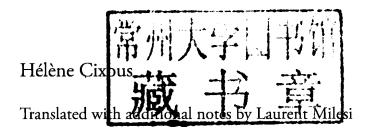


Hélène Cixous

Translated by Laurent Milesi

Zero's Neighbour

SAM BECKETT



polity

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How can one translate a text written 'in two tongues in French' (p. 39) that is 'written through' another writer who translated-rewrote himself back and forth across two languages till the exhaustion of his minimalist tongue 'in the vicinity of zero'? Or, as Jacques Derrida might have said, how can one experience the impossible in translation as the crossing of a desert when one needs to retreat into what intractably resists in and across idioms? Such is the 'task' facing the translator of Le Voisin de zéro, who, as he toils along, discovers that he must adaptively cast aside all systems, theories and rules, and learn when not to translate 'from French into English', as he is conventionally expected to, but rather to translate French into English performatively, the français having to become English whenever a more ethically literal² translation would go against the original's insistence on its own linguistic act. Thus, to practise what can be called an intraduction, tra-ducting - in both its now obsolete senses of transferring/transporting and translating - within a 'foreign' language while re-marking the original in its address. Such a strucţural permutation is at work in the

following sequence, rendered 'back to front' (i.e. swapping source and target languages) – rather than attempting to resort to an equivalent of French *verlan* words in back slang – in order to adhere to the performative dimension of the original passage, which parades the untranslatability of its idiom:

<u>Ouf.</u> Par exemple. (Ça c'est intraduisible, n'est-ce pas? Faire ouf, Être <u>ne peut le faire qu'en français</u>. Pareil pour faire Œuf, ou faire Feu. Mais dans chaque langue on se débrouillera pour faire ouf autrement.) <u>Rien qu'en français</u>. Nous notons: faire ouf! ou bien faire ououf! ouf [...]. <u>Whew!</u>³

Whew. For example. (That's untranslatable, isn't it? To whew. Who can do so only in English. Same for to whoa, or to whoosh. But in each language one will wan'gle a way to whew otherwise.) Just in English. We note: to whew! or to phew! whew [. . .]. Ouf! (p. 33)

But what happens when Cixous's text re-marks (on) its linguistic medium and act of enunciation in a context emphasizing Beckett's adoption of, and fidelity to, the same French language? Double-bind with a twist: one cannot 'translate into English' without betraying Beckett's linguistic allegiance in an alien speech act, nor

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can one still manage to express oneself in French like the original, which can confidently state 'puisque je m'adresse à vous en français'... Unless one takes the Cixousian performance at its own word ('ce qui n'empêche pas de passer d'un bord à l'autre de E à F et de F à E') and translates 'in effect', plying back and forth between the two edges by playing on the double (Anglo-Saxon, Romance) vein of the English language and even introducing a touch of Gallicism as a make-believe. Traduttore, traditore: the age-old cliché of the belles infidèles is here given a renewed lease of life in this paradoxical problematic of how one needs to betray in order to be faithful. The following excerpt occurs soon after a dense idiomatic weaving of dis, faire and diffère, for which an equivalent could have been found in English (e.g. be, come, become; gain, say, gainsay) but to radically 'different' effects, hence the decision to foreground the French puns within the English. The interlingual translation is held together by the initial intraduction of 'fare' (p. 41), by being deliberately unfaithful to infidelity itself as 'infidèle' becomes 'unfair', by the insertion of 'in spite of appearances' to introduce the un-French 'I am addressing myself to you in French', and, further in the text, in the rendering of 'tout compte fait' as 'when all is said and done':

En faisant cette chose devant vous en français je ne suis tout de même pas infidèle à Beckett, pas plus pas

moins que lui. [...] mais cette conférence [...] est au secret ici, en réserve, et répandue partout sous chaque page et dans chaque phrase, puisque je m'adresse à vous en français, langue élue de Beckett, apres peu d'hésitations, ce qui n'empêche pas de passer d'un bord à l'autre de E à F et de F à E, c'est selon [...].⁴

As I am doing all this in French in front of you, I am still not being unfair to Beckett, not more not less than him. [...] but this lecture [...] is in secret here, in reserve, and spread everywhere beneath each page and in each sentence, since in spite of appearances I am addressing myself to you in French, the language elected by Beckett after few hesitations, which does not prevent one from stepping or passing from one edge to the other from E to F and from F to E, depending on the setup [...]. (pp. 41–2)

Le français must know when and when not to become English to secure the effect and benef(f)it (see p. 42) of a translation which also has to negotiate and convey a movement of trans-lation, the impossible 'inter(-) diction' of a trans-linguistic experiment or passage. A dissymmetrical symmetry, E F F E (English French-French English), for instance that of the translation in effect of 'efflanquée' as 'effete' within a self-consciously effable sequence:

Rien qu'à voir les deux volumes faux jumeaux du Harrap's Dictionary ou un autre, c'en est fait pour Sam et son appétit pour le maigre, rien qu'à poser côte à côte le mince <u>F.E.</u> alors qu'à côté <u>E.F.</u> est deux fois plus gros gras lourd lard proliférant volumineux, naturellement, et pour ainsi dire, congénitalement, Beckett est du parti de l'efflanqué [. . .]. 5

Just take a look at the two false twin volumes of *Harrap's Dictionary* or another and Sam's appetite for the lean is <u>effectively</u> done <u>for</u>, just put side by side the thin <u>F.E.</u> whereas in comparison <u>E.F.</u> is twice as big fat thick heavy proliferating voluminous, naturally, and so to speak, congenitally, Beckett, poor him, has been on the side of the <u>effecte</u> [. . .]. (pp. 42–3)

Cixous's 'numerical' study⁶ of Beckett can be read indirectly as an ad-hoc translation manual, complete with (stage) directions for use in order to zero in on the right choice between literality, literarity and all forms of (trans-linguistic) adaptation, 'not more not less':

While approaching the exact thing, thus first approximation and error, in order to correct the error you estimate the error by committing a smaller error, you approach the exact thing, the end, by making finer and finer errors. Variant: the alternate series. It's

less great, it's less small or it's too great it's too small, correct, every other term by default, every other term by negative excess [...], there's a little lacking, there's a little too much, again, correct, approach [...]. (p. 48)

This sort of constant adjustment has also regulated our approach to rendering Cixous's deceptively semicitational prose, and some of the unexpected discrepancies between the French text and this English translation can be traced back to the gap between her working through Beckett's French and, consequently, the necessity for us to translate through, or at the very least take into account, Beckett's English. This gap has been partially 'corrected' whenever her own commentary relays French quotations and thus requires closer proximity to the linguistic material she is working from, regardless of Beckett's own English adaptations. As much as possible where it was felt to be necessary, though without wishing to be exhaustive in the light of such a near-constant practice, sources in the Beckett corpus have been supplied in endnotes.

Laurent Milesi

Notes

- 1 See Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 72.
- 2 See, for example, Antoine Berman, La Traduction et la lettre, ou l'auberge du lointain (Paris: Seuil, 1999) and Lawrence Venuti, 'Strategies of Translation', The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, ed. Mona Baker (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 240–4.
- 3 Hélène Cixous, Le Voisin de zéro. Sam Beckett (Paris: Galilée, 2007), pp. 45-46. Throughout this introduction elements we wish to highlight for specific attention in quotations and in the translation have been underlined and the French interpolations within square brackets in the translation have been omitted.
- 4 Cixous, Le Voisin de zéro, p. 55.
- 5 Cixous, Le Voisin de zéro, p. 56.
- 6 For the relation between algebra and translation, see Laurent Milesi, 'Algébrie à l'irlandaise: Le Voisin de zéro', in Cixous sous X, d'un coup le nom, ed. Marie-Dominique Garnier and Joana Masó (Saint-Denis: Presses de l'Université de Vincennes, 2010), pp. 149–58.

Why, Beckett, I can love him, a rare, precious can, I who am not on the side of grey blackness, I can love him, frozen and collapsing endlessly, I who'd rather leap, cross all the thick, opaque, slothful, luxuriously slothful zones of his fog, in order to come and love him all the same, thus like my next of kin? Because of his insistence on being himself from yesterday to the beyond, from today onwards, himself faithful to himself, on being inflexibly the very selfsame, no matter how broken or broken in, without adulteration, on always having been the one he would be and conversely on endlessly becoming the one he would always already have been incorruptibly, the being before the end, all life long and all the time of times forever owing before the end [devant la fin]. He owes the end, owes it to himself, owes it to us, all his life crept [rampée] owing before the end, without death, spent vamping [vamper] the end, in vain, camping [camper] in the vicinity of zero. Dreaming of zero, because of the cawing-wailing-rattle of his Belacquian voice, because he will have gone round the purgatorial world purging as much as purged, lame-limping along to come

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back reduced to almost nothing, the same on the same time-worn soles.

It was on 14 August 1922. Proust was going. 'And if the world were coming to an end, what would you do?' the newspaper L'Intransigeant had asked – a little question. To come to an end. How wonderful life would suddenly appear to us, said the one who was going. Then our laziness, which ceaselessly postpones life, would be undone. If the world were coming to an end, in the end, I would live, the dying man said, I would wrench myself free from negligence.

It was on 9 December 1989. Beckett was going. 'I'm done', he said. And now that the world is coming to an end, V., a curious voice, will ask Beckett, what will you say? 'Was there much of the journey you found worthwhile?' Answer: 'Precious little.' Two words. Untranslatable. Qu'est-ce que ça valait, ce voyage? Bien peu. Pas grand-chose (Not much). Precious little. Literally in French: précieusement peu. A fine idiomatic oxymoron. What is precious is little, precious little. I can love such a little.

Precious little. For Proust the five visitations: cobble spoon plate napkin water-pipe, cup. The keys of his life-works. For his successor: skull, stick, sand, sky, grey, ray in the dark. The Almost-Nothings of the whole that make up the Whole.

Cruel Sam Beckett, yes, no, of a disaffected, natural,

structural, white cruelty, a white cruelty, perhaps grey but less and less, still less and less, more still, faithfully cruel without blood, without a drop of blood, that would be too crude, no, self-cruelty, not without a compassion, white or grey, but without any piety, a compassion accompanying the character, indistinct but similar, if not of solidarity, no, but at least of an echo, of a - co. A small minimum of with. There, in the minimal, most infinite company remains that which will have never abandoned Beckett, will have never been abandoned, writing, or the text. No matter how rasped, clipped, denied, the tone and the rotunda managed to have been, he will have always, regularly, samilarly signed Sam. As early as the first words, these are already, similarly, the last words. I admire that. As early as the first flight of the artist Trinity College-ENS Ulm a single without return. He has read, seen, known, thrown it all Dublin, Joyce, Florence, Paris, you bet, Dante, Mandelstam, nothing has encroached upon him, nor anybody upon his rock, he remains the same giant hunched up on a pebble. Like the other giant, his only next of kin, Proust, whom he paints leaning over this shallow well of an inscrutable banality: a cup. Proust a giant and his cup of the world, the only giant and cup he can swallow, Proust is, because Joyce sticks in his throat. Proust's genius, he will have gobbled it up. He is twenty-four years old. Proust has just died. I should have said fallen. Straightaway Beckett picks him up, the giant and his uneven cobble. Beckett's *echo's bones* version of Proust.

Hélène Cixous

Without Tom Bishop's confident commission I would not have had the courage to overcome my laziness to Beckett the immense Beckett. It is thanks to Tom and his fault, *felix culpa*, and out of fidelity to the enthusiastic fidelity of this eternal Beckettian that I have attempted to scale the ante-purgatorial rotunda.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow Creeps in this petty pace from day to day To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, sc. v, ll. 19–28

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