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“Traduit de l’américain” as Text and Paratext

Mort Guiney, Kenyon College
20th-21st Century French Studies, 2020

The online translation forum Wordreference.com contains a thread that began in July of 2005, discussing the use and possible abuse of the expression “*traduit de l’américain*” as it often, though not always, appears in the front matter of French translations of American literature. The discussion contains 197 posts covering a period of more than eight years; clearly, the use of “*américain*” in this context elicits strong reactions among literary experts, both Anglophone and Francophone. Does it imply that “*Américain*” is a different language from “*Anglais*”? Or that it is an inferior version of English? Why are some American novels published and advertised as translated from “*l’américain*”, others from “*l’anglais*”, and still others (especially if they have been published more recently) from “*l’anglais (Etats-Unis)*”? [see examples in accompanying Powerpoint that use “*américain*”, “*anglais (Etats-Unis)*”, but also counterexamples: “*anglais (Irlande)*”, “*anglais (Afrique du Sud)*”, and even, surprisingly, “*anglais (Grande Bretagne)*”]

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Edgar Poe

Le Scarabée d'or

Trad. de l'anglais (États-Unis) et préfacé par Charles Baudelaire. Édition de Jean-Pierre Naugrette

William Faulkner

Les larrons

[The Reivers]

Trad. de l'anglais (États-Unis) par Maurice-Edgar Coindreau et Raymond Girard. Préface de Raymond Girard

Collection L'Imaginaire (n° 654), Gallimard

TONI MORRISON *Beloved*

Beloved examine l'horreur et la rage d'un passé douloureux. Ancienne esclave, Sethe a tué l'enfant qu'elle chérissait au nom de l'amour et de la liberté, pour qu'elle échappe à un destin de servitude. Quelques années plus tard, le fantôme de *Beloved*, la petite fille disparue, revient douloureusement hanter sa mère coupable.

Loin de tous les clichés, Toni Morrison ranime la mémoire et transcende la douleur des opprimés. Prix Pulitzer en 1988, *Beloved* est un grand roman violent et bouleversant.

Traduit de l'anglais (États-Unis)
par Hortense Chabrier
et Sylviane Rué

Stephen King

La Tour Sombre, tome I : Le Pistolero

Lu par Jacques Frantz

[The Dark Tower]

Trad. de l'anglais (États-Unis) par Marie de Prémonville

Contient 1 CD audio au format mp3. Durée d'écoute : environ 9 h
Collection Écoutez lire, Gallimard

NADINE GORDIMER

Vivre à présent

Trad. de l'anglais (Afrique du sud) par David Fauquemberg
Collection Folio (n° 5868), Gallimard

FLANN O'BRIEN

Une vie de chien

Trad. de l'anglais (Irlande) par Christiane Convers
Collection Du monde entier, Gallimard

William Boyd

L'Amour est aveugle

Le Ravissement de Brodie Moncur

Traduit de l'anglais (Grande-Bretagne) par Isabelle Perrin
(Seuil, 2019)

Raymond Chandler

Le grand sommeil

Une enquête du privé Philip Marlowe

Traduit de l'américain par Boris Vian

Le vieux général Sternwood, à demi paralysé, est affligé de deux filles, Vivian et Carmen, qui sont absolument dépourvues de tout sens moral et se livrent à leurs vices avec une fureur malade : Vivian se saoule et joue à la roulette ; Carmen se drogue entre deux crises d'épilepsie et d'érotomanie. Des gangsters chevronnés s'en mêlent aussi, mais le sympathique privé Philip Marlowe fonce dans le tas pour remettre un peu d'ordre dans cette maison de fous. Il était temps !

Ernest Hemingway

Les neiges du Kilimandjaro

suivi de Dix Indiens et autres nouvelles

Traduit de l'américain par Marcel Duhamel

« Ils commencèrent à prendre de l'altitude en direction de l'est, semblait-il ; après quoi, cela s'obscurcit et ils se trouvèrent en pleine tempête, la pluie tellement drue qu'on eût cru voler à travers une cascade, et puis ils en sortirent et Compie tourna la tête et sourit en montrant quelque chose du doigt et là, devant eux, tout ce qu'il pouvait voir, vaste comme le monde, immense, haut et incroyablement blanc dans le soleil, c'était le sommet carré du Kilimandjaro. Et alors il comprit que c'était là

Herman Melville

Bartleby le scribe

Traduit de l'américain par Pierre Leyris

suivi de Notes pour une vie de Herman Melville

par Philippe Jaworski

« Une fois dans la bibliothèque, il me fallut environ deux secondes pour mettre la main sur le *Bartleby* de Melville. *Bartleby*! Herman Melville, *Bartleby*, parfaitement. Qui a lu cette longue nouvelle sait de quelle terreur peut se charger le mode conditionnel. Qui la lira le saura. »

Daniel Pennac

Furthermore, why has there been so little research into an issue important enough to sustain an eight-year argument on WordReference? Literary scholars, including specialists in translation studies, have rarely considered the question. One exception is Sarah Lawson who in 1975 published an essay in the journal of linguistics *American Speech* ("Traduit de l'Américain") in which she argued that the term is unnecessary, perhaps illegitimate. So why does it appear so consistently,

Livre de Poche: “américain” is not a separate language from “anglais”, but the term represents a different “school” of literary expression.

Rowohlt: the “different narrative styles of British and American writers” (318)

[Sarah Lawson, “Traduit de l’américain” *American Speech* 50: 3-4 (Autumn-Winter 1975) 317-319]

not only in American works translated into French, but into other languages as well? Lawson asked both a French and a German publisher why they specified “American”, but not other Anglophone countries “Canadian”, “Australian”, “Indian”, and so on and received the following responses [see PPT slide]: the “*Livre de Poche*” agreed that “américain” is not a separate language from “anglais”, but that it represents a different “school” of literary expression. Similarly, the German publisher Rowohlt claimed that while Americans have “different styles [from the British] which play a great role in colloquial speech, expressions which have different meanings in England and the USA”, the real justification lies elsewhere: what is really at issue, according to Rowohlt, is the “different narrative styles of British and American writers”. (318) We are therefore not talking about separate languages or dialects, but about different “schools” or “narrative styles”.

Let us not make too much of what a couple of European publishing houses said to get rid of Sarah Lawson and her pesky questions. And yet, I find it revealing that both publishers chose to say that the term “American” does *not* designate a linguistic distinction, but rather a literary one: something that can only be vaguely described as a “school” or a “narrative style”. Therein lies a clue. There is a type and a degree of artistic difference that requires a name, as if the United States were not only further away from Europe in terms of physical space, but also in terms of intelligibility. In other words, the paratextual term “américain” may not refer to a nation in which one can hear and read certain varieties of English, but rather to a kind of literary estrangement, a

recognition that texts written by Americans exist at a greater remove from France than the rest of the Anglophone world, including Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, and Australia. The apparent decline in the use of the expression “*Traduit de l’américain*” would therefore suggest that American literature has, over time, undergone some degree of assimilation. For most of the twentieth century, however, it was considered foreign in ways that cannot be reduced simply to linguistic variation.

Like many of us, I was no more mildly puzzled by this example of American exceptionalism, until one day I came across a copy of the first novel by Roger Breuil, published in 1933 [see PPT image]: its title is simply “*Traduit de l’américain*”. Here I have to pause briefly in my presentation, and try to answer the questions on all of your minds: who is Roger Breuil [see PPT]? Information about this author is hard to find, as he seems to have been largely forgotten. Fortunately his son, Sidney Jézéquel, published a biography in 2007 (*L’Avant-dernier des Protestants*), also very hard to find. It is not sold on Amazon, and Harvard is apparently the only American library to have a copy. The first sentence of the biography provides an important key to Breuil’s identity: “Mon père était incroyablement croyant”. (7) We learn that his real name was Roger Jézéquel, that he was a Protestant minister

Roger Breuil (Roger Jézéquel), 1898-1948

who belonged to a small group of French disciples of Swiss theologian Karl Barth in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1932, the group founded a journal, *Hic et nunc*, that lasted about four years. Breuil studied for a year at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He wrote several more novels, essays, screenplays, and plays, before dying in 1948 at the age of 49. During the Occupation, his family sheltered a number of Jewish refugees, Spanish Civil War veterans, and Resistance fighters in his wife's estate near the Pyrenees, and in 2003 Breuil and his father were honored as "Righteous Among the Nations" by the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem.

Now let us return to the novel. Obviously, it was written in French, so what is the meaning of the title, aside from the fact that the novel takes place in the United States?

What follows is a necessary sequence of summary and textual analysis through which I hope to arrive at some tentative answers to the question. Two surprises greeted me when I read the novel: first, it is really good, in spite of being relatively unknown, or at least forgotten (it won the *Prix du premier roman* in 1933, putting Breuil on course for a potentially far more successful literary career than the one he had). The second surprise was that it has a queer dimension, treating the theme of male homosexuality even more directly than other, more famous works such as André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* or *Les Faux monnaieurs*, works that allegedly were very influential on Breuil's own writing. In the process of providing evidence of the novel's treatment of same sex desire, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of what makes it American.

Synopsis: the protagonist George Wendell Bulkeley is a student at Columbia University whose staunch Protestant upbringing inspires him to bring material comfort, as well as the Gospel, to those less fortunate. He encounters a very young, handsome, and destitute Polish immigrant named André Dłuzewski and brings him to a Christian boarding house, hoping to "faire d'André un 'chrétien' et un Américain" (48). A fellow student named David Simonson, who happens to be a stereotypically rich and decadent Jew, is attracted to André and recruits him into his inner circle of dope fiends and night owls. Two other members of the gang are Bruce Sanders, a self-loathing gay man who can only act on his desires when under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and Gertrud Haines, a beautiful runaway and party girl from Detroit who works as a typist. As George sees André slipping away into sin and oblivion with David's gang, he realizes that his love for him is earthly as well as spiritual. He goes to André's boarding house one evening; it is not clear whether he goes with the intention to save the young man's soul or to consummate their relationship, or both. When he arrives, the room is empty. Later, Simonson and Sanders enter carrying an unconscious André, who has overdosed on cocaine. George wants to get a doctor right away, but Simonson warns him that there would be a criminal investigation, and it is better for them simply to wait for André to sleep it off. Time passes, and just as George is about to go find a doctor despite the danger to his reputation, André dies. And this is only the first half of the novel!

The moral dilemma, as well as the literary complexity of the narrative, can be seen in a number of passages I have selected. First,

George's sense of his personal conflict as a Christian evangelist who is tempted into sin by the very person whose soul he is trying to save:

Le projet de faire d'André un « chrétien » et un Américain, lui paraissait toujours dominer sa conduite ; il s'y consolait de certaines inquiétudes, y puisait l'absolution à une étrange dérive intérieure. Mais il y pressentait aussi la ruine de ce monde d'émotions charmantes où il s'évadait avec André.

Car avec lui il échappait à ce rêve moral qu'il ne songeait nullement à abandonner, qu'il aimait d'une sincérité toujours plus passionnée, mais contre lequel, obscurément, il luttait. (48)

Bulkeley has another reason to be ashamed, his scapegoating of Jews. He is jealous of their ease in the world, and of their lack of inhibition, as if they alone were guilty of acting upon the secret desires that he shares:

En particulier lui déplaisait l'élément juif, grand lanceur de modes et qui donnait le ton à la masse amorphe des étudiants. Des juifs il redoutait et méprisait la nonchalante intelligence ; que sans effort, sans mener bataille, par la seule puissance d'un esprit mou et curieux, des jeunes gens incroyables allassent tranquillement au succès, il s'en indignait. Il les croyait, au surplus, buveurs, perdus de vices et pécheurs irrémissibles. (52)

George's puritanism extends into the esthetic realm. This is also what makes him "American": his utilitarian rejection of gratuitous display of color or sound, that implies the weakness of the flesh, even if it is nothing more artistic than the sight of traffic at night among the neon advertisements:

Le mouvement torrentiel des voitures dans Broadway, les enseignes lumineuses haussant leurs arbres stylisés, aux fruits de verre, sur les espaliers de la nuit, tandis que volaient parmi leurs branches les oiseaux de paradis, les paons flamboyant des annonces en couleur, ah ! quel ironique décor ! (68-9)

(. . .)

George haïssait profondément tout luxe inutile, tout ce qui dépassait la perfection pratique, toute recherche d'une signification esthétique. Les objets d'art lui paraissaient toujours plus ou moins de ces « images taillées à la ressemblance des choses » et que la Bible défend. (69)

George's repressed homosexuality is therefore assimilated with a sensitivity to art that he consciously represses. To Simonson, the worldly and therefore artistically enlightened Jew, it is obvious that George is simply bluffing, and calls him out:

(. . .) –quel est le véritable, le décisif sentiment qui vous attache à ce prestigieux petit Polonais ? (. . .)

Simonson venait de lui révéler un monde obscur que jusque-là il avait repoussé dans le mépris. (77-8)

(. . .) Soyez honnête : vous tentez d'éloigner Dluzewski de moi, n'êtes-vous jaloux que de son salut ?

--Oui, dit George avec fermeté.

Simonson fit un geste de lassitude.

--Ecoutez, Bulkeley, dit-il gravement. Toute cette histoire m'est profondément indifférente. Et même j'en suis fatigué. Mais je vais vous donner un conseil : aimez André, si cela vous agréé, mais tâchez au moins de l'aimer sans mensonge.

--Oui, je l'aime comme un frère qui se perd et qu'il faut sauver. (78-9)

Of course, it would not be an interesting novel if the protagonist never discovered the extent of his self-deception. His awakening to the world begins at skin level, so to speak. After playing a pick-up game of basketball in the Columbia gym, George adheres fully to sensual pleasure, but still without admitting to himself his obsession with any male body other than his own:

Au contact de ses compagnons d'équipe, il retrouva son entrain et fit une partie superbe. Et comme il se dirigeait vers la piscine, la calme possession de son corps

en sueur l'enchantait. Quand le corps passe aux degrés supérieurs de la santé, il nous fait éprouver une sécurité morale profonde. L'esprit se satisfait dans la contemplation du corps ; il lui laisse volontiers la prééminence ; il admire cette incarnation qui, pour un instant, l'exprime tout entier. C'est l'heure des imaginations sans honte, où tous les plaisirs sont possibles, car la chair communique au désir sa pureté présente. Et cependant l'être comblé, à cette minute, de sa perfection physique, n'est jamais plus loin dans le rêve ! (94)

The spoiler alert given at the start of this paper, that “American-ness” and “homosexuality” are not related in any figurative sense, now becomes justified. Three men witness André's death: an “aristocratic Jew”, and two closeted gay men, the New England Protestant George Bulkeley, and the Texan Bruce Sanders who swings like a pendulum between deep self-loathing and unrestrained orgiastic self-indulgence. Contrary to the cliché, the Jew is not the foreigner in this trio, at least not from the author's (French Protestant) perspective: he is as comfortable in the realm of the esthetic as he is in the world of bisexuality. Simonson, I would argue, is not so much a Jew as he is a European, blithely indifferent to, or at most amused by, the moral agonies of his college classmates.

“*L'américain*” is a signifier of extreme otherness, the need to hold American culture at arm's length. Breuil exploits many of the connotations that the term allows, in a now largely forgotten novel that happens to be a minor masterpiece of “Christian fiction” and repressed (homo) sexuality, strongly reminiscent of works by his bicultural contemporary, Julien (Julian) Green. (Green was a member of the jury that awarded Breuil the *Prix du premier roman*). One more detail about the novel that I have not mentioned: George is half-French on his mother's side. After André's death, he travels to France. We do not know what he did there, but upon returning to the United States, he convinces Gertrud to go with him to the fictional Long Island town of Pemmican Beach. “Il avait arraché Gertrud à ces brutes de là-bas [Simonson's gang]. Il la tenait ici, dans une demi-possession, et il ne la touchait pas. » (171) Apparently, after “saving” Gertrud (having previously failed to save André), he is still caught in the web of his messiah

complex and sexual inhibition. But then something changes. Though it is at Gertrud's initiative, they become lovers. George "avait décidé de ne pas appeler cela péché, il avait résolu de le nommer libération . . . » (190). What George could not even attempt in his relationship with André becomes possible with Gertrud. One might be tempted to think that it is only possible because he moves on from same-sex attraction to opposite-sex attraction, which would turn the novel into a simplistic apology for social convention. That is not how the relationship between George and Gertrud appears, however. Even if their union did not continue to be problematic, it is highly unlikely that Gallimard would have published a novel that concluded with a successful same-sex relationship (see Gide). The resolution of the opposition between flesh and spirit is, in the end, the « translation from the American ». Breuil should be remembered for having accomplished something quite unusual for the time period in which he wrote: a queering of American society viewed through a French window.