolete. Although this effort might seem to be utopic, its value lies in the process, not in the result. Crossing borders is not a call to blindness—but to transgression. The borders the permutator crosses are not only regional or national; they are also individual. Crossing individual borders means to reject the autonomy of the genius and enter a community of peers. Permutators, like humans, are not individual trees; they are rhizomes constantly sprouting, intertwining, and making new connections.

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