Texts and Textiles: Translations and Transformations

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For some time I have been interested in what might be labelled "trans-tech", that is, the interconnections between two different technologies of creativity. I am thinking of the craft of written narrative and the art of weaving, here not so much the machinery of printing and fabric production as the acts of expression in both media. My particular interest is the entanglement of textile arts and commentary and literary texts and theory. ("Entanglement" is itself a textual appropriation of a visual/ haptic image originating in the threads and strings of materiality.)[1] What is going on when a creative writer, or a literary theorist, a painter or a music critic 'borrow' words and images from fabrics and their production? What happens when the fabric arts draw on words and textual theory to inspire or describe their different mediums? How does attending to the specific nature of what is borrowed generate new readings of either aspect of the 'trans' exchange?

One window onto a scene will show different aspects to what one notices from another window into the same scene. Shifting into another disciplinary space can give us tools for thinking anew about the one we are used to inhabiting. Words, for example, can serve as analogues or indices for population movement or trade exchanges if considered within historical linguistics (Barber 37). Language is itself coeval with the development of other technologies: it enabled them and they constructed new terms and relationships by which we think and express ourselves. We continue to expand our knowledge in one field by making raids on other areas, sometimes resuscitating moribund mental connections. Textual work that turns to textile technology is one example.

We have forgotten that we see many things through the window of textile language: we inherit heirlooms, losing sight of the "loom" that is passed down from one generation to another as a valuable family asset. Under stress we are "on tenterhooks" without remembering that this is a visual image of fabric stretched out for bleaching (Postrel 3). Linen work provides us with both "hackle" and "heckle", the upstanding hairs of a scared dog, for example, visually reproducing the combing (originally with thorns, sharp stones or nails set in wood) of soaked and beaten threads of flax, and the verbal scarifying of heckling being an extension of that (Barber 13–14).

Many of these analogies become clichéd metaphors because their comparative referents have dropped from view, and many of them now apply to textual practice rather than textile production: we "spin a yarn" (English for a string twisted from gut) or write a "sutra" (Sanskrit for "thread") (Barber 266, Postrel 3, 5). Text and textile are – to fall into one of the many inevitable puns in this area of discourse – intricately interwoven; the two words themselves come from the same Latin root, just as "fabric" and "fabricate" do. We argue over what a literary canon is and what its social effects might be without recalling that the word includes in its derivations the name for a stick used to measure things and as a "reed" (literal and technical) to hold up the heddle threads that ordered the weft patterning (Scholes 101–2; Liddell and Scott 336). Indeed, if the canon orders what and how we read, it reproduces the meanings of textile words and textile

[1] Entanglement is a notion set in critical motion by anthropologists and can be tracked back through works such as Nicholas Thomas's *Entangled Objects* Cambridge MASS: Harvard University Press, 1991.

technology, which is to order threads into cloth. "Order" connects to Romans arranging warp threads onto looms, and a French *ordinateur* (computer) puts bits and bytes into intelligible order, computing emerging out of weaving technology thanks to Monsieur Jacquard, Ms Lovelace, and Mr Babbage (Barber 270, Postrel 5, Plant).

To reverse the picture briefly, the turn begun by anthropology, then postcolonial and cultural studies that has influenced many disciplines has taken textile objects and elucidated their textual properties. Cloth has often featured designs that are mnemonic signs visualising the nature of the world in geometric metaphors of time, space and social relations — South Asian mandala, for example (Dhamija), or South American cosmology (Tedlock) or Sumatran rituals (Barber 374). Woven motifs also sketch out myths, or the story of someone's life. Ancient textile work not only gave words to language but anticipated later literacy, such that Homer not only tells of woven cloths but possibly draws on their simulation of oral 'histories' to produce his epic verse (Barber 373–382).

If you want to conceive a child in India, go to Fahtepur Sikri and tie some thread into the stone filigree of Chisti's tomb. In Cyprus, to ward off some threat or fulfill a wish, tie a handkerchief to a tree near an ancient underground spring. At Merlin's tomb in Brittany, make a wish and tie a strip of cloth to the twisted old tree in the forest clearing.[2] Mark a fatal traffic accident in New Caledonia by tying bits of clothing to a roadside cross of sticks.[3]

At all these sites, bits of textile become signs for something else, and their assemblage fabricates its own meaning: a kind of installation of history, desire, faith, fear, memory, love, made physically present. Nature, industry, *manu*facture, combine to make textile over into text; textile bricolage transforms place into text—or at least translates that place into a different, multi-stranded, mode of meaning. At the same time, the *hand*craft, the fabric materiality of each installation refuses a textual takeover, producing an evocative if unstable shuttling of signification — a two-way metaphoric transaction.

In modern times, we have seen textual theorists begin to remember the textile crafts that underpin their language and conceptual operations, and from that turn has come a new visibility and valuation of fabric arts, particularly informing feminism and the challenge to old and gendered distinctions between 'high' art and 'low' craft. For example, in *The Pleasure of the Text,* Roland Barthes aligns 'text' with 'tissue' and teases out ideas about textuality through the weave of images arising from that sense of an organic network of cells and a gauzy film of cloth. Jacques Derrida pursues this connection further in *Glas*. Tracing ideas and images from nature through to culture, he discusses embroidering flowers, braiding, sewing, nets, and the fabric of writing (*Glas* 69, 168).Text he describes as a tissue of citation and a grid. It relates to sewing, which is a cutting (couture) and joining that betrays, exhibiting what it should hide (209). Gilles Deleuze takes up the image of the fold in cloth as a symbol characterising a Baroque aesthetic, a pathway into the thought of polymath philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and stretches the folds of his own thinking to suggest his own view of text and the world. He and his colleague Felix Guattari follow

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[2] Personal travel experience.
[3] See Jean-Claude Bourdais, *L'arbre à souvenir* Nouméa: L'Herbier de Feu, 2000.

on from Derrida's distinction between weaving and sewing, making their own contrast between "smooth" and "striated" structures figured as felted and woven cloth.

Textile, then, becomes a useful tool for thinking about other texts and aspects of life in general, but in serving this purpose loses its materiality, being turned from objects perceived through the senses and produced by bodies as well as machines, into mental abstractions. Thomas Carlyle anticipates this theoretical turn when he parodies German philosophy in *Sartor Resartus*, offering a humorous criticism of the text/textile transmutation masquerading as a "philosophy of clothes". Textual representations of textile may preserve something of the "thingness" of fabrics but can also deploy textile imagery to serve textual interests. For the theorist there is perhaps a desire to repossess the physicality of fabrics and their production; to give some figurative substance to their ideas; to reconnect with an art-craft *gemeinschaft* ideal. This is a time-honoured rhetorical practice: illustrate a conceptual point with a concrete example. It also suggests an awareness that words are never concrete enough and require supplementation. Especially when used in the humanities and arts, they carry the disparagement voiced by Plato in the *Republic*: poetry is a copy of a copy of a copy and thus unreliable illusion.

Gayatri Spivak and Rukmini Bhaya Nair imply that such textual/theoretical play with textile metaphors is a false mask of radicalism, text being set in opposition to the "textile of activism" — the real world of poor women in third-world sweatshops that nineteenth-century literature like Mrs Gaskell's novels critically depicted. Nonetheless, Bhaya Nair resorts to her own textilic-textual play:

> But now irony appears in a Greek mode: words spun out for pleasure are processed in the loom of fate. … Even the shamiana, so benign a structure, has undergone those changes characteristic of postcoloniality: *text style*, *textile.* (Nair 252)

Her recourse to textilic figures of speech is so typical, one might speak of a "textile turn" in literary studies. One more example comes from Carolyn Porter. In her article "Are We Being Historical Yet?", she writes:

> New historicism projects a vision of history as an endless skein of cloth smocked into a complex overall pattern by the needle and thread of power. You need only pull the thread at one place to find it connected to another. (Porter 765)

Now, at risk of being pedantic, we might point out that this is a set of textile images assembled to make an analogy that dramatizes a concept of historical formation. It mixes its textile metaphors and its lack of attention to fabric arts compromises its description of an intellectual movement. A skein is a looped and or twisted hank of thread. Cloth is what happens when that skein is unravelled and strung on a loom and woven with other threads. Smocking is the gathering of cloth into ridges by sewing and pulling the stitches tight. There is no integral connection between the cloth and the embroidered patterning of the smocking threads. The threads themselves are not necessarily intertwined, so pulling at one will not affect the cloth and may not interfere with the other smocking. It would only loosen some element of the ruched cloth. Textile analogies have become a critical (bad) habit.

Porter is actually debating some of the aspects of subalternity as it is absent from or mis-represented in the standard workings of history. In the same context, Anshuman Mondal analyses the historicism behind Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land.* Here one might apply a textile metaphor to the argument about etymology entailing a teleological view of tracking back to origins. Ghosh constantly posits Arabic origins for European words and sometimes Sanskrit origins for Arabic ones (Mondal 24). This is akin to the common metaphor of following the thread. As with Theseus' adventure in the labyrinth of Minos, one goes to a centre/end, then is able to track back to a beginning. History is the thread to and fro in time that saves the venturer. But Ghosh is attempting a kind of counter history: the uncharted story of his chosen subaltern fragment: the slave Ben Yizu. Mondal makes the point, using Robert Young, that such an alternative history relies on there being a standard from which to assess and assert difference. Ghosh talks of his exploration into the labyrinth of subalternity as "tiny threads woven into the borders of a gigantic tapestry" (IAAL 95/ Mondal 25). This both admits to and demolishes the "following the thread" concept. The large tapestry of historical grand narrative suggests a completed whole resulting in a continuous weaving from beginning to end. Lyotardian "petit récits" of the subaltern are disparate fragments tacked on in the margins of the great work, but they can be detected by the subaltern historian tracking back through the threads of the greater picture story. However, the tapestry of history *as tapestry* is a more complex structure, less smoothly linked together and not distinct from subaltern additions. We could wonder what the warp (the continuous underlying threads) of the total work consist of, but the events, or moments, or individual experiences that make up the overall pattern are — as tapestry — separate bits of thread twisted into the base mesh: they are not connected to each other, so have no teleological nature, making the historians' retrospective "following of threads" problematic, regardless of whether they are tracing mainstream or subaltern stories.

Ghosh's tapestry metaphor, however, is not completely inappropriate, since tapestry involves the existence of a totalising vision pre-existing the work of the tapestry makers. Thus it resonates with the idea of a grand narrative pre-packaged by some dominant discourse. There is a retrospect that prefigures the anticipatory assemblage of threads. At the same time, unless we understand history as a process preordained or at least preconceived by some extra-temporal entity, historical "story weaving" must be an endless experiment without any clear sense of an end or guiding picture subject to adjustments according to present interests. Its tapestry motifs arise from chance or temporary contingency. Perhaps they generate related patterns or repetitions. These we can only see once they have emerged in the fabric, but the overall picture is never definitively known.

Recourse to textile images may have something to do with anxieties concerning the doubleness of the word. To use two of much-quoted poetic examples, it washes away in the waves of time, but it also endures longer than a summer's day. Putting words into textiles and textiles into words may be a way of addressing this duality. Doing so does not, however, resolve differences. How long it took to write a text is not usually part of how we value it, but the painstaking process of creating textile art is a key factor in how we value it. Reading text works by our erasing awareness of the pen/ typewriter/ computer/ publisher; fabric art declares the fibres and processes by which the work comes into being. Texture in reading is a mental apprehension

of shape/ rhythm/ density of sentences; texture in fabric is a material feel of ridges and troughs, thinness and thickness of weave perceived haptically.

At this point, I shall look at one particular instance of a textual appropriation of textile imagery to draw out first, how its metaphor (its translation or carrying across) transforms what it transfers from one technology to another, and how recognition of that mistranslated textile can reveal something about the working of the text.

The seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan wrote a piece lamenting the "unhoused" freedom of mankind. As a good Christian of his time, and one escaping the disturbances of England's civil war, Vaughan saw freedom as a disturbing mutability arising from exile from Eden. "Man" starts with nature as a point of contrast to human life:

> Weighing the steadfastness and state
> Of some mean things which here below reside,
> Where birds like watchful Clocks the noiseless date
> And intercourse of time divide,
> Where bees at night get home and hive, and flowrs
> Early, as well as late,
> Rise with the Sun, and set in the same howrs;
>
> I would (said I) my God would give
> The staidness of these things to man! for these
> To his divine appointments ever cleave,
> And no new business breaks their peace;
> The birds nor sow, nor reap, yet sup and dine,
> The flowres without clothes live,
> Yet *Solomon* was never drest so fine.
>
> Man hath stil either toyes, or Care,
> He hath no root, nor to one place is ty'd,
> But ever restless and Irregular
> About this Earth doth run and ride,
> He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where,
> He sayes it is so far
> That he hath quite forgot how to go there.
>
> He knocks at all doors, strays and roams,
> Nay not so much wit as some stones have
> Which in the darkest nights point to their homes,
> By some hid sense their Maker gave;
> Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
> And passage through these looms
> God order'd motion, but ordain'd no rest.

Vaughan comes up with his concluding weaving imagery as a striking poetic conceit of the kind that John Donne or George Herbert also valued. Aldous Huxley sees its unusual nature when he singles out the last three lines as an example of creative rather than scientific use of language when he sought to track a path between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis (between "bland scientism" and "one-track moralistic literalism" 5) in *Literature and Science* (Huxley 25–26). He defined scientific language as dealing in 'public' matters and having recourse to common language and discipline-specific jargon in order to make words convey exactly and only what is intended and arrive at general principles: "At its most perfectly pure, scientific language ceases to be a matter of words and turns into mathematics." (14). Literary language attempts to convey 'private' understandings in relation to specific, though complex human situations, grappling with "radical incomprehensibility… uniqueness, multifariousness and mystery" (12):

> The literary artist purifies the language of the tribe in a radically different way…. Human life is lived simultaneously on many levels and has many meanings. Literature is a device for reporting the multifarious facts and expressing their significances…. Not by simplifying and jargonizing but by deepening and extending, by enriching with allusive harmonics, with overtones of association and undertones of sonorous magic. (14).

We can note the transition in this passage to another mode of creativity (music) to give us a clarifying, possibly refracting, side-glance at the central literary subject — an "allusive harmonics" in itself. As Huxley points out by citing Vaughan's concluding metaphor, the subtleties and nuances of particular human experience rely on inventive phrases to make sense of (give sensory impact to) an idea and to capture in their allusiveness the multiple shades of meaning and feeling attaching to the writer's apprehension of that idea.

As he comments, such similitudes generate questions of their own that complexify meaning and keep interpretation in play. Vaughan's poem contrasts the regular patterns of flowers and birds and bees to mankind, who "hath no root, nor to one place is ty'd/ But ever restless and Irregular/ About this Earth doth run and ride". Nature lives in pre-lapsarian unity with God's "divine appointments". The poet wishes that God allowed such "staidness" to humans, who seem "ordained" to wander the world without earthly home and only a vague sense of some remote heavenly one. The textile imagery seems to be tacked on right at the end of the poem as a kind of clinching flourish. We wonder what the looms might be in which we move; what our movements actually weave; what the warp is and what kind of weft our shuttle lays in; how — or if — God the weaver beats us into some ordered pattern, and where all this "rabbit-out-of-hat" conclusion comes from. Well, the technology of weaving figures forth in an abrupt manner the distinct nature of human life as compared with birds and flowers; it is a kind of poetic "fall" in itself relative to the rest of the poem. However, it is prepared for in the first stanza, where "birds like watchful Clocks the noiseless date/ and Intercourse of times divide". This messes with the nature–culture binary otherwise at work in the poem, but carries the idea of God's creation as a well-oiled machine of regularity and anticipates the machine images of weaving, suggesting the loom or its weft is also a figure of time's "intercourse". The image of man, who "knocks at all doors" perhaps also prepares us for the loom conceit in that the sound resonates with the knocking of the weaver's shuttle and the beater. The problem remains, however, that the "winding quest" of mankind as described in the rest of the poem is far more "Irregular" than the movement of the shuttle in a

loom: not winding at all, but steadily back and forth; not winding its way up and down among the threads of the warp but flying straight between them as they are separated by the shed. Now it may well be that Vaughan took up an allusion to give dramatic and visual impact to his poetic theologising without having set eyes on a loom, though it is unlikely, given his years in Wales.

Deliberate or not, the mishandled borrowing of weaving imagery can be read as conveying something of the tacit tensions of the poem's working out of its argument. It is reflected in the split of voice in the line "I would (said I) my God would give…" and in the breakdown of regular metre when man "scarce knows where" his home is: "He says it is so far/ That he hath quite forgot how to go there". The syllables are regular according to the overall pattern, but it is a strain to read the last line as five iambic feet. If man is a sorry creature forced to wander erratically through the world, the happily regular (regulated) creatures of nature are also "mean" and clock-like. Presumably the stones that have the wit to point to their homes are magnetised rocks, so again there is an associative clash between nature and technology, and we begin to feel that the poet, while perhaps yearning for some "staidness" amid the upheavals of life, possibly longing within conventional Christianity for release into a heavenly home, is also more unhappy with the idea of being "ordained" (as are the animals and birds) to be a shuttle than he is with his post-lapsarian enforced freedom to roam on "winding quest" (which entails the poet's freedom to come up with catchy if clunky textile metaphors).

If literary writers have recourse to other lines of work so as to generate new ways of seeing our condition, other disciplines also rely on labour and knowledge outside of their immediate practice and focus. Though he finds Freudian psychoanalysis full of flaws, Huxley allows its usefulness:

> But to be adequate as a realistic explanation of the observed facts, and as a principle dictating therapeutic procedures, a merely psychological theory of human nature as a product of the interaction of conscious and unconscious mental activities, in relation to present and past environments, requires to be supplemented by other theories, based upon facts of a different order. (82)

Towards the end of his essay, Huxley notes the cross-disciplinary work involved in ecological studies (assorted sciences, ethics, philosophy) and connects our present condition to the *hubris* of Greek tragedy. He also begins to take into account post-Heisenberg relativity and the mysteries of quantum physics, and how they open up to engagements from creative thinkers, looking to new spaces "between some classes of observed facts and some classes of felt values" and "a new kind of Nature-literature" (93). This takes us closer than differences of language use among scientists and literary writers, to considerations of the cross-border raids of literary theorists and artists.

As indicated by my word choice when discussing Vaughan's recourse to shuttles and looms, a useful concept anticipating questions around transfers/transactions /transformations across modes of creative production would seem to be that of "misprision" as outlined by Harold Bloom in his *Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom argues that "strong poets" become such by appropriating and misreading their strong forebears: that is, they free themselves from imprisoning tradition through paradoxically borderline criminal acts of theft and mistranslation. Bloom himself

propounds his theory of poetic formation by committing some (mis)appropriations of his own. He admits to basing his notion of poetic struggle against precursors on Freud's psychological theories of parent–child competition (Bloom 8, 37, 57, 62, etc.), and like Freud resorts to analogies from the Greek classics. He also invokes Nietzsche as a prior influence (8, 49, 55) and in his own sermon-like pronouncements includes the writings of Kierkegaard (56, 72). To advance his investigation of literary creativity, Bloom regularly has recourse to history, in particular to the work of Vico and its notion that cycles of history included transmutations in self and style in each era. But in validating his intellectual credentials via classical borrowings, he also draws upon science: Lucretius's use of the word "clinamen" as description of a "swerve" in the motion of atoms that allows change to occur in nature (14, 43–44). The root word denotes a slope, and one of its derivatives lends itself to Bloom's analysis by describing one thing leaning upon another. Possibly captured by his own etymological borrowing, Bloom adopts one more connotation of KLINO: things may "swerve" but do so (in his model of self-formational poetic struggle) in a succession of declines (10). In his history of poetry, these stem from the Renaissance, the moment when people became self-conscious of themselves as individuals and originality became a cultural value. So, Spenser makes his own self/work from creatively (mis)using a range of medieval romance material and Christian iconography, is followed by Milton, who in turn inspires/terrorises Shelly and the Romantics and so on.

Bloom also draws on the communications theories of Gregory Bateson of which he says, "Now it ought to be clear that I am invoking an analogue only" (71). The term is repeated throughout the work (8, 58). However, his somewhat dogmatic ideas — other models of criticism are declared to be "absurd" (69) or a "failed enterprise" (43); modern poets are said to be "miserable" dualists (35) — are founded on a series of analogies that result in his own analogous psychodrama for which Judaism and Blake's epics are foundational. The former seems to imbue his argument with negative images of melancholy and suffering and heroism as a kind of depleted endurance (22); the latter inspires tales of battles among Muses, Sphinxes and Cherubs over the genius of the poet's creation.

We can argue with Bloom's overall outlook, but his example, and a translation of his notion of the strong poet onto the strong novelist or the strong theorist as deliberately misreading (swerving from/ finding swerves in, transforming) other work in order to generate new ideas, helps us see something of the creative misprision at work in the increasingly hybrid fields of creative practice and theory.

This paper has concentrated on transfers and transformations of textile work into textual practice. We may as readily study how the fabric arts and commentary on them adopt phrases and ideas from textual studies, in particular from those theorists who have been influential in that intellectual space. Working across multi-modal translations and transformations, we are faced with questions that overlap with others now familiar from studies of difference focused on race, class, gender. How can we talk about textiles without textualizing them? What happens to our reading of texts and our understanding of textual practice when we attend to the materiality of textilic things alluded to — when we look at stories in cloth and cloth in stories? How might we reshape our relation to textile art-crafts if we also think critically about their importation of textual apparatus? What has been taken for granted, transmitted uncritically across generations and

disciplines? What gaps, silences, limits, particular differences are highlighted in one when we stop to examine the specificities of the other? Which ceremonies and what commerce go on in the translations of the two? The answers, like much contemporary art work, will be 'site specific' but they will respond to such general interrogation.

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