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Writing on the Edges of Language

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Panel: At Language's Edge

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Writing on the Edges of Language

In thinking about my own writing and translation practice, I have found it valuable to reflect on Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) notion of "minor" literature, especially their use of a tetra-lingual model for the spatiotemporal categories: vernacular (here), vehicular (everywhere), referential (over there), and mythical (beyond), and how these work in imaginatively and creatively constructing our territory or (de)-territorialising our sense of being in the world, both spatially and temporally.

The path of the "minor" is radical indeterminacy with a fractured consciousness, whose perspective is vibrant yet uncertain as the writer/translator resists the symbolic powers of one single language in continuous experimentation. This suggests a kind of *via negativa* in literary practice, best expressed in the mantra from the *Upanishads* "neti neti" ("neither this nor this"). Kafka speaks of this predicament as a choice among several impossibilities, finding it impossible to write in Czech, Yiddish or German. In a letter to Max Brod of June 1921 he speaks of: the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise, and the impossibility of writing (Casanova 1999: 347, 370). This suggests a condition of intimate estrangement in the language in which one writes, making other voices vibrate within through the neural correlates of consciousness and our affective relationship to language.

In the cramped space of islands such as my own (Cyprus), this interplay is more salient. Lost in the labyrinth of languages, I wonder: where am I in the world? My task as writer and translator is bringing dissimilarities next to each other, and modes of non-comprehension, a charged speechlessness with osmotic moments that re-imagine what has been denied or excluded or appeared to be obsolete. I constantly find myself shifting the boundaries by redistributing tensions and affective connections of language in personal and cultural memory through the cosmopolitan and the vernacular, the national and the mythical, attempting to be here, there, elsewhere at the same time, or taking a line of flight beyond.

I would therefore place myself in the camp of poets like Brodsky (among many others) who say that "poetry is found in translation" rather than Frost's statement that "poetry is what is lost in translation." The cultures of the Americas are often in the vanguard in these debates, given that these cultures are characterized by syncretism and creole language practices, bringing new challenges to myths and stories of origin, and translation is often used (metaphorically or otherwise) as a foundational practice, rather than derivative. Borges irreverently states in one of his essays: "the original is unfaithful to the translation" (1999, 106)¹ (with reference to Henley's English translation of Beckford's *Vathek*, written in French). Given that language can only strive to be adequate to the impossibility of an original presence, translation may give new life to the text as counterpoint, irreverence, or sacrilege, by thinking through the gaps of language and perceiving the difference of difference. Borges brings translation to the centre of literary practice in a number of essays by emphasizing that texts (translation or writing) are only versions or drafts that create transformations and a repertoire of possibilities, in other words literariness itself, and the idea that translations are inferior is our superstition (or found in religion). To exemplify the latter, I may refer to one of the oldest stories or myths of translation about the Septuagint, the seventy or so translators of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek. The translators were kept in isolation so as to

¹ "el original es infiel a la traducción" Borges, *Obras Completas* vol II, p. 109.

communicate with God directly and not mediate meaning with each other. They miraculously came up with the same translation, thus guaranteeing that their translation was the word of God.

The story (like many other stories of translation) embodies our impossible desire to find a pre- or post-Babelian condition, while in our worldly condition we live in a “poetique de relation,” as Édouard Glissant would have it. My experience of the Mediterranean has been shaped by my own personal and affective immersion in felt life, in the specificity of places where I lived, whether in the region or the world beyond, and the claims that places have made on my embodied memory and the multiple mediations of the imagination across distance, mediation, and dispersion. As writers we probe the difference in difference in the play of literary language, and this is doubled in translation. Sharpening awareness of the interplay of languages is not easy, as the literary and linguistic economies of exchange are not the same everywhere, yet as writers it provides us with the pleasure of continuous literary experimentation in making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.