

Plying the Toby



Bernard Hæpffner

Some ten years ago, at Brown, in Princeton, I was asked to explain what it was like to translate Joe McElroy, Robert Coover and Toby Olson; while expatiating at length on the numerous difficulties of transposing into French the texts of the two first ones, I was wondering what I could say about Toby and, when I came to talk about him, all I could find to say was: “What I like about Toby is that he is so easy to translate.” To which he reacted with amused violence, and probably peeved: “Why can’t I be as difficult as Joe and Bob!”

I did think at the time that translating him was easy; and I wondered for a long time why I thought so. The first novel of his that I translated was *Seaview*. And except for one sentence I couldn’t understand, it went very smoothly (when I asked him to explain the sentence, which contained “a transparent matrix of parts”, he wrote to me saying he didn’t understand it either [or anymore]: “Remove!”) Not long after the French translation was published, I went to visit Toby and Miriam in Truro. The first thing Toby did on arrival was to drive me to a golf course not far away, where he introduced me to a few people, afterwards giving me the names they had in the novel. He had taken me to *Seaview* and I was in the middle of the novel. What he didn’t tell me at the time was that Melinda was drawn in part after

Miriam.

A few years later, I translated *The Woman Who Escaped from Shame*, and, looking at the series of questions I asked Toby about the book, I obviously had a more difficult task, the novel was “like a vast nest of Chinese boxes... turning ceaselessly one within another”; characters spoke with different voices and had to have different voices in French also; it was at times difficult to know in which of the boxes one found oneself. But on the whole, I had no real problem. I was carried along with the flow of the stories, each word, each sentence was taking me farther into Toby’s writing, where some magic helped me to change every letter while remaining faithful to the original text: “I know I am transmogri-fying; but I am your very brother.”

Then I started on *The Blond Box*, another set of Chinese boxes, but much more complicated, Duchamp was one of the characters, part of the book was slightly off sci-fi, Toby did his utmost (or his worst) trying to lose and confuse the reader (which is what a translator is — a very slow reader); though, when I asked him about his readers, his answer was: “You asked me if these stories are designed to keep the reader unsettled, unsure of the novel’s plot progression, and I have to answer that I never think of the reader at all. Of course, I want readers. Don’t we all? But I never think of them in the writing.” And I do have to say I found the novel difficult to translate, however enjoyable it was to spend a few months as a slow reader of it.

Today, I am still to start on *Tampico*, still to translate his other novels, still to translate more of his poetry (I think I only translated one of his poems, for a magazine), still to look forward to this enjoyable task.

So why do I like translating Toby, why do I feel overwhelmed and carried along by the numerous stories his books contain? I have come to believe that, as was the case when translating Coleman Dowell, translating Toby is like writing in French a book I should have written in the first place, as if I could simply close the book and translate without the original. This of course with a pinch of salt: Toby is a raconteur, he button-holds his reader by telling him stories (and, contrary to Charles Lamb being button-held by Coleridge, I, for one, do not want to cut off the button), he is Scheherazade starting one story long before finishing the previous one, unfurling waves upon waves of various digressions into which the reader dives; the purpose of the stories is to have the reader bask in them like a porpoise,

snorting like a miniature bejewelled miniature sea-horse in the spume. So writing like Toby is what I would like to do, though I'm unable to do it, I'm not a shaggy-dog writer, and the best I can do is translate him. So, as he writes the way I should be writing (but don't), as he does it so well, keeping his sentences close to his vest, shandying his effects, and as I enjoy translating him so much that it stops me from trying to do it myself with my own words, there is no difficulty there for me. I do accept that, possibly, another translator, less close to him, would find it difficult, though I've never met any other translator of his novels (I don't even know whether he has been translated in other languages).

So I'm not in fact translating him, I'm plying the toby, what I am doing is highway robbery; his books were mine to start with and I'm only restoring them to the language that should have been theirs to start with (French, and mine): "But thou didst these goods bereave / From rightfull owner by unrighteous lott." I don't even know why I bother putting his name on the books.

I want to finish with a paean to Miriam Olson. I met her for the first time when Miriam and Toby, with the Spielbergs, came to have dinner with us in Lyon (it should have been lunch but they were embroiled in total chaos coming over from the South of France as the lorry drivers were doing a go-slow and lunch became dinner). I remember a beautiful evening in Provincetown, Miriam sparkling like a thousand diamonds, a few days in Philadelphia and so much sweetness from her, contrasted with Toby's Viking. When I read Toby's memoir of Miriam, I kept remembering Melinda in *Seaview*. Melinda is very ill, and the tenderness with which she is described there by Toby is for me a strong indication that he had her in mind when writing the book – and that's where I realize how much I con myself when trying to believe the novels are mine. Of course, they are entirely Toby's and I'm only the translator.

"He liked the feather touch of her fingers on his spine playing some light music. She made little sounds when he sucked a piece of flesh on her arm into his mouth, making a circle. He bought her a silk scarf to keep her collars from chafing against her neck. She bought him a snakeskin wallet." *Seaview*