

From *Triling* to Babel

Triling is a series of nine poems that evolve through three languages. Each trilingual poem exists here in a shape with three facets (French, English, German), which are connected by processes of self-translation seeking a poetic metamorphosis. It tries to extend Walter Benjamin's metaphor on the task of the translator towards creation: "to make the seeds of pure language grow within translation¹". A model for a triling poem could be a changing three-dimensional hologram.

At the beginning of *Triling* I thought of using electronic translators, but obtained only dull results. The errors of these machines induced some comical but monotonous transformations. So, speaking three languages moderately, I decided to translate myself and to increase consciously, with each passage of translation, the morphological, syntactic, semantic, rhythmic shifts. A new poem was materializing, not a translation but a facet of the same matrix, related and different.

To compose a triling, I construct a first poem of 18 French verses. Then I transpose it into English, not line-by-line: the verses are reorganized according to the music and the semantics which emerge from the English facet. Then, similarly, I transpose the English verses (not the French) into German and obtain the German facet which has moved further away from the French facet. Finally I return to work on the French text, taking into account events which have appeared in the two other languages. One cannot really speak anymore of an original text or of a target language, the three idioms follow one another in cycles and undergo back-and-forth transformations between one another and inside themselves.

This work is a mix of experimental translation, self-translation and multilingualism. Let us stay here within the field of poetry — where the question of translation is crucial — but, for some contexts, let us consider one minute the bilingualism (Latin/national language) of the European literates in the Middle-Ages, and, in the 21st century, India with its twenty-two literatures in twenty-two official languages and 7% trilingual inhabitants. Now we can also remember polyglot texts like the hybrid verses of the Grand Rhétoriqueurs, Italian baroque macaronic poetry, the Arab-Andalusian muwashshah or some book-poems by Khlebnikov, Joyce, Pound and Sanguineti, as well as the homophonic English translation of Catullus by Louis Zukofsky. Today where the mobility of speakers on this planet, and of languages in the internet, is greater and faster, the positions in the art of language move too².

The German Oskar Pastior translated Petrarca, then transformed his translation, which in a second or a third version, almost completely escapes its model³.

Among the rare authors who translate themselves, Samuel Beckett did not want to reproduce exactly the same text⁴.

The Italian Amelia Rosselli wrote her poetic diary intermingling three tongues⁵, and the Flame Paul Claes transposed a short cycle of his poems into seven languages⁶.

Poets are undoubtedly more sensitive to the passages of translation in the areas where languages and dialects are complementary. The Italian Michele Sovente⁷ translates himself in three idioms (Italian, Neapolitan, Latin: artificial trilingualism), and the Alsatian André Weckmann proposes three different versions of his poems in the same book (Alsatian, French, German: real trilingualism)⁸.

A member of the OuLiPo, Jacques Jouet, has travelled through Europe by train, and written French poems in which he permuted each time three foreign words offered to him by the speakers he met in each country⁹.

A typical form of collaboration between poets of different languages currently takes place in the fluidity of the Internet. E-mail texts are answered, translated, metamorphosed. This creates new poems and brings the common work further. Frédéric Forte and Ian Monk exchange short French and English poems in an enigmatic way¹⁰. Birgit Kempker and Robert Kelly intertwine their correspondence about shame in a dialogic German-English poetic prose¹¹.

Anyway the idea of experimental translation with a poetic goal is now more widespread, it is enough to see the diversified contributions to the babelian issue of the American magazine *Chain* on this topic¹².

In the same way the rewriting of classical poems is renewed with the filtering translations of Benedikt Ledebuch¹³, or the transpositions out of foreign German or remote German into a different German by Franz Josef Czernin¹⁴.

Bénédicte Vilgrain, it seems, grounds her poetry on her transposition of examples found in a Tibetan grammar, adding to it some sounds of this language¹⁵. And my second project of experimental self-translation *Rêve : Mèng* tries to develop a monosyllabic tonal French out of my cranky Chinese writing¹⁶.

Finally, the adventurous experiments with translation in some magazines of literary creation present the works in progress. This leads us to the open project of a "Poetry of response", between creation and translation, in the Australian magazine *Jacket* on the internet¹⁷.

It seems to me that the double concept of self-translation as poetic metamorphosis is still neglected, and I wanted to systematize it. Some interesting poets use it to publish in another country, but the results mostly appear in the destination language only. In *Triling*, a superficial reading evokes source texts transformed by translations as small, ornamented and linear Rosetta stones, but the final poem in three languages remains crossed by dynamic microprocesses which can be connected in different manners, if one reads successively the three whole facets which make a complete triling, or only some parts alternately from one language to another, between two languages or between the three of them. This last type of reading is encouraged by the three italics which traverse each facet. They show how a segment of sentence changes in each language, or how it becomes autonomous.

Although the author really had to speak these three languages in his geographical biography, joining together three tongues in a poem, where each one expresses a different aspect, can also be seen as the nostalgia for a hypothetical proto-world idiom or for an ideal "pure language" as point of convergence of all idioms¹⁸, in order to open poetry to a surplus of meaning, counter the curse of the confusion of languages and exemplify the

current multilingualism in the art of language. As for the question of knowing if the author really writes in several tongues, which is a justified dream of many translators in love with their language of predilection, one could say that the poems written here do not function on the same level as those of native poets but that they offer an estranged idiom, readable enough for speakers of these vernaculars. And in a retroaction the mother tongue looks a bit foreign too (disturbingly unfamiliar?). *Triling* is then dedicated to the “imperfect” polyglots crossing the borders of Babel.

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NOTES

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