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How to distance oneself: Pseudotranslations as imagined cultural transfers

Pseudotranslations – original texts which signal that they are translations – ask their readers to imagine cultural transfer, often using what Shklovsky calls defamiliarization.

Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), a famous example for imagined cultural contact in 18th century literature, supposedly presents to the public the private correspondence of two Persian travellers visiting France. While the first edition of the *Lettres persanes* maintains plausibility as a faithful translation of authentic letters containing two Persian travellers' perception of early Enlightenment Europe, this fiction of translation neither meant to deceive readers, nor did it do so. Rather, its invitation to shift perspectives by describing everyday items and concepts in unfamiliar terms (Jean Starobinski calls this "voluntary aphasia") was enthusiastically accepted as an epistemologically valuable act of imagination.

Linguistic defamiliarisation based on pseudotranslations' imagined cultural transfer may also be driven by aesthetic experiments: Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (1979), imagining cultural contact between Martians and Britain, gave the "Martian Poetry" movement its name, to which Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac* (1985), a purported translation of a volume of Polish poetry by the eponymous poet Katerina Brac, contributes. The movement hoped to gain "fresh" metaphors and images by writing English poetry as if it had been translated from a foreign language and culture.

I want to focus on pseudotranslations ascribing texts to imagined writers from other cultures as epistemological and creative trope. Clearly, this practice has some problematic implications such as possible exoticism, orientalism or appropriation. Connecting examples of defamiliarization in pseudotranslations to the notion of critical distance and to the concept of the writer as a medium for inspiration coming from outside, I want to show how some fundamental poetological concepts are tied up with distancing from oneself as invoked by imagined cultural transfer, and think about possible, less problematic alternatives.