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Hela Michot-Dietrich

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# The Massacre of Ionesco's *Jeux de massacre* or Pitfalls in Translation By Hela Michot-Dietrich

Subservience is the prime virtue of good translators. Knowledge of the literary scene surrounding a particular work is a further requirement for the intermediary whose role it is to convey concepts, ideas and themes expressed in a foreign language to often highly educated readers who merely lack skill in a particular language. Such knowledge is especially important in situations in which the translator is faced with choosing between more than one *correct* version. The sole language skill then easily becomes treacherous as a slippery rock, and ignorance may take on the appearance of presumptuousness, while the translated work turns out to be an *adaptation* rather than a *translation*. Not even the argument that such *free* translations serve the general public and the stage can vindicate the resulting perversion of the trusting student of literature who hopes to broaden his understanding of humanity through the study of literary works from cultures other than those whose language he masters. It is therefore of utmost importance that readers of translations be reminded that even though great care may have been taken in translating many a piece of literature, all is not well with the current proliferation of hastily marketed renditions of contemporary foreign texts.

Most translators of past centuries have considered themselves creative vulgarizers of great works from foreign cultures. Today's Babelian confusion within some national languages<sup>1</sup> would seem to mandate particularly strict adherence to literary fidelity on the part of those who profess to bridge the void between languages and cultures, lest they become guilty of perpetrating the communication gap they pretend to close. Having quoted the seventeenth century French poet and member of the *Academie francaise*, Jean

Chapelain, who was intent on rendering a text "agréable sans rebuter le lecteur par une fidélité dégoûtante," Henriette Valot confidently concludes in 1970, that "aucun directeur littéraire de nos jours n'accepterait un tel procédé."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, a lingering conviction remains that literary translations can dispense with fidelity at the translator's whim. A case in point is Stuart Gilbert's translation of Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*, in which the translator has falsified and sacrificed the protagonist's characterization achieved through linguistic idiosyncrasies, by giving us smooth, idiomatic English.<sup>3</sup>

Smooth idiomatic English is the language used by Helen Gary Bishop in her recent translation of Eugène Ionesco's *Jeux de massacre* (1970). At this writing, it is the only English edition available. Presented without comments or notes, it claims to be a translation. A close reading of both plays reveals, however, numerous shortcomings in the translation. The following illustrations are meant to disabuse the reader who would trust *Killing Game* (1974) to be a faithful English version of *Jeux de massacre*. They further reveal that free translation of certain words in crucial sentences, and approximations in rendering some passages, lead to interpretations of *Killing Game* quite different from those gleaned in the French play.

Comparing the original with the translation, we find first of all innumerable omissions in the play itself as well as in the stage directions. Since the playwright considered his stage directions vital enough to print, we would at least expect the translator's explanations as to why they were omitted. Granted, any stage director may modify them, as Ionesco himself generously suggests here and there; but to omit them in what purports to be

the English version of the play not only appears to be blatant unfaithfulness, but it also deprives the reader of the joy of appreciating Ionesco's fun with repetitious statements, ludicrously meticulous communications of ponderous trivialities, which are such an important part of Ionesco's universe and which are definitely aimed at "setting the stage," creating the mood of the play. The many wrong translations of right and left in the stage directions are not justified by the one possible error in the scene between the old man and the old woman. The instructions "lorsque apparaissent par la droite un vieil homme et une vieille femme. . . Ils se dirigent doucement, assez difficilement vers la droite,"<sup>4</sup> are rendered by "toward stage center,"<sup>5</sup> while more logically they might have been translated to "toward the left," in an effort to correct an error. But even then, such liberty ought to have been explained by the translator. In the same scene, the author's comment that "les mots d'amour qu'elle dit et la révolte qu'il exprime se prononcent avec des voix de vieillards bien entendu, assez cassées" (J 92) are not translated at all. Yet, these lines are meant to underline the absurdity of the situation as well as of the characters and serve to produce a *Verfremdungseffekt*. Surely, not all oldsters have shaking, broken voices, and the reader or stage director would not automatically assume that the words be spoken with such voices. On the other hand, the translator has chosen to include the appearance of a "man of middle age and the middle class" (K 108) at the end of the play, when Ionesco ends the play before the appearance of the man, adding the final short scene (on a new page in the *Manteau d'Arlequin* edition) and the following instructions absent in the translation: "Cette courte scène ne se garde que s'il y a un entracte, au choix du metteur en scène, qui pourra l'intégrer vers le milieu de la pièce." (J 106) In a unique but unacknowledged comment of her own, the translator informs us that there are "multiple stage directions" (K 6). Indeed, sixteen lines of directions are missing on this occasion! The instances of such omissions are too numerous to mention them all.

*Killing Game* has a title for each scene, whereas the *Manteau d'Arlequin* edition indicates titles for only a few scenes. The fact that the edition printed in *L'Avant-Scène du théâtre* (N° 472, 15 Mai 1971) lists titles for all scenes seems however not to have influenced the translator, as evidenced by the discrepancies between these titles and their English translations. We find that "A l'hôpital" (p. 18) becomes "New Scene" (K 29), "Scène des quatre" (p. 22) "New scenes A and B" (K53), "Le bal clandestin et auberge" (p. 24) "New Scene" (K 61), and "Scène des docteurs" (p. 33) is transformed to "The Council Chamber" (K 85). Never are we informed of the liberties taken, let alone of the reasons behind the changes. So much

for the mechanics of the play; let us now turn our attention to the dialogue.

When translating the actual text of the play, the translator's quest for personal freedom asserts itself further, to the point of seriously tampering with the spirit of the play. It may not always be easy to do justice to the French "âme"; but to translate "Pouvoir et savoir sont les deux facultés de l'âme. De l'âme de l'homme" (J 11) with "Precisely. Knowledge and power are the two great faculties of the human spirit" (K 6), transforms a highly humorous, even sarcastic remark into a truism. While Ionesco's afterthought reminds us of the quarrel regarding the question as to whether or not animals have souls, it also suggest ever so slightly that women share the fate of animals, and that, consequently, men are the sole possessors of souls. On the basis of the English text, this speculation is simply impossible. The translation further eliminates the nonsensical absurdity which has the first man declare that power and knowledge are faculties of the soul, the only two faculties of the soul, as the use of the definite article in French indicates. No differentiation between great and less great faculties is found in the French sentence. The soul has two faculties and they are power and knowledge. This is an Ionescoesque definition of soul.

We can recognize the translator's attempt at internal rhyme in her rendition of "fleas in my knees" (K 9) for "fourmis dans les jambes" (J 13). But when we hear the *chambermaid* praise the inn's quality by assuring the guest that "there are no fleas here" (K 61), our suspicion is awakened that the only insects the translator knows are fleas. In French, the *servant girl* says simply "Pas de punaises." (J 60) Whatever is wrong with calling a bedbug a bedbug? And why must the lid that traps and shuts in or out the sixth man in scene one become a key? A key first though to have been made of lead? (K 7) While there may be little difference between being shot by a policeman's revolver (K 26) or his "fusil" (J 32) and, depending on how literal the reader's mind, between picking up your master's "tête" (J 32) or his "body" (K 26) by the hair, there surely is a great difference between characters saying "Ils sont coupable! Ils sont innocents!" (J 19) or their saying instead "How do we know they are guilty?", "Maybe they were innocent." (K 14) The categorical assertions of guilt and innocence are watered down to mere doubts not only about those accused or defended by the remarks, but about a crowd's ability to judge whether a defendant is guilty or innocent. Self-doubt on the part of the accusers, while commendable as a general rule, is not suggested in the French text.

Reading on, we find that the seventh man checks the sixth woman's pulse in English, but in French, he takes her hand and finds it lifeless.

(K 15, J 20) While the difference between original and translation in this instance is one of stage effect rather than meaning, the following example is of much more serious nature. The *fonctionnaire* tells us that "Ce mal fait le tour de la terre et vient frapper le pays ou la ville la plus heureuse," (J 22) his English equivalent informs us that "This scourge, in its travels, can attack at random the most peaceful country or city, in their finest hour," (K 17) omitting the definite suggestion, on the part of the playwright, of a world-wide affliction. And the selection of the happiest country or town does not imply randomness; on the contrary. The *they-syndrome* so prevalent throughout the French play, indicative of a generalized persecution complex, is transformed into a reassuring scientific assertion that all can be explained in terms of the laws of probability and random distribution of events occurring on this earth. Not that the result is any different in the two approaches to consider fate, yet the attitudes of people mirrored in a given piece of literature are what interests us, not the ultimate evidence that human beings are victims of fate. Although this classical truth pervades Ionesco's plays, it is man's behavior in the face of the inevitable that the author strives to illustrate. In this particular instance, Ionesco presents the civil servant's reaction as one of superstitious assertion that happiness would seem to invite misfortune: In addition, the fact that it is the civil servant who spreads the information, lends a semblance of respectability to the superstition.

Although *City Fathers* are civil servants, not all civil servants are city fathers. To translate the French *fonctionnaire* with this designation would doubtless flatter any French city employee, but it would vastly exaggerate the importance of the latter's role both in real life and in the play at hand. Thus, it is the civil servant, a mere cog in the wheel of bureaucratic machinery, rather than the city father, engineer of the mechanism, who makes the announcement regarding the progress of the mysterious illness. It is his stolid communication of instructions which characterizes and caricatures his profession as well as the absurdity of bureaucracy. Yet another confusion of roles stems from the translation of *orator* to *politician*, as we shall see later. In *Killing Game*, the second politician promises "social justice through peaceful means," (K 79) whereas in French, the second orator promises "la justice sociale, dans la liberté." (J 77) While the English promise is a realizable political goal, the French one, upon close scrutiny, reveals itself as a utopia, since to impose it would necessitate infringing on the liberties of some socially privileged citizens. This promise becomes all the more significant — and absurd — since it is the apparent response to the revolutionary orator in the preceding scene, whose contradictory

statements are strongly reminiscent of surrealist jargon.

This first orator informs his listeners that one-fifth of the councilors are on vacation, but only one-twentieth of the city's population are vacationing outside the city. Although the socio-economic reason for the difference in percentages is self-evident, the orator chooses to see in the councilors' absence from the ill-fated city clear proof of a Machiavellian plot (the *they-syndrome*). He refuses to accept any logical explanation and is equally reluctant to let pure chance be responsible for their absence and the death of three other councilors. He then concludes that "le hasard objectif" is responsible for the whole situation (J 74) and warns that the survivors would be those privileged ones chosen by "le hasard objectif" whom our infamous rulers have already recognized. "Ils seraient les privilégiés que le hasard objectif aura choisi mais qui sont déjà prévus par nos infâmes dirigeants." (J 75) In English, we read that "the survivors will be designated by our power-hungry rulers through a diabolical system of deliberate accident." (K 76) Once again, an intentionally confused tirade becomes in the translation a clear-cut accusation implying tyrannical use of power by the government. The French text merely accuses the rulers of taking advantage of a situation beyond everyone's control by including in their plan those whom they foresee as survivors. After the orator's death, the people adopt his confusion, calling him a martyr of their just cause but at the same time a victim of "le hasard objectif." They thus acknowledge the fact that he was killed for having incited them to rebel and that the true cause of his death is beyond the reach of their intelligence; they know and do not know. This conclusion is, of course, typical of Ionesco. It has profound philosophical implications with respect to *Jeux de massacre* and is one more example of humanity's ignorance of the causes of death and evil and its continuous quest for knowledge of these causes. As such, it could be related to any relativistic system of philosophy, were it not for the use of specifically surrealistic terminology.

The key words in this passage, *hasard objectif* and *prévus*, point to the surrealists' use of the concept of objective chance in their lives. According to Maurice Nadeau in his *Histoire du surréalisme*, *hasard objectif* is a surrealist concept designating "une continuité des événements du monde qui peut être antérieurement perçue et dont les correspondances demeurent invisibles. Cependant, L'auto-analyse permet de les déceler."<sup>6</sup> When we apply this definition to the orator's words, we find that he is saying that there is a continuity from the dead to the survivors (a truism), and that this continuity can be perceived before the deaths

occur (another "vérité de La Palisse"), although the causal relationship remains hidden. Self-analysis would reveal this relationship, but the orator's attempt at analysis, in his confused speech, can hardly be called self-analysis. The reference to objective chance serves to underline the absurdity of the orator's effort while it ridicules, at the same time, the surrealists' involvement in political activity. The whole scene is a tragic farce and as such qualifies as a microstructure of the whole play, as Lucien Goldmann might have illustrated it.<sup>7</sup> Objective chance may be said to represent, in the context of the scene, a duality of scapegoat and pseudo-god. Seen as a microstructure of *Jeux de massacre*, the scene is crucial to the interpretation of the play and to mistranslate it as much as to obliterate all suggestion of surrealism is of grave consequences, if we take literature and its interpretation at all seriously. The scene further illustrates with particular poignancy the paranoia of the suffering and frightened people incapable of understanding the reasons for their suffering and unable to recognize the manipulation on the part of the equally confused orator — who need not be a politician but could, in fact, be a poet such as André Breton, whose political services were rejected by the Communist Party. Breton and the original members of the surrealist group revived and redefined the concept of *hasard objectif*, using it to designate events in life which are beyond our control and consequently appear miraculous.<sup>8</sup> This term is usually translated into English with *objective chance* and as such can be recognized by students of literature and literary surrealism not familiar with the French language. To translate the expression on the first two occasions with *deliberate accident* (K 75, 76) and on the third with *the Government's deliberate-accident policy* (K 77) is an obviously relevant interpretation, but it is one exposing the translator's ignorance of surrealism and Ionesco's association with this important modern literary movement. It further deprives us of an extremely valuable aspect of the playwright's comment on man's situation in general and the surrealists' in particular, with respect to political involvement. What reader would make the connection between *deliberate accident* and the surrealists' role in the communist revolution during the 1920's in Europe? Yet this connection imposes itself on the informed reader as soon as he encounters the key expression *objective chance*.

Obviously, it is not the purpose of this essay to play a pedantic game of insisting on insignificant detail. But given the fact that a great many literary works are taught and studied in translation, it must be emphasized that translators have a duty to be consciously and conscientiously pedantic lest they misguide their readers. The following examples of free translation expose the translator's unfamiliarity with existentialist terminology, since she renders

one of existentialism's key expressions with *stupidity* (K 88) in an effort to come to grips with the French *mauvaise fois*. The scene among the doctors is, of course, a take-off on doctrinary philosophical discussions in general and existentialist philosophical theory in particular. These discussions are no more absurd than Jean-Paul Sartre's preoccupation with being and nothingness. The fourth doctor sums it all up when he, the only one in the group willing to accept the reality of death, states that "Ainsi, vous soutenez, messieurs et mesdames, que des centaines de milliers de personnes sont mortes par ignorance, par mauvaise fois, ou parce qu'elles n'arrivaient pas à croire à la vérité de la doctrine." (J 85) But the fifth doctor affirms that "On meurt quand on veut bien mourir. Mais ce 'vouloir bien' est un vouloir complexe." (J 83) This is translated by "One dies when one wants to. And this 'want to' corresponds to a death-wish." (K 86) The translation of *vouloir complexe* with *death-wish* leaves us no option for interpretation and suggests the author's alluding to Freudian psychology. Ionesco's choice of *vouloir complexe* indicates, however, his desire to suggest numerous options, one of which might be that of death-wish. The sixth doctor's declaration that "On meurt lorsque, consciemment ou non on accepte la mort. C'est l'être qui cède, qui renonce" (J 83) is rendered freely and becomes "One dies once he has accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, death as inevitable. That happens when one gives in, resigns." (K 86) Nothing about the English language would preclude the following literal rendition: "We die when, consciously or not, we accept death. The being gives in, renounces." The words *être* and *renonce*, followed by *mauvaise fois* suggest existentialist jargon to the informed reader and enable him to appreciate Ionesco's stab at "l'être et le néant." The reader of the English version might well have received the same message, had the translator used *bad faith*, *being* and *renounce*. There is no linguistic or stylistic excuse for smoothing over these terms and eliminating, in the process, important options of interpretation.

While oversights and occasional mistranslations happen to the best translators, they are isolated incidences in an otherwise faithful rendition. When such mistakes are combined with a generally free if not careless and negligent translation, they appear all the more intolerable. Thus Jean and Pierre, comforting Jeanne and Lucienne in the simultaneous scenes, do not say "Nothing can happen to us now." (K 55) They are more honest and more pessimistic about the desperate situation and venture only a meek "Il se peut que rien ne nous arrive." (J 55) To state that "All our friends have died," (K 62) when the French text tells us that we all have lost some friends or,

better yet, we all have dead friends ("Nous avons tous des amis morts." J 61), is unequivocally erroneous. Still another aspect of careless translation is revealed in the scene in a house. The frightened master shouts "Les cloisons doivent être étanches mais le coeur doit être imperméable." (J 31) Both adjectives have basically the meaning of *tight*. Their usage differs, however, according to the noun they modify and they are not interchangeable, since "un coeur étanche" would be most undesirable and dangerous, for it would absorb liquid and keep it. This difference is brought to our attention by the conjunction *mais* in the master's exclamation. Any other interpretation becomes nonsensical. In English, the master shouts that "If the walls can become impermeable, then the heart must become impregnable." (K 25) The translator has modified the stylistic exercise of sorts into a complicated causal relationship between the walls and the heart, introducing a pun which is strictly her own and leads us onto a completely different path from the one indicated by the master's pedantic, automatic but totally serious and correct use of language. The absurdity of the implicit comment on language while giving ineffectual instructions in a highly tense situation in which language no longer has any power, is completely lost in the translation. And so is Ionesco's serious humour.

Examples of similar nature abound throughout the play. To enumerate them all would be too cumbersome and lengthier than a retranslation. One final comment seems, however, in order. The original *jeu de massacre* is a game played at fairs and consists of knocking down dolls on rockers by means of bran balls. The term is also used figuratively to designate situations in which hardship befalls a group of people.<sup>10</sup> While it would be impossible to do justice to all implications in one short title, there is no explanation for the translator's choice of the singular, *Killing Game*, in preference over Ionesco's use of the plural, *Jeux de massacre*. The author's choice is supported by the variety of games played by the characters in the various scenes, illustrating their efforts to cope with the disaster inflicted upon them by unknown forces or causes. The use of the singular *game* may, however, quite easily lead us to infer that Ionesco had in mind a single power or individual playing a nasty game of dirty tricks on the population of the universe. Incidentally, this universe is a large urban area which still counts many survivors after having lost 220,006 souls to the mysterious sickness. These deaths have occurred in three of a minimum of twenty-three districts, according to the town official's announcement in the final scene. The blurb on the back of the English version indicates that the play "is set in a peaceful *village*." This is just another indication of the lack of care (or conscience?) in

preparing this translation which, for want of another and better one, will find its way into many a college classroom.

The importance of the examples given in this essay will be self-evident to the critic, student and stage director who values close literary analysis as a means for attaining greater insight than the cursory reading of a text offers with respect to the cultural commentary inherent in any piece of literature. If we are to take the study of literature in translation at all seriously, we must protest against the proliferation of *free* translations such as Ionesco's *Killing Game*. Ionesco's style makes him one of the authors whose work it is relatively easy to translate literally into English. Nevertheless, the present English version of *Jeux de massacre* illustrates once more that literary translations which, at best, are approximations of the original can not be trusted to be rigorously faithful to the author's text. Hence, we are forced to concur with Claude Pichois' conclusion that "il faut donc se résoudre à apprendre les langues de ceux dont on veut connaître les littératures. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Merril Sheils, "Why Johnny Can't Write," *Newsweek*, December 8, 1975, 58-65.
- <sup>2</sup>Henriette Valot, "Les belles infidèles," *Babel* XVI (1970), 117.
- <sup>3</sup>Helen Sebba, "Stuart Gilbert's Meursault: A Strange Stranger," *Contemporary Literature* XIII (1970), 334-340.
- <sup>4</sup>Eugène Ionesco, *Jeux de massacre* (Paris: Gallimard, ed. Le Manteau d'Arlequin, 1970), 88. All subsequent references to this edition are given in the text, preceded by "J."
- <sup>5</sup>Eugène Ionesco, *Killing Game* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1974), 91. All subsequent references to the translation are given in the text, preceded by "K."
- <sup>6</sup>Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), 197.
- <sup>7</sup>Lucien Goldmann, *Le dieu caché* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955).
- <sup>8</sup>André Breton, *Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 140-141.
- <sup>9</sup>Michel Carrouges, *André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism*, translated by Maura Prendergast (The University of Alabama Press, 1974), 179-219.
- <sup>10</sup>Paul Robert, *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: Société du nouveau Littré, 1973), 1668.
- <sup>11</sup>Cl. Pichois et A. M. Rousseau, *La Littérature comparée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), 48.