

Born in Translation:
Writing the Self in Brice Matthieussent's *Vengeance du traducteur*

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Abstract:

The narrating self of Brice Matthieussent's 2009 novel *Vengeance du traducteur* emerges from the gap between two languages and dwells — at first — in-between the pages of a book. More precisely, the voice we are hearing, which belongs to the French translator of an American novel, speaks from the margins of two books at the same time: the one we are reading and the one he is supposed to be translating. While the text of another person in another language, the unknown Other provides the very *raison d'être* of the speaking self, this self is meant to be mute, a 'serviteur muet', without a voice and character of its own. However, Matthieussent's novel dramatizes precisely the impossibility for the self to remain mute, marginal, secondary: once conscious, it is inevitably caught up in a centripetal movement that pulls it towards the centre (of attention, of the book). From translator-narrator, this voice rewrites itself as a character-narrator-author, and by becoming an active part of the plot, he takes over the space of 'freedom' allocated to the writer. This freedom remains nevertheless highly problematic, and the nature of the space in which the self find itself is ambiguous. This paper explores the process of the emergence of this self as written self and the implications of the twisted space of writing displayed in the novel.

The narrator of Matthieussent's novel is someone who, in the normal course of things, is not supposed to say 'je'. What is more, he is not supposed to say anything at all, if not to reproduce someone else's words in another language. The speaking voice and this *je* belongs namely to a translator, whom we meet at the expense of the text he is supposed to be translating, a novel by an anonymous American author. This *je*, the translator first appears at the bottom of the page, under a line that separates the space for notes from the space for the body of the text. The main text itself is missing, however: the central space of the page is empty; there is only an asterisk on each page, which refers the reader to a footnote, the translator's notes. The space of the 'original' *je*, the *je* of the text which in normal circumstances would be the first and only one to appear to the reader, is thus cleared or veiled (or deleted or undisclosed), eliminated, or *overwritten* by the *je* that according to the conventions should be entirely transparent, or as close to it as possible. The self–other relation is thus

reversed and problematized from the very first moment: the ‘original’ self of the ‘original’ text or its author is missing, it only appears as a faceless and nameless rival who is in power over the main place — and the ‘other’, whose role would be limited to conveying that self and its message in another language without manifesting itself as a consciousness and identity, is the only one that actually appears to the reader as a self.

The narrator we do hear speaking (which from now on I call the narrator, to avoid confusion) is perfectly aware of the situation and his own secondary role in the system as it is conceived, as the opening paragraph shows, and this is precisely what the entire plot of the novel, complex at several levels will be about:

Je loge **ici** sous cette fine barre noire. Voici mon lieu, mon séjour, ma tanière. Les murs sont peints en blanc, puis couverts de nombreuses lignes de minces caractères noirs, comme une frise irrégulière, un papier peint changeant. Bienvenue à **toi**, cher lecteur, franchis donc le seuil de mon antre. Ce n’est pas aussi spacieux que chez **mon voisin d’au-dessus**, mais **en son absence** j’accueille ici les visiteurs déroutés par **cette désertion inexplicée**. (p. 13)¹

The narrative begins with a strong statement highlighting all three fundamental deictic factors that anchor the speaking voice in time, space, and person: ‘je’, ‘ici’, and a verb in the present tense that implies ‘maintenant’ and situates the *je* in an abstract space. This *je* immediately situates itself in relation to a ‘toi’, which is here the reader-visitor, and a third person, the absent ‘neighbour’ from ‘upstairs’. The space in which the narrator dwells is clearly separated from the rest of the world with a threshold, the ‘fine barre noire’. It also quickly becomes clear that the space allocated for him is not sufficient, too narrow, and he manifests himself through his voice — more precisely, writes — because this is the only way he can show and experience his existence at all: ‘Dans ce modeste espace je joue des coudes. **J’empile ces lignes pour que ma cave ne soit pas un cercueil, ma soute un tombeau.**’ (p. 13)

Space will be one of the major issues throughout the text as the translator struggles for existence, freedom, **power** — and identity. **Speaking or writing** will be the means in this struggle for life (and more), and the ‘toi’, the recognition by the

¹ All page references are to Brice Matthieussent, *Vengeance du traducteur* (Paris: P.O.L, 2009).

second person, embodied by the reader, the muted author of the ‘original’, or even by the fictional characters of the original and/or rewritten narrative would be the confirmation of the success of the translator as a subject. In what follows, I shall attempt to unfold the development of the self through the image and workings of space and writing in the narrative.

First of all, in order to make clearer the context in which the struggle for space and power takes place, let me provide a bit more detail about the progress of the narrative. The translator’s notes first suggest that they are called for by moments of the invisible primary text, but the words explained (‘hidebehind’, ‘prote’, ‘dumbwaiter’) always have a clear link to the author’s and the translator’s respective positions, and the choice of terms and their explanations are also clearly directed by the interests of the translator. In other words, the notes always **gravitate toward the subjectivity and perspective of the *je***. They then gradually **grow independent** from the invisible main text: soon the translator does not even pretend any longer to intervene in the interest of a better rendering of the translated text, but multiplies comments on the absurdity of his situation and his discontentment, until his frustration grows into a clear rebellion and he **decides to simply rewrite the original text** according to his own ideas by shamelessly manipulating, deleting, and adding passages. In the end we must rather say that **he writes another text** using certain elements of the one he should be translating. From the **initial** position as a sort of ‘**para-narrator**’ speaking alongside another, silenced, but admittedly primary voice, the ‘*je*’ of the notes quickly begins to **emancipate itself**.

The possibility of the final and complete emancipation is formulated in terms of a conquest, that of the space above the line, the main space for the text, for the plot, and for the writing self. There is only one space available and only one first person, one self can occupy it: the struggle for existence, voice, and identity, is a battle over (or war for) the space in which the self can manifest itself as subject, rather than just being a squatter or a ‘*serviteur muet*’. What happens in the first and longer part of the book, however, is ‘only’ a gradual increasing of the space under the line, at the expense of the space above the line, and the translator first denies that he would aspire to take over the space above the line:

A force de prendre mes aises, l’envie me vient de faire monter la barre en poussant du dos et des fesses. [...] C’est avec détermination que **je vais**

repousser vers le haut cette barre sans haltères, si lourde cependant. Mais **pour rien au monde je ne désire enjambrer la barre**, ni sauter par-dessus tel le coureur de cent dix mètres haies qui un moment s'envole au-dessus de la cendrée et franchit l'obstacle rectiligne. **Je ne tiens pas à quitter mes douves** pour occuper la place forte, **je n'ai nulle envie de trôner en pleine page royale.** (p. 27)

Nevertheless, he does mean to expand his existing space and his intentions are becoming more combative as his desire to *be* acknowledged grows more powerful:

Quand à ma vengeance, elle n'implique aucun arme de poing, d'estoc ni de taille, mais une **croissance régulière, obstinée**, singulièrement à l'abri de toute poursuite judiciaire, une lente montée [...] une **invasion discrète** qui provoquera forcément le fureur de l'écrivain lésé, expulsé hors de son espace vital. (p. 64)

The image of the slow but unstoppable expansion at the expense of the current holder of the central space, the invisible Other (writer), and the metaphor of an invasion invite a reading in terms of a Deleuzo-Guattarian **deteritorialization**. This is precisely what the main line of the narrative is about: a suppressed self's awakening and **revolt** against the Other represented as an oppressor, and the expansion of the self's territory over the Other's. The size and the control over the respective spaces above and under the line are explicitly a question of **power, and the** visible measure of the power of the self is writing and the text produced.

The growing power of the translator, as he takes more and more liberty in rewriting the plot, paradoxically first becomes manifest in his talking less about himself, as he exercises his power and states his existence through twisting the translatable plot to his liking. As he declares in a tone of unveiled satisfaction after some reflections on the fact that the lives of the characters are now in his hands: 'Désormais mon pouvoir est grand.' (p. 107).

Nevertheless, at the end of the day the expansion of the space under the line proves unsatisfying as a solution because whatever large it grows, that space always remains secondary, marginal. The final move in the progress of the conquest of space and on the way towards independent selfhood needs to be something radical: the

translator does end up climbing over the ‘fine barre noire’ which first represented the limit of his territory: ‘J’abandonne derrière moi l’astérisque inférieur à son triste sort, pour bondir sans regret vers son double supérieur.’ (p. 193). From this point on, the text we are reading continues in the space above the line: the narrator-translator definitively took over from the author of the ‘original’ novel; he is from now on not simply a secondary self, a secondary narrator on the side of the invisible but powerful primary narrator of the invisible primary text, but the only one ruling over the entire space, which he thus **reterritorializes**: ‘Mon auteur, c’est moi. Ou presque. Et j’ai accompli ma vengeance. **J’ai enfin pris la place de l’autre.**’ (p. 199). But there are still some hundred pages to go.

Interestingly enough, however, the line remains there for a while at the bottom of the page, and sometimes higher, with an asterisk and an empty space underneath, as a mark of the abandoned initial dwelling of the translator. The line will disappear after a couple of pages, yet the unusually large empty space at the bottom of the page persists, and will shrink only on the last pages, in the ‘Epilogue’, suggesting that even though the translator took over from the ‘enemy’ and now has the power of the author who determines the development of the plot, some of the space will always escape his control, or that he cannot possibly fill it all.

While the ambiguous move from one space to the other and the associated theft of power and text from the dethroned author seems to endow the translator with the role and recognition he aspired for, by the same token he also puts himself in an ambiguous position of a new kind. Namely, the space he gets into is that of the narrative, a textual world into which he writes himself.

He is now the author of the main text, yet the status of that space is ambiguous if we try to define it in terms of an opposition between reality and fiction. In terms of this binary opposition, the translator’s initial self, space, and work would be the translator’s ‘reality’ and the translatable text is ‘fiction’. However, the translator has now joined the fictional space and turned into fiction — or the other way round, fiction has turned into reality. To him, it seems that ‘tout se réalisait, se confirmait, se vérifiait dans la vie réelle [...] la vie se conformait à la fiction’ (p. 233). Yet this life-fiction sometimes disobeys and things happen that Trad — this is the name the translator now goes by — did not write: ‘La réalité diverge, s’écarte du roman.’ (p. 238). Fiction and reality mix and merge, their domains and boundaries vanish, and it becomes impossible to separate them as distinct dimensions. And this also applies to

the self which occupies this space of indeterminate ontological quality: the status of the self becomes or remains just as ambiguous as that of the space it occupies as a voice and writing. We call the result fiction, but such fiction may well be the only reality for the self. At the end of the day, if we are to circumscribe the reality of the writing and written self we might need to rethink our attitude to fiction and reality, in the spirit of the narrator's remark towards the end of his account:

« Après tout, est-ce vraiment si important de savoir d'où viennent les choses, les gens, les objets [...], à quel monde ils appartiennent, si tel ou tel événement a réellement eu lieu, s'il ne sort pas d'un rêve ou d'un livre ? Tu crois que oui ? Tu crois vraiment que c'est indispensable de le savoir ? Moi, à force de toutes ces bizarreries, je commence à en douter, et même à m'en moquer. » (p. 286)