The Laughing Cry of the Translator

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Editors' note: the following paper is a transcript of a speech by Prof. Moore for the presentation of a Doctorat de l'Université de Paris to Henri Lopes, author of the novel 'The Laughing Cry'.

The translator must always have in mind that his readership will not be identical with that of the original literary text. Its political and cultural formation; its familiarity with the author's world and field of reference; even its racial composition may differ widely from those encountered by the original work. This raises a question of central critical importance. How far should he make himself the interpreter of those differences? Should he take the liberty of modifying his text along the lines that he supposes will make it more acceptable to the tastes and consciences opened up by the use of another language? William Weaver, in his much-praised translation of Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose, took wide advantage of this supposed privilege of the translator, presumably in view of his knowledge of the American public and its very limited understanding of medieval Europe. The effect is to rob the book of much of its distinctive blend of detective and learned interest.

My own answer to this question would be that the translator should exercise this privilege, if at all, rather sparingly and with humility. After all, the fact that the author approved the translation rights is a clear indication of professional confidence that the book can successfully navigate strange seas. And the interactions between the creative imagination and the reader can never be limited or predicted. The translator is employed as a specialist in the craft of translation, not as one in the assessment of his unknown reader's curiosity, knowledge or imaginative scope. It is well that he should bear this also constantly in mind.

But the translator has a relationship not only to the author and the reader. The publisher will have his own views about these matters. In the case of The Laughing Cry, will he stand for Tonton's favourite expletive: "Your mother's cunt"? To soften this in any way would be to eliminate the barrack-room swagger so vividly portrayed by the original. My translation of Mongo Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba was held up for years by the English publisher's fears about the explicit seduction scene of the young acolyte Denis, although this had already appeared in the review Black Orpheus. That was in the days when even D.H. Lawrence had to be defended against the prurience of English magistrates. So far as the publisher of The Laughing Cry is concerned, he swallowed any such fears in the more relaxed climate of the 1980s. He did contribute a subtitle to the English translation, 'An African Cock and Bull Story', but this is quite felicitous both in its idiomatic sense of a tall tale and in its oblique reference to the characters of the bombastic dictator and the amorous narrator. It was the publisher, too, who came up with a solution to the problem of translating the dictator's preferred nickname, 'Tonton'. I was reluctant to lose the echoes of the Tontons Macoutes, but could not translate the name as 'Uncle', because that title was already reserved for the local French colons. The publisher's choice of 'Daddy' had much to recommend it as a way out of this impasse, since English offers no strict equivalent to the informal French word 'tonton', at least not since the disappearance of the medieval word 'em' used by Chaucer in Troilus and Criseide.

Le Pleurer-Rire is a contemporary novel whose topicality is refreshed by every coup d'état in the morning's headlines; by the rise of every fresh dictator; by the appointment of every new Committee for National Salvation or Redemption or Reconstruction or even Resurrection, brought by the tide of events in Africa or elsewhere. But the translator into English, to take one example, has no way of limiting his readership to those who will peruse its pages with a wry smile of recognition or a shrug of weary disgust. Henri Lopes and he may be leading the reader into a world known to him only through hasty bulletins and media clichés.
Lopes himself eases the task of transition to that world in many ways. The reader may learn from the blurf that the author is a distinguished Congolese statesman and public official, but his narrator is careful to locate the action of the novel as vaguely as possible:

_Ah yes! the Country, the Country, the Country - but which Country? Somewhere on this continent, for sure. Choose for yourself, after a hundred calculations, or just follow your hunch, take a point on the Equator and steer either northward or southward, keeping your nose with the wind, and at a slightly oblique angle. Your craft, then, after surviving air-pockets and overcoming tornadoes, will arrive, after a certain time, at a point from which you can just discern the capital of our country_ (Lopes 1987: 34-35).

Thus we are encouraged to believe that 'the Country' may be whatever African nation (for we are certainly in Africa) has most recently succumbed to the rule of some self-elected saviour, ushered in with all the customary fanfare of justification, all the statutory abuse of the previous regime, that accompany such occasions. Not only as if there were no tomorrow, but as if nobody remembered yesterday, when that previous regime was hailed with exactly the same rhetoric.

As for Tonton himself, he may remind the reader by his gestures and attitudes sometimes of the unalmented Emperor Bokassa of Central Africa, sometimes of Togo's President Eyadama, sometimes of Idi Amin, sometimes of the home-grown Congolese version of dictatorship, President Mobutu. Most of these have in common a passion for boosting African authenticity in the midst of a personal life-style surrounded by the most outrageous imported opulence. All sprang to power from humble beginnings in the former colonial army where they learnt, if nothing else, to kill their fellows. Their total unpreparedness for the tasks and burdens of government renders them plastic material in the hands of their often foreign security chiefs (Tonton's has a long background in the French secret service, working against African independence movements). By manipulating the insecurity and anxiety of their masters, such chiefs quickly assume most of the power themselves, without the inconvenience of responsibility or visibility. They seldom go down with the ship.

We may assume that the Uncles are quite happy with such as Tonton. An occasional squandered loan or gift, an occasional trip to Paris, will suffice to keep him in line, and to keep his country safe for the continuation of neo-colonial policies. His brutality and buffoonery, far from shocking them, only justify their worst prejudices. After all, it was only when Bokassa began butchering school children that he was finally ditched by his masters, whom he had recently festooned with diamonds. Perhaps the rumours of foreign involvement in the coup are not without foundation, any more than they were in the sudden advent of all the dictators mentioned above. All gave satisfaction for a while, and will be got rid of when they cease to do so. Such is the measure of the real distribution of power in the world, and Lopes keeps us constantly aware of it.

If the personality of Tonton displays many familiar features, that of the venial narrator is somewhat original. He may sometimes remind us of Chinua Achebe's narrator Odili in A Man of the People, sharing with him a weakness of the flesh and an attraction to luxury. But the 'Maitre' has none of Odili's ambition for power and little of his self-deception. Like the President, his _Maitre d'Hotel_ is a protegé of the colonial order, under which he rose. His good reputation at the white-owned restaurant _Le Relais_, catering mainly for the Uncles, is one cause of his being summoned quickly to the Presidential Palace, but Tonton Bwakamabé soon makes it clear to him that a more important qualification is his membership of the same tribe. This all-too-human narrator, the real hero of the novel, has no choice but to accept the perilous eminence now thrust upon him. His cautious instincts warn him that it will be too close to the centre of power for comfort. But a refusal would be more obviously and immediately perilous. So he tries desperately to play for time. Forlorn attempt against the military mind obsessed with immediate results!

_Hearts above._

_Bravo, bravo, my dear cousin. In the family one always thinks things over first. Think before speaking. Think before acting. That's excellent. But we soldiers are men of action. Not too much reflection. Have to jump to it! Have to make people feel the change. So I'll give you twenty-four hours._

(Lopes 1987: 20).

The hero soon discovers, however, that his dangerous new eminence does have its compensations, which prove to include the warm embraces of the President's favourite wife, Ma Mireille. Also by hovering around with drinks at all important gatherings, he is able to overhear everything that is going on. Ironically, the one development he misses is the one that most concerns himself. He is on his way to work when he hears that Tonton is out for his blood, not for the obvious reason of discovered cuckoldry, but because of some fantasy woven by his security chief.

Through thick and thin, the narrator maintains the
even current of his easy, colloquial style of reminiscence - for we are occasionally reminded that these episodes are being recorded years later and in exile. The current is broken only when he offers us verbatim the bombastic utterances or bulletins of Bwakamâbê, or the sycophancies of the official propagandist Aziz Sonika. Neither of these presents any great difficulty to the translator. Here, for example, is the opening of a Presidential broadcast much celebrated for its clownish absurdity:

Agence France-Presse, open your ears as wide as rabbits, because otherwise you'll have the ears of an elephant... (Lopes 1987: 178).

Here, at least, the President provides diversion to his subjects. Everyone in this nation of orators sets about working out what he was really trying to say.

But the novel does not consist entirely of this smooth fabric of chronological narrative. It is broken by occasional letters addressed to or by the narrator, usually concerning aspects of the tale he is weaving. There are also passages of anonymous popular dialogue, snatched from the markets and alleyways of Moundié, the African quarter of the capital, which is the extreme opposite of the official city in its vitality and squalor. Here is such a dialogue concerning the recent coup:

- Les nègres là, vraiment pas sérieux.
- La bouche, la bouche, c'est seulement la bouche et la paration que nous, là, on est fort.
- C'est ça, même, mon frère, ô. Nègre, il connaît bien pour lui bouche-parole.
- Absolument, je te dis.
- On dit qu'il n'y a pas même eu coup de feu.
- C'est que les mercenaires ont prêté main-forte au nouveau maîtres, dé.
- Les messeigneurs?
- Je te dis, mon frère.
- C'est pas possible.
- Toi, quand on te dit, tu ne veux pas croire pour toi...
- Mais les messeigneurs-là, ce sont des Blancs, non? La différence de leur peau avec celle des noirs, c'est trop nombreux, même.

Here is the English version of the same exchange, which has to consider the differences between French and English usage in West and Central Africa. In the former, this is quite largely a matter of intonation, stress and occasional grammatical short-cuts, with relatively few lexical borrowings. West African English betrays a wide range of different levels of usage, ranging from full Pidgin, which is really a language of its own with a distinctive grammar, to the informal speech of even highly educated Africans which, apart from the differences of voicing and stress already mentioned, makes use of many loan-words from African languages, expressions (similar to the dé used by the speaker here) and phrases borrowed from Pidgin. I have tried to reflect these differences in the translation.

"These blacks, really, they're not serious at all!"
"Just lip-lip - it's only in lip and palaver that we're strong."
"Too true, brother-o! Blackman know notin' but mout', mout'."
"Exactly, I tell you. Ye-e-es."
"They say there wasn't even a shot fired."
"That's because the mercenaries lent a hand to the new masters, dé,"
"The messenries?"
"I tell you, brother."
"It's not possible."
"You! When you're told something, you never want to believe it..."
"But those messenries, aren't they Whites? The difference of skin is too much-o!"
"Black mercenaries, then."
(Lopes 1987).

As for the narrator himself, he always waxes most poetic when in bed with one of his numerous lovers, and especially when the one concerned is his beloved Soukali, wife of the Customs Inspector whose duties often take him out of town. The Maître stretches his entire vocabulary of images in the effort to keep pace with her vocabulary of techniques:

She showed me the whole array of her poses, and we tried those of the gladiator and the panther, then of M. Pascal's wheelbarrow, then riding the seahorse. Wonderful, wonderful, really. Bathed in the indescribable odour of our intimacies, rocked to the rhythm of the Inspector's ceiling-fan, we would be surprised suddenly into sleep. (Lopes 1987: 10).

But these delectable objects of his amours, especially Ma Mireille and Soukali, develop heroic qualities the narrator quite lacks, as the political situation darkens and the trap closes around them. There is a nice symmetry in this, for he has always pored scorn on the whole notion of 'politics', preferring to seek refuge from his cares in the arms of his ladies. But it is those very arms which draw him gradually and inexorably towards the truth; it is those ladies who teach him new lessons in the meaning of courage, fidelity and solidarity. After recounting Ma Mireille's
battle to save the life of Soukali, whom Tonton was determined to see executed, the Maître somewhat ruefully reflects:

Perhaps they understood each other all the better because they were women. As superior to us men as our mothers. They show us the way to a new life.

This new life is not to be glimpsed within the confines of the novel, which ends rather in disintegration and confusion. But the way towards it has been prepared in the new political maturity we sense in the widespread popular mourning for the death of the veteran nationalist Tiya, whose funeral is railroaded by a frightened Bwakamabé; in the heroic defiance of Captain Yabaka, which passes immediately into legend; in the stern resistance of the womenfolk. The naivety which surrounded Tonton's advent to power has evaporated and given place to a sterner national mettle. Even his tribal base has narrowed to vanishing point. The country has become a grimmer but more serious place. But through it all, the narrator's geniality never deserts him. Even when he is fleeing in peril of his life, he finds time for a seduction. And when he has been long in exile, he finally gets into bed with Mme Berger, who used to torment him with her perfumed proximity long ago at Le Relais, memories of which are now softened by the mists of nostalgia. Thus Lopes achieves his effects without any great fanfare or abrupt change of character. The narrator's opinion of women may have been altered by events, but his appetite for them remains undimmed. It is part of the novel's distinction that his reaction to those events remains to the last a laughing cry, and Lopes maintains our own in the same mould.

Bibliography