



# “I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m’étonnerait pas”: Self-Translation and the Construction of Sexual Identity

## « I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m’étonnerait pas » : auto-traduction et construction d’une identité sexuelle

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### Article abstract

In this paper I would like to explore the work of five bilingual writers focusing on the different narratives they develop in their use of (self-)translation as a textual strategy to fashion a sexual persona. Julia(e)n Green’s *Le langage et son double/The Language and its Shadow* and Louis Wolfson’s *Le Schizo et les langues* create narratives of severance and disjointing. The self-translational activity is used here to create perfectly separated spheres of (sexual) identity. Raymond Federman’s *A Voice within a Voice* and Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Between*, on the other hand, develop narratives of merging and mixing. The self-translating activity is viewed as a constant shifting and moving of sexual roles taking place in a sphere outside the conscious control of the writer. The final part of the paper will be dedicated to a discussion of Abdelkebir Khatibi’s *Amour bilingue* that fictionalizes the functioning of bilingualism and self-translation in terms of sexual roles, introducing, this way, a post-colonial dimension missing in the other texts.

# “I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m'étonnerait pas”: Self-Translation and the Construction of Sexual Identity

Rainer Guldin

Alors le vieux mythe biblique se retourne,  
la confusion des langues n'est plus une punition, le sujet  
accède à la jouissance par la cohabitation  
des langages, *qui travaillent côte à côte*:  
le texte de plaisir, c'est Babel heureuse.

- Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, 1973

The *alternating* under-current of the *sub-altern's* language  
*ad-ulterates* (mongrelized) the *over-altern's*  
rhetorical master code, by committing  
incestuous intercourse (*ad-ulterium*) with  
the colonizer's imposing mother's speech...

- Haroldo de Campos, *The Ex-centric's Viewpoint:  
Tradition, Transcreation, Transculturation*, 2005

To speak different languages, to write in different languages and to translate oneself generally involve duality, division, discord. This inner tension and the answers it calls for have been described by bilingual writers, according to their specific social and cultural plight,<sup>1</sup> in most contradictory terms: a painful experience bordering

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1 Cultural and biographical context are absolutely essential for the way in which a multilingual setting is perceived. Compare Samia Mehrez who stresses the difference between George Steiner's and Abdelkebir Khatibi's view of their trilingual origin (Mehrez, 1992, p. 121).

on madness, a hazardous, but fundamentally creative endeavor or a liberating possibility of breaking up and reconstituting one's identity. In this paper I am going to explore some of the roles self-translation plays in the definition and development of identity, focusing on its specific use as a textual strategy to fashion a sexual persona. I have used the concept of self-translation in the broadest sense possible: as an internal, mental activity, a bilingual rewriting-process and a form of rearranging one's sexual identity.

This paper deals with three specific narratives: first of all, narratives of severance and disjuncting, describing the indispensable but impossible task of coming to terms with the two irreconcilable sides of one's sexual identity; secondly, narratives of merging and mixing, viewing the self-translating activity as a playful interaction of sexual roles; and thirdly, a narrative about a possible way out of duality by opening up to a third dimension animated by the idea of cultural, and possibly sexual, multiplicity. The single authors and works have been chosen mainly on the basis of their exemplary formal significance for the subject under discussion.

### **The Gender and Power Metaphorics of Translation**

In her seminal paper about the gender metaphorics of translation Lori Chamberlain (2000, pp. 316f.) distinguishes between two irreconcilable forms of fidelity: the source-oriented fidelity of a male author-translator to the original female text and the target-oriented fidelity to his own feminine mother-tongue. In the first case the translator must avoid making the new text too beautiful, lest he betray the original. In the second, as the substitute father of the new text to be born through translation, he must be true to his mother-tongue in order to avoid producing illegitimate offspring, protecting, thus, the target-language from any vilification. These two coexisting roles can in some cases enter into open antagonism with each other: the call for fidelity to the mother-tongue, for instance, can justify abuse, rape or pillage of the other language and the translated text. In the imaginary triangle of author, text and translator the latter must either usurp the author's role or appear as a dangerous seducer. In both cases issues of paternity and the importance of the reputation—that is,

the chastity—of a feminized original text are absolutely essential. Another, perhaps even more important aim of this discourse is to assign the danger of infidelity and the questionable role of the seducer to the translational side alone, so as to make it practically impossible for the original and its author to be in any way guilty of infidelity.

As Rosemary Arrojo pointed out (1999, p. 142), the asymmetrical gender relation implied here is closely related to the power divide at work in colonial situations. In this view the translator is not only equated with a woman because of the allegedly reproductive side of his activity, but also with the slave and the subject of colonization, both forced to live a life in translation, that is, a secondary, imitative existence dominated by the values of the mother-land. In sexual terms: the inaugural narratives of colonial settings tend to stress the vulnerability of the weak feminine exploited nature of the subaltern culture and the complementary maleness and invulnerability of the dominant one. The relation between the two is conceived in terms of rape and violence. Lori Chamberlain has discussed this point with reference to George Steiner's hermeneuticist model (Steiner, 1998, pp. 312f.) involving a four-part process of translation. The second step is "overtly aggressive" (Chamberlain, 2000, p. 320) penetrating and capturing the foreign text.

In the case of self-translation these clear-cut divisions break down as author and translator happen to be the same person. In this unstable context where gender and power-roles have lost their unilateral meaning one is constantly forced to betray oneself in order to remain true to oneself. Even so, some bilingual writers have taken up the gender-metaphorics preeminent in the field. "Être bilingue, c'est un peu comme être bigame: mais quel est celui que je trompe?" (Triolet, 1969, p. 84) asks Elsa Triolet, pointing out the fundamentally self-contradictory dimension of bilingual writing, its self-destructive, if not self-abusive aspect. Triolet reasserts the traditional idea of illicitness with regard to the act of bilingual writing establishing the inalienable right of a first marriage, that is, the relation to a male mother-tongue which is seen as the original legitimate sexual partner of the author. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, Vladimir Nabokov uses the metaphor

of adultery, again gendering the triangular relation of a male author to his two female writing-languages. "I have lain with my Russian muse after a long period of adultery and am sending you the poem she bore." (Klosty Beaujour, 1995, p. 97) Legitimate offspring is only possible when the male author has had sexual intercourse with his first lawfully wedded wife.

### **Irreconcilable Duality: Narratives of Severance and Disjointing**

Julien Green's novel *Si j'étais vous...* is an attempt to reconcile sexuality with ideas of identity through the very act of writing (Armbrecht, 2003, p. 260). Fabien, the protagonist of the story, wants to escape himself in order to become more masculine. To achieve this, he slips into someone else's body. The magic formula that allows him this metamorphosis is his proper name, the two syllables 'Fa' and 'bien': "ces deux syllabes [...] vous désignent et d'une certaine façon vous emprisonnent." (*ibid.*, p. 262) The conflict is thus dramatized as a passage from one identity into another made possible by language. Green's oeuvre, and the novel just mentioned is paradigmatic in this sense, is determined by his obsession with two opposing forces: body and soul. This conflict or 'psychomachia', as Thomas Armbrecht called it, must be seen as an attempt to come to terms with one's homosexuality in an era pre-dating gay liberation movements. The act of writing not only documents Green's negation of his homosexual desire, it is the very way that enables him to reject it. The point I want to make here is that this specific conflict is also unconsciously acted out in Green's self-translational activity.

Green was born on 6 September 1900 in Paris of American parents.<sup>2</sup> Although strictly speaking his mother-tongue was

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2 His mother was from Savannah, Georgia, and his childhood was imbued with nostalgic stories about the South and the regret of having lost the Civil War. She died when he was fourteen. Green described the English language as "langue ombilicale" (Green, 1987, p. 9). Despite this he speaks of his instinctive love for the French language, especially its sound. This is also the language through which he assimilated most of his cultural values in the early years at school. His mother spoke to him only in English: "I had great trouble in learning that language.

English, he grew up in a French environment and had problems pronouncing his mother-tongue properly. Because of this double identity he was given two different names: at home he was Julian, outside Julien. "My own name would also cause me to lose myself in endless reveries." (Green, 1987, p. 210) Green always perceived his English self as a secondary, borrowed identity. One of his favorite metaphors for translation is dressing up in another tongue. The French self, on the other hand, represented the true inner voice, the call to artistry and spiritual life (*ibid.*, p. 14). The two languages run parallel to each other and do not mingle; they are separated by an invisible wall that has to be made transparent in order to be crossed each time a translation takes place. "(...) I am more and more inclined to believe that it is almost an impossibility to be absolutely bilingual. (...) What I mean is that a man may speak half a dozen languages fluently and yet feel at home in only one." (*ibid.*, p. 166) And: "(...) Il ne peut y avoir d'équilibre parfait que l'être intérieur ne penche d'un côté." (*ibid.*, p. 384) The possibility of hybrid texts and the danger of "traces of foreign infiltration" are therefore vehemently condemned. Green uses military metaphors to describe the border-transactions taking place during self-translation: a language has to protect the "weakest points" in its "line of defense"; any true translation must avoid that "the last retrenchments are taken." (*ibid.*, p. 212)

The bilingual edition of Green's *Le langage et son double/ The Language and its Shadow*, published in 1987, consists of a series of parallel French and English texts, mainly written between

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(...) my mother was trying to make a sort of duplicate of the Universe (...)." (Green, 1987, p. 206) On 27 December 1914, Green's mother died. In 1916 he enrolled into the American Field Service on the French front and converted to Catholicism. In 1919 he decided to become a Benedictine monk. In the same year he decided to travel to America and to start studying at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. There he discovered the South his mother had told him about. He fell in love with the country, its language and a young American by the name of Mark, discovering his homosexuality. He wrote a short story in English which was published in 1920. Back in France in 1922, after having given up his studies, Julian became Julien again. Green wanted to become a painter but ended up becoming a French writer.

1940 and 1945. Even though some texts were originally written in French and then translated into English, the main corpus consists of English texts that Green translated into French.<sup>3</sup> Michaël Oustinoff called Green's form of self-translation 'autotraduction naturalisante' (Oustinoff, 2001, pp. 29f. and 36f.):<sup>4</sup> the translator's work has to leave no traces, carefully weeding out any possible interference with the source language. "Words being like persons in French and in English [have] to be treated in a different way in each language." After his arrival in the United States in 1940 he decided to write a book about France and its cultural heritage. He began in French, but after ten pages decided to begin anew by translating his own sentences into English. "(...) on rereading what I had written [I] realized that I was writing another book (...). It was as if, writing in English, I had become another person. (...) There was so little resemblance (...) that it might almost be

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3 Out of the 14 texts listed only the first (1923 and 1924) and the last two (1962-64 and 1975) were first written in French and then translated into English.

4 Oustinoff distinguishes four phases in Green's self-translational activity. First phase (1919-1922): Green publishes *The Apprentice Psychiatrist*, he begins in 1922 a second book *Christine* that he finishes in French and publishes in 1926. Second phase: *William Blake* (1923) written in French and published in French first, but translated simultaneously in English. After 1924 self-translations become very rare. Third phase (1940-46): Green is back in America; several texts are first written in English and then translated into French. Fourth phase: the publication of *The Language and its Shadow*. Green's deliberate choice of a generally accepted form of translation might be seen as a further signal of his attempt at normalization. This, however, is only partially true as a systematic comparison of the two versions of the above mentioned text clearly shows that in several instances whole significant passages have been added or left out (see for instance Green, 1987, p. 159: "renaître en quelque sorte dans une autre langue."). In the French translation a significant, highly revealing sentence with a sexual innuendo referring to a sense of culpability—succumbing to one's passions—is left out: "It was an eighteen year old boy, who was unable to master his desire to look into the abyss, and had fallen." (*ibid.*, pp. 332-333) A further passage missing in the earlier English version: "(...) dans les moments dramatiques mes pensées profondes se manifestent en anglais. Ma langue maternelle, j'allais écrire naturelle, resurgit." (*ibid.*, p. 167)

doubted that the same person was the author of these two pieces of work.” (Green, 1987, p. 174)

Throughout his life Green stressed the moment of absolute partition between the two languages informing his mind, using self-translation as a means to keep them separated. In *Le langage et son double* a note added to the title bears witness to this schizophrenic split and to the twofold character of the book itself: “Julian Green traduit par Julien Green.” Raymond Federman, on the other hand, writes: “(...) I have often considered writing a book in which the two languages would merge into one another. On the cover of this book (...), it would say, translated by the author, but without specifying from which language.” (1993, p. 83)

In the course of self-translation then Ju-lian becomes Ju-lien. The separation between the two languages and the two sides of Green’s identity are reduced, thus, to a minimal but decisive, because irreducible phonetic difference. As with Fabien in *Si j’étais vous ...* the name allows a passage from one self to the other. This difference represents the prison house on which Green’s personality is built, the impenetrable wall keeping the two sides of his sexual identity safely apart. Each time a translation takes place the sides of the self are both separated and connected creating a double persona in the process, the essential aspect consisting in the self-translational movement itself which breaks down the wall in order to cross it, but only to make it higher and stronger.

A comparable but highly idiosyncratic use of self-translation can be found in Louis Wolfson’s *Le schizo et les langues*. Wolfson’s self-translational activity is a fight against his hateful English mother-tongue, strictly speaking the language of his mother. The translation protocol he adopts is based on the principle of phonological proximity, as well as on semantic and etymological similarity. Most important are the consonants as they seem to carry all of the hurtful potential of the words penetrating him through all sensorial channels. The distressing and disturbing English words have to be stopped from entering through eyes and ears by immediate conversion into German,



Russian, French or Yiddish.<sup>5</sup> If they do manage to penetrate the defensive system they rebound and reverberate painfully in his echolalic brain. Straight translation does not convey him any pleasure: the deformed English words have to be restored. To accomplish this, single sentences are broken down into words which are then dismantled, dismembered, destroyed and subsequently reconstructed within the vigilant consciousness of the self-translator. "(...) mots (...) en quelque sorte déformés et qui pourraient ou devraient être restaurés par lui." (Wolfson, 1997, p. 175)

In Wolfson's vision the overall system of bodily orifices has been assigned complex complementary roles. The schizophrenic language student, as he calls himself, tries to stop English words uttered by his mother's loud voice, from penetrating him, not only by constant translation, but also by putting his fingers into his ears, listening to the radio, muttering sentences in other languages or by reading texts in other languages, fighting and substituting the flow of spoken English words with the words on the page. Another endangered entrance is the mouth. The systematic blocking out of English words is associated with spells of ravenous feeding. The dangers involved here are the penetration of the filthy larvae of parasites or their eggs when the ingested food happens to touch the lips. On the other hand there is always the dangerous necessity of having to read the English writing on the packages. Feeding and translating are described as fundamentally opposed yet complementary activities. The feeding frenzies which can last several hours are characterized by orgiastic behavior. Food is randomly swallowed mostly without any chewing. The English words, however, are picked clean to the bone: "désir de démembrer ces premiers, et de gauche à droite, en les désossant pour ainsi dire, en les dépouillant de leur squelette (les consonnes)." (*ibid.*, p. 138)

Interestingly enough the narrator insists on his preference for rectal coition administered by a woman, injecting some

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5 Sometimes an English sentence is translated into a multilingual string (Wolfson, 1997, p. 138).

cleaning liquid into his anus. The female sex, in a sort of inversion, is seen as a “tube de caoutchouc graissé.” (*ibid.*, p. 116)<sup>6</sup> The anus must therefore be considered the other side of the mouth. Both orifices are characterized by an obsessive moment of eroticism and loss of self-control. “(...) une obsession érotique, à propos des irrigateurs de l’orifice postérieur du canal alimentaire.” (*ibid.*, p. 116)

In order to avoid any psychic stress Wolfson aims at turning his self-translational activity—“cérémonial de transformation” (*ibid.*, p. 138)—into a mechanical routine, an instant reaction, comparable to the automatic transformation of an unstable chemical component. This wish of becoming a machine is mirrored in the description of his feeding frenzies: “une machine mangeant automatiquement.” (*ibid.*, p. 49) The sexual identity constructed in the process is based on a strict management of flows leaving and entering the orifices of the body and on a tight translation protocol regulating their exchange. A structural parallelism between the lack of unity of the schizophrenic’s dissolving identity and the fate of the single words, translated outside any context, may be detected. Wolfson’s self-translation would thus construct a double physical and linguistic body without organs.<sup>7</sup>

### **Playful Bisexualism: Narratives of Merging and Mixing**

Raymond Federman, son of a Jewish artist, was born in Paris in 1928. He lost his family in Auschwitz and migrated to the USA in 1947. His bilingualism has, thus, a tragic existential dimension. In his *The Bilingualist* that describes the relation of the two languages he writes in, in sexual terms, he deliberately eschews any specific gendering:

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6 The word ‘caoutchouc’ is related to the sexual organ of the narrator, who masturbates together with a prostitute: “(...) toujours sur le dos et jouant nerveusement avec sa verge toujours dans le contraceptif en caoutchouc laquelle ne voulait plus s’ériger” (Wolfson, 1997, p. 105).

7 Compare also Deleuze’s foreword to Wolfson’s book (Wolfson, 1997, pp. 5-23).

To answer the question I'm always asked [voyons réfléchissons] No I do not feel that there is a space between the two tongues that talk in me [oui peut-être un tout petit espace] On the contrary [plus ou moins si on veut] For me the one and the other seem to overlap [et même coucher ensemble] To want to merge [oui se mettre l'une dans l'autre] To want to come together [jouir ensemble] To want to embrace one another [tendrement] To want to mesh into the other [n'être qu'une] Or if you prefer [ça m'est égal] They want to spoil and corrupt each other [autant que possible] [...] More often they play with one another [des jeux très étranges] Especially when I am not looking [quand je dors] I believe that my two tongues love each other [cela ne métonnerait pas] And I have on occasions caught them having intercourse behind my back [je les ai vues une fois par hasard] but I cannot tell you which is feminine and which masculine [on s'en fout] Perhaps they are both androgynous [c'est très possible]. (Federman, [www.federman.com/rffict12.htm](http://www.federman.com/rffict12.htm))

In this passage the idea of fluidity is accentuated by a constant change of languages and the complete absence of punctuation. Even if the languages are attributed a personality of their own and their relationship is seen in sexual terms, Federman deftly avoids the dualistic simplifications of the meta-narrative preminent in the field, suggesting, however, that the playful intercourse of the two languages taking place outside the writer's conscious control has a transgressive side to it. The poem stages the co-presence of two different independent languages commenting upon the writer's bilingual situation. This linguistic duality is complemented by two different first-person narrators. The passage from one to the other is abrupt and unpredictable making it impossible to decide which of the two, respectively four, narrative instances is actually in power.

As Federman pointed out in *A Voice within a Voice*, in a bilingual writing situation things get constantly mixed up: "I think and I dream both in French and in English, and very often simultaneously. That, in fact, is what it means to have a voice within a voice. It means that you can never separate your linguistic self from its shadow." (Federman, 1993, p. 77) Federman's self-translational activity is bent on contaminating the syntactical and semantic texture of the two languages. Instead of preserving

their purity he uses them to actively corrupt each other, like two children left alone in a playground, seducing each other to forbidden sexual games: two or more interlinked, overlapping and mutually merging identities, cross-fertilizing each other in a series of self-translation processes. In his bilingual text *La Voix dans le cabinet de débarras/The Voice in the Closet* (Federman, 1979) that narrates in part the story of Federman's own miraculous survival from Nazi-persecution, the author's two representatives in the text are 'Namredef' (the reversed Federman) and 'Moinous,' the plural voice of the bilingual author. "Perhaps my French and English play in me in order to abolish my origin. In the totally bilingual book I would like to write, there would be no original language (...) only two languages that would exist (...) in the space of their own playfulness." (Federman, 1993, p. 84)

The main character of Christine Brooke-Rose's multilingual novel *Between* is of trilingual origin, with a life-story situated somewhere on an imaginary frontier between French, German and English. This, together with her job as a simultaneous translator in the world of international conventions, introduces a sense of disorientation in her rootless nomadic existence. As Brooke-Rose pointed out in an interview: "(...) she just doesn't know who she is, she is always translating from one language to another and never quite knows to which language she belongs (...) And that kind of disorientation is very personal to me. I was brought up in a trilingual family." (Friedman/Fuchs, 1995, pp. 31-32) The multi-linguistic passages of the novel reproduce this sense of loss for the reader forced to move from language to language as the main character of the book. As in the case of Federman, even if the author has opted for English as her main means of literary expression, the different languages are not arranged in a hierarchical pattern as in Green's, Wolfson's or Khatibi's case.

The loss of identity through translation and travel, though, is only one side of an overall situation set between two extremes: on the one side, the pleasurable crossing of boundaries and the creative use of languages, twisted and used against themselves in the process of code-switching and translation and, on the other, the nightmare of a world made up of unconnected elements

drifting apart in a whirl and jumble of topics and jargons. The novel begins and ends on the same formula—‘between the enormous wings’—suggesting that we never leave the plane of language. With the small difference, however, that in the first case it is the body of the plane and in the second the body of the translator herself. The protagonist hovers in an interstitial space comparable to the plane enclosing and transporting her from place to place. Both are vessels, containers, and act as shuttles between cultures.

In a first version of the book that was subsequently rejected Brooke-Rose conceived of the main character as an androgynous traveler. She abandoned it, realizing that translating and the passivity of circulation of a female body transported across national borders had to be linked to a female protagonist. The gendering of the main character suggests that successful translation implies loss of identity, the translator becoming a mere conduct through which languages circulate freely. Translation becomes, thus, the central metaphor for loss of place and identity in an increasingly globalized world dominated by the frightful fluency of the unchecked circulation of signs. The myth of androgyny, as the successful summing of contrary elements into a harmonized whole seemed therefore to suggest a deceptive freedom and a wrong sense of completeness.

Although the translator is female her gender markings are unmoored. Furthermore the narrator’s identity is unstable and uncertain. To stress this, Brooke-Rose has used, nearly throughout the whole book, a narrative form that may be called ‘free direct discourse,’ being neither a first, nor a third-person, but an unspecified ‘you.’

The main character is a crossroad, the central consciousness in which the different languages meet, a vessel crisscrossed by flows of words unfixing her identity.<sup>8</sup> She is a

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8 For a different kind of reading of the relation of traveling, translation and sexual identity compare Larkosh, 2006, pp. 297-298.

woman of uncertain age and “uncertain loyalties,”<sup>9</sup> an ambiguous figure, an “alonestanding woman” (Brooke-Rose, 1986, p. 444), echoing the German ‘eine alleinstehende Frau,’ only partially hidden in the incomplete translation that again points to her intermediate, hybrid state in between languages. Some aspects of her personality suggest a refusal of feminine role-models. In the midst of sadness and isolation she enjoys the ambiguous independence of the ‘Junggeselle,’ the eternal bachelor (Simon, 1996, p. 65), escaping the entrapments of family and child-bearing, opening up to independence and creativity. On a bicycle-trip with her German lover<sup>10</sup> to a church in Rothenburg she comes across a figure summing up her predicament: “a frail skeletal nun in a glass case. Heilige Munditia. Patronin der alleinstehenden Frauen.” (Brooke-Rose, 1986, p. 490) This meeting, repeated two more times in the course of the novel sums up one side of the equation: images of absence and emptiness in the midst of overabundance.

In describing the erotic interconnectedness of the different languages in the narrator’s mind Brooke-Rose makes use of Federman’s incestuous metaphor. The description shifts from the bodies of language to the bodies of the main character and her German lover, both pleasurably intertwined. In this instance the overabundance of free-floating signs does not lead to indistinctness and vagueness but to a joyful playfulness in the midst of promiscuous excess: words and organs unbound, liberated from hierarchical totalizing concepts fraternize freely.

As if languages loved each other behind their own façades, despite alles was man denkt darüber davon dazu. As if words fraternised silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication,

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9 In two instances—first by the German Nazis and after the war by the allied military forces—she is questioned as to her willingness to pledge allegiance to the government she works for as a translator.

10 The translator moves from her German to her British lover the same way she transits from language to language (compare Lawrence, 1995, p. 82, and Brooke-Rose, 1986, p. 437).

inside the bombed out hallowed structures and the rigid steel glass modern edifices of the brain. Du, do you love me? Du, dein Bein dein Brust dein Belly oh Christ in Rothenburg gem city between the sheet and the tumbled sheeted eiderdown amid the central heating and the wooden paneling. (...) thin white lines man feels as an abstract study in seduction man performs with the precision of the mouthpiece eyes voice hands over limbs that find each other delicious on a creaking bed somewhere along the Romantische Strasse in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication (...). (Brooke-Rose, 1986, pp. 447-448)

Sexual translation, implying again both words and limbs, as with Wolfson, is conceived as a secret meeting on equal footing, unhampered by the constraints of family-life. Instead of imploding and drifting apart within the brain of the narrator words happily fornicate within “the same cell.” (Federman, 1993, p. 77) This idea recalls a comment by George Steiner on Nabokov’s multilingual work. According to Steiner the multitude of different tongues to be met with in *The Gift*, *Lolita* or *Ada* and their interconnection are based on

complex erotic relations between speaker and speech (...) This also, I would judge is the source of the motif of incest, so prevalent throughout Nabokov’s fiction and central in *Ada*. Incest is a trope through which Nabokov dramatizes his abiding devotion to Russian, the dazzling infidelities which exile has forced on him, and the unique intimacy he has achieved with his own writings as begetter, translator and re-translator. Mirrors, incest and a constant meshing of languages are the cognate centers of Nabokov’s art. (Steiner, 1969, p. 124)

### **‘Pensée du tourbillon’: from Dualism to Multiplicity**

Abdelkebir Khatibi’s *Amour bilingue* describes the narrator’s relationship to a foreign language in terms of a love affair between a man and a woman. One moment of illicitness and betrayal lies in the fact that the extramarital relationship to a woman from another culture conflicts with the Arab tradition represented by the tongue of the mother and the language of the aunt, who was the narrator’s nanny. Three languages, three women in a man’s life. This duality suggests a split origin within the mother-tongue itself before the encounter with the language of the colonial oppressor,

which is then seen as adding a second partition overlaying an already existing primordial diglottic situation. This foreign woman is not totally external to the narrator but represents an embodiment of that which is foreign, but already part of him: the creative, destructive impulse born out of the original diglottic arrangement.

Khatibi described the layering of his trilingual situation in hierarchical terms "(...) the Moroccan dialect spoken at home, classical Arabic barely mastered at the Koranic schools for Muslim children, and the 'imposed' French language of the colonizer learned at the French *lycée*." (Mehrez, 1992, p. 121)

The influence of the foreign language on the language first acquired is always violent and disruptive; it penetrates it, transforming and restructuring it from within. Writing in another language than one's mother-tongue implies the systematic symbolical killing of the mother, and the mother-tongue for that matter. Similarly the narrator's relationship with the foreign language and the foreign woman is based on an act of radical subversion mirroring and at the same time commenting upon colonial violence: abusing the purity of the other—both as a person and a language—, expresses a will to displace its logic, losing oneself in the language of the other. The inexpressible love for the other, for the language of the other, can be articulated only by constantly shattering and rupturing it. The battlefield, on which this creative and self-destructive war is fought, is the bilingual writer himself. The relationship between the two partners is characterized by incessant acts of translation or self-translation depending on the perspective adopted. The narrator translates from Arab into French; he translates his love from one language to the other; his love is an attempt at translating the other and himself.

Even if Khatibi, by defining the French writing language as a female lover, operates within the tradition sketched at the beginning, his treatment moves beyond any simple dualistic view. He attains this by systematically breaking up the unity of all narrative instances. First of all there are two narrators, an anonymous external narrator that is superseded halfway through



the text by a first-person narrator. These two narrators are the two sides of the same person, a double, bilingual being. The other instance involved is either a French woman the narrator met abroad or the French language itself—perhaps to be seen as the female side of the narrator—, fighting with its Arab counterpart within the narrator's mind. In both instances, thus, we have a doubling accompanied by a bridging of the internal and external perspective. As with the two narrators, there is an oscillating movement leading from the external to the internal: "(...) un glissement de la femme (...) à la langue proprement dite, grâce à la jouissance que lui procuraient certains mots." (Memmes, 1994, p. 104) The body of the woman becomes the body of the text. This double thematic progress, based on the disappearance of the characters behind the languages they stand for, shows that *Amour bilingue* was intended to be a history without characters, an essayistic narration of the unfolding of a pluri-langue from the gestation of a bi-langue. The two languages of the bi-langue are continuously being translated one into the other. This is made evident by the presence of Arabic words within the French text. Every writing is already double, a passage from the unsaid to expression, also seen as an incessant process of translation. The text and the body of language it represents is hybrid, 'métissé.'

The ambivalent status of all narrative instances achieved by doubling and multiplying abolishes any clear-cut identification, any simple gender-determined role-assignments, doing away with the opposition of an internal and external space and leading to a light-footed swirling dance which the author himself calls 'giration.' A multi-linguistic thought born out of the free floating disembodied instances meeting in between languages. But before reaching this final liberating stage one has to move beyond psychological disruption and the feeling of absolute stasis that goes with it, a feeling of being both inside and outside oneself.

Furthermore, the 'bi-langue' itself is not to be seen as a combination or summation of two different languages, in the sense of the term 'bilingualism,' but something other and new resulting from the constant confrontation between French and Arab within one single mind: a devouring and demiurgic being, the androgynous

protagonist of the tale. Khatibi calls the new receptive organ that develops in the course of this process a 'third ear,'

(...) une sorte de 'troisième' langue entre le français et l'arabe, le résultat de leurs rapports en abîme et de leurs confrontations dans le même être. Dans *Amour bilingue*, les gestations de la bi-langue permettent de déboucher sur la 'pluri-langue' (l'ouverture sur d'autres langues) et une 'pensée-autre' qui s'annonce comme une heureuse issue aux conflits paralysants des deux langues (...) un remarquable élargissement de la notion d'identité (...), une possibilité incommensurable de liberté et de jouissance. (Memmes, 1994, pp. 100-101)

Khatibi operates with hybridization constructing a plurilingual text that reproduces on the level of the used languages the complex interaction between the narrative instances. The sexual transgressions are echoed by linguistic transgressions.

Khatibi's answer to the inescapable problem of linguistic and cultural duality and the painful psychological tensions it can cause is the development of a notion of nomadic errantry which enables the bilingual being, lost in endless acts of self-translation and forced to choose between two alternatives, but incapable to do so, to break out of the vicious circle of duality.

The multiple ambivalences and indeterminacies mentioned so far also affect the sexual identity constructed and deconstructed in the course of the narrative. Although the narrator is initially presented as a Moroccan male courting a French woman, he is described in several instances as an androgynous being. This unresolved ambivalence mirrors the fundamental character of the bi-langue itself. His sexual relationship to the French woman is at the same time expression of this inner androgyny and because of the strongly mystical overtones pervading the whole narration stands also for the androgynous couple achieved in the process. But there is more to it.

One day, we are told, the narrator fell in love with a woman and changed sex. On this occasion he was raped by his foreign language, while another part of himself was standing by, ironically detached from it all, without any intention of penetrating the

penetrator in turn. What was in fact penetrating him was the pleasure of the body of language, his own homosexuality. "(...) étrange émotion d'aimer la jouissance pour elle-même. Jouissance du corps de la langue" (Khatibi, 1983, p. 23): bodies lying together, languages lustfully uniting and mixing. Languages taken on their own ignore such blissful moments of pleasure. In this final vision active and passive, male and female, love of the other and self-love, mother-tongue and foreign tongue, body and language are drawn into a swirling movement of reshuffling. Behind the playful breakdown of roles described above the freedom of the 'pluri-langue' comes into view. Khatibi has not explicitly described it in sexual terms but it could be seen as the possibility of a playful translational bisexuality, a "delightful bisexuality" (Brooke-Rose, 1989, p. 68) as Christine Brooke-Rose called it, suggesting a fluid sexual identity beyond simple gender-dichotomies.

Even if some bilingual writers tend to reproduce the gender metaphors preeminently associated with translation, these tend to be expanded and revised within the context of self-translation and multilingual writing. The question of fidelity to one specific language, staged as a family-drama between husband, wife and lover, is abandoned in favor of a view in which unambiguous role assignments tend to lose their footing. One important trope is that of an incestuous interaction between fraternal languages. The idea of illicitness, and the ideal of translational purity that goes with it, give way to reciprocally contaminating encounters of the bodies of language, "two lovers (loose lovers)" playing "with one another in order to possess and even abolish one another." (Federman, 1993, p. 84)

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**ABSTRACT: "I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m'étonnerait pas": Self-Translation and the Construction of Sexual Identity** — In this paper I would like to explore the work of five bilingual writers focusing on the different narratives they develop in their use of (self-)translation as a textual strategy to fashion a sexual persona. Julia(e)n Green's *Le langage et son double/The Language and its Shadow* and Louis Wolfson's *Le Schizo et les langues* create narratives of severance and disjuncting. The self-translational activity is used here to create perfectly separated spheres of (sexual) identity. Raymond Federman's *A Voice within a Voice* and Christine Brooke-Rose's *Between*, on the other hand, develop narratives of merging and mixing. The self-translating activity is viewed as a constant

shifting and moving of sexual roles taking place in a sphere outside the conscious control of the writer. The final part of the paper will be dedicated to a discussion of Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Amour bilingue* that fictionalizes the functioning of bilingualism and self-translation in terms of sexual roles, introducing, this way, a post-colonial dimension missing in the other texts.

**RÉSUMÉ:** « I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m'étonnerait pas » : **auto-traduction et construction d'une identité sexuelle** — Dans ce texte j'aimerais explorer l'œuvre de cinq écrivains bilingues, en me concentrant sur les différents récits qu'ils produisent en utilisant l'(auto)-traduction comme stratégie textuelle pour créer une identité sexuelle. Julia(e) n Green (*Le langage et son double/The Language and its Shadow*) et Louis Wolfson (*Le Schizo et les langues*) élaborent des récits de séparation et de disjonction. L'auto-traduction est utilisée ici pour générer des sphères sexuelles tout à fait séparées. Raymond Federman (*A Voice within a Voice*) et Christine Brooke-Rose (*Between*) par contre développent des récits de fusion et de mélange. On considère que l'auto-traduction, lorsqu'elle entraîne des changements et des revirements au sein des rôles sexuels, évolue dans un espace qui relève de l'inconscient de l'auteur. La partie finale de la présentation est consacrée à la discussion de Abdelkebir Khatibi (*Amour bilingue*) qui parle du bilinguisme et de l'auto-traduction en termes de rôles sexuels, ajoutant, ainsi, une dimension post-coloniale qui est absente dans les autres textes.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, self-translation, sexual identity, post-colonial theory, body and language.

**Mots-clés :** bilinguisme, auto-traduction, identité sexuelle, théorie post-coloniale, corps et langage.

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