

## Si er bu si: Translating Translating 85

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*Translating Translating Montréal* Conference. University of Calgary, March 2007.

On appartient à l'ordre messianique quand on a pu admettre autrui parmi les siens. Qu'un peuple accepte ceux qui viennent s'installer chez lui, tout étrangers qu'ils sont, avec leurs coutumes et leurs costumes, avec leur parler et leurs odeurs, qu'il lui donne une *akhsania* comme une place à l'auberge et de quoi respirer et vivre – est un chant à la gloire du Dieu d'Israël. Simple tolérance? Dieu seul sait tout l'amour que demande cette tolérance!

Emmanuel Lévinas<sup>1</sup>

The work I've been doing, which you see here today, I call *books*. They are *Books of transinhalations* of texts by Tang Dynasty Chinese poets (7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> C.E.). In Chinese the combination of breath and translation yields: *qì yì*.

Chinese is perhaps the oldest surviving language on this planet, and one which regards writing as a system autonomous to speech and constitutive of the world around us. Many of the Tang poems, including those of poets known in the west such as Li Bai, Du Fu and Wang Wei, are written in the poetic form known as *juéjù* or perfected sentence. Perfect because an extreme condensation of feeling, sound and vision, limited to 20 characters — a character is a monosyllabic word — and strictly regulated in tones, homophony, imagery and contrasting metaphors. They are works of extremely concentrated energy with an open-ended view of the world.

The difficulty in translating Chinese is to avoid one of two temptations: the traditional English method of domesticating the poems into long lines of lyric sounding more like Shakespeare or Wordsworth — the *Bugu* bird is thus transformed into a robin and the musician plays a lute instead of the *pipa*. On the other extreme, you find the truncated pseudo-sage pidgin English of the Orientalist tradition: “Confucius say...”.

In French, the work of François Cheng has done a great deal to present the structure and sensibility of Chinese by offering word for word (character by character) translations into French. In English, in spite of his distortions and misrepresentations of the Chinese language, we owe much to Ezra Pound's translations, which at least have the merit of having allowed the ancient Chinese voices and visual images to impact English in a way that changed our language forever.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, “Les nations et le temps messianique,” in *À l'heure des nations*.

<sup>2</sup> “Instead of translating fluently, foregrounding the signified and minimizing any play of the signifier that impeded communication, pursuing linear syntax, univocal meaning, current usage, standard dialects, prosodic smoothness, Pound increased the play of the signifier, cultivating inverted or convoluted syntax, polysemy, archaism, nonstandard dialects, elaborate stanzaic forms and sound effects — textual features that frustrate immediate intelligibility, empathic response, interpretive mastery. (Lawrence Venuti, *The Invisibility of the Translator*, p. 203)

In my case, I've relied heavily on Claire Huot's detailed literal analysis of each of the Chinese characters, radicals and phonemes of the original poems to compose my 85s.<sup>3</sup>

Restricting the translation to exactly 85 letters, approximates the original limitation of 20 words in Chinese. The absence of spaces between the words and the alignment from right to left and top to bottom results in a materialization of the letters that reflects the critical role of the visual in the Chinese writing system. But the resemblance of these translations to the original is not a re-presentation. Neither in form nor content have I sought a one-to-one reproduction of the original. In Chinese aesthetic theory, the phrase *sì èr bù sì* means "to look like but not look like." Thus, for example, Chinese landscapes, which we have all seen on scrolls, with their mountain peaks, forests, lakes stacked one on top of the other, and fading into clouds and dragons, are considered *sì èr bù sì*. *Sì èr bù sì* could also be a formula for translation: to capture the *geist* (which is both more and less than the *spirit*) of the original without a word-for-word literal translation.

Curiously and magically, the visual, semantic, aural and spirit resemblance to the Chinese in these translations came for the most part before I had actually engaged with the Chinese. The rationale for adopting 85 letters without spaces between the words came from a profoundly Western tradition: Judaism or, as I prefer to call it in order to distinguish philosophy from religion, Rabbinical thinking. I first dreamt these 85 letter books based on poems by Paul Celan and the *Song of Songs*.<sup>4</sup>

If, historically and increasingly today, the Western world has perceived China, its people, its culture and its language, as the external Other, the Jew has and remains our internal Other. The dirty little secret of Western civilization is that Hebrew, Judaism, rabbinical thinking are an integral part of the very foundation of our civilization. Early Hebrew or Protosinaitic writing is at the origin of Western alphabets, whether Phoenician, Greek, Latin or modern Indo-European. Buried in the beginnings of Western culture, Rabbinical thinking offers a materialist, metonymical, open-ended, rhizomatic and polyvocal view of the world that later Platonic and Christian binary metaphysics has failed, in spite of repeated attempts, to entirely exterminate from the Western unconscious. This digressive, disturbing reasoning resurfaces periodically throughout history. It is called variously, picaresque, satirical, absurdist, avant-gardist, dialogic, psychoanalytic, or postmodern.

It is appropriate then to return to the repressed ancient rabbinical philosophical outlook at the heart and origin of European civilization in order to come face to face with — but without mastering — the Far East in the Chinese poetic tradition. "The name of God, Edmond Jabès reminds us, "is the juxtaposition of all the words in the language. Each word is but a detached fragment of that name."<sup>5</sup> The Rabbinical world view, not unlike the Chinese, regards writing as a system autonomous to speech and constitutive of the world around us. Writing precedes speech.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Claire Huot is a sinologist and author of *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes*, Duke University Press, 2000. A professor of Chinese language and culture, and comparative literature, she served as the Cultural Counselor at the Canadian Embassy to the People's Republic of China in Beijing from 2000-2002.

<sup>4</sup> See "Books from the Burning Building" in *No: A Journal of the Arts*, #5, 2006, New York, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Edmond Jabès, in R. Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 13.

So where does the idea of a book containing 85 letters with no spaces between the words come from? First, let's remember that the text of the ancient Torah scroll contains no vowels, no punctuation, and only the occasional space, or *paracha* (passage), between words.

The letters are equal and equidistant. "The single letter," as Jabès argues, is "the motor of the production of meaning, and at the same time the propagator of what is unknown and exempt of meaning."<sup>6</sup>

Why are 85 letters enough to make a book? Posing the question what is a book in *Le livre brûlé*,<sup>7</sup> Marc-Alain Ouaknin returns to a discussion in the ancient Talmud (*Chabbat* Treatise) to remind us that, even on the Sabbath when work of any kind is strictly forbidden, a holy book must be saved from a burning house, and this even if the book is damaged, so long as it contains a minimum of 85 letters.

Why 85? Chapter 10:35 and 36 of the Book of Numbers, "Whenever the coffer was to travel..." contains 85 letters. The passage is unique in that these 85 letters are separated from the surrounding letters, bracketed by two backward *nounim* (the Hebrew letter n). According to the rabbinical sages, these two marks are meant to identify the enclosed passage as a book in itself. These letters which are not letters (because backward) are the trace of an erasure of the very passage they enclose. The book is at once written and unwritten, out of its place and in it. Displaced. By this metonymical maneuver characteristic of rabbinical thinking, we arrive at the question of what constitutes a book? And the answer turns out to be a minimum of 85 letters!

The subject of these biblical verses happens to be the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Law that Moses brought down from Sinai, the law that governs all meaning. The passage stipulates that the Ark must remain mobile, always ready to travel. To ensure its portability, the poles of acacia that flank the coffer must never be removed. This perpetual movement of the Ark is a metaphor for the continual movement of meaning.

The essence of what we call the book then is this: it contains a minimum of 85 letters and it generates meaning endlessly. The being of the book is forever becoming. The Book is neither object, nor text, nor reader; it is the relation between them. By its non-synchrony, the Book produces a surplus of meaning. As it moves, it moves us. Reading breaks open the contents of The Book. The Book is explosive.

"Poetic autonomy, comparable to none other, presupposes broken Tables... Between the fragments of the broken Tables the poem grows and the right to speech takes root."<sup>8</sup>

What I would like to emphasize here is the gesture of retreat, of humility, of making room for, or "beckoning," as Erín Moure would put it, involved in translation into English. In restricting myself to 85 characters, and in eliminating word breaks, I am whittling my texts in order to concentrate their effect, to the point where each individual letter achieves its own sacred

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Gugliemi, *La Ressemblance impossible*, Edmond Jabès.

<sup>7</sup> Marc-Alain Ouaknin. *Le livre brûlé* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book*.

presence on the page. I am hoping that restraint, reduction, erasure, paradoxically, open up the text to meanings.

This retreat is based in the ancient Hebrew tradition of *Zimzum*. The creation of the universe we inhabit, creation originating with *Ein Sof* or No-one, occurs by *Zimzum*, a process first of inhalation or withdrawal and concentration. Only this retreat makes possible the creation of the 22 letters and their subsequent permutation to produce all the various creatures and forms of being in the universe. In French this inhalation produces *souffle*, in Chinese it is called *qi*. In every case, this writing is a material, physical process of enactment by the body.

I want to return here to the approach to translation the speakers have been proposing here today. Not appropriating the other language, not *using* the other's language to generate *my* work in *my* language, the language let's not forget, of AmeriKa, of imperialism and domination in the world today.

Hence *transinhalation* — withdrawal, restraint, intake of breath — seeks rather to make room for the other. It emphasizes the difficulty of re-presenting the Other in my language, it bends, transforms my language.

Rosemarie Waldrup argues that breaking open words, recombining letters “permits a rediscovery, a rereading of the word. One opens a word as one opens a book.... it is creation in the sense of enacting the possible.”<sup>9</sup>

Reading these books of 85 letters is a process of stuttering, hesitation, echo, of circling back and starting again. The reader is slowed right down, measuring the value of each letter and relations between them. The eye hesitates over the continual enjambment, meaning slips, stumbles, multiplies.<sup>10</sup>

“The letters are without any doubt the root of all wisdom and knowledge, and they are themselves the contents of prophecy, and they appear in the prophetic vision as though opaque bodies speaking to the reader-writer face to face, saying most of the intellectual comprehensions thought in the heart of the one speaking them. And they appear as if pure living angels are moving them about and teaching them to the person, who turns them about in the form of wheels in the air, flying with their wings, and they are spirit within spirit.”

Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, 1280

Robert Majzels  
Calgary, March 8, 2007

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<sup>9</sup> Rosemarie Waldrup, *Lavish Absence*.

<sup>10</sup> To view readers engaging with 85s, see <http://285bungalowdrive.blogspot.com/>