Nina Mehra

Maurice-Edgar Coindreau

(1892-1990)

Maurice-Edgar COINDREAU

"La littérature américaine, c'est la littérature Coindreau"
(Jean-Paul Sartre)

M-E. Coindreau : The one who could be referred to as an active participant in the Americanization of European culture by introducing American literature in France. His first translation of John Dos Passos' *Manhatten Transfer* in 1928 was a big success in France. It brought a commission from the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* as advisor in charge of hunting down new American authors, to contribute letters concerning the American literary life. This led to all his major translations. Dos Passos, by then, an intimate friend, became a touchstone to the American literati. The subsequent translations by M.Coindreau, together with his critical articles and prefaces, soon made him a recognized authority in France on modern American literature. He translated the works of William Faulker, Ernest Hemmingway, Erskine Caldwell, Truman Capote, John Steinbeck and William Goyen, among others. All of those works that he admired and that could be qualified as "experimental" in the 20th century America. In 1954 his translation of Goyen's *House of Breath* won the prestigious French literary award, the Halperin Kaminsky Prize, for translation.

Today the Maurice-Edgar Coindreau Prize of 15000 FF. for literary translation of American works features amongst the well-known prizes for translation in France. It symbolizes the recognition of the translator's status as a writer (also passed as a law of 1957) by the history of literature.

M-E. Coindreau was born December 24, 1892 in La Roche-Yon, France. His interests fluctuated from medical studies to the study of law, which he eventually discarded in favor of a degree in languages and literature. His knowledge of Spanish plus degrees from the Universities of Bordeaux, Madrid and Paris gained him an instructorship at the Lycee Francais of Madrid and also at the lycee of Orleans.

The professor

He began his career in Princeton in 1923 as a member of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures. He was named assistant professor in 1927, and then elevated to associate professor in 1939 and professor in 1953, which he retained until his retirement in 1961. He taught Spanish as well as French. His chief areas had been 16th and 20th century

literature. He was widely acquainted with the works of contemporary French as well as American literature and likewise acquainted with contemporary critical theory and trends.

The following excerpts from the letter of recommendation of promotion (from the post of an assistant professor to that of an associate professor) gives an incite to the kind of professor M.Coindreau was :

"…His work as a teacher is of the very highest quality; he is a master of his subjects and has unusual power and skill in the processes of instruction. With unfailing energy and understanding he devotes himself to his work with undergraduates both within and without the classroom. Rarely do so many students seek personal guidance and inspiration from a faculty member. In other words, his services to the intellectual and cultural development of our undergraduates seem to us invaluable. In sympathetic understanding of American culture and of the American student Professor Coindreau is probably unrivaled among Frenchmen in this country. He is a thorough scholar in his own fields and his broad interests and unusual knowledge of other literatures and of other cultures make him an admirable worker in any plan of cooperation in the Humanities. He has taught with outstanding success in underclass and upperclass courses, and the course which he has been giving the past years in the literature of the 16th century is of the highest quality; the present year he has inaugurated with signal success a new course in contemporary French literature. He is one of the members of the Department upon whom we rely for effective work in the new junior Conference course. (…) Professor Coindreau's reputation as a teacher is evidenced by constant invitations to participate in the summer sessions of American colleges and universities.

Professor Coindreau is recognized as one of the chief intermediaries if not the chief, between the contemporary cultures of France and America. He conducts an American Department in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* and in the *Nacion* (Buenos Aires), writes numerous articles on American literature for the *Cahiers du Sud,* and reviews current French publications for the *French Review*. […]His interest in the teaching of the French language to American students is demonstrated by his publication of text-books which have been of marked excellence; he is joint author with Professor Lowe of *A French Composition Book* (Holt 1925), the second volume of which appeared in 1936 entitled *An Alternative Composition Book*."…(Faculty Files 1938).

His *Aperçus de littérature américaine* is a collection of magazine articles and the critical prefaces that preceded each translation (in which he explains the nuances of style, reference, and context for the French reader). His second major critical production, *La Farce est jouée*, is

a survey of the French theatre from 1900 to 1925 (in the first volume) M.-E. Coindreau appears to be the natural-born critic who has never been able to read a book without picking it apart. His translation and critical studies in one or two occasions made him take a leave of absence, from Princeton, in order to spend time in Spain to interview authors and find material for the study of a certain Spanish novel.

At another instance (while working on *La Farce est jouée*), in order to catch the opening of the French theatre, which hibernates in summer and wakes in fall, M.Coindreau had to take another leave of absence.

Professor Coindreau was distinguished as a teacher, author, critic and translator who earned international recognition as a leading interpreter of the contemporary literature of the United States, France and Spain. He not only contributed in awakening an interest for American literature and culture in France, but also attempted to introduce contemporary French writers by bringing them to America. He wrote about them in books and journals. In 1955, the French government awarded him its highest honor, the Legion of Honor, for his services interpreting French culture to the United States and American culture to France.

The translator

When he was asked what made him translate, he would reply that he did it as a hobby, so as not to get bored; much more valuable, as far as he was concerned, were his critical works.

"There are two kinds of translators," says M-E. Coindreau, "those who merely translate and those who are truly creative writers. The former can't write a great novel themselves, so they translate them. They enter the world of literature through the service entrance." Coindreau would class himself among the service enterers. Among the great translators he would class such varied exemplars as the author of Vulgate, St. Jerome, who translated and revised the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin between 382 and 405, and C.K.M. Scott-Moncrieff, translator of Proust and Pirandello. According to Coindreau, creative translators such as Charles Baudelaire (who translated Edgar Allen Poe into French) and Andre Gide (Shakespeare's "Hamlet") use translation as a rest between great works of their own, and as a means of developing their technique and enriching their vocabulary.

A good translator, Coindreau feels, can only work on what he loves, with a sincere desire to reproduce in readers of a new tongue all the delights and nuances of the original work. But, he believes, a translation must be accurate even if liberties are allowed by the author. The argot of Steinbeck's Okies, Faulkner's Negroes, and Cadwell's Crackers cannot

be literally translated, according to Coindreau. Instead he had to find country idioms familiar to French readers which would give them the feeling. His solution was a *pis aller*, of putting these speeches into the patois of a socio-economic bloc which conveys approximately the same general idea. In translating Hemingway, he says: "Sometimes I didn't use the swear words where he used them. I managed to find another place where they would sound more natural in the mouth of a French soldier."

Talking about the translation of one of his heroes: Gerard de Nerval. "Imagine," says Coindreau. "They say that in his old age Goethe preferred to read *Faust* in De Nerval's translation. (*Newsweek*, March 12, 1956).

M. Coindreau believed in corresponding with the authors, whose works he was translating, to clear up obscure or difficult points. This led to his close acquaintance with a number of the writers. And was instrumental in inviting prominent Frenchmen to Princeton and acting as *liaison* between the University and the French intellectual world.

In his book entitled *Mémoires d'un traducteur* , which is a collection of interviews with Christian Giudicelli, Coindreau talks about his relationship with the writers, the kind of feedback he got from some of them, the problems he encountered while translating and also his thoughts and opinions vis-a-vis certain works. The book is interestingly concluded with a final chapter entitled "Recettes de cuisine"(cooking recipes), in which Coindreau presents a sketch of his thoughts involved in the translation process, peppered with instances from his personal experience.

His first remark sums up his stance towards translation: "*Un traducteur est un homme qui n'a aucun droit, il n'a que des devoirs. Il doit témoigner à son auteur une fidélité de caniche, mais un caniche étrange qui se conduirait comme un singe"*. (A translator is a man without any rights, he only has duties. He has to be as faithful to his writer as a poodle/dog would be, but a poodle/dog quite out of the ordinary, one that would behave like a monkey). This remark was inspired by a quote by François Mauriac: *Le romancier est le singe de Dieu.* (The writer is God's monkey). Coindreau goes on to add that the translator is the writer's monkey ! (Mémoires d'un traducteur, p.131-132).

He had some very strong ideas about what was unacceptable for a translator to do: " … An error in the interpretation of a question in detail, a mistake in a technical word, and even the voluntary substitution of one word for another (a procedure which is often necessary when it is a matter of names of birds, fish, or flowers) are only venial sins. On the other hand, to modify the general style of an author or, what is even worse, to substitute for it one's own style is the cardinal sin of inexperienced translators. A translator who would not make it possible for his

readers to recognize immediately the style of Hemmingway, let us say, or that of Thomas Wolfe, would be an execrable translator even if one could find no error in his text." (Faculty Files).

M.Coindreau had a very special relationship with William Faulker. His translation of *The Sound and the Fury*, in which the writer and translator worked closely, remains one of his personal favorites. Some of M.Coindreau's explanations about how he translated Faulker, can be an eye-opener to other translators.

Talking about the *phenomenon of Obscurity* in Faulker's works- Coindreau says:

> "…This phenomenon is due largely to the virtually complete absence in French of neuter pronouns and to grammatical rules which require that adjectives and participles agree gender and number." He goes on to say : "…in spite of my constant efforts to preserve the obscurities of the text, the story (*The Sound and the Fury*) in French is clearer than in English, a fact that causes me some regret." About the translation of *Requiem for a nun* he says: "The long narrative sections […] can be reproduced in French without sacrificing their rhythm and movement, in spite of the syntax, with its complexity of structure, its cascades of subordinate clauses, its single and double parentheses, etc."
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> "Ambiguity is one aspect of Faulknerian obscurity. The English language lends itself readily to multiple interpretations, an exceptional case in French. This was the problem faced by the translator of *The Unvanquished*. Is "unvanquished" in the masculine or the feminine, in the singular or the plural? The translator chose the masculine singular. In my opinion, this is an error. Had I translated this novel I would have called it "*Les Invaincues*", thus employing the feminine plural, and would have justified my choice by pointing to the many cases in which Faulkner uses this word in connection with those Southern ladies who have yet to accept defeat, and who ostentatiously leave the motion picture theatres when "*Gone with the Wind*" is presented. But the masculine plural would be equally acceptable." Coindreau adds.

This translator who had nearly 50 translated books in his credit among other writings- what kind of life did he lead ?

The man

In his typical American residence at 319 Nassau Street, Professor Coindreau, harbored what would be a treasury for an intellectual or any avid reader. He had walls lined with shelves stocked books, mostly first editions autographed by the authors, some of which were even rare ones. A particularly unusual one in existence, a copy of *Farewell to Arms* was one that Hemingway had filled in some of the blank spaces that his publishers had deleted. This he did with his left hand as he had broken his right arm at that time-signed with an equally scribbly autograph.

A bachelor and a creature of habit, in his home M.Coindreau retired regularly at 10:45 and woke up at 7, reading just 10 minutes before going to sleep. Professor Coindreau would be remembered by his students as a favorite , who aroused their interest and enthusiasm. His lectures were clear, well organized and spiced with wit. He could be seen around the campus in his conservative gray pin-stripe suite on weekdays that violently contrasted his image in the flashy maroon sweater he wore behind the wheel of his coupe on week-ends. Professor Coindreau remained in Princeton until the end of his carrier in 1961.

He died at the age of 98 in Limeil-Brevannes in France.

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