And the Books Were Opened: Dreyer and Derrida in Translation

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Abstract

Translation theory has long wrestled with notions of ‘original’ and ‘supplement’, where a translator strives to carry across some sense of meaning from one language to another. Deconstruction, with its multiplicity of signification would appear to complicate such a task. This article, investigating possibilities of deconstructive translation, works also with the inherent impossibilities of translation, through intensifying distances between languages and media, prompted by a citation by deconstructive literary critic and cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from a discussion on the edges of language and self or “selvedges”.

Citing any text as translation of another predicts that one has been intimately, carefully, and rigorously worked through and that something has been transposed and transported from one language to another, augmenting and ensuring the survival of a text. Reading Carl-Theodor Dreyer’s 1927 silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer 1999) as translation of Jacques Derrida’s text ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own: Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil’ (Derrida 2001) would appear to operate at an impossible spatio-temporal distance from the careful workings called for in translation. This article, through location of moments of intensity and similarities in poetic approach threading between Dreyer and Derrida, questions this distance, through an interweaving of languages from the multi-cultural background of its writer. Translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

Open Book, Closed Book

> *Yet language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a dissemination cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the spacey emptiness between two named historical languages we get perilously close to it. By juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray into frayages or facilitations. Although every act of reading or communication is a bit of this risky fraying which scrambles together somehow, our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum, except in the communication and reading of and in love. …The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. (Spivak 1993)*

A deconstructive reading of translation opens the books between original and shadow, attempting to shed light on both. Yet in this attempt, this trial, light must take care not to fall too often on the shadow, must allow the shadow to perform in all its 'frayages' and 'facilitations', to fall unhindered through text – through textile.

> *Thronus…flamme ignis,*
> *Rotae eius ignis accensus.*
> *Fluvius igneus rapidusque*
> *Egrediebatur a facie eius;*
> *Millia millium ministrabant…*
> *Et decies millies centena millia assistebant…*
> *Lucidium sedit,*
> *Et libri aperti sunt.*
>
> *[His] throne…was ablaze with flames,*
> *His wheels were a burning fire.*
> *A swift river of fire*
> *Came forth from his countenance*
> *A thousand thousand waited on him*
> *Ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood by.*
> *The court sat*
> *And the books were opened.*
>
> *(Daniel 7:9)*

Figure 1. Dreyer 00:38:27:15 [1]

In 1985 restoration was completed on the negative of a film that had been both destroyed by fire and, in its reworked version, presumed destroyed by fire until uncovered in its entirety and in restorable condition in a cupboard at a Norwegian psychiatric institution. That film is 'The Passion of Joan of Arc', Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 black and white silent translation to film of excerpts from the transcript of the trial,[2] torture, judgement and sentence of a young French woman, Jehanne – Jeanne d'Arc – Joan of Arc. Dreyer had made the film in response to the canonisation of Joan in 1920 and to a multitude of works around her life.[3]

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[1] A faint greenish tinge on this still frame and on other interstitial frames from the film is thought to be from traces of adhesive where the film has been spliced.

[2] Transcripts of the trial have undergone an interesting itinerary of translation and movement between languages. Records taken in French during the investigation and trial were taken by a trio of notaries and collated at the end of each day. These records were later translated into Latin by the chief notary Guillaume Manchon and Thomas de Courcelles and have since been translated into English.

[3] These include Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part 1 (1591), Robert Southey's epic poem in honour of Joan (1794), Voltaire's La Pucelle d'Orléans (published 1899), Die Jungfrau von Orléans by Friedrich Schiller (1808), Verdi's Giovanna d'Arco (1845), the Russian opera in four acts by TchaikovskyОрлеанская дева (1878-79), Mark Twain's Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc, by the Sieur Louis de Conte(published in serial 1895 and book 1896), George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1924), Henri Auguste Barbier's *Jeanne d'Arc* (1909), the monumental oeuvre of Charles Péguy (1910-1930's) and Anatole France's biographical *La vie de Jeanne d'Arc* (1908). From her death in 1431 both French and English history was divided over Joan's role and in particular her relationship to her God. She was largely decried until in 1803 Napoleon Bonaparte in his battle against the English, called on Joan as symbolic of French patriotism. An intensive five year research by French historian Jules Quicherat

The face in the image (Figure 1) is the face of Joan as played by Renée Falconetti, an actor of whom Dreyer wrote "…in Falconetti, who plays Joan, I found what I might, with very bold expression, allow myself to call 'the martyr's reincarnation'" (Dreyer 1999). A veil covering her lower face in this particular still frame records the scars on film's emulsion as well as suggesting an itinerary of covering and uncovering of the body of Joan that will, on screen a few moments later, be escorted, bound to a pile of logs and burnt alive. Resonances between inside and outside, between a burning of the body of Joan and destruction by fire of the body, the physical structure of film, events off screen echoing events on screen, set this film apart as something quite different and in the same space further question notions of inside and outside in relation to film.

A screening of this film in 2000, at a festival in Tamaki Makaurau – Auckland, was accompanied by a live choir of women singing the Einhorn libretto (1994) which included voices in Latin, French and English, poetry (some misogynistic and others by female saints), hymns, prayers, letters and biblical citations. Throughout the film I was intensely aware of a heightened sensory awareness of the slightest movement, sounds and smells around me. The psychological complexity of a live performance of women's voices folded into and enfolding Dreyer's unrelenting procession of close-ups and extreme close-ups of the faces of participants in the trial and Falconetti's embodiment of Joan, provoked, for me, a physical engagement with this film[4] that remains with me to this day, even without the particular vocal accompaniment. Perhaps this response had already occurred in relation to every other film, with this film marking an awareness of these responses, an awareness of film in relation to a reading body, of a bodily reading of film.

There is another (among others) level at which Dreyer's 'Joan' operates, and one which performs perhaps, in a more intensely political manner. The woman, Joan, is on trial in France, the majority of which has been occupied by the English for over a hundred years. Here the film performs as biography, living outside of itself, both inside and outside the trial to which it restricts itself. Joan's life, her commitment to France, her raising troops to fight the English, her prowess as a warrior and leader are written unseen into every frame. And yet the face in the image stands alone in a trial where church and university are pitted against her on charges of heresy.[5] For me, the film operates as an intense reminder that movements against oppression of any people are performed on an individual level as well as on a level of solidarity with

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gathered together all documents from Joan's life and trial, making these widely available, through translation into a readable French.

[4] References to other such close relationships to the Dreyer film have been made through other films such as Jean-Luc Godard's 1962 film 'Vivre sa vie' (Godard 2010) and more recently Kaufman's 'Henry and June' (Kaufman 1990).

[5] In some ways a trial for heresy by university in both its etymology with a notion of choice, and in its accepted meaning as standing outside the currently accepted, opens an interesting relationship with the requirements for a thesis within a university where certainly both 'choice' and to some degree a 'standing outside' operate – another thesis perhaps.

others. Inside and outside, community and the foreign, public and personal are on trial here not only on screen but also through translation and translatability of any text, any film.

Inter-Weavings

> *Every day she had to pass by the castle. Help came from the statue of Joan of Arc. The great golden woman brandished her flaming lance and showed her the way to the castle. By following the golden sign she would finally get there. (Cixous 2001)*

The book Veils, written by Derrida and French feminist and long-time friend Hélène Cixous opens with the above citation from Cixous, a citation that immediately threads between film and text under analysis. Jacques Derrida wrote the autobiographical philosophical 'A Silkworm of One's Own: Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil' (1998, 2001) while travelling towards and through countries of South America. Written both in response to Cixous' 'Savoir' (Cixous 1998, 2001), which operates as first chapter disclosing her recent laser surgery to restore vision, 'Silkworm' performs as (among other matters) an examination of the Jewish tallith as religious artefact, unravelling weavings of *verité* – truth, verdict and veil. Where these are all matters that have been discussed and worked through in other Derridean texts, this book stands out for its poetic treatment, for the attention it gives to the handiwork involved in each, alongside and interwoven with a deep and playful working with a homophonous relationship between the French words *soie* – silk and *soi* – self and an interplay with processes involved in the fabrication of each.

Parallel and interwoven with such discussions is a series of childhood memories, where discourse is taken up through threads of memory, opening text to similarities and concurrence with a reader's memories, eliciting a phenomenological recalling on the part of a reader.

Souvenirs

> *Souvenir d'enfance: en levant les yeux au-dessus de leurs fils de laine, sans en interrompre ni même ralentir le mouvement de leurs doigts agiles, les femmes de ma famille disaient parfois, me semble-t-il, qu'il fallait diminuer. Non pas défaire, sans doute, mais diminuer, à savoir, je ne comprenais rien à ce mot mais j'en étais d'autant plus intrigué, voire amoureux, qu'il fallait procéder à la diminutiondes points ou réduire les mailles d'un ouvrage en cours. En vue de diminuer, aiguilles et mains devaient ainsi travailler deux mailles à la fois, en jouer plus d'une en tout cas. (Derrida 1998)*

> *Childhood memory: raising their eyes from their woollen threads, without interrupting or even slowing the movements of their agile fingers, the women of my family would say, sometimes, it seems, that it was necessary to diminish, to cast off. Not unpick, no doubt, but diminish, that is, although I understood nothing of what this word meant then but I was all the more intrigued by it, even in love with it, that they needed to proceed to diminish the stitches or reduce the knit of a work in progress. And in light of this*

> *diminution, needles and hands thus had to work with two loops at once, or in any case bring more than one into play.*

There is a tracing, here, an inscribing of memory following a brief address to himself, with a self writing self, Derrida recalls the word '*diminuer*' with and through memories of women and family that open to other memories of women and family. Casting off, knitting-two-together or*diminishing*, as Derrida discusses in the opening lines of 'Silkworm', is a fairly common direction in any knitting pattern where a particular shaping is required. Diminishing is a matter of casting off from a continuous length to curve for shoulders, arm openings, necklines, shaping textile to a body. It is also used to fabricate small openings inside a straight piece of garment, openings that allow pattern and texture in the knitted or woven fabric through repetition. The action, in knitting, requires passing a needle through two stitches as if they were one, continuing with the pattern after each *diminution*. The needle works between stitches of film and text, and again between stitches of one language and another; French and English, English and Māori, diminishing without lessening, shaping a garment, a text, a textile in writing. Neither stitch is lost in the process, but woven or knitted together through a strategy of inclusion and through performance of that strategy.

In *whatu* – weaving, a process of working with two threads as one is even more usual. I must confess to having more practical knowledge of knitting than of *whatu*. However, in weaving a*rourou*[6] – a food basket, two strands are woven together where required for shaping through a process of twisting together, each strand then separating to continue on its separate way until the *rourou* is complete, where all strands are then woven back into and over themselves.

All the twos

The notion of couple, of two, of two stitches, two threads or fibres, of a play between two, recalling those other twos; *tu* – (French) 'you' singular and *tout* – (French) 'all', has performed through several Derridean texts and is introduced here again, through construction of two mirrors involved in the laser that has restored sight to Hélène (Cixous), as well as what is, in French, discussion on gendered differences between the twos of *le* (masculine) and *la*(feminine), *voile* (veil and sail), *soi* (self) and *soie* (silk). Sites of such homophony immediately open Derrida's text to the inclusion of other languages (for me, Māori) where *tu* translates as the verbs 'to stand' and 'to stay', 'to take position' or 'take place' and relates at once to Tu Matauenga, 'God of War', who, at the time when the children of Papatuanuku – Earth Mother and Ranginui – Sky Father were locked in the restrictive space between their embracing parents, sought to kill his parents to force them apart, to allow light and space for the children. Tu-Matauenga, whose name is commonly shortened to Tu, also has, for Māori, a relationship with two, *tout* and *tu*.

[6] Here the word weaving is used for a process that is essentially a plaiting (*raranga*), where all threads are engaged, as distinct from *whatu* (weaving), which involves a twisting together of active and passive threads.

Woman's work

Intense engagement with the film 'Joan' that calls out for a working through is echoed, to some extent, through encounters with 'Silkworm', where a physical response is summoned throughout Derrida's writing, where body, and in particular a woman's body, is never far from the scene, never far from sites of philosophical questioning.

> *Hélène Cixous y traite à sa manière, pensante et poétique, en y mettant la main et les langues, toutes ces grandes questions" (Derrida 1998)*
>
> *Here Hélène Cixous treats this in her thoughtful way, employing her hands, languages and tongues to engage with these immense questions.*

Philosophical questions are engaged through and in a body. Thinking involves hands, tongues and languages. In this close-up view of thinking, these immense questions are a woman's work, a woman's handiwork, a woman's tongue work. We are moved between hand and mouth of a woman. Both 'Joan' and 'Silkworm' work with series of such close-ups and extreme close-ups of bodies and body parts, Dreyer's style perhaps larger and more obvious but certainly no more or less effective than Derrida's. Both engage with aspects of a woman's work, two French women, Joan – Jeanne and Hélène, d'Arc and Cixous, two works, two lives lived at temporal distances, Joan in the early fifteenth century and Hélène now. It is a particular style, a particular intimacy that runs through these close-up views, through bodies of women in film and text that initially attracts and has, initially, suggested one as translation of the other.

Again, a little later, in discussion of Cixous' work, Derrida turns his hand to a woman's body, moving through a sleight of hand from body of work to body proper, from text to textile.

> *Each time this unheard of operation (poetic writing) operates in this way, thus and otherwise, in each text signed by Hélène Cixous, in her opus that is also the body proper of her corpus, but a body proper exposed, vulnerable, expropriable in advance: readable unreadable. Vulnerable: an almost invulnerable tunic, we were saying, and it must not be absolutely invulnerable, such is the condition of the signature. (Derrida 2001)*

Signatures

Derrida's direction, like Dreyer's, moves between body and garment, body and textile, between what is proper and property in and around the signature. Joan signs, Hélène signs, Carl-Theodor signs as does Jacques and a hand forges the signature of a king (Figure 2). In both of these works, written, directed by men, discussion revolves around eyes, hands, mouths, and handiwork. Joan is on trial for raising an army to reclaim France from English occupation, for the clothes she wears while performing such tasks and for the images her words and actions have woven around a particular relationship with her God, a relationship that no-one else is privy to, a singular relationship to which she remains faithful even to death. Handiwork, in 'Joan' also brings to screen the work of men, not only of men involved in the making of the

film, but also of Church and University whose work in this respect is commissioned by the English colonisers.

'Silkworm' traces a no less complex weaving of body and handiwork, from wool and needles through laser operations and the tallith, the woven prayer shawl that is worn only by men, binding a relationship with a God. Handiwork in 'Silkworm' is Derrida's subject, the matter on which he writes. The opening paragraph introduces "the movement of their agile fingers" (2001, 21) and proceeds through discussions on textiles, on veils and tallith, a tallith of his own and further a silkworm of his own, writing stitches and thread throughout.

> *En finir avec le voile, c'est en finir avec soi.*
>
> *…Aucune chance que cela arrive jamais, qu'on s'appertienne assez soi-même (dans quelque s'avoir, si tu veux jouer) et qu'on réussisse à tourner vers soi un tel geste. Tu finiras dans l'imminence – et le dé-voilement restera toujours un mouvement du voile. Celui-ci ne consiste-t-il pas, dans sa consistance même, dans sa texture, à en finir avec soi, à se lever, à disparaître, à se retire pour laisser voir ou laisser être, pour laisser? (Derrida 1998)*
>
> *To finish with the veil is to finish with self.*
>
> *…There's no chance that that will ever happen, that one would belong enough to oneself (in some s'avoir,*[7] *have oneself, if you want to play) and that one would succeed in turning such a gesture toward oneself. You'll end in imminence – and the un-veiling will always remain a movement of the veil. Does this not consist, in its consistency, in its texture, in doing away with itself, in taking off, in disappearing, in withdrawing to let be seen or to let be, to let?*

"To finish with the veil", the veil that has haunted, continues to haunt Derridian texts. "To finish with the veil is to finish with self", or with a feminine self – *soie* – silk, feminine (*la soie*), and with a worm, a masculine worm (*un ver*) that weaves both *soie* and *soi*, both silk and self. It might be said that the fundamental question of deconstruction revolves around the 'who' and the 'what,' the *tupuna* – ancestors of the silk-self worm. This worm is a worm of and from language and languages. Weaving a self around its-self as text and textile it works its way through text and film, voraciously devouring in its passage, diminishing, knitting twos together, shaping a garment to cover it/self, to veil it/self.

Under it's skin

Another coupling, again, in Derrida, body and text are coupled, intertwined:

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[7] S'avoir – in this gesture Derrida plays with the title of Hélène Cixous' work that precedes and introduces Un Ver à soie. S'avoir – to have oneself and 'Savoir' (H.C.'s title) to know both play with at least two other homophonies; sa voir – her/his to see and sa voix – her/his voice.

> *Voilà toute la question, chaque mot compte. Il tient, il touché, il tire, comme une laisse, il affecte et parfois déchire la peau, il blesse, il pénètre sous la surface épidermique, ce que ne fait jamais un voile quand il suffit à voiler la vue. Savoirpourrait se lire comme un poème du toucher, il chante le voir au bord de la caresse "sans intermédiaire, sans les verres de non-contact"... (Derrida 1998)*
>
> *Voilà, (there is) the question in its entirety, each word counts. It holds, it touches, it draws and pulls like a lead, it affects and sometimes rips the skin, it wounds, it penetrates beneath the epidermal surface, which a veil never does when it is sufficient to veil the gaze. Savoir could be read as a poem of touch, it sings sight at the edge of a caress "without intermediary, without the non-contact lens"…*

Each word 'touches' and 'affects' the skin, weaves knits and produces a garment, a covering. Each word of Cixous' text, of 'Savoir' the text that precedes and calls for 'Silkworm', engages a haptic encounter and each word of Derrida's discussion works with a similar encounter, translated to screen in Dreyer's portrayal of Joan, where each movement, each flicker of an eyelid draws and pulls a reader, penetrates beneath the skin of an eye, burning beneath any notion of identity of a reading body. Such attention to detailed involvement of a body through such extreme close-ups is part of the rhetoric of both Dreyer and Derrida in these instances, part of the language and its customs.

Translation performs through destruction and survival of cultures and languages, in processes of living on. Processes of translation have performed as an integral part in the rituals and violences of colonisation and also perform in decolonisation, in writing ourselves,[8] in handiworks that write our languages, technologies, customs and thinkings through translations of Western texts and films, particularly where there is also a questioning, a deconstruction, a bodily thinking, a working of hands, mouths and languages through engagement with the question itself; the question of translation. There is no living on without death, violence and destruction; no survival without translation.

Separate and 'autonomous' each of the works (Dreyer's 'Joan" and Derrida's 'Silkworm') is powerful in its own standing. Written in what might be named the same language (French), though foreign to each other through differing technologies, 'Joan' and 'Silkworm' coupled are able to reflect off each other, resonating to engender a radiance that is capable of burning through separations of Christianity/Judaism, Him/Her, film/text, cross/tallith, inside/outside, community/foreign. Opening the books between the two risks *frayages*, risks a devouring by fire, risks all as it approaches the other in the intimacy of translation.

[8] Writing the self returns to *écriture feminine*, a call from Derrida (1979), Cixous (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 1997) and others to write the self, particularly for women to write our selves.

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List of Figures

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