Reading White for Black

And what shall I say of those more properly called traitors than translators, since they betray those whom they aim to reveal, tarnishing their glory, and seducing ignorant readers by reading white for black?

JOACHIM DU BELLAY,
Defense and Example of the French Tongue, 1549

We can only prohibit that which we can name.

GEORGE STEINER,
After Babel, 1973

Throughout part of 1992 and 1993, I worked on the translation of three short stories by the late Marguerite Yourcenar. The stories, published in French under the title *Conte Bleu*, which I rendered in English as *A Blue Tale*, are very early works by the writer who was to become, in later life, such an accomplished stylist. Understandably, since they were written with the exuberance and know-all of youth, the stories stray from time to time from sober blue to lurid purple. Since translators, unlike writers, have the possibility of amending the faults of the past, it seemed to me that to preserve every glitter and volute of Yourcenar's young text would have been nothing but a pedantic undertaking, less intended for lovers of literature than for literary urologists. Furthermore, the English language is less patient with ebullience than French. And so it was that a few times - *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* - I silently clipped an adjective or pruned an outrageous simile.

Vladimir Nabokov, criticized by his friend Edmund Wilson for producing a translation of *Eugene Onegin* "with warts and all", responded that the translator's business was not to im-prove or comment on the original, but to give the reader ignorant of one language a text recomposed in *all* the equivalent words of another.[1] Nabokov apparently believed (though I find it hard to imagine that the master craftsman meant this) that languages are "equivalent" in both sense and sound, and that what is imagined in one language can be reimagined in another - without an entirely new creation taking place. But the truth is (as every translator finds out at the beginning of the first page) that the phoenix imagined in one language is nothing but a barnyard chicken in another, and to invest that singular fowl with the majesty of the bird born from its own ashes, a different language might require the presence of a different creature, plucked from bestiaries that possess their own notions of strangeness. In English, for instance, the word *phoenix* still has a wild, evocative ring; in Spanish, *ave fénix* is part of the bombastic rhetoric inherited from the seventeenth century.

In the early Middle Ages, translation (from the past participle of the Latin *transferre*, "to transfer") meant conveying the relics of a saint from one place to another. Sometimes these translations were illegal, as when the saintly remains were stolen from one town and carried away for the greater glory of another. This is how the body of St. Mark was transferred from Constantinople to Venice, hidden under a cartful of pork, which the Turkish guards at Constantinople's gates refused to touch. Carrying away something precious and making it one's own by whatever means possible: this definition serves the act of literary translation perhaps better than Nabokov's.

No translation is ever innocent. Every translation implies a reading, a choice both of subject and interpretation, a refusal or suppression of other texts, a redefinition under the terms imposed by the translator who, for the occasion, usurps the title of author. Since a translation cannot be impartial, any more than a reading can be

unbiased, the act of translation carries with it a responsibility that extends far beyond the limits of the translated page, not only from language to language but often within the same language, from genre to genre, or from the shelves of one literature to those of another. In this, not all "translations" are acknowledged as such: when Charles and Mary Lamb turned Shakespeare's plays into prose tales for children, or when Virginia Woolf generously herded Constance Garnett's versions of Turgenev "into the fold of English Literature,"[2] the displacements of the text into the nursery or into the British Library were not regarded as "translations" in the etymological sense. Pork, Lamb or Woolf, every translator disguises the text with another, attractive or detractive meaning.

Were translation a simple act of pure exchange, it would offer no more possibilities for distortion and censorship (or improvement and enlightening) than photocopying or, at most, scriptorium transcription. Alas, *pace* Nabokov, it isn't. If we acknowledge that every translation, simply by transferring the text to another language, space and time, alters it for better or for worse, then we must also acknowledge that every translation - transliteration, retelling, relabelling - adds to the original text a *prêt-à-porter* reading, an implicit commentary. And that is where the censor comes in.

That a translation may hide, distort, subdue, or even suppress a text is a fact tacitly recognized by the reader who accepts it as a "version" of the original. In the index to John Boswell's ground-breaking book on homosexuality in the Middle Ages, the entry for "Translation" says "see Mistranslation" - or what Boswell calls "the deliberate falsification of historical records." The instances of asepticized translations of Greek and Roman classics are too numerous to mention and range from a change of pronoun which wilfully conceals the sexual identity of a character, to the suppression of an entire text, such as the *Amores* of the Pseudo-Lucian, which Thomas Francklin in 1781 deleted from his English translation of the author's works because it included an explicit dialogue among a group of men on whether women or boys were erotically more desirable. "But as this is a point which, at least in this nation, has been long determined in favour of the ladies, it stands in need of no further discussion," wrote the censorious Francklin.[3]

Throughout the nineteenth century, the classic Greek and Roman texts were recommended for the moral education of women only when purified in translation. The Reverend J. W. Burgon made this explicit when, in 1884, from the pulpit of New College, Oxford, he preached against allowing women into the university where they would have to study the texts in the original.

If she is to compete successfully with men for 'honours', you must needs put the classic writers of antiquity unreservedly into her hands - in other words, must introduce her to the obscenities of Greek and Roman literature. Can you seriously intend it? Is it then a part of your programme to defile that lovely spirit with the filth of old-world civilization, and to acquaint maidens in their flower with a hundred abominable things which women of any age (and men too, if *that* were possible) would rather a thousand times be without?'[4]

It is possible to censor not only a word or a line of text through translation, but also an entire culture, as has happened time and again throughout the centuries among conquered peoples. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, for instance, the Jesuits were authorized by King Philip II of Spain, champion of the Counter-Reformation, to follow in the steps of the Franciscans and establish themselves in the jungles of what is now Paraguay. From 1609 until their expulsion from the colonies in 1767, the Jesuits created settlements for the native Guaranís, walled communities called *reducciones* because the men, women and children who inhabited them were "reduced" to the

dogmas of Christian civilization. The differences between conquered and conquerors were, however, not easily overcome. “What makes me a pagan in your eyes,” said a Guaraní shaman to one of the missionaries, “is what prevents you from being a Christian in mine.”[5] The Jesuits understood that effective conversion required reciprocity and that: understanding the other was the key that would allow them to keep the pagans in what was called, borrowing from the vocabulary of Christian mystic literature, “concealed captivity.” The first step to understanding the other was learning and translating their language.

A culture is defined by that which it can name; in order to censor, the invading culture must also possess the vocabulary to name those same things. Therefore, translating into the tongue of the conqueror always carries within the act the danger of assimilation or annihilation; translating into the tongue of the conquered, the danger of overpowering or undermining. These inherent conditions of translation extend to all variations of political imbalance. Guaraní (still the language spoken, albeit in a much altered form, by over a million Para-guayans) had been until the arrival of the Jesuits an oral language. It was then that the Franciscan Fray Luis de Bolaños, whom the natives called “God's wizard” because of his gift for languages, compiled the first Guaraní dictionary. His work was continued and perfected by the Jesuit Antonio Ruiz de Montoya who after several years’ hard labour gave the completed volume the title of *Thesaurus of the Guaraní Tongue*. In a preface to a history of the Jesuit missions in South America,[6] the Paraguayan novelist Augusto Roa Bastos noted that, in order for the natives to believe in the faith of Christ, they needed, above all, to be able to suspend or revise their ancestral concepts of life and death. Using the Guaranís’ own words, and taking advantage of certain coincidences between the Christian and Guaraní religions, the Jesuits retranslated the Guaraní myths so that they would foretell or announce the truth of Christ. The Last-Last-First-Father, Ñamandú, who created His own body and the attributes of that body from the primordial mists, became the Christian God from the Book of Genesis; Tupá, the First Parent, a minor divinity in the Guaraní pantheon, became Adam, the first man; the crossed sticks, *yvyrá yuasá*, which in the Guaraní cosmology sustain the earthly realm, became the Holy Cross. And conveniently, since Ñamandú’s second act was to create the word, the Jesuits were able to infuse the Bible, translated into Guaraní, with the accepted weight of divine authority.

In translating the Guaraní language into Spanish, the Jesuits attributed to certain terms that denoted acceptable and even commendable social behaviour among the natives the

connotation of that behaviour as perceived by the Catholic Church or the Spanish court. Guaraní concepts of private honour, of silent acknowledgement when accepting a gift, of a specific as opposed to a generalized knowledge, and of a social response to the mutations of the seasons and of age, were translated bluntly and conveniently as “Pride,” “Ingratitude” “Ignorance” and “Instabilit”. This vocabulary allowed the traveller Martin Dobrizhoffer of Vienna to reflect, sixteen years after the expulsion of the Jesuits, in 1783, in his *Geschichte der Abiponer* on the corrupt nature of the Guararís: “Their many virtuos, which certainly belong to rational beings, capable of culture and learning, serve as frontispiece to very irregular compositions within the works themselves. They seern like automata in whose making have been joined elements of *pride*, *ingratitude*, *ignorance* and *instability*. From these principal sources flow the brooks of *sloth*, *drunkenness*, *insolence* and *distrust*, with many other disorders which stultify their moral quality.”[7]

In spite of Jesuit claims, the new system of beliefs did not contribute to the happiness of the natives. Writing in 1769, the French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville described the Guaraní people in these laconic words:

These Indians are a sad lot. Always trembling under the stick of a pedantic and stern master, they possess no property and are subjected to a laborious life whose monotony is enough to kill a man with boredom. That is why, when they die, they don't feel any regret in leaving this life.[8]

By the time of the expulsion of the Jesuits from Paraguay, the Spanish chronicler Fernández de Oviedo was able to say of those who had "civilized" the Guaraní people what a Briton, Calgacus, is reported to have said after the Roman occupation of Britain: "The men who have perpetuated these acts call these conquered places 'peaceful.' I feel they are more than peaceful - they are destroyed."[9]

Throughout history, censorship in translation has also taken place under more subtle guises, and in our time, in certain countries, translation is one of the means by which "danger-ous" authors are submitted to cleansing purges. (The Brazilian Nélida Piñón in Cuba, the decadent Oscar Wilde in Russia, Native American chroniclers in the States and Canada, the French *enfant terrible* George Bataille in Franco's Spain, have all been published in truncated versions. And, in spite of all my good intentions, could not my version of Yourcenar be considered censorious?) Often, authors whose politics might be read uncomfortably are simply not translated and authors of a difficult style are either passed over in favour of others more easily accessible or are condemned to weak or clumsy translations.

Not all translation, however, is corruption and deceit. Sometimes cultures can be rescued through translation, and translators become justified in their laborious and menial pur-suits. In January 1976, the American lexicographer Robert Laughlin sank to his knees in front of the chief magistrate of the town of Zinacantán in southern Mexico and held up a book that had taken Laughlin fourteen years to compile: the great Tzotzil dictionary that rendered into English the Mayan language of 120,000 natives of Chiapas, known also as the "People of the Bat."[10] Offering the dictionary to the Tzotzil elder, Laughlin said, in the language he had so painstakingly recorded, "If any foreigner comes and says that you are stupid, asinine Indians, please show him this book, show him the 30,000 words of your knowledge, your reasoning."

It should, it must, suffice.

1 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, New York: Vintage Books, 1982.

2 Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. I 1912-1918, edited by Andrew McNeillie, London: Hogarth Press, 1987.

3 Quoted in John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the, Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century,* Chicago & London; University of Chicago Press, 1980.

4 Quoted in Jan Morris (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Oxford*, Oxford University Press, 1978.

5 Quoted in *Tentación de la utopía: La República de los jesuitas en el Paraguay*, foreword by Augusto Roa Bastos, introduction and selection by Rubén Bareiro Saguier & Jean-Paul Duviols, Barcelona: Tusquets, 1991.

6 Ibid., Bastos, Foreword.

7 Martin Dobrizhoffer, *Geschichte der Abiponer, einer berittenen und kriegerischen Nation in Paraguay*, Vienna, 1783.

8 Louis Antoine de Bougainville, *Journal du voyage autour du monde*, in *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde 1766-1763*, Paris; Imprimerie Nationale, 1977.

9 Tacitus, *Histories & Annals*, vol. l, edited by C. H. Moore & J. Jackson, London: Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, 1963.

10 Alexander Cockburn, *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary*, in *Soho Square l*, edited by lsabel Fonseca, London: Bloomsbury Press, 1988.