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Touring the translator's jail¹

Marguerite Yourcenar, a franco-belgian writer of this century, makes her principal character, Zenon, say, in her book *L'œuvre au noir*,

*Qui serait assez insensé pour mourir sans avoir fait au moins le tour de sa prison?*²

The French language does not have the same ambiguity as the English language on „tour”. „Touring the jail”, or „to go around the jail”, a slight difference indeed. In the former there is an idea of leisure and pleasure, a knowledge somewhat from the outside, as a spectator. In the latter, the glance is from the inside, certainly more accurate, a little bit as a wild animal goes around its cage looking for a way out. These two possible translations of Yourcenar's expression can safely be applied to the translator's position, especially within the context of the European Union in terms of „dire need of translators”.

Indeed, translating is now the trend not only necessary — as it has always been — to share artistic creations and scientific knowledge, or to understand secret military plans, but also necessary for what I would call our daily needs as our personal and national lives are depending upon some sorts of „super rules” which are generated by the creation of the European Union. These rules are dealing with marketing of any sort, and administration. Both require a precise translation of documents and other data. In this case, the translator has definite choices (if more than one), linked with lexicon, grammar and a particular aspect of the culture of both the sender and the receiver. Although one can indeed speak of choices, the walls of the translator's jail are close to each other, in this particular case where fantasy and humor are to be banished. In a way, and without jumping over analysis and conclusions, one may say that this kind of translation depends much upon the groups' choice of way of life.

The other translation, the next jail, is interested in translating what I would call, for the time being, as I know the term to be too fuzzy and general, the „arts”, although it can be an extremely accurate translation too. This kind of translation does allow one to be at liberty with the text (written or visual or musical), getting at the edge of the human mystery, without, most of the time, penetrating it though, as all our *readings* are linked with our moment of civilization. Indeed, the cell's walls are moving, loosing their geometry and enabling floods of light in the jail. Does it allow and enable truth to come in, and establish itself? Or rather doesn't it simply enable the coming in of a ray of this truth? Could the answer to this question be a definite „yes”, we could then assert that there actually is an

¹ After the title of Marguerite Yourcenar's book: *Le tour de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

² Who would be crazy enough to die before touring his or her jail? (my translation)

epistemology of translation. The existence of such a tool would help us indeed see the hypothetical „universality” of man, on the one hand; on the other, it would certainly ease the pedagogy of translating. But although this type of translation allows one to be free and creative, this type of translation deals also with the deep mystery of each creator and translator. Therefore, translating seems to be the reflect (or the consequence) — although pale or weak — of a particular way of thinking of a given group at a given time. Could translating then be a consequence of what Michel Foucault calls an *épistémè*? This will be the research question which will guide my study of which to day I shall present the basic arguments.

First of all, let me define the term *epistemology* as I shall analyze it and use it in my study.

Traditionally, epistemology belongs (or belonged) to fields covered by philosophy, as it is for sciences and about sciences.

Indeed, philosophy developed spontaneously a theory of knowledge, and a theory of sciences which both have as objectives to emphasize the means of scientific knowledge, the characterization of the objects to which it is applied, and the determination of its validity: that is to say, to base it in truth and as truth. Therefore, epistemology within philosophy (or used by philosophy) has two basic aims: 1/ The quest for positive knowledge (the scholar is speaking of what? And how?); 2/ What is a scientific truth? What are the conditions of truth? Within which limits is there a scientific truth?

This strong link with sciences (and science) led philosophy to use the tool of epistemology to broaden its field to the concept of philosophy of sciences. In fact, it became obvious, along the centuries up to the 19th, that there was no science in general but only some systems of specific knowledge all in evolution, either appropriate to their objects or appropriating these to them. All these systems are not independent but exchange endlessly their means and their objects. Therefore, the philosophy of science establishes an ideal object, which is the fiction of science, fiction existing only for the philosophers, and on which they established their systems.

But in the course of the 19th century, epistemology became, because of its apparently independent objective (science), a quasi scientific study, giving up, apparently, its links with philosophy. Then, epistemology is positive only regarding a non-thought which directs it and makes it *philosophy* without its knowing. This freedom from philosophy gives epistemology the right to interest itself to anything, any field, and particularly to lend itself to get away from any scientific practice. At least from the outside, if we follow Auguste Comte in his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*:

*... en considérant dans son ensemble le développement effectif de l'esprit humain, on voit de plus en plus que les différentes sciences ont été, dans le fait, perfectionnées en même temps et mutuellement; on voit même que les progrès des sciences et ceux des arts ont dépendu les uns des autres par d'innombrables influences réciproques, et enfin que tous ont été liés très étroitement au développement général de la société humaine.*³

³ Upon considering the effective development of the human mind as a whole, one sees moreover that the different sciences have been, in fact, perfected simultaneously and mutually; one even sees that sciences and arts' progresses have been depending upon each other, through countless reciprocal influences, and finally that all have been tightly linked to the general development of society. (my translation)

According to this, it would be then only a question to find back the thread of the problems and of the concepts giving life to scientific discoveries. But the 20th century slipped from this positive point of view to a more complex approach, although not too far from it.

Indeed, with Michel Foucault and others appears the *epistemological cut*. This science is constituted through cutting with its prehistory and its ideological environment. The process is complex and generates a so far unknown order. According to Foucault, several such „cuts” appeared in the course of our Western history, the latest being with Marx and Freud, although the most important „epistemological cut”, according to Foucault is at the end of the 18th century. These „scientific cuts” — to follow the Greek meaning of *èpistèmè* — refers to a period where sciences in a special field seem — concurrently or separately — all to lead to an event which will bring a new point of view on life, a kind of new order in our perception of what we should think our future. For example, all the developments in genetics (but not only in that field) brought to birth the cloning. Our biological dream: the quiet identity, a kind of experience of quietness of death although we are alive. Identity, not sameness, though. Isn't it somehow „interpellating” to notice that this cut from the Classic Age (according to Foucault) going from difference to sameness is still generating new discoveries confirming the trend. Of course, as nothing is perfect, this trend has many exceptions. Nonetheless, the notion of science generated by a conjunction of slightly divergent research stresses the existence of an endless becoming transforming completely a system of scientific knowledge. This becoming leads to the concept of a *scientific epistemology*, that is to say a knowledge by concepts freeing itself from its philosophical origins.

The question now at hand is to see on which grounds „translation” can be analyzed with the tool called epistemology, or/and if there is such a science as the „epistemology of translation”. We shall try to analyze this problematic through literature and/or arts, as these texts are jails with flexible walls escaping, in most cases, our architectural convictions.

The heart of this question, answered *de facto* if not in theory by many researchers, is indeed to define the nature of translation, as it is perceived nowadays.

For a long time (let us say up to the mid-20th century), it has been supposed that translating was going from one text in a given language to another in an other language, the former being exactly rendered by the latter. In other words, the reader sort of ignored — consciously or not — what the British would call the „circumstances” of a translation in literature and arts: the creator, the cultural and political contexts, the social contexts, and so on. All these are complex and often ambiguous elements influencing the creator (the artist) and the translator. Their very complexity and ambiguity make us understand the veracity of the *epistemological cut* as Heidegger suggests it:

La parole d'Anaximandre peut-elle encore nous dire quelque chose à une distance chronologique-historique de deux millénaires et demi?... De quel droit nous adresse-t-il la parole, à nous, qui sommes probablement les attardés les plus tardifs de la philosophie...

Nous essayons de traduire le fragment d'Anaximandre. Ceci exige que nous transposions en allemand ce qui est dit en grec. Pour cela, il est nécessaire qu'auparavant, notre pensée se transporte vers ce qui

*est dit en grec. Le passage en pensée vers ce que dit le fragment dans sa langue, est un saut au dessus d'un fossé. Ce fossé n'est pas seulement la distance historique-chronologique de deux millénaires et demi. Il est plus large et plus profond. Si ce fossé est aussi difficile à franchir, c'est parce que nous nous trouvons au bord. Nous sommes tellement près du fossé que nous ne pouvons pas prendre un élan suffisant pour un saut aussi long et que la plupart du temps nous ne sautons pas assez loin, si toutefois le manque d'une base suffisamment ferme n'empêche pas un tel saut.*⁴

This breach, if not a ditch, is a true cut, or a gap in our ability to absolutely faithfully translate a text, whatever it is. Heidegger was referring to a presocratic philosopher, Anaximander, whose texts we have are at least extremely fragmented, if not false in part. Certainly the breach between Heidegger and the Greek philosopher was enormous, although Heidegger was a scholar in Greek. The uncertainty of the Greek text, the period — encompassing time, history, culture, social network and approach, and so on — the many attempts at translating this author are as many dragons waiting for the translator to fall in the abyss. Real dragons though. The translator has to count them, to identify them and to deal with them one per one and ... to make a choice to face some and ignore some. Would he/she choose to deal with all of them, the translation would take years, a life time maybe, and the results might be still imperfect, because, as Count Kuki, a Japanese scholar, used to say *languages unfold themselves differently*. And this unfolding depends on the elements numbered above, on the one hand; on the other, it also depends on the „user”, the writer or the artist. This aspect of the „unfolding” is the most mysterious one. We all acknowledge its presence in the work or the opus, without being able to do much in identifying it precisely. We have however to identify it in order to take into consideration dragons like psychoanalysts, anthropologists, sociologists. At least we have to define the limits of our approach when we translate by clearly naming our field and clearly acknowledging fields we discard because we are not qualified, or not interested into them, or our time as a human being is counted. In other words, our project in translating should be as free as possible of interferences we do not want to tackle, being fully aware, nonetheless, that we shall never be able to overpass them, although we can name them as we are probably forever prisoner of our culture, as Merleau-Ponty experienced it in his quest for an intercultural dialogue.

It seems then, that translating should be a victory over the walls built by the cultures around the world. A good translation should be then a translation which would have

⁴ Martin Heidegger, Holzwege, Frankfurt/Main, quoted in Georges Périlleux and Hedwig Reuter, *Communication Interculturelle et Traduction Littéraire — Observations théoriques et épistémologiques*. In *Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme*, Mons: Cléphum, # 92 – 93 – 94, 1999.

Can Anaximander's word still tell us something at a chronological and historical distance of 2 and a half millenia? On what ground does he address us, we, the most belated philosophers of philosophy? ... We try to translate Anaximander's fragment. This requires that we transpose in German what's said in Greek. To do this it is necessary for our thought to transport itself beforehand toward what said in Greek. Going in thought toward what the fragment says in its language is jumping over a breach. This breach is not only the historical-chronological distance of 2 and a half millenia. It is wider and deeper. If the breach is difficult to get over, it is because we are on its edge. We are so close to the breach that we cannot take sufficiently off for such a long jump and most of the time we do not jump far enough, if however the lack of a basis strong enough does not prohibit such a jump. (my translation)

somehow transcended the original, having adopted the philosophical meaning of *representation*, adding or considering more dimensions to the original source. Some important steps have been taken in that direction by the group **Writing-Culture**, in the mid '80s, mainly by James Clifford. This group stresses that each translator of literature should know that his/her representation of the other keeps in itself its own accents, and that his/her translation is a creative interpretation.

Therefore in our study, in order to answer our research question (*could translating be the consequence of Foucault's „épistémè”?*) we will analyze first Foucault's point of view (referring to our previous works) first. Then we will translate poems from two poets I particularly love: e.e.cummings and Saint-John Perse. The first is American and will be translated in French, the second is French and will be translated in English. An analysis of my choices underlying my translation will follow in order to uncover my limits and my understanding of the poets, of the readers, and of my own reading and writing. In other words, I shall try to identify three groups of dragons: the authors', the readers', mine. I shall kill some (by ignoring them), accept some and love some. Understanding a method, then, an epistemology?

References

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