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The (Mis)Translation of Jouissance

There is no precise, single word in English for *jouissance*, in the sense that Lacan used it. This fact alone is worthy of our interest. What is it about the English language that disallows the specificity of the term as used by Lacan in the French? What does French know that English does not; and of course, vice-versa? And to ask the ill-tempered question: does this “living part of a substance” named in French, and without its own name in the English from the English, exist in subjects spoken by English? I ask this seriously. We are spoken/used/inhabited by language, not the other way around. So, what does an absence in a language speak? We can ask this because we make comparisons across languages, which any task of translation must confront as part of its work. So, we are provoked by it here.

Going further, what are we to make of the common practice of (mis)translating *jouissance* into contemporary English, as enjoyment (something that Silvia Rosman thankfully made a point of NOT doing)? I believe it signals many things. In one important way, it is an effect of what we are all living now, namely our implication and revolving absorption in a quasi-discourse and set of despairing attachments we can name as digital, neo-liberal, hyper-modern, commodity capitalism. While we certainly do not have the time today to tease this apart, the one aspect of this quasi-discourse I would like to highlight is the leveling or flattening out of speech and language. In the face of the imperative to consume and to produce, to make our bodies and mouths into so many ticky-tacky little factories of high-performance and efficiency, our words are being emptied out, made into commodities like everything else, lined up on a virtual shelf for easy scrolling and one-click purchases. This code can no longer hold or hope to convey the singularity of our constant becoming. They are like little cars on an endless freeway. Some slight variations, but in the end, all the same, and worse still, all headed in an identical direction. Driving towards death?

It is in this impoverished state of affairs that *jouissance* becomes enjoyment. For it can only be that. There can only be enjoyment. The enigma posed by the actual term *JOUISSANCE* is hurriedly swept away, and enjoyment put in its place. It is not just that English per se cannot hold what the French language can or attempts to with the term; it is English as the *lingua franca* of our age that simply cannot abide what is held by the term in French, or Spanish, or Portuguese or Italian for that matter, although these languages too are losing their footing. No one is exempt. We are all falling into this void...

Which, incidentally, brings to the fore serious clinical questions regarding the organization of *jouissance* in our moment. My analysands tell me that the future is now dead. I have no reason to dispute this. After all, we encounter the political in the discourse of the analysand. But with no future, even in its phantasmatic or ideological guises, how do they organize their *jouissance* and what does this say about their confrontation with the Real? Which is another way of asking whether *jouissance* can exist without a big Other? And if so, is an unbearable excess the result?

Moving on, let's consider the tricky question of why it took so long to get this exceptional text translated into English? Let us quickly track its trajectory:

- Dr. Braunstein publishes the first comprehensive treatise on *jouissance* in Spanish in 1990. It is named *Goce*.
- A translation into French is produced in 1994.
- A revised and expanded edition in French is published in 2005.
- A revised edition in Spanish is published in 2006 (which serves as the basis for this edition in English).
- A translation in Portuguese appears in 2007.
- After 30 years, this translation by Silvia Rosman in English is finally produced.

Again, why did it take so long?; especially if we consider how vital the concept has become both in the clinic and in extension during this long gestation. What does it strike at in Lacanian theory as it has come to be formulated in English? What does it undo, or problematize in the received or conventional Lacanian “wisdom” to date IN ENGLISH. For my part, I find a deterritorialization at play in every single page of this text. A perpetual upending and subversion that is in alignment with the logic of an analytic session. Cuts, momentary breaks that open up entire structures, cleavings that open up surface area, resurrecting tensions where previously “resolved” and “final” dogmatic pronouncements on fine-tuned aspects of theory had been put into place. In short, this work makes the theory live, as in flow with no finality in mind. A kind of mordant guide through the bards of Lacanian theory.

Which brings us to a related set of questions, namely what is *lost in translation*? Despite the superb work that Silvia Rosman has gifted us, what is lost in this translation, or really any translation that is attempted? As Dr. Braunstein notes:

- “In the beginning was *jouissance*,” but *jouissance* was not, because it can only be recognized after its loss and subsequent translation into speech. *Lost in translation*. The Thing is the real, but only inasmuch as it is mortified by language. (p. 92).
- To which we can add Silvia Rosman’s sage words in her Introduction to the book:

“Like the analytic act, a translation confronts the impossible, as Lacan shows in 1963, a hole that language cannot represent and can only be said between the lines. Lack is structural, loss is inevitable: for the *parlêtre*, the destiny of the analyst (expelled as object at the end of analysis) and, as Lacan muses regarding (the) English, even for the survival of psychoanalysis.” (p. 2)

- Which leads us to consider what *jouissance* has erupted as a result of this rendition from French to Spanish to English? What is the loss, this impossibility that haunts the liminal space between one line, one word and the next, that can now be recognized by virtue of this translation? I will not give you an answer to this, because I cannot give you an answer to this, and frankly speaking, no *one* person can give THE answer to this. The question puts us each to work, forging a path at the moment we glimpse it, only to lose its scent again.

And that is one of the great gifts of this work: in its translation (of a translation) it sets us on a path. But mind you, not a pre-ordained one with already erected signposts showing us the way. Quite the contrary, it sheds light on the fact that there is no already conceived path and that we must each do the arduous work of finding, of configuring an encounter with the impossible.

Which is a way of saying that this book is not and cannot be the “definitive” work on *jouissance*. And I should confess that I myself said at one time that it was. No book or article or presentation can lay claim to that. The brilliance of this book, beyond its trickster subversion, its grand theoretical subtleties, its delicious word-play, is that it invites us to an encounter. And it may well give us some direction, but only in the form of someone pointing towards the ocean and saying, “it’s somewhere over there”.

I emphasize this aspect of the encounter, precisely because this text speaks from the clinic, from an unremitting revolution of the discourse of the analyst. This is not theory for theory’s sake. And many of you will know why I underscore this. To take up a position made available by the demand and speech of an-other

puts us in a singularly peculiar place. A generative instance if we know how and where to sit. A sometimes despairing place that can lead us to take a work like this as the gospel, transforming it into a manual on how and what to think. Granted, Dr. Braunstein deliberately makes it very hard for us to do that, and yet many will try to do so all the same.

To conclude my brief comments today: it could very well be that this translation and these sets of interventions today serve to invoke *jouissance* in English, to bring it into being as it were, by virtue of naming it. Are we catalyzing “a response of the real” by calling its name. No doubt, a kind of sorcery/sourcery. But isn't that yet another name for *jouissance*?

Bio:

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