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Perec and Translation

Résumé

Abstract

Mots-clés

In the page of acknowledgments at the end of *Is That A Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, I list all the people who provided me with ideas, information, suggestions, and corrections. Among those names I include that of Georges Perec. Now it is no secret that I never met Georges Perec, and he certainly never knew me. What business did I have to put him into a list of colleagues and acquaintances, as if he were one of my friends? It must seem pretentious, or worse. But I did not include Perec to make myself seem better connected than I was or ever will be. I did so in order to thank Georges Perec for the immense service he rendered me, which was no less than this: he taught me how to write.

Whatever else Oulipo is or may be, it is a fantastic pedagogical tool. It teaches what writing is, in an indissoluble bond with the means to do it. I don't mean to refer only to its celebrated *Ateliers d'écriture*, nor to the now widespread practice in French schools of using Oulipian devices to amuse and instruct young people. What I mean is that Oulipo asks you and invites you to write, as part of the process and product of reading. If you happen to be a translator, and more specifically a translator of works with Oulipian features, Oulipo actually teaches you how to do it. *Writing A User's Manual* could be the title of every anthology of Oulipo. It would not be a bad name for Perec's masterpiece either.

However, there is a misunderstanding about translation in the Oulipian field that needs to be laid bare and cleared up. Some of Oulipo's most famous and fundamental procedures are frequently labeled or categorized as "translation devices": the designation goes back to the early years of Oulipo. But they are not, and I would like to explain why.

The standard example of a "translation device", exploited by commentators to such an extent that it has come to irritate many of the Oulipians themselves, is S+7. This method of transforming a poem or a text into another one that may be even better presents itself as a mechanical substitution: once you've specified the dictionary, laid down the count, decided which part of speech is to be used in the S role, the procedure is supposed to involve zero discretion on the part of its practitioner. What it requires is a slave-like submission to the constraint, which by its own force (and with luck) leads you to exhilarating, mind-bending or utterly unforeseen results. That's the official story. We

know it's not completely true, because Mathews among others has revealed that the best part of S+7 is the cheating. Queneau's *La Cimaïse et la fraction*, to take the most famous example, must have involved a very flexible notion of "7" or else a concertina-style dictionary that no one has yet nailed down. However that may be, calling S+7 a translation procedure necessarily also says something about translation. What it says is hardly new, but in my view it is profoundly wrong. What is brought into play when you call S+7 a translation device is not the creative practice of translation, but precisely its opposite—that idea that translation is a mechanical substitution of the words of one language by matching terms in some other. It may be your Latin master who was responsible for giving you that kind of understanding of translation; but elementary language pedagogy (for which I have the utmost respect, having been a language teacher for more than forty years) uses *thème et version* for a specific purpose—as aids to language acquisition. In reality, word-substitution does not have anything to do with translation itself, or with writing.

Georges Perec taught me to write in a different sense, and he taught me through translation. Translation interested him greatly. Not only did he try his hand at it with two of Harry Mathews's novels, he also reflected on what kind of an enterprise it was. Let me quote his words on the subject, made in the last year of his life, on Australian radio, and in English:

Translating is to impose oneself to produce a text through a constraint which is represented by the original text. And for me, in a utopian way of thinking, there is no difference between languages. I would like to know a lot of languages, but unfortunately it takes too long to practice so I am just able to balbutiate in English. But it's very interesting to try to produce the same text when you start from a different one.¹

In the mid-1980s, when I set out to create a readable English companion-piece to *La Vie mode d'emploi*, that is how I understood my task too. I knew not a lot about Georges Perec. But with the help of many people in Paris and elsewhere, I quickly learned about some of the constraints involved and especially about the wonderful, dreadful, fearful Chapter 51 with its Great Compendium. I decided that I would not be

able to translate it in the running order of the book, as if it was just another chapter. So I set up a special routine. I had to, and I'm very glad I did.

In the mornings, I translated prose. At lunchtime my typist came round to collect my handwritten pages—for those were days before PCs. She for her part delivered the previous day's clean copy, and I spent the early afternoon correcting my mistakes, or at least some of them. Then I had tea. And between 5 and 7 every day for many weeks, I *prepared myself* to translate, and then did effectively translate, 179 lines of French of 60 characters each by 179 lines of English also of 60 characters each.²

To begin with, I thought I would never manage. But I had to. I had a contract and a schedule, but also, because I had already absorbed, rather hazily but increasingly profoundly, the real lesson of *La Vie mode d'emploi*—that nothing is completely impossible. I squared off a ream of lined paper into 60 blocks, and invented a training routine. I decided to write about anything at all, as long as I could fit into a line of 60 typographical characters (including spaces). I allowed myself to compose shopping lists, memos to colleagues and course descriptions in that special form. I wrote in pencil, and of course I kept rubbing things out. I began to learn a few tricks—contractions, punctuation marks, ampersands and apostrophes give you some flexibility with the number of characters in any English expression. Little by little, I got a feel for what could and could not be said in roughly 60 spaces, and given the malleability of written English, roughly was good enough, because there are usually ways of stretching or squeezing by a character or two.

My next task brought me closer to the real task. I sought to identify the 179 passages of Perec's novel to which the lines of the Compendium refer. That could have been a very time-consuming task, because Perec has Valène recall some anecdotes that are told in only half a sentence, and others that are much easier to find because they summarize a whole chapter or a character that by then I knew well. But my task was speeded up immensely by what was the very first doctoral dissertation to be completed in the UK (and probably anywhere in the world), by Michel Guillaume, for it contained a "map" of all the links from the Compendium to their sources in the other chapters. It then struck me that if I could write in 60-character lines, and if I knew the story that was being

encapsulated in a given line of the Compendium, I did not actually need to translate it. I needed to invent my own capsule of the anecdote, then massage it into the required form, and then see if it could be massaged further into something closer to Perec's own version. The job I was doing every day between tea and the television news was beginning to seem like fun. I started believing I would get it done.

But then there was the acrostic itself, the "magic letters" that march solemnly down the page from right to left in three sequences of 60 lines —the last of the third set which would have begun with an E is of course missing, in the most understated and elegant self-reference imaginable. In what manner could I represent that in English? The French key letters, as you know, spell out AME, a word of three letters. There's no obvious English word of three letters with a meaning close to it. To translate it in itself I would have had to invent not 179 but 239 lines encapsulating stories told somewhere in the novel so that the four letters of SOUL could be made to walk the same walk.

I thought about it quite seriously. By now I was quite adept at writing 60-character lines. I could have done 60 more. But would that have been a translation? I think so, myself, now: but I didn't expect publishers or readers to grant me the right to expand Perec's strange poem, especially because I was not going to tell them—certainly not straight away—what justified the expansion. So you may call me a coward. But good sense also dictated the cowardice, for the kind of response that critics for the *TLS* would most likely have given a 239-line catalogue in lieu of Perec's 179 could have ditched not only my reputation but Perec's too. My intuition was well-founded: the *TLS* turned out to be harsh critic of my translation as a whole, without even guessing what had gone on in Chapter 51.

At this point, scratching my head, I set off for Saarbrücken to get to know Perec's German translator, Eugen Helmle. He was the only person to have translated *La Vie mode d'emploi* in Perec's lifetime, and as he was also a good friend of the writer, he had had privileged information for his work. In fact, Perec had annotated a copy of the novel for Helmle to use, pointing out various constraints that needed to be respected and others, as he wrote in the margin, that didn't matter at all for the German version. Eugen explained that Perec's method in composing the acrostic had been not to work through the lines one

by one, but to write his 60-character capsules first, then shuffle them around until he could make the order produce the diagonal letter-order he wanted. That was a tactic I made my own on the spot: to move my own lines into any order if it helped to make the acrostic work. But that still didn't solve the problem of a 3-letter AME and a 4-letter soul. In German it's even worse—*Seele* has five letters. What had Helmle done?

He'd used the German word for "I", namely ICH. It's only got one letter in English—but in Latin, as in German, it has exactly three! What's more, that Latin word was used by a famous translator, James Strachey, to translate ICH in the works of Freud, and it had come to have the sense of "selfhood" in ordinary English speech. EGO it would be! I hopped on the train back to Sheffield with an immense feeling of relief, and renewed determination.

The friendship and collaboration Helmle offered me as a fellow translator has set the pattern of relationships between a great many translators of *La Vie mode d'emploi* into many languages. Over more than 25 years I have been in fruitful contact with Perec's Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Greek, Turkish and Hebrew translators, and only a few months ago I sat down in Tartu with Anti Saar, whose Estonian translation of *Life A User's Manual* is due to appear soon. Such camaraderie, which is exceedingly rare in the world of translators, who almost always work in isolation, is also an Oulipian gift. Oulipo invites cooperation, because it is in its very conception a cooperative enterprise. Those of us who only translate it are affected all just as much if not more than other readers by Oulipo's blithe and joyful disregard for individual ownership of literary skills. That is part of what I mean when I say that Perec taught me to write.

In the spring months of 1986 I learned to do something quite useless—to write in lines of 60 characters. With the help of practice, training, and a couple of key facts supplied by Helmle, I was able to use that strange facility to produce a parallel poem in 179 lines that does well enough as a substitute for the Great Compendium of Chapter 51 of *La Vie mode d'emploi*.

Acquiring a useless mastery is very important to a writer: it's not the utility, it's the mastery that counts. I developed mental muscles I didn't know existed. I had been

obliged by Georges Perec to improve my control of language by paying strict if simple attention to its elementary written units.

I- haven't practiced the skill for a quarter of a century. Do I still have it? My first answer is to say that it doesn't matter at all, because what I gained from making myself "write like Perec" was a sense of my own power over words, and a greater daring to try other difficult things. I doubt whether I have it any more. But as I recast what was an oral presentation for publication in print, I can't quite leave the question open, for myself. So let me try to repeat one of those training exercises—make just a banal list of things that happen to be in my mind today— and see if *Bellos can still do it*:

What the Greeks meant by *varvaros* was nothing more than dumb
 The former professor coming back to Princeton for the soirée
 Labrador, alsatian, pekinese or terrier? I'll have a spaniel
 I can hear Ms Sirken playing her grand piano clear as a bell
 I wish that curvaceous blonde jogger would stop to say hello
 The actresses who played in the two main roles in *Les Bonnes*
 Bernard-Henri Lévy has a facial twitch I can only call a tic
 They've asked me to give a talk in a desert city called Doha
 The pizza we consumed this evening was cooked in a large pan
 The therapist who helps husband & wife resolve thorny issues
 Driving my girl-friend from the restaurant to a parking spot
 There's a long distance from conjugal dispute to decree nisi
 A barista working shifts in Small World Café wearing a shawl
 I'll have 4 ounces of herring in cream and a Portuguese roll
 I spend too long puzzle-solving, so as to beat my own record
 I've never had an X-box or tried to play games like Nintendo
 I've cycled over Alps and Fens, but never encountered a wadi
 I'm about to buy a bright red brand-new airconditioned Smart

Well, that proves it. A lesson learned is never lost!

It's more important than it seems. The skill that Perec obliged me to acquire now informs and underlies everything that I write, in lines of any length. I'm convinced that my experience is not unique: many other people have surely learned as much if not more from working with Oulipo. That's why I hope nobody will take exception my thanking Georges Perec (and through him, Oulipo) as a major contributor to books that I now write for myself.

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¹ <http://www.franceculture.com/emission-les-passagers-de-la-nuit-vendredi-hors-serie-27-perec-in-english-what-a-man-2011-05-06.ht>. Dernier alinéa, le segment "Hörspiel". La citation recherchée commence à 2 min 03sec, jusqu'à la fin (app 20 secondes).

² The writing exercises and preliminary drafts of the English translation of the *Compendium*, together with other manuscript and typescript sources for *Life A User's Manual*, can be consulted at the library of the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, Norfolk, UK. The drafts of my other translations of works by Georges Perec and others are at the Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana.