

Verbal Disengagements: Translating Language Games in Annie Abrahams's *Separation/Séparation*

Mauro CARASSAI, Renata MORRESI

mauro.carassai@lmc.gatech.edu
renatamorresi@hotmail.com

Abstract

Born out of a generative conversation between a PhD candidate working on e-literature and an Italian poet-critic and translator working on experimental women writers, our Italian translation of Annie Abrahams's *Separation/Séparation* aims at highlighting the importance of 'behavioural code' both in human and machinic practices and has become an inquiry into the ways in which Abrahams's responsive literary device (involved in linguistic and extra-linguistic practices) partakes in reconfiguring our rule-guided intersubjective behaviours at the level of literary negotiation. In Abrahams's work negotiations of visualized words are purposefully meant to undergo readjustments and modulations whose effects are rarely under complete control of either the author or the work's reader/"empathizer"/interpellator. As Wittgenstein remarks in *Philosophical Investigations*, "it is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact." Assuming, with Henry Meschonnic, that translation does not concern the sign, rather the organization of the movement of speech and the negotiation of elements such as rhythm and prosody, pauses and positions, expectations and deviations, we address the translation of an electronic work considering the procedure as constitutive of the creative act and its subjectivization. All the more poignantly in the case of *Separation/Séparation*, a work conceived as an exercise in the managing of respite and excess in the human-machine interaction.

Keywords

translation, poetry, language-games, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Henri Meschonnic, Annie Abrahams, trans-subject, e-literature, digital media, Break Timer Software, Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), reading, subjectivity

Mauro Carassai is a Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at Georgia Institute of Technology. He received a PhD in English from University of Florida, an MA in American Literature and Culture from University of Leeds (UK), and was a Fulbright visiting student at Brown University in 2007-2008. His research combines literary theory, Ordinary Language Philosophy, and digital literatures within the larger frame of American literatures and American studies. His scholarly work has been published in journals such as *Culture Machine*, *LEA Almanac* (MIT Press), and *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. He was a 2010-11 HASTAC scholar. Among Carassai's publications: "Electronic Literature as Language Game: a Philosophical Approach to Digital Artifact Subjectivity." *DAC 09. After Media: Embodiment and Context*. Special issue of *Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA)* 17.2 (2012): 36-49. MIT Press. "E-lit Works as 'forms of culture': Envisioning Digital Literary Subjectivity." *Digital Humanities: Beyond Computing*. Special issue of *Culture Machine* 12 (2011): 1-23. "Futures of

Digital Studies: Introduction.” Co-Author, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5.3 (2011). Brown University and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Renata Morresi is PhD in Comparative Literature, poet and translator; she has received a post-doctoral grant in Transnational American Literature. She has worked at the University of Macerata, teaching subjects related to Anglo-American Studies, and at the University of Padua, teaching American Literature. Morresi focuses on the study of cross-cultural themes and questions arising from encounters across different languages and cultures; she has written on transatlantic modernism (Nancy Cunard, Claude McKay, little magazines, etc.), poetry and polylinguism (Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, etc.), gender studies and interculturality. Among her publications: Rachel Blau DuPlessis. *Dieci Bozze*. Edited with an introduction by Renata Morresi, Macerata, Vydia, 2012 (Achille Marazza Prize 2014); “Borders, pachangas and Chicano children's picture books,” in Maria Sachiko Cecire, Hannah Field, Kavita Mudan, and Malini Roy, *Place and Space in Children's Literature*. Ashgate: Farnham, forthcoming; *Bagnanti*, Roma, Perrone 2013.

As digital media increasingly rely on a multiplicity of interfacing platforms used to communicate electronically, textuality in digital environments implicitly poses a problematic separation of digitization, born-digital creation, encoding, programming, databases modelling, multimedia authoring, and interface design into distinct fields of inquiry. Literary scholars who take initiatives to process digital texts out of an interest in encouraging both experts and laymen audiences to read electronic literature worldwide should not find such “textual condition” unfamiliar. As a consequence, in the process of translating pieces of electronic literature,¹ translators should necessarily engage in making informed decisions not only about a preliminary stage focused on locating the translatable, as it were. They should also have a clear idea about what particular *practice* of translation they are about to engage in.

Our specific attempt has been fundamentally heuristic insofar as we put ourselves in the position of anyone who happens to have to translate an e-literature work without having access to such an essential component as the original code. Such specific translation practice is far from the unusual when considered within the paradigm of traditional print literature and expands the larger set of issues highlighted by Andrea Lunsford in “The Nature of Composition Studies” where, in her attempt to connect literacy theories to the practical spheres of private and public life, she called “for those interested in literacies, in the dynamic relationships among texts, writers, readers and contexts to move beyond the safe borders of the campus or traditional classroom, to voyage out to meet new learners and new questions waiting on new intellectual and personal horizons” (11). So we tried to imagine what the equivalent situation of taking a piece of paper and sitting at a table with a couple of dictionaries would be for an e-lit work such as Annie Abrahams’s *Separation/Séparation*. As such practice might happen

¹ As for the definition of electronic literature, in this context we refer to the Electronic Literature Organization web site definition as “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer.” «What is E-Lit?», < <http://eliterature.org/what-is-e-lit/>>. Accessed on August 20th, 2014.

in many parts of the world for the most variegated purposes (assigning translation tasks to students being certainly not the most far-fetched, for example), would the resulting translated electronic text tell us something about the practice's own effectiveness? Could our assumed position – applied to a specific e-literature text – be in any way productive of fruitful considerations and findings over the complex question of translating e-literature?

Separation/Séparation, in Annie Abrahams's words, "was written during a stay in the hospital in 2001. Computer workers often neglect their bodies and by doing so they risk the development of what is called "Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI)"². In addressing the possible insurgence of such muscoskeletal problem due to fast repetitive movements, *Separation/Séparation* was composed by the author according to the underlying idea that it would have to be read at a very slow pace – a pace that, when not respected, would collapse the text itself. When such textual accident occurs, the resulting textual outcome forces the reader to perform a set of exercises as physical penitence. These exercises *de facto* interrupt the reader from any action upon the written surface of *Separation/Séparation*'s literary text and thus they adequately protect her against RSI.

As it frequently happens for digital writers who engage their creative enterprises without high proficiency in programming languages, translators with low levels coding literacy are also likely to have to *repurpose* what is already available in terms of authoring software tools and applications. Even more so, translators who decide to engage the translation in the absence of authorized access to the underlying code. As a consequence, we initially thought that the most basic equivalent of our so-called piece of paper for our purpose might have been an existing presentation tool such as *Power Point*. *Power Point* would work on at least two levels: first, as a *sequencer* of slides visually identical that would reproduce the incremental appearance of the text on a static electronic surface; second, as a *user-friendly* equivalent of a notebook for outlining and organizing text for different kind of learners in the digital age. At the end of the day, unlike specific competence in HTML, XML or Java, familiarity with word processors and slide-based or animation-based presentation programs such as *Power Point* or *Prezi* is increasingly assumed as necessary components of the contemporary English students' multimodal writing skills. In order to have a sense of how easy and graphically rewarding could be the attempt to reproduce Abrahams's work by means of *Power Point*, please take a moment to review our Italian translation of *Separation/Séparation* here below (once on the web page, scroll down to Translating E-Literature, then click on "Powerpoint Translation" to access the file):

<http://carassai.lmc.gatech.edu/dh-projects/>

There were, however, several problems with this kind of roughly experimental form of translation that became almost immediately evident both as we went through the process and once we reconsidered the resulting artefact in retrospect. First of all, since the *Power Point* file is realized by adding one word at a time (over a total of 184 slides), any makeshift translator would likely end up, if anything, directly experiencing on her

2 Repetitive strain injury (RSI) (also known as "repetitive motion injuries" or "repetitive motion disorder") can be conceived of as an injury of the musculoskeletal and nervous systems that may be caused by repetitive tasks. In carrying out light exertions and various kinds of mechanical compressions such as pressing against hard surfaces and assuming awkward positions, computer users can incur forms of injuries that may include non-specific arm pain or upper limb disorders.

own practice Annie Abrahams's warning against the repetitive use of digital media. In other words, after translating the text this way, the translator would eventually risk end up properly suffering from RSI. Most importantly on a theoretical level, however, despite this kind of translation offers a fair translational account of the fragmented format of the original text, it does not offer a rendition of the algorithmic-based imposed interruptions and breaks that should prevent the reader from developing RSI. In order to overcome such a shortcoming, one possibility might have been to rely on software designed to help in repetitive strain injury. We might have implemented, for instance, some sort of so-called *break timer* software to remind the user to pause frequently and perform exercises while working behind a computer. In any case, we realized almost immediately that the above-mentioned software (regardless of its variety) would have hardly suited our translation because it fundamentally fails to translate Abrahams's literary work's specific *utterance*. We can see such specific utterance as concerned with a fundamental urge toward change. The work, that is, encourages readers to change their *attitude* towards the machine and, consequently, their relation to (the) work. Abrahams's literary work ultimately urges readers to change their relation to their own body as they usually perform *reading*.

Such behavioral change is not just simply mediated *by* the work but gets actually re-directed towards the digital literary artifact itself in terms of *reading* practice. Readers have to click slowly to *read* the work itself. The poetics animating Abraham's work is, in other words, activated by the actual performance of a different way of reading: being patient and/or *identifying with* the patient allow the reading experience of the text. This aspect reminds us of the intimate connection between *poiein* (the creative activity) and *paschein* (the passive activity of suffering). The terms may at first seem antonyms, but, following Aristotle, they share the same disposition to the core concept of *pathos* as change: the change that occurs in the course of an action, the change that occurs in the quest for healing.³ In *Separation/Séparation* such change is further amplified by being prompted within the very fruition. An important consequence is that an e-literature piece that does not produce behavioral change as a (post-reading) effect but encourages behavioral change as *part of* its very aesthetic fruition (i.e., along the reading) can be hardly characterized as a literary object we dispose of but rather, we might better consider it as a post-machinic language-based entity we inter-subjectively relate to. Such shifting re-conceptualization is crucial as it offers an opportunity to re-imagine the – often interactive, time-based, algorithmic – digital work within the frame of an account of inter-subjectivity as relational interactions based on “language games” as the ones typical of Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy.

A Wittgenstein-ian understanding of the language-using subject implies an attention to the prominence of relationality over issues related to the essence of the single Cartesian subject. Language, in its characterization as a rule-guided activity, becomes for Wittgenstein the set of relational phenomena that shape our inter-subjective activity. Language, in the philosopher's view, has no essence but ‘is part of an activity, or of a form of life’ (1953: §23) and our language games are interwoven with non-linguistic practices in a totality which is at the same time both contingent and embedded in them. As Wittgenstein points out in the *Philosophical Investigations*, he ‘call[s] the whole, consisting of language *and the actions into which it is woven*, a “language-game” [emphasis added]’ (1953: §7) and he explains that ‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’ (1953: §19). As a result, from this point of view, considering e-lit

3 The connection has been investigated by Marjolein Oele in her *Aristotle on Pathos*, PhD Dissertation. Loyola University Chicago, 2007. Retrieved from ProQuest/UMI, 3280696.

works as textual post-machinic subjects is contingent on our willingness to allow for the electronic literary work to change the rules of our language games.

We better clarify that, in thinking our translation act within the frame of such philosophical perspective, our goal was neither to investigate what makes a human being into a human being (or a machine into a machine) nor to establish an inner correspondence between allegedly comparable machinic and organic informational systems. In making justice to the above-mentioned utterance by Annie Abrahams, we are interested in drawing attention to the extent to which the theoretical frame of subjectivity might help us in understanding our current relation to the digital literary and to the related practices of translation it encourages. Reconsidered within such philosophical frame, Abrahams's work could function as an entity whose textual and algorithmic behaviours can be approached as marks of cultural difference and subjective identity. Moreover, insofar as digital literary artifacts such as Abrahams's allowed us to put to test the relationship between mind and body and the one between self and the machinic other we, as critical translators of digital works, should ask how long we could afford to keep our interactions with such digital literary work locked outside the circle of intersubjective ("transpositional" textual) relations. If we agree with Noah Wardrip Fruin that "rather than defining the sequence of words for a book or images for a film, today's authors are increasingly defining the rules for system behavior," (42) then the textual behaviours we increasingly associate with second-generation digital literary works should be legitimately included *within* our interpretive affordances and critical responses as translators.

In our carrying out our heuristic translations, we thus considered Abraham's work neither as a mere object, i.e. an opaque product whose code we are left to unpack, nor as the immutable work of art, the "Grecian urn" inherited by literary tradition. It is interesting to notice here that *Separation/Séparation* does actually allude to the traditional lyric poem, with its alignment flush left, evoking the I/You conflicted relationship of the love poem, soliciting a close reading. Yet it does so ironically, only to overturn our expectations: if you are too involved in the words the pop-ups ask you to slow down; the page reveals its content one word at a time; the You turns out to be quite different from the *troubadours'* object of devotion. The digital work makes this possible not only at the verbal level, but also by redesigning the play field and by giving us a new set of rules to gain access to and process it. The work becomes a trans-subject, inscribed by a new negotiation of subjectivity. This relationship is often hidden by the ideology of the work of art as a separate, extraordinary entity using a special language, but it is here especially (perhaps inevitably) brought to light by the translation process.

Translating is joining a discourse, entering a relationship, engaging in a negotiation. It is far more than delivering the same message from one language into another language. As King-Kui Sin reminds us, the "conduit metaphor" (39) and the "myth of the translator's black box" (43) have long been prevailing, but the widespread idea that translation may work according to Shannon and Weaver's model of communication, like the transmission of a content wrapped in words, as well as the notion that "words are containers of meaning" (38) – they themselves contained into the head of the translator who has to re-address them to the target language containers – have in many ways been misleading.

Henri Meschonnic suggested we should overcome such traditional translationist lexicon and the dualistic obsession articulated by it: spirit against form, sense-for-sense against word-for-word, freedom against loyalty, and so on. Translators and scholars have for a long time considered translation as the mere transfer of information, or as the

strenuous interpretative search for the truth, forgetting that we do not (we should not) translate what the text says, i.e. the text's signs, but rather what the text *does*⁴. Meschonnic did not see language as a mere system of signs, or as a formal verbal structure used as an instrument to actualize a preceding, transcendental meaning. Language, in his view, is both constrained and amplified by its interrelation with the non-linguistic. Translation is an act of language but you don't translate what language says, rather what language does: you always translate a discourse, a material, historical subjectivization within language, that exceeds the sum of its verbal components and concerns the organization of the marks through which a specific semantics is produced. "Ces marques peuvent se situer à tous les 'niveaux' du langage: accentuelles, prosodiques, lexicales, syntaxiques" ("These marks can be located at any 'level' of language: accentuation, prosody, lexicon, syntax," Meschonnic 1982, 217): the marks do not correspond to lexical meaning, rather they identify the rhythm of the individual work. Meschonnic calls this rhythm "l'organisation du mouvement de la parole dans l'écriture" ("the organization of the movement of speech in writing," Meschonnic 1996, 17).

Rhythm is a key concept in Meschonnic: it is the overall organization of the subject as discourse, in and across its discourse. It is the subject's gait and bearing, it is rhythm as conceived by pre-Socratic philosophers, as Benveniste also pointed out: not the fixed alternation of strong and weak accents, a pre-set measure, rather a temporary configuration, the arrangement of things at a given moment in time. "Le rythme met en question la régie du signe, le primat du sens" ("rhythm puts into question the authority of the sign, the supremacy of meaning," Meschonnic 1999, 97). It is the subject's identifying touch when becoming. Not the psychological subject, not the linguistic subject of an utterance, not the sociological subject created by history, not the ideal subject projected by the 'true' interpretation of the text. It is, once again, a trans-subject, that deploys on the surface of the text the extralinguistic vibrating in language, the tensions and intentions inscribed in its modes, its historicity.⁵ In this sense translating a text is always entering a relationship and decentering its participants. Thus, the aim of translation becomes "le mode de signifier" of the work's trans-subject, rather than the transmission of a meaning. This is especially evident in a work like *Séparation/Séparation*, where the pace of disclosure (a non-verbal element) is decisive for the rhythm of this work and where new reconfigurations of the verbal text are surprising us at every step.

4 See Meschonnic 1999, pp.139-141.

5 "There is in this search for a description of rhythm something very close to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. In a series of books that might be considered his 'poetical investigations,' Meschonnic makes us see rhythm in all its functional diversity, in the same way in which Wittgenstein criticized the supposed uniformity of 'meaning' in language." (Muresan 428).

Since we had an eye focused on the rhythm of what we have just described as a trans-subject, we attempted a translation that might render such textual “gait” by means of inserting a *Javascript* routine into an html file that would result in the popping up of slow-pace reminders (once on the web page, scroll down to Translating E-Literature, then click on “Javascript Translation” to access the file):

<http://carassai.lmc.gatech.edu/dh-projects/>

As it might become evident to anyone who tries to read it, this second translation certainly represents an enhanced version compared to the previous one. However, regardless of how faithfully we could set the time-based parameters for the pop-up warnings in relation to the original, we still realized that our translation would not be complete as long as we would not reproduce the dynamic of *disclosure* of which we are going to illustrate specific instantiations.

An effective metaphor for our Italian translation was to consider the text as a chessboard. Paraphrasing Hans Glock when he explains the concept of meaning as use in Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, we can assume that “the ‘meaning’ of each verbal sign, like that of each chess piece, is the set of rules that determine its possible ‘moves’.” (196) In other words, what moves are actually possible depends, at each step, from the situation (position on the board). The progressive word-by-word unfolding of the text in Abrahams’s piece, from this point of view, continually rearranges the chessboard configuration in terms of the “interpretive move” expectations generated in the reader/translator.

If the time-based component of Abrahams’s piece re-configures the range of the interpretive move at every single step, any translation into another language of the piece must take into account (and allow for) the *retrospective* reconfiguration of the specific language-games actually “playable” in that language. Since our reading of the verbal poem in the (apparent) foreground of *Separation/Séparation* can only take place by means of gradual disclosure, the time-honored method of “word-for-word” translation might be applied to its extremes: we could translate *words* as they appear on the page, with their whole unexpected effect, their implied collocations, their potential allusions, their not-yet-realized and about-to-come status of speech acts, treating them as singularities emerging one by one, reproducing the expectations before the readjustments of the chessboard/text around another (less wide, more detailed) set of possibilities, reproducing the suspense of getting to another level of intimacy with the text, with the “I” speaking of her pain.

Translator guidelines usually suggest that the translator should read the literary text more than once, analyzing it as a whole and respecting its overall linguistic style and register: what if the text itself questions all these traditional forms of reading (and translating), preventing direct access, playing on hesitation and on the linguistic potential of words a moment before their actual configurations into meaningful acts? We argue that for an effective adaptation of *Separation/Séparation* into Italian we should do more than consider the poem in its final form as the source text of our interlinguistic translation, we should rather reproduce the instability informing its unfolding. Not only do not we have a source language in the first place (how to know whether to translate from French or English? Or both?), we do not even have a fixed verbal source text in the shape of a stable poem: Abraham’s work lies in the exposure of this vulnerability, a fissure that draws us near, inviting the readers in and making them agents of the work’s performance itself. After six mouse-clicks we read six words:

“lonely soul / not knowing how to”. What does the “lonely soul” ignore? And later in the text what are the two protagonists “exchanging”? What did “your body bec[o]me”? The reader is invited to project meaning, to discover it (slowly) and to make progressive guesses on who the speaker is (the writer? the lover? the program? the computer itself?). Abraham’s work, after all, evokes the separation necessary to avoid the fusion that becomes unintelligible confusion or complete absorption by the love object: it is in this distance that lies the possibility to reach for the other. Togetherness and wholesome closeness become thus attainable only by *separation*, otherwise extreme involvement might turn the adverb into a dangerous hunt “to-get-her”, as Abrahams writes, and trap her.

When embracing the task of translation the language-game we are most likely to enact is probably critical re-reading: the issue with punctuation is indeed a crucial one when it comes to it. While during most of the work commas appear simultaneously with the text (i.e., not as isolated textual units requiring their own separate mouse-clicks), the last two questions conversely *become* questions via the addition of question marks by means of dedicated mouse-clicks. This aspect suggests that, in principle, we might have expected at every step not only syntax reconfigurations by means of words’ future (re-)combinations with other lemmas but also reconfigurations of *speech acts* by means of sudden apparition of punctuation. In the latter case, syntax changes would have, for example, transformed what were previously statements into questions or invocations (as it actually happens in the last two lines) and what were previously main clauses into indeterminate digressions. In other words, sentences can become – along the text – different *behaviours* or, in other terms, distinct moves within different language games regulated by different rules.

In Abrahams’s work negotiations of visualized words are purposefully meant to undergo readjustments and modulations whose effects are rarely under exclusive control of either the author or the work’s reader/“empathizer”/interpellator. As Wittgenstein remarks in *Philosophical Investigations*, “it is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact.” (§ 445) As a result, as our limited set of examples have hopefully shown, our translation eventually became an inquiry into the ways in which Abrahams’s responsive literary device (involved in linguistic and extra-linguistic practices) partakes in reconfiguring our rule-guided intersubjective behaviours at the level of literary negotiation.

Bibliography

ABRAHAMS, Annie, “*Separation/Séparation*,” 2002-03.

<http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/abrahams_separation/separation>, accessed on August 25th, 2014.

GLOCK, Hans-Johann, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1996.

LANSFORD, Andrea, “The Nature of Composition Studies,” in: LINDEMANN, Erika and TATE, Gary, *An Introduction to Composition Studies*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 3-14.

MESCHONNIC, Henri, *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie du langage*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1982.

MESCHONNIC, Henri, “Le sujet comme récitatif ou le continu du langage,” in: Rabaté, Dominique, DE SERMET, Joëlle & VADÉ, Yves, *Modernités: Le sujet lyrique en question*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996.

MESCHONNIC, Henri, *Poétique du traduire*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1999.

MURESAN, Maria Rusanda, “Wittgenstein in Recent French Poetics: Henri Meschonnic and Jacques Roubaud,” *Paragraph* 34.3 (2011): 423-440.

WARDRIP-FRUIIN, Noah, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2009.

WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, Transl. Anscombe, G.E.M. Oxford, Blackwell, 2001.