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Lost in (Trans)lation: The Misread Body of Herculine Barbin

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C.J. Gomolka

Abstract

After the twentieth-century's *crise de la langue*, it might be considered commonplace to hear the phrase, "the meaning was lost in translation." However, the twenty-first century has inaugurated a new era in which "linguistic gender bending" among transsexuals has witnessed a recrudescence and the desire to translate the meaning of this identity is at the center of the gender movement. Today, numerous trans-autobiographies attract buyers at Fnac or on Amazon.fr: *Né homme, comment je suis devenue femme*, *Alain transsexuelle* and *Je serai elle* just to name a few examples. Besides their discourses that recount a marginalised social identity, all share a common linguistic denominator: a narrative alternation between genders.

However, this modern linguistic heterodoxy may owe more to the past than it seems. Discovered in the 1860's by Auguste Tardieu and first published under the title *Question médico-légale de l'identité*, the memoirs of Herculine Barbin might represent the genesis of the practice of trans-subjectivisation through the linguistic manipulation of gender. Herculine's life, told through h/er memoirs, exemplifies a linguistic attempt to expose a trans-identity relegated to the margins of nineteenth-century French life.

This essay will explore the hermeneutic function of narrative gender variation in *Mes souvenirs* (the memoirs of Herculine Barbin). On the one hand, this essay will attempt to show how, in the French version, Herculine's trans-discourse produces a narrative subversiveness that transcends social margins and expresses what it means to be between genders. On the other hand, I will expose how the English version of *Mes souvenirs*, translated by Richard McDougall, pigeon-holes her identity into one of two genders and therefore removes from h/er discourse any possible trans-subversiveness.

In the Introduction to the English version of Herculine Barbin's autobiography *Mes souvenirs* [My memories], the editor, Michel Foucault, states of the author's life:

One has the impression...that everything took place in a world of feelings—enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness—where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance. It was a world in which grins hung about without the cat. (*Herculine* xiii)

This "happy limbo of non-identity," as Foucault terms it (xiii), a designation that this paper takes to task, poses several problems for possible translations/translators. Moreover, as I will discuss throughout this paper, this term also presages the problem inherent to the translation for which Foucault has written an introduction. On the one hand, it would seem that Barbin's intentions as to the transmission and comprehension of h/er text are clear from the personalised title given to h/er finished product: *Mes souvenirs*; indeed, an indication of the desire to communicate a nostalgic and certainly personalised identificatory statement. Rather than highlight the individualised context through which Herculine defines h/er story, Foucault would have us read less of an autobiography and more of a translated and emotionally charged biography, as it were. Found in the 1860's by Auguste Tardieu and originally published under the title *Question médico-légale de l'identité* [Medico-legal question of identity], the memoirs of Herculine Barbin might represent one of the first instances of trans-subjectivization by linguistic gender manipulation. Moreover, as I hope to show throughout this paper, Herculine Barbin's narration rather than representing 'non-identity' seems instead to produce a literary refusal to accept only one identity. Absent from the English translation, this refusal takes to task at once narrative form itself and what expressing oneself through this form might mean.

Today as markets become more global, including the "linguistic market" (Bourdieu), the phrase 'the meaning was lost in translation' might need to expand its semantic scope to be inclusive of transfers outside the limits of the 'word for word.' What if the meaning that was lost in translation was not that of a word, but rather an identity? Is it possible for all literary identities to be rendered from one language into another? And if so, what happens during this transformative process? Is the identity changed, deformed, displaced? These questions are very topical in a global translation market as new identities, in particular non-heteronormative identities, are progressively more present in discursive media practices such as journals, television, radio, novels, etc. Paul Baker explains that as the purveyors of discourses based on these identities, the media seem to hold the power of presentation.

Moreover, as these non-normative identities seep into universal mass culture and are therefore displaced from their formally centralised positions, they are necessarily dissected by mass culture in an attempt at comprehension. Today, many non-heteronormative identities feel the need for self-expression: that is, to rely on personal accounts, many of which appear in autobiographical form, given over to mass culture in an attempt to thwart misapprehension. What is important and seemingly constitutive to many of these works is an emphasis on the multiple rather than singular nature of identity and the use of language to translate this variance.

A new era of “linguistic gender bending”¹ among French and Francophone trans-identities and the sexually marginalised saw a recrudescence in the late twentieth century. Today, numerous trans-autobiographical works can be found on bookshelves in Fnac or on amazon.fr; *Né homme, comment je suis devenue femme*, by Brigitte Martel (1981), *Alain, transsexuelle* by Inge Stephens (1983), *Diane par Diane* (1987), and *Je serai elle* by Sylviane Dullak (1983) to name a few.² Besides being autobiographical and focusing on male-to-female transsexuals, these trans-narratives also share another aspect: a narrative alternation between masculine and feminine gender concord as a means of linguistic and therefore gender dissention.

Jennifer Coates in her seminal survey *Women, Men and Language* convincingly shows that at its most elementary level language is gendered. Linguistic social variation based on age, gender, social class, etc., is not only a given in a social context; it also helps to highlight structure and to order linguistic “heterogeneity” (4), in a way that allows not only for the comprehension of linguistic interrelations between genders, what she calls “gender-preferential languages,” (44) but also the role that gender plays in the articulation of the social power systems that control these interrelations. If language, then, can be seen as the linguistic expression of a gendered self, vocalising a multidimensional gendered subject must take to task the heteronormative imperative (Warner) that would require a clearly articulated univocal gendered identity based on a socially marked sexed body. For the trans-autobiographical writer, articulating sentient gendered experiences rather than one that might be anchored in a scientifically based taxonomic speech act, might prove quite difficult. And this because the merging of gendered constructions within a text’s network of significations is vital to the way in which we understand both the text itself and the writer. As Monique Wittig says of gender in language, “No other has left its trace within language to such a degree that to eradicate it would not only modify language at the lexical level but would upset the structure itself” (88). Highlighting the important role that gender plays in the creation and comprehension of the self in society, these twentieth-century trans-narratives manipulate language, putting it to use for the articulation of them/their selves rather than being passive linguistic *flâneurs* accepting the linguistic social conventions through which they would be inadequately expressed.

Linguist Anna Livia explains that in French trans-autobiographies the transsexuals “us[e] the binary opposition of the French linguistic gender system...to express or underscore many... changes of mood, attitude, and identification” (352). The idea of bending gender to self-subjectify, she explains, is used:

by groups whose sexual orientation or whose gender identity is at odds with societal norms. Sexually liminal communities use linguistic gender in ways both paradoxical and ironic, for the very system whose simple binary excludes them is called into play to generate their own meanings and construct the communities’ own network of alliances. (365)

Contrary to the English language, which complicates linguistic or textual (morphological/ syntactical) alternation between gendered linguistic experiences, many romance languages offer language users the option of a multi-gendered linguistic or textual self-presentation. For example, in English: *I am happy* would linguistically and textually be gender neutral, indicating no gender in and of itself, only allowing for gender identification to be known through external perception or admission by the speaker/writer. In French: *Je suis heureux* (I am happy) (masculine singular, hereafter ms) or *Je suis heureuse* (I am happy) (feminine singular, hereafter fs) would allow for the reader or listener to understand linguistically and/or textually the gender identification of the speaker/writer. The French language provides its users with a range of linguistic and/or textual gendered possibilities, permitting multiple identificatory prospects even in one simple enunciation: *Je suis heureuse* (fs) *et satisfait* (ms)

(I am happy and satisfied). In essence, this linguistic nonconformity allows trans-identities to take full advantage of the potential of a linguistic system plagued by ostensible discrimination and divergence in terms of heteronormativity. Taking agency back into their own hands, these autobiographers translate themselves through a manipulation of their own language inscribing a gendered spectrum onto their lives and offering up a protean view of the trans-identity. Indeed, these trans-identities express what it means to be.

It might be considered anachronistic to include Herculine Barbin in the category 'transgender' since the term was not coined until the 1980's. However, h/er story as well as the presentation of h/er/self in the French version of the text seem to produce undeniable evidence that would preclude a discussion about whether or not today s/he would be placed under this umbrella term; especially when compared to only a few of the persons Susan Stryker includes in this 'imagined community' (Anderson): "transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine women, effeminate men" (4). Indeed, like the trans-narratives of twentieth-century France, the bending of this 'mark of gender' plays a decisive role in the nineteenth-century French narrative presented by Herculine Barbin. This essay will explore the hermeneutic function of narrative gender variation as it appears in *Mes souvenirs*. More importantly, however, this paper will show how the discourse produced by this semantic web translates the narrat(ive)ed body of Herculine Barbin into a subversive example of a textualised trans-identity in nineteenth-century French society; and conversely, how the English version, void of gender variation, strips the narrative of any possible narrative trans-subversiveness leaving behind the linguistic vestiges of the heteronormative imperative that the French version seems to resist.

The transfer of meaning from one language to another is certainly not without casualties. It might be said that the 'perfect' translation exists only in a world of chimeras. Charles Péguy comments: "ce que la réalité nous enseigne impitoyablement et sans aucune exception, c'est que toute opération de cet ordre (la traduction), toute opération de déplacement, sans aucune exception, entraîne impitoyablement...une déperdition, une altération, et que cette déperdition... est toujours considérable" (Steiner 197).³ Yet what is lost in the translation marks a gain for the translated. George Steiner remarks:

[t]he motion of transfer and paraphrase enlarges the stature of the original [and this increase has an existential perspective... there is no doubt that echo enriches... We are back at the problem of the mirror which not only reflects but also generates light. The original text gains from the orders of diverse relationship and distance established between itself and the translations. (196)

In this sense, the very existence of the original text can be underscored by its translation. Through this epistemic exchange, even in its failings, the meaning imbued in the original text is localised and undergirded.

As the title of the English version suggests, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, Herculine Barbin was a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite who was born with an ambiguous genital constitution. Herculine was described by the medical examiners as predominately masculine with a "verge imparfaite" [imperfect penis] and a "[é]bauche de vagin" [underdeveloped vagina] (Tardieu 148),⁴ grew up among women in religious houses, was forced at the age of eighteen to assume a masculine role, and subsequently committed suicide after many failed attempts to integrate h/erself (or be integrated) into society.

As an early example of what would appear to be a narrative imbued with an ambiguous trans-identity, the English version of *Herculine Barbin*, translated by Richard McDougall, might find itself among similar trans-narratives in courses on transgender theory and history.⁵ Its placement among these narratives is conspicuous, and therefore must be examined in a different context. Unlike the ambiguous French title, *Mes souvenirs*, the English title becomes a teleological disclosure that causally divests the memoir of any eventual transitivity; in other words, the English reader knows the end before he/she knows the beginning. This seemingly flagrant betrayal of Herculine's French narrative seems twofold: first, in *Mes souvenirs*, Herculine never discloses any information, in the narrative or in the title, of any manifest auto-taxonomic speech act: Herculine never classifies h/erself

as a hermaphrodite. In the first instance, then, the English title purges the narrative and its narrator of a possible psychosomatic transition or fluctuation. Second, the title of the English version coerces the reader to consciously (mis)read a narrative created by and (re)presenting the ambigendered identity of Herculine Barbin. Moreover, the English title works as a polarising agent, charging Herculine as always already sexually deviant, forcing h/er contextualised *ambigendered* identity to become necessarily *sexually* dichotomous. In other words, the English title inscribes a medico-legal taxonomic discourse (hermaphrodite) onto the body of the narrative which seems discordant with this discourse. Refracted by the sheer stress of the heteronormative imperative under which s/he is deviant, the English title compels the reader to always already read h/er in a biology-is-destiny formulation.

If, as Jay Prosser explains in *Second Skins*, “[n]arrative is not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition (for transsexuals), the link between locations: the transition itself” (9), it seems then that the English title undercuts the very narration or transitivity it intends to foreground. As Charles Taylor remarks in an essay on multiculturalism and the politics of recognition: “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others...Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (25).

The English title, as does the English version of the text, seems to preclude the interlocution that the author envisions between h/erself and the reader. Obviating any type of interpretation and recognition based on this dialogue, and concomitantly promoting an *a priori* misrecognition and a distorted identity, the English version seems to operate on an ontological adulteration that already acknowledges the narration by a prescribed *telos*.

Foucault states in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, “The truth [does] not reside solely in the subject” but rather in the hermeneutic decipherment by the listener after the subject (66-67). Yet, as a misrepresentation of this ‘subject,’ the English version of the text deprives the reader of an interpretation based on Herculine’s original intention: a presentation through which gender was not a stationary given. In order to find what is lost, in order to understand this ‘presentation of the subject,’ the English version, rather than existing as a self-contained or autonomous piece, underscores the need to have recourse to the original work.

Like the trans-autobiographies of twentieth-century France, the *souvenirs* of Herculine Barbin become the hermeneutic encoding of the self into text. Moreover, Herculine’s nuanced narrative is encouraged by the linguistic construction of the French language, allowing for a compliant manipulation of the gendered self. I will add here to what Anna Livia called “linguistic gender bending,” and term Herculine’s gender manipulation a *linguistic trans-functionality*, since it functions in the text as a linguistic psychosomatic marker of trans-identity, rather than *only* ‘bending’ gender. Adversely, the construction of the English language, a construction that hinders the fluid expression of gender needed to communicate the trans-experience, forecloses the elaborate gendered network created by Herculine’s self-representation, promoting, like the medical documents that precede the text, a biology-is-destiny formulation of Herculine Barbin. Indeed, this translation of Herculine’s story has more consequences than might first appear. In linguistically placing Herculine as a ‘she’ until s/he is forced to assume an imperative ‘he,’ the English version forces Herculine’s seemingly amorous discourse with several women to be reworded into that of a lesbian and then inescapably that of a ‘man-made’ straight man. This type of translation takes away from Herculine any possible (trans)agency and places h/er into one of two binaries that the French version seems determined to frustrate. One might argue that this flagrant misrepresentation of Herculine’s identity retranslates h/er story from autobiographical to fictional; indeed, then, in the English version, Herculine as a trans-identity ceases *to be*. Moreover, in addition to subverting the very linguistic binary that should exclude Herculine, this gendered trans-functionality seemingly sustains h/er narrated self by reaffirming, within the terms of linguistic discourse, its social existence. In being addressed, one is said to be recognised both for what one is but also, as Judith Butler states, “to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible...If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence” (*Excitable* 5). In other words, Herculine Barbin can

only exist by a reciprocal recognition conferred to the reader by the French version of the text. Without this recognition, Herculine seemingly cannot be understood as s/he intended.

The English version of the text gives an inconspicuous *avertissement* to readers toward the end of Foucault's Introduction; a *caveat* worth quoting in full:

In the English translation of the text, it is difficult to render the play of the masculine and feminine adjectives which Alexina (Herculine) applies to herself. They are, for the most part, feminine before she possessed Sara and masculine afterwards. But this systematization, which is denoted by the use of italics, does not seem to describe a consciousness of being a woman becoming a consciousness of being a man; rather, it is an ironic reminder of grammatical, medical, and juridical categories that language must utilize but that the content of the narrative contradicts. The editors of the English-language edition have followed Herculine's system wherever possible, italicizing the feminine nouns which she used in referring to herself. (xiii-xiv)

From this, one can glean one of two things: on the one hand, the editor points out that the regulation of masculine and feminine fluctuations in the text are "for the most part, feminine before she possessed Sara (one of Herculine's love interests) and masculine afterwards" (Foucault, *Herculine* xiii-xiv). Yet this seemingly innocent advancement seems to prove not only counterfactual from the very start of Herculine's narrative, but remains even more controversial as the narrative continues. In fact, when placed side by side with two French versions of the text (Éditions Gallimard and Éditions du Boucher),⁶ this warning becomes all the more problematic. For the one (Gallimard), the editor does not even mention the fluctuation in agreement; rather the reader encounters only the title given by Herculine (*Mes souvenirs*), and then the text, promoting a reading of the narrative sans *a priori* information. In the Éditions du Boucher, the editor includes the following note: "Les mots imprimés ici en italique sont soulignés dans le manuscrit, car l'auteur a mis une visible affection à parler tantôt de lui au masculin, tantôt au féminin" (emphasis added).⁷ On the other hand, the editor of the English version assumes that "this systematization, which is denoted by the use of italics, does not seem to describe a consciousness of being a woman becoming a consciousness of being a man, rather, it is an ironic reminder of grammatical, medical, and juridical categories that language must utilize but that the content of the narrative contradicts" (Foucault, *Herculine* xiii-xiv). In other words, the fact that Herculine refers to h/erself in both the masculine and feminine forms, from the very beginning, holds little if any consciously imbued semantic weight, but rather seems to be a linguistic coincidence, allowed by the specificities of the French language. While the footnote does make reference to its own contradiction by informing the reader that the narrative seems to counter this fatalistic linguistic occurrence, this cautionary nudge to the narrative seems quite insufficient. Indeed, when filtered through a reading of the trans-narrative produced by the French version, the use of this type of gender variant discourse seems to mimic the subversive nature of the trans-narratives of twentieth-century France.

From the very beginning of h/er narration, Herculine's story is deflected through a trans-functional linguistic discourse that bends but does not break recognisable gender binaries with which the reader is familiar: masculine and feminine. Indeed, by choosing to oscillate between a masculine and feminine semantic narrative construction, the reader is compelled to reorient him/herself toward a type of fluctuation rather than a concrete separation of gendered psychosomatic experience. This gender variant discourse assumes then a subversive quality as it distorts the discursive functionality of the heteronormative imperative that would require a linguistic and/or psychosomatic 'true sex.'

In the following citation, I have placed in brackets an (**m**) for masculine designation and an (**f**) for feminine designation which occurs on the very first page of the narrative:⁸

C1: J'ai vingt-cinq ans, et, quoique jeune encore, j'approche, à n'en pas douter, du terme fatal de mon existence. J'ai beaucoup souffert, et j'ai souffert seul (**m**)! seul (**m**)! abandonné (**m**) de tous! ...Cet âge n'a pas existé pour moi. J'avais, dès cet âge, un éloignement instinctif du monde, comme si j'avais pu comprendre déjà que je devais y vivre étranger (**m**). *Soucieux* (**m**) et rêveur (**m**), mon front semblait s'affaisser sous le poids de sombres mélancolies. J'étais *froide* (**f**), timide, et, en quelque sorte, insensible à toutes ces joies bruyantes et ingénues qui font épanouir un visage d'enfant. J'aimais la solitude, cette compagne du malheur, et, lorsqu'un sourire bienveillant se levait sur moi, j'en étais *heureuse* (**f**), comme d'une faveur inespérée. (*Herculine* 9)

C1: I am twenty-five years old, and, although I am still young, I am beyond any doubt approaching the hour of my death. I have suffered much, and I have suffered alone (**gn**)! Alone (**gn**)! Forsaken by everyone (**gn**)! ...That age did not exist for me. As soon as I reached that age, I instinctively drew apart from the world, as if I had already come to understand that I was to live in it as a stranger (**gn**). Anxious (**gn**) and brooding (**gn**), my brow seemed to sink beneath the weight of dark, melancholy thoughts. I was cold (**gn**), timid, and, in a way, indifferent to all those boisterous and ingenuous joys that light up the faces of children. I loved solitude, that companion of misfortune, and when a benevolent smile rose over me, it made me happy (**gn**), like an unhoped-for favor. (Foucault, *Herculine* 3)

Indeed, from the very first page of the novel, Herculine refers to h/erself six times with a masculine designation and only twice with a feminine form. We must remember of course that this extract represents a moment in time before h/er 'possession' of Sara. In other words, from the very beginning Herculine's narrative undermines the erroneous warning provided by the editor by using the masculine designation for seventy-five percent of the opening narration, there where the editor would like us to see at least that much in the feminine.

Indeed, numbers are only numbers, and I do not intend to make a mathematical assumption into how the weight of certain quantitative representations affect the text. Rather, the second part of the footnote seems to interest us at much deeper level. Again, the editor explains that the systematisation of masculine and feminine referents "does not seem to describe" a conscious switch between *being* a woman or *being* a man or any combination of the two, but is, rather, only the *ironic* reminder of the different disparate categories that a language is forced to assume in order to express a certain system of attributes. In fact, what seems more ironic is the assumption that someone who lived their life between, among, or as two different gendered categories would have only inserted that distinction into the story by some causal linguistic *fatalité*. It seems much more logical to assume that the author is someone who is writing *to be read* and therefore with the intention to be 'recognised.' Even Foucault remarks on the dialogical nature of Herculine's story: "The first name Camille (the name for Herculine in the story) seems to have been a convention that was invented either by Tardieu, when he published Alexina's (one of Herculine's names in life) recollections, or—*more probably*—by herself, *which allows us to suppose that she was thinking of possible readers*" (Foucault, *Herculine* 120; emphasis added). Ironically, the note from the famous French sexologist that prefaced the English version seems to not only contradict the idea that there was only one identity⁹ (one consciousness), in the narrative, but also discernibly frustrates the argument noted by the editor in his preface to the English version. Indeed, if Alexina (female/male) turned Herculine (self-constructed man) had not envisioned people to read h/er text and had not consciously intended to describe a consciousness of *being* a man and/or *being* a woman, it seems only logical that written retrospectively h/er narrative would have been steeped in the same masculinity s/he was forced to assume at the end of the text. Yet, perhaps more interestingly, the trans-functionality of h/er linguistic discourse in the French version of the text seems to ontologically demonstrate that this ambigendered construction always already existed in h/er identity. Indeed, far from the "happy limbo of a non-identity" suggested by Foucault in the Introduction.

As one encounters the narrative instances in which Herculine linguistically 'bends gender,' it would seem that the curt jab to the narration given in the English footnote is anything but heuristic. For there seems to be ample evidence in the text, that a conflation of, or fluctuation between, consciousnesses is contextualised in the trans-narrative and should be analysed as such. In a first instance, Herculine recounts h/er nascent affections for Sarah as a friend (curiously translated as "girlfriend" which can denote numerous interpretations in English but seems to activate, however weakly, a sexual script in this version):

C2: Naturally good, Sara surrounded me with a thousand delicate attentions that denoted a generous heart. I was her confidante (**gn**) and her first *girlfriend* (**gn**) (Foucault, *Herculine* 44) (emphasis in original).

C2: Naturellement bonne, Sara m'entourait de mille prévenances délicates qui dénotent un cœur généreux. Je fus sa confidente (**f**) et sa première *amie* (**f**) (*Herculine* 53 ; emphasis in original).

While the English translation does seem to follow the meaning of each word from one language to the other, even emphasising some critical distance with the use of italics “*girlfriend*,” later it will become difficult to understand the fluctuating sexual and gendered relationship between Herculine and Sara when oriented around this type of nuanced language; especially when the French version is much more conspicuous. It seems that Herculine put “*amie*” in italics, not to denote a primordial sexual attraction to Sara (at least not yet), but rather to synchronically situate h/erself as female (“*confidente*” with a final “e” denoting a feminine noun) in relation to Sara. In other words, “*amie*” is not evidence of an amorous relation between two women but rather is used to demonstrate a psychosomatic gendered experience for Herculine where s/he understands h/erself as female, in a first instance, in relation to Sara. This gendered choice seems all the more pertinent as the citation that follows:

C3: ‘Sara,’ I cried to her, ‘from the depths of my soul I love you as I have never loved before. But I don’t know what is going on *inside* of me. I feel that from now on this affection cannot be enough for me! I would have to have your whole life!!! I sometimes envy the lot of the man who will be your *husband*.’ (Foucault, *Herculine* 50 ; emphasis added)

C3: Sara, lui criai-je, du fond de l’âme je t’aime comme je n’ai jamais aimé. Mais je ne sais ce qui se passe en moi. Je sens que cette affection ne peut pas me suffire désormais! Il me faudrait toute ta vie!!! J’envie parfois le sort de celui qui sera ton *époux* (*Herculine* 60 ; my).

This emphatic citation is interesting for two reasons: on the one hand, it highlights a *conscious* desire to be the husband (*époux*) (an internal desire which will translate itself corporeally as a sexual desire later in the narrative), to perform the masculine role in a feminine *milieu* and also clearly states that this transformation/desire’s genesis is interior: *inside* (*en moi*). Speaking of Sara’s mother and her reaction to the two girls’ close relationship Herculine states:

C4: Poor woman, she saw me only as her daughter’s *girlfriend* (**gn**), while in fact I was her lover (**gn**)! (Foucault, *Herculine* 52)

C4: pauvre femme qui ne voyait en moi que l’*amie* (**f**) de sa fille, tandis que j’étais son *amant* (**m**)! (*Herculine* 62)

Here there are two important distinctions to make. On the one hand, the word “*amie*” reappears, used in the French version to emphasise the contrast between Herculine as Sara’s ‘feminine friend’ (her mother’s heteronormatively-based social perception) and her ‘masculine lover’ (the actual non-normative relationship between Herculine and Sara). Yet, the translator of the English version uses the same word, “*girlfriend*,” in this citation (C4) as before in citation two (C2). The problem that this creates is simple: if in citation two (C2) of the English version “*girlfriend*” is taken at face value, meaning a platonic relationship between two females without any sexual implications, then the reader is forced into understanding both the word “*girlfriend*” and therefore “*lover*” mentioned in this same citation (C4) to be of the same gender (feminine). Not only does this lock Herculine into a feminine identity, supplanting the clearly masculine self-designation in the French version, but it also creates a necessarily lesbian relationship between the two protagonists. In the French version, Herculine’s phrase clearly sets up a transitional experience: s/he was no longer just “*l’amie*” (feminine friend) of Sara but rather her “*amant*” (masculine lover). The first-person narrative favoured in the English translation seems incapable of moderating this nuanced narrative transition.

The trans-functionality of h/er linguistic discourse in the French version of the text produces then corporeally and psychologically h/er internalised desire. The externalisation of this desire through h/er trans-narrative allows h/er to effect a fluctuating transitivity in the text. It is only then in the French version of the text that the authorial, intended recognition of Herculine is possible, since it is only in the French version that h/er discourse becomes a psycho-somatic indicator: a textualisation of the trans-identity.

Finally, once h/er transition from a feminine gender to a masculine gender is discursively presented, Herculine can confirm the feminine gender of Sara:

C5: The sweet girl, who had become my companion, my sister—I had made my mistress!!!
(Foucault, *Herculine* 54)

C5: Cette douce jeune fille, devenue ma compagne, ma sœur, j'en avais fait ma *maîtresse* !!!
(*Herculine* 64)

This statement, indeed, makes little sense in the English version when read after citation four (C4). In the French version, the distinction between Herculine as the 'amant' (masculine lover) and Sara as the 'maîtresse' (female partner) is clear. Herculine's newly-found masculine gender is thus foregrounded a page later during a visit to the confessional:

C6: J'étais arrivé (m) là profondément humilié (m) (*Herculine* 65)

C6: I had gone (gn) there profoundly humbled (gn) (Foucault, *Herculine* 55)

The lack of an 'e' at the end of "arrivé" allows the French reader to identify the "je/I" as a masculine narrator and therefore a masculine subjectivity. Yet, in the English version, deprived of the word 'amant/masculine lover' in the previous statement and then of the masculine denotation in citation six (C6) the English reader is forced to ground Herculine's identity in a putative female sex, therefore unequivocally qualifying her as lesbian.

In her book *Gender and Citizenship*, Claudia Moscovici makes such an assumption about Herculine's lesbian discourse: "by virtue of her 'inordinate' sexual attraction to women, she violates the heterosexual imperative that dictates that one's own sexual identity is determined by virtue of its polar difference from the object of one's desire" (103). It seems clear from her claim that Moscovici understands Herculine to be a she (as is shown by her pronoun choice). In this sense, as she states, Herculine's sexual attraction to Sara might be considered subversive of a heterosexual imperative. Yet, this would be, in the least, a myopic stance that refuses to see Herculine for the way s/he clearly describes h/er/self. In other words, Moscovici presupposes a lesbian discourse, and therefore a subversion of the heteronormative imperative, because she fails to see Herculine as anything but female. It would seem impossible, however, to make such an assumption, since, on the one hand, even the English title speaks to the hermaphroditic nature of the protagonist, alluding to both sexual as well as gendered ambiguity. On the other hand, the French trans-narrative presented by Herculine precludes such a concrete affirmation; an affirmation that seems to reduce Herculine and Sara's relationship to that of a butch/femme liaison. Judith Butler makes a similar claim in a chapter dedicated to the novel in *Gender Trouble*: "Among the various matrices of power that produce sexuality between Herculine and h/er partners are, clearly, the conventions of female homosexuality both encouraged and condemned by the convent and its supporting religious ideology" (134). While it is true that a superficial criticism of power-relations between Herculine and the women with whom s/he lives at the convent reveal the *appearance* of female homosexual relations, one might argue that it would be impossible to categorise Herculine's identity as 'clearly' homosexual. Indeed, Herculine's discourse does appear in a feminine form *some of the time*, but one must not delimit the discourse by means of Herculine's sexual identity. In fact, one of the medical examiners that presided over the autopsy of Herculine after h/er untimely death states the following:

it can be seen that the present case (that of Herculine) raises several physiological and medicolegal questions. The formation of the external genital organs of this individual permitted him, although he was manifestly a man, to *play* either the masculine or the feminine *role* in coitus, without distinction (Foucault, *Herculine* 131).¹⁰

Doctor Régnier, the medical expert here, seems to miss the important implications of this very statement. Just as Herculine is self-subjectivised by an ambigendered trans-functional discourse, so to h/er 'performance' in relation to others, driven by this discourse, informs h/er ambisexuality. In the repetitiveness of this discursive and yet corporeal act throughout the French version, Herculine seems to adhere to the 'performative' aspect of gender highlighted by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Indeed, if Herculine's discourse is said to inform the notion of h/er subjectivity, and this discourse is multi-gendered, then we are inclined to ignore any paratextual taxonomic placement (hermaphrodite) and to understand h/er only through this discourse. Butler treats this concept in a similar manner: sex as a biological category can only receive meaning through gender, as the apparatus of production

whereby the sexes themselves are established. It is, then, this *ambigendered* discourse that gives meaning to Herculine as a (trans)*being* and not h/er hermaphroditic sexed nature. The English version forecloses this ‘performative’ aspect of Herculine’s transitive nature and produces a sterilised context that restricts the formation of an indefinite self, qualifying Herculine as necessarily either man or woman from the very beginning. Such an assumption then can only re-inscribe an imperative on h/er (narrative) body —albeit homosexual and not heterosexual— there where h/er personal discourse seems to resist such an imperative.

As the French version attests, it would be wrong to assume that Herculine remains masculinely gendered. In fact, no less than two pages later when speaking of the reproaches s/he received for having too often embraced Sara in public s/he states:

C7: Moi surtout, j’étais gravement *inculpée* (f). On me faisait un crime d’embrasser trop souvent mademoiselle Sara (*Herculine* 66)

C7: I above all was gravely censured (gn). They made a crime out of the fact that I kissed Mademoiselle Sara too often (Foucault, *Herculine* 56).

The adjective “inculpée” with two ‘e’s’ is indicative of and associated with the feminine gender and not the masculine narrator one encountered in citation six (C6) just pages before. Once again the English version misses this subtlety completely. Perhaps most interesting of all, the nuanced trans-functionality effected by Herculine’s discourse also varies within a single passage. Just before Sara’s younger sister is about to give birth, Herculine describes h/er relationship to the other women of the family:

C8: Devant moi, l’*amie intime* (f) de Sara, on ne se gênait pas; naturellement, j’étais initié (m) à tous ces petits détails secrets qui se communiquent entre personnes du même sexe!!! (*Herculine* 84)

C8: As I was Sara’s *intimate girlfriend* (gn), nobody was constrained in my presence; naturally, I was initiated (gn) into all those secret little details that are exchanged among persons of the same sex!!! (Foucault, *Herculine* 73)

Interestingly, Herculine first qualifies h/erself as Sara’s “*amie intime*” (intimate friend); “*amie*” with an ‘e’ designating h/er as female and undergirded by the feminine agreement in the adjective “*intime/close*.” Herculine then goes on to say that as a “female” among “females” s/he is privy to all the secrets that are told “entre personnes du meme sexe/between people of the same sex” again qualifying h/erself as feminine. However just before this s/he states, “j’étais initié/I was initiated” into all the secret talkings of women. Curiously, the past participle “*initié*” in this instance would need an extra ‘e’ if s/he was referring to h/erself as feminine and therefore s/he is designated masculine. This complex web of gender fluctuations is lost completely in the English version. While the words seem the same, the trans-identity is completely lost. In the English version, Herculine is reduced to being only a woman with no indication of masculine attributes. After finding out about the newborn’s arrival, Herculine describes h/er and Sara’s excitement:

C9: Nous étions descendus (mp) immédiatement, vêtus (mp) à peine, poussés (mp) par la curiosité, autant que par l’intérêt (*Herculine* 85)

C9: We immediately went downstairs (gn), hardly dressed (gn), driven (gn) by curiosity as much as by interest (Foucault, *Herculine* 73)

Citation nine (C9) is extremely curious when the two translations of the text are looked at side by side. While the English reader is forced to understand the “we” as two young women (Herculine and Sara), the French reader gets a completely different perspective. The phrase “*nous étions descendus*” (we went downstairs) represents a certain phenomenon of agreement in French where the past participle “*descendus*” the equivalent of “went downstairs” can be written one of four ways: “*descendu*” no ‘s’ would indicate a man; “*descendue*” with an ‘e’ represents a female; “*descendus*” with an ‘s’ would be either many men, or a man and a woman; and “*descendues*” with an ‘e’ and an ‘s’ would be two or many women. Understanding that it is Herculine and Sara (seemingly two women) going down the stairs, one would expect to see “*descendues*” but that is not what Herculine writes, s/he puts “*descendus*,” no ‘e’ just ‘s,’ which would qualify h/er (or Sara) as masculine. This instance is carried over to the adjectives “*vêtus*,” no ‘e,’ one ‘s,’ meaning ‘dressed,’ and “*poussés*,” no ‘e,’ one ‘s’ meaning ‘driven.’ When placed in the context of the numerous other passages where a gendered trans-functionality is present, Herculine’s

trans-narration allows the French reader to understand Herculine's identity as multi-faceted rather than sexually heteronormatised.

It is certainly not insignificant that Herculine, after being decidedly marked as male by society, decides to embark for the United States, the iconic symbol of individual freedom. Yet, s/he will never arrive there. Herculine's narration ends like it began, with a heuristic voice that defies convention. S/he ends h/er story with a commentary on the role imposed on h/er by a repressive heteronormative society and qualifies h/erself, ironically, under the 'universal' category of man:

C10: Il était trop tard pour me conseiller ou pour m'adresser des reproches. On me laissa faire... Quel étrange aveuglement me fit soutenir jusqu'au bout ce rôle absurde? Je ne saurais m'expliquer. Peut-être cette soif de l'inconnu, si naturelle à l'homme. (*Herculine* 127-8)

C10: It was too late for others to advise me or reproach me. They let me go on my way... What strange blindness was it that made me hold on to this absurd *role* until the end? I would be unable to explain it to myself. Perhaps it was that thirst of the unknown, which is so natural to *man*. (Foucault, *Herculine* 114-15) (emphasis added)

A comprehensive critique of *Mes souvenirs* seems to demonstrate that Herculine's trans-identity is buttressed by a narrative multi-dimensionality that is free-floating, attaching itself, where necessary, to underscore or frustrate any taxonomic placement. In this sense, looking into anatomy, or sex, can only be confused by the multivocality of Herculine's discourse. Only in the French version, it seems, does the expression of a linguistic trans-functionality become transgressive and subversive of the very category to which society demands s/he adheres, predating the autobiographical trans-narratives of the twentieth century.

Herculine's untimely death by asphyxiation would demonstrate then the arrant weight placed on such individuals during this time. Yet Herculine's self-imposed suffocation does not silence the agency s/he inscribed in h/er memoirs. Foucault asks in the incipit to the English introduction: "Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?" (vii). A provocative question indeed. The English version of *Herculine Barbin* seems to answer in the affirmative; Herculine's 'sexed' existence is always already marked out for h/er by a temporal and linguistic construct. Yet, in its failure to express the trans-discourse produced by Herculine, it can however, highlight the achievement of the French version. Herculine's story was originally intended as the preface to the first volume of Foucault's collection *Les vies parallèles* (parallel lives); he states of such lives:

Les Anciens...aimaient à mettre en parallèle les vies des hommes illustres; on écoutait parler à travers les siècles ces ombres exemplaires...Les parallèles, je sais, sont faites pour se rejoindre à l'infini...Souvent elles n'ont eu d'autre écho que celui de leur condamnation...il faudrait retrouver le sillage instantané et éclatant qu'elles ont laissé lorsqu'elles se sont précipitées vers une obscurité où 'ça ne se raconte plus' et où toute 'renommé' est perdue. (*Herculine* back cover)

The ancients...liked to parallel the lives of illustrious men; one heard these exemplary shadows speak through the centuries. Parallel lines, I know, are made to join each other in infinity. Imagine others that diverge indefinitely...Often condemnation is their only echo...We must find the instantaneous and dazzling wake that they leave behind as they slip away into an obscurity where 'their stories are no longer told', where their 'celebrity' is lost. (my translation)

Indeed, Herculine's trans-narrative becomes the echo of an illustrious life that deviated from the norm, allowing for others to follow in h/er wake. Often overlooked and overshadowed in French literature classes, Herculine's *souvenirs* offer a primordial source from which to situate the trans-narratives of today. And like the trans-narratives of the twenty-first century, Herculine's story appears to demand from its readers a reciprocal recognition of authorial self-expression that, currently, only the French version seems to allow. A new translation might offer readers a more complete understanding of the identity that Herculine intended to present. This might be achieved by betraying form for function and rephrasing h/er story in the third and not the first person. A third-person narration might give readers the chance to experience the story the way a French reader would: through the constant intermingling of gendered language and experience.

¹ For the use of the term, see Livia.

² See Livia.

³ ‘what reality ruthlessly teaches us is that all types of operations such as these (translation), all operations of transfer, without exception, brings with them a loss, an alteration, and that this loss is always considerable’ (All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated).

⁴ While never explicitly mentioned by Herculine in the text, the medical documents detailing h/er sexual constitution are attached to both the French and English versions.

⁵ The idea for this paper originates from a course I took at the University of Maryland, College Park, entitled *Transgender Literature*.

⁶ These editions do not alter the original text found in Tardieu’s treatise but rather remove and isolate Herculine’s *Mémoires* and the medical examiner’s notes from the very lengthy treatise in which the narrative was originally published.

⁷ “The words that the author highlighted in the original manuscript are reproduced here in italics, because *it is clear that the author desired to refer to himself* both in the masculine and in the feminine” (4; emphasis added).

⁸ In subsequent citations, I will use the same indicators where: (m) is masculine, (f) is feminine, (mp) is masculine plural, and (fp) is feminine plural. I will indicate the genders used in the French version. In the English version I will place (**gn**) gender neutral next to the words that, in the French version, would be gendered. The French and the English texts will be juxtaposed throughout the article.

⁹ Herculine was given or assumed numerous names: Herculine, Alexina, Abel, Adélaïde.

¹⁰ “on voit que le cas présent soulève plusieurs questions physiologiques et médico-légales. La conformation des organes génitaux externes de cet individu lui permettait, bien qu’il fût manifestement un homme, de *jouer* dans le coût indistinctement *le rôle* de l’homme ou de la femme” (*Herculine* 143).

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