

All my Life Translating a GRIOT

Etienne Galle

It is hardly thinkable to translate a literary text without some commitment of the sensibility. Language here is not reduced to intellectual significations as it should ideally be in a scientific text. It emerges into our world of appearance and manifestations loaded with the energies and potencies that have urged the author to create it; it is suffused with emotional messages. In various grades and contents according to whether it approaches speculation or borders on poetry, a text radiates feeling to which the reader is invited to react. And the translator, who very often is the reader of a language that is not her or his own, has to make herself or himself sensitive to these messages.

Weighing words

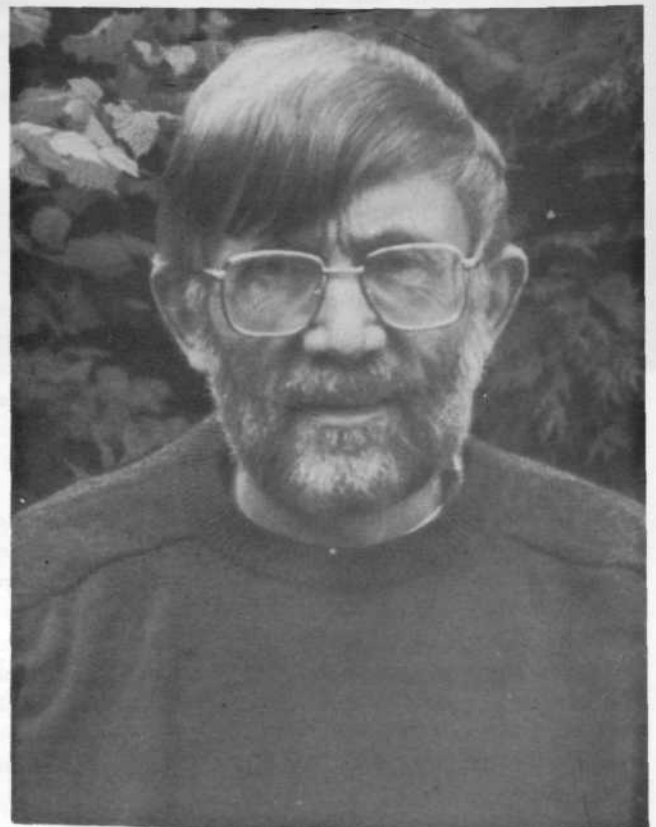
Beyond the meanings conveyed through the sequences of sentences, a translator should perceive in the lexical choice, banal or mannered, loaded with sensuous images or dry concepts, in the syntactic complexity or simplicity, monotony or variety, in the stylistic endless games and the multitude of unnamed nuances, the total significance of the fluid thought of the author never fully conscious himself of the expression he mediates and creates. The translator should feel as well as understand, work as a technician and as an artist. And this, clearly, in addition to an extensive and precise knowledge and mastery of the languages whose correspondence she/he ensures, with the pitfalls their linguistic proximity can hide, such as the deceptive cognates to the anglophone translator of French.

And translating implies style and choice. A technique and an art, a profession or a passion, translating has its theoreticians and its historians, its trends and schools. A translator should keep informed of these in order to understand the wide range of possibilities offered, rigid or flexible, shy or daring, overdoing or underdoing. When Jacques Derrida says that 'good translation should indulge in excess' he may not find unanimous support but he does not fail to find quite a few followers.

A French specialist of translation, Valéry Larbaud, says that 'all the work of translation is a weighing of words', an option

for differential sensibility that means with some propriety to obtain the seal of scientific value. But Valéry Larbaud knows well that we must think of the author's words rather than the dictionary's, that is words which, while retaining their cores of conventional values, have been coloured by what has preceded them in the text where they appear and even in previous texts, and also in the linguistic environment of the writer since his childhood, whether his mother tongue or others, with their own structures and cultural bases, or again the ever growing and expanding field of his literary and social associations.

Wole Soyinka spoke Yoruba before he started learning English, even though at a very early age, and still speaks it; but, voracious reader that he is, he has been continuously nourished by an indefinite wealth of new verbal entities. Behind the hidden



or manifest allusions to Shakespeare or Yeats, or the Bible often humorously twisted, loom the innumerable presences of literary worlds superimposed or associated to the Yoruba language and thought in his 'selective eclecticism'. A translator should become acquainted with all these data and feed his cerebral computer whose unconscious work produces and proposes a text that the mental checker sifts through, deletes, corrects or retains.

Cultural Distance

A literary text is never read in pure objectivity. The farther it is in time and space, the more the reader projects his own preoccupations on it. If the reader is a translator, he tends to emphasize whatever is relevant to his own desires in the text he is attempting to capture and tone down whatever has little appeal to him. And he also knows that his translation should receive the approval of his publisher, which may sometimes be something of a feat when he wants to remain faithful to the values of the writer. And this means that a translation will age. Like any other literary text it will develop a coat of patina or rust. It runs the risk of becoming trite. A new translation then scrubs the first and attempts to recreate the original

text with the most honourable intentions and... illusions.

Obviously the problem of time distance does not exist with Wole Soyinka, but that of spatial, or rather, cultural distance does. Wole Soyinka is a Yoruba, Nigerian, African, Planetary writer. He questions the pretensions to universality of Western culture. He has particularly criticized its 'periodic dialectics', examining the effects on the evolution of literatures and the accompanying movements of criticism of this 'compartmentalising habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or "truths") sustained by a proliferating superstructure of presentation idioms, analogies and analytical modes. I have evolved a rather elaborate metaphor to describe it; appropriately it is not only mechanistic but represents a period technology which marked yet another phase of Western man's comprehensive world-view.

'You must picture a steam-engine which shunts itself between rather closely-spaced suburban stations. At the first station it picks up a ballast of allegory, puffs into the next emitting a smokescreen

on the eternal landscape of nature truths. At the next it loads up with a different species of logs which we shall call naturalist timber, puffs into a half-way stop where it fills up with the synthetic fuel of surrealism, from which point yet another holistic world-view is glimpsed and asserted through psychedelic smoke. A new consignment of absurdist coke lures it into the next station from which it departs giving off no smoke at all, and no fire, until it derails briefly along constructivist tracks and is towed back to the starting-point by a neo-classic engine.' (Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 37f).

This 'series of intellectual spasms' (ibid.) has been confirmed and analysed by French academic Gilbert Durand who has shown the pendular movement of cultural generations impelled by recurrent myths.+

Western and westernized translators, just like their fellow writers and critics, cannot easily escape these fluctuations. But Soyinka challenges the dialectical agitation and contrary excesses in perpetual unbalance and rebalance. To the compartmentalization of European thought resulting in the extremes advocated by Derrida he opposes 'culture as defined within man's knowledge of fun-

damental, unchanging relationships between himself and society and within the larger context of the observable universe.' (ibid.)

+Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre, Paris, Berg International, 1979.

Sound, sense, harmony

It seems quite natural that a translator of Soyinka's works should endeavour to share his cultural vision. What about a reader of Wole Soyinka who came to translate him because he felt in himself a deep agreement with this vision? There is little danger for him to be tempted any longer by ebb and flow of Western schools



Etienne at home with wife, Zeinabou (France, May, 1996)

and cultural generations. And yet he has to admit that he does not fully know all that went into his formation and is unaware of the laws of the cerebral computer that presents him translations he can only check, reject or accept. Let us only say that the Cerberus that keeps watch at the portals of the nether regions of the psyche out of which emerge the French words that had entered in English garb has its three heads: sense, sound and harmony. It unemotionally tears to pieces the unfaithful beauties, grunts in front of make-up and drives back all that is out of tune with the song started long before.

To translate Soyinka therefore means to be in harmony with the deep thoughts that inspire him. It also means to remember that Soyinka has himself practised translation and expressed his sentiment about it, however briefly, in his prefatory note to *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, a translation from D. O. Fagunwa's Yoruba saga *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*. Soyinka explains that his translational options are based on the art of the storyteller whose text he wants to capture and render:

'Fagunwa's concern is to convey the vivid sense of event, and a translator must select equivalents for mere auxiliaries where these serve the essential purpose better than the precise original. In what I mentally refer to as the 'enthusiastic' passages of his writing, the essence of Fagunwa is the fusion of sound and action. To preserve the movement and fluidity of this association seems to be the best approach for keeping faith with the author's style and sensibility.' (op. cit., p.3).

Soyinka as translator just like Soyinka as poet, novelist and dramatist heeds rhythms and harmonies as much as sense, and may even sacrifice the latter to the former:

'In one of the extracts for the magazine *Black Orpheus*, this phrase 'mo nmi ho bi agiliti' which became 'my breath came in rapid bloats like the hawing of a toad' aroused some protest from a critic. Indeed agiliti is far from being the toad, it is more a member of the lizard species. But then neither toad nor lizard is

the object of action or interest to the hero Akara-Ogun or his creator Fagunwa at this point of narration' (ibid.).

This free attitude towards the letter for a better faithfulness to the spirit and its musical expression connects with what Soyinka says about the relationship between the dramatist and his producers: he lets those who stage his plays take liberties with his text in order to adapt to the public and their cultural environment but remains uncompromising about the essential message to deliver.

Soyinka's translator should not be misled by their freedom; it expresses a demand for a sensibility to modes of expression that cannot be easily defined. In Soyinka's works elliptical, allusive and obscure turns may perplex a reader who is after total intellectual lucidity. Should the translator then come to his help? What about a phrase like 'the rocksalt psyche' in *The Interpreters* which looks and sounds both hermetic and poetic? When I found an opportunity to ask the writer he was surprised at my embarrassment and kindly explained that salt dissolves when it absorbs too much water and therefore the rocksalt psyche is that which risks dissolution when it absorbs too much knowledge. Then, out of pity for the francophone readers, the translator writes: 'cette psyche de sel gemme que dissout l'eau qu'il absorbe' (the rocksalt psyche dissolved by the water it absorbs), regretting that his explanation breaks the rhythm, turns the phrase off key, in fact ruins the text.

Take the example of Soyinka's address to the Lagos Symposium in May 1988. He says: 'On this continent we have had far too many martyrs among writers, artists and scientists who have met with hideous ends at the hands of purely reflexive rulers.' The translator suspects that 'reflexion' here hides something derogatory and wonders how reflection can be noxious. Chancing on the man he puts it to him and receives a mischievous glance and reply: 'What? You don't know what reflexes are?', and suiting the action to the words WS demonstrates the knee-jerk. How should we translate then? Is it not treasonable to explain: 'des dirigeants qui n'agissent

que par reflexe' (rulers that act only through reflex)? Should we not rather leave the reader the chance and pleasure to guess, relish the hidden meaning, the strangeness of the phrase at the end of the long period? Attachment to immediate lucidity is fanatical intellectualism declining feeling and refusing imagination and denying the poet his art and right to choose his words with the unexpected slant that freshens them up.

In his poem 'New York, USA' Soyinka mentions his 'long liquid vigils' in the feverish wait for Western and Eastern cosmonauts' departures for space. 'Liquid'? I learn from the horse's mouth that it refers to the beers and other ogunian beverages that help him to kill time. But 'liquide' hardly applies. Shall I use 'arrosé' (wetted, washed)? It is clearer in French. Yet I keep 'liquide', and who can tell me why? Just a feeling. Of course an explanation is deplorable in a poem and a footnote disgraceful.

'Music before anything' 'de la musique avant toute chose' (Verlaine)

Soyinka is an artist even when he uses words as essayist, orator or professor. His texts are often musical works, as when he theorizes on Yoruba drama in his major essay, *The Fourth Stage*: 'This masonic union of sign and melody, the true tragic music, unearths cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence, reveals the magnitude and power of creation, but above all creates a harrowing sense of omni-directional vastness where the creative Intelligence resides and prompts the soul to futile exploration' (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, p.148).

A translator should enter into this relational spirit in which 'the sound must seem an echo to the sense' as Pope says. Because of this duality of sound and sense and their delicate tension and balance, his choices partly rely on intuition and cannot be easily justified. Is it the impression of the moment, unerring instinct or simply necessity that decides? What is he to do, among other things, when faced with rhymes? In 'Psalm' (*Idanre and Other Poems*) Soyinka threads couplets like a

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string of pearls. Some of the English rhymes use latinate words, inviting loan-translation: 'gratitude/plenitude', 'sanctuary/mystery', 'exegesis/genesis'. Should not the francophone reader be shown that Soyinka does not disdain rhymes when he feels them expressive of the mood of a poem? With 'Roots' (A Shuttle in the Crypt) I simply gave up, fearing that I would have to cut down too much in the wealth of images. But with 'The Apotheosis of Master-Sergeant Doe' (Mandela's Earth and Other Poems) I felt I could not escape. The heroic couplet here seems essential, conveying the satire in a pastiche of occasional verse, but my French alexandrins (twelve-syllable lines) have certainly lost a number of allusions and nods, and some of the original caustic wit.

Translating without betraying

Most of the problems the translator addresses in Soyinka's poetry, whether rhymed or not, are similar to those found in all texts where form carries a major load of expressivity. Then come problems specific to African literature, rarely insolvable but quite worthy of attention. To avoid certain blunders, it is desirable to have some knowledge of African geography, history and some acquaintance with African life and people. Nothing here can better help than to have lived in Africa and become sentimentally attached to Africa.

With such a background the translator will not translate 'corn' in Idanre by Blé (wheat) but by Mais (maize). The harvest in Kongi's Harvest is not moisson, which only applies to corn, but récolte, the only word that can be used for yam.

The kite in *Death and the King's Horseman* is not a toy but a hawk, a milan or épervier, probably the Yoruba ashá. Should we translate 'void' in the same play by néant (nothingness)? The Void is a primal concept in the Yoruba worldview. It is the first basis in Ogun's mythology and Soyinka's vision. Ogun is the pioneer and ferryman of the Void. Rather than nothingness and Void is a whirling world of creative and destructive energies as the reader comes to feel through this passage in *Myth, Literature and the African World*: 'The void had become impenetrable. A long isolation from the world of men had created an impassable barrier which they tried, but failed, to demolish. Ogun finally took over. Armed with the first technical instrument which he had forged from the mountain-wombs, he cleared the primordial jungle, plunged through the abyss and called on the others to follow' (pp. 28f).

The void feared by the praise-singer in *Death and the King's Horseman* is the great Void on whose boulders the world will smash if it leaves its course (p. 11). No doubt the word néant, in its associations with Pascal and Sartre for the French public, is more pregnant, in a sense, than Vide (emptiness). We certainly can imagine that Soyinka in his broadmindedness will lend a favourable ear to this argument. And yet, should we not attempt to invite the western or westernized public to come out of their cultural world, pay attention to the 'other', escape from the formidable ethnocentrism which maintains most of these people in their closed universe and invincibly makes them relate everything to themselves and their system of values in a naively patronizing atti-

tude?

As regards the Yoruba words and phrases Soyinka drops here and there in his writings, occasionally without explanations, the translator can use a dictionary or ask a friendly informant to help him write footnotes or a glossary, even though some readers prefer to keep the exotic touch intact and ignore the meaning. On the other hand the surprising syntactic or stylistic turns sometimes used by Soyinka should not be interpreted as marks of the Yoruba: Professor Akinwumi Isola told me at the time he was translating *Ake, the Years of Childhood* into Yoruba that his job was definitely tougher than mine. Soyinka's English contains nothing that compares with Gabriel Okara's in *The Voice* or Amos Tutuola's in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Rendering popular language

Yet another issue to meet in translating WS is that of pidgin English. This is one of the most widely used languages in Nigeria, by semi-literates primarily, but also by educated people and even academics when they want to relax or be facetious or again humorously veil their gravest thoughts. It is simplified English structured in African syntax, peppered with twisted words of, sometimes, unknown origin, often very pithy and evocative. It appears prominently in *The Road*, and the translators Christiane Fioupou and Samuel Milogo chose Abidjan Popular French (FPI) to render it. The result is very satisfactory. The few passages that are not readily understandable for the average Francophone are explained in footnotes. The comical effect is faithful to the original. And yet the use of FPI requires fairly long passages to acquire coherence, unless the reader or listener is acquainted with it. It would not be so effective in the shorter passages. To render Ambrose's and Polyphemus's pidgin in *The Man Died* I used Niamey popular French, a little toned down to be easily grasped by all types of readers. But the French publisher changed it for popular France French. Why not after all? Anyway I do not think there is any one solution to the translation of pidgin. Quite often I would use simplified French with contractions. But for plays the producer should adapt to the local popular French, wher-

ever he is.

Translation and publication

When a translator has finalized his text he is not yet out of the wood: publishers are his masters as they are the reader's. Their choices can be ideological, artistic, political... most often simply commercial, which is, after all, understandable. French publisher Belfond took interest in Soyinka only when he heard that he was a potential Nobel prize winner in 1984. My translation of *Season of Anomy*, completed in 1979, waited in a few publishers' drawers after being turned down by the 'great' Gallimard and Le Seuil. Belfond finally published it in 1987. The most touching refusal was from Le Seuil, which regretted that the novel should be 'ambitious sometimes, rich, sometimes too rich'. Well, how many readers find a novel good and beautiful only when a critic has

told them. André Gide himself turned his nose when he first read Marcel Proust.

The last enemy to confront is the printer, if you are given a chance to read the galley proofs. You have to make him agree that what he took for mistakes are not always mistakes. And when the book is finally out, you are in for a few shocks. I remember 'Hurlez, hurlez votre comptant' (Howl, howl your cash) instead of 'harlez, hurlez votre content' (Howl, howl, your fill) in 'To the madmen over the wall' (A shuttle in the Crypt) which froze my blood in my veins, and 'avilissant' (degrading) instead of 'aveulissant' (enervating) which made it boil because I had corrected it on the proof but the printer, evidently smarter than me, had de-corrected it. It is a real disaster in the passage: 'Suspect all conscious search for the self's authentic being: this is the favourite fodder for the

enervating tragic Muse' (The Man Died, p.87). This is a basic idea in Soyinka's philosophy of life, as it appears also in *Myth, Literature and the African World*: 'the insidious enervation of social will by the tragic afflatus' (p.47).

Translating Wole Soyinka is an absorbing and fascinating activity carrying the reader-translator further into his/her feeling of the work, leading her/him deeper and deeper into the universe expressed in it. Translating gives the satisfaction to help other readers share in it, but it is worth doing for its own sake. Any reader approaching a poem, a novel or a play in a foreign language should feel invited to translate a passage every now and then and respond and reach a finer, stronger and more genuine experience in the language that belongs to his blood and guts.**GR**

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