

Sheila Fischman

On Sunday, June 6, 1999, Sheila Fischman received an honorary doctorate from the University of Ottawa. This is the address she gave on that occasion.

TRANSLATION MATTERS / EN GUISE DE TRADUCTION

In memoriam
Philip C. Stratford 1928-1999

I'd like to begin by reading you some words and phrases, just a short list:

scapegoat
peacemaker
passover
long-suffering
Ask and it shall be given you.
Let my people go.
Am I my brother's keeper?
Death where is thy sting?
Let there be light.

They are so much a part of the English language that probably few of us have ever wondered where they came from or when. They seem to have always been there. The fact is, all those words, those phrases, are from the pen of one man, a great 16th century translator into English, perhaps the greatest of all time. His name was William Tyndale and it's to his genius that we owe much of that masterpiece of English prose, the King James version of the Bible. Tyndale was martyred for his chutzpah—which might be translated as hubris—at having dared to translate what was considered to be the word of God into language accessible to all. Translators now are treated much better--as you can see. Translation matters.

Valéry Larbaud, écrivain français et traducteur de Samuel Butler, James Joyce, et Walt Whitman, entre autres, a choisi une belle métaphore pour représenter le travail du traducteur. He used the image of a set of scales in which we weigh the words: "Chacun de

nous a près de soi, sur sa table ou son bureau, un jeu d'invisibles balances [...] capables de peser les impondérables! Auprès de ces Balances, les autres instruments de notre travail [...] ne sont que des accessoires. [...] L'essentiel est la Balance [...] car tout le travail de la Traduction est une pesée de mots."

As for me, I began weighing words as a way to help me learn the French language as it's spoken and written in Quebec, for which academic courses hadn't really prepared me. As I was discovering the challenge of finding the words that the writer would have used if he had written in English, I was also discovering the pleasure—no, the joy—of finding the right words, of putting them in the right order. In time, translation also allowed me to share my own enthusiasm for a book and make it known to others—in the case of that first translation, to *many* others, because it was Roch Carrier's novel *La Guerre Yes Sir!*

Le plus bel hommage que j'ai reçu—jusqu'à ce matin—c'était une lettre, écrite à la main, d'une bibliothécaire dans une petite ville en Ontario, qui m'a exprimé, en mots très simples, son gratitude pour avoir pu connaître certaines oeuvres québécoises grâce à mes traductions. Je traduis ces romans québécois pour deux raisons: parce que je crois que de tous les romans et nouvelles qui se publient de nos jours, ceux qui viennent du Québec francophone sont parmi les meilleurs, les plus novateurs, les plus exigeants aussi; et parce que la pratique de ce beau métier me permet en même temps d'approfondir ma connaissance de ma propre langue, l'anglais. Translating takes you deep inside the text, the language, the culture, the mind of the writer. It's a thrilling place to be, but it can sometimes be dangerous also. I still recall the troubled sleep, the nightmares even, that I suffered during and after the translation of *Neige Noire*, the last novel written by Hubert Aquin. More recently, the bounteous and terrible world of Marie-Claire Blais's great novel *Soifs* was both disturbing and enriching: but had I not been able to feel sympathy for the characters, I would have been unable to give them a second life. You see, I believe that to make a successful translation, you must choose books that "speak" to you, for which you feel an affinity, emotional as well as stylistic. Indeed, without the emotional affinity, it's impossible, for me anyway, to render the style.

Pour un écrivain, être traduit en d'autres langues cela signifie avant tout un lectorat élargi, et tout au long de ma carrière je n'en ai jamais rencontré un auteur qui ne voulait pas

que son oeuvre soit traduit. Elsewhere, there are exceptions. Anthony Burgess was a cranky British novelist who once wrote that "to be translated is horrific. If an author can be translated into innumerable languages he is not strictly speaking a practitioner of literature at all, because literature cannot be translated, only the appearance of literature, the arrangement on a page of words which do a minimal job, that of describing action, feelings, and dialogue of a fairly easily translatable kind." Burgess was quite simply wrong.

Translators do get it wrong, of course. Rarely. Well, sometimes. There is a famous example from the first translation of *Bonheur d'occasion*, where "poudrerie" was misread as "poudrière," so that *The Tin Flute* has a powder-house exploding on a city street. Je conserve précieusement une coupure de presse montrant des T-shirts qui portent l'étiquette: "Made in Turkey/Fabriqu  en Dinde." And these irresistible instructions seen in a hotel elevator in Paris: "In case of tempestuous stop in course of the march, open the portals and close at once, and command descent by leaning on the button and eventually, on the button of descent." And my personal favorite, a bilingual strip of paper from a Chinese fortune cookie that's one of my most precious possessions: the English side reads, "One must choose the lesser of two evils." En franais on lit: "De deux mots il faut choisir le moindre." Et mots est  crit: m-o-t-s. En guise de traduction...

People sometimes ask me how to be a translator. Aside from surrounding yourself with dictionaries and using them—but not slavishly—the most important thing you have to do is read. Voraciously, indiscriminately. Novels, newspapers, poems, journals, ads, plays, magazines, junk fiction, even film subtitles, if they're good. You can learn about your language from all of them. (The great Italian-to-English translator William Weaver once said that he reads thrillers to keep in touch with how people talk—a green light for escapist reading without guilt.) Then, you have to listen. Listen to pop songs and to the dialogue in movies and plays. Eavesdrop in stores and caf s, on the subway, on the street and at the gym. Listen to how people use and misuse their language. And try to keep the best of it in a mental file. Une grande  crivaine m'a racont  qu'un jour, nageant sur le dos dans une piscine pr s de chez elle, elle a bouscul  une vieille dame, qui l'a r primand e en ces termes: "Il faut faire attention   moi!" Anne H bert remembered that unusual order and put it in the mouth of one

of her characters; learning the source of it helped me to find an equivalent in English. So hunt down the sources of unfamiliar phrases—they might be the work of a Tyndale or a Valéry Larbaud—or come from the mental file of an observant writer! Learn when it's hot to be cool and cool to be hot, learn the difference between "kitsch" and "kétaine," entre "tacky" et "cheap"—et comment les rendre dans une autre langue. Il faut apprendre la différence entre "getting into" la musique techno et "getting into" une école huppée. Let the rhythms of your language seep into your awareness till you can reproduce them in your own words. Study your language. Écrivez. Car c'est la meilleure façon de connaître votre langue à fond.

Now let's go back to the Bible. In a "Preface to the Reader," the King James translators wrote: "Translation it is that openeth the window to let in the light; that breaketh the shell that we may eat the kernell; that putteth aside the curtain that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well that we may come by the water." Oh yes, translation matters. Though in the interest of full disclosure, I have to tell you that at a funeral the other day, the rabbi said that the Bible, the Old Testament, in translation, is like an orange from which the juice has been squeezed. In his defence, while the rabbi knows the Hebrew bible and all the commentaries intimately, he's probably not acquainted with Tyndale's version.

The British critic George Steiner has written of translation: "Even more than the linguists, and long before them, poets and translators have worked inside the time-shaped skin of human speech and sought to elucidate its deepest springs of being." D'après Naim Kattan, "la traduction ne fait que débloquent la porte qui peut rester fermée faute de candidats qui désirent passer le seuil." For my friend Alberto Manguel, "Translation is the ultimate act of comprehending." My late friend and colleague Philip Stratford wrote that: "So-called creative acts are themselves acts of translation, attempts to translate some imperfectly grasped vision, concept, or reality." À ce propos il cite le poète Robert Melançon pour qui: "Un poète n'est jamais qu'un traducteur qui transpose en mots ce qui échappe aux mots." Melançon comes closest to my own definition. For me, translation is a kind of quest: I see us as prospectors who seek beyond the gold, searching for what lies behind what lies behind the words.

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