Alaina Brandt
Professor Terando
UWM-MALLT: TRNSLTN 820
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The Deconstructionist Monkey Grammarian: Writing and Reading in Octavio Paz's *El mono gramático* and Helen R. Lane's Translation

Escribir y hablar es trazar un camino: inventar, recordar, imaginar una trayectoria, ir hacia…

Octavio Paz, *El mono gramático*

In *El mono gramático*, Octavio Paz tests the limits of language and confronts and challenges the traditional use of metaphor, analogy and other literary conventions. Remarkably, Paz carries out this rebellion through the use of those same devices, blurring the traditional borders assumed to exist among writers, readers and texts. In the book, Paz recalls travelling on a path to Galta. However, this journey is superimposed by another—a journey in which the text itself is likened to a path through which both writer and reader must pass. The path is arduous. For example, in one chapter, a catalogue of each tree in an imagined grove confronts readers: "los bambúes gigantes de Birmania… la palmera de Filipinas… la Kitul… la Talipot… [el] árbol de la guatapercha… el árbol Upa… los arbustos de Queensland… el nogal de Okari… [et cetera]" (43-44). Later, Paz acknowledges this "página de enmarañada caligrafía vegetal" and asks, "¿cómo leerla, cómo abrirse paso entre esta espesura?" (46-47). A central theme in Paz's work then is how to negotiate the denseness of language, how to, and if we ever truly, arrive at meaning. Paz explores this complexity by explicitly questioning and probing the deconstruction at play in language. This paper and exploration into Paz's work will consider some of the deconstructionist concepts on which *El mono gramático* is founded, eventually shifting to the implications for translation and a comparison of Helen R. Lane's translation, *The Monkey Grammarian*, to Paz's original. The path we will traverse, to borrow Paz's metaphor, will move from deconstruction in general to différance and proper nouns specifically, before shifting from the intimacy required for translation to a discussion of Lane's reading of Paz's work.

What is deconstruction?

…en todo el diccionario no hay una sola
palabra sobre la que reclinar la cabeza…

In his "Letter to a Japanese Friend," Jacques Derrida admits, "this word [deconstruction], at least on its own, has never appeared satisfactory to me (but what word is), and must always be girded by an entire discourse" (3). Within this letter meant to clarify the term for translation into Japanese, Derrida indeed provides a great deal of the context for the discourse that for him surrounds the term. He begins his letter by discussing the factors that led him to choose the term "deconstruction" as his own translation for the Heideggerian word "*Destruktion*" (1). Among these were the various definitions for the term outlined in the *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (*Littré*)—definitions like "[the] action of deconstructing… [d]isarranging the construction of words in a sentence… [t]o disassemble the parts of a whole" (quoted in Derrida 2). Derrida notes that these definitions combined the "grammatical, linguistic… [and] rhetorical… with a 'mechanical' sense," which to him seemed "fortunately adapted to what [he] wanted… to suggest" (2). Still, according to Derrida, the *Littré* definitions suggested "models or regions of meaning," rather than the "totality of what deconstruction aspires to at its most ambitious" (2). Thus, Derrida must continue his discussion on deconstruction by providing a theoretical context for the term.

Derrida notes that deconstruction seemed to align with the post-structuralist movement that was gaining popularity in the United States. However, he is careful to point out that "the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures" associated with post-structuralism "was not a negative [destructive] operation," but an attempt to "understand how an 'ensemble' was constituted and to reconstruct it to… [that] end" (3). Derrida, in fact, begins his letter with the desire that the negative connotations of the word deconstruction be avoided in the translation to Japanese. Still, he also later acknowledges the difficulty of translation—that "'deconstruction,' like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is too blithely called a 'context'" (4). Given these limitations, Derrida more easily seems to identify what deconstruction is not: "an *analysis*… [or] a *critique*," "[a] *method*," "an *act* or an *operation*" (). Instead…

> Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. *It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed*. (Derrida 4)

The above certainly does not conform with a traditional dictionary entry; yet, as Nicholas Royle notes in the chapter titled, "What is Deconstruction?," this is a concept not well-served by traditional definitions. In fact, for Royle "the very possibility of a dictionary explodes" when considering deconstruction (2), as this sort of fixed catalogue of a language does not account for the never-ending "destabilization on the move in 'things themselves,'" (Derrida quoted in Royle 6).

Given the problematic of considering deconstruction in terms of an over-arching definition, let us consider instead some of the characteristics of the phenomenon. The concept of *différance* will eventually elucidate that destabilization alluded to above; still, this concept is no more easily defined than was deconstruction. Again, the term does not exactly correspond with conventional expectations regarding the function of words, and in the book *Jacques Derrida* by Royle, we encounter that same identification of a term by what it is not. In this case, differance is "not the name of an *object*, not the name of some 'being' that could be present… not a concept either…" (Derrida quoted in Royle 75). Instead, in what readers might consider to be another hazy definition, we learn that "Differance 'is' the difference of the present from itself[,]… what makes the present possible *and* at the same time impossible" (Royle 74). This play of presence and absence, possibility and impossibility is the result of the two processes at work in differance: "differing and deferring" (Royle 74). Paz too considers these processes in *El mono gramático*.

Différance in *El mono gramático*: Differing and Deferring

> *…es turbadora la facilidad con que el lenguaje se tuerce*
> *y no lo es menos que nuestro espíritu acepte*
> *tan dócilmente esos juegos perversos*

In an "Interview with Julia Kristeva," Derrida himself speaks perhaps more clearly to the movement at play in differance. In his discussion, Derrida often makes use of the word *traces*, which refers to the "chains or systems" of words associated at a given point in time with a particular word (26). Derrida notes that the unavoidable presence of these traces "forbid[s] at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself,

referring only to itself" (26). His discussion on the interrelatedness and inseparableness of the elements of language draws attention to the fact that a word means nothing in a vacuum; instead, words are conceived of only in relation to other words. A passage quoted by Royle from Derrida's essay "Différance" demonstrates how these traces contribute to the idea of *differing*. In this passage, Derrida explains that "each so called 'present' element" contains "the mark of a past element," while also "already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element" (quoted in Royle 72). Thus, as past, present and future exist on a continuum rather than as fixed divisions of time, the traces associated with elements of language are constantly in flux, evolving in relation to both the past and the future. Still, for an element to be present, it must also be separate from the past. We learn, "this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself" (Derrida quoted in Royle 72).

Paz's text too is framed by the idea of differing, perhaps most explicitly in his writing on *fijeza*. Paz writes, "La fijeza es siempre momentánea," before noting that this phrase is perhaps an attempt to capture the "oposición entre movimiento e inmovilidad" (25). Still, Paz also notes that he has used a "superchería retórica" to lend credibility to this illogical construction: namely, the use of the word "momentánea" to abate the "violencia del contraste" between the two sides of the opposition identified above (25). Paz later returns to this phrase, expressing a desire to analyze it not in the direction in which speech acts are produced by speakers, but in the opposite direction, through deconstruction (27). He goes on to acknowledge the contradiction inherent in equating the spatial (fijeza) with the temporal (momentánea), and in the discussion that ensues Paz offers various substitutions in a search for some sort of original that might embody the opposition he had originally suggested ("lo que no cambia es (siempre) movimiento… no-cambio es (siempre) cambio" [27-28]). However, the results are always unsatisfactory, in that each substitution is "una metáfora de otra palabra que es una metáfora de otra" (28). This movement from metaphor to metaphor has two effects. It demonstrates the fleetingness of a fixed present frame in language and the constant deferment of meaning.

This idea of temporality discussed in terms of the "present" in Derrida and in relation to a fixed state in Paz also plays great part in the notion of *deferring*. This idea seems to be referred to by Derrida as "spacing" in his interview with Kristeva, or "the

detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation—in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a *being*—are always *deferred*" (29). In "Deconstructive Criticism," Lois Tyson discusses deferment as well. Her discussion is based upon the inadequacy of the structuralist formula for meaning (*sign = signifier + signified*). In terms of differance and deferment, Tyson notes that that formula is too simplistic: "[E]very signifier consists of and produces more signifiers in a never ending *deferral*, or postponement, of meaning," (252). Again we return to that idea of *traces*, in that according to Tyson, "what we take to be meaning is really only the mental *trace* left behind by the play of signifiers" (253). We encountered this deferment in Paz's discussion of words as metaphors for words.

Paz's discussion on *fijeza* demonstrates that no word embodies an original concept or a beginning in that movement from metaphor to metaphor, and his discussion on "the end" expresses the same concern for some sort of ultimate arrival at meaning. Paz begins by discussing his journey to Galta in the same way travels are traditionally discussed: in terms of a destination. Paz's concern is with discovering what one encounters upon arriving at that destination or reaching that end. However, he soon exposes one of the many "tramp[a]s verbal[es]" inherent in language: that at the end there can be nothing since "si algo hubiese el fin no sería fin" (11). Despite the emptiness of the word, Paz notes that this search for the end continues and in fact serves an important purpose: "Sin ese fin que nos elude constantemente ni caminaríamos ni habría caminos" (12). Yet, the end is also "la refutación y la condenación del camino" (12). As Paz utilizes the idea of journey as a metaphor for writing, reading and understanding, his conclusions about the inexistence of *the end* implicate those other actions as well. His discussion is reminiscent of Derrida's thoughts on deferment—that when considering any word we will never arrive at some final meaning. And while the inexistence of that final meaning may refute the existence of the word itself, we must nonetheless traverse that path toward… In his essay on deconstruction, Royle expands that discussion from singular units of meaning to deferment on a much larger scale, in the "sense that we can never be quite sure that… any text has ever completely, fully, finally arrived" (6-7).

This perpetual movement of a text presents unique challenges for the translator. In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin acknowledges the complexity of the task,

stating, “Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages” (78). As Benjamin notes, both the original and target languages evolve, and “[e]ven words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” (77)—or in the words of Paz, *la fijeza es siempre momentánea*. Moreover, “meaning is never found in relative independence” in either a single word or sentence or an entire language system (Benjamin 78). Rather, Benjamin states that “the intention underlying each language as a whole… can [not] be attained” by a single language, but by “the totality of the… intentions” of all languages “supplementing each other” (78). From this complex relationship between languages we reach what Benjamin refers to as “pure language” (78). The translator’s task is then “to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (82).

Derrida takes up this paradoxical nature of translation in “Des Tours de Babel,” and his discussion on Babel, “the origin of the confusion of tongues,” at least suggests that he subscribes to Benjamin’s notion that there at some time existed (and perhaps still does) a “pure language” to be liberated in translation (171). However, Derrida also reflects that this name “Babel” is at once a proper noun that refers to not only that original confusion of tongues but to “pure language” (indeed, even God) and a common noun meaning “confusion” (171-172). This multiplicity of meaning cannot be re-created in another language in a single word. Thus Derrida comes to see that original confusion as translation “*at the same time* [being] impos[ed] and [forbade],” an event that encompasses “the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as* impossibility” (170, 171).

Paz too seems to join this conversation. However, where Benjamin refers to a universal language to be unlocked in translation and where Derrida points to proper nouns as evidence of the impossibility of the translator’s task, Paz seems to question the existence of any language—pure language or proper noun—capable of naming the existence of *being*. We return again to those trees: “La arboleda es intraducible: es ella y sólo ella. No se parece a las otras cosas ni a las otras arboledas; tampoco se parece a ella misma; cada instante es otra” (95). Paz considers his own statements, questioning the exaggeration that might be at play, since if the grove of trees were not a grove of trees it would have another name (95). Still, Paz reflects that the reality of that particular grove of trees is “única”—untranslatable and un-re-creatable (95). As such, “merecía tener de veras un nombre propio,” just like

"[t]odos merecen (merecemos) un nombre propio y nadie lo tiene" (95-96). And yet "las cosas y los seres son sus nombres y cada nombre es propio"—a contradiction made possible by Paz's discussion of the uniqueness of each being (96). Paz explains that the grove of trees is not "única" in that it shares its common name, but at the same time it is "puesto que ningún nombre es verdaderamente suyo" (96). That, to Paz, is perhaps the real paradox of language: *all* words are at once proper nouns and common nouns. So how does one translate that "arboleda… intraducible" (Paz 95)?

Deconstruction in Translation: *The Monkey Grammarian*

Fixity is always momentary.

Helen R. Lane translating Paz, *The Monkey Grammarian*

In an interview with Ronald Christ, Helen R. Lane, translator of numerous important literary works including Paz's *El mono gramático*, identifies the space in which a translator works: "somewhere *between* the source language and the target language." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also refers to that space in "The Politics of Translation." She speaks to a "meaning [that] hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages," an emptiness that might also be called "the silence at work within rhetoric" (Spivak 370, 371). Spivak explains that within language, both logic and rhetoric are at play. The former "allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections," while the latter operates "in the silence between and around words" (Spivak 371). Moreover, the relationship between logic and rhetoric, a "condition and effect of knowing," constructs "a world" in which an "agent can act" (Spivak 371). The task of the translator, according to Spivak, is to surrender to that world of the original and "facilitate… love between… [it] and its shadows, a love that… holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay" (370). For Spivak, "Translation is the most intimate act of reading" (Spivak quoted in Spivak 370).

Lane too alludes to this intimacy and surrender in her interview with Christ. Lane is asked to speak of "the books [she has] most enjoyed translating" (Christ). She responds, "All [of] Octavio Paz's books… because he transmits on a wavelength that for some reason I feel tuned to *automatically*. Always the quite eerie feeling that I am his 'medium,' not so much translating as relaying crucially important messages, effortlessly" (Christ). While

Lane feels this intimate connection to Paz, she does not seem subscribe to the idea that her translations of Paz are definitive. In fact, Lane speaks specifically to the absurdity of such an assumption that "a single, correct, monogamous relationship exists between an original text and its translation" (Christ). In discussing the inadequacy of such an idea, Lane cites the fact that both original texts and their translations exist in distinct contexts of time and place, each affected by that "basic principle" that "all living languages, and hence meanings (not to mention the meaning of meaning), are in constant evolution" (Christ). And in speaking to that question of fidelity, Lane asks a very significant question: "fidelity to what?"

Perhaps Lane would agree with Clive Scott, who in *Translating Baudelaire* seems to suggest that the translator's task is to remain faithful to her own reading of an original. Indeed, Scott advocates for the re-conception of—or more accurately *an initial foray into*—the way in which translations are read. In response to his own question of "how… a translation… should [be] read," Scott advocates that translations not be considered as "achievements… [or] finished texts," but "as activators of a special kind of reading" (Scott 13). Like Spivak's discussion, Scott's encompasses a certain intimacy between the translator and the original text. He sees translation as "an involvement in the making of meaning, in the making of a meaning peculiarly significant to the maker" (3). This intimacy has profound effects, providing readers with "the experience of reading itself" (3). Scott's view of translation is of great consequence, in that it asks that translations be judged based on very individualistic criteria and that they be valued based on these criteria as well.

When comparing Paz's chapter on proper names to Lane's translation, we encounter a number of small but impactful changes that might point to the intimate and independent reading discussed above. For instance, Paz attributes our ability to arrive at pure understanding to poetry, which is said to allow us—"por un instante"—to see the world as it truly is (97). Lane's translation, "for the space of an instant," does not particularly change the meaning of Paz's text (110). However, the addition of the word "space" draws our attention back to Paz's earlier discussion on *fijeza* and that confusion he attributes to describing a spatial property (*fijeza*) as temporal (…*es momentánea*). In that passage, Paz offers a number of examples of phrases that demonstrate that same confusion of the spatial and the temporal: "a lo largo del año," "[la] carrera de las horas" and "[el] avance del

minutero" (27). He would perhaps add the phrase utilized by Lane to that list. While we cannot know if this felicitous addition was planned, its contribution to Paz's discussion of the tricks of language is evident.

The differentiation in the use of articles in the two texts is another small but impactful change noted in a close reading of these two texts. Interestingly, and given the respective demands of the Spanish and English languages, one would expect to encounter less article use in the English text, if there were to be any change in article use at all. However, this is not the case when comparing Paz's chapter to Lane's. Readers encounter a number of instances where Paz begins a sentence or a phrase with a noun alone—that is, without an article. The use of these article-less nouns feels particularly marked, in that this same passage also contains many sentences that begin as traditionally expected: *article* + *noun*. Consider the following from Paz's text: "Trasmutación de las formas y sus cambios y movimientos en signos inmóviles: escritura; disipación de los signos: lectura" (97). The only change Lane has made to this phrase is the addition of two articles, as in "**[t]he** transmutation… **the** dissipation" (110). One might expect the addition of these articles to be rather ineffectual. However, where Paz's *trasmutación* and *disipación* suggest something more fluid, the action of writing or reading as it actually takes place, Lane's text seems to refer to an action that is more concrete, *fixed* we might say. Still, perhaps we could dismiss these small changes in article use if this were the only instance in which it took place. It is not.

Paz writes, "Aparición:… la mesita de madera negra," and it appears (98). Lane translates, "An apparition," and the table might have been there all along (113). Paz writes, "Transfiguración de los desperdicios" and later "transubstanciación del ladrillo," and we envision these transformations in the process of taking place (99). Lane renders these as "The transfiguration of refuse" and "a transubstantiation of brick," and it is as if we are meeting the result of a transformation that has already taken place (113, 114). The effects are different—Paz suggests action in progress and Lane the result—and yet, Paz inspires the effects we experience in Lane's text. Consider the following: Paz writes, "Por la escritura abolimos las cosas, las convertimos en sentido; por la lectura, abolimos los signos, apuramos el sentido y casi inmediatamente, lo disipamos" (97). In this declaration two

distinct processes take place, just as Paz's *El mono gramático* and Lane's *The Monkey Grammarian* might be said to be the result of two distinct actions: writing and reading.

Conclusion

Human writing reflects that of the universe,
it is its translation, but also its metaphor:
it says something totally different
and it says the same thing.

According to Walter Benjamin, "the language of a translation can—in fact must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony" (81). In Octavio Paz's *El mono gramático* and Helen R. Lane's translation, *The Monkey Grammarian*, we encounter that harmony. Both draw attention to the deconstruction at play in writing, reading and language, although, at least in the passage analyzed above, they do so in slightly different ways. However, what's important to remember is that neither Paz nor Lane actually carries out deconstruction, and these are not specifically deconstructionist texts. Rather, deconstruction is subtly at work in all texts, moving just under the surface of our conscious use of language, and the beauty of Paz is that he does not take this movement for granted. ("Estas palabras que escribo andan en busca de su sentido y en esto consiste todo su sentido" [109].) Moreover, that deconstruction at play underneath all language seems to be what makes both the writing and reading of translation a dynamic and worthwhile activity. We'll return again to those trees. Benjamin's discussion of the "language forest" from outside which translators must work recalls that grove of trees to which we were introduced in the introduction of this paper (79). Paz's question of how we negotiate that denseness seems to have been already answered by Benjamin—at least regarding translation. He notes, "translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge" (79). Translators "call… into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give" (79). The beauty of translation is that no two translators are likely to produce the same echo…

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