

To Revisit: A Transitive Verb?
A babel translation of Nicole Brossard's *Journal Intime* + commentary

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(with Babel Fish Translation¹)

...by returning to the fundamental categories of language, such as person, tense, and voice, we place ourselves at the heart of a problematic of interlocution, for such categories are precisely the ones where we may examine the relations of *I* and of what is deprived of the mark of *I*.

- Roland Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?"

**I. Excerpt of an entry from
Nicole Brossard's *Journal
Intime***

3 février 1983.

Travail épuisant que celui de la lecture en traduction de l'un de ses propres textes. Épuisant parce qu'aux opérations mentales que l'on exécute en rédigeant le texte, s'ajoute un processus que j'appellerais, le dévoilement.

Être traduite, c'est être enquêtée non pas seulement dans ce que l'on croit être mais dans sa façon même de penser dans une langue, de même que dans la façon dont nous sommes pensées par une langue. C'est avoir à s'interroger sur cette autre que je pourrais être si je pensais en anglais, en italien ou en toute autre langue.

La question qui se pose en traduction comme en écriture est celle du choix. Quel signifiant privilégier, élire pour animer en surface les multiples signifiés qui

Like other readers who have primarily encountered Nicole Brossard's writing in English, I cannot claim to be entirely familiar with Brossard or her writing. I know only the body of writing that Brossard has, on her own and in collaboration with translators and editors, chosen to recreate in English, but this body is one that Brossard frequently posits as unfamiliar. This body that is and is not Brossard has taken the form of Nicole Brossard, an English writer in *Baroque at Dawn* who chooses to bear her mother's name but to write in her father's language, and Nicole Brossard, a French writer in *Intimate Journal* who wonders, in translator Barbara Godard's words, about "the other I might be if I thought in English, Italian, or some other language" (36). Like Brossard's French inscriptions that rest between the covers of my English editions of her books, these appearances seem to be intentionally staged to remind readers that an author read in translation may not be what or whom they appear to be. However, if this is the case, on what basis can Brossard's English readers claim any level of familiarity with her writing? And does this necessarily preclude the possibility of "revisiting" Brossard's writing in English, as this issue of *How2* has solicited its contributors and readers to do?

In the call for papers for this special issue on

s'agitent invisibles et efficaces dans le volume de la conscience? C'est formellement que je dois compenser pour que l'énergie qui ailmente ma pensée ne se retourne pas contre moi, pour que la langue elle-même ne se retourne pas contre la femme que je suis.

II. *Private Diary* – A babel translation from French to English

February 3, 1983.

Exhausting work that that of the reading in translation of the one of its own texts. Exhausting because to the mental operations that one carries out by writing the text, a process is added which I would call, the revealing.

To be translated, it is to be surveyed not only in what one believes being but in his way of even thinking in a language, just as in the way in which we are thought by a language. It is to have with interoger on this other which I could be if I thought in English, Italian or any other language.

The question which arises in translation as in writing is that of the choice. Which meaning to privilege, to elect to animate on the surface the meant multiples which are agitated invisible and effective in the volume of the conscience? It is formally that I must compensate so that the energy which ailmente my thought is not turned over against

Nicole Brossard, the editors chose, not without reservation, to limit the call to English language articles featuring English quotations of Brossard's writing. In many respects, the parameters of the call are understandable. *How2* is an English language journal with a predominantly English-speaking readership. It is also not surprising that *How2* would choose to dedicate an issue to the writing of Nicole Brossard. For over three decades, Brossard's work has circulated in English, influencing the work of many English language writers, including many of the scholars and language poets whose work has appeared in *How2* and its print predecessor, *How(ever)*. Rather than question the need to revisit Brossard's writing, I wish to question which Nicole Brossard an exploration of her writing in English *can* revisit.

As a transitive verb, "revisit" presupposes a relation, and more specifically, a relation to which one returns. But does the use of the term in this context preclude the possibility that some of Brossard's readers, critics and even collaborators may not be entirely familiar with the author they have been invited to revisit? Does revisiting Brossard's writing in English necessarily entail revisiting the translators with whom she has collaborated since her work first appeared in English as part of the Coach House Press Quebec Translations series in the early 1970s? To suggest that Brossard's English readers can only revisit Claxton's Brossard, Shouldice's Brossard, Godard's Brossard and so on is to place under erasure the conditions that Brossard has fostered as a scene of translation where author and translator often appear to literally share the stage. In the lived reality of book launches and readings, for example, Brossard's translators are often visible; sometimes they hover at the edge of the stage, and occasionally they join the author on stage to read from a translated work or to

me, so that the language itself is not turned over against the woman who I am.

III. *Diario Riservato* – A babel translation from English to Italian

3 febbraio 1983.

Lavoro sfibrante che quello della lettura nella traduzione di quella dei relativi propri testi. Esaurendo perché ai funzionamenti mentali che si effettua scrivendo il testo, un processo è aggiunto che denominerei, rivelare.

Essere tradotto, deve esaminarsi non soltanto in che cosa si crede essere ma nel suo senso di pensare uniforme in una lingua, appena come nel senso in cui ci pensiamo da una lingua. Deve avere con interoger su questo altro che potrei essere se pensassi in inglese, italiano o qualunque altra lingua.

La domanda che si pone nella traduzione come nella scrittura è quella della scelta. Quale significato al privilegio, di scegliere per animare sulla superficie i multipli significati che sono invisibile ed efficace agitati nel volume della coscienza? È formalmente che doverlo compensare io in moda da l'energia che il ailmente il mio pensiero non è girato contro di me, di modo che la lingua in se non è girata contro la donna che sono.

answer questions with the author. They are frequently at the author's side. And as is often the case in Brossard's writing/life where life and fiction overlap, translators also populate the edges of her fiction, and occasionally appear as more central characters. In this respect, to revisit the work of Nicole Brossard in English through her translated English editions is a process that must at the very least be understood as something mediated by the translators with whom she has agreed to collaborate over the past three decades. More explicitly, it means revisiting the work of a group of translators/writers who have not only helped to bring Brossard's writing to an English audience but also worked with the author to explore translation as a generative process marked by its potential to expand rather than limit the ways one might enter language. But rather than turn to the substantial prefaces and critical articles that have been written by Brossard's translators,² I have chosen to turn from Brossard's intermediaries to her media: the technologies of writing and communication that circulate as symbols in her work and make the circulation of her work possible.

If translators help to facilitate the author's passage across different realities, technologies of writing and communication occupy a more integral and threatening position in Brossard's work. The possibility of the writer, the woman and the lesbian, identities that Brossard often claims, are continuously linked to the availability of technologies of writing and communication. In her representations of self and other characters, the writer is frequently described in relation to her books (printed and blank) or depicted as desperately searching for a pen and a blank page on which to write. In *The Aerial Letter*, writing technologies are explicitly linked to the possibility of the lesbian who needs only a "bed, a work table to write on, and a book" to "come abreast of who they

IV. *Per diem Classified* – A babel translation from Italian to English

3 February 1983.

_job sfibrante that that one of the reading in the translation of that one of the relati you own witness. Exhausting because to the mental operations that are carried out writing the text, a process is added that I would call, to reveal.

Be translate, must be not only taken an examination in that what is believed to be but in its sense to think uniform in a language, hardly like in the sense in which we are believed from one language. It must have with interoger on this other that I could be if you thought in English, Italian or any other language.

The question that is placed in the translation as in the writing it is that one of the choice. Which meant to I privilege, to choose in order to animate on the surface the multiples it means to you that they are invisible and effective it churns to you in the volume of the conscience? It is formally that to have to compensate it I in fashion from l'energia that ailmente the my thought is not turned against of me, of way that the language in if it is not turn against the woman that is.

are” (136). In *Baroque at Dawn*, the absence of technologies first threatens to place the writer, woman and lesbian under erasure. When Cybil Noland and Irène Mage find themselves trapped on a boat stripped of their technologies of choice, the pen and the camera, their existence appears to be imperiled. When they are later given a new technology in the form of virtual reality, reality superimposes itself on reality and in the process, both women’s identities are simultaneously threatened and reaffirmed. In Brossard’s writing, the replacement of one technology with another imperils one’s ability to exist as they have existed up until that moment in time, yet this perilous transition is one filled with the potential to engender new ways to enter the symbolic order.

Technologies are not only linked to the possibility of representation and self-representation in Brossard’s writing but also to the crossing of seemingly impenetrable boundaries. In the novel within a novel that appears at the end of *Baroque at Dawn*, writer and translator first merge on the radio as “two voices staged on waves” (217). Technologies appear to hold the potential for subject formation and the rupture of boundaries between subject and object, self and other. In *Intimate Journal*, digital technologies are associated with the crossing of spatial and temporal boundaries. In reference to her granddaughter’s engagement with an interactive atlas, Brossard observes, “By pressing a button she will be able to awaken Vesuvius and make California shake...she will be able to displace entire populations and draw new boundaries” (134). Technologies hold the potential to make the “earth miniscule and children giants” (134), but this is both a compelling and a terrifying prospect, one that underscores the double-edged consequences of the passage from page to screen.

V. *Par jour classifié* – A babel translation from English to French

3 février 1983.

_ sfibrante du travail qui celui-là de la lecture dans la traduction de celle-là du relati vous posséder le témoin. Exhausting parce qu'aux opérations mentales qui sont effectuées écrivant le texte, on ajoute un processus que j'appellerais, pour indiquer.

Soyez traduisent, doit être non seulement passé un examen du fait on pense que ce qui est mais dans son sens de penser l'uniforme dans une langue, à peine comme dans le sens en lequel nous sommes crus d'une langue. Elle doit avoir avec l'interroger sur cet autre que je pourrais être si vous pensiez en anglais, Italien ou n'importe quelle autre langue.

La question qui est placée dans la traduction comme dans l'écriture il est celle-là du choix. Qu'a signifié au privilège de I, de choisir afin d'animer sur la surface les multiples qu'elle signifie à vous qu'ils sont invisible et efficace elle bat à vous en volume de la conscience? Il est formellement celui à devoir le compenser I de mode de l'energia que l'ailmente la ma pensée n'est pas tourné contre de moi, de manière que la langue dedans si ce n'est pas tour contre la femme qui est.

This brings me to the translation that runs alongside this commentary. Enacted by a hybrid form – a translation software program – this translation offers a scene through which to begin considering where Brossard's preoccupations with translation and technology intersect. Although computer translations are invariably imprecise, to submit an excerpt of Brossard's writing to a free translation program is an especially absurd exercise. If Brossard and her translators have sought to explore the possibility of translation as a collaborative process with generative potential, computer translation stands as a virtual opposite. Translation software programs offer no possibility for dialogue and no possibility to take context into account. Primarily characterized by the inevitable loss of meaning, computer translation may be more accurately characterized as a (de)generative process than a generative one. It is a process that reifies the readers' debt to translators, but what does it imply about the other form of translation in question here – the translation of texts across media?

An inventory reveals that it (the translation software/its programmer) or I (because I must take some responsibility for submitting the text) have:

- i. lost the possibility of a semiotic discourse (*les multiples signifiés* became *meant multiples*)
- ii. traded in all gender neutral pronouns
- iii. generated new words (i.e. *relati* – perhaps, an Italian relative noun; *exhausting* – an h-less form of depletion; *invisible* – an elusive secretion that helps to digest whole parts)
- iv. abandoned the possibility of a self-referential grammar (in several languages)

VI. *By classified day* – A babel translation from French to English

February 3, 1983.

_sfibrante of the work which that one of the reading in the translation of that one of the relati to have you the witness. Exhausting parce qu'aux operations mental which are carried out writing the text, one adds a process which j'appellerais, to indicate.

Be translate, must have not only passed one examination of the fact one thinks that what is but in its direction to think l'uniforme in a language, hardly as in the direction in which we are believed d'une language. It must have with l'interoger on this other which I could be if you think in English, Italian or n'importe which other language.

The question which is placed in the translation as in l'écriture it is that one of the choice. Does Qu'a meant with the privilege of I, to choose so d'animer on surface the multiples qu'elle mean with you qu'ils are invisible and effective it beats with you in volume of the conscience? It is formally that with having to compensate for it I of mode of l'energia that l'ailmente the my thought n'est not turned against ego, so that the language inside if this n'est not turn against the woman who is.³

v. mislaid meaning and accumulated more signs than expected (38 words and 102 characters gained)

vi. turned language against the author

In *By Classified Day*, only time appears to stand still; it is *still* February 3, 1983. The problem is that where time stands still, there is no prospect of a return. Again, this raises a question about whether or not it is possible to revisit Nicole Brossard in English, and if so, on what basis?

Perhaps, it is impossible to revisit Nicole Brossard in English (or any other language), or perhaps, any attempt to revisit Nicole Brossard presupposes the possibility of imagining “revisit” as an intransitive verb: a verb that does not necessarily imply a return to something with which we are already familiar. If Brossard’s readers, especially her readers who are primarily familiar with her writing in English or another language, can only revisit a multiplicity of Nicole Brossards that have been carefully crafted by the author, on her own and in collaboration with translators and editors, there is no choice but to accept the possibility of understanding the act of revisiting as an inherently intransitive maneuver.

This brings me to the final irony of the conditions under which this “revisiting” of Nicole Brossard is being staged. Despite Brossard’s fascination with new technologies and willingness to exploit the potential of new media in the presentation of her work,⁴ Brossard’s writing is ultimately the work of a bibliophile, a lover of books. The Borgesian laments that appear in Brossard’s recent publications suggest that she ultimately considers the page the surface upon which one is most likely to come into being. In *Museum of*

the universe is on the page one page
over
as dawn erases night
water has washed the sky and we said
the ink fled carrying with it
husks and antennae
the whole system of reproduction
the nudity of reasoning beings

Nicole Brossard, "Theatre: Speed
of Water," *Museum of Bone and Water*
(Trans. Robert Majzels and Erin Mouré).

Bone and Water, "the universe is on the page" (40) rather than the screen, and it is running ink rather than scrambled code that threatens to take away the "whole system of reproduction" (40), or the possibility of writing oneself into existence. So what does it mean to return to Nicole Brossard on the screen rather than on the page? Does the scene of this return – a digital descendent of a deceased print journal – also mark a type of translation? Does a return across media, from page to screen, trouble the possibility of a simple return as much as a return enacted across languages?

Revisiting Nicole Brossard on the screen rather than on the page may be a surprisingly appropriate stage upon which to return to the work of an author whose translation projects necessarily preclude the possibility of returning to a subject who is already familiar. If the analogue universe of the page is marked by the direct contact of ink on paper, the digital universe of the screen is distinguished by a gulf of code – a language few writers recognize and even fewer writers have the knowledge to navigate. In contrast to the writer's mark on the page, the relation between the typist's strokes and the letters that appear on the screen is never transparent; it's a relation necessarily mediated by another language. And when the gulf that separates the writer from their signifying marks is obscured, so too is the potential to retrace one's route – to return to a familiar person or place. Again, this points to the possibility that "revisit" no longer necessarily entails the transmission of an action from subject to object but, rather, may be anything but transitive.

Notes

¹ Babel Fish Translation, which operates on Systran Language Translation Technologies, is a free translation software programme offered by AltaVista at <http://babelfish.altavista.com>. The service enables users to translate up to 150 words from English into one of twelve other languages.

² See in particular Barbara Godard's "The Moving Intimacy of Language" in *Intimate Journal*; Patricia Claxton's "Afterword" in *Baroque at Dawn*; Susanne De Lotbinière-Harwood's "Acting the (Re)Writer: a Feminist Translator's Practice of Space" in *Fireweed* (44/45); and Marlene Wildeman's "Translator's Introduction" in *The Aerial Letter*.

³ The following excerpt appears in *Intimate Journal* (Mercury, 2004), Barbara Godard's translation of Nicole Brossard's *Journal Intime*:

3 February 1983

Exhausting work it is to read a text of one's own in translation. Tiring, because to the mental operations one performs in writing the text is added the process I shall call unveiling. Because what one chooses to hide in a text must now be exposed. To be translated is to be interrogated not only in what one believes oneself to be but in one's way of thinking in a language, and of being thought by the same language. It means I have to question myself about the other I might be if I thought in English, Italian, or some other language. [...] The question raised in translation as in writing is that of selection. Which signifier to favour to choose, in order to enliven on the surface the multiple signifieds that agitate invisibly at work in the depth of consciousness? Formally is how I must compensate, so the energy that nourishes my thought does not turn against me, so that language itself does not turn against the woman I am.

⁴ See in particular Adriene Jenik's *Mauve Desert: A CD-ROM Translation* (Los Angeles: Shifting Horizon Productions, 1997).

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