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SPEAKING IN TONGUES

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Nur, was sie nicht erst zu verstehen brauchen, gilt ihnen für verständlich
Theodor Adorno

A língua portuguesa não é pátria de ninguém
Pace Fernando Pessoa

In an unpublished lecture delivered in 1959, Paulo Quintela, the great master of Germanic Philology at the University of Coimbra, in fact, an early master in Portugal of what we might call “the comparative”, and surely a man with the gift of tongues, reminds his audience of the extraordinary importance for the future course of Western Literature of the translation of the Bible into English and German: the so-called authorized English version, dated 1611, and almost a century before that, Luther's German Bible (1522 [New Testament]; 1534 [Old Testament]). Quintela's lecture, as he was only too careful to insist, was on the act of translating, “Traduzir,” not on the fact of translation, “Tradução,” as apparently it had been publicly announced.¹ The distinction is important. Quintela, who uses as an example his own translation of John Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” claims that the act of translating is precisely the act of appropriating demanded of its readers by the poem itself. The theoretical implication is that the act of appropriation/translation has nothing to do with representation, and is unrepeatable. In other words, you don't represent or

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¹Paulo Quintela, “Traduzir.” Presented at the Invitation of the British Council in Coimbra in 1959. Forthcoming in *Runa: Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Germanísticos*. To be included in vol. V of Quintela's *Obras completas*. Orgs. Ludwig Scheidl, António Sousa Ribeiro, Carlos Guimarães, Maria Helena Simões (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1995-). My thanks to António Sousa Ribeiro for making the ms. available to me.

repeat a poem, a translation, a reading. As Adrienne Rich would say, you "start to speak again."²

A poem, just like any language, is ever open to appropriation because the concept of the "proper" (or self-sameness, as Gayatri Spivak translates Derrida's *propriété*) does not concern it.³ On the contrary, as Irish Joyce's English "syphilisation" so wonderfully exemplifies, deliberate malapropism does.⁴ To appropriate implies to make momentarily one's own that which (and I here slightly modify Bakhtin on language propriety)⁵ can never be truly anybody's own, because it "belongs" to no one, certainly not to a particular language, culture, nation, let alone to "itself," or to "its own self" (This is the implication of my Portuguese epigraph, a facetious subversion of a too often repeated Pessoaan dictum).⁶ Language is there—languages are there—to be spoken, primarily by those who do know how to speak them, of course, or whose mother tongue they are, but also by those willing to learn them. For, as Toni Morrison would say, these things *can* be learned, even though, as my German epigraph suggests, people tend to understand only that which does not demand understanding.⁷ Moreover, consciously "not knowing" is the condition—a happy condition, I would argue—of humankind after Babel. By confusing the languages while presumably withholding an all-knowing over-Word, Jehovah lays the foundation of epistemological colonialism: knowledge-as-regulation irretrievably

²Adrienne Rich, "North American Time," *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York: Norton, 1986) 36.

³Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 10 ff.

⁴The phrase is used by the Citizen in "Cyclops." James Joyce, *Ulysses*. Intr. and notes Declan Kibert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 421.

⁵M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 291-94.

⁶"Minha pátria é a língua portuguesa" [My nation is the Portuguese language], says Fernando Pessoa-as-Bernardo Soares in *Livro do desassossego*. 2 vols. Recolha e transcrição de textos de Maria Aliete Galhoz e Teresa Sobral da Cunha. Prefácio e organização de Jacinto Prado Coelho (Lisboa: Atica, 1982) I, 17. See also *The Book of Disquietude*. Ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991) 151.

⁷1 paraphrase Toni Morrison as quoted by Nellie McKay in "Disbanding the Wheatley Court or, Who Shall Teach African American Literature?" Forthcoming in *PMLA*. See also Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982) 128.

justifying linguacide and epistemicide. Nonetheless, and if I'm allowed to go on drawing freely from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the splintering of totality in the so-called confusion of languages is also the necessary condition for knowledge-as-emancipation.⁸ As a recent book by an American specialist of American literature suggests, it seems that we have had to wait for the multicultural experience of a hegemonic country like the United States of America to be allowed to appreciate the pleasures and theoretical possibilities of cultures of multiple languages, knowledges, and aesthetics. But not before the cross-pollinated polyglossia of the Chicano borderlands began to take pride in itself.⁹

By the same token, poems (in whatever language) are there to be read, reading being always already translating/appropriating for the briefest time being. There are as many languages as users of language; there are as many versions of a poem as readers of it.¹⁰ By its very fleeting nature, a language or a poem is never "the same," neither language nor poem has self-sameness or "identity," both partake of the nature of what poets like Spenser or Shakespeare would call "mutability" or "infinite variety." Keats had a wonderful phrase for the linguistic possibility of the poetic: Negative Capability. To be sure, Keats's phrase, like his other memorable one about the Chameleon Poet, paradoxically concerns the negativity of the poet's capable imagination.¹¹ In my appropriation of it, however, I make it speak the splendid metamorphic scarcity of language that is the very foundation of poetry itself. Poetry as "an other tongue." As I have already suggested, in cultural studies in multicultural United States today, this concept of "an other tongue," not to hypostatize one proper,

⁸Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition* (New York: Routledge, 1995), esp. the first and last chapters.

⁹For an enthusiastic celebration of contemporary American literature as "Babelic," see Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993). The concept of "cross-pollination" I borrow from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera : The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) Preface.

¹⁰Not that there are no limits to speaking a language or reading a poem. Of course there are. What I am talking about here is, precisely, the temporal *possibleness* of the notion of limit itself.

¹¹For the Keats references, see the poet's letters to George and Tom Keats (21 [27?] Jan. 1817) and Richard Woodhouse (27 Oct. 1818).

self-same culture but to signify each one and every different culture, begins to take shape, particularly amongst practitioners and theoreticians of hybridization and *mestizaje* in the American Southwest.¹²

I wish now to go back briefly to the King James Bible, not to brood on the undeniable importance of its vernacular translation for some of the most lasting and seductive conceptions of literature in the West, but rather to ponder the idea of translation and translatability that the Bible itself contains, beyond its outrageous ambition to be the only language, that is to say, the single uninterrupted Word that for once autocratically speaks the whole world. "And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech," the author of Genesis seems to marvel (Gen. 11.1). But because this intolerable ur-language of divine totality, by virtue of its potential licence of appropriation, becomes inevitably threatening to the primordial idea of an absolute power, absolute power soon hastens to shatter it into Babelic confusion. The pattern easily repeats itself in the most compelling poetic myths of the tradition: power boasts of itself while it conceives of itself as totally out of reach, only readily to recoil into itself again as indeed unreachable when the powerless begin to show signs of approaching it. Just think of Lucifer, for his own godlike light damned by God into Satanic darkness. And thus, some poets and theoreticians claim, is poetry born. Poetry, that is, as the endless possibility of speaking all the dark shades of difference, rather than the perfect brightness of the same. In my conclusion I shall come back to a beautiful recent reinvention of the Biblical myth of originary being as an equalizing dialogue between Lucifer and God.

In Genesis, at the very root of the tradition, there is no doubt as to the awesome power of naming and the name to constitute indisputable identity. Control of language means freedom, wholeness, and independence of self; ignorance of language means dependence, fragmentation, and annihilation of self: "And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let

¹²*An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*. Ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham: Duke UP, 1994).

us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth" (Gen. 11. 4-9).

The myth of linguistic totality as a sign of supreme power was to be sanctioned by the resounding founding repetition of the New Testament: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1.1). Little wonder then that, thenceforth, the greatest poets in the Judeo-Christian tradition should be striving for the original site of primeval naming. Walter Benjamin called it "die reine Sprache."¹³ The quest is justified by the Bible itself: for does not the Bible recount its amazing possibility with wonder in the miraculous episode of the gift of tongues?

"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues, like of fire, and it sat upon each of them: And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed, and marvelled, saying one to another,

¹³Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1923). *Gesammelte Schriften* IV.1. Herausgegeben von Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 18. See also *Illuminations*. Ed. and intr. Hanna Arendt (1968; New York: Schocken, 1969) 80.

Behold, are not all these which speak Galilæans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?" (Ac. 2.1-8).

Most of us may prefer perhaps the miracle of the flaming tongues to the curse of Babel as narratives of our literary occupation as comparatists. But, if read aright, they both tell the same story of confusion. In Genesis, Jehovah confuses language to foreclose identity; in the Acts of the Apostles, total intelligibility becomes reductive of identity and is therefore confusing. Regardless of divine presumptions of totality, reality is multiple, language is plural, intelligibility must always be a challenge and a trial, and an exchange of tongues. "Jede Sprache ist ein Versuch", said Wilhelm von Humboldt once.¹⁴ Indeed, as American lyric poet and theoretician of the lyric, Próspero Saíz, knows only too well, every language, every poem is an "attempt;" but because a single total saying of radical origin is ever vainly to be aimed at nostalgically, every language, every poem is also always "contre-temps"¹⁵. The way the Babelic myth has been recounted throughout the ages effectively erases the marvellous interruption of difference as real and indeed desirable. The miracle of the tongues of fire, on the other hand, precisely because it is a "miracle," and *not* a first instance of simultaneous translation fully recognizing language difference, goes on postulating the ultimate irrelevance of different languages vis-à-vis the ungraspable ideal of absolute meaning. Contemporary poets, like Carolyn Forché, who are witness to the insane designs of powerful states on so-called global order, call this empty meaning of meanings, or God-the-Word, "the *silence* of God."¹⁶ Peggy Kamuf has recently suggested that American English, increasingly performing worldwide as the privileged (if not universal) language of institutionalized literature, may well be

¹⁴I am quoting from George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford UP, 1975) 83.

¹⁵Próspero Saíz, "Attempt, Contre-temps: A Lecture Concerning Lyric Poetry,,,,,," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, nº 47 (Fevereiro de 1997) 167-77.

¹⁶Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History* (1994; New York: Harper, 1995) 5 (my italics). Forché is also editor of a collection of poetry titled *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: Norton, 1993).

giving rise to a new kind of silence.¹⁷ The truth is that Babel alone speaks the world. Even if poets in the romantic tradition go on rhetorically crying out for the Perfect Word, they do know, or perhaps they *sense*, that poetry depends on the corporeal vulnerability of imperfect meaning, on the generosity of not knowing and the responsibility of knowing alike. For only those who do not know that they don't know think that they have the sum of all (uninterruptable, untranslatable) knowledge to be imposed upon all the others. To say it differently: only those who, like Walt Whitman in "Salut au monde," for example, believe they are self-same, expect to be *identified with* by all the others. But if, as Diana Fuss has demonstrated, identification is a necessary step towards what we now-a-days call identity, what could in the end the content of *identity* be?¹⁸

This presumption of identification has been overwhelmingly hegemonic in the Western tradition, from civilizing missions to Pessoa's "imperialism of poets."¹⁹ But strong poets have more often than not, in spite of ideology, allowed the interruptibility of language and the poetic to speak differently, as witness Pessoa's own myriad heteronyms. "My head and the universe ache me," says Pessoa's semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares eloquently.²⁰ And his contemporary, the American poet, Wallace Stevens, concurs: "The imperfect is our paradise."²¹ Many other modern poets have expressed this idea in many different ways, perhaps most movingly, just before his premature death, the Portuguese Al Berto: "god must be swiftly replaced by poems, sibilant syllables, bulbs burning, and bodies—pure, pulsing, and palpable bodies."²²

¹⁷Peggy Kamuf, *The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1997) 13-14; 230, n. 12. On the misleading sameness of scientific language in the lab, see João Arriscado Nunes, "The Transcultural Lab: Articulating Cultural Difference in/through Scientific Work." Coimbra, *Oficina do CES*, nº 84 (Dez. 1996).

¹⁸Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁹Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, "An Imperialism of Poets: The Modernism of Fernando Pessoa and Hart Crane." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 29.1 (1992).

²⁰*Livro do desassossego por Bernardo Soares*. II, 170. ("Doem-me a cabeça e o universo"). See also *The Book of Disquietude*, 206.

²¹Wallace Stevens, "The Poems of Our Climate," *Collected Poems* (1954; New York: Knopf, 1968) 194.

²²Al Berto, "Notas para o diário," *Horto dos incêndios* (Lisboa. Assírio e Alvim, 1997). ("deus tem que

Poems are tongues of fire replacing the silence of God. Or so must they be read. And that is why we, who make of poetry reading our way of life, can't help but speak in tongues. Not because the spirit inspires us from above with the illusion of total meaning but because meaning must be for us attempt ever fraught with contretemps. The poet's uncanny discovery that the center *does not* hold must be our guiding principle as interpreters. "Missing all," as in Emily Dickinson, so as to avoid "missing minor things" (#985).²³ A new poem about the "creation" and the "fall," by Afro-American poet Lucille Clifton, in its subtle implication that understanding/reading/poeming should not be struggle for power but demystification of power, is particularly heartening in this respect. The poem is titled and described as follows: "'brothers" (being a conversation in eight poems between an aged Lucifer and God, though only Lucifer is heard. The time is long after)."²⁴ Here is the opening poem, Lucifer's invitation to God to come and wonder with him as creation happens into language one more time, now *properly* as a conversation:

come coil with me
here in creations's bed
among the twigs and ribbons
of the past. i have grown old
remembering this garden,
the hum of the great cats
moving into language, the sweet
fume of the man's rib
as it rose up and began to walk.
it was all glory then,
the winged creatures leaping

ser substituído rapidamente por poemas, lâmpadas acesas, corpos palpáveis, vivos e limpos") 38.

²³Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960) 459.

²⁴Lucille Clifton, *The Book of Light* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993) 69-76.

like angels, the oceans claiming
their own. let us rest here a time
like two old brothers
who watched it happen and wondered
what it meant.

Lucifer alone is heard, the poet warns her readers, but his voice, she insists, bespeaks a conversation between equals. What the poem as a whole suggests is that the First Word spoken by God before time was in the Judeo-Christian myth must be heard again, but now as a conversation, too, and heavy with time as well. For languages or poems are nothing if not translatable conversations *in time*. I believe this is what Mary Layoun means by "relational literacy."²⁵

²⁵"The Trans-, the Multi-, the Pluri-, and the Global: A Few Thoughts on the Comparative and Relational Literacy." Forthcoming in *Passages: Journal of Transnational and Transcultural Studies*.