

Translating MAUVE: Reading Writing

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Traduction de MAUVE: Lecture écriture

En utilisant le glissement de sens qui lie la traduction et l'écriture, Daphne Marlatt fait un compte rendu de sa traduction du MAUVE de Nicole Brossard pour leur lioret NBJ / Écriture. Elle compare l'horizon qui s'ouvre sur le mot de la fin 'MAUVE' au bord qui permet de sauter par delà l'imperméabilité de deux langues, deux esprits, créant une coda afin de saluer l'expérience de lecture / écriture comme une transgression érotique de frontières, à la fois culturelle et linguistique, où le sens filtre à travers le poème d'un esprit à l'autre.

Translation has always stood in an intimate relationship to writing for me, not the same but similar to, and it is this shade of difference that is fascinating, that is exactly the area – i might even add 'shady' area – that the process of translation works. Writing this, i'm assailed by words like 'ground' and 'basis' which want to insert themselves, but what i want to say about translation denies those terms. For me translation is about slippage and difference, not the mimesis of something solid and objectified out there. Even though i begin with a text that is another's, how i read that text or what that text seems to me to be saying will occur in an indeterminate space between its author's vision and my own: this is not the text i would have written but it is the text that i am reading and, in a dubious sense, rewriting. 'Dubious' because nothing is decided ahead of time. What i 'write' will be the result of the very elastic play between all that the poem might be saying and what i come to hear, complicated by the shift between the poem's play of meaning in French and what it comes to mean in play in English. Since it is impossible to 'bring over' all of the complex of meaning in French, the difference is crucial. And fascinating. And for me a clear instance of what writing itself is about: sensing one's way through the sentence, through (by means of) a medium (language)

that has its own currents of meaning, its own drift. So that what one ends up saying is never simply one with, but slipping, in a fine displacement of, intention. Meaning is the poem's complex issue, both what i thought to say and what language brings into play beyond my intention.

If writing involves this kind of slippage, then translation involves it even more, since there are two minds (each with its conscious and unconscious), two world-views, two ways of moving through two different languages. All of this is compounded when you have two women writers aware of the displacement that occurs between their own experience as women and the drift that is patriarchally loaded in their language. Then you have both drift and resistance, immersion and subversion – working together.

So i was delighted when Colin Browne asked me to translate a poem by Nicole Brossard for the new series he and Michel Gay were inaugurating in a joint publishing venture between Writing and NBJ. It was to be a series of 'transformances,' he said. How could or even would i refuse when the definition of transformance he gave me included 'reading reading, writing writing, writing reading – that flicker pan-linear, lured beyond equivalence: a new skin ...,' especially when it was the author of 'Tender Skin My Mind'* i would be translating.

When i first received the four pages of *MAUVE* with their four elliptical poem-statements, i went into despair: how translate these hermetic instances of poem / theory so unfamiliar in their philosophic and perceptual concerns to anything in the English tradition? Meaning operates strangely in them, seeping from one phrase to others around it, leaking back and forth between fragments, definitely not progressing in linear fashion. The last poem ends with the leap:

fiction culture cortex

MAUVE

a spaced out mauve, a mauve i kept turning over in my mind, trying to

* *In the Feminine: Women and Words / Les Femmes et les mots. Conference Proceedings 1983* (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1985), pp. 180-183. This essay is included under a different title, 'Lesbians of Lore,' in Nicole Brossard's recent collection of essays, *The Aerial Letter*, translated by Marlene Wildeman (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988).

perceive its various verbal hues / clues. To what? Here was a marvelously untranslatable word, a truly bilingual word that transferred nothing but itself. Mauve is mauve and, like a rose in English, mauve is a flowering plant in French, a mauve is a mauve is a mauve. It's not that the spiral stops here but that it circles back and stains everything leading up to it with its meaning.

Throw the stone of an untranslatable word into the fluent drifts of culture, into 'fiction culture cortex,' and it ripples out: roseblue or 'bluer and paler than monsignor' (says Webster's dictionary), the colour of rebellious women, of lesbians say Judy Grahn and Dale Spender (Mauve, eh? mauvais!), the colour of a bruise (connected with violence and vision in *L' Amer*, 'L' Acte violent de l'oeil au mauve épris s' infiltre ravi déployant'), the smitten purple we see by, converting light into electrical impulses, into the language of the nervous system. Conversion, transmission, neural seepage, transgression of boundaries, connection and communication.

Talking about the poem after translating it, i seem to be working backwards through it, though translating it i worked forwards. This seems to me analogous with the working of the poem as a whole, its end implicated in its beginning, in its relationship to its parts. A kind of doubling works throughout, and at the start most obviously with mouths, their relationship to another double, reality and the real, even as they double each other. Curves of the mouth resembling the images that surround in a reality that is not the real, 'La bouche au féminin,' that mouth which speaks of another real and another (dorsal) mouth – the slippage between the social medium and the subjective one, like the displacement (the curve) of something going underwater. Nicole's lines make this curve, making leaps of displacement between the living body and its mental impress, the divergence of the virtual, especially from the point of view of woman, much imaged: a paradigm for that difference between the writing and the written.

There is the horizon line of language which represents the edge thought comes to, and then there is the leap beyond that borderline of words, beyond the edge of the page, which i came to see as a leap beyond the separateness of two languages, two minds. Paradoxically – since it is through language that separates us that meaning flowers in the brain, seeping like a bruise, a transgression of limits. Translating MAUVE became a remarkable illustration of this process, a reading of the depths of the drift, a writing running counter to it, so that i felt as

if, in the process, my own cerebral cortex were being marked or written on. MAUVE stands as a commentary on the act of reading and especially the act of translating.

I came to see Nicole's line of letters reading 'MAUVE,' then, as the horizon line of thought, a horizon line of fluency indicating that point where meaning curves. Taking liberties, i wrote a coda to honour this experience of reading MAUVE, the erotic transgression of borders, both cultural and linguistic, where meaning seeps through the poem from one brain to another. This is a fiction yes, but it has an element of truth, like my etymological shift from *malva* (mallow) to *maiwa* (gull or mew riding that horizon line between two elements). So under Nicole's ending MAUVE my MAUVE beginning the shift into a shared 'cortex fiction culture' which is the continuity of her 'fiction culture cortex,' the evidence of that stain her meaning leaves in my reader's brain-tissue / text (not forgetting her own play: corps / text). Perhaps this is the kind of reading tender minds make for each other, slipping the borderlines of skin and sense, playing with that subtle displacement difference is – phonetic, syntactic, metonymic. In this we have the kind of transport translation can be.