

Translate – Blanchot?

Peter Banki

Maurice Blanchot, *Awaiting Oblivion* trans. John Gregg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 2000).

The publication of *The Instant of My Death* and *Awaiting Oblivion* makes available to English speaking readers for the first time two important texts by Maurice Blanchot. Adding to the growing number of translations that have appeared in English over the last ten or so years, these publications respond to the ever growing interest in this extremely contemporary thinker and writer.

The question of what is at stake in the translation of Blanchot is rarely considered, beyond the mention of specific difficulties relating to the translation of idiomatic expressions. In the case of *L'Attente l'oubli*, however, such a simple appraisal is not possible. This is because the transformations that it enacts on the French language do not limit themselves to the exploitation of multiple meanings, but work at the level of the syntax itself. This can be seen even from the title of the work. Unlike the titles of many of Blanchot's other works (which indeed 'exploit' certain idiomatic possibilities of meaning of the French language¹), *L'Attente l'oubli* doesn't necessarily make grammatical sense. It brings together two separate affirmations without specifying their relation. It suggests two separate movements or events that it affirms are somehow thought and experienced together, but in a manner yet to be defined. There is perhaps a logical connection between the two: waiting presupposes forgetting; forgetting presupposes waiting. Or otherwise, perhaps, there is a temporal hiatus: there is waiting, then there is forgetting. (Note: the text is separated into two parts.)

In this regard, the decision to translate the title as *Awaiting Oblivion* is unfortunate. If Blanchot had meant 'Awaiting Oblivion', he would

have entitled the work *L'Attente de l'oubli*, or rather, *En attendant l'oubli*. The translator has tried to make sense out of something which suspends the movement of making sense, or, in any case, leaves it undecidable.² *Awaiting Oblivion* hides the suspension of the title which is (paradoxically) marked by the absence of grammatical marks, leaving only a rhythm, the rise and fall of a cadence, with stress on the first syllable of each word: *L'Attente l'oubli; Waiting Forgetting*.³

Now *L'Attente l'oubli* is certainly one of Blanchot's most obscure, even painfully obscure books. Like the syntax, the narration interminably rolls over itself in oxymorons and ever more subtle displacements that relentlessly disturb the sense of what is being recounted. The anonymous characters (like the narrative itself) are no more than minimal devices that scarcely frame the research that approximates a series of notes. One can certainly argue (faithful to Blanchot's interpretation of literature) that before a text such as this one cannot not lose one's footing, and that furthermore it is necessary to do so in order to have some sort of relation to it. How then to interpret the task of the translator if the understanding of the meaning of the work cannot be assured? Indeed must one understand a work in order to translate it well?

Blanchot himself gives the rule, if not specifically for the translation of his own works, then for the task of the literary translator more generally. In a short text on Walter Benjamin simply entitled 'Translating' (*Traduire*), Blanchot argues that when directed towards works of literature the translator's task does not relate primarily to the signified meaning of the work, but to the alterity of the work with respect to the language in which it is originally written. Following Benjamin, he argues against literality and resemblance of the original as governing criteria (these are seductive traps in which something essential is lost.) Rather, by utilizing the difference of languages, it is the translator's task 'to awaken in his own language a presence of what is different, originally in the original'.⁴ This is the literary inventiveness of his work, its singular originality, to make visible in his own language what makes the work always other. (Incidentally, this untranslatability of the original with regard to its own language is also the condition for it to be worthy of being translated in the first instance: 'either because it originally makes a gesture towards *another* language or because it assembles, in a manner that is privileged, the

possibilities of being different from itself or foreign to itself, which any spoken language has'.⁵)

This elegant formulation of the translator's task in fact shelters a double and contradictory exigency: not only must the translator (as is well understood) measure the untranslatability of the original, but must translate this untranslatability in such a way as it *remains* untranslatable in his own language. Now it must be said that this may not be possible, except perhaps on very rare occasions, and as Blanchot himself intimates, not without treachery and madness.⁶ In his *Translator's Introduction*, John Gregg notes that in *L'Attente l'oubli* Blanchot often strings together words of the same root but that function grammatically as different parts of speech:

Attendre, se rendre attentif à ce qui fait de L'Attente
un acte neutre, enroulé sur soi, serré en cercles dont
le plus intérieur et le plus extérieur coïncident,
attention distraite en attente et retournée jusqu'à
l'inattendu. (xii)

In a quasi-Heideggerian gesture – one that is, one might say, idiomatically translated into French – Blanchot links the experience of waiting (*attendre*) to that of making oneself attentive (*attentif*), and then to distracted attention (*attention distraite*), which in the same sentence is turned back to the unexpected (*l'inattendu*). The shared etymological foundation of these words becomes the sediment of a movement of thought which allows Blanchot to testify in his own way to an exemplary experience – one that remains as if *en attente*, in abeyance in all experience.⁷

Strictly speaking, this specific use of language is not translatable into English (any more than it could be written otherwise in French). The shared Latin etymology which overdetermines the words' relation to one another and thus the meaning of the passage as a whole is not reproducible outside Latin languages. Moreover, different words in the same language – even if they could convey the same *signified* meaning – would also necessitate the loss of the shared Latin root.

The question of loss is usually the most compelling question in the translation of a literary text – indeed in any translation when the language is idiomatic or otherwise 'untranslatable'. In Blanchot's

conception of the translator's task, there is, on the one hand, an acceptance that the alterity of the original with regard to the language in which it is written cannot be reproduced in the same way in translation. On the other hand, he maintains that there is the possibility that that alterity can be reinvented, or rather reinvent itself, in a completely different way. The inevitability of loss is accepted, not negated, yet the possibility that the loss is not simply a loss is also kept open: ideally the translation is the re-invention of the originality of the original.⁸

The Instant of My Death is of itself the translation of an untranslatable experience – that of a marvellous feeling of lightness – an experience whose very untranslatability it scrupulously respects:

There remained [*Demeurait*], however, when the shooting was no longer but to come [*n'était plus qu'en attente*], the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness.... I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. (9)

The Instant of My Death translates this unanalysable experience into a personal testimony in the French language, the testimony of a young man caught by the Nazis and subjected to an order of imminent execution. Derrida's reading (also translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg in the same volume) analyses the untranslatable manner in which Blanchot employs the terms *instant/instance* and *demeure/demeurer*. The instant of death to which the title refers is the instant of death *en instance*, the instant at once in imminence and in abeyance, about to take place but on hold, because the instant of death itself is impossible as such, or, in any case, inaccessible to autobiographical testimony. The young man experiences the *en instance* of his death as the instant of his death because at that moment it is no longer a question of possible survival, the distinction between life and death is no longer pertinent. At that moment – *à cet instant* – the instant of death in its supposed unicity and truth is divided and put under erasure because he is at once living and dead, experiencing what he is not in fact experiencing.

The expression *en instance* also resonates in French with the senses of insistence, juridical authority and example which all come together in the final sentence of the text which speaks of the instant of death as from now on always *en instance*:

All that remains [*Seul demeure*] is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance [*l'instant de ma mort désormais toujours en instance*].
(11)

Blanchot seems to be saying here that from now on death can no longer happen to him. Death can most certainly happen, indeed will happen, but it can no longer happen to him as a living/dead 'subject'. What remains, in fact all that remains, is the feeling of lightness, the memory-trace of his death. The lightness remains – *demeure*: a complicated word, untranslatable because of the resonance of death and dying (*je meurs, tu meurs*). The lightness dies/undies – *de-meure* – permanently abides as the insistence and persistence of the instant of death *en instance*. Despite appearances, this abiding – *demeurance*, or even as Derrida suggests, *démourance* – is not the permanence of a timeless eternity or an eternal present, but the permanence of an anachronic remainder, necessarily out of measure with the time he has to live: the imminence/abeyance of a death that has already taken place.

This anachronic remaining, dying/undying (*demeurance*) of his death which is marked by the feeling of lightness is irreducible to the logic of death, if by death one understands a simple absolute end without remainder, without *demeurance*. By virtue of this *demeurance*, death is not negated, but complicated, be it in his own memory or in those to whom he testifies (or as a written trace – or any trace). To this extent, Blanchot's testimony can be understood as a belated, godless, politico-philosophical response to the nihilism of the Nazis, indeed to any nihilism, which, by virtue of a commitment to the idea of a simple absolute end (a final solution, for example) sanctions senseless destruction with impunity. For even if Blanchot had been killed at that instant, according to the logic of the testimony the *demeurance* still would have taken place, which is to say something

that outlives his life and is incommensurable with it. (The word *demeure* in French also has the sense of a legal order or instruction.)

Derrida's reading of *The Instant of My Death* is not simply a commentary on Blanchot's text, it also participates in its translation – at once into French and into English. Included in the same volume, it accompanies the translation of Elizabeth Rottenberg whose provisional character is marked by the fact that it also includes the republication of the French original. Derrida explores – even gets carried away with – the untranslatable character of Blanchot's text, which it analyses as it extends and even supplements (most significantly with the term *demourance* as a translation of *demeurance*). The untranslatable is the passion of the singular, the irreplaceable – what remains (*demeure*) of it in language. *The Instant of My Death* as the testimony of an exemplary encounter, of a migration without return, can be read as an allegory of translation in general.

Notes

1. For example: *Le Pas au delà*; *Le Très haut*, *L'Arrêt de mort*, *La Folie du jour*, *Faux pas*, *Au moment voulu*, etc.
2. For the difference between polysemy and undecidability of meaning, see Jacques Derrida, 'Mallarmé', in Derek Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 114 f.
3. The decision to translate 'awaiting' for *L'Attente* is quite deceptive, because, as the text makes clear, *l'attente* at the limit is not the waiting for anything in particular. Its interest resides in the fact that ultimately it has no object: 'As soon as one waited for something, one waited a little less' (10). The decision to translate 'oblivion' for *l'oubli* in the title is also noteworthy. Significantly, Gregg never translates *l'oubli* as 'oblivion' in the text itself (where it frequently appears), and in the Translator's Introduction he makes no attempt to account for this inconsistency. Of course, the issue is that 'oblivion' is a state, whereas 'forgetting', a present participle, implies movement. While there are indications in the text that *l'oubli* might resemble a state for Blanchot (he speaks of 'its immobile presence' (45)), this immobility is extremely active: *l'oubli* is the 'breath' which speaks in advance in every word (46); it gives death while permitting to turn away from death (46); it is the detour and initiative (*l'allant*) in immobile waiting (47).
4. Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 59.

5. Ibid. It is worth underlining the fact that when referring to the translator Blanchot employs the universal masculine pronoun (as is always the case in his critical essays). Given the extreme importance of women and the feminine affirmation in his literary work, it is not without irony that in this regard he conforms to the French milieu from where and for whom he generally writes.
6. '[I]n the end, translating is madness', *ibid.*, p. 61.
7. It is important to note that the first version of *L'Attente l'oubli* was published in a *Festschrift* commemorating Heidegger's seventieth birthday. Timothy Clark suggests that some of *L'Attente l'oubli* is 'practically a French translation of fragments from Heidegger'. See T. Clark *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.) pp. 48–9, 90–93, 105–7. While there is a clear resemblance between some of Blanchot's formulations on waiting and those of Heidegger (as well as the shared employment of a similar form, that of dialogue), Blanchot has nonetheless made additions and alterations – be they subtle. For my purposes here, I simply wish to draw attention to the *quasi*-Heideggerian manner in which Blanchot interprets and re-inscribes *Latin* etymology as a sediment of thought, translating, one might say, 'thought' into literature.
8. While Blanchot's understanding differs markedly from Benjamin's, it can be argued that the messianic element is still present, not as the intimation of the 'pure language' (*reine Sprache*) in which the different modes of intention proper to each language are reconciled, but in the ideal of translation in which the alterity of the original with respect to the language in which it is written is still visible. Interestingly, this is what Benjamin rejects: 'the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation.... [T]ranslation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973) p. 75. If a translation were successful by Blanchot's criteria, it would in turn be worthy of translation and therefore no longer simply a translation. In other words, Blanchot's position implies a self-deconstruction of the relation between the original and the translation.