

Trans-gender, Trans-bordering, Translation in Tawada Yoko's Narratives¹⁾

Danuta ŁĄCKA

Abstract

本小論は、多和田葉子の文学に焦点を絞り、さらに、言葉がその特性や偉大さを証明する鍵であることを前提にし、多和田の言葉遣い、言語遊戯、文体を中心にし、具体例に重要性を置きながら作品を分析していく。さらに、三つの作品を紹介した上で、多和田の、外国・外国語に向き合うことによって培われること、彼女の言語に対する不信や強い抵抗、拒絶を示そうとする。多和田は、自分を包み込んでいる言葉、疑いも無くそこに全身を委ねてしまうことから「外に出る」という行為、つまり、移動、あるいは、越境による肉体的な変化、そして、それによって生じる言葉への可能性を強調する。多和田はまた、言語と身体の繋がりを見せる上で、言葉が身体を通過する運動性を前提にし、システムとして表される言語から、言葉が生み出されるレベルに移動する。さらに、言語における差別（性別）性を越境する方法を示し、その二項対立を崩していく。そして、言語におけるイデオロギー性と神話性の起源を探る。本小論は、ユダヤ・キリスト教的・一神的ロゴスに入り、言語の肉体性を暴露するという多和田の挑発的かつ革新的な物語に目を向け、言語観を批評のレベルで蘇生させようとする試みでもある。

Key Words: language, translation, gender, cross-bordering

The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; to know, positively refracted in new language, the impossibilities of our own; to learn the systematics of the inconceivable; to undo our own “reality” under the effect of other formulations, other syntaxes; to discover certain unsuspected positions of the subject in the utterance, to displace subject's topology; in a word, to descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without even muffling it, until everything Occidental in us totters and the rights of the “father tongue” vacillate – that tongue which comes to us from our fathers and which makes us, in our turn, fathers and proprietors of a culture which, precisely, history transforms into “nature”.

Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*

1. Introduction

Tawada Yoko has published award-winning prose, poetry, plays, as well as literary criticism both in her “mother” tongue, Japanese, and her adopted tongue, German. Tawada Yoko was born in Tokyo in 1960 and studied Russian literature at Waseda University. In 1979, she took a trip to Germany on the Trans-Siberian railroad and decided to stay there. She continued literary studies at the University of Hamburg, the city where she lives now.

The foreign world of Europe (including Germany), has been no less an “empire of signs” for her than Japan was for Roland Barthes. Yet, she seems to be actually dreaming Barthes’ dream; her literature clearly shows that she knows the language and finds meaning there, though she neither understands it nor acknowledges the interpretations it imposes on her. Reading the signs (involving an openness and vulnerability to the violence of language), Tawada inverts, subverts and explodes them, making manifest the artificiality of language and the concepts it mediates, and we take for granted.

Most of Tawada’s narratives take on an autobiographical tone, simply by deploying female Japanese narrators. In many of these stories, such as the three that I am discussing in this paper – *Missing Heels* (1991), *A Guest* (1993) and *The Gotthard Railway* (1996) – the narrators are “women of letters”: typists/translators/writers providing observations and evoking the sensations of new places, of foreign cultures and languages. The plots of these stories are hardly exciting or of interest in themselves; the plot is not the point in Tawada’s writings. So, what is so special about them? One answer to this question is simply the language these novels employ. Living in a difficult (in-between) space, Tawada’s narrators try to translate their reality and make sense of their surroundings in a provocative way, one that is amusing and sometimes irritating to the reader. Language seems to be telling its own story (*monogatari*), and the narrator, the author, the reader seem to be nothing more than a medium for some ghostly spirit (*mononoke*)² that possesses. Translation – the fluidity and changeability that the protagonists experience – is language’s best and most frequent incarnation, as it involves a physical, material sensation. It is the process of translation that allows Tawada’s tongue to shift the conventions of corporeal-linguistic representations in the magical way that I will be discussing here. Moreover, in and through the Tawadian tongue, the boundary between signifier and signified is collapsed. The Tawadian tongue acts as the key that releases us from the linguistic shackles that hold us captive in our so-called “prison-houses of language.”

2. Slippage in meaning

Missing Heels – the story of the six-day marriage of a mail-order bride – begins with the

narrator's experience of "stumbling" as she arrives in a new town. There are historical associations here with mail-order brides from the so-called Third World who go to such industrialized countries as Europe and Japan,³⁾ and also with superstition towards foreigners during Japan's long period of national isolation,⁴⁾ but I want to concentrate instead on gender related issues. To portray the situation of a stranger "floating" in a new place, Tawada puns on a word *ika* – the Japanese word for "squid" and also a homonym for "defamiliarization." She describes the process of losing one's linguistic and cultural bases, through a corporeal "transformation", namely, the loss of heels. "Heels" – *kakato* in Japanese – can mean real bodily heels, as well as shoe heels. Tawadian "heels" then perform the slippage between the two. The Tawadian body brings into play the gap between "biology as destiny" and something sartorial that one puts on or takes off, to fit into another culture.

The narrator believes it not her that is unstable but rather the town itself that is slanted. Yet, no matter how you look at it, it is lacking heels that causes her to lose balance. She is hobbling and stumbling throughout the story. Paradoxically though, while being an object of observation and judgment by others due to its "handicap," her body is simultaneously an "organ of power." It responds to the situation before "she" is aware of it. It is, as de Beauvoir argues, "the instrument that accomplishes the comprehension of the world."⁵⁾ The body becomes an active agent of the protagonist's subjectivity. Bodily sensation guides her through a new life of translating and facing the words and behaviors of people she encounters. The body constitutes the narrator's very being/self as a speaking subject mediated by language.

On the fifth day of her marriage the protagonist goes to the hospital where the doctor – a big, bearded man like Freud – informs her that she "lacks" heels and so they have to be reconstructed. It is a crucial moment when her body proves its/her subjectivity, since it is "the body's voice" that answers the doctor by rejecting the translation/transplantation, even before the narrator comprehends "her" feelings intellectually. It protects her, as it protects itself/herself against being transformed into someone "normal" or socially acceptable. The traditionally established hierarchy between mind-subject and body-object is no longer valid. As the body speaks for the mind, their relations are disrupted and displaced. In this story, Tawada is certainly playing with Freudian and Lacanian concepts of "lack", as well as with the centrality of heels in the Oedipus story or the overlapping meanings of "the Other" – woman and foreigner. She reveals the female body – although perceived by others in its "lack" and "otherness" – to be a free and active, even if not always under her control. Through the double meaning of "heels," Tawada recasts the concepts of femininity; it is neither the essential nor the constructed, but the slippage between the two. Tawada Yoko's innovative use of language develops a sophisticated understanding of hybrid subjectivity in our age of pervasive globalization with its blends of poststructuralism, discourse

theory, and psychoanalysis.

3. Imprinting the body

The story, *A Guest*, also makes the body perform and speak as the main subject. “I had an ear infection” (149)⁶, says the protagonist in the first line, inviting the reader to follow her in a bizarre metonymic walk through a flea-market and through her life. The flea-market is an entrance into a shopping arcade, as well as into the narrator’s ear canal. Images of a flea are present throughout the whole story; for example, the narrator believes that “a flea living in her ear” is responsible for the infection. The ear acts as both an agent making her life possible (though hard) in the new environment and also a tunnel connecting the realistic and magically realistic worlds. As she has to make her ear hear the new language, she feels “a burning sensation” in her ear. This physical feeling is the way the narrator perceives the world.

What causes the irritating sensation? It might be the flea. But more likely, it is another avatar of the “guest” – the intriguing/intrusive voice from a tape that she found in the flea-market and that she keeps listening to on a tape recorder. After having examined her ear with a “spyglass” a doctor proclaims: “You’re pregnant” (157). The narrator’s body has become impregnated by the voice coming through her ear. Clearly, the ear canal was always also a vaginal canal.

This notion of impregnation with voice and by language appears also in Tawada Yoko’s novel *The Bath*, where the narrator states: “It’s as if the German entering my ears were something like spermatic fluid” (15). In *Missing Heels*, we have a similar situation of “infection.” The narrator’s ear gets examined after she complains that her body “feels heavy.” And here too, the diagnosis is: “You’re pregnant.”(116)

Here however, the protagonist is pregnant as an effect of another “sexual” act. She reports that in a dream her husband “stuck a fountain pen in [her] ear, sending a stream of black ink seeping through [her] eardrum to invade [her] body.” (109) The black ink – also playfully associated with the image of squid – is the semen of logos. (By the end of the novel we discover that her husband really is a squid, not a man at all, and that squid in German is *Tintenfisch*: Tinte(n) = ink.) These overlapping images of a fountain pen (the phallic association is obvious) and language invading and impregnating the protagonists’ body in Tawada’s writings raise suggestions about the powerful effects on us of phallogocentrism. Her narrators are constantly translating and reimagining these concepts, making us as readers rethink their fictional and ideological nature.

4. Bodily and linguistic openings

I began my discussion of Tawada's unique representation of the body in *A Guest* with the ear as a tunnel connecting two worlds and as one of several bodily orifices. In *The Gotthard Railway* as well, the image of a tunnel recasts in provocative new ways human perception – this time that of a male body. In the story the protagonist gets sent on assignment to write an article, riding on the St. Gotthard railroad, passing through the mountain, and cutting across the two different language zones of German and Italian in Switzerland. She transforms this trip into a thrilling experience of “riding through a saint”, of exploring yet unknown territory inside of the “Father.” Entering the tunnel turns out to be entering a male body. “The tunnel was a gullet, and I was its food.” (141), says the narrator, taking pleasure in being swallowed. Literary critic Suzuko Mousel Knot argues that eating is an act of integration, a mingling of cannibalism and communion.⁷⁾ Besides, becoming food for the “Father,” assimilated forcefully to the body of language, we also see logos – the invader/abuser – itself being penetrated, infiltrated, violated.

The story plays with the multiplicity of images that a single word can produce, combining entrances and exits with mouths and wombs, tunnels with trachea and oesophagus, converting male and female roles in (re)production. We read: “The tunnel was saying, “Come back.” The exit wanted to turn into an entrance. The womb was calling, “Come back!””(154) It is significant that the calling womb is the male cavity. The distinction/dichotomy between male and female is blurred, and remains in a continual process of (re)formulation.

Tawada puts stress on the form that words take, alphabet letters and sounds, and their effect on how we experience them. The letters of the alphabet become parts of Gotthard's body. For example, the O's in Italian city names are likened to the tunnel's entrances/exits. “AIROLO. The two “O's” looked like the twin exits of the tunnel we'd just emerged from.” (154). The protagonist here involves the reader in the topography and movement of this “body-language” game. The O's intriguing openings in this story, however, are distressing and troublesome “holes in the white page” in another Tawada's story. In *Wounds in the Alphabet*, the O's insides are blackened in with the narrator's fountain pen, so she can safely and with “a slight sense of relief” continue her work. It is she who holds the pen and thus has the power of creation. Translator and literary critic Margaret Mitsutani argues that in blackening the inside of the O's, the protagonist has turned the holes backed with a white wall into tunnels.⁸⁾ We can also see here, however, the denial of her own bodily openings – ears, mouth, vagina – that is, the repudiation of their reproductive function.

In the bodies of Tawada's narrator-protagonists, we see an instinctive reaction to the letters of the alphabet and foreign sounds. Here, Tawada's accomplishment is in demonstrating that even culturally imprinted bodies restrained by uniforms and social mores can still resist, create,

or respond uniquely and physically to the production and perception of language. This conception brings us back to *A Guest*. There, the “guest” voice, the voice of a foreign language from the tape recorder that – like the spirit (*mononoke*) – “takes possession of” the narrator’s life, allows her to create a new space of fluidity but also uncertainty between signifier and signified. When the protagonist hears foreign words, she locates them somewhere between her imagination and reality. It handicaps her, presumably, in writing in her mother tongue. At the same time, however, as she says in *A Guest*, she realizes the possibility of “erasing the letters in a novel.” (161) Tawada’s narrators can now begin to dismantle and deconstruct the logos.

5. Corporeal-linguistic transplantation

Tawada’s writing experiments with the ways to understand and (re)constitute the self, gender, knowledge, social relations, and culture without resorting to linear, teleological, or binary ways of thinking and being. She frequently emphasizes liberation by exercising the first-person pronoun used in European languages and comparing it to the complex and powerful “I” in Japanese. The Japanese cannot simply say “I” without identifying them in a particular position. Even in “standard Japanese” factors such as gender, age and the relationship between speakers affect the choice between the many possibilities: *boku, ore, atashi, watashi, atakushi, watakushi*.

New and foreign languages allow Tawada to solve the problem of constant self-reference and to concentrate on a structural understanding of language, rather than a historical or autobiographical one in what is called the *shi-shosetsu* tradition. Her “I” becomes simply the grammatical subject of writing, or, perhaps more than anything else, a symbol of the narrator possessed by the spirit (*mononoke*) and subjected to the writing that washes over her.

Tawada’s linguistic trans-bordering continues in Japanese as well. So Japanese, her mother tongue, is not “home” for her either. Gaining the freedom of non-specific age/gender/social position subjectivity as in European languages, Tawada tries to transport it into Japanese. In *The Fugitive’s Night-Time Railway* she uses *anata*,⁹⁾ the pronoun literally meaning “you” with no additional connotation. We can speculate who the protagonist is, but he/she escapes all fixed categories. *Anata* itself is artificial construction in Japanese that was assigned the role of acting as an equivalent to the Western pronoun during the nineteenth century. For Tawada, however, it is neither “artificial” nor “natural.” In her linguistic project it is rather always unstable and translatable in various ways. Moreover, the fact that *anata* is related to *kanata*, meaning basically a “far away place,” as well as the clearly experimental character of the second-person narration, emphasizes Tawada’s project of crossing over boundaries, and questioning fixed or “natural” meanings in language.

6. Conclusion

Tawada's tongue is the "one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law."¹⁰ It emphasizes the impact of language on the body, as well as the impact of the body upon language. No wonder Tawada's literature manifests the proximity of writing to the body, since the kanji character for "body" is made up of the signs "human being" plus "book." No wonder her narrators never cease to look for new openings and escape routes in language; after all, her name "Yoko" also embodies two O's.

"To know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it" – we might say that Roland Barthes' unrealized dream speaks in a Tawadian tongue.

Notes

- 1) The paper was presented at the international conference "Gender Trouble in Modern/ Post- Modern Literature and Art," held on 17-18th April at Haliç University (Istanbul).
- 2) Tawada points out the semantic connection of *monogaki* and *mononoke*, positioning an author as "a person under the spell of things." (See *Voices From Everywhere*, 14.) We can extend this connection to *monogatari* as well.
- 3) Tawada explains that her intended title of the narrative was "Fake Marriage." It was changed, because it did not match the story well. (See *Katakoto no Uwagoto*, 24). The problem of the protagonist's marriage and her social status, however, is repeatedly pointed out in the text. Reiko Tachibana discusses its importance in her essay "Tawada Yoko's Quest for Exophony" in *Voices From Everywhere*, 163.
- 4) In the period of Japan's national isolation (1604-1868), during which the Dutch were the only Europeans allowed to live in a secluded area, a small artificial island in Nagasaki harbor called Dejima, people believed that they wore shoes rather than the Japanese-style sandals (*geta* or *zōri*) in which toes and heels are visible in order to hide their missing heels. Tawada mentions this connection in one of her essays. See *Katakoto no Uwagoto*, 10.
- 5) Toril Moi, *What is a Woman*, 77.
- 6) The numbers in brackets after the quotations refer to the page number in the English edition of the cited works.
- 7) Suzuko Mousel Knot, "Sign Language," in *Voices From Everywhere*, 145.
- 8) Margaret Mitsutani, "Missing Heels, Missing Texts," in *Voices From Everywhere*, 38.
- 9) Tawada herself emphasizes the ambiguity and novelty that *anata* provides. We can also detect here the provocative character of the second person narration as the narrator's vision strongly imposed on the reader.
- 10) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 108.

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