

Reading as a *Trans*-Semiosis : Don Quixote, a very special reader of the world

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Abstract

Reading is a cognitive process of constructing a textuality of a text on the basis of a world knowledge. Structural poetics makes an assumption that textuality resides in a text. Cognitive poetics has questioned this assumption by claiming that it is not in a text but in the interaction between a text and a reader that textuality is being constructed. My thesis is that reading as a cognitive process is of a semiotic order. In this paper I put forward a concept of 'trans-semiosis' to account for this reading process from a semiotic point of view. Trans-semiosis supposes at least two autonomous semiotic orders that cross each other to produce a new semiotic order. For the illustration of my purpose I attempt to consider Don Quixote as a very special reader of the world. Why is he a special reader? Interestingly the object of his reading activity is not a text but the world itself. My theoretical claim here is that reading the world is a cognitive process of constructing a 'textuality' of the world on the basis of a 'text' knowledge.

1. TRANSLATION AS A *TRANS*-ACTION

In his book entitled *Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction « relevante »?*, Jacques Derrida (2005) suggests that this question can be translated as follows : « Qu'est-ce que la traduction ? », or « Que doit être une traduction ? », this one implying another : « Que devrait être la meilleure traduction possible ? ». (29). Inasmuch as « this word, « relevant », it contains in itself an operation of translation at work », the so-called « relevant » translation cannot but designate translation itself. (14). What does this « operation of translation at work » exactly mean, then ? People can read later on that it consists of a dialectic movement of « internalization » and « sublime spiritualization » (66), a hegelian dialectic of « supprimer et élever » (64), *Aufheben*, in a word. While translating, something — the materiality of signifier — is always lost, denied, eliminated for the sake of « internalization » process, and something else — the spirituality of signified — is always gained, adapted, promoted through the process of « sublime spiritualization », so to speak. In reference to the history of judeo-christian tradition, Derrida illustrates this dialectic of translation as follows :

J'insiste sur la dimension chrétienne. Outre toutes les traces que le christianisme (et notamment le protestantisme) a laissées dans l'histoire de la traduction et du concept normatif de traduction, outre le fait que la relève, l'*Aufhebung* d'un Hegel (dont il faut toujours rappeler qu'il fut un penseur très luthérien, sans doute comme Heidegger), est explicitement une relève de la Passion et du Vendredi Saint spéculatif dans le savoir absolu, le travail du deuil décrit aussi, à travers la Passion, à travers la mémoire hantée par le corps perdu mais gardé dans le dedans de son tombeau, la résurrection du spectre ou du corps glorieux qui se lève, se relève – et marche. (73).

The question about a « relevant » translation thus turns out to be a critical inquiry into the religious — judeo-christian — as well as philosophical — hegelian — implications of the word « relever », « to relieve ». Translating a text is parallel to giving it a second life on condition that it already be dead. Describing « through the Passion », « through the memory haunted by the lost body », « the resurrection of the glorious body », that's the « work of grief », the task of a translator.

I won't enter into details of it. Within the framework of this paper on *trans*-semiosis, it is interesting to note, however, that the operation of translation under discussion is already embedded at the 'morphological' level of this word *trans*-lation. Derrida draws attention to a 'prefixe' « *tr-* » hidden in such words as *travel*, *transport*, *travail*, *transformation*, *transaction*, etc., implying a kind of mysterious link between them. (69). How is this *tr*-operation with respect to translation processed? To begin with, translation can be viewed as a *travel* from one language to another. For instance, translating Korean into English means transferring a meaning system from the former to the latter by *traversing* their borderline. This inter-lingual *travel* here is not referred to as a picnic but as a business *trip*. In other words, it demands a laborious hard work (*travail*), in the course of which something is always lost and something else is always gained, in short, a *transformation* through the dialectic movement inevitably takes place. All along in his discussion, Derrida claims that « translation is a *transaction* ». (35). Just like all

forms of transaction, the linguistic one is logically submitted to a « economic principle ». (20). According to this principle, it tends to keep a balance between « two contradictory things » : « 1. Anything cannot be translated » and « 2. Everything can be translated ». (20). The best transaction that would be possible means nothing more than the best choice that could be made from an *economic* point of view between these two things. Here is a possibility of the best translation.

To sum up, the translation as a transaction is operated as follows : travel (moving away from one language to another) -> transformation (eliminating and elevating). My aim in this paper is to come up with a new conception of semiosis based on this concept of *translation*. My working hypothesis is that reading is a form of translation. Over the discussion I would like to quote Don Quixote's episodes for the illustration of my purpose.

2. *TRANS-SEMIOSIS AS A TRANSLATION*

According to C. S. Peirce, semiosis is defined in terms of the sign action performed by three agents interconnected : Representamen, Object and Interpretant. Notice that Interpreter, the human being as a subject who operates the sign action is excluded from this initial definition ; he is at the outside of a semiosis whereas the semiosis is always operated inside him. The interpreter who is supposed to live his life in a specific semiotic sphere is an external agent of the semiosis that is operated in this sphere. In other words, a semiosis is to be *situated*. To give a full account of it, four — three internal and one external — agents and the semiotic sphere where they are situated should be made available : Representamen, Object, Interpretant, Interpreter (or Subject) and Semiotic Sphere. From the perspective of this extended definition of the semiosis *situated*, what I propose here to call a *trans-semiosis* can be understood in terms of the semiotic *trans-action* that is realized at least between two different semiotic spheres. In this sense I'd like to claim that the *trans-semiosis* as a semiotic *trans-action* is part of translation. In his book entitled *After Babel*, George Steiner(1992), in my view, clearly formulates, within his own framework, problematic relating to the semiotic *trans-action* as follows :

The relations of a text to its translations, imitations, thematic variants, even parodies, are too diverse to allow of any single theoretic, definitional scheme. They categorize the entire question of the meaning of meaning in time, of the existence and effects of the linguistic fact outside its specific, initial form. But there can be no doubt that echo enriches, that it is more than shadow and inert simulacrum. We are back at the problem of the mirror which not only reflects but also generates light. The original text gains from the orders of diverse relationship and distance established between itself and the translations. The reciprocity is dialectic : new 'formats' of significance are initiated by distance and by contiguity. Some translations edge us away from the canvas, others bring us up close. (1992 : 317).

Different forms of semiotic transactions can be dealt with in terms of « the relations of a text to its translations ». My working hypothesis is that if semiotics is a science of signification and communication, the question as to « the meaning of meaning in time », to « the

existence and effects of the linguistic fact outside its specific, initial form » can be addressed from a semiotic point of view. Notice that the semiotic transaction as a form of translation has as consequence a surplus of meaning that is produced when a semiotic form is transferred from one semiotic sphere to another.

In this connection, the experience of a « happy anthropologist » that Todorov(1989) lucidly brings to light in his work on *Nous et les autres* and what Steiner calls in his book quoted above « the hermeneutic motion » with respect to translation, among many others, are two cases in point.

2.1. « A happy anthropologist »

A trans-semiosis takes place on the borderline between two different semiotic spheres to which a single semiosis cannot be applied in a same way. It occurs at a moment when an interpreter having resided in one semiotic sphere finally makes his decision to cross the borderline to move in another. He is expected to go through unexpected experiences. In his book mentioned above, Todorov(1989) sets the following four stages for the possibility of a common sense in the context of a trans-cultural contact : « distance one », « rapprochement one », « distance two », « rapprochement two ». Thus, the dialectic movement of *Aufhebung* is doubled through complex anthropological experiences.

Here is a « happy anthropologist »(122) who is attracted by others. The stage « distance one » consists in distancing himself from the society he has been belonging to. He comes to have a desire to move around, to go on a travel as soon as he senses a « small gap between his own society and himself ». (122). This « small gap » insinuates that there occurs in his social as well as cognitive life a sort of crisis of meaning or identity without knowing how to deal with it. A phenomenon called trans-semiosis thus begins with that kind of existential crisis. Ironically, a doubt as to the meaning of a being leaves a room for trust in otherness. The dialectic of doubt and trust in this conception of travel entails the possibility of a new horizon of meaning. The « rapprochement one » stage is that of « plunging » into a foreign society with the purpose to figure it out from the inside. The anthropologist vaguely feels something out there to be understood. However, he tries in vain to identify himself to the members of that society. He might succeed in adapting himself to their customs as well as in mastering their language, while failing still to totally erase what he used to have been. The third stage « distance two » is applied when he returns home. It deserves noting that he cannot feel « at home » in his hometown. This means that he comes back home changed. The « rapprochement two » is the final stage in which the existential change he has been through makes him able to see his own society from the outside. Now he is capable to cast an external look at his own society as well as at other societies. It is in this dialectic way that he gains a « common sense ». From this perspective, it can be said that the semiotics that is concerned with trans-semiosis aims at giving an account of how a « common sense » is made possible within the framework of semiotic contact.

2.2. « The hermeneutic motion »

Steiner (1992) accounts for this doubled dialectic movement of « distance » and « rapprochement » in his own framework in terms of « the hermeneutic motion » consisting of the following four stages : trust, aggression, appropriation and restitution. The fourfold process of this

hermeneutic motion is in line with the doubled dialectic as illustrated through the example of a happy anthropologist. First, having trust in the « meaningfulness, in the ‘seriousness’ of the facing or, strictly speaking, adverse text » (312) forms an initial condition of the translation although this trust risks falling down sooner or later. Second, « after trust comes aggression ». (313). « The translator invades, extracts, and brings home ». (314). Notice that these belligerent terms are not used here in their literal sense. Steiner argues that, as Heidegger claims, « understanding, recognition, interpretation are a compacted, unavoidable mode of attack ». (313). However, this act of attack is doom to failure. Third, the « appropriation » is a stage in which the translator attempts to « naturalize », « neutralize » or « expel » the « foreign body » with the consequence that « no language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed ». (315). Fourth, the « restitution » process is called to restore « the equilibrium between itself and the original, between source-language and receptor-language which had been disrupted by the translator’s interpretative attack and appropriation. » (415). Thus, the hermeneutic motion is completed.

2.3. Schema of the trans-semiosis

To recapitulate, the trans-semiosis as a semiotic transaction is defined in terms of travel and transformation. This definition can be specified further in terms of causality: the reason for a travel, as illustrated above, is deeply rooted in a crisis of meaning or identity, and transformations that happen to take place on a travel have as consequence a surplus of meaning. The whole process of trans-semiosis can be finally schematised as follows :

Crisis of Meaning -> Travel -> Transformation -> Surplus of Meaning

3. READING AS A TRANS-SEMIOSIS

Reading is part of trans-semiosis in that it calls for an interaction between two different semiosis situated. The reader takes the role of a traveler who moves across the borderline between the real world he lives in and the text world he tastes by the act of reading. From the point of view of the cognitive narratology, the narrativity that makes a narrative text narrative lies, not in a text itself but in an interaction between text and reader. Reading unfolds as a concrete form of this interaction. Reading a text is equivalent to making a hypothesis based on real life experiences in order for a reader to understand it. From this perspective, a strong, i.e., convincing hypothesis is that which is based on the experiences that can be shared by many people as well as applicable to many parts of the text. In cognitive narratology, this hypothesis used to be formulated in terms of scenarios, frames or cognitive schemas.

A dialogue between a landlord and Don Quixote shows well ways a cognitive schema is applied to make sense of the default logic of a story.

Then he asked if he had any money with him, to which Don Quixote replied that he had not a cent, as in the histories of knights-errant he had never read of any of them carrying any. On this point the landlord told him he was mistaken, for, though not recorded in the

histories, because in the author's opinion there was no need to mention anything so obvious and necessary as money and clean shirts, it was not to be supposed therefore that they did not carry them. He might regard it as certain and established that all knights-errant (about whom there were so many full and unimpeachable books) carried well-furnished purses in case of emergency, and likewise carried shirts and a little box of ointment to cure the wounds they received. For in those plains and deserts where they engaged in combat and came out wounded, there was not always someone to cure them, unless indeed they had for a friend some sage magician to aid them at once by fetching through the air on a cloud some damsel or dwarf with a vial of water of such power that by tasting one drop of it they were cured of their hurts and wounds in an instant and left as sound as if they had not received any harm whatever. In case this should not occur, the knights of old took care to see that their squires were provided with money and other requisites, such as bandages and ointments for healing purposes. And when it happened that knights had no squires (which was rarely and seldom the case) they themselves carried everything in very slim saddlebags that were hardly seen on the horse's croup, as it were something else of more importance. Unless for some such reason, carrying saddlebags was not very favorably regarded among knights-errant. He therefore advised him (and, as his godson so soon to be, he might even command him) never from that time forth to travel without money and the usual requirements, and he would find how useful they were when he least expected it. (Don Quixote, pp.35-6)

In response to Don Quixote saying that the reason why he has no money to pay the bill is that, according to many knight stories he has read, there aren't any indications about traveling expenses, the host gives another account of this critical omission: the reason why we cannot read that knights carry traveling expenses with them is that this fact is too obvious to be mentioned; the authors didn't find it necessary to put down this evidence. Don Quixote as a reader cannot but be convinced by the writing logic that is too obvious to be mentioned.

However, Don Quixote is not an ordinary reader who tends to read a text by making a hypothesis based on his real life experiences. He is a very special reader attempting to « read » the real world from a text perspective. My purpose is to describe this specificity by claiming that reading is part of trans-semiosis.

3.1. Crisis of Meaning and Travel

In the following passage, the reason why Don Quixote is determined to go on travel is well expressed.

Once these preliminaries had been settled, he decided to wait no longer before putting his project into effect, for he was afflicted by the thought of how much the world would suffer because of his tardiness. Many were the wrongs that had to be righted, grievances redressed, injustices made good, abuses removed, and duties discharged. So, without informing anyone of his intentions, and without anybody seeing him, one morning before dawn (which was one of the hottest of the month of July) he put on his suit of armor, mounted Rocinante with his patched-up helmet on, grasped his shield, took his lance, and by the back door of

the yard sallied forth upon the plain. It gives him immense pleasure and satisfaction to see with what ease he had inaugurated his great purpose. (Don Quixote, p.29)

In view of Don Quixote, the world is left chaotic for lack of justice. It is to be cleaned up, corrected and reformed. This way of viewing the world is equivalent to providing it with a sort of plot. The accidents that occur in it are to be linked with one another in terms of causality to make up a story. Going on a travel is for Don Quixote restoring the cohesiveness of the world that fall short of meaning by plotting it.

3.2. Transformation and Surplus of Meaning

On the travel, Don Quixote is to be faced with a lot of accidents. Having an accident is not a problem for him. He is always ready to meet with it. Even failing cannot make him to be disappointed as this is quite frequent for knights. The problem is how to understand the cause of the accident, the meaning of his failure. He doesn't cease to ask himself why this or that accident has happened to him, why he has failed. It is interesting to note that he cannot come to find the answer of these questions in the real world. That's why he relies upon the texts he has read to make sense of the world. For instance,

Finding, then, that, in fact he could not move, he thought of having recourse to his usual remedy, which was to think of some passages in his books. His madness brought to his mind Baldwin and the Marquis of Mantua, when Carloto left Baldwin wounded on the mountain side. The story is known by heart by the children, not forgotten by the young men, and lauded and even believed by the old folk. Yet for all that it is not a whit truer than the miracles of Mohammed. Thjis seemed to him to fix exactly the situation in which he found himself; so, making a show of severe suffering, he began to roll on the ground and with feeble breath repeat the very words which the wounded knight of the wood is said to have uttered. (Don Quixote, p.44)

In his book entitled *Orientalism*, Said characterizes this attitude that is dependant on texts in terms of « narrative realism »: Narrative realism is blamed to play the role of ideology to support the Orientalism.

One would no more think of using *Amadis of Gaul* to understand sixteenth-century (or present-day) Spain than one would use the Bible to understand, say, the House of Commons. But clearly people have tried and do try to use texts in so simple-minded a way, for otherwise Candide and Don Quixote would not still have the appeal for readers that they do today. It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human. But is this failing constantly present, or are there circumstances that, more than others, make the textual attitude likely to prevail? (1978: 93)

According to Said, the conditions under which people show a textual attitude are twofold. First, when people are faced with new situations they have never experienced before, they tend

to have a text dependant attitude. A travel guide book is a good case in point. Second, when text dependant attitude is successful, it tends to be fortified. But the text dependant attitude Don Quixote has shown with regard to new situations cannot satisfy these two conditions. What he is intended to do with texts is not to get some information from them to adapt himself to the new situation, but to compensate for lack of meaning by restoring the world semiosis through text semiosis. In this regard, narrative realism is a side effect of the trans-semiosis that is produced between the world and texts.

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