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Retracing transparency: calques and creativity in modernist translation

Sam Trainor, 2014

Section 1. Tracing Transparency

Transparency pervades modernity. Walter Benjamin predicted it would become a ubiquitous and revolutionary feature of the modern technological and social environment. As he notes in the *Passagen-Werk* :

“It is the peculiarity of technological forms of production, that their progress and their success are proportionate to the transparency [*Durchsichtigkeit*] of their social content. (Hence glass architecture.)” [*Passagen-Werk* N4,6, P.465 *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press 1999].

That last parenthesis is a nod to Paul Scheerbart’s strange utopian *Glasarchitektur* (1914), notable as much for its influence on the ‘panopticon’ dystopia of Yevgeny Zamyatin, as for the uncanny prescience Benjamin recognises in its modernist redefinition of the architectural interior. Again, this comes from the *Arcades Project*

The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency [*Transparenz*], its tendency toward the well-lit and airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense. [p. 104 ([14,4]) *Arcades Project*]

But the built environment is not the only aspect of modern technological society for which transparency is a ubiquitous, radical feature. The proliferation of transparent plastics means that virtually nobody in the developed world now leaves home without something transparent about their person: the dial of a watch, contact lenses, the screen of a smartphone, sleeves for credit cards, the cling-film around their sandwiches, a bottle of water... in fact, the late capitalist phenomenon of bottled water as a staple commodity depends entirely on the possibility of manufacturing cheap transparent plastic bottles.

Karl Marx suggested that the late stages of commodity fetishism would be characterised by a kind of paradoxical transparency – the fetishism becoming easy to ‘see through’ [*durchschauen*], and yet all the more pervasive. André Gide once described the desire (*la convoitise*) for the commodified object as a spiritual loss of ‘transparency’ – *j’éprouve que chaque objet de cette terre, que je convoite, se fait opaque, par cela même que je le convoite, et que le monde entier perd aussitôt sa transparence*. But our society tends to figure the process of commodification as the presentation of an object in some kind of see-through plastic packaging.

One can't help feeling that the political and corporate tropes of 'transparency' might be related to this point-of-sale packaging industry. Almost every recently elected representative in the so-called 'Western World' has claimed at some point to uphold 'transparency'. For example, the first memorandum written by Barack Obama after his inauguration in 2009, begins:

A democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency. As Justice Louis Brandeis wrote, "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants."

Moreover, transparency is a heavily exploited quality, and a recurring theme, in literature and art, particularly since the 'age of mechanical reproduction'. Think of Art nouveau glasswork, Mallarmé's obsession with windows and venetian glass; Van Gogh's 'glass of absinthe', Manet's repetitive paintings of flowers in glass vases, the decanters and carafes in cubist still lifes, Stephen Dedalus on Sandymount Strand – 'Limit of the diaphane in, why in?... diaphane, adiaphane' – Marcel Duchamp's 'La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même', John Cage's 'plexigrams'... and a thousand other things.

So transparency pervades modernity. But what exactly is 'transparency'? Tropes of transparency abound in philosophical and critical discourses across language cultures. They form fundamental cognitive metaphors, but, especially in translation, they seem troublingly nebulous. And, crucially, within discourses that discuss the problems and possibilities of translation, they seem not merely 'troubling' but genuinely *troubles*... as clear as mud.

I'm going to take a few minutes to trace one or two of the highlights from some of the best known core texts of Translation Studies to demonstrate what I mean. I'll begin with one of the foundational texts in the French tradition, Georges Mounin's *Les belles infidèles*.

Mounin's book concludes with a typology of translation strategies – pre-empting LADMIRAL's *cibliste* and *sourcière* – under the self-consciously poetic headings *Les verres transparents* and *Les verres colorés*. *Les verres transparents* are figured as translations that are functionally indistinguishable from contemporary writing emergent from the literary tradition of the target language. They aspire to an ideal attributed to Gogol, which Mounin (unfortunately) gives only in French as: *devenir un verre si transparent qu'on croie qu'il n'y a pas de verre*. On the other hand, *les verres colorés* are translations that carry various perceptible tints of the language, culture and literary tradition of the source text. The analysis is canonical and lucid, but the metaphor is problematic.

The first thing to say, is that this trope (seemingly unconsciously) reproduces Mallarmé's fondness for the pun on *verre* (glass) and *vers* (verse). Slight cracks seem already to be forming in the surfaces of our supposedly perspicuous signifiers, muddying the waters ...

The second thing to note is how deeply problematic it is to figure the ideal 'invisibility' of glass as a

material – quite apart from colourlessness, this also implies the disappearance of any of the reflections, distortions, magnifications, depths, dust, cracks and blemishes that render a pane of glass perceptible. And to refer to this illusion of metaphysical absence as ‘transparency’ is semantically dubious for two reasons. The first resides in the perfectly obvious redundancy of the term *transparent* if it is totally synonymous with *invisible*. The second is to be found in the stranger, but just as crucial, possibility of the polar opposite. That is to say the pane of glass that goes unseen – and is thus functionally invisible – because it is entirely and convincingly reflective, like an illusionist’s mirror:

“I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane.” Nabokov’s waxwing – the Russian migrant redolant of Icarus – is killed not by absolute transparency but by a perfect reflection of the blue sky... later called the “feigned remoteness” (the illusion of the beyond). This too is invisibility. So when Mounin congratulates Nazim Hikmet [p. 78] for producing a couplet in impeccable French (as impeccable as Nabokov’s in English) by saying: *on ne distingue plus quand la vitre du traducteur s’interpose entre le poète et nous*, how can we distinguish between perfect ‘transparency’ and perfect ‘reflection’ (and thus a total absence of transparency) in this *trompe l’œil* of invisibility that slays the critical waxwing?

It is in precisely the same nullifying terms that Lawrence Venuti employs ‘transparency’ in *The Translator’s Invisibility*. He doesn’t quote Gogol directly, but through the lens of Norman Shapiro:

“I see translation (says Shapiro) as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it’s there when there are little imperfections - scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any.” (Venuti: 1995, 1) [The actual source is Kratz, D. (1986) ‘An Interview with Norman Shapiro’, *Translation Review* 19, 27-8. But Venuti does not provide this attribution.]

I certainly do not intend to counter Venuti’s cogent argument that such *domestication* poses serious ethical concerns, However, the trope of transparency is clearly (‘opaquely’) auto-deconstructive in Venuti’s explanation:

A translation is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers [...] when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem **transparent**, giving the appearance that it **reflects** [...] the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation” (My emphases.)

Is this hypothetical (non-)translation ‘transparent’ or does it ‘reflect’? For which reason does it go unnoticed? Were it to do both (as transparent media nearly always do) it would be invisible in neither of the senses mentioned above (it would neither dematerialize nor trick the viewer with a perfect reflection). Under such circumstances might these self-revealing reflections not have a *foreignizing* effect, drawing as much attention to what Mounin calls *la vitre... qui s’interpose* as his

couleurs, or as Shapiro's 'scratches' and 'bubbles'?

Of course, there is an assumption here. Can we really say that Mounin's *transparent* is exactly synonymous with the cognate 'transparent' in Venuti's English? The shared etymology is certainly suggestive, but might *transparent* be a *faux ami*? There is a danger, here, of ignoring an alternative translation of the French *transparent* into English: namely 'see-through'. It would take a good deal of time – time I don't have – to explore all the semantic and socio-linguistic alterations caused by such a translation.

However, this is quibbling. By comparison, translation from German into both French and English, throws up some genuinely troubling opacities. The first point to make is that the cognate term *Transparenz* holds a rather more doubtful position in German philosophical discourses precisely, one suspects, because it is etymologically French. For example, when Heidegger talks about the experience of transparency in creative work characterized by *Zuhandenheit* rather than *Vorhandenheit*, he always employs the more commonplace term *durchsichtig* (see-through). As an English reader, I can't help feeling that this is because the frenchified *Transparenz* (with its connotations of the abstract and aristocratic) feels too close to *Vorhandenheit*. However, one German Translation theorist *does* use the term *Transparenz* in an approving way. Elmar Tophoven employs it to refer to a methodology of procedural openness in a form of translation that seeks to grant the reader access to the processes of translation and thus to allow translators to question their methods and their cultural influences as they work.

However, the most troubling usage of a transparency trope is to be found in Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. The infamous statement introducing the concept of 'pure language' – a worryingly Platonic metaphysical metaphor – is couched in the following terms: [in Steven Rendell's translation] "True translation is transparent*, it does not obscure the original, does not stand in its light, but rather allows pure language, as if strengthened by its own medium, to shine even more fully on the original. This is made possible above all by conveying the syntax word-for-word, and this demonstrates that the word, not the sentence, is the original element of translation. For the sentence is the wall in front of the language of the original, and word-for-word rendering is the arcade.

Read in this English translation, or the French translation by Gondillac and Rochlitz, the first thing that stands out is the apparently paradoxical use of 'transparent' *transparent*. Where Mounin and Venuti use it to name the *cibliste* ideal, Benjamin employs it to precisely the opposite effect. His 'transparent' translation is radically, extremely *sourcière*. The original syntax is an opaque 'wall' that is not to be rearranged but rendered a luminous arcade by word-for-word translation. But the point, of course, is that he doesn't use the German word *transparent* but *durchscheinend*... literally through-shine-ly. If *durchsichtig* is equivalent to the English 'see-through' then *durchscheinend* is 'shine-through', that is 'translucent' *translucide*. Except, not quite. In German there is also the word: *lichtdurchlässig* for translucent, which is less likely to be confused with 'transparent' in this

way. *Durchscheinend* appears to occupy a slightly more ambiguous semantic field like ‘diaphanous’, which might refer to something that is either properly transparent or merely translucent... or both, depending on where it is placed in relation to an object or a source of light... like a piece of tracing paper... *un morceau de papier calque*.

So *durchscheinend* translation is... *Wörtlichkeit* is... the arcade. Think back to the *Passagen-Werk*. In fact, if you go back and look at Eiland and McLaughlin’s canonical English translation of the *Arcades Project*, you’ll see no less than 6 different German terms all translated with the totalizing signifiers ‘transparent’ and ‘transparency’. They are : *Transparenz, durchsichtig, durchscheinend, Durchschaubarkeit, lichtdurchlässig* and *Farblosigkeit*.

It appears that the totalizing and semantically neutralizing signified of the philosophical ‘transparent’, from the French *transparent*, has leaked into a totalizing and semantically neutralizing use of the signifier ‘transparent’ in translation.

It would be hard to imagine Benjamin accepting this kind of thing as ‘true’ *durchscheinend* translation. This is not *Wörtlichkeit*. But what actually *is* *Wörtlichkeit*? There is a thin line, a hair’s breadth, between Benjamin’s *Wörtlichkeit-Arkade* and the *calque*.

Section 2. Calques and Creativity in Modernist Translation

The book I’m working on proposes a new theory and praxis of ‘creative transparency’ in literary translation. One of its key features is the concept of the ‘creative calque’.

What follows is one, very small, example of what I believe to be the creative critical value of the calque:

The Joycean epigraph to this presentation is also the epigraph to Jacques Derrida’s essay on Foucault, “Cogito et histoire de la folie” collected in *Écriture et différence*:

N’importe, c’était terriblement risqué, ce livre. Une feuille transparente le sépare de la folie.
(J. JOYCE, à propos d’*Ulysse*)

I know of two published translations into English. The more recent is by Alan Bass in his translation of *Writing and Difference*.

In any event this book was terribly daring. A transparent sheet separates it from madness.

On the face of it, this seems quite a *good* translation, at least as far as one is able to discern in this abstract context. In particular, Bass’s handling of the potential pitfall *une feuille transparente* as ‘a

transparent sheet' appears lucid. However, the immediate context renders the translation dubious. It's an English translation of a French quotation from a native English speaker; and it follows a (mis)quotation of Kierkegaard, originally given in an unsubtly foreignized form of French, employing the Germanic capitalization of nouns:

... L'Instant de la Décision est une Folie... (KIERKEGAARD)

Elsewhere in the collection, there is evidence that Bass, whenever possible, uses existing English translations of secondary texts. When handling Derrida's quotation of Freud's note on the 'Mystic Writing Pad', in the essay "Freud et la scène de l'écriture", for example, Bass uses the canonical James Strachey translation. It is worth quoting some of the Strachey (alongside terms employed in the Laplanche and Pontalis translation used by Derrida):

The Mystic Pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet [durchscheinendes Blatt ; 'feuille transparente'] [...] This transparent sheet [*feuille transparente*] is the more interesting part of the little device. It itself consists of two layers, which can be detached from each other except at their two ends. The upper layer is a transparent [durchsichtige ; 'transparent'] piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin translucent [durchscheinendes ; 'transparent'] waxed paper.

Again we see the totalizing, nullifying use of the French signifier : *transparent* to render the nuanced German terms *durchsichtig* and *durchscheinend*.

Derrida perfectly exemplifies the symbolic neutralization effected by this concept of transparency:

Le langage étant la rupture même avec la folie, [... il n'est] plus séparé que par la « feuille transparente » dont parle Joyce, par soi-même, car cette diaphanéité n'est rien d'autre que le langage, le sens, la possibilité, et la discrétion élémentaire d'un rien qui neutralise tout. [Derrida 1967:85]

What we also see, of course, is an intertextual justification for Bass's translation of Joyce's *feuille transparente* as 'transparent sheet'. In fact, the effect on the reader, when encountering this correspondence, is perhaps to experience a sense of retrospective illumination of the Joyce epigraph... of course: Freud... madness... the transparent sheet. It's all becoming clear. Joyce is thinking of Freud's *Wunderblock*.

However, the reader with a sensitivity to the ethics of translation might also think: but where did that Joyce quotation come from? Was it originally French? Is there an existing translation by someone who read it in context? Is this appropriation to the terms of the collection really justified?

In fact, it was indeed originally in French. It comes from Jacques Mercanton's *Les heures de James Joyce*, a mémoire of the Swiss writer's meetings with Joyce during the period of composition of what was to become *Finnegans Wake*. During one of their meetings, Mercanton describes the two men discussing his belief in the fundamental importance of '*transposition*' in art – by which he means something very similar to Jakobson's 'intersemiotic translation' – and how this justified Joyce's own 'translation' of the visual content of dreams into the auditory and linguistic:

Si j'avais mûri, je n'aurais pas fait cette folie d'écrire *Work in Progress*. [dit Joyce]

[...] Il se préoccupe de l'objection capitale qu'on peut lui faire : avoir traduit en impressions auditives les images du rêve [...] Ce genre de transposition, dis-je, est l'essence même de l'art.

Joyce confirms that his technique of interior monologue, used in *Ulysses*, was just such a 'transposition'. But then he issues an irascible, bellicose dismissal of interior monologue as a technique he has outgrown:

Je m'en moque aujourd'hui, maintenant que je m'en suis servi. Que le pont saute, pourvue que j'aie fait passé mes régiments.

Then he says...

N'importe, c'était terriblement risqué, ce livre. Une feuille transparente le sépare de la folie.

Unlike Alan Bass, Mercanton's translator, Lloyd C. Parks, had access to this (and far more) contextual information. Here's his translation:

Nonetheless, that book was a terrible risk. A transparent leaf separates it from madness.

On the face of it, this seems a pretty *bad* translation. 'Nonetheless' is excessively cohesive and formal ; 'that book was a terrible risk' is a rather po-faced transposition ; and 'transparent leaf' is a glaring calque.

It's not exactly the kind of 'creative calque' that I've been hinting at. But it points us in the right direction. If creative transparency, like Benjamin's *Wörtlichkeit*, is supposed to open up the text to a kind of multifocal illumination, then this leafy oddity does seem to have a certain translucency.

Looking back through it at Joyce's original pairing of *feuille* and *folie* reveals a typically Joycean play on words. The formal similarity of the signifiers – especially with this particular group of letters – should immediately draw the attention of anybody who has ever read even a few pages of *Finnegans Wake* (the text Mercanton was working on with Joyce). Part 2, in particular, is full of folio after folio, of f/l words that foil and fold back the fallow semantic fields; those fool enough to follow their flow, their floods, their flight might well fall foul of folly. A folly, of course, *une folie* – an extravagant *maison de plaisance* in the parkland of a rich estate – is supposedly initially derived not from *fou* but from *feuillée*, as in *abri de feuillage*. *Folie* (not madness, but extravagance) has influenced the word by false etymology. This architectural 'folly' is a loanword in English, and it's unlikely that an English speaker as sensitive to lexical slippages as Joyce would use the French *folie* in such close proximity to *feuille* without bringing this to mind.

At the beginning of his book, Mercanton notes that Joyce had a 'marked English accent'. So let's read that sentence again:

Une foyll transpaREnte le say-par de la folly

With an English accent, only a transparent leaf separates *feuille* from *folie*... and, indeed, *séparer* from *c'est pareil*

But don't take my word for it. Here's that pun from the horse's mouth. This is from the first part of *Finnegans Wake* :

Hence when the clouds roll by, jamey, a proudseye view is enjoyable of our mounding's mass, now Wallinstone national museum, with, in some greenish distance, the charming waterloose country and the two quitewhite villalettes who hear show of themselves so gigglesomes minxt the **follyages**, the prettilees! Penetrators are permitted into the museomound free.

That 'follyages' is at once 'foliage' (the greenwood... a focal area of both concealment and revelation in a highly sexualised landscape... the site of the sight and sound of frisky 'gigglesome' frolicking), and it's the *folly of the ages*... the polar opposite of the *wisdom of the ages* that one expects to find in the actual museum here, the 'museomound' to which penetrators are permitted free.

Running quickly through the three existing French translations. We see that Du Bouchet's 1962, *feuillée* etymologically digs up [*fouiller*] the architectural *folly*. Lavergne's canonical translation has *folliages* which seems a neat equivalent with a partially comparable double sense, and the latest (ongoing) translation by Hervé Michel, gives *fouillages*, which is my favourite, for its triple overlay of *fou ... fouiller ...* and *feuillage* especially coming after his *folâterleau* for 'waterloose'.

So this extract reveals something of the subtextual fetishistic, sexualised quality of this pun on *feuille* and *folie*. Not just the terms and their cultural associations... think *feuille de vigne*

think *folies bergère* – but also of the fetishistic nature of the pun itself for Joyce.

This then leads me to my concluding example of creative transparency in translation of the Joycean epigraph. It consists of two 'creative calques', which when metaphorically 'overlaid' give a third 'creative metacalque'.

The first is rather camp, in keeping with the echoes of *Finnegans Wake* :

Anyway, it was frightfully risqué, that book. A transparent figleaf separates it from sheer folly.

The figleaf, of course, is what would separate 'penetrators into the museomound' from the sexual organs on the statues and paintings....

The second of my 'creative calques' focuses on the concrete reality of the book... what, it asks, is a *feuille transparente* in an actual book? Here's the translation:

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In any case that book was terribly audacious. A see-through folio, a tissue paper insert, separates it from insanity.

This 'see-through folio' is what in French is called *une serpente* (a 'tissue guard' *une feuille intercalaire en papier de soie*) in fact, French bibliophiles will refer to the *hors-texte sous serpente* (the plate covered with a tissue guard). In a material sense, this is what might separate Joyce's book from its hors-textual insanity. But, of course, this doesn't lose its fetishistic nature. The tissue guard is one of the most important fetishized features of high quality books from this period for contemporary bibliophiles who have been known to sniff and stroke the objects of their chronic diachronic desire.... or for Gide *convoitise*.

So, my final synthetic metacalque, my overlaid multifocal transparency, which will have to stand as the implicitly synoptic conclusion to my paper, is this:

In any case, that book was frightfully [f]risky. / A see-through folio separates it from [sheer] folly.