

THE WRITER AS TRANSLATOR

A Personal View

Joyce Marshall

ONCE READ THAT ALL WRITERS should in the course of their careers write at least one book for children and translate at least one book from another language. (I believe the exact words were “owed it to the profession” — a daunting phrase.) I haven’t yet written my book for children (though I have one or two excellent ideas and have been waiting for years for something — myself? — to set me going) but I have translated seven books, as well as a number of shorter pieces, from French, the only other language I know. I’m not at all sure that this was in any sense a gift to the profession of letters — I don’t think in such terms and, anyway, someone else would have translated the books — but it was certainly a gift of tremendous value to me as a writer, a writer in English.

Of the seven books only three were works of fiction — *The Road Past Altamont*, *Windflower*, and *Enchanted Summer* (to give them their English titles), all by the late Gabrielle Roy — and as I am myself a writer of fiction, I propose to deal specifically with these. Though I learned something about the languages from my translation of the three non-fiction books, and though my work on *Word From New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de l’Incarnation* plunged me into the heart of an alien seventeenth-century society and a personality unlike my own in every respect (a huge and exciting leap of the imagination), I shall leave these more or less to one side.

My translation of the three Gabrielle Roy books, which concluded with close, extremely demanding sessions during which she and I went over my translations word by word and sentence by sentence, not once but several times, gave me the inestimable privilege of friendship with one of our greatest writers (and finest and most elusive human beings). We were already acquainted, in fact vaguely friendly when I undertook the work but I would never have known her so well if I had not seen her at work and, by working with her, learned much about the methods and imaginative texture of an extraordinarily disciplined and original mind. As I have described these revision-sessions more than once, in other places, emphasizing to some extent their amusing aspects, I shall not repeat these descriptions here, just say that they were great fun and, because we were both exceedingly stubborn people, often exasperating as well and that in my frequent need to defend

myself, often turning my mind inside out to do so (for though of the two of us she was the unquestioned authority on her own meaning and intention, I was just as unquestionably the authority on English syntax and idiom), I learned things about the English language I might not have learned in any other way, learned what it could do and couldn't do and above all learned to value it more than I had ever done before. I've often thought that every translator, especially every translator who was just beginning to learn the craft, should have had to work at least once with Gabrielle Roy — particularly if that translator hoped or was trying to be a writer. It was a stimulating, if at times excruciating, process but having been through it three times, I was glad finally to decide not to go through it again. I learned much from these sessions and what I learned I know. I am grateful for this and for the friendship that survived all differences of opinion and added so much to my life.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I propose to write in general as well as particular terms about the writer (in this case myself) as translator: what are (or might be) the disadvantages, the advantages, and the ultimate gains.

I BECAME A TRANSLATOR by accident. I had done some writing and it was known that I'd grown up in Montreal and thus knew French, so when some time in the late 1950's Robert Weaver wanted a story by Gabrielle Roy translated for broadcast over the CBC he asked whether I'd give it a try. I said I would and learned whatever I've learned about the craft of translating by doing. I'd never met anyone who'd done even a single translation — in fact, there were few such people in this country at that time. I'd never (nor have I yet) taken a course in translating. (I don't think that in those days there were any such courses.) I'd never read a single book — or for that matter an article — on the subject. After I decided in the late 1970's not to translate any more books, having grown weary of scraping my mind raw over thoughts that weren't mine, I encountered a few books and sometimes read them even now, thinking rather wistfully how useful they'd have been when I was trying to teach myself to be a translator.

At the time, however, I undertook the job of translating one of our most important and, for some reason that I'd never quite managed to put my finger on, one of our most intractably difficult writers, without knowledge, theories, or skill. And soon after I'd completed that first story, Harry Binsse, who'd translated Gabrielle Roy's most recent books, was no longer available for freelance work and I was asked to translate *La Route d'Altamont*, of which the story I'd already translated was a tiny part. I happened to be bored with my own writing at that time; I felt that I knew what I would say before I said it since I'd been saying the same things, or at least the same sorts of things, for years. So I agreed to translate the book.

For me it was a gruelling and desperately difficult undertaking. I simply set down the English equivalent, as nearly as I could discover it, of every word in pretty much the order in which they occurred in the French, then tried to turn the resulting curious sentences into English. At this point it was the similarities rather than the differences between the languages that troubled me. It might have been easier to work with a language that didn't have subjects, objects, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. (if such languages exist), at any rate from a language that didn't make even wild, clumsy sentences when translated more or less word after word. As a matter of fact, I never got much beyond this first stage of translating fairly literally then fighting the results into English. If there are tricks I never discovered them or problems with easy solutions I never found them, and when I did find a solution to a problem, any relief I might feel was quickly wiped out by the looming of some new equally formidable problem. I learned a great deal by this fighting; what effect it had upon the outcome I cannot say. As I'm discussing this matter from the point of view of a would-be translator who was already a writer, the fact that I did know, at least essentially, how an English sentence went was an advantage. But even so I found, and continued to find whenever I was translating, that I had to spend some time every day reading English — not the newspapers but the most immaculate English I could find. Otherwise I simply forgot, or was at least in danger of forgetting, how an English sentence was put together and why it was put together in that way. I also had to examine very carefully, not only every word of the French but every word of my English rendition, deciding not only what it meant but also what it weighed and how it affected other words and phrases in the sentence. (This last was important. English words do condition, even tinge, one another as French words do not do to the same extent.) Another useful discipline was that I was forced to follow Gabrielle Roy's thoughts and intentions in every way. I'd tended in my own writing (as I imagine most writers tend) to try to get an effect in one way and, if this failed, strike it out and try some other way. As a translator I had to get Gabrielle Roy's effect in the way she had chosen to obtain it. This was complicated by the fact that much as I admired her writing, and continued to admire it, I did not always like, or perhaps it would be more exact to say I didn't always find congenial, the way she obtained an effect — by which of course I mean her emotional, dramatic, or structural effect. But I was bound to use her way.

AND NOW WE COME to what might have been the disadvantages (or at least difficulties) of the writer (myself) as translator. People often asked me, and in fact continue to ask me, "Weren't you tempted to convert the French into an equivalent of your own English style?" The answer to that is No —

not only was I not tempted to do this, I would have found it impossible. (I have a style presumably although I'd be at a loss to try to describe it; it seems to be a sort of rhythm that comes, in some way I can neither control nor analyze, from my head to my fingers.) I suppose if there were a writer whose thoughts and imaginative processes were identical, or almost identical, to my own, I might slip into this rhythm without realizing that I was doing it. But when, as with Gabrielle Roy, not only the thoughts themselves but the structure of the thoughts, the use or withholding of detail, in fact the entire attitude, were idiosyncratic and unique, these thoughts, coloured as they were by the mind that inspired them, could not fit themselves into my particular way of forming sentences but had to find their own arrangement of words, vocabulary, and stress. I never found this in itself much of a problem. As a writer of fiction, I was accustomed to writing dialogue, in other words to recording the speech of people who expressed themselves in characteristic ways. Translation is simply an extended exercise in dialogue-writing. I didn't describe it to myself as such at first, I simply did it, or at least tried to do it, reminding myself when necessary that this was someone else speaking, not I myself. And an entire novel, or linked series of stories, was a more extensive piece of dialogue than any I'd tackled before, and the fact that it came from a mind that was very much subtler than any I could possibly invent was not only a tremendous challenge to me as a writer but a marvellous holiday from myself.

I've been asked, by the way, whether the intensity and prolongation of the work — the solitary struggling and the final discussion-sessions with Gabrielle Roy of which I've already spoken — tempted me or even caused me unknown to myself to try to write like Gabrielle Roy, structure events as she structured them, attempt to copy her style. I don't believe so. Our minds were too different, as going right down into the bones of her writing would have shown me even if I hadn't been aware of it before. The experience made me not only more disciplined as a writer but, by taking me right away from myself, more conscious of how I wanted to write, what I wanted my style and approach to be. In other words it taught me to accept my own individuality, even to know, dimly at least, what this individuality involved.

So much for the benefits and disadvantages. Now for the discoveries. I suppose the chief of these, and the one that sums up all the others, was the realization that my thinking, my attitude, in fact everything that influences my way of expressing myself, as well as my choice of what I want to express, is completely bound up with the English language — and with this realization came my awareness that I was glad that this was so. It is easy for anyone who was taught to speak French, as I was by a native speaker of the language, to acquire an inferiority complex about English. I certainly did and I even have a record of the way it started, in a diary I kept when I was twelve. Into the usual record of childhood doings, ornamented with the usual high-flown and egotistic sentiments, comes the announcement that “today Mademoiselle ———— told us that no one could write good prose

in English because English words can mean more than one thing.” “Damn her and her French!” I added, apparently already determined to prove her wrong. Though I never referred to the incident again, the memory must have rankled. In fact I know it did. Certainly Mademoiselle ——’s pronouncement was not the last such comment I heard. French-speakers are taught not only to value but to extol their own language as English-speakers are not and I always had a sneaking fear that English could never achieve the *clarté* French was said to possess and to possess by its very nature. The trouble was that I loved French and kept up my reading of the language through all the years when my life in Toronto gave me very few occasions to speak it, loved it not only for its *clarté* but for the marvellous lightness of its sentence structure, the neat adroit phrasing and connections between phrases that often made me, as a lover of language, want to cry aloud with delight. Can English ever do this, I sometimes wondered.

Perhaps not that. Or not precisely that. But what it can do, it does to a considerable extent because English words, in Mademoiselle ——’s immortal phrase, “can mean more than one thing,” are influenced by other words, spread, are never static. And we have so many — the Latin words so formal and heavy often, or at least abstract, the Saxon words so much quicker, so evocative, so much closer to the heart. (We’ve never after all these centuries quite accepted these Latin intruders, I often think.) After years of working with French, getting right down into the sinews of the language while doing no original writing of my own, staring at words whose meanings, though perhaps not subject to change, were often so wide that they swallowed up a good half dozen of our small bright English words (and needed a variety of set phrases — *pour ainsi dire*, *malgré tout*, etc. — to tie them down), looking at conclusions when I wanted to see process — for French is to a considerable extent a language of nouns, English a language of verbs — and discovering that a sentence of great *clarté* in French wasn’t at all clear in English (and this often because it didn’t tell me the things I wanted to know), I began to feel less apologetic about English. I have even praised its merits to French-speakers on occasion, to their great surprise. Perhaps “merits” isn’t the right word. Perhaps no language can be said to possess merits as such. Perhaps all I mean is that English suits me as a medium of expression, multiple meanings and all, and that I’ll cheerfully damn, as I did with such lack of knowledge when I was twelve, anyone who suggests that it can’t produce “good prose.”

