

Paul St. Pierre

## *HIGH TIDE EBB TIDE, OR THE NECESSITY AND IMPOSSIBILITY OF TRANSLATION*

*High Tide Ebb Tide*, the translation by Bikram Das of Gopinath Mohanty's *Laya Vilaya*, an Indian (Oriya) novel first published in 1956, touches upon the theme of the necessity and impossibility of translation. It tells the story of Tarun Roy, a man from Calcutta who, along with his wife and daughter, makes a trip to Puri, one of India's holiest cities, the seat of Lord Jagannath. There Tarun Roy undergoes a mystical experience, experiencing fusion with nature and his God. He imagines another life, one in which all barriers, including those of language, are erased. Tarun Roy muses:

How ephemeral this mortal vessel is, how brief its existence! No more than the blink of an eye! And to think that it has its story, its chronicle of joys and sorrows! Even its pride! Nothing is real, nothing exists but this mortal creature's awareness of the fullness and then the void; and above all, of that one single Life which is Creator as well as Preserver. It has no language, no caste, no distinctions. Not just between man and man; it is that Life which holds all of Creation together like a thread. That is It – Jagannath! Jagannath!

In a different tradition, this dream could be assimilated to one of pre-Babel times, a dream of, among other things, both a past and a future with no need for translation. Jean-François Lyotard characterizes this as the ideal of every translation: to render itself useless and even impossible.

There are several ways in which the story of Tarun Roy, and the circumstances of the translation of his story, are of interest to us. Firstly, by pointing to linguistic difference as separation, to the plurality of languages and the need for translation as the sign of, or the desire for, some greater unifying force, beyond difference, a force which would abolish language and with it, one can surmise, translation. Secondly, the function given translation into English in Indian society. The translator talks about linguistic difference in his preface, and the bridging of such difference through the use of English. He writes: "A crucial role that English can and should perform in India is that of a link between the literatures in the indigenous languages; it is mainly through this mediating role that

English can acquire legitimacy as an Indian language.” There is a paradox here: English is to play a role in making works in one Indian language known to the readers of another; it is to have the role of a neutral, transparent mediator; and in playing such a role, it will come to be considered an Indian language. Will it too then require translation along with its fellow Indian languages? And into what language? Or will English be both a language to be translated and the language of translation? This particular position of English within India is of course largely a result of colonization. But this paradox can perhaps be understood in a more general way, in which a translation is considered both as a transparent glass through which the original can be clearly seen and as opaque, a work in its own “write.” And there is also a third aspect of interest in relation to this translation: the question of the translatability of such a work into a language such as English, now resituated as an eminently Western, non-Indian, language. The translator recounts the difficulties encountered in having the translation published:

*Laya Vilaya*, one will be told, is imitative of the stream-of-consciousness technique, which is hopelessly obsolete. But to apply the touchstones of modern, Western critical theory to a completely Indian, in fact completely Oriya, work such as *Laya Vilaya*, is to betray one’s own limitations. *Laya Vilaya*, it seems to me, is pure meditation, pure worship.

And he continues:

Gopinath Mohanty is reported to have told a young research scholar that the hero of this book is Lord Jagannath Himself. It would be difficult to explain to an ‘outsider’ the nature of the influence the Dark God has on all facets of life in Orissa.

The impossibility of translation, of bridging the distance between cultures is mooted here: Western theory is inapplicable, an outsider cannot understand. The work to be translated is not simply Indian, it is Oriya, and translation can only be a betrayal. The final paragraph of the translator’s introduction makes this clear, and, given the theme of the novel, goes beyond the traditional deference translators show an original work : “I can only hope, therefore,” Bikram Das writes, “that my translation will intrude as little as possible between the reader and the author’s meditation, which is beyond language.” The

role of translation here is to make accessible to readers a work – a meditation beyond language – which both underscores the necessity of translation and its impossibility.

---

Ce texte a été publié dans le numéro de printemps 2000 du *Bulletin de l'Association canadienne de traductologie*. p. 1-3. Paul St. Pierre est professeur à l'Université de Montréal et Président de l'ACT.

---