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## "TRADUIT DE L'AMÉRICAIN"

**B**ECAUSE OF MY INTERESTS and work, which can be described as bridging two civilizations and cultures, I have read a good part of the recent crop of American novels, both in the original and in their French translations, and I would like to offer a few casual remarks on my experience in that field.

I have sometimes been pleased, more often irritated, and frequently scandalized by the books *traduits de l'américain* (a relatively recent expression substituted, about twenty years ago, for the traditional *traduit de l'anglais*).

The people chiefly responsible for my anger are, of course, the French publishers. Too many members of that businessmen's club are running too hard after fast money. They choose books, not for their literary values, but for their chances of becoming *best sellers*. They draw heavily upon *names* of well-known writers, upon lists of popular books, and discard artistic and experimental literature as unremunerative. Even such enlightened publishers as André Bay, of Stock (a delicate poet and essayist in his own right) left lying in a drawer, for three or four years, Anais Nin's novels and *Journals* because they did not seem to carry enough appeal for the general public.

A second calamity lies in the way translations are chosen by the publishers. Most translations are entrusted to people who do not know enough about the American language, literature and civilization.

Most publishers also want books to be translated too quickly. They frequently set unreasonable deadlines – three months, for instance, for a 300-page novel.

Lastly, they have been paying translators very poorly, which, of course, may be justified in the case of slipshod work, but is less so when the translators have worked very hard and delivered a creditable piece of writing. As of today a recognized translator receives an average of 10 F. to 12 F. 50 – that is, less or a little more than \$2.00 – for one typed 25-line page of the English text. This meager salary has been more or less standard since 1957 and it does not take into account the rising cost of living.

There is, also, the problem of censorship. Books can be censored, in France, for reasons of obscenity and pornography and, just as in some American States, the definition of those terms is open to question and frequently varies. Henry Miller's *Tropics* were translated completely and adequately (by Henri Fluchère) long before they were authorized in America. But the French translation of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* contains a certain number of blank pages, representing passages which the publishers did not want or did not dare to have translated. There are, however, also non-pornographic pages which have not been translated, and I strongly suspect the publisher and/or the translator of having found in censorship an easy excuse for not translating difficult passages. (There are many painful, almost untranslatable paragraphs in Burroughs' novel, and one sympathizes with the translator!)

In dealing with the *traduit de l'américain*, we must now examine the justifications of the French translator and his special problems.

Unfortunately, no particular talent is generally required, except some knowledge of English and French. No academic degree, no previous experience is asked. Some of the translators, unfortunately, are mere hacks or rank amateurs.

I will include in the category of hacks most of the translators of detective stories (with the possible exception of Marcel Duhamel of *La Série Noire*). In a novel by Uta Donella published by Presses de la Cité and entitled *Oublie si tu veux vivre* (*Forget if you want to live*) the translator culminated an unintelligible sentence with the following, in which he confused *closed* and *open*: “Karl, les yeux fermés, nous toisa l'une après l'autre,” which means once re-translated: “Karl, with his eyes closed, gazed at each of us in turn”. A difficult trick, indeed! Another hack confused, in a novel by J. D. Salinger, “horse race” and “race horse” and translated the former by “*cheval de course*” instead of “*course de chevaux*”!

The problems of the translator *from the American* are, of course, quite complex and specific. He must, first of all, beware of *cognates*, and then, be familiar not only with English but with American, and not only with the American speech, but with the American slang and brand new American terms. Otherwise, how many mistakes he can make!

Let us, first, take a look at *cognates*.

The book by John Updike, *Of the Farm*, was translated into French as *La Ferme*, an unfortunate expression which carries a quite different meaning. (*La ferme!* in familiar French means *Shut up!*) Besides, this *farm* is not a *ferme*. It is a large rural estate, where neither agriculture nor breeding is practiced. *La ferme française* evokes something quite different and the whole book will probably be misunderstood because of this initial, perhaps unavoidable, mistranslation.

Another example of *contresens* – the French word for misinterpretation or mistranslation – can be found in the translation of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, a title translated, God knows why, by *L'Attrape Cœur*, which means the *heart snatcher*.

The translator of *L'Attrape Cœur* evidently did not know all the meanings of “figure,” nor those of “terrific.” Therefore he translated “She had a terrific figure,” (which, in conversational French could be expressed as “*Elle était vachement bien roulée*”) by “*Elle avait un visage terrible*,” which means “She had an awesome face”!

In another passage, the words “What are you majoring in?” becomes “*Qui est en majorité la-bas?*”, that is, “Who holds the majority there?”

Funnier still is the translation of “...And run around the goddam house, naked”, which becomes: “...*Et puis courir à poil autour de la maison*”, which means “and run, naked, *around the house*”!

These are only a few examples of the way Mr. Salinger's work was translated into French. One of my younger colleagues, D. E. Schlesinger, found more than one hundred *contresens* in the one volume of *L'Attrape Cœur*.

Puns are extremely difficult to translate, and titles are often based on this type of play upon words. It is occasionally possible to explain this in a footnote, but such an explanation, particularly on the title page, would seem heavily pedantic.

Among the bad or unsatisfactory titles of recent years, I would like to point out a few. The most ridiculous, in my opinion, are the following:

-*Le Cow Boy de Charme*, for *Midnight Cowboy* (*Le Cowboy du macadam*, title of the French version of the movie, was a slight improvement).

-*L'Attrape Cœur* (*Catcher in the Rye*), already mentioned as one of the worst.

-*Couleur de Tendresse* (*The Color of Darkness*, by James Purdy), which is a heavy *contresens*.

-*Frankie Addams* (*Member of the Wedding*, by Carson McCullers), a total elimination of a beautiful image, replaced by the name of the heroine.

-*L'Homme de Buridan* (*Dangling Man*, by Saul Bellow), a kind of bad pun which evokes *L'Âne de Buridan*, the donkey of Buridan, an argument proposed by a Scholastic doctor of the fourteenth century and a symbol of the inability to make up one's mind.

Among the good or satisfactory titles *traduits de l'américain*, I will report:

-*Les Domaines Hantés* (*Other Voices, Other Rooms*, by Truman Capote), which strongly suggests the haunted, supernatural atmosphere of Mr. Capote's early stories.

-*Savannah* (*The Fair Sister*, by William Goyen), because this word in French immediately conjures the Old South and the Negroes of the *Savane*.

-*MOM* (*A Mother's Kisses*, by Bruce Friedman), because the word *momism* is just as well if not better known in France, than in America.

The translator has not only to come up with a good title. He has to keep up with the times. He has to realize, for instance, that *pot*, which used to be a container for plants, is now a drug, and that *grass*, *turn on*, etc. are no longer what they used to be.

It is often necessary to study in depth the technical vocabularies and to come to the United States to hear them and understand them properly. Such was the case for M. Rambaud, the translator of John Rechy's *City of Night*, who acquired the language of the drug pushers and users and hustlers by frequenting for a period of several months the milieux of *junkies* (*camées*), *fairies* (*tapettes*), *gays* (*folles*), *pinkies* (*pédalettes*), *drag queens* (*reines des tantes*) and *connections* (*contacts*).

Other special jargons, which are not usually included in dictionaries are those of the *hips*, the *squares* and the *cool cats* (*les mecs qui ne se laissent pas démonter*); those of the religious and ethnic groups: Jewish or Yiddish terms (a *chaver* is a believer, *ur-camarade*); those of sex. How many French translators know that *hamstring* means *enjarnaguer* and *to turn on* is "s'envoyer en l'air" or "se mettre les veines en fête"?

A serious and paradoxical problem, for the French translator, is what to do about words that the novelist has written in French (or pseudo-French). When there are bad mistakes inserted in the original novel, must one attribute them to the printers, to the character created by the novelist, or to the novelist himself? I am afraid that James Baldwin's French (in *Another Country*) is quite rusty, whereas Mr. Updike's is probably better, even though his characters, in *The Centaur* and *Couples* sometimes speak in funny but atrocious French or "franglais": *huile étendarde* for *Standard Oil*, *dorme-t-elle?* instead of *dort-elle?* *trois heures c'est trop beaucoup*, etc.

Another difficulty for the translator is to try and write approximately the same num-

ber of lines as in the original – an often difficult, almost impossible task. Looking at a translation for a bilingual edition of the poetic novel *House of Incest*, by Anais Nin, I found that, on pages 62-63, the English text has 21 lines and the French translation more than 27. It is quite frequent that the translator cannot put in one page what should be one page and what is paid as one page!

Then, who is the ideal French translator and what is the ideal French translation?

Mr. Nabokov once said something to the effect that the best and only translation is a “literal translation with commentary and abundant footnotes.” I don’t entirely agree. The literal translation may be useful in science and, generally speaking, in non-fiction, but it falls short of creative work.

It is reasonable to state that a good translator must be not only an expert but a man of imagination, judgment and taste, and, of course, a *creator*.

A good translator must have mastered not only two, but possibly three or four languages. Maurice Edgar Coindreau, an *agrégé d’espagnol* and a former Princeton professor, is equally at home in Spanish and in English and his knowledge of French, Spanish and English is an invaluable asset for all his translations.

The good translator must be able to realize that the English spoken at Montreal may not be the same as the English spoken in New York or London. Let us take, for instance, the word *bluff* which may mean, in French, *bluffer* or *bosquet d’arbres*, or the word *riding* which may apply to a horse or to an electoral division.

A good translator from the American must understand thoroughly the structure of both languages and realize how important word *position* is in English. The difference between a *race horse* and a *horse race* has already been mentioned and is an example of this.

Very often *humor* is based on this type of shift of meaning. For instance, when the elephant jokes were going around, they told you: “What is more difficult than getting a pregnant elephant in a VW?”, the answer being: “Getting an elephant pregnant in a VW.”

English sentences can be extremely ambiguous, with the meaning of a chain of words apparent only when the sentence is completed. There can, in fact, be situations where the meaning is pinpointed only when another sentence makes it clear. Take, for instance, those words: “Time flies. You can’t. They fly too fast,” which were used in a test for candidates to the United Nations Interpreters’ Section. The crucial word *they* comes only in the third sentence and eliminates the possibility of *flies* as a verb. The right translation of the first sentence being not “*Le temps fuit*,” but “*Chronométrez les mouches*.”

One must also keep in mind the effect of the French work upon the subconscious of the readers. The name of the heroine of William Goyen’s *The Fair Sister* is Savatta. This name, in French, would be ridiculous: *une vieille savate*, not only means an old shoe, but a decrepit has-been, whereas Savatta is a young, beautiful woman. The translator, rightly, had the imagination to change Savatta into Savannah.

Another example, in that connection, is to be found in the translation of a novel entrusted to M. E. Coindreau. M. Coindreau had to translate, within a very poetic context, the word *meadow lark*. The meadow lark, in French, is *le pipi des prairies*. M. Coindreau

used his judgment and taste and found something much more harmonious than *pipi des prairies*.

I have already mentioned that M. Coindreau is a man of many cultures. I believe that the good translator must be a man of culture, actively engaged in improving his knowledge and taste. He should prepare his mind to translate by reading books written in the style which is the nearest to that of the original. For instance, reading Marcel Proust may help a translator of Henry James or William Faulkner, even though James, Proust, and Faulkner has each his own mannerism.

Another important point. A good translator should not undertake to translate a book he does not like. Translating should be a pleasure and give its author the impression that he is creating a great work of his own. Among the French translators of American novels who sympathized with their subject and took pleasure in translating, I will again mention M. Coindreau and a few of his colleagues of Gallimard who personally choose all the books they translate.

Time is of the essence. There are no shortcuts in translating. One must never hurry. There may be three or four different drafts. And a 300-page book will demand at least six months of toil.

Finally, I would like to mention that the translator should try to suggest, in one way or another, the literary implications of the American title of a novel. Take, for instance, John Steinbeck's works. His titles are borrowed from Milton (*In Dubious Battle*), from Blake (*Burning Bright*), Robert Burns (*Of Mice and Men*), Shakespeare (*The Winter of Our Discontent*), from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (*Grapes of Wrath*). It is evident that *La Flamme* is a weak translation for *Burning Bright* and that even *À l'Est de l'Éden*, for *East of Eden*, does not have the same impact for a nation like France, where knowledge of the Bible can be scant. It is a notable fact that there is often a fundamental difference underlying the choice of titles by French and American authors and that this very difference makes for major if not insurmountable difficulties in going from one language to another. Whereas the French are fond of linguistic allusions, plays on words recalling proverbs or well-known phrases (for instance, *Le Chemin des Écoliers*, *Les Enfants du Limon*, or *La Symphonie Pastorale*), American authors favor literary allusions like those already mentioned à propos of Steinbeck. An interesting example of this fundamental difference is Vercors' *Les Animaux Dénaturés*: the French title is a play on words. It was translated into "You shall know them," an expression which refers to the Biblical "By their fruits you shall know them."

In conclusion, may I suggest that critics should be more aware of the problems faced by those who do the difficult but often rewarding work of translation? They should realize the creativity involved, the constant need for judgment and good taste, as well as for sound linguistic background, and therefore they should give the translator his due, naming him almost as co-author of the work they review, for in a certain fashion, he is. Such a recognition of the true nature of this literary category would certainly give the translator the incentive he needs, particularly if it brings the *éditeurs* to be more careful in choosing those to whom they entrust a work and to be more generous in their treatment of both the time element and the financial remuneration involved.

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Reference: *The World of Translation*, PEN American Center 1970, p. 335-341.