CHAPTER 2

Machine Translation and Hsia Yü’s Poetics of Deconstruction

In his essay “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2),” Derrida presents us with an epistemological puzzle: the dilemma of considering in tandem the event and the machine. By virtue of their antithetical qualities—or, more accurately, qualities perceived to be antithetical—the two are often seen as incompatible entities. The event, including a textual one, is an incidental occurrence, something “that happens,” that is “nonprogrammable,” of “incalculable singularity,” and irreducible to mechanical repetition. The machine, on the other hand, is precisely programmed “to reproduce impassively, imperceptibly, without organ or organicity, received commands” (Derrida 2002, 72). The fundamental question is this: how can we reconcile a thinking of the event and that of the machine at the same time, in other words, both what happens/arrives and what is a calculable, machinelike repetition (72, 136)?

Assume for the moment that Derrida’s machine takes the form of a computer program that performs interlingual tasks in place of human translators—what is popularly known as MT (Machine Translation). How would we, then, contemplate the relationship between this translation machine, or machine translator, and the textual event of writing? To consider these questions, this chapter looks at the case of a linguistic experimentation that involves an extraordinary writing project in association with MT. The textual event in question is an English-Chinese bilingual poetry collection with the title of Pink Noise (Fenhongse zaoyin 粉红色噪音), “written” (the quotation marks here are critical, for reasons that will become clear in a moment) by the contemporary Taiwanese author Hsia Yü 夏宇.

Hsia Yü is one of the most transgressive avant-garde poets in the Chinese literary world. Flagrantly creative and at times controversial, her works display formal traits that challenge prevailing aesthetic sensibilities, such that their peculiar poetics can hardly be appreciated within traditional frames of analysis. In terms of her dominant themes, Hsia Yü is said to have “herald[ed] the beginning of a much-awaited Chinese écriture féminine” (Bradbury 2000, 249), with her “frank and innovative treatment of gender and sexuality” (249) giving rise to a unique brand of feminist poetics (Yeh 1993). She is, therefore, more of a cult writer than a mainstream author (having said that, she is concurrently a popular song lyricist by profession), as evidenced in the fact that she
is often excluded from canonical anthologies of Chinese literature in Taiwan. Such marginality affords her poetics a sense of the “underground”, one that, in Parry’s (2007, 81) reading, “unsettles institutionalized knowledge formations”.¹

My own interest in Hsia’s poetry lies in its formal rather than thematic properties, specifically in its subversion of linguistic conventions and use of intersemiotic modes/media of expression to create a sense of displacement in reading. This chapter sets out to establish Pink Noise (Hsia 2008) as an extremely rich metatext that provides us with fertile ground on which to theorise the relationship among writing/translation, multimodality, and technology. It does so by recourse to poststructuralist thinking on language and writing, with a view to critically examining the implication of automated translation for literary poetics. Three themes come into focus, namely the translator’s agency and subjectivity (or lack thereof); the play of differences in meaning within and across texts and languages; and the unbounded boundary between creative writing and translation. Let us address each of these themes before turning to Pink Noise.

**Death of the Translator**

In his famous proclamation of the death of the Author, Roland Barthes debunks the long-standing myth in literary criticism that meaning,² seen as some sacrosanct entity, resides in the originator of an utterance. Paving the epistemological grounds for poststructuralist theories, Barthes proposes the displacement of the author as the source of meaning, positing instead that “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality […] to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’,

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¹ More precisely, Parry (2007, 81) sees Hsia Yü’s poetry as “modernist” with regards its “embodiment of and reflection on fragmentation”. The poet’s “attention to the ‘microstructures’ of the everyday […] provides a critique of the structures of knowledge and feeling that constitute the logic and affectivity of precisely those nationalist and other knowledge formations that constitute Taiwan’s narratives of modernity”. Whereas Parry is primarily concerned with the poetic sensibilities in Hsia’s works, and hence the poet’s modernity in terms of thematic treatment, other scholars, most notably Meng Fan (Meng 2003, 225–71; see also Chen 2009), have tended to focus on Hsia’s techniques, which are decidedly postmodern.

² The word “meaning” used here and throughout the rest of the chapter (and book) does not suggest that the meaning of the word “meaning” is unproblematic. As the primary objective of the following discussion is to illustrate the de(con)struction of literary “meaning” in translation, all instances of the word should be interpreted within quotation marks. Other keywords that should be read likewise are “original”, “source”, and “target”.

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