

## On Translating *Ulysses* into French

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### *Abstract*

Jacques Aubert offers in this article an account of the project that led to the second translation of *Ulysses* into French, published in 2004. Professor Aubert describes his coordination of the collective enterprise in which writers Tiphaine Samoyault, Patrick Drevet and Sylvie Doizelet participated.

The second translation of *Ulysses* into French was published on June 16th, 2004, as a fitting contribution and memorial to a day which, considered from the point of view of the common people, may be considered as far from significant, and even outside History proper. That is no reason, however, for dispensing with an examination, however summary, of the history of the project itself.

To say the truth, this history is a little more complex than may appear at first sight. There was, at the time, another translation in existence, which was indeed far from negligible. This is not the place to tell the whole story of its development,<sup>1</sup> but it is necessary to point out the special status it had in France. It certainly had its own merits, due to the length of time devoted to it and the number, three, of the translators involved. But there was more than that: it was closely associated with the name of Valery Larbaud, who had discovered Joyce, and specifically *Ulysses* in the early twenties, and had been instrumental in its publication, which, surprisingly enough, had taken place in France. Very early, Joyce had hoped that Larbaud would assume the whole project; but Larbaud, who had for years been extremely active in the promotion of foreign writers, especially

Spanish and Latin American writers, now wished to devote more time to his own, personal projects. Something of the general idea can be detected in the final announcement, on the title page, in addition to the names of the translator, M. Auguste Morel, “assisté par M. Stuart Gilbert,” of a “traduction entièrement revue par M. Valéry Larbaud et l’autre,” a statement which a closer examination proves to be rather exaggerated.

Whatever the case may be, Larbaud’s prestige in literary circles was enough subsequently to impress on the general public the notion that they were reading “Larbaud’s translation,” *la traduction de Larbaud*. A minor anecdote is in point here. On the occasion of Joyce’s centenary, being interviewed on a French radio station, I was rash enough to suggest that the translation was not faultless and was in need of some revisions and corrections. I was not aware at the time of the hubbub I had raised, of the storm brewing in the local teacup. Only several years later I heard, from the very person who had launched the idea, of a round robin to be dispatched in the literary establishment, to protest against my suggestion: “One is going to tamper with the Larbaud-Joyce text!” The argument was that the text is part and parcel of French literary history, and was of great importance as a document on the state of the French language in the middle of the twentieth century, an argument that I was, and still am, quite ready to accept. One consequence of this attitude was that, when in charge of volume II of Joyce’s *Œuvres*, in answer to the specific question I was led to ask, “What translation are we going to use?,” Robert Gallimard said something like “Larbaud’s translation.”

Things turned out differently when Stephen Joyce came on the scene. He had for some time advocated a new translation. Besides, it appeared that the general mood, probably under the influence of developing language studies, new critical approaches, and a widespread interest in the ideological substratum of cultures, was now in favour of multiple translations.

In short, it happened that I was approached by both Stephen Joyce and Antoine Gallimard, asking whether I was ready to coordinate a new translation, since I had acquired some practical experience with the text. It was my belief, shared by both the initiators of the project, that the presence of one or several writers was of central importance. I cannot detail here the various contacts I made: what I can say is that, in most cases, established writers, including the most conversant with Joyce’s works, found it

practically impossible to conciliate such a considerable task with their own projects. This provided a good opportunity to turn towards the new generations, and I was fortunate enough to enlist Tiphaine Samoyault, Patrick Drevet and Sylvie Doizelet, to take part in the team, which was to include academics who had been or were, in one way or another, to a great or lesser extent, familiar with Joyce studies.

For indeed, with the experience of the first translation in mind, I decided that one principle on which everybody has to agree from the start, was that we would work as a team. I initially thought I would meet with difficulties in the assignation of the episodes to the various participants; but I was wrong. I asked everybody to make a list of three favourite episodes; there was little overlapping in these choices, and certainly no conflict emerged. I pointed out the specific nature of episode XIII, "Oxen of the Sun," which in my mind had been remarkably translated in the first version. We finally decided that it would stand, as a sort of memorial, not only to that translation, but also to the very idea it embodied, of the consubstantiality (to use an Ulysean reference) of literature and language in the history of culture.

Other principles were then accepted. One was that we were to have regular meetings, another was that "everybody would read everybody's translation": in short that there would be a general circulation of experience, exchanges about specific as well as general problems met by each, and general conclusions reached, whether positive or negative. I am glad to say that everybody accepted the challenge, although one participant, in charge of one episode only, found it difficult to attend our meetings, and I had to supplement her absence with direct exchanges, which proved both easy and fruitful. One outcome of those exchanges was that, contrary to what could have been expected ideally, it proved almost impossible to come to a general agreement on a number points, and so to establish hard and fast *rules*: not because of temperamental idiosyncrasies, but because of the very nature and structure of the text that Joyce had contrived. Whenever we were coming close to a general agreement, e.g. on the translation of names, somebody submitted a case which did not fit in. And we gradually discovered, or were confirmed in the idea, that Joyce's whole textual machinery, whether consciously or unconsciously on the author's part, was devised, or at least worked on the basis, not of general principles, but rather of exceptions. That did not mean that each of us was condemned to isolation and

subjective decisions: on the contrary, it tended to lead to a continual adjustment of “visions and revisions which a minute [would] reverse.” Several of us, at one point or another, had to abandon some “brilliant” idea which did not fit into the overall development of the text.

But the most interesting commentaries came from the writers who accepted the challenge of leaving aside for a time their own projects and devoting a number of months to *Ulysses*. Patrick Drevet was one of them. To say the truth, Joyce’s novel had been prominent in his personal, literary, history:

When I was twenty, and trying to grope my way among authors who might show me the way, I stumbled upon a novel [*Ulysses*] which was literally exploding the genre by submitting it to a number of styles and forms; Joyce was trying to “translate” *une radiophonie intérieure*, created out of various words, discourses, dialogues, cinematic effects, and images. And it somehow discouraged me, or rather induced me to take another course, with the consequence that when I was offered the possibility of translating some sections of it, my first reaction was to refuse. But obviously the first translation, Morel’s, was a bit dated, and many developments had taken place: among them, *le nouveau roman*, new critical approaches, and of course the very development of the French language. What was striking in Joyce’s approach was the importance of the senses as dominating sense, meaning, and so gave his discourse its special flavour. It was not only a matter of *mots-valises*: we all of us realized the importance of syntax, of the order of the words in each sentence, of rhythm, and of the importance of Joyce’s sometimes idiosyncratic punctuation. His language, his vocabulary in particular, is fairly simple and straightforward. But his mental rhythm is irregular, as well as musical.<sup>2</sup>

Now, if Patrick Drevet’s commentary here reflects rather faithfully the general attitude of our team in their approach to the task at hand, his personal attitude as a writer is still more remarkable:

It was my first experience as a translator. Translators are right to point out that they need to know their own language in the first place, over and above the foreign language they are dealing with. Now, as a writer, the

present experience amounted to pure pleasure, insofar as it led me to work in and through my own mother tongue. And that made me realize that *Joyce himself was merely translating into English*. My own job was to try and translate into French something that had been translated into English: the inner worlds that Joyce was staging are inner worlds that belong to no language in particular.

After all, Patrick Drevet's attitude should not surprise us, since its mental make-up owes much to Proust, Faulkner, and others. But it gains additional value from the fact that he is a genuine practitioner of the craft. Tiphaine Samoyault's personal experience could not but be different, but it proved no less fascinating, for us as well as for her. She says that Joyce's text provided a sort of cover for what she personally meant to say, the kind of things that one sometimes does not dare to formulate as one's personal aims as a writer. The process of translation was as it were activated by the "*multiples énergies de sens*" developing in *Ulysses*; and at the same time the translator must remain close to the text, remain naive as a reader, in order to be close to the characters and their individual lives. This makes for a kind of proximity and even empathy with the characters, especially Leopold Bloom, to the point of sometimes feeling sorry for him, for instance when he is the butt of attacks by customers in the pub.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to conclude on a more general note. The writers' contributions, and their retrospective assessment of what was for them an exceptional (in both senses of the word) commitment, combine with what I have just pointed out about "Oxen of the Sun." Both have to do with the basically enigmatic nature of language. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, its main character is not communication, but creation. "Oxen of the Sun" spells out the process by which *language is born of literature*, whether written or oral, not the other way round. There lay the basic enigma, not only of language, but of the human condition.<sup>4</sup> That is what Joyce had felt from the beginning of his involvement in the writing process, and his whole effort aimed at remaining true to this discovery.

**Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> I have given a brief outline of it in James Joyce, *Œuvres*, t. II, p. 1029-1033, and a fuller, well-documented examination of the questions relating to it can be found in John L. Brown, “*Ulysses* into French,” *Joyce at Texas* (Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1983) 29-59.

<sup>2</sup> This is free adaptation from an interview in *La Libre Belgique*, June 11, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Interview, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, June 3, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See my article, “Translating the Unreadable,” in *Through Other Eyes, The Translation of Anglophone Literature in Europe*, ed. Richard Trim and Sophie Alatorre (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).