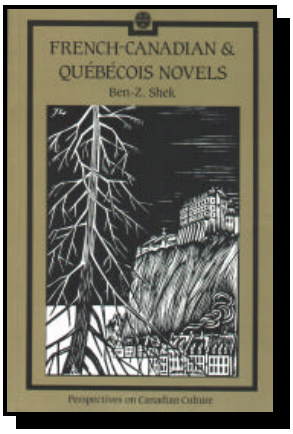
Ben-Z. Shek

THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION



The first written translations of texts, from French to English and vice versa, occurred at the very beginning of the British regime in the *Quebec Gazette*, launched in 1764. Literary translation began in the nineteenth century when successes in either language were translated into the other shortly after the original publication. The explosion of literary output in Quebec in the 1960s was followed by a veritable flood of translations. These were given further impetus by the establishment in 1972 of translation grants by the Canada Council. There has been an imbalance in literary translations, with a far greater number of French-language books being rendered into English than the reverse. In the last two decades, however, there has been considerably more literary translation into French. Our concern here, of course, is with translations from French to English. Since 1977 the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (UTQ) has provided a close and critical examination of these translations in its annual 'Letters in Canada' issue.

In a 1988 article, in which he drew on his observations as 'Translations' columnist during six years at the *UTQ*, and in other activities in the translation field, John O'Connor wrote: .... given the extraordinary diversity in the quality of translations published in Canada, we must never forget that our reading of them is always, in some sense, an act of blind faith—faith in the translator, the editor, often the reviewer on whom we depend to alert us to problems in the "transfusion" process.' (O'Connor and others have pointed out that in the past, unilingual English reviewers and editors were the most common 'assessors' of translations from a language they did not know. I would add that this is still a frequent occurrence today!) Furthermore some translations with serious flaws—the first translation of *Bonheur d'occasion* by Hannah Josephson and *Prochain episode* translated by Penny Williams, to name two outstanding examples—are not only being read but are also taught in English-Canadian schools and universities as if they were authentic renderings of the originals. O'Connor has summarized the main problem-areas of French-to-English translation

as the following: the rendering of colloquialisms, puns, titles, cursing; the *tulvous* distinction in French; and the use of the target language (English) in the source text. (In Hébert's **Kamouraska* and Ducharme's *L'Hiver de force* / *Wild to Mild* the use of English within the original French text often has an important ideological function that happily has not been overlooked by the translators.) O'Connor has also catalogued the large number of omissions and mistranslations that occur.

A perusal of the translation columns of the *UTQ* since 1977 shows the following weaknesses, in addition to those mentioned above, in the rendering of Québécois novels into English: omission of adjectives, descriptive phrases, clauses, adverbs, entire sentences, significant punctuation; overly literal translation of phrases resulting in inexact, unidiomatic or misleading diction; mistranslation of individual words and misinterpretation of sentences, resulting in actual contradictions of the original; misplaced modifiers; shifts in verb tenses that falsify the text; omission of epigraphs; excessive looseness constituting a paraphrase or adaptation; careless reliance on censored or bowdlerized versions of texts for the translation; the addition of gratuitous explanatory sentences or words; alteration of the text towards increased specificity, sometimes leading to errors of degree or fact; failure to find English equivalents for religious terms, and to capture colour, style, tone or nuances; poor choice of title, reflecting only one aspect of the original rather than its centrality. On the positive side several translators got high marks for their authentic, strong, or even excellent dialogue, fine choice of idiomatic English, sensitive capturing of the tone and pace of the original, its nuances, and minute details; clever replication of puns and apt description; and for the subtlety of their rendition of informal/formal address *(tu/vous).* Translators singled out for positive achievements were: Alan Brown *(Orphan Street),* Sheila Fischman *(The Scarecrows of Saint-Emmanuel, The Jimmy Trilogy, Hamlet's Twin, The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant),* Barbara Godard *(The Tale of Don L'Orignal, These Our Own Mothers or the Disintegrating Chapter),* John Glassco *(Fear's Folly),* David Toby Homel *(The Draft-Dodger),* Mark Czarnecki *(Inspector Therrien),* Carol Dunlop *(Deaf to the City),* and Philip Stratford *(Pélagie: The Return to a Homeland).* In the translation *of Pélagie,* we have a fine example of the rendering of the oral quality of Antonine Maillet's style:

'Alive! Captain Broussard-called-Beausoleil, master of an English four-master christened

Grand' Goule and a full crew of survivors . . . Aye, Bélonie, survivors, survivors from midocean snatched from the furious sea...' The colloquial flavour of seaboard turns of phrase is also captured by Stratford's translation of 'laughed his salt-roughened, sea-windy laugh' for '*rit de toute sa gorge rauque de sel et de vent du large*'. Sheila Fischman, one of Canada's most accomplished translators, has also won praise for her rendering of the title of Victor-Beauiieu's *Don Quichotte de la démanche* as *Don Quixote in Nighttown,* which plays on the author's borrowings from Joyce's Ulysses—choosing to ignore the parodic play on Quixote's full name. On the other hand, Ray Chamberlain, the translator of Beaulieu' s *Steven Le Hérault,* while praised for his use of concrete images to give a colloquial touch to the dialogues, substitutes sexual imagery for typical angry blasphemy, like many translators of *joual* and Franco-Canadian speech. Thus the expression *mon hostie de tabarnaque—literally* my consecrated tabernacle wafer (host)—becomes 'son of a whore'. Many English translations of Michel Tremblay's plays show similar distortions.

But these errors are minor compared to the disfigurement of *Bonheur d'occasion* in many details of Hannah Josephson's 1947 translation. Often cited is her changing of the French-Canadian *poudrerie* (blizzard) into a munitions-factory explosion (in standard European French *poudrerie* means 'gunpowder factory'). One could add the highly ideological transformation of Jean Lévesque's description of Florentine as '*moitié peuple, moitié chanson*' (half commoner or working-class, half song) into 'half slut, half song'! *Poudrerie* continues to elude translators, for Alan Brown's 1980 translation of Roy's classic gave it as 'powdered snow', which is closer but not precise enough. This translation elicited the criticism from John O'Connor that 'much of the colour and style of *Bonheur d'occasion* is lost'.

Penny Williams' 1967 translation of Aquin's *Prochain épisode* contains a great many deletions (of difficult expressions and historical and literary references) and mistranslations. One example of the latter early in the book will suffice. The imprisoned narrator imagines a spy for the novel he is writing and names him Hamidou Diop, a member of the Wolof ethnic group of West Africa. Williams translates *'Et si j'introduisais un agent secret Wolof .... Tout le monde sait que les Wolofs ne sont pas légion en Suisse Romande ...*' as: 'And if I were to introduce a secret agent named Wolof ... Everyone knows that there are not many

Wolofs in French Switzerland . . .

Other translations of important works that have been singled out for failing short of the mark are those of Bersianik's *L'Euguélionne,* Bessette's *Le Cycle,* Poulin's *Les Grandes Marées* and *Volkswagen Blues,* and Godbout's *Une histoire américaine* —the last three for failing to distinguish the presence of many English expressions and dialogue in the originals.

A good translation, in my view, must respect the cultural differences between the language of the source text and that of the target text by the judicious inclusion in italics of key words or phrases from the original (translated), and by giving some of the flavour of the original's use of personal nouns and idiomatic or dialectal expressions. When there are switches from French to English in the original, as is often the case in Québécois texts, the irony should be indicated in italics or by another typographical device, with a prefatory note to explain the usage. John O'Connor has summed up this approach very well in defining an excellent translation as 'an authentic counterpart of the source text, providing the reader with one work in two languages, not with two fully independent works.'

Source : Ben-Z. Shek, *French-Canadian & Québécois Novels*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, «Perspectives on Canadian Culture» Series, 1991, p. 136-139.