

MORE THAN AN ECHO

Notes on the Craft of Translation

George Woodcock

TRANSLATION IS A DIFFICULT and not always well-regarded craft. The Italians, with their linguistic pride, have a harsh saying, *traduttori traditori*, “translators are traitors,” and even George Borrow, who rendered works from a good many languages into English, remarked that “Translation is at best an echo.”

Yet there have been superb translations, which strikingly conveyed the spirit of the originals. Sometimes, indeed, translators have been credited with producing versions that are *better* than the originals, as used to be said of Edward Fitzgerald’s version of the *Rubaiyat*, which Persian scholars have always regarded as a rather minor and inferior work.

The fact is, of course, that Fitzgerald’s success, such as it was, came from his boldness in moving to the far verges of translation, and producing what was essentially a mid-Victorian poem, abandoning the form and preserving the hedonistic sentiment as he turned Omar’s discontinuous aphoristic quatrains into a unified and continuous sequence, which presented an ironically philosophic view of life that caught the public imagination when the traditional consolations of religions were being eroded by the findings of modern science and the materialistic arguments based on them. Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat*, in fact, was paraphrase rather than translation, as his earlier renderings of Calderon had been.

Fitzgerald’s bold treatment of his originals is probably connected with his imperfect knowledge of Persian and Spanish. Having got the philosophic hang of the *Rubaiyat*, he used his talents as an English versifier to present what he felt was the spirit rather than the letter of the works. And in doing this he seized rather roughly on one of the essential limitations of translation: that it can never be faithful in the sense of rendering in another language the actual verbal texture of the original. In that sense a translation is indeed, as Borrow contended, no more than an echo. It is the spirit and intent, and the structural form, that can be carried over, and the skin of words is shed like a snake’s and replaced by that of a translator’s own language, so that works written in French or Italian or German must ideally *seem* in translation to have been originally written in English. I am not suggesting that there should be any abdication of the responsibility to render the actual text as faithfully — which does not mean as literally — as possible, for verbal texture and basic form are necessarily interdependent; there is in fact an

intricate adjustment here, the very heart of the mechanism, to find English words that will convey the spirit of a work and clothe its structure as adequately as the original words had done, a process that, given the various ways languages work, may necessitate notable departures from the literal.

I suppose such departures occur at their most extreme in poetry. My own first translations, from the French and fifty years ago, were of sonnets by Pierre de Ronsard, and here the problems were double: to find a slightly archaic English that would be *parallel* to the original sixteenth-century French, and somehow to prevent the stiffer English rhyme patterns from destroying the fluency of the French rhymes. For anyone who might wish to see how I succeeded, an example appears in my *Collected Poems* (1983). It is inevitably awkward, because of the attempt to reconstruct the poem in detail, down to the metre and the rhymes, and in later years I have tended in rendering poems into English to get as literal a prose version as I could and then to start over again, using what I now have for a new poem in a form that seems to me to offer a convincing verbal echo. Sometimes, like other modern poets, I have moved into an area of inevitable paraphrase, putting into English something from a language in which I am not fluent. In the early 1960's there was almost a movement among Canadian poets who offered versions of poems in Hungarian, Bulgarian, and other tongues without ever having learnt to speak or even read them; Earle Birney and John Robert Colombo were among those working with primary translators who knew the language and turning their literal renderings into English-Canadian verse. Somewhat later, in the early 1980's, I also produced "translations" from languages I knew slightly or not at all, using prose translations of the *Tao-te-Ching* or of Greek archaic poems which I turned into English verse that I felt had enough contemporary relevance to bridge the centuries and the continents. An example was one of Anacreon's late poems, when he had lived his hedonistic life to the end and turned to an ironic lament whose implications I felt deeply since I had come to the age when my own thoughts crossed with his; in rendering this late untypical Anacreon into the language a modern man might use I was speaking for myself and any aging contemporary as well.

I'm grey about the ears
and going thin on top.
What grace I had in youth
is rotting like my teeth.
I had sweet life before me.
Now it has passed me by.

Of course I lament it,
fearing what comes after.
It's a long way down to Hades
and the journey is dreadful.
And for him who has once gone down
there is never a climbing back.

Most translators in fact, if they are not merely mechanical interpreters and have some feeling for the work they are undertaking, speak for themselves as well as for the writers they are translating. In this sense translation is a craft similar to biography; it involves a moving forward into identification with the subject — person or work as the case may be — and at the same time a counter-movement of withdrawal into the objectivity needed to achieve a separate creation.

THERE ARE SOME LITERATURES that especially offer themselves to successful translation — in the sense of the translation itself becoming a valid and evocative work — more easily than others, and this has nothing to do with the ease of literal interpretation. The differences between Chinese (and Japanese for that matter) and any European language are so profound that a literal translation has very little meaning. But Chinese poetry has the saving grace of its great visuality; it is a poetry of evocative images, and images — more easily than phrases — overleap the verbal frontiers of language. Thus, though Arthur Waley undoubtedly knew Chinese and Japanese well, his translations were no better, as poems in English evoking the Chinese imagination, than those of Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth, who knew Chinese hardly at all, yet had good collaborators and were imagists enough to trap and use the visual content and the exile's sadness of Chinese poetry.

Another literature lending itself astonishingly well to translation has been Russian. I think there are two reasons for this. The best of the Russian novelists, rather like the best of the Canadians, have always had that sense of the look and feel of the land which comes from living in large countries; I once compared Margaret Laurence and Tolstoy in this respect, and I do not think I was wrong. But Russian literature, because it has always been the principal means of expressing dissidence obliquely in a land where free thought had always been inhibited by tyrants and censors, has inclined towards the expression of broadly tendentious ideas or generous sentiments, both of which stop just short of rebellion but which have nothing of the sharp specificity of the ideas to which French novelists often give expression in their moralist *récits*. Since comparatively few English-speaking readers know enough Russian to make linguistic judgments, translators have been more at liberty to stray from the literal in rendering writers like Turgenev and Tolstoy, like Dostoevsky and Chekhov, and to rely for their appeal on the evocation of the landscape or the projection of provocative thoughts, and so we have had a succession of what are sometimes rather unilateral but often tremendously evocative translations. I still shudder with as much delight as any story in English can give me when I read the Hepburn translation of Turgenev stories like "The Singers" and "Bezhin Meadow," with their absolute truth of tone, or the Garnett rendering of Dos-

toevsky's *House of the Dead*. Yet often when I read scholarly books on Russian writers I find their authors — perhaps with justified precision — drastically revising the old translations that have opened the Russian imagination to generations of Anglo-Saxon readers. All the same, these new scholarly versions are not so appealing as the old more amateur ones, and this brings one back to the conclusion that the secret of good translation is to keep the bones of structure and the flesh of content, but ruthlessly to change the verbal structure until the work is, as it were, skinned afresh.

Skinned it may have to be more often than once. A work written in the writer's own language is there for good or ill; only he can change it without violating its integrity. But any translation is *ipso facto* a violation or, more accurately, an impersonation. We offer a double of the original, in a new and modish dress, speaking a different language; but always the original is there in its own language, and different generations of translators, seeing it anew, feel the challenge, if it is a work of lasting consequence, to translate it according to the literary and linguistic conventions of their day. Originals are permanent; translations are always transitory. Take the *Odyssey*. Chapman rendered it into sound blank verse, the idiom of his Jacobean day, in 1616; little more than a century later, Pope turned it into Augustan heroic couplets. Then came along the mid-Victorians Lang and Butcher with their prose translation, which was marred by the same kind of archaicisms as falsified Tennyson's and William Morris's excursions into romanticized pasts. Richmond Lattimore constructed something deceptively reminiscent of Homer's own hexametric verse in his 1962 translation, but that seemed even more archaist, for prose has been the appropriate form for adventurously romantic narrative ever since Malory, and I always found myself more comfortable — reading and teaching — with E. V. Rieu's 1946 prose translation of the *Odyssey* than I have with any verse translation into English, with the possible exception of Chapman. It kept the structure, the imagery, the mythology and such intellectual concepts as the Greeks had evolved by Homer's day, and rendered them into an epic equivalent of the prose fiction in which inevitably such a tale as the *Odyssey* would appropriately have been written since verse began to go out of fashion as an English narrative medium in the seventeenth century; it had already gone out of fashion in Greece when Herodotus and Thucydides began to write their histories of wars later than that of Troy.

UP TO NOW I HAVE BEEN GENERALIZING as much from the reader's as from the translator's viewpoint, and it is time I returned to my own experience in the craft, for I did not indulge only in awkwardly strict translations of French verse and happily free ones of Anacreon and Lao Tzu. In recent decades translators have taken a pride in their occupation, have formed themselves into

professional associations, and in our country can even qualify for a special Canada Council prize. But in England during the 1940's, except for a few virtuoso figures like Cecil Day Lewis with his version of the *Aeneid*, translation was usually a means by which down-at-heel writers could supplement their incomes. Translators in those days were the upper crust of that New Grub Street half-world of literary mechanics which also included copy-editors, publishers' readers, indexers, and those sad people who called themselves researchers and before the advent of Xerox would sit day after day, year after year, copying by longhand under the great dome of the British Museum Library.

Once, when I was broke, I was offered such a Grub Street task of translating a novel called *Anny* by Marc Bernard, a French writer who had some kind of reputation in the years after World War II. I recruited my friend Marie Louise Berneri, who had lived most of her childhood and youth in France, as collaborator, and we gave ourselves the *nom-de-plume* of M. L. George. We did so because, though *Anny* had won the Prix Interallié in 1934 and Bernard later won the Goncourt for his *Pariels à des Enfants*, we found the novel so shamelessly mawkish that we did not want our real names attached to it. Still, we earned a hundred pounds we badly needed, and had some amusement, sitting day after day at the height of a splendid summer in an outdoor café in Hyde Park, as we laughed over the outrageous sentimentalities and tried to put them into a form that would not sound too ridiculous in English — which, contrary to general opinion, is a language less adapted to the expression of false feeling than French. But *Anny* was a sow's ear no magic could transform, and our last laugh was a sardonic one, when a reviewer remarked that the book was so poor that it might have taken a beating in translation; we realized that there was no way — even in the most skilful rendering — of turning a bad book in one language into a good book in another. It was a salutary lesson.

And though I did not at this point give up translating for money, I did abandon working on authors for whom I did not feel the respect that made faithful translation a challenge to be met with diligence and with one's stylistic antennae at the alert. Usually, in later years, translation tended to fit in with my current interests, and this I am sure helped a great deal, since I approached it with the right kind of predispositions and often with a good deal of background knowledge.

In the 1960's, when I was writing a great deal of radio drama, I put *Le Malade Imaginaire* and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* into English for Gerald Newman of CBC Radio, and also did for him a free blank verse version of Racine's *Phèdre*, which Andreas Schroeder later published as a special issue of his magazine, *Contemporary Literature in Translation*; I still think it was my best piece of translation.

My writings on anarchism and particularly my anthology, *The Anarchist Reader*, led me to put into English many of the writings of Bakunin and the French anarchists, and my biography of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon also involved a good deal

of translation, since so little of Proudhon had appeared to this time in English. Undoubtedly I was helped in one case by the fact that my mind was steeped in anarchist teachings, and in the other case by the fact that in relation to Proudhon I had fallen into the typical biographer's condition of identification with the person whose life I was writing; I came for awhile to think like him, to feel like him, even to mimic his minor illnesses, and in these circumstances faith in translation came almost naturally.

IN MORE RECENT YEARS my interest in the métis led me to use sources in French while I was writing my *Gabriel Dumont*, and here again my inclination to identify with Gabriel helped me greatly; I knew through shared feeling what Dumont meant in the narratives he dictated after the 1885 rebellion, and I translated them quickly and easily. The success of *Gabriel Dumont*, which itself was eventually translated into French, led to my being invited to undertake the vast task of rendering into English Marcel Giraud's seminal work, *Le métis canadien*. This was no shallow novel to be translated in a few weeks; it did not even compare with the relatively brief anarchist essays I had put into English in the past. It was a vast scholarly book, filled with unfamiliar knowledge, and 1,300 pages long. I thought it over very seriously before I agreed. I knew that I could not possibly sit down, put aside all my other work, and translate it in — say — a concentrated year and a half. But I had always found I worked best when I did two or three literary tasks in tandem, so I suggested I take three years over the job, doing a page or so a day and continuing with my other writings at the same time. It worked out very well. My own writing benefited from my having another, constant task to which I could turn when my originative energy was flagging. And my translation benefited because I was in the flow of my own writing and the stylistic tone of my version of Giraud was sustained in the same continuum as that of my other prose.

There were difficulties, of course. Fortunately Giraud, writing in the early 1940's, did not use the repulsive jargon in which ethnologists now mostly write, and in any case he was as much a historian as an ethnologist, and his book had a broad narrative sweep and was full of vivid descriptive detail. But he was prolix in his writing, tended to repeat himself, and wrote long, involuted, almost Germanic sentences that trapped one in labyrinths of thought from which the exit was not always easily visible. In addition, there was a strong flavour of social Darwinism about the book; Giraud was close to the nineteenth-century ethnologists who tended to see primitive peoples as less "evolved" than the civilized people with whom they came into contact.

What should I do about this? I decided to make no direct approach to Giraud, who is still alive, though I did not object to my publisher sending him a couple of chapters of my version to get the flavour, which he liked. I believed that my dealings as a translator were with the book, not with the author; if I were translating Balzac I would not even be able to consult him. Since there were no points in the work that were too obscure for me to solve through my own research, I decided to make no direct contact with Giraud until the work was complete; when I did get in touch with him he found only one fault in 1,300 pages.

As for the defects, it was obvious that the book had not been very rigorously edited at the time of publication, when a good deal of fat might have been trimmed. But once it had been printed, and the author himself had not proposed a condensation, it seemed to me that it had acquired a kind of permanence and must be translated as it stood, faithfully, but not necessarily literally. For example, I disentangled many of the elaborate sentences, often substituting three or four short ones for a long one, and in this way aerating the book, at the same time as I did my best to tone it up stylistically. As for Giraud's outdated views, I decided these must be reproduced as he wrote them, and my introduction would have to express my disagreement. While I was working I did talk to other translators, and I remember one Bulgarian scholar who vigorously objected to my toning up the style; all its textual faults should be carried over into the translation to make it "faithful." I did not accept his view. I believed I had to make a work that would stand as a piece of good English prose, and I think I succeeded. Certainly in the end Marcel Giraud believed I had done so. And this meant it was a translation that had met the double test. It seemed faithful to the man who had written it in French and who was fortunately bilingual; it stood its ground in English. When one's work meets these two criteria, translation becomes one of the most satisfying of the literary functions.

Yet in translation, as in other fields, even success breeds its dissatisfactions, and ambition still challenges one. One lives, as in one's other work, with the sense that the best achievements are ever ahead, that one is still, in comparative terms, an apprentice. And always, as for a mountaineer, there are ventures full of ardour to be dreamed of and — who knows? — completed. My own Everest is a new translation of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Partly I am led by my admiration for Proust, whom I regard as the greatest of modern novelists, partly by the fact that I feel the present English version (with its hideously misfitting title) was never eminently faithful (I am not talking of literalness), and partly by the same kind of urge that led Pope and all the others to retranslate Homer: the feeling that not merely our language and our cultural ambience but also our sensibilities have changed since the 1920's when Scott Moncrieff rendered most of the work into English. There has been a radical shift in feeling and tolerance so that readers

of English are now more able to accept Proust as he was, in all his complexity, in ways impossible sixty years ago, and it is time they were given a version fitting these changed circumstances and more accordant with the author's intent. Shall I succeed? Shall I even live long enough to come to the end? Perhaps not, but the prospect of the journey is irresistibly appealing.

RESOLVE TO BE ALWAYS BEGINNING — TO BE A BEGINNER: RILKE

Rienzi Crusz

Turn away from the cracked face of the mountain.
For once, try the waters.

Swim, tingle your skin like fire,
or die, falling and thrashing with bubbles in your mouth.

There'll only be a clasping of hands
(life with death), a soul breaking out of ribs.

All in a flash
you'll learn the language

of new beginnings,
the good earth,

Cherubim and seraphim,
the nether darkness.

What kills for certain
(even before you reach the river)

Is the no-no head, the jaundiced skin
that never knows

those other beginnings,
how an old configuration can end.