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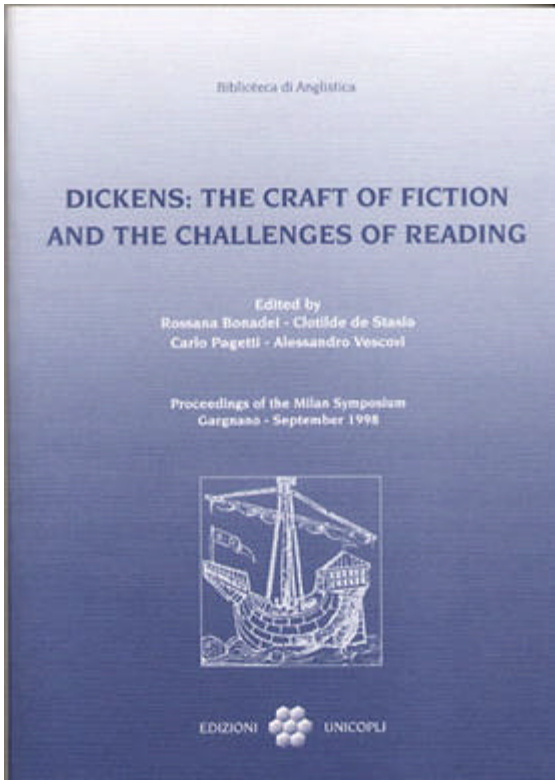

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"THE TYRANNY OF WORDS":[1] READING DICKENS IN TRANSLATION

In an essay on translation Walter Benjamin writes:

> It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.(1973: 14).

Perhaps I shouldn't say "Walter Benjamin writes" as this quotation is itself a translation. I am not even quite sure how close the words are to the original since I could not check: there is no copy of *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* on the shelves of my University library. But I did find another translation of Benjamin's text, an English translation of a French translation of an English translation of the German original, a translation "en abîme", so to speak, which runs as follows:

> To redeem in his own tongue that pure language exiled in the foreign tongue, to liberate by transposing this pure language captive in the work, such is the task of the translator.[2](Graham 1985: 188).

Having no means to determine whether, according to Benjamin, "pure language" is "redeemed" or "released" by the translator and whether it was "exiled" or "under a spell", I will merely select a few words – "liberate", "captive", "imprisoned", "release" – implying in either text that the act of translating is an act of liberation.

I have a feeling that Benjamin's definition would have appealed to Dickens. When he once drew the portrait of a professional translator in his fiction, namely Charles Darnay, the hero of *A Tale of Two Cities*, he chose a man whose political and moral inclinations were all in favour of

[1] "The tyranny of words" is David Copperfield's expression, *David Copperfield* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), lii, p. 822.

[2] Benjamin's essay is translated by J. F. Graham from a translation by Maurice de Gandillac. Extract quoted by Marie-Claire Pasquier in "Les langues déliées", *Fabula*, 7, 1986, pp. 19-33.

emancipation and whose own life story, at home and abroad, was a fight for liberty.

An "uncommercial traveller" who shuttles back and forth between France and England where he eventually exiles himself, Darnay/Evrémonde (or Evrémonde/Darnay?) is actually a perfect embodiment of translation itself, a living metaphor for this metaphorical act. His relationship with Sydney Carton, his look-alike – their rivalries, their misunderstandings, their ultimate and dramatic changing places – would also seem to be the narrative counterpart of a linguistic process that aims at erasing dissimilarities and reconciling "faux amis". Most illustrative of this achievement is the episode in the Paris jail in which, writing a message that his alter ego dictates, Darnay gradually loses consciousness, a prelude to his being passed off for another – a Frenchman translated into an Englishman – thereby regaining his freedom.

Besides writing metaphorically about the art of translation, Dickens is quite explicit as to what he expects from a good translator. He describes Darnay as "an elegant translator who brought something to his work besides mere dictionary knowledge", (*Tale of Two Cities*: 160) terms that echo, literally for one of them, his praises of Paul Lorain, the French translator of *Nicholas Nickleby*: "an accomplished gentleman perfectly acquainted with both languages, and able, with rare felicity, to be perfectly faithful to the English text while rendering it in elegant and expressive French". (*Letters* vol 8: 263n) "Elegant", "expressive", "faithful to": wisely, Dickens does not say "accurate", aware, no doubt, that accuracy is an impossibility. Fidelity is a looser notion and a matter of subjective appreciation. "Brought something to his work" also implies that Dickens allows translators some authority over the texts they have to render into another language and considers, like Benjamin, that translation is, at least within limits, a form of re-creation.

This, indeed, raises a problem. When, in a letter to Forster, he first mentioned the Hachette series (which Lorain was to supervise) Dickens spoke of "a complete edition, authorized by myself, of a French translation of all my books" (*Letters*, vol 8: 8): "authorized" it certainly was, but how far was it still "authored" by him? Even though he had some notions of French ("as we French say", he jokingly writes in a letter from Paris) (*Letters*, vol 8: 40) even though he believed that he had some "control" over the series and could properly appreciate the "skill" of his translators, could he fairly claim the authorship of these new texts?

The question is even more disturbing when applied to all those translations into exotic languages that have been published since then, all those volumes of the Babel Library[3] "*by* Charles Dickens" which Charles Dickens would have been unable to decipher, and in which, at best, he would have recognized the names of his characters. The answer to this question (if there is one) depends to a large extent on whether by "author" we mean "novelist" or "writer": for, undeniably, the readers of different translations all read the same stories, but they do not read the same books.

Added to linguistic incompatibilities are cultural, geographical, political, historical discrepancies requiring "transposition" or "re-creation" and, sometimes, explanation. Thus, an early translation of "Sketches of Young Couples" into Japanese (1882) was rendered into something like "Sketches of Man and Wife *in the West*".(Schlicke 1999)[4]. But we need not travel so far to meet difficulties and, following Pascal's advice, I have chosen to stay at home to illustrate my point.

One of the bugbears of French translators of English, for instance, is the word "gentleman". Up until the Revolution there used to be a strict equivalent, "gentilhomme'; but the word suddenly became obsolete instead of evolving and democratizing itself as "gentleman" did[5] and we now need a large "retinue of words" as David Copperfield would say, to render the many shades of meaning of the English term. In the introduction to his translation of *Great Expectations*, Sylvère Monod has a nicely apologetic note on the subject, in which he draws the list of synonyms and circumlocutions he resorted to in order to convey slight differences of meaning: "un monsieur" ("quite someone" or "a proper gentleman", says my dictionary), "un gentilhomme" ("a man of gentle birth"), "un homme du monde" ("a man who moves in high society'), "un honnête homme" ("a man of breeding"), "un homme de bien" ("an upright man"), "and sometimes, as a last resort and with a bitter feeling of failure and frustration", Monod goes on without losing his sense of humour, "un gentleman" (1959 xlv). The translator is certainly right to deplore the shortcomings of the French language: dispersed throughout the book, these terms impoverish the text and deprive it of much of its irony, pointing to only one meaning at a time, while the word "gentleman" harbours all its virtual meanings. On the other hand, the note is an enlightening commentary on a keyword of the novel and on one of its major themes; alerted from the outset to the polysemy of a word which is not quite translatable into their own

[3]See Anny Sadrin's entry on 'Translations' in Paul Schlicke 1999. 567-9.
[4](My emphasis).
[5]A phenomenon that was well analysed by Alexis Tocqueville1952: 148-9.

tongue, French readers of this translation are, paradoxically, better equipped than English readers for a critical reading of the book.

Footnotes can indeed be very helpful: they "release" meaning and have the further advantage of emphasizing the dialectical nature of translation, of re-establishing for the benefit of the reader the dialogue that inevitably took place between author and translator during the transformational process; but, unfortunately, they are not very popular with the average reader, who prefers to take the translated text on trust rather than to have his pleasure spoilt by constant interruptions. As a result, footnotes are sparingly provided, even in the best editions and, in many cases, both the author's meaning and the translator's intentions are lost on the reader. Let me give you an example. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Book I, chapter 2, Eugene Wrayburn is described as "gloomily resorting to the champagne chalice whenever proffered by the Analytical Chemist".(*Our Mutual Friend*: 53) "Chalice" is not a word that we normally associate with champagne but with the ritual of Christian churches; in contemporary English it designates "the cup used in the celebration of the Eucharist" (the OED gives the old sense of "drinking cup or goblet" as merely "poetic": "Now, only in poetic and elevated language"). The scene, with its biblical solemnity ("Come down and be poisoned, ye unhappy children of men!" (51), is a parody of the Last Supper or, more precisely, of its genteel ritualization. The implicit comparison of the Veneerings" dinner party to a ceremony of Holy Communion has for me a Bunuellian ring and somewhat announces *Viridiana*, *The Exterminating Angel*, or *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. A few years ago, wishing to comment upon this and other sacrilegeous scenes in Dickens in my book *Dickens ou le roman-théâtre*, I turned for quotations to the Pléiade translation by Sylvère Monod and Lucien Carrive. To my surprise, there was no "calice" in the scene but only "une coupe de champagne",(*L'Ami commun*: 14) nothing out of the ordinary, nothing disrespectful or sacrilegeous. I enquired from Sylvère about the reasons why he or his co-translator had soft-pedalled Dickens's cheekiness and he explained to me that they had chosen "coupe" preferably to "calice" on the ground that the word is commonly used by protestants in our country, which seemed to imply 1/ that French readers should not be induced into believing that Victorian England was a Roman Catholic nation 2/ that the translators were punning on the word "coupe". I must say that I found the answer very clever and very unconvincing. Dickens's satire is clearly aimed at the Establishment, represented here by the High Church whose rituals are very similar to those of the Catholic Church. What's more, "calice"

connotes the church for everybody, "coupe" certainly does not and I doubt that many French readers of the Pléiade, whether protestant or not, will read Dickens's irreverence between the lines. So, I "corrected" "coupe" into "calice" in my quotation, convinced that the translators' private joke was bound to remain very private. Surely, a footnote would have helped.

But there are cases when one cannot expect translators to explain their choices as when, reporting dialogues in French or in German, they of necessity use "tu" or "vous", "du" or "Sie" to render the invariable English "you". (See also Monod 1998: 234). Opting for one form of address rather than another is often a tricky business with subtle implications on the relationship between the characters. It requires textual, sociological, psychological analysis, compels the translator to become even more than an interpreter and to release meaning that was not intended though it may (or must?) have been implicit in the author's text – "pure language" exiled in the author's text. I found it interesting to compare three translations of *Great Expectations*, Charles-Bernard Derosne's in the early Hachette series,[6] Pierre Leyris's for the Pléiade (1954) and Monod's for Classiques Garnier (1959). Here are some clues for you to interpret the different choices: "tu" often expresses familiarity and is commonly used by children among themselves, by close friends and relatives or by adults addressing children; but this pronoun can also express contempt towards a social inferior; "vous" usually means respect or lack of intimacy with the interlocutor, but its usage is also a matter of social upbringing (it is used more frequently in the upper classes than among the common people) and it can also betray aloofness and social distance. Derosne's and Monod's Estella calls Pip "tu" in the early chapters of the novel, then switches to "vous" from chapter 29 onwards, after (in her own words) his "change of fortune and prospects" (*Great Expectations*: 258). Elaborating on her comportment as a child, Leyris, for his part, has her say "vous" at the very beginning of chapter 8, then "tu" a moment later, maybe under the influence of Miss Havisham who addresses him as "tu" from the start. Derosne's and Monod's Miss Havisham, however, calls Pip "vous" from beginning to end. In chapter 11, when he invites him to "come and fight", Herbert says "tu" to Pip in the first two translations, but he says "vous" in Monod's. When the two young men meet again in London in chapter 21, they say "vous" to each other in the three translations, but in two of them, Monod's and Leyris's, they convincingly move on to

[6]Reprinted in 1981, Paris: Robert Laffont, Collection 'Bouquins'.

"tu" as their friendship grows. Magwitch calls Pip "tu" in the churchyard scene and "vous" on his return from Australia in the three translations; but, while he sticks to this form of address right up to the end of the novel in Derosne's and Monod's texts, he, more plausibly, reverts to "tu" in the Pléiade translation from the moment in the return scene when he reveals his identity and the part he has played in his interlocutor's social promotion. Pip, for his part, says "vous" to almost everybody except Joe and Biddy (and, eventually, Herbert in two translations).

Each new translation, as we see, is a new performance of the text, each one brings out ("liberates") potential meaning and potential emotion. Translations, in other words, like stage or screen adaptations, fertilize, energize and sometimes even rejuvenate the old standard version which in the source-language is, of course, immutable. Whether for better or for worse is a question, however, which cannot be assessed by those for whose benefit translations are intended since they, by definition, have no knowledge of the source-language. Like spectators attending a play that they do not know, these readers discover a text that has been pre-read and pre-interpreted.

But, if they force their own interpretation upon their readers, translators, on the other hand, again like stage managers or film directors, often adapt their texts to the tastes of their time. Thus, the Pléiade translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Jeanne Métifeux-Béjaut (1970), the one French readers are most likely to read today, is entitled *Un Conte de deux villes*, a literal and, I am afraid, most awkward rendering, corresponding to our modern expectations of accuracy. In the "faithful" Hachette series, published in 1861, at a time when the Terror was still well within living memory, Dickens's French contemporaries were invited by Henriette Loreau to read *Paris et Londres en* 93.[7] A century later, in 195°, when the French could afford to be nostalgic and to romanticize the good old days of the monarchy, a new unabridged translation by Robert Maghe and Albert Waughty was published under the title *Le Marquis de Saint-Evremont*,[8] a title no doubt prompted to the translators by the French title of Jack Conway's film (1935), one more sign of the interrelatedness of the two genres.

Translation as performance is indeed quite appropriate for Dickens, himself a brilliant translator and performer of his texts in

[7]Victor Hugo's *Quatrevingt-treize* came out in 1874.
[8]Verviers, 1950, Marabout.

more ways than one. As a public reader, he adapted his stories, impersonated his various characters, re-created his own works. But, even as a writer, he can be said to have been a self-translator. Think of the famous paragraph in *David Copperfield* beginning "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship" (*David Copperfield*: 210), which describes David's misery and humiliation once placed in the service of Murdstone and Grinsby. We know, thanks to Forster, that this passage (with a few others) was lifted bodily from what has come to be called "The Autobiographical Fragment". But in this new context, it becomes a new text. The situation is similar, but it is not exactly the same. The deictics "my" and "I" in particular no longer refer to the same person no matter what biographers may tell us about DC and CD.

But was not the fragment itself a translation in the first place? "No word can *express*", says the text: "express", that is "squeeze out", ("release"), or, literally, trans-late from the seat of emotions to the level of the symbolic Order. Proust says no less in *Le Temps retrouvé*:

> I realized that, to *express* those impressions, to write this essential book, the only genuine book, a great writer needs not invent it [...] since it exists already, but must translate it. The duty and task of the writer are those of a translator.[9]

No words can express the intimate truth of human experience, yet, paradoxically, only words can express it, and, even more paradoxically, it would seem that for Dickens, at least in confessional writings, only the same words can recreate the same emotion, that repetition is the only "faithful", in fact the only possible, form of translation – "translating degree zero", as we might call it – a phenomenon significantly reproduced in the first two chapters of *George Silverman's Explanation*.

Dissatisfied with his initial opening, "It happened in this wise" – "an uncouth phrase" as he calls it – Silverman meekly notes: "and yet I do not see my way to a better". His second try – "It happened in *this* wise" – shows that there is indeed no other way: "But, looking at those words, and comparing them with my former opening, I find they are the self-same words repeated. This is the more surprising to me, because I employ them in quite a new connexion." This remark, which

[9] "Je m'apercevais que, pour exprimer ces impressions, pour écrire ce livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas [...] à l'inventer puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche de l'écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur. *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), La Pléiade, Vol. III, p. 890 (my translation, my emphasis).

illustrates the compulsive and mysterious nature of linguistic performance, actually imperils the very notion of translability: unsolicited utterances surging and re-surging up from the depths of the unconscious are in essence untranslatable. In practice, however, it is, admittedly, easy enough for a translator to render the effect of spontaneous repetition as long as it occurs within the same text, which is the case with the E*xplanation*. But how about D*avid Copperfield*? How can a translator do justice to the linguistic determinism of the most personal bits and their complex network of correspondances short of reproducing the "Fragment" itself in a note? This is precisely what Leyris does in his Pléiade translation; but, most disturbingly, after advising his readers to "compare" the two texts and informing them that "some passages" are verbally identical ("intégrés mot à mot"), he provides a translation which is totally different from that of the corresponding passages in the novel.[10]

This sets us dreaming of absolute minimalism. But would even that be satisfactory? George Silverman himself, even as he comments upon the tyranny of words, suggests that repetition does not quite entail perfect replication ("I employ them in quite a new connexion'); in his provocative "Pierre Menard, translator of Quixote", Jorge Luis Borges is even more categorical, as the following excerpt will show:

> It is a revelation to compare Menard's D*on Quixote* with Cervantes. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):
>
> [...] truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser of the present, and the future's counsellor.
>
> Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:
>
> [...] truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser of the present, and the future's counsellor.
>
> History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases – *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor* – are brazenly pragmatic.
>
> The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard – quite foreign, after all – suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.[11]

In spite of what the title suggests, the main character of Borges's fable is not the translator, but the translator's reader. A reader who is both rigorous and subjective: the diachronic perspective and the

[10]Paris: Gallimard, 1954, pp. 1480-1489.
[11]Quoted by George Steiner 1975: 72.

peremptory tone clearly indicate professionalism, but the re-contextualisation of the text – bringing William James into a re-definition of the concept of "history" for instance – is quite personal. The reader is himself the interpreter of another reader's interpretation.

Silverman and Borges do not facilitate my task when it comes to concluding on translators and translations. Should I say, "as we French say", "traduttore, traditore"? Should I say, as Benjamin "says", "traduttore liberatore"? But why generalize? And why choose anyway? And, above all, why not extend our moral categories to readers in general, readers/interpreters whether of translated or untranslated texts?

I would therefore think it appropriate to dedicate the Borges quotation to all those among you (there are bound to be some) who never read Dickens, except in English.

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