

## Auto/bi(o)graphy

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– On ne parle jamais qu'une seule langue...

(oui mais)

– On ne parle jamais une seule langue...<sup>1</sup>

My interest in autobiography is entirely autobiographical. Is this a tautology? Am I this self which irrepressibly desires to write itself or its self? What is this writing-life that professes to be 'auto-', as in 'automobile' or 'automatic'? Why spell auto/bi(o)graphy differently? First of all because there never is a neat distinction between life-writing and 'theory' – the autobiographic always involves 'theory'; and theory is always (also) autobiographical. If theory were to write its autobiography, which language would it be in? French, English, German, Russian...? One never speaks more than one language; yes, but one also never speaks only one language. Hence the strange spelling auto/**bi**(o)graphy, in literature and in theory.

Doubly undecidable 'on ne parle jamais qu'une seule langue' can mean 'One never speaks only one language' or 'One never speaks more than one language'. Yes, but

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<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre – ou la prothèse de l'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 25 [henceforth referred to in the text as *Monolinguisme*]. All translations in this paper are mine.

– and the dialogic form in which Jacques Derrida expresses this central aporia of his *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* confirms this undecidability performatively, so to speak, by replying: ‘on ne parle jamais une seule langue’ – *we* never speak one language, or the same language. This dilemma represents the (miraculous) ‘law of translation’, or even the ‘law as translation’ (*Monolinguisme* 25). Is it still possible to translate under such circumstances? After all, undeniably, translation ‘takes place’.

The ‘more than one/no longer one [*plus d'un*]’, ever since *Mémoires – pour Paul de Man*, has been put forward by Derrida as one of the impossible definitions of deconstruction:

Je crois qu’il n’y a [dans la déconstruction] que du transfert, à tous les sens que ce mot prend dans plus d’une langue, et d’abord du transfert entre les langues. Si j’avais à risquer, Dieu m’en garde, une seule définition de la déconstruction, brève, elliptique, économique, comme un mot d’ordre, je dirais sans phrase: *plus d’une langue*.<sup>2</sup>

The irony in this passage with its ‘God forbid/save me from’ (*Dieu m’en garde*) recalls Derrida’s ‘Des tours de Babel’. In its ‘definition without sentence’ (*sans phrase*) it produces a double movement of uncovering and (re)covering at the same time, which

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires – pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), p. 38.

I think that [in deconstruction] there is only transfer in all the meanings this word takes in more than one language, and first of all transfer between languages. If I had to risk, God forbid/save me from doing so, only one definition of deconstruction, short, elliptical, economical, like a watchword, I would say without using a sentence: *more than/no longer one language*.

inscribes deconstruction into the fold of the ‘more than one’, of the undecidable that lies between the alternatives of the one, the two and the many.<sup>3</sup>

Deconstruction (‘itself’) occurs as a transfer – *not* a translation (maybe even *without* translation) – between languages. It causes the boundaries between languages to vibrate but also keeps them in place and, indeed, confirms at once their impossibility and their necessity. It is therefore distinct from any notion of translation as a (spatial and temporal) process of transposition, either unidirectional or mutual. It also opposes itself to the idea of translation as a mixing of languages, linguistic hybridity or interference. In this sense, deconstruction is only bi- or plurilingual, if one accepts bi- or plurilingualism as being the coinciding of more than one language in their completely autonomous co-existence within one ‘place’ (i.e. an individual, a group, a society, etc). This paper explores this impossible ‘necessity’ of the *plus d’une langue* by reading some passages in a few texts which are concerned with forms of mono-, bi- or plurilingual ‘suffering’: suffering from exile, the exile from language, suffering from translation and self-translation as a process of rewriting the divided or displaced self.<sup>4</sup> These texts arguably all belong to an important subgenre of autobiography: the ‘language memoir’. However, they vary as to their degree of ‘fictionalisation’.

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<sup>3</sup> Again confirmed by Derrida in ‘Fidélité à plus d’un – mériter d’hériter où la généalogie fait défaut’, *Cahiers Intersignes* 13 (1998), pp. 221-265.

<sup>4</sup> These texts are Derrida’s *Monolinguisme*, and Abdelkébir Khatibi, *L’Amour bilingue* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1983) Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (London: Minerva, 1991) and Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (London: Granta, 1995).

## I.

It is of course banal to say that all writing is somehow autobiographical in the sense that writing always occurs through some 'one': the subject *of* writing (double genitive). Writing about one's self and writing oneself are, however, very different processes. This distinction acquires particular importance in a context in which more and more 'selves' use their multiplicity (their 'fidelity' to more than one language, culture and identity) as the starting point and object of their writing (a practice which the unusual spelling of auto/bi(o)graphy tries to capture). 'Derridean' deconstruction has always been concerned with a very specific subject of writing. Despite all failed attempts at 'defining' deconstruction either as strategy, method or critique, it is of course historically and geographically, maybe even politically, locatable (e.g. it is closely related to Derrida's '*nostalgérie*'<sup>5</sup>). One could argue that deconstruction in its Derridean form constitutes a (radically) 'French' form of postcolonial theory. *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, finally, thematises the turn or rather return to the geo-political, historical and autobiographical and hence also partly (auto)fictional traumatic 'origin' of deconstruction's (and arguably theory's) '*plus d'un*'.

*Monolinguisme* is a text marked by issues of language and power, nationality, colonialism, cultural imperialism and linguistic hegemony (the specific question of the '*francophonie*'). But it is also concerned with the possibility and survival of the one language, or language as 'one', with a certain problematic 'purity' of the idiom and with

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Derrida's 'Taking a Stand for Algeria', *Parallax* 4: 2 (1998), pp. 17-23.

that which is at stake in ‘creolisation’ (*Monolinguisme* 24). The dramatic and outrageous incongruity of the ‘hyperbolic’ (co)existence of the two absolutes – the necessary phantasm or fiction of the ‘one’ language and the always inevitable ‘more than one’ of translation is – in Derrida’s case, is derived from a very specific socio-historical and socio-linguistic ‘exemplary identity’, his ‘*nostalgérie*’ (*Monolinguisme* 86) which refers to the history of the Jewish community of Algeria in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ‘irremediable monolingualism’ Derrida claims for himself is inscribed within a special relation to his ‘only’ language (French) which nevertheless can never be his ‘own’ (i.e. the primary source of his identity): ‘*je ne parle qu’une seule langue (et, mais, or) ce n’est pas la mienne*’ (I speak only one language [and, but, therefore] it is not mine, *Monolinguisme* 15). The process of alienation from (one’s) language, the original ‘lack’ of the decentred subject, which caused the peculiar ‘identity disorder’ [*trouble d’identité*] in the wartime francophone Jewish community of Algeria, was engendered by the temporary loss of their French citizenship in 1940. In the absence of any other language to take the place of French (neither Hebrew, Arabic or Berber were free of stigmatisation available within the context of colonialist language politics), the mother tongue remained barred from the linguistic outcast, who was also outside any citizenship. This (mono)language, ever since this traumatic event, has been marked as the language of the other, the (m)other tongue and its associated ‘phantasm’ of the monolingualism of the other.

This account of traumatic mono/lingualism, however, has a subtext, or rather has to be seen as part of a dialogue – which means it is itself divided. As opposed to arabophonic ‘Franco-Maghrebian’ writers such as the Moroccan Abdelkébir Khatibi

whose notion of bilingualism Derrida wants to resist in *Monolinguisme*, the francophone exile in his own language is subject to a radical condition that might be better called 'lingualism', and which cannot be qualified satisfactorily by any of the prefixes mono-, bi- or pluri-. Instead, the 'monolingualism of the other' exposes the non-identity of language to itself, which makes it at once necessary and impossible to speak of one language. In this sense the possibility of bi- or plurilingualism is necessarily inscribed into the very structure of every language, and the functioning of any one language depends on this radical openness.

The traumatic experience of the loss or prohibition of one's maternal language results in the peculiar dysfunction of an 'aphasic monolingualism' (*Monolingualism* 117). The 'aphasic monolingual' suffers from continuous but incomplete translation. The task/abandonment (*Aufgabe*) of the translator, as outlined in Derrida's reading of Walter Benjamin,<sup>6</sup> lies in the liberation of the language of the other. The non-identity of language to itself is the ethical condition for this impossible *monolangu*e which contains a messianic promise of linguistic alterity (i.e. the language of the other *and* the other of language). Furthermore, the singularity of the monolanguage of the other is the precondition for any language because '(a) language belongs to the other, has come from the other, is the coming of the other' (*Monolinguisme* 127).

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<sup>6</sup>Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', in *Psyché: inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), pp. 203-235.

It is, however, this structural ‘messianicity’ (without messiah), the ‘to-come’ (*à-venir*)<sup>7</sup> – built into the very ‘idea’ of language – which also contains the danger of (linguistic, cultural, colonial) hegemony. This colonial tendency inherent in any language can only be deconstructed from ‘within’, from inside (and against) the idea of a ‘*demeure*’ (a dwelling place) of a language by invoking the non-identity of (one) language to itself and its radical openness towards other languages. By ‘cajoling’ (*amadouer*) language the ‘lingual’ subject attempts to make language speak of itself, or on its own (*Monolinguisme* 84), which constitutes the prosthesis of the un(re)presentable ‘original language’ inside every language that causes writing to be a translation within ‘one’ language, a translation of the entirely other language, the phantasmic ‘monlanguage of the other’.

## II.

*Monolinguisme* addresses a particular context of bi- or indeed trilingualism, namely the complex sociolinguistic triglossal situation of the Moroccan francophone writer Abdelkébir Khatibi and his ‘strategic’ political concept of the ‘*bi-langue*’ against which Derrida’s impossible concept of the ‘*monolanguue*’ is set as a kind of transcendental ethical imperative. Everyone must have the right to say: ‘I am monolingual’

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<sup>7</sup> For Derrida’s notion of ‘messianism without messiah’ see his *Spectres de Marx*, pp. 56, 102, 266 and *passim*; and “The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994), p. 31-33.

(*Monolinguisme* 42): ‘One only ever speaks one language’, only one (at a time). It is possible to be monolingual (this is what I am, after all) and to speak a language which is not one’s own’ (*Monolinguisme* 19). On the other hand, the special (double) chiasmic relation between the Moroccan vernacular, Arabic and the French language is described by Khatibi as an eminently complex situation, for the French substitutes itself to the diglossia (Arabic and Moroccan vernacular) by translating itself (i.e. from French into French). This means that ‘the bilingualism internal to each language (the bilingualism from the communicable to the incommunicable...) operates a separation, an act of splitting, of difference and transmutation according to a movement which never ceases doubling and splitting’.<sup>8</sup>

Khatibi’s *Amour bilingue* is a declaration of love to the language of the other, and describes the attempt to come to terms with the suffering from linguistic *dédoublement*. ‘I am’, the narrator says to himself, ‘the middle/place between two languages: the more I approach this middle/place the further I depart from it’ (*Amour bilingue* 10-11). The vernacular Arabic of the narrator’s mother has been split by the language of the former coloniser (i.e. French). Between two languages, the always more than one gives rise to a different phantasm, not a *monolanguie* but, in Khatibi’s case, a *bi-langue*: ‘My chance/good fortune, my individual abyss and my beautiful force of amnesia. A force which, strangely enough, I do not feel to be a deficiency; rather it might be my third ear’ (*Amour bilingue* 11). The bilingual vision and the ‘third ear’ project the original split to every perception and demand a constant effort of translation and retranslation, always

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<sup>8</sup>Abdelkébir Khatibi, ‘Incipits’, in Abdelkébir Khatibi et al. (eds), *Du Bilinguisme*, (Paris: Denoël, 1985), p. 179.



bordering on the untranslatable as a lived, physical disaster, which constitutes the cruelty and destructive force but also, at the same time, the unlimited blessing and creative gain of the *bi-langue*.

*L'Amour bilingue* recounts at once the loss and gain of love, the success and defeat of mutual translation. Khatibi's bilingual love takes place in the 'common language' of two lovers (i.e. French), which, nevertheless, for the bilingual narrator remains the language of the other, while his lover does not speak the narrator's maternal language (*Amour bilingue* 58). In their union 'two countries make love' (*Amour bilingue* 24). While his bilingualism unites the pair his *bi-langue* separates them (25). His love, eventually, itself becomes subject to the linguistic doubling and splitting: 'Maybe in her he loved two women: the one who lived in their common language, and the other, whom he inhabited in the bi-language' (26). The passion drives the bilingual lover towards the exploration of the untranslatable of the *bi-langue*, the 'pure language, at the tip of the untranslatable' (27), the self-abandonment in the other, in the language of the other: 'The great nostalgia of every bilingual love: to give one's life for a foreign passion without (receiving anything in) return' (28).

Bilingual love, however, remains restless, unlocatable, incommunicable, absent in its desire for a *bi-langue* which would be a 'translation' in the sense of a hybrid but, at the same time, would constitute a 'pure' meeting point between languages. But the non-materialisation of such a pure language causes the central dilemma: 'When I speak to you in your language, where does mine forget/lose itself? Where does it still speak, in silence? Because never is it cancelled out in these moments' (48). The cruelty lies in the realisation that his love is necessarily 'contained' within the language of the other: 'I love

you in your mother tongue' (*Amour bilingue* 49), which is, of course, also the language of writing, the language in which the narrating is taking place.

While Khatibi and other Arabic writers of French language can still refer to either a concrete or phantasmic (m)other tongue, while writing in the language of the other (French), for Derrida – and here lies the truth of his paradoxical claim to be ‘more... or maybe even the most Franco-Maghrebian’ (*Monolinguisme* 29) – there only remains the unbridgeable gap of and the unquenchable desire for the prohibited (m)other tongue of the (French) mono-language, a traumatic ‘lingualism’ that unsettles the mono-, bi- and plurilingual and instead produces the insanity of an exile from language as such. Instead, language is experienced as the impossible law/translation: ‘I have always suspected the law, just as language, to be insane, in any case, to be the only/unique place and the first/primal condition of insanity’ (*Monolinguisme* 25).

Against Khatibi’s specular *bi-langue* Derrida reinforces his claim by pointing out the problem of hyphenation in the term ‘*franco-maghrébin*’. The silence of the *trait-d’union* is far from unifying and pacifying the colonial experience it seeks to express; just as translation in fact, hyphenation can also aggravate ‘the terror, the lesions and injuries’ (*Monolinguisme* 27). Derrida is fully aware of the colonising power that resides within his phantasm of the monolingualism of the other. But the phantasm of the *monolanguie* remains at once impossible and necessary:

This monolingualism of the other certainly has the face and the menacing traits of colonial hegemony. But what makes it insurmountable, despite all the necessity and the legitimacy of all emancipation, is simply the ‘there is language’, a ‘there is language that does not exist’, that is to say that there is no metalanguage and

that *a* language will always be called upon to speak of language (in general) –  
*because* the latter does not exist. It does not exist henceforth, it never yet exists.

(*Monolinguisme* 129)

Just as Derrida's *monolangue*, Khatibi's *bi-langue* also has a socio-political subtext. French as the language of the other is, for the Franco-Maghrebian the language of the coloniser. It is this very duplicity in the (post-colonial) bilingual which is attractive to his lover (post-coloniser ; *Amour bilingue* 70). French as the language of the colonial power is subject to a love-hate relationship that cannot help but affect the identity of the bilingual, and cause suffering and strain to his bilingual love: 'What I endured, what I paid for my past and my own, dangerously escaped her. The French language for me will have been this passion for the untranslatable' (72-73).

### III.

Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* are only two examples of a growing number of fictional semi-autobiographical 'language memoirs' which focus on the experience of the linguistic exile. *Lost in Translation – A Life in a New Language* – is the autobiographical account of an estrangement from reality and the recovery of a transposed identity. The (anti)dantesque journey of the Polish girl, violently renamed from Ewa to Eva, starts off from the childhood 'Paradise' of Cracow, to the 'Exile' of her new but rejected 'home' in Canada, and her resettlement in America. Recovering the irrecoverable in this text is associated with an ungovernable nostalgia.

The uprooting of the Polish child from her culture and language, forced into learning the language of the other (i.e. English), causes a crisis in her identity and her relation to reality. The doubling of reality leads to a 'loss' of translatability or a being lost in translation which subjects reality to a kind of relativist inaccessibility. This is expressed in the writing by a constant use of the (historical) present tense. It is also associated with a certain 'literalism' which runs parallel to the structuralist theory of writing Eva experiences during her studies at American universities:

I am becoming a living avatar of structuralist wisdom; I cannot help knowing that words are just themselves. But it's a terrible knowledge, without any of the consolations that wisdom usually brings. It does not mean that I am free to play with words at my wont; anyway, words in their naked state are surely among the least satisfactory play objects. No, this radical disjoining between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colours, striations, nuances – its very existence. It is the loss of a living connection. (*Lost in Translation* 107)

The transposition from Polish to American leads to a traumatic loss of Eva's interior language and triggers a long and painful process of supplanting and translating her entire former identity into a new coherence. The process of becoming American in its various stages of cultural assimilation (from being a 'displaced immigrant' to becoming a 'hybrid resident alien' [221] and finally a 'New York intellectual' [244]) is worked through in the (psycho)analytical manner of a cure. The realisation comes at the end of the autobiographical recovery in the form of a return of the past in a different, namely

American, form. This is linguistically expressed in a departure from the historical present to the present perfect: 'I've been here [in America] this long' (277). In embracing the social reality of her new environment and American community Eva also affirms the value of the existing structures within a shared reality and its conservative power. It is not surprising therefore that the text ends on a transcending note of metaphysical closure that invokes a reality 'beyond' language: 'Time pulses through my blood like a river. The language of this is sufficient. I am here and now' (280). The acquisition of an American self seems to have overcome or at least compensated the 'loss' of translation. One could say that the 'translation of the other' (again double genitive) has taken place in the following two forms: the other has translated 'me' and 'I' have translated the other to myself.

A completely different form of exile and translation is taking place in Lee's *Native Speaker*. The narrator of Lee's novel, Henry Park, arrived in America at a younger age than the teenager Eva. He is a 'Korean-American'. Incidentally, this novel also narrates the fate of a bilingual (and bicultural) love, namely between the narrator and his American wife Lelia. As in Khatibi's *Amour bilingue*, their love in the American language (Lelia does not speak Korean), is affected by aspects of cultural hegemony and ethnicity. But Henry Park's case the difficulty arises out of an intermingling between his private and professional life.

The story begins with Henry's and Lelia's (temporary) separation and ends with a cautious but nevertheless hopeful reunion. Before leaving Lelia writes a list of her dislikes about Henry. Among her accusations figure: emotional alien, stranger, follower, traitor, spy and, maybe worst of all, false speaker of language (*Native Speaker* 5). Lelia has

difficulty understanding Henry's bilingual and bicultural conflicts, his precarious sense of identity in relation to ethnicity and masculinity. Lelia's profession – and she, too, has difficulty keeping private and professional life apart – is being a speech therapist, and Henry's original linguistic trauma, and his difficult, almost sterile relation to the American language, stem from an enforced, violent speech therapy at school. American, however, is his dominant, although not his maternal language, while his Korean is rather passive and fading. So he speaks a (mono)language which is nevertheless not his own and never will be. The initial attraction between Lelia and Henry lies in this linguistic situation: 'What I found was this: that she could really speak... she was simply executing the language. She went word by word. Every letter had a border. I watched her wide full mouth sweep through her sentences like a figure touring a dark house, flipping on spots and banks of perfectly drawn light' (*Native Speaker* 9). Henry, on the other hand, confesses that 'people like [him] are always thinking about still having an accent' (11). And Lelia confirms his anxiousness about being a 'true' native speaker by saying, with the authority of a speech therapist: 'You speak perfectly, of course. I mean if we were talking on the phone I wouldn't think twice. (...) Your face is part of the equation, but not in the way you're thinking. You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker' (11).

This inbetweenness, the hyphenation, the constant 'translation' marks the ethnic combination of Korean-American in a completely different way than Eva's cultural assimilation which is never thought of in terms of Polish-Americanness. This unlocatability which results in a constant shift or switch of identity, or passing – again something that seems erased from Hoffman's text – has a particular political importance

in Lee's novel. Henry Park is a spy. And he is a 'postmodern' or postnational spy who works as an employee within an agency that offers its services to whomever pays. This means that the actual agent rarely knows for whom he or she is spying, so that no questions of (national) loyalty should stop the 'job' – usually the observation and infiltration of a particular subject, group or organisation – from being carried out.

Henry's boss, Hoagland, who prefers recruiting his agents among ethnic minorities, advocates complete 'impartiality' for what they do: 'our job was simply to even things out, clear the market as it were, act as secret arbitrageurs... We pledged allegiance to no government. We weren't ourselves political creatures. We weren't patriots' (15). The reason why Hoagland works with Americans of ethnic minority origin, however, is far from being unpolitical. His agency specialises in the observation of other minority groups: foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans. 'Our clients were multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign governments, individuals of resource and connection. We provided them with information about people working against their vested interests' (16). In a certain sense one could describe Henry's activities as 'cultural translations', carefully registered and written 'unauthorised biographies' (16). Just like Eva, Henry is a 'cultural anthropologist' and historian: 'I the most prodigal and mundane of historians' (16).

Lee's novel is in fact the story of how the 'ideal' concept of pure translation on which the activity of the spy and his or her passing is based becomes entangled in (national) politics. Henry's job is – by infiltrating the entourage of an ethnic minority politician – to produce some sort of evidence that may be used against him. The subject of Henry's surveillance, whose confidence he obtains by becoming his private secretary,

is another Korean-American who is about to run as a candidate for the mayor election in New York. Although Henry admires John Kwang and his politics of inter-racial communication, which resembles Martin Luther King's 'dream', he produces his downfall by passing on what to Henry seems 'unusable' material. In the end, however, Henry finds out that *he* has been used and deceived by all sides. He realises that Kwang was responsible for a murder he had originally blamed on his own boss. And the material he passes on is used, nevertheless, to destroy Kwang's political career and thus the chance of a better relationship between Asian- and African-Americans. But Henry Park is most of all a traitor to himself. By passing on information about a Korean system of mutual financial help for future shop-owners – a means of intra-ethnic support Henry's own father had relied upon to become wealthy – he betrays the cultural identity both of his father *and* Kwang who acts as a substitute father-figure. The information is taken up by the government and used to declare this Korean practice as illegal tax evasion. The list of contributors at the same time reveals the illegal status of many Korean immigrants to the authorities.

What attracted Henry most about Kwang was his apparently successful co-existence as American *and* Korean, the stability of his hyphenation, but in realising the political appropriation of his 'translations' of what remains for him an unbridgeable cultural difference, he acknowledges his radical otherness, the evasiveness of his own identity and the impossibility to become, while always having been American (i.e. by birth right):



My ugly immigrant's truth... is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited. This forever is my burden to bear. But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your own history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (*Native Speaker* 297).

The cultural politics of immigration and assimilation is ethnically perceived and appears much more problematical in *Native Speaker* than in *Lost in Translation*. Nevertheless *Native Speaker* ends on a much more hopeful note, namely by describing Lelia's speech therapy and the respect for the correct pronunciation of the immigrant children's names, which is in stark contrast to the violence done to the Polish Ewa renamed as Eva. *Native Speaker* is conscious of the untranslatability of otherness and the inevitable political and potentially violent dimension of translation.

#### IV.

Nevertheless, it is not a matter of 'cultivating the untranslatable', as Derrida explains (*Monolinguisme* 100). Everything may be translated in the 'lâche' (weak/loose/lax) sense of the word. But in another, slightly 'hyperbolic' sense, nothing of course is translatable.

However, the monolingualism of the other, the right to say, 'I am monolingual', is always already supplemented by the fact that, this monolanguage is not mine, it is of the other, which means 'uninhabitable'. To be an exile to one's only language (each and every time), which is not one's own, may become an increasingly widespread phenomenon in a world and a time characterised by global communication, migration and translation. This is reflected both in contemporary literature, culture and the theoretical and institutional discourses about them.

It is often said that bi- or plurilinguals do not translate, and strictly speaking, of course, they are the first to testify to the untranslatability of their languages. An untranslatability whose threat *and* resource, whose impossible necessity is a matter of lived experience and survival. But, on the other hand, who else would be able to translate if not the subject competent in more than one language? The auto/bi(o)graphical personæ in *Monolinguisme* and *Amour bilingue* experience their passing or their transpositions between languages or cultures as lived 'translations': 'the constant translation that will have been my life' (*Amour bilingue* 86). But the tense, the future perfect, is important here. Because one is always dealing with a translation *après coup*, a story, a construction, an interpretation, mourning. Pure translatability, just as untranslatability, are inconceivable (as Derrida insists: 'there is no translatory metalanguage'; translation always takes place within *one* language, at a time). But translations *do* manifest themselves in 'impure' political forms.

For bi- and plurilingual 'hybrids' translation is imperative. They must and have to translate, they cannot help but translate and be translated in that process. They suffer as much from refusing to translate as from indulging in translation. But this is not

necessarily 'tragic'. One is free to believe that although something must necessarily be lost in translation, something may also be gained (as Salman Rushdie famously claimed).<sup>9</sup> What can be gained through translation *only*, however, is a curious sense of this 'monolingualism of the other', that is a certain (ethical) notion of alterity *and* (a political) experience of difference as indistinguishable: 'One can only speak of a language in this language. Even if one had to put it outside of itself/to cause it to be beside itself. Instead of closing off anything this solipsism conditions the address to the other...' (*Monolinguisme* 43). I can only speak one language (at a time), but this language is never mine and is never itself. It does not coincide with itself and I can never be 'at home' in it, because it is the language of the other who always precedes. It is a 'politics' of translation that administrates the hybridity any manifestation of translation engenders. Of course, one hopes that any concrete other might also wish to translate (him- or herself). 'The extra-ordinary would be, in a sense, to write with several hands, in several languages in one (a) text that would only be (be nothing else than) a perpetual translation.'<sup>10</sup> But this process of translation already presupposes this radical 'lingualism' of the 'monolanguage *of* the other. The *of* does not so much signify the property than the provenance: language is the other, it has come from the other, it is the coming of the other' (*Monolinguisme* 127). In this sense, Derrida's '*monolanguae*' and Khatibi's '*bi-*

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<sup>9</sup>Compare for example Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1992), p. 17: "It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained."

<sup>10</sup>Khatibi, "Incipits", *op. cit.*, p. 193.

*langue*' form two sides of the same (but undialectisable) 'problem': 'bi-langue' refers to a process of hybridisation that occurs in the name of a unifying principle, an ultimately political claim. Derrida's 'monolingualism of the other' tries to do justice to an irreducible (ethical) demand which incessantly inscribes alterity within (a) language.

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