

# Oulipian Networks in Search of an Author

Hervé le Tellier Translates Jaime Montestrela

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## Side Entry: Troubled Orientation

In his 1991 essay on poetic translation, with the telling title “L'attore senza gesti” (“The Actor without Gestures”), the prolific and renowned critic, translator, and writer Cesare Garboli maps poetic translation qua metaphorical analogy onto the art of theatrical performance while emphasizing what he sees as the primary function (or: virtue) of an actor as well as a translation.<sup>1</sup> According to Garboli,

[l]a qualità di una traduzione sta tutta nella sua virtù mediatrice, sta *solo* nella disponibilità a rendere un servizio. Come un attore che abbia finite di recitare la parte, la traduzione si ritira, ricevuti gli applausi, a struccarsi nel camerino. Ha già smesso di esistere. La sua vita è tutta là, nel breve spazio in cui ha reso il servizio, durante lo spettacolo [...]. Solo nel momento fugace in cui sta rendendo un servizio, la traduzione non è più una “traduzione”; ma un corpo, un testo, una scrittura a sua volta [...]. (197)<sup>2</sup>

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1 The analogy of acting and translating has been and remains a *topos* in meditation on poetic translation, and was famously brought forward for example by Jiří Levý in his seminal work on literary translation *Umění překlada* (1963; 31–32). See also Prammer (39–44) and Leupold and Raabe.

2 In the English rendition that is published alongside: “The quality of a translation lies entirely in its mediating virtue, lies *only* in its willingness to render a service. Like an actor who has finished to play his role, the translation, having been applauded, retires to the dressing room to take off its makeup. It has already stopped existing. Its life is all there, in the brief space of its performance, during the show [...] Only in the fleeting moment of its performance is the translation no longer a ‘translation’: but a full body, a text, in its turn a writing [...]” (Garboli 196).

Far from being a rhetorical gesture, the employment of such an analogy carries strong theoretical statements. The assumptions implied in the flowery comparison inscribe themselves in a field of debate touching on the relation between a text and its translation.<sup>3</sup> This debate regards not only the hierarchical dynamics between them, but also their respective (and distinct) medial qualities and, concludingly, their different modes of access to materiality. Leaving aside for a moment questions regarding the hierarchical dynamics between original and “derivative” writing and the concurrent demand for a “serving” translation,<sup>4</sup> it is remarkable that Garboli’s equation of a translation with a performing actor contains a number of troubling assumptions, starting with the underlying suggestion of a change of medium that occurs when a translation takes over: It is classified as belonging not to the realm of poetic “scrittura,” writing, but to mimic speech. Whereas the “original” is characterized as a *text*, and therefore a (more or less) stable material entity, the translation as *performance* can gain that same materiality, a “body,” only in the moment of the medial act, the “service.” This means that in a rather radical gesture, Garboli hands over translation to absolute ephemerality, denying it, if not a material existence at all, at least a material *persistence* beyond the act of reading. There might exist a textual artefact that links to another via a concept and cultural practice called “translation”; the ontological status of this artefact, however, is somewhat dubious.

We need not follow Garboli in his overall rather conservative conception of the relation “translation”–“original” to see the value of his metaphorization in putting the finger right on the peculiar, precarious mode that being a “translation” (as creation-as-medium-as-artefact) demonstrates. Firstly, in regard to the temporal dimension: even as a palpable artefact, Garboli marks it—in contrast to a text that is *not* translation—as essentially ephemeral. It manifests itself, but only for an instance. The appropriate question to ask might then be not *what*, but *when* a translation is.<sup>5</sup> From a number of sophisticated (and less sophisticated) meditations on “translation,” I suggest that the difficulty in grasp-

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- 3 Whenever the term “translation” is mentioned throughout the article, it refers to a translatory treatment of works/texts in a poetic context: *of* or *as* textual work that is considered as part of the artistic sphere, in contrast—at least apparently—to translational work that is primarily put forward with a pragmatic objective.
  - 4 For a discussion of the latter through the lens of feminist translation theory, see the ground-laying article by Chamberlain. See also Prammer (45–47).
  - 5 Theo Hermans polemically criticized his colleagues in contemporary translation studies as early as 1985 for “continuing to ask similarly unproductive essentialist questions

ing translation's *when-ness* might indeed essentially be related to what Lydia H. Liu has, in another context, called the "multiple temporalities of translation" (15). We find complications of the temporal dimension of translation in a number of seminal and by no means congruent twentieth and the twenty-first century theorizations that deal with translation as both a textual and an imagined entity and form. Walter Benjamin famously reflects on the "essentiality" of translation within certain poetic works and on a "Fortleben" of the original within a translation (11), questions which Jacques Derrida further complicates in his discussion of Benjamin in "Des Tours de Babel" (1985). We encounter a layering of temporal dimensions in Judith Butler's critique of Anne Carson's translation of Sophokles's *Antigone* and in Naoki Sakai's rigorous reconfiguring of translation as social action ("Translation"). While these authors' foci and their approaches to translational temporality differ, and while their conceptions of translation are by no means alike or even compatible with one another, what these authors have in common is a take on the translational form, practice, or event as something that defies a clear-cut temporal relation (as in *before*, or *after*, or *simultaneously*) to the text(s) it relates itself to as translation: its "origin/al."

The rather banal observation that when we talk about *a* translation we are addressing at minimum two texts at once, namely the so-called source text and the textual form in which it appears *as* translation, illustrates that "translation" not only, by definition, sails the waters of a precarious in-between mode—trans-latio, from the Latin *trans* ("across") and *ferre* ("to carry," "to bring")<sup>6</sup>—, but also inhabits a confusing plural on a very fundamental level. Translation's complicated timeframes might then well be connected with the question of what has for example been discussed under the terms "ré-écriture" (Berman 40), "ré-énonciation" (Meschonnic 309), or "recriação" (Campos 34), that is, the "troubling doubling" that translational practice brings into life. In his essay, Garboli grasps the essential diplopia (and its temporal scandal) once more by evoking the realm of the performance:

Ha scelto [il traduttore], chissà perché, di creare, inventare, fare esistere una cosa che già c'è, già esiste, già è stata scritta. Di farla esistere *come* è stata

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(how is translation to be defined?, is translation actually possible?, what is a 'good translation?') (9).

- 6 For an enlightening critique and complication of this traditional image, see Naoki Sakai's discussion of "translation as a filter" (*Schematism*).

scritta, e come mai nessuno aveva pensato che fosse, prima de lui che la recita. (203)<sup>7</sup>

To bring into existence “a thing” that is already there, to make a text exist *as* it was written: if, according to Liu, “all acts of translation [...] are mediated by temporality and spatiality” (15), then the translational mode brings into existence not only “a” translation, but a somewhat paradoxical dissolving of dimensions: a destabilization of the categories of unity, originality, and creation, which are at work—at least since the eighteenth century—when we are confronted with poetic text and/in translation,<sup>8</sup> and which are usually regulated by regimes and rules of (chronological) succession, (spatial) distance, and (physical) differentiation. Brazilian neo-vanguard poet and translator Haroldo de Campos uses the chemical image of isomorphism (34)—Garboli uses metaphorical comparison—to grasp the complex net of seemingly paradoxical relations that come into being when a translation comes into being: as an idea, as an artefact, as a claim.

### Being and Time: Dis-locating *Contes liquides*

In 2012, a small volume was published at the Éditions de l'Attente. Its turquoise cover unsurprisingly states the author's name, Jaime Montestrela, and the French title, *Contes liquides*. In smaller letters, some additional information is given that discloses the work as a translated work, names the translator, and points to the peritexts the book contains: “Traduit du portugais et préfacé par Hervé Le Tellier” with a “Postface de Jacques Vallet.”

Apart from the mentioned foreword and epilogue, the volume also contains, directly following the preface and without clearly assigned authorship, a short biographical overview of Montestrela's life. The preface seems to first and foremost serve as an introduction to an author who, as Hervé le Tellier writes,

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7 “He [the translator] has chosen, who can say why, to create, invent, bring into existence a thing that is already there, already exists, has already been written. To make it exist *as* it was written, and as no one ever imagined before him, the one who is performing it” (Garboli 202).

8 For a discussion of how the paradigm of the “original” shapes the modern idea and notion of translation, see Nebrig and Vecchiato.

has left only few traces.<sup>9</sup> All those (potential) readers who are not familiar with the author learn from the foreword that Montestrela was born in 1925 in Lisbon, that he published under the Salazar regime a book of engaged poetry that led to his imprisonment and torture, and that he went into exile in Rio de Janeiro in 1951, where he published his only novel. When Brazil was taken over by the military, Montestrela is said to have traveled to Paris, where in 1968 he started to write his *Contos aquosos* and made the acquaintance of a number of French writers, among them several members of the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Oulipo), before dying from an aneurism in 1975 (Le Tellier, "Préface" 10–12).

Le Tellier's peritext is concerned with laying open various relations with the French literary scene of the time and connecting Montestrela's oeuvre to a peer group of well-known authors and eminent leftist intellectuals who apparently held his work in high esteem. Writer, adventurer, and politician André Malraux is cited with praise for Montestrela's essay *Cidade de lama* (11), and Marguerite Yourcenar, the first woman ever to enter the *Académie française*, is cited with praise for his early poetry collection (10). Le Tellier himself compares the tales he translated as *Contes liquides* to the sharp, humorous writing of Max Aub and Roland Topor (8), with whom Montestrela was, as Le Tellier points out, well acquainted (11). He also points to Montestrela's friendship with Portuguese surrealist Jorge de Sena and Belgian writer Jacques Sternberg (11). Jacques Vallet, founder of the French humorist journal *Le fou parle* and provider of the postface of the *Contes liquides* in Le Tellier's French rendition, is said to have published for the first time translations of some of Montestrela's *contos* after his death in that very magazine (11–12). Even Montestrela's sudden decease, in 1975, happened in the bosom of members of the French literary scene, among them the Oulipians Jacques Bens and Raymond Queneau.

As far as Le Tellier's foreword tells, Montestrela himself, although connected with several Oulipian writers and even figuring as an honorary guest for one Oulipo meeting in 1974 (12–13), was not a genuine member of the famous literary group that was founded in 1960 by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau—a group concerned, up until the present day, with experimental poetic creation according to self-given "*contraintes*," that is, formal rules. The eighty numbered, ultrashort stories that Montestrela collected, according to the foreword, under the original title *Contos aquosos*—each story consists of one to four sentences (with only one exception) and rarely exceeds

9 "J'ai trouvé très peu d'informations sur Jaime Montestrela, même à la Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal" (Le Tellier, "Préface" 10).

half a page—nevertheless dispose of a number of qualities that suggest that at least a loose set of rules assisted at their creation.

I will not discuss these qualities in detail here; suffice it to say that the texts relate to each other by a certain regularity regarding not only length but also style and narrative scope. Usually, a conte begins by referring to a certain event at a certain historical moment, to a particular person (in the past or in the future), people, or social group (terrestrial or extraterrestrial), or to a specific place (real or invented). It then notes—in a dry, straight style that recalls ethnographic discourse—an incidence, situation, or circumstance that tends to lean towards the absurd:

La ligne droite est taboue dans la ville d'Along Ulang (Birmanie). Le rues y sont courbes, les trottoirs arrondis, les immeubles bombés ou cintrés. Le fil a plomb est interdit, et nulle ficelle n'est autorisée à pendre aux fenêtres. Et quand filent dans la poussière, rectilignes et provocateurs, les rayons du soleil, on voile les yeux des enfants. (conte n°158) (Montestrela 56)

Depuis que toute vie s'est éteinte sur la planète X34, à la suite d'incessantes guerres de religions, elle n'est plus peuplée que par des dieux dont le nombre est difficilement quantifiable. Ceux-ci, incapables depuis longtemps de la moindre création, passent le temps en jouant aux dés. (conte n°173) (Montestrela 57)

Les chercheurs de l'Université de Leipzig, qui travaillent sur la discontinuité entre l'homme et l'animal, ont pu prouver qu'une rupture fondamentale s'est produite le 18 janvier 142 152 avant J-C, à 16h24. Ils cherchent désormais la nature exacte de l'événement. (conte n°429) (Montestrela 83)

Lorsque les premiers extraterrestres, les Uhus, débarquèrent sur Terre, en 2045 de notre ère, ils prirent d'abord les dauphins comme la race intelligente de la planète. Les Uhus s'aperçurent néanmoins assez vite de leur erreur et entrèrent aussitôt en relation télépathique avec les fourmis. (conte n°186, à J.S.) (Montestrela 61)

Eight of the contes are not only numbered but, as in n°186 cited above, provided with a dedication that gives an abbreviated name. These dedications are without exception commented on by the translator Le Tellier, who at the lower end of the page not only suggests written-out versions of the abbreviations, but also occasionally adds further biographical information to support his specu-

lations. These would indeed, if they proved correct, show Montestrela's deep investment in the Paris-based (male) literary circles of the 1960s and 1970s:<sup>10</sup> conte n°9 is dedicated to a certain J. T., referring "sans doute" to Jean Tardieu (22), n°51 to G. P., "[p]ossiblement Georges Perec, rencontré en 1967 à Avignon" (35), n°113 to J.-M. D., "[s]ans aucun doute Jean-Marie Domenach, qui dirigea la revue [*Esprit*] de 1957 à 1976" (49). Conte n°186 is dedicated to J. S., "très certainement l'écrivain Jacques Sternberg qui, comme lui, collaborait à la revue *Mépris* et affectionnait ces formes courtes" (61), n°231 to P. R., referring, according to Le Tellier, without any doubt to the painter Puig Rosado: "Le conte de Montestrela pourrait même être postérieur au dessin de Rosado" (69).<sup>11</sup> The dedication of conte n°431 to H. M. is accompanied by the longest commentary of the collection: "Ce conte, dédié par J.M. à H.M., n'est pas, comme on l'a longtemps cru, un hommage à l'auteur du *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*, Henri Michaux. Il s'agirait plus sûrement de l'écrivain américain Harry Mathews, rencontré à Paris, qui reprend d'ailleurs ce thème, presque inchangé, dans une de ses nouvelles" (84). Conte n°473 is dedicated to R. Q., "Raymond Queneau, avec qui Jaime Montestrela déjeunait parfois au restaurant *Polidor*" (90), and n°515 to R. T., who is identified by Le Tellier as the writer and "dessinateur Roland Topor" (95).

One could even suspect more connections between Montestrela's persona and the illustrious network of France-based intellectuals of the time, ready to be uncovered by his custom of dedication. For if one is to believe the foreword, Le Tellier's translation only covers a small fraction of Montestrela's original work:

Il s'agit d'un recueil de plus de mille contes baroques, de quelques lignes à peine, sous-titré *Atlas inutilis* (il manquait deux cahiers de 32 pages à cet exemplaire, et les contes numérotés de 263 à 406) [...]. Enfin, je n'ai choisi pour cette édition qu'une sélection de contes de la première moitié du volume. (Le Tellier, "Préface" 7–8)

That is, what the reader holds in her hands as *Contes liquides*, she learns, is just a more or less random fragment of a fragment of the original Le Tellier decided to translate. Le Tellier claims not only that the copy he borrowed from a friend

10 This investment is also confirmed in the postface by Jacques Vallet (99–100).

11 After Le Tellier's foreword and before the first of the *contes liquides*, there is a small sketch that is separately inserted, glued to a page, and signed "Puig Rosado."

in order to do so was already missing two volumes, but also that the eighty tales printed in the book are only a selection of the first half of Montestrela's *contos*: the first tale printed in the French edition published by Éditions de l'Attente bears the n°1, the last one the n°519.

If this circumstance may leave a philologically invested reader somewhat dissatisfied, the preface has in store a far greater scandal, when the status of Le Tellier as translator becomes, at least in traditional terms, more than problematic, as he admits that his Portuguese is rather bad (8). The back cover presents the facts more bluntly, simply stating that the translator of the here-published tales does *not* speak Portuguese.<sup>12</sup> The reader's suspicion is triggered by minor peritextual inconsistencies that catch the eye,<sup>13</sup> and she will be able to discover, even with superficial research, that the original author sketched out in the foreword as well as the afterword has (as such) never existed. The publication *Contes liquides*, translated by Hervé Le Tellier, is the only (attainable) version of the—now marked as fictitious—Portuguese *Contos aquosos*.<sup>14</sup>

*Contes liquides* could, in this regard, be classified as “pseudo-translation”—a term that was brought to the translation studies debates by Gideon Toury (1984) and that designates a poetic original that fraudulently masks itself as its translation—and be placed as such within a considerable group of literary predecessors (see Apter; Jenn). Emily Apter has identified pseudo-translations as “scandals of textual reproduction” (159), and undoubtedly they prove to be an intriguing and challenging topic not only in the context of translation theory in general, but especially with regard to genre definition and the relation between

12 See the presentation on the back cover of the publication: “L’écrivain lisboète exilé Jaime Montestrela (1925–1975) écrit ces ‘contes liquides’ à Paris, de mai 1968 à juin 1972, au rythme de deux ou trois par semaine. Plus de mille, donc. Nous en présentons ici quatre-vingts, ce qui n’est pas mal, compte tenu du fait que le traducteur ne parle pas portugais.”

13 To name only one example: the foreword mentions Montestrela's guest appearance at an Oulipo meeting, of which a record is said to exist in the Oulipo archive at the Bibliothèque d’Arsenal, on 12 September 1974 (Le Tellier, “Préface” 12), whereas the listed biographical elements date it to 12 December 1974 (Le Tellier, “Préface” 13). A look into the archive, however, which is now located at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, shows that there was no scheduled meeting on either date (see <http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc98168h/cdoe3869>; <http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc98168h/cdoe3922>; accessed 20 Nov. 2024).

14 This makes the only tale that Le Tellier cites in Portuguese in his foreword a sort of ex-post original (see Le Tellier, “Préface” 8).



translation and experimentality. In the following paragraphs, I will nevertheless focus on *Contes liquides* less as a “pseudo-translative” original, and more as a text that is not only essentially motivated by and imbued with a translation imaginary but also bound to its “actual” realization on various levels. It is in the schizophrenia of (only) performing translation while at the same time manifesting it—by *staging a translation*—that *Contes liquides* enters into a critical discussion of the expectations, hierarchies, and dogmas that surround the field of poetic “translation.” As such, I want to posit it within a field of texts I consider as *experimental translation*. Within recent research,<sup>15</sup> this term has often—though not coherently—been employed with a view to forms of poetic production that are marked by a heightened level of intertextuality: texts that are intrinsically connected to the normalized, sanctioned practice of translation while also undermining, expanding, challenging it.

## Manipulation as Critique: Experimental Translation

Starting with the highly interconnected avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, a heightened attentiveness to translation began to (re-)install itself in various fields and contexts especially during and following from the 1960s and 1970s. Transnationally, an immense number of authors invested themselves in theorizing translational practice, problematizing hegemonic views on translation, and developing other (in their turn normative) perspectives. On the one hand, this activity was significantly fueled by the linguistic turn in the humanities; on the other hand, it undoubtedly has to be placed in the context—and against the backdrop—of machine translation developments (see Luhn, “Literary/Machine/Translation”). It was also against that very horizon (see Luhn, *Spiel* 39–47; Robert-Foley, *Experimental Translation*, 9–10, 16) that an exploration of rather unorthodox forms of poetic-translational practice started to proliferate, thereby going far beyond the idiosyncratic play of a chosen few.

Taking as a foundation Lily Robert-Foley’s lucid elaboration in her 2020 paper “The Politics of Experimental Translation: Potentialities and Preoccupations,” which has been expanded only recently by a more detailed discussion in her monograph *Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production* (2024), I have proposed elsewhere to subsume a certain

15 Notably and substantially, the term is used by scholars Lily Robert-Foley and Douglas Robinson.

type of poetic practice under the umbrella of *experimental translation*, labeling as such those texts and activities that refer to themselves as “translation” while employing methods that go far beyond the scope of what the translational doxa of a certain time and culture allows and defines. I understand the “experimentality” of these types of inter- or intralingual activity in a double sense (Luhn, *Spiel* 58–66).<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, in the context of playful unorthodoxy, the obvious connotation of the adverb “experimental” is that of the modalities of “experimental art” or “experimental literature” that come into life at latest with the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. “Experimental” here refers to the turning away from established formal principles, conventions, and traditions in order to invent artistic techniques that drastically challenge the limits and laws of art and its genres that are at work at a given moment. In that sense, the experimental horizon is, simply put, substantially concerned with questions of form and method, and “experimental translation” links to the playful forms of experimental literature, its norm-violating and delimiting de-automatization processes. Closely related to forms, poetics, and methods of experimental and avant-garde literature, experimental translations make a text undergo experimental procedures. That is, their translational “rewriting” (Lefevere 241) comprises a practice of excessive text manipulation that breaks with the ruling translation paradigm of a given time (Robert-Foley, “Politics” 401) by “entering,” carving out, and reproducing certain hidden structures, patterns, textures, and dimensions of an “original,” and often by emphasizing some of its features grotesquely at the dispense of others.

Beyond this, however (and at the same time inextricably linked to it), the adverb “experimental” points first and foremost to the *scientific* experiment, in the sense of those experimental arrangements that became the dominant paradigm of scientific knowledge production from the modern era onwards.<sup>17</sup> The scientific experimental design has an epistemic horizon: as practice-based research, the elaboration and systematic execution of an experiment obligatorily aims at generating a gain in knowledge. Its planning and usually meticulously exact realization are followed by evaluation and—ideally—new

16 The potential pitfalls of the word “experimental” in the context of poetic creation/translation are discussed in Robert-Foley, *Experimental Translation* (19–20).

17 A development particularly set in motion by the publication of Francis Bacon’s epoch-making *Novum Organum* in 1620.

insights.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, texts I refer to as “experimental translations” are essentially bound to a certain—if at times idiosyncratic—degree of system-aticity: Their experimental set-up is characterized by a clear-cut, if not always recognizable, set of regulations for textual manipulation, a set that is not infrequently highlighted and explained via peritexts. The playfulness (Lukes 8–9) that is usually—and rightfully—attributed to experimental translation then becomes apparent not as an end in itself, but rather as a result of boundedness to constraints and rules that determine the experiment as well as the game. In the spirit of the scientific experiment as a knowledge-generating instrument, this orderly, designed textual manipulation under an experimental regime is then conceptually driven by an *epistemic* rather than an interpretative desire.<sup>19</sup>

The sort of experimental poetic manipulation described above has long found a home in scholarly discussion under the umbrella of avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, or postmodern “conceptual writing”. The added value of examining a certain number of texts under the *translational* paradigm now lies exactly in being able to discuss them within a specific analytic frame, i.e. within the spectrum of heightened intertextuality that is commonly referred to as “translation.” Such an endeavor is only legitimate if we consider translation—as, of course, it has been done by various strands of modern translation studies—not as an ontological category but as a categorical tool that can be used to relate two (or more) textual entities to one another. And it requires that the texts in question are explicitly labeled, categorized, and referred to by their authors *as translations*, or as being produced by translational practice. In other words: an “experimental translation,” at least in the argumentative framework I’d like to suggest, can only exist where there is a claim that a certain text *is* a translation.

In that regard, the label “translation” functions as a claim that deliberately, and decisively, performs theoretical work. To carry, adopt, and appropriate translation as a designation of one’s own choice—and not as a functional term that is assigned and assignable by others—manifests a critical *telos* directed not only at a specific poetic work (as an object of translational desire), but also at the frameworks, paradigms, and phantasms that are named “translation,”

18 Drawing on Vincent Broqua’s “Temporalités de l’expérimental” (2018), Lily Robert-Foley refers to this dimension in her 2024 monograph (18–19).

19 It is clear, though, that the separation between those two desires can be only a heuristic one, in the sense that the wish to gather knowledge about a subject is to make sense of it, to *explain* it—thus: a desire of interpretation.

and that have the power to structure the relationships and hierarchies between textual forms and languages, as well as between modes, subjects, and objects of writing.<sup>20</sup> It is only by taking seriously the self-descriptions of the textual experiments in question and their appropriation of the term “translation” that one is able to recognize and value as such their critical engagement with and problematization of particular concepts, traditions, and normative settings of artistic (re-)production.

## Un-authorial Actors and Hypertextual Performance

It is exactly in this regard that *Contes liquides* belongs to the realm of “experimental translation”: in the very moment the publication claims to be a translation, it enters into a critical relation with the ways literary translation is perceived, and expected, to function in a certain moment in history.<sup>21</sup> It is crucial in this context not only that the work was initially coherently presented *as translation* by all peritextual and editorial instances,<sup>22</sup> but also that this

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- 20 In this regard, Lily Robert-Foley’s take on *experimental translation* as a “creative-critical, practice-based research interrogating translational norms and epistemic virtues, in their relationship to experimentation in the hard sciences, and in particular to developments in MT [machine translation]” (Robert-Foley, *Experimental Translation* 19), overlaps crucially with the here-suggested scope of the term. However, in my rendition of the term as well as in the scope I give it, I do insist to a much greater extent on the systematic, rule-bound aspect than Robert-Foley does.
- 21 Robert-Foley rightly notes that experimental translation procedures are always addressed to “translational norms, as they are fixed by a certain, specific, translational climate: historically, culturally, linguistically and technologically. The critique of norms in experimental translation is profoundly situated, in its language and in its cultural and historical specificity” (*Experimental Translation* 11). See also Luhn, *Spiel* (101–03).
- 22 However, this was only the case for the first edition of *Contes liquides*, published by Éditions de l’Attente. A second edition, published in autumn 2024 by Gallimard, re-attributes, for better or worse, the author position to Hervé Le Tellier, a decision that considerably alters the way in which the narrative construction of *Contes liquides* is able to work. Before this second account, Hervé Le Tellier’s authorship of *Contes liquides* was disclosed not by the publishing house Éditions de l’Attente, but by secondary sources who name him as the author of *Contes liquides* (see Cabana), pointing for example to the fact that he has been awarded the Grand prix de l’humour noir Xavier-Forneret for this work in 2013. The webpage of the prize as well as the Wikipedia entry, however, lists *not* Le Tellier, but Jaime Montestrela as its recipient. Accordingly, Le Tellier’s profile page on the Oulipo web presence does not mention *Contes liquides* under his authored works.

claim was put forward without a particularly strong effort to maintain this illusion—something that would, in the age of digital information retrieval, prove challenging, but not impossible. Precisely in its sloppiness, the masquerade works as a disruptive element. Even if it is plausible to identify the translator with the creator of the ultrashort tales, we cannot now just read the eighty “liquid tales” simply as an original account, since surrounding the “main text” of the *contes* there is a whole apparatus of peritexts that suddenly change their status as well. For if, to begin with the obvious, Hervé Le Tellier is not the translator, then his elaboration on Montestrela’s work is no longer a commentary on a work of fiction, but instead a part of this work of fiction itself, as are the translator’s notes regarding the dedications. With the fictional status of the publication-as-translation so easy to discover, all commentary notes and all peritextual information by Le Tellier join the corpus of what is held together by the title *Contes liquides*. And once the authorial stability is undermined on one level, the doubt infiltrates the whole publication: How sure can the reader be, after all, that the afterword was actually written by Jacques Vallet, and not again Le Tellier? In this regard, what Lily Robert-Foley has noted for Douglas Robinson’s 2020 pseudo-translation, or “transcreation,”<sup>23</sup> of Volter Kilpi’s *Gulliver’s Voyage to Phantomimia* applies to *Contes liquides* as well: it is primarily through the set of paratextual phenomena that a clear

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The comparison between the two editions of *Contes liquides* deserves its own detailed discussion. A few brief observations are worth further consideration: While the 2012 edition contains 80 *contes*, the 2024 edition contains 366, but not all of the 80 *contes* of the first edition appear in the second (four are missing). In quite some cases, the numbering of the *contes* has changed: conte n°1 in the 2024 edition, for example, is identical to conte n°11 in the 2012 edition, except for a very small lexical variation. In many cases, the *contes* of second edition are subtly modified versions of the first edition. There are cases where a name, a place, or the sentence structure has been changed. Dedications have been added (conte n°3) and comments have been modified (conte n°9). The postscript by Jacques Vallet does not appear in the 2024 edition. Instead, the last conte (n°999) is followed by three indexes: “index des dédicataires,” “index des personnes citées à l’existence attestée,” and “index thématique” (167–69), which are not part of the first edition. The 2024 edition includes 24 illustrations by comic artist Patrice Killoffer, but not the drawing by Puig Rosado from the 2012 edition. The preface and the “éléments biographiques” figure in both editions, but with a number of significant changes and additions regarding Montestrela’s biography, oeuvre, and networks.

- 23 This term, which originally stemmed from Haroldo de Campos, is used in the peritext of the work: “transcreated by Douglas Robinson” (see Kilpi).

allocation of authorship(s) is confused, twisted, and obfuscated (see Robert-Foley, *Experimental Translation* 174).

If the confusion of authorial positions infiltrates the work via its carelessness in creating the translational illusion (in the sense that Jenn speaks of pseudo-translation as a “texte hyper-illusioniste, un paroxysme de traduction”; 24), this confusion is spelled out and reinforced, paradoxically, precisely by the excess of markers that point to a distinctive author figure throughout the meticulous (re-)construction of Montestrela’s social network, which is found in Le Tellier’s foreword, Jacques Vallet’s afterword, and the commented upon dedications of the contes. In the abundance of the biographical connections, traced hints, and name-dropping, what is brought forward instead of an authorial portrait, then, is the exposure of an expectation of, if not *longing* for an author figure that holds a work together: the custom—which despite all poststructuralist attempts is still pertinent and emerging anew—of projecting (pseudo-)biographical specters on poetic textures to assign to them a certain stability, reliability, genuineness, “authenticity.”<sup>24</sup> Going back to Garboli’s attempt to metaphorically get hold of the ways and procedures that materialize as translation, which ends up with the paradox of an ephemeral, strangely doubled coming-into-existence, *Contes liquides* acts out the dissolution of authorial substantiality and origin/ality within the genre “translation,” thus pointing us to the contradictory, or at least arbitrary categorical matrix of so-called “original” and “derivative,” substantial and ephemeral textual existence: and isn’t it in the end exactly by claiming to be a translation that *Contes liquides* imposes on itself a translational taboo, and therefore, paradoxically, emerges as an ever untranslatable original?<sup>25</sup>

24 These are naturally more or less phantasmagoric virtues that are problematized *eo ipso* by any practice of translation whose very task it is—at least according to a hegemonic understanding—to genuinely *not* speak for itself. In her discussion of Robinson’s pseudo-translation of Kilpi, Robert-Foley concisely notes that “it is indeed the suspicion of translation—the idea that translation betrays its original—that allows pseudotranslation in the contemporary era to be set up not to prove a text’s authenticity but precisely the opposite: to call attention to the hoax that is translation (although this does not necessarily mean debunking it), and to give the ‘translator’ license to play and to stray, often under the auspices of heteronyms that liberate him from the unmanageable expectations placed on translators in our contemporary climate (to be both ultimately faithful and yet ultimately readable and perfectly productive)” (*Experimental Translation* 175).

25 If we do not necessarily (and normatively) have to consider poetic translation, with Benjamin, as essentially “untranslatable” (Benjamin 20; see also Derrida 236) outside

On another level, the excessive referential framework backing the pseudo-translational set-up of *Contes liquides* also comments on the disturbing complication of temporal frames within translational writing, the precarious “when” of a translation that Robert-Foley (via Elisa Sampedrín) refers to as the “time-travelling paradox”: “[T]ranslation again is what ‘destroys time’ [O *Resplandor* 6] in Sampedrín’s words, what takes us out of time and confounds then and now, makes another time to speak through the body, the mouth of the translator: a paradox” (*Experimental Translation* 179).

It is the way in which temporally conditioned relationality is almost obtrusively inscribed in the textual body of *Contes liquides*, constantly signaled in the interplay of the supposed peritext and the main text, that renders this relationality profoundly precarious. As the paratextual body supporting the work draws so heavily on individual links and networks of admiration, influence, and inspiration that Hervé Le Tellier—an Oulipo member since 1992—and Jaime Montestrela most likely share, any established chronological order instantly undoes itself once the reader realizes that the translational framing is porous. A blatant example, raising the topic of intersemiotic translation (which I will leave aside here), is a constellation set in motion via the illustration with which *Contes liquides* opens. The drawing, by painter Puig Ruisado (1931–2016), shows the infant Jesus, spotted with red dots, in a manger. Conte n°231, which is dedicated to “P.R.,” reads: “Selon le professeur Friedhof Schwartz, épidémiologue à l’université de Dortmund, à moins d’un miracle, le petit Jesus a eu la rougeole” (69). The translator’s note states that Montestrela’s tale might have existed prior to Rosado’s drawing. This comment on a potential chronology leaves the reader in a temporal impasse: Even if she can assume that, leaving the fictional frame, Montestrela’s prose could for obvious reasons not precede Rosado’s drawing, should she nevertheless situate the drawing historically in the 1970s? Or more readily in the 2010s? Was the tale modeled on the drawing, or did Rosado produce it for the publication of *Contes liquides*, by request of Le Tellier?

The eroding of *Contes liquides*’ temporal framework from within is even more obvious in the case of what I see as one key section of the work regarding its dimension of translational experimentality, namely conte n°431, dedicated

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the scope of experimental translation, it at least resides outside the habitual interests of translational activity. In other words, and conventionally, all translation practice needs to consider the text it works on as “original” in order to legitimize itself: What value would lie, to speak with translational doxa, in translating *a translation* of Dante?

to “H.M.” This tale signals its special status not only by being followed by the longest (by far) of all explanatory comments. It also diverges from the formal cadre of *Contes liquides*, a factor that should not be underestimated in an Oulipian, rule-bound context. While all other 79 stories consist of one to four sentences, n°431 counts five:

Le peuple Oho de Nouvelle-Guinée, découvert par Harry Matthew Botherby, utilise la parole, mais réduite au minimum. La langue oho n’a qu’une phrase: “Rouge égale mal”. Découvrant dans une vallée toute proche un second peuple, les Ouhas, a la langue non moins rudimentaire (leur seule phrase est “Ici pas là”), H. M. Botherby leur apprend l’existence de leurs voisins les Ohos. Voulant traduire en ouha le oho “Rouge égale mal”, il dut se réduire à l’unique option: “Ici pas là”. La langue dit ce qu’elle peut et c’est tout. (Montestrela 84)

In the accompanying translator’s note, cited above, Le Tellier deciphers that the salutation of this tale is not, “as one has for a long time believed,”<sup>26</sup> to Belgian author and painter Henri Michaux, but to Harry Mathews, an American writer and member of Oulipo since 1972 who would, according to the note, take up the theme of the conte, “almost unchanged, in one of his short stories” (Montestrela 84, as cited in French above). Visibly, this reference is yet another example of cross-temporal confusion of origin/al and adaptation that is produced in the interplay between the ostensible main text and its peritext, pointing this time to a 1996 talk (not a short story!) by Harry Mathews at the French Institute in London, where he held a St. Jerome lecture on the topic of translation, published later under the title “Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese.”<sup>27</sup> Here, the narration of the two “tribes,” the “Ohos” and “Uhas,”

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- 26 The reader is inclined to ask: by whom? And how could this misappropriation have possibly happened, given the fact that Mathews’s name appears literally, if misspelled, in the text?
  - 27 The talk was reprinted in a collection of Mathews’s essays in 2003. Remarkably, the paratextual remark works as yet another source of uncertainty due to its questionable reliability: it is not a “nouvelle” by Mathews, but a talk/essay that sketches out the story of the Uhas and Ohos. Reversely, there exists a related *story* in Mathews’s work. “The Dialect of the Tribe” tells the story of the mysterious dialect Pagolak (discovered again by the fictitious ethnographer Botherby), which is gifted with extraordinary, paradoxical procedures of translation, while defying all attempts to be translated itself (Mathews, “Dialect” 8–9). That translation here figures again as a core topic makes it unlikely that



takes up approximately four times the space of Montestrela's version. Essentially though, it is possible to conflate the two stories:

They [the Ohos] also used speech, but speech reduced to its minimum. The Oho language consisted of only three words and one expression, the invariable statement, "Red makes wrong." [...] in another valley, he came upon his second tribe, which he called the Uhas [...]. like the Ohos, they had a rudimentary language used invariably to make a single statement. The Uhas' statement was, "Here not there." As he was expounding this information with gestures that his audience readily understood, Botherby reached the point where he plainly needed to transmit the gist of the Uhas' one statement [...]. How do you render "Here not there" in a tongue that can only express "Red makes wrong"? [...] There was only one solution. He grasped at once what all translators eventually learn: a language says what it can say, and that's that. (Mathews 68–69)

Recognizably, whole sentences in the French and the English version are very much alike in the two versions ("La langue dit ce qu'elle peut et c'est tout." / "a language says what it can say, and that's that."), making it legitimate to classify them as linked via a translational relation. Insofar as the accounts differ in length and detail, other forms of intertextual relations from the realm of "secondary" literary practices can also apply: variation, for example, or adaptation; concision (in the case that Mathews's text was formulated before that of *Contes liquides*) or extension (in the opposite case). Genette lists in *Palimpsestes* a whole bunch of possibilities for how reduction or augmentation can take form in an intertextual (with Genette: "hypertextual") constellation (321–95).<sup>28</sup>

As much as a comparative discussion of the two respective accounts would undoubtedly prove fruitful and deserve, as a meditation on the theme of translation, substantial commentary (for Mathews's version, see James; Gervais), what I especially want to point to in this context is that, at the heart of the (deliberately!) poorly masked pseudo-translation *Contes liquides*, an instance of "true" translation can be discerned<sup>29</sup>—only to be instantly confounded again,

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Le Tellier's flawed reference, pointing to a "nouvelle," is merely due to scholarly sloppiness.

28 Regarding the relevance of Genette's work on "hypertextualité" in *Palimpsestes* for a theoretical grounding of experimental translation, see Luhn, "Intralinguale Übersetzung."

29 "True" in the sense of what Mathews has coined "translation's customary *raison-d'être*: the [intralingual] communication of substantive content" ("Dialect" 10).

as it is difficult to stabilize the temporal (and therefore functional) vector needed in order mark one of the two texts as a translation of the other.<sup>30</sup> It seems decisive in this context that the brief dis-/appearance of “proper” translation in conte n°431 is bound to the very topic of the translational practice’s paradoxical nature, which defies theorization, or even proper grasping.

It is also worth noting that the (pseudo-)paratextual comment, by allegedly ruling Henri Michaux out as addressee of the dedication, is what brings his *Voyage en Grande Garabagne* (1936) into play as an intertextual reference in the first place. There is indeed an undeniable resemblance between the style, scope, and imagery of the ethnographically imbued short tales in *Contes liquides* and Michaux’s *carnet de voyage*, which describes in a sober manner the ways and habits of a number of invented people, flora, and fauna in the fictive region of “Grande Garabagne” (echoing, of course, the French “Grande Bretagne”),<sup>31</sup> making it an obvious point of reference for analysis of Montestrela’s tales. Fittingly, the compilation *Ailleurs* (1948)—in which Michaux adds to the *Voyage* his later works *Au pays de la Magie* (1941) and *Ici, Poddema* (1946)—opens (from the 1967 edition on) with a page-long preface qualifying the three works as the author’s attempt to (of all activities) *translate* “the world that he wants to flee from”:

L’auteur a vécu très souvent ailleurs: deux ans en Garabagne, à peu près autant au pays de la Magie, un peu moins à Poddema. Ou beaucoup plus. Les dates précises manquent [...]. Il traduit aussi le Monde, celui qui voulait s’en échapper. Qui pourrait échapper? Le vase est clos. Ces pays, on le constatera, sont en somme parfaitement naturels. On les retrouvera partout bientôt... [...] Derrière ce qui est, ce qui a failli être, ce qui tendait à être, menaçait d’être, et qui entre des millions de “possibles” commençait à être mais n’a pu parfaire son installation... H.M. (Michaux 7)

30 If one might agree that Mathews could not possibly have had access to the written work of the persona Montestrela after 1972, can the same be said regarding the writing of Le Tellier, which entered Oulipo circles at latest in 1992?

31 To cite only one example: “Les Omobuls vivent dans l’ombre des Émanglons. Ils ne feraient pas un pas sans les consulter. Ils les copient en tout et quand ils ne les copient pas, c’est qu’ils copient les Orbus. Mais quoique les Orbus soient eux-mêmes alliés et tributaires et race parente des Émanglons, les Omobuls tremblent qu’imitant les Orbus, les Émanglons ne soient mécontents. Mais les sentiments des Émanglons restent impénétrables, et les Omobuls se sentent mal à l’aise, louchant tantôt vers les Orbus, tantôt vers les Émanglons” (Michaux 27).

The temporal confusion reigning in Michaux's first sentence—where the precise timespans the narrator H. M. has spent, according to himself, “elsewhere” fall apart instantaneously after they have been given—surely resonates with the temporal instability of *Contes liquides*. But it is even more tempting to read the last sentence of Michaux's foreword, with its reference to the millions of “possibles” that lurk everywhere, in connection with the ever-growing, inter-relational, inter-translational texture that is unfolded in *Contes liquides* by following its (always partly fraudulent) leads.

A paradigmatic element and conceptual nucleus of this unfolding is the second explicit interlingual translation that lies quite literally at the core, the non-existing authorial origin of the work: the translation of the German name *Sternberg* (star-hill), borrowed from Jacques Sternberg, into the Portuguese equivalent *Montestrela*. Le Tellier mentions the writer in the foreword as one of Montestrela's acquaintances, and conte n°186 is—supposedly, or, with Le Tellier, “très certainement”—dedicated to him.<sup>32</sup> It may not come as a shock, then, that there exists an account of 270 trenchant short stories by Jacques Sternberg, published in 1974, illustrated by Roland Topor, under the title *Contes glacés*. Unsurprisingly, the stories relate to Montestrela's *contes* in that they are written in a dry, at times ethnographic style, and at least a number of them can be said to resonate very strongly on a formal level, but also on a verbal level,<sup>33</sup> with Montestrela's *Contos aquosos/Contes liquides*—a title transformation designating quite literally a Benjaminian “Fortleben,” a becoming of the original in its translation, when the tales that are *iced* with Sternberg become *aqueous/liquid* with Montestrela.

## From Original Text to Translational Textures

In a weird movement, a paradoxical back and forth, the discernible spectrum of translational, hypertextual traces of *Contes liquides* thus does at the same time counter *and* support the fictitious biographical relationality laid out

32 “Lorsque les premiers extraterrestres, les Uhus, débarquèrent sur Terre, en 2045 de notre ère, ils prirent d'abord les dauphins comme la race intelligente de la planète. Les Uhus s'aperçurent néanmoins assez vite de leur erreur et entrèrent aussitôt en relation télépathique avec les fourmis” (Montestrela 61).

33 Compare the previously cited conte n°186 with the beginning of Sternberg's “La vérité”: “Quand enfin, au XXIIe siècle, les premiers extra-terrestres débarquèrent sur la planète Terre, ils furent assez étonnés de voir que cette planète était verte. [...]” (60).

throughout the text. This is not the only regard in which *Contes liquides*' status as a pseudo-translation allows it to belong in the realm of (at least experimental) translation. The whole textual artefact is motivated, set in motion, and fueled by the conglomerate of practices, artefacts, and ideas that are found together in a collective imaginary subsumed under the signifier "translation." This is the case, firstly, in the sense that what is usually understood by interlingual translation is actually, essentially traceable in (at least) two very crucial instances of the work: in the author's name Montestrela (from Sternberg) and in the central conte n°431 (see Mathews, "Translation"), where translation as a practice and as a problem is explicitly thematized. This is the case, secondly, in the sense that *Contes liquides* lays out a dense network of textual relations that constantly negotiates the levels and forms of intertextual relatedness of which translation is only one mode, yet also the very framework that sanctions, categorizes, and labels whether (and the ways in which) literary forms belong to the "first" or the "second degree." This is the case, thirdly, in the sense that *Contes liquides* points to the clandestine subversion of the established frames of hierarchy and succession that any translational artefact inevitably produces. In other words, it spotlights the temporal ambiguity of translation (*when is a translation?*).<sup>34</sup>

It might be disputable whether Le Tellier does, in the strict sense, *translate experimentally* within the framework of *Contes Liquides*—although there are, I would say, a few indications that the "contes baroques" are baroque, especially insofar as they are a result of combinatorics and lose Oulipian constraint.<sup>35</sup>

34 It is in that sense that *Contes liquides* performs the very process of textual palimpsest, the ubiquitous movement of hypertextuality Genette marks as the principle of literature in *Palimpsestes*. It is worth noting in this regard that, almost parallel to the publication of Genette's influential book discussing hypertextual practices, of which he considers translation to be one (central) among others, Brazilian translation and literary scholar Rosemary Arrojo uses "palimpsest" in 1986, especially in the context of translation. In her *Oficina de tradução* (1986), under the chapter headline "O texto original redefinido," she proposes: "Ao invés de considerarmos o texto, ou o signo, como um receptáculo em que algum 'conteúdo' possa ser depositado e mantido sob controle, proponho que sua imagem exemplar passe a ser a de um *palimpsesto*" (23).

35 For the close interconnections between Oulipo and translational thought, see Mathews, "Translation"; James; Bary. It would be very worthwhile to examine further, in this context, the explicit hints to other works of short, sharp, pseudo-ethnographic writing laid out in *Contes liquides*, including Michaux, Sternberg, Mathews, but also Aub (who in turn produced several pseudo-translations; see Martin). These links form indeed a constellation of their own, opening up to a whole set of questions regarding forms of

What the publication surely does, though, is stage *translation as experiment*. In claiming translation as its mode of existence, in carrying a double translation at its core and on its cover, *Contes liquides*, in its entirety as a textual artefact, experiments with the norms, expectations, and values projected on what we usually encounter, without further thought, as the material text-in-translation—it carries with it questions about the hierarchical distribution of “original” speech and the conditions that allow “original” speech to be pronounced.<sup>36</sup> It is in this experimenting with the conditions, constellations, and configurations that make a literary text a translation, thus performing it as a material artefact, that *Contes liquides* manifests itself both as playful research and as critique of those configurations.

Garboli, in his 1991 essay, characterizes translation as an “attore senza gesti,” as an actor who performs their act, gestureless, in the black on white of a page—an ephemeral, medial existence that fades out the moment the reading (the being read) has come to an end: what settles in the reader’s mind is the impression, the imprint not of the translation, but of the text that it so readily mediated. Hervé le Tellier’s experiment, his *stagings* of translation operate in reverse: They produce, using an inconsistent wordplay, “gesti senza autore,” gestures (that is: textual bodies, poetic manifestation) that are without the necessity, the existence of one (original) author and are instead built by plurality and on multifarious forms of relating. If Garboli’s translation performs a *body of work* (the “original in translation”), Le Tellier’s experimental translation performs *texture*: by dissolving the solitary text, liquifying it into a web of hypertextual encounters, of communal ground. It is in that sense, then, that *Contes liquides* is essentially conditioned by, while working critically on, the phantasma of translation—translation as a potential mode and spectrum, or, as Mathews formulates it, “the paradigm, the exemplar of all writing” (“Dialect” 7).

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poetic interrelatedness and the constant negotiation of their delineations (as translation, homage, epigonal writing, pastiche, parody...).

- 36 See conte n°413: “Sur la planète HC678, toute personne usant d’une phrase déjà prononcée—des scribes en gardent trace sur d’immenses registres—doit régler des droits d’auteur à son premier locuteur. Seuls les riches ont ainsi la parole, mais n’est-ce pas partout pareil?” (Montestrela 79).

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