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Afterburn:
An Afterword to “The Flying Manuscript”

Peggy Kamuf

Barcelona, June 22, 2005

A large lecture hall at the University. Rows upon rows, waiting. I have a copy of the typescript held ready but not uncovered until after she begins to read. “Le manuscrit volant . . . [and she adds: voulant, voilant]. Arcachon 7 avril 2005 Triste bonheur de retrouver le manuscrit de Voiles, oui . . .” Her voice soft, firm, setting each word down carefully, but without emphasis or dramatization, then letting them go on their way like fledglings out of the nest. They take flight and she reads on. The pages fly by swiftly, and like swifts they dip and spiral from one side to the other in complex patterns of many-voiced speech, dialogues external, internal, and maternal, telephonic, helenophonic, teleidiomatic, derridiomatic, telepathic, telegraphic.

In the hall, stillness and attention. I am both listening and reading, hearing and seeing for the first time the text I have pledged to render into English. Between ears and eyes, but also on the tongue and to the touch, the enveloping sensation of the untranslatable. A sensation, yes, and not just a matter for reflection, not just a teasing of thought into the space between idioms—hers and his and mine. That will come too, later, but first a sensation, tingling, stinging, better yet: burning.

The sensation, in the eyes and the ears, on the tongue and the skin, is that of a writing that burns through its fuel, language, without consuming it yet without leaving it intact. For already in French, in the original tongue, the untranslatable burns its way through the walls containing a language “within” “itself.” “Je ne sais pas comment c’est traduisible, t’inquiètes-tu, en français,” says one of the voices of Jacques Derrida ventriloquized by “The Flying Manuscript.” “I don’t know how it can be translated, you worry, into French.”

The sentence that prompts this worry and this recollection sets off an intense searing sensation when I hear and read it again in Barcelona. As if to douse the flame, tears flow from eyes to ears to tongue. I know it cannot be translated, first of all into French; it is just barely that one can bear to hear it again and then again: Comment voulez-vous que je meure?
And then I know for sure I am lost. The translation must crash and burn. It must because it is impossible, necessarily impossible. The only thing to do therefore is to begin as soon as possible.

Los Angeles, July 22, 2005

Right away, the little three-letter word jet in “. . . oui, le premier jet” brings everything to a halt even before the end of the text’s first line. Here it “means” draft, sketch, thus the first draft. But mere meaning is a very thin plank on which to cross the oceans between languages. A jet is thrown, it spurts, like a water jet. Jeter: to throw, hurl, toss, propel. Derrida has shaken down jeter and jacere (Latin is never far off; objet, sujet, rejett, projet, etc.) in countless places and in “The Flying Manuscript” Cixous recalls one of them parenthetically: “(the last time you did the commentary of jet was, I believe, in GGGG . . .).” With this reduction of Derrida’s title Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie to its repeated initial (which is above all, for Cixous, that of her father’s name, Georges), an acronym is forged that in French would be pronounced, homonymically, JetJetJetJet. So, in the very first sentence Cixous puts her finger on this sensitive place of thrownness and of what she will later describe, when she arrives at last to characterize the physiognomy of the manuscript’s first page, as “its quivering signs that look like they’ve been hurled from a brush” [signes frémissants comme jetés d’un pinceau]. Less pictorially but with no less figurative thrust, she will refer to the “premier jet” as “these savage psalms hurled at the sky” [ces psaumes sauvages jetés au ciel]. Jet also resonates with Derrida’s forename, especially via Latin (alea jacqueta est). But in this first occurrence in the text, it is the streaming force of the premier jet that is retained most explicitly, for she adds that it is “jailli de très loin,” spurted, gushed from very far away. Left dormant, but only for a brief time before it will be activated, is the airplane jet, which is pronounced more or less as in English, therefore unlike the other closer homonym here, j’ai (I have), which at least on the surface seems not to be working, although . . .

There’s nothing to be done with jet and the loss is immense, right at the start. To be sure, one could add a note, put words in brackets, or force English to accept an anidiomatic expression (“first throw/spurt/gush”) but the compensatory solution solves little and encumbers either the eye or the ear of the reader. Cixous’s fledgling birds, her darting swifts, should not have to bear, in their migration, the added weight of such encumbrances or be expected to soar if stumbling blocks are put in the way of their flight in the idiom’s ether. Let it be, then, “the first draft” and let this first displacement caused by the English idiom ricochet
elsewhere to make up for some of the loss, e.g.: “the first draft . . . blown in from very far.”

Such displacements will be forced upon the text countless times, and not always felicitously, of course. They form part of what I want to call the afterburn effect of translating any text by Hélène Cixous and, differently although no less searingly, any text of Derrida’s. That these writers have always shared an acute ear for the idiom’s reserve stores of untranslatability is one of the most constantly sounded “themes” in “The Flying Manuscript.” I’ve already cited one exchange around this theme, but there are others, for instance:


Or:

–I am listening to you, I say, I listen to your thought weave itself.
–You know how to hear yourself, you say.
–You think? Me, I think it’s you on the brink that I hear [Moi je crois que c’est toi en croix que j’entends].

So we scandalize ourselves the one the other.
–I don’t know how it can be translated, you worry, into French. All of these nested settings.

Often, too often, encumbering brackets mark the place where the translation has failed to burn through from one language to the other, where a ricocheting displacement has not worked its way to the surface in time (for, like everything else, translation’s afterburn is timed: there are deadlines, one must put an end to the endless search that, because it is much more like a passive waiting to be found, cannot be hurried). Nothing like an electrifying spark leaps across the gap to save the alliance of these friends in another tongue. The afterburn, in other words, is also the experience of the cooled spark and the dampened flame.

And yet, writes Cixous, “a cry starts up again like a flame, as soon as it is gazed on lovingly.” Announcing a precept and even something like a natural law (one day someone may try to codify Cixousian natural law as indexed in hundreds, perhaps thousands of axioms like this), the sentence locates the action, the passion, of an original afterburning, which is therefore not at all specific to the time or space of translation, at least not in the common sense of translation between natural languages. For “The Flying Manuscript” is, through and through, (about) afterburn, (about) the cry starting up again like a flame that
one thought extinguished, but that burns on after it has burned out. This poses the question of the very possibility of extinction or extinguishment of what has once been set in motion by a cry—of anguish, love, despair, anger, longing—that is, by the force of an ignition.

According to Cixousian natural law, extinction/extinguishment would be a matter of chance, or *malchance*, and as witness, she cites Proust:

one trembles, one has received a message from a dead one, the past/the passed one, it/he is hidden, says Proust (the passed one, the dead one) “in some material object (in the feeling that this material object would give us) that we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before dying, or whether we do not encounter it.”

Cixous’s subtle touch on this most famous Proustian moment in the afterburn of the *madeleine* episode displaces its key terms of *chance* and *le passé*. For the chance, if there is any, is for whom or for what? And *le passé*, is it ultimately a past experience that is returned to the subject by the sensation of the material object, or is it rather *someone* or *other*, a *trépassé* as one can also say in French? The syntax of “*le passé*” in Cixous’s gloss twice makes possible both readings, so that one is obligated to translate its pronoun, “*il*,” as both personal and impersonal, “*he*” and “*it*”: “on tremble, on a reçu un message d’un mort, le passé, il est caché, dit Proust, (le passé, le mort) ‘en quelque objet matériel . . .’” What is more, in its second occurrence in parentheses “*le passé*” can also stand in apposition to the proper name Proust. That “*le passé, le mort*” can also be Proust, whose cry is being revived by this reader’s touch, has the effect of staging right here the very event that Proust’s narrator is describing in general terms, that is, the chance encounter with “*le passé, le mort*” in a material object: in, for example, the materiality of a *madeleine*—text—or else of a forgotten manuscript, rediscovered by chance.

In this way, afterburn passes the flame along syntactic pathways where one (subject, object, person, non-person) cannot be distinguished from the other. According to Cixous’s supplement to the laws of thermodynamics, the undistinguished is unextinguished and what is without distinction is also without extinction. Here’s another such syntax, which once again raises the heat under the personal/impersonal pronoun “*il,*” but also depends on a flexing of the verb *s’éteindre* among its idiomatic uses: to burn out, go off, die down, like a flame or a light, to fade, like a voice, and, when said of persons, to die:

Il crie, et il m’envoie ce cri enveloppé dans du papier, depuis Buenos-Aires en me recommandant de ne pas le recevoir avant qu’il se soit éteint, le cri. Je ne l’ai donc lu qu’éteint.
[He cries, and he sends me this cry enveloped in some paper, from Buenos Aires advising me not to receive it before it/he has been extinguished, the cry. I read it therefore only extinguished.]

The appended “the cry” at the end of the first sentence seems at first to specify the subject of “extinguished,” until, with a shock of mild surprise, one realizes how the sentence’s syntax defies being tamped down even so. For there is no assurance that, in the latter part of the sentence, the object pronoun “it” (le) and the subject pronoun “it” (il) have the same antecedent. Relayed by their multivalent pronouns, it and he can share and exchange substance; both can be extinguished: the cry can fade and he can die.

(Of course, it is this multivalent chance that is otherwise extinguished by English with its non-recognition of gendered pronouns and substantives. The delicate firing of Cixous’s syntax here is made to sputter when the translation has to insert alternatives for the pronouns. But this time a chance spark lands in the following sentence—“I read it therefore only extinguished”—and ignites a supplementary possibility unavailable in French for the same reason of the rules of gender agreement. For in addition to him or it, the English sentence also lets one read that it is “I” whose light has burned out, who am extinguished.)

But then, in the next paragraph and as we have already read again, whatever is extinguished—him, it, me, which are all relaying each other in a structure of substitution—begins its afterburn, for “a cry starts up again like a flame, as soon as it is kindled with a loving gaze.” Here, it is not the pronouns but a crossing within the figurative idiom that is passing the flame between material object and le passé, le mort: “un cri repart comme une flamme, dès qu’il est couvé des yeux.” I earlier pointed to this sentence as a precept within the vast “system” of Cixousian natural law. Examining it more closely, one finds that not only is the law stated in terms of a simile (“like a flame”), but it poses as well a principle of crossing the “natural” lines of division between, once again, the personal and the impersonal, animate and inanimate, and finally the living and the dead. The rhetorician would call this figurative crossing personification, or perhaps prosopopeia, but it little matters since Cixousian poetics leave the realm of rhetoric for that of natural law, the laws of thermodynamics. That a cry, in its manuscripted trace, can be “couvé des yeux” and thereby rekindled, like a flame, is not a figure of speech but a law of afterburning nature.

“Couver des yeux” is virtually what one calls a dead metaphor in ordinary speech. Here it is being reanimated by a writing practice that heats up words until they become volatile. Literally, as we are taught to say by those same rhetoricians, “couver” is to incubate, to cover eggs and
keep them warm, to hatch. Hence, the figurative extension toward the sense of hatching a plot, a plan for revenge, or else of incubating an illness, as in “Je dois couver quelque chose,” “I must be coming down with something.” Intransitively, however, “couver” smolders beneath the ashes and, in its most common use in this sense, what smolders thus has not the innocence of newborn chicks but is of the order of hatred, envy, vengeance, revolt, resentment. “The Flying Manuscript” deploys the verb in this sense as well in a sentence whose form is closer this time to a maxim of La Rochefoucauld, a pensée of Pascal, or a Nietzschean aphorism than to a dictum of natural law: “nothing guarantees that some odium of resentment is not brewing [ne couve pas] in the secret of those who have no love for attention.” Resentment smolders, brews and stews; as Nietzsche insists, it is born—or hatched—through the suppression of (negative) feeling, “sentiment,” which has to return in another, inverted guise, for example, moral condemnation. Resentment, so understood, would be an inversion or perversion of life’s afterburning force, a smoldering, a hanging-fire (for example “in the secret of those who have no love of attention”) of ill-feeling toward whatever it resents: the strong ones who are life-affirmers (Nietzsche once more, but also Cixous and the Nietzschean Derrida). So, “couver” covers quite a range in ordinary usage: from the natural, life-giving warmth of the broody hen to brooding, brewing, stewing resentment or hatred that festers in secret, hatching finally only monsters who are anti-life, life-deniers.

But “couver des yeux” burns openly, visibly. There is here no secret afterburning of resentment or envy. Rather, there is desire, longing, love shown for another in the eyes, by the eyes and the gaze (one also says couver du regard). It is a visibility that burns for the other also in the sense that only another can see this look in my eyes, which will always be invisible for me. Even if it is not impossible for me to say of myself “I gazed with longing, with desire at X” (j’ai couvé X des yeux), I will not have discovered this feeling by looking myself in the eyes, but rather by sensing from within what wells up when I look at X. To “couver des yeux,” then, is to “express oneself,” literally, to push the inside out, without words, without meaning and meaning-to, onto the surface of one’s exposure to others and to a place from which may be seen the look of “me” that I cannot see myself. The expression thus implies a witness, the act of witnessing some “I” who can be said to “couver des yeux.” It is for the witness to see and to say “my” expression, which thus divides me right on the burning surface of the visible, speakable ex-position to and with others.

On the very first page of “The Flying Manuscript,” the expression “couver des yeux” is aligned with a call to witness: “you fight over yourself, you tear yourself apart. And you let it be seen by the people
who follows you and who looks longingly at you [te couve des yeux], and whom you call upon to witness this tearing to pieces.” The witnesses are called upon inasmuch as they let themselves see with a heated glance the passion of J. D.; the act of seeing “with their own eyes” (as what are called eyewitnesses) is made consequent on the action—which is again a passion—of couver-des-yeux. To see the passion, to witness it, is to couver: to keep warm, heat, protect, bring (back) to life.

It is this mode of seeing, which generates heat and germinates life, that Cixous in her turn is arousing from its deadened state by this remise-en-scène of the drama witnessed when, we read in the same passage, Derrida stages

the irruption of foreign forces into your course, I mean to say into your inner forum [for]—your own foreign forces, your own polemos, you fight with yourself. I mean to say: you fight over yourself, you tear yourself apart. And you let it be seen by the people who follows you and who looks longingly at you, and whom you call upon to witness this tearing to pieces. And to these people, an immensity, you say You [Vous], you name it and bring it toward you, with the name You.

On that stage, he will have addressed “You” by saying or asking, for example: “Comment voulez-vous que je meure?” And now You too are called to witness this sentence-event, by letting it resonate endlessly, by letting it tear itself—and you—apart. From the beginning, then, Cixous’s text prepares the reader-witness to couver des yeux the flying, crying manuscript, which had landed in a drawer and lay there extinguished for years, so that when at last, after many deferrals and digressions, its first page is brought into view, its cry will leap up again like a flame. It burns, it afterburns for you if you have eyes to see, which is to say, to incubate what has been confided to your longing look. Look, hear, couvez-le, kindle it, keep it warm with your eyes and your ears, and in that way bear witness, be a witness. Translate it, in other words and otherwise.

Undistinguished, unextinguished, I said. It is especially voice, always more than one, that bears out this undying principle. How many voices make up the chorale of “The Flying Manuscript”? Who could ever count them, that is, who could ever unravel their strands, distinguish one from the other? There are indeed different voices sounded here, but they exchange places rapidly or else they speak from several places at once, in the name of the one but also for the other. Pronouns attributing speech (I say, he says, you ask, she cries) shift just as unstoppably among all the stops on this many-voiced instrument, the song sung by citing and reciting the other’s voice within, which is itself more than one. Consider, for example: “Ich mag das nicht, says Eri says my mother, something that
you eat, it means you don’t like it. That, that’s Eri. I don’t like this, I don’t like that. —Ich möge das gern, that means we like that.” “Says Eri says my mother” says Hélène. And she (?) adds “that’s Eri,” the one whose tongue is always discriminating in its taste, the one who says “I don’t like this, I don’t like that.” But then this taste of the other’s tongue forms the German sentence Ich möge das gern, in the first person singular, which, however, is right away translated with the plural: “ça veut dire nous aimons ça,” “that means we like that.” A lesson in translation is being given here by the pluralizing voices of Hélène’s mother: when one reads or hears “I” and especially when this “I” is stating its pleasure, the unextinguishable, undistinguishable voice of the nearby other slips onto the tongue, and I then translate the irrefutable truth that we are always more than one to speak. Listen to your mother (tongue): that is translation’s imperative.

And yet, no less imperatively, the other translator here—me (?) for example—must analyze the voice strands so as to try to give them their due, assuming that this is what they want or mean to say. In other words, the basic duty of translation is to know, to assume it knows what the original wants or means to say—and who says it. What becomes, however, of this essential analytic task when it is precisely the question “who speaks?” that cannot be resolved and, for whoever would not neglect that translation is an ethical task, that should not be resolved? Can one translate without knowing or without knowledge, sans savoir? Not in ignorance, perhaps, but in total suspense, without possible decision of certainty?

These questions burn on long after it’s time to declare the translation “finished,” “done.” Every line of “The Flying Manuscript” could testify to this suspense, but let just one example serve to illustrate the effect. After the version had already been compared many times to the original, a moment of undecidable voice leaped out from its syntactic, semantic reserve where it had lain unobserved until then. It is just one of many such moments when voices are intertwined in a back and forth whose oscillation or incorporation cannot be stilled. Here, Cixous cites the multibeginnings of “Un ver à soie,” the definitive published version of the flying manuscript. Before the citation, she remarks how, in its multiple beginnings, “three sorts of vers ‘succeed’ each other” [se succédent]. Her commentary resumes after the quotation, but it is quickly interrupted (as signalled by the singular punctuation of a shortened dash, –) by another voice saying, and I will cite it first of all in French: “—Se succéder, c’est ce qui m’attend, me dis-tu.” Now, on first encounter, this intervening remark seemed to pose above all the question of how to translate “se succéder,” which can be either reflexive or reciprocal: to succeed oneself or one another. But in the afterburning
aftermath arose what seemed to be another question altogether, which is tied up with the attribution of the pronouns in the phrase that ascribes speech: *me dis-tu.* Who says, who may be heard saying: “you say to me”? For in the absence of quotation marks, it is possible to hear the cited intervention as including as well this phrase, that is, to hear Derrida saying to her: “*Se succéder,* that’s what awaits me, you’re telling me.” But no less possible is the reading: “*Se succéder,* that’s what awaits me,’ you say to me.” In other words, it is equally possible to read Cixous citing Derrida, as it is to read Derrida citing Cixous who cites him citing her and saying he is citing her, tossing the infinitive “se succéder” back while saying she is saying that what awaits him is to succeed himself—or another.

Given that, throughout the text, the intervening, echoing, reciting voices are almost never distinguished by quotation marks, this suspension of attribution is a general effect of polyvocality throughout the text. Voices take the other in and are taken in, housed, sheltered, indistinguishably, unextinguishably. And translation has the task of resheltering in another tongue all these nested voices without deciding their undecidable succession. Its analysis must therefore be endless.

—Oh! Translate, you, the depth of my anguish, she writes.

Los Angeles, August 27, 2005

*For a translation comes after the original and, for important works, which never find their predestined translator at the time of their birth, it characterizes the stage of their living on.*

—Walter Benjamin

Time has run out. The translation must be sent off, unfledged, on a wing and a prayer. Its only hope has ever been to slip into the jet stream behind the original. Following after, always after, it feels the singeing blast from the propulsions driving the original ahead, always ahead. By catching the jet’s thermal drafts, it may remain airborne for a while. But even when it crashes, especially when it crashes, the sensation of the untranslatable lives on long after. After all.

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