

THE MANY FACES OF TREASON

COMMONPLACES MAY COME AND GO, but one that has held forth over the years to the dismay and discouragement of translators is the Italian punning canard traduttore, traditore (translator, traitor), leading one to believe that the translator, worse than an unfortunate bungler, is a treacherous knave. Before copping a plea and offering a nolo contendere, let me see wherein this treason lies and against whom. Then we translators can withdraw once more into that limbo of silent servitors, for, as Prince Segismundo says at the end of Calderón's Life Is a Dream when he awards his liberator the tower where he had been imprisoned, "The treason done, the traitor is no longer needed."

Let us submit the practice of translation to a judicial enquiry into its various ways and means and in this display seek out the many varieties of betrayal which might be inherent to its art. I say art and not craft because you can teach a craft but you cannot teach an art. You can teach Picasso how to mix his paints but you cannot teach him how to paint his demoiselles. There are many spots where translation can be accused of treason, all inevitably interconnected in such diverse ways that an overall view is needed to reveal the many facets of the treason the Italians purport to see.

an unprincipled, untrustworthy or dishonest person

cannot teach an art

The most elemental of these will be betrayal of the word, for the word is the very essence of language, the metaphor for all the things we see, feel, and imagine. Out of this we also have a betrayal of language, in both directions (I try to avoid the jargon of "target language"; I am an old infantryman, and we dogfaces were taught to shoot at a target and, ideally, kill it). Languages are the products of a culture, or perhaps the reverse as some bold anthropologist might have it. Treason against a culture will therefore be automatic as we betray its words and speech as well as assorted other little items along the way.

Then we come to personal betrayals, those against the people involved in the act of translation. The first victim is, of course, the author we are translating. Can we ever make a different-colored clone of what he (read he/she, as in a U.N. document) has done? Can we ever feel what the author felt as he wrote the words we are transforming? As we betray the author we are automatically betraying our variegated readership and at the same time we are passing on whatever bit of betrayal the author himself may have foisted on them in the original (unless we have left it out on some Frosty morning along with the poetry). Lastly and most subtly we betray ourselves. [We will sacrifice our best hunches in favor of some pedestrian norm in fear of betraying the task we were set to do.] The facelessness imposed on the translator, so often thought of as an ideal, can only mean incarceration in Segismundo's tower in the end. This last betrayal must stand before all the treasons here delineated as the most foul.

Words are treacherous things, much moreso than any translator could ever be. As is obvious, words are mere metaphors for things. This is shown by the biting episode in Part III of *Gulliver's Travels* where the traveler reaches the city of La-

gado and visits the Grand Academy. Here Dean Swift has the Projectors explain a plan to save our lungs by doing away with words in oral communication, "since words are only names for *things*, it would be convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on." This solution, along with prolonging our lives, would also eliminate the need for all the many languages that are spoken in the world. We could even get about rebuilding Babel. More than likely Swift was also hinting at class distinctions here, as a wealthy man with a retinue of servants carrying his "things" would be much more eloquent and expressive than a poor man who would have to do with one simple rucksack. In the real world the rich man with his college education can express himself so much better and more clearly than the poor illiterate.

There is more to it than this. If a word is a metaphor for a thing, why does a single thing have so many metaphors in orbit about it? Here we have the dire consequences of Babel. If Mama Lucy had speech, her *Ursprache* must have spread out and scattered into more variants than the birdsongs of a single species. This has left us with a welter of words to designate one simple *thing*. *Stone* can never sound like *pierre*, so are the two words interchangeable simply because they represent the same object? Since Flaubert would either say or think *pierre* when he picked one up does *stone* cover his thought when we translate him? We can only say that here translation has betrayed a complete and clear sense of the stone's thingness for the author, with no attempt in this lithic example to bring in the attendant nuances of Peter and the Papacy. That Lagadian discussion would best be left to the likes of Bouvard and Pécuchet, along with the analysis of why a diamond is a stone to the jeweler but a rock to the jewel thief.

Swift Gulliver's Travels

stone, pierre

Not only has the object been betrayed here but the word itself has also been. As it moves ahead (progresses?), a language will load a word down with all manner of cultural barnacles along the way, bearing it off on a different tangent from a word in another tongue meant to describe the same thing. Among languages there are ever so many terms used to denote the same object and by their very variety they beggar any possibility of ascertaining the unique reality of said object. The now regnant cult of indeterminacy might be happy with this, but *homo sapiens* likes to know as his name implies and which is what makes us what we are today and what we shall be tomorrow if we ever get that far. It may be that there is something like Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty at work in lexicology so that every time we call a stone a *pierre* we have somehow made it something different from a *stone* or a *Stein*. This leaves us with the question of whether a stone can ever be a *pierre* or a *pierre* a stone and whether either of them can be that hard object we are looking at on the ground, teaching us that even if a thing can be cloned the word that designates it cannot and any attempt to reproduce it in another tongue is betrayal.

Some concepts seem to be the exclusive property of one language and cannot be rightly conceived in another. When we have trouble coming up with just the right word in English we turn to the French and say "a certain *je ne sais quoi*." If we say "a certain I don't know what" the effect is ragged and even unnatural. As we borrow from another language to enrich our own, more often than not there is treason afoot, if not in the meaning certainly in the sound. Although the French sound of *lingerie* is not too difficult to reproduce fairly closely in English, most people will *plusquam* it into a hyper-Gallic *lahnjeray*, a sound worthy of W. C. Fields and his *say finay*. A

betrayal of language is many times the betrayal of words and at the same time it is a reflection of the hurdles present in communicating between cultures. We tend to acculturate foreign sensitivities, sensibilities, and reflexes into our own milieu with the requisite changes. Ask a New Yorker what Kafka's Gregor Samsa awoke as and the inevitable answer will be a giant cockroach, the insect of record in his city. What Kafka called it was simply an *ungeheuern Ungeziefer*, a monstrous vermin. He then goes on to describe what is obviously a hard-carapaced beetle. The pull of local reality is too strong for a New Yorker to make a closer concept or translation. This then can be seen as a betrayal by the imposition of another culture.

Most of these matters merge to form an indirect betrayal of the author. He is a compendium of all these factors: language, culture, and individual words. These are, in fact, inseparable, and the author is their product, the same as what he writes. [His free will and originality only exist within the bounds of his culture.] If he is to betray it, he betrays it from within, which connotes intimate knowledge, while the translator betrays it from without, from an acquired reflective, not reflexive, awareness.

Within his cultural limits the author, as an individual, can and, indeed, must extend himself as far as he can to set himself and his art apart from the commonplace, showing all the while whence he comes, doing this through language most of all. With the translator we have quite the opposite situation. He cannot and must not set himself apart from the culture laid out before him. To do so would indeed be treasonous. He must marshal his words in such a way that he does not go counter to the author's intent. Nowhere is translation more dubious than here as we try to translate into our own language and culture something that the author is translating into words

Cockroach example

quite the challenge!

able to be forgiven

within his culture and still make it our own. Treasonous it is. The important thing is to consider whether the treason is high or low, the sin mortal or venial. There are those who, like Nabokov, view translation as a criminal act that can only be judged as to whether it is a felony or just a misdemeanor and there are so many critics who do enjoy walking the perp.

While all this is going on, matters of which the translator must be quite aware, there is a danger of the translator's committing the saddest treason of all, betrayal of himself. The translator, we should know, is a writer too. As a matter of fact, he could be called the ideal writer because all he has to do is write; plot, theme, characters, and all the other essentials have already been provided, so he can just sit down and write his ass off. But he is also a reader. He has to read the text closely to know what it's all about. Here is where he receives less guidance or direction from the text. It is a common notion to say that if a work has 10,000 readers it becomes 10,000 different books. The translator is only one of these readers and yet he must read the book in such a way that he will be reading the Spanish into English as he goes along, with the result that his reading is also writing. His reading, then, becomes the one reading that is going to spawn 10,000 varieties of the book in the unlikely case that it will sell that many copies and will be read by that many people.

Our translator must know that this is the best he can do in this place and at this time and must still recognize that his work is, in a sense, unfinished. Although I have been satisfied with a translation when I finish it (as a translator ought to be), years later as I peruse the published text I find myself wishing I could make some changes for the better. When a translator starts an attempt at reasoning out a solution it is best to emulate Alexander before Phrygia as he sliced through the Gor-

dian knot with his sword in a demonstration of what Ortega y Gasset called "vital reason." The translator must not betray his hunches. There will be carping from the critics, but he will be closer to being right that way and, in any case, he will not have betrayed himself. A careful confidence in himself is as necessary for a translator as it is for the point man in an infantry patrol. He must have a care, however, and remember that with the addition of a slightly aspirated letter *auteur* becomes *hauteur*.

The translator must put to good use that bugbear of timid technicians: the value judgment. In translation as in writing, which it is as we have said, the proper word is better than a less proper but standard one. Here again the translator must borrow Alexander's short sword. Translation is based on choice and a rather personal one at that. Long ago I discovered a funny thing: if you ponder a word, any word, long enough it will become something strange and meaningless and usually ludicrous. I suppose this is some kind of verbicide, bleeding the poor word of its very essences, its precious bodily fluids, and leaving a dry remnant that could pass for a five-letter group in a cryptographic message. When we snap out of it and retrieve the meaning of the word, we have, in a sense, deciphered it. This is as far as I would go in turning translation entirely over to reason since, so much of it should be based on an acquired instinct, like the one we rely on to drive a car, Ortega's vital reason.

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