

## REINCARNATION, TRANSLATION AND ADVENTURE\*

BY UMBERTO ECO

There are writers who do not bother about their translations, sometimes because they lack the linguistic competence, sometimes because they have no faith in the literary value of their work and are anxious only to sell their product in as many countries as possible.

Often the indifference conceals two prejudices, equally despicable: Either the author considers himself an inimitable genius and so suffers translation as a painful political process to be borne until the whole world has learned his language, or else the author harbors an "ethnic" bias and considers it a waste of time to care about how readers from other cultures might feel about his work.

People think an author can check his translations only if he knows the language into which he is to be translated. Obviously, if he does know that language, the work proceeds more easily. But it all depends on the translator's intelligence. For example, I do not know Swedish, Russian or Hungarian, and yet I have worked well with my translators into those languages. They were able to explain to me the kind of difficulties they faced, and make me understand why what I had written created problems in their language. In many cases I was able to offer suggestions.

The problem frequently arises from the fact that translations are either "source-oriented" or "target-oriented," as today's books on Translation Theory put it. A source-oriented translation must do everything possible to make the B-language reader understand what

\*Translated from the Italian by William Weaver, who also translated Umberto Eco's novels, *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*.

the writer has thought or said in language A. Classical Greek affords a typical example: In order to comprehend it at all, the modern reader must understand what the poets of that age were like and how they might express themselves. If Homer seems to repeat "rosy-fingered dawn" too frequently, the translator must not try to vary the epithet just because today's manuals of style insist we should be careful about repeating the same adjective. The reader has to understand that in those days dawn had rosy fingers whenever it was mentioned, just as these days Washington always has D.C.

In other cases translation can and should be target-oriented. I will cite an example from the translation of my novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, whose chief characters constantly speak in literary quotations. The purpose is to show that it is impossible for these characters to see the world except through literary references. Now, in chapter 57, describing an automobile trip in the hills, the translation reads "the horizon became more vast, at every curve the peaks grew, some crowned by little villages; we glimpsed endless vistas." But, after "endless vistas" the Italian text went on: "*al di là della siepe, come osservava Diotallevi.*" If these words had been translated, literally "beyond the hedge, as Diotallevi remarked," the English-language reader would have lost something, for "*al di là della siepe*" is a reference to the most beautiful poem of Giacomo Leopardi, "L'infinito," which every Italian reader knows by heart. The quotation appears at that point not because I wanted to tell the reader there was a hedge anywhere nearby, but because I wanted to show how Diotallevi could experience the landscape only by linking it to his experience of the poem. I told my translators that the hedge was not important, nor the reference to Leopardi, but it was important to have a literary reference at any cost. In fact, William Weaver's translation reads: "We glimpsed endless vistas. 'Like Darien,' Diotallevi remarked . . ." This brief allusion to the Keats sonnet is a good example of target-oriented translation.

A source-oriented translator in a language I do not know may ask

me why I have used a certain expression, or (if he understood it from the start) he may explain to me why, in his language, such a thing cannot be said. Even then I try to take part (if only from outside) in a translation that is at once source- and target-oriented.

These are not easy problems. Consider Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. As many know, this novel—written in Russian, of course—begins with a long dialogue in French. I have no idea how many Russian readers in Tolstoy's day understood French; the aristocrats surely did, because this French dialogue is meant, in fact, to depict the customs of aristocratic Russian society. Perhaps Tolstoy took it for granted that, in his day, those who did not know French were not even able to read Russian. Or else he wanted the non-French-speaking reader to understand that the aristocrats of the Napoleonic period were, in fact, so remote from Russian national life that they spoke in an incomprehensible fashion. Today if you reread those pages, you will realize that it is not important to understand what those characters are saying, because they speak of trivial things: What is important is to understand that they are saying those things in French.

A problem that has always fascinated me is this: How would you translate the first chapter of *War and Peace* into French? The reader reads a book in French and in it some of the characters are speaking French; nothing strange about that. If the translator adds a note to the dialogue saying "*en français dans le texte*," it is of scant help: The effect is still lost. Perhaps, to achieve that effect, the aristocrats (in the French translation) should speak English. I am glad I did not write *War and Peace* and am not obliged to argue with my French translator.

As an author, I have learned a great deal from sharing the work of my translators. I am talking about my "academic" works as well as my novels. In the case of philosophical and linguistic works, when the translator cannot understand (and clearly translate) a certain page, it means that my thinking was murky. Many times, after hav-

ing faced the job of translation, I have revised the second Italian edition of my book: not only from the point of view of its style but also from the point of view of ideas. Sometimes you write something in your own language A, and the translator says: "If I translate that into my language B, it will not make sense." He could be mistaken. But if, after long discussion, you realize that the passage would not make sense in language B, it will follow that it never made sense in language A to begin with.

This doesn't mean that, above a text written in language A, there hovers a mysterious entity that is its Sense, which would be the same in any language, something like an ideal text written in what Walter Benjamin called *Reine Sprache*, The Pure Language. Too good to be true. In that case it would only be a matter of isolating this Pure Language and the work of translation (even of a page of Shakespeare) could be done by computer.

The job of translation is a trial-and-error process, very similar to what happens in an Oriental bazaar when you're buying a carpet. The merchant asks 100, you offer 10, and after an hour of bargaining you agree on 50.

Naturally, in order to believe that the negotiation has been a success you must have fairly precise ideas about this basically imprecise phenomenon called translation. In theory, different languages are impossible to hold to one standard; it cannot be said that the English house is truly and completely the synonym of the French maison. But in theory no form of perfect communication exists. And yet, for better or worse, ever since the advent of Homo Sapiens, we have managed to communicate. Ninety percent (I believe) of *War and Peace's* readers have read the book in translation, and yet if you set a Chinese, an Englishman and an Italian to discussing *War and Peace*, not only will all agree that Prince Andrej dies, but, despite many interesting and differing nuances of meaning, all will be prepared to agree on the recognition of certain moral principles expressed by

Tolstoy. I am sure the various interpretations would not exactly coincide, but neither would the interpretations that three English-speaking readers might provide of the same Wordsworth poem.

In the course of working with translators, you reread your original text, you discover its possible interpretations and it sometimes happens—as I have said—that you want to rewrite it. I have not rewritten my two novels, but there is one place which, after its translation, I would have gladly rewritten. It is the dialogue in *Foucault's Pendulum* in which Diotallevi says: "God created the world by speaking. He didn't send a telegram." And Belbo replies: "*Fiat lux*. Stop."

But in the original Belbo said: "*Fiat lux*. Stop. *Segue lettera*" ("*Fiat lux*. Stop. Letter follows." "Letter follows" is a standard expression used in telegrams (or at least it used to be standard, before the fax machine came into existence). At that point, in the Italian text, Casaubon said: "*Ai Tessalonicesi, immagino*." (To the Thessalonians, I suppose.) It was a sequence of witty remarks, somewhat sophomoric, and the joke lay in the fact that Casaubon was suggesting that, after having created the world by telegram, God would send one of Saint Paul's epistles. But the play on words works only in Italian, in which both the posted letter and the saint's epistle are called "*lettera*." In English the text had to be changed. Belbo says only "*Fiat lux*. Stop," and Casaubon comments "Epistle follows." Perhaps the joke becomes a bit more ultraviolet and the reader has to work a little harder to understand what's going on in the minds of the characters, but the short circuit between Old and New Testament is more effective. Here, if I were rewriting the original novel, I would alter that dialogue.

Sometimes the author can only trust in Divine Providence. I will never be able to collaborate fully on a Japanese translation of my work (though I have tried). It is hard for me to understand the thought processes of my "target." For that matter I always wonder what I am really reading when I look at the translation of a Japanese

poem, and I presume Japanese readers have the same experience when reading me. And yet I know that, when I read the translation of a Japanese poem, I grasp something of that thought process that is different from mine. If I read a haiku after having read some Zen Buddhist koans, I can perhaps understand why the simple mention of the moon high over the lake should give me emotions analogous to and yet different from those that an English romantic poet conveys to me. Even in these cases a minimum of collaboration between translator and author can work. I no longer remember into which Slavic language someone was translating *The Name of the Rose*, but we were wondering what the reader would get from the many passages in Latin. Even an American reader who has not studied Latin still knows it was the language of the medieval ecclesiastical world and so catches a whiff of the Middle Ages. And further, if he reads *De pentagono Salomonis* he can recognize pentagon and Solomon. But for a Slavic reader these Latin phrases and names, transliterated into the Cyrillic alphabet, suggest nothing. If, at the beginning of *War and Peace*, the American reader finds "*Eh bien, mon prince . . .*," he can guess that the person being addressed is a prince. But if the same dialogue appears at the beginning of a Chinese translation (in an incomprehensible Latin alphabet or—worse—expressed in Chinese ideograms) what will the reader in Beijing understand? The Slavic translator and I decided to use, instead of Latin, the ancient ecclesiastical Slavonic of the medieval Orthodox church. In that way the reader would feel the same sense of distance, the same religious atmosphere, though understanding only vaguely what was being said.

Thank God I am not a poet, because the problem becomes more dramatic in translating poetry, an art where thought is determined by words, and if you change the language, you change the thought. Yet there are excellent examples of translated poetry produced by a collaboration between author and translator. Often the result is a new creation. One text very close to poetry because of its linguistic

complexity is Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Now, the Anna Livia Plurabelle chapter—when it was still in the form of an early draft—was translated into Italian with Joyce himself collaborating. The translation is markedly different from the original English. It is not a translation. It is as if Joyce had rewritten his text in Italian. And yet one French critic has said that to understand that chapter properly (in English) it would be advisable to first read that Italian draft.

Perhaps the Pure Language does not exist, but pitting one language against another is a splendid adventure, and it is not necessarily true, as the Italian saying goes, that the “translator” is always a “traitor.” Provided that the author takes part in this admirable treason.

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