

Translate Me a River



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Every childhood should have a river. Raised near the Rhine, my river was the Mississippi: I tasted its muddy water, I felt the power of its current, I caught a catfish, without ever setting eyes on it. I must have been eight when I entered the adventures of Tom and Huck, reading two books which only appeared to be Mark Twain's—they were translations, adaptations, reductions, betrayals—still, I liked them, and I had a river on which to let my imagination flow. Since then I have read Huck Finn time and time again, complete and in English, and of course, once I had become a translator, I had to translate it.

This was not as simple a task as it seemed, for I also had to traduce, translate and transpose an image: in France, Twain, a jolly leonine man writing for children, had to be changed into one of America's greatest writers. First I had to find a serious publisher prepared to take the risk of a "serious" edition, especially as there had already been eleven translations into French—and here I must thank Éditions Tristram for having given me a free hand and generous conditions to do this work. Then, as I knew the book so well, I wanted to test to the utmost something towards which I had been working in recent years: writing a first draft as fast as possible, no pause, no analysis, pure pleasure, uninterrupted rhythm, helped by a new life in a multilingual

house where everyone played with languages and neologisms—so that *misérabilité* came easy on the keyboard, as well as *enruchés*, *jouailleries*, *sobrification*, *frivolation*, *cataminieux*, *chauvitude*, *grinchinieux*, *grabataclan*, *superlifiquant* etc. (I think French is much more open to word creation than is usually thought and it could easily be enriched through contact with other languages and cultures. This is why we need translations, why we need to look back at the time of the Renaissance, at the works of Jacques Amyot, John Florio, Thomas North and Thomas Urquhart.) My first draft of *Huck* took less than three weeks. It goes without saying that such rapid first drafts entail a number of subsequent close readings and collations, up to seven including reading the proofs, and this took another two months.

I had, previous to the translation itself, done a number of translation workshops with passages of the novel, discussed the status of the word “nigger” (that I’ve always translated by *nègre*), had learned the vocabulary linked to river transport, (previous translations used a maritime language which impoverished the atmosphere of the book), I had reread Raymond Queneau and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who had both introduced the spoken language into French literature. Nothing is easier than picking holes in a translation, and, as I do not wish to be thought unjust with the previous attempts (although I find it difficult to understand the condescending tone of André Bay who, not translating but paraphrasing the preliminary “Explanatory”, says: “Mark Twain, self-taught and conscious of his limits”), let me quote Antoine Berman:

When a translation is a re-translation, it is implicitly or explicitly a critique of previous translations, in two senses of the term: it “exposes” them in the photographic sense for what they are (translations of a certain era, a certain state of the literature, or the language, or the culture), but may also reveal that these translations are deficient or outdated. *

However, when browsing through those translations, one finds not only that they are outdated (which is normal), that they reflect the time when they were made much more than the writing of Mark Twain, the rules of French grammar more than the freedom of *Huck Finn* as a narrator, but also that they remove what they feel as offensive, also that they forget what is so important in the book: the

language creation, violence against the literary traditions of the time.

Before analysing—as I was asked to do—one passage of *Huck Finn* and its translation, I would like to add that the image of Mark Twain has changed and is changing in France, that already another translation of Huckleberry Finn has been published after mine, that since then I translated N° 44, *The Mysterious Stranger*, an important choice of Twain's political texts, and that I am now at work on the translation of his *Autobiography*. The ambitious task I had set myself was to prove Mark Twain wrong when he wrote, in "Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar:" "Classic.' A book which people praise and don't read."

I would like to start the analysis with the first sentence of the novel: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter." (The same abrupt start as another masterpiece, *Moby Dick*: "Call me Ishmael.") The reader is immediately thrown into the discourse of this narrator who never went much to school. "That ain't no matter" was not translated in 1886 (Hughes), was rendered by *mais ça n'a pas d'importance* in 1961 (Bay), *mais ça mange pas de pain* in 2008 (mine), and *mais c'est pas un souci* in 2009 (Michalski).

Here is a small extract from Chapter IX of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (I would like to point out something often forgotten, that this title, contrary to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, is without the article "the") containing quite a few examples of what the book is about; Huck has just met Jim on Jackson's Island, Huck is escaping from society, Jim from slavery:

We spread the blankets inside for a carpet, and eat our dinner in there. We put all the other things handy at the back of the cavern. Pretty soon it darkened up, and begun to thunder and lighten; so the birds was right about it. Directly it begun to rain, and it rained like all fury, too, and I never see the wind blow so. It was one of these regular summer storms. It would get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside, and lovely; and the rain would thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spiderwebby; and here would come a blast of wind that would bend the trees down and turn up the pale underside of the leaves; and then a perfect ripper of a gust would follow along and set the branches to

tossing their arms as if they was just wild; and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest—FST! it was as bright as glory, and you'd have a little glimpse of treetops a-plunging about away off yonder in the storm, hundreds of yards further than you could see before; dark as sin again in a second, and now you'd hear the thunder let go with an awful crash, and then go rumbling, grumbling, tumbling, down the sky towards the under side of the world, like rolling empty barrels down stairs—where it's long stairs and they bounce a good deal, you know.

“Jim, this is nice,” I says. “I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread.”

“Well, you wouldn't a ben here 'f it hadn't a ben for Jim. You'd a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittn' mos' drownded, too; dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when it's gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile.”

On reading this passage, the first thing one notices is the number of « and » (and « en »): 22 for 322 words, i.e. 6.83%! In my translation of the passage: 20 “et” for 336 words—5.95%. For the whole book, we have 5.71% “and”—4.78% “et”. A huge proportion, though of course fitting for a more or less illiterate young boy who would naturally use coordination instead of subordination. More research (I got interested) shows me that as far as “and” is concerned, the Bible is at the top of the list: the Vulgate with 7.83%, then Darby's (6.70%), and King James (6.30%); then comes Huck Finn, followed by Blake's “Songs of Innocence and Experience” (5.23), Twain's *Roughing It* (4.60), Florio's Montaigne (4.50), Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (4.49), Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (4.34), all the way down to Melville's *Israel Potter* (2.21)—this of course only with the books I have on the computer. Research for *et* in French showed Segond's Bible at 4.25%, Montaigne's *Essais* (4.25), Pascal's *Pensées* (3.64), my French *Tom Sawyer* (3.51), Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* (2.94), down to Raymond Roussel and Rabelais at around 1.50%. So, religion is tops for “ands”, but we knew that; more surprising is that Twain comes second. On reading the proofs, I thought I had made the common mistake of most beginners—translating all the “ands”! However, it wasn't a mistake, they should be numerous, if less so than in English. To compare with another

translation of *Huck Finn*, the first one, Hughes', there are only 2.2% of *et* (I do not have digital copies of the others).

The second noticeable aspect, in this passage, is the use of tenses. "We spread" could be the present tense, "eat" is the present tense, "put" could be, "darkened" is a past tense, so is "began" (which should be "began"), etc. Of course, this is Chapter IX and we are used by now to the language of the narrator. But this is difficult to reproduce in French, as a French Huck would not mix tenses, he might use the wrong auxiliary (*avoir* and *être*), make mistakes in subjunctives and conditional tenses, not however, with the necessary degree of frequency (*quand je m'ai réveillé, j'ai donc descendu par l'échelle, ils avaient décédé*, etc.), use popular formulas, such as *malgré que*. What I did was translate the "we" as "*on*," much more colloquial than *nous*, and remove the first part, *ne*, of the negative form *ne... pas* most of the time—as can be seen in the direct speech of Huck and Jim. So here the French is more proper than the original.

Next we have "like all fury", most probably coined by Twain; there I used the expression "*comme vache qui pisse*", that I heard as a child but which has more or less disappeared since; it would probably only ring a slight echo in younger readers, sounding almost as if it had been coined. Hughes has "*tomber à torrents*", and Michalski "*dégingolaient si dru*", both, to my mind, much too literary.

"Thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spiderwebby". "*S'abattait, tellement épaisse que les arbres proches devenaient flous et comme vaporeux.*" My French here is normal, slightly literary, I could not find an equivalent for "spiderwebby", it being much more difficult to change a word into an adjective, *toiledaraigneux* doesn't work or, if it does, would be more appropriate for a translation of *Finnegans Wake*. I am not too happy today about my "*vaporeux*", cannot, even today, find anything better, find Michalski closer to Twain but, what you loose on the roundabouts you gain on the swings: somewhere along the line by I will coin something where Twain did not, the point being to keep the balance of coinages more or less equal while taking into account that I'm not a creator and should not overtwain Twain. For example, twice in the translation, I have a coinage borrowed from Queneau, "*voilatipa*" (*ne voilà-t-il pas*) where Twain had "sure enough" and "lo and behold".

For "A perfect ripper", I have as "*une rafale monstre*". For "just wild"—the usual problematic "just" so rarely translatable by "juste"—,

I have “*en furie*”, thus bringing in the “fury” not translated a few lines higher. With “a-plunging” I could do nothing, that beautiful old English form “a” plus gerund having no equivalent in French, nevertheless, I haven’t lost hope, am still searching and, maybe one day, I will find an approximation; a start of a solution was found in this book for “I’m a-going to see what’s going on here”, which became “*je m’en vais voir ce qui se passe là-dedans*”. At the end of the paragraph, “*et qu’y sautent*”, approximating the popular pronunciation, replaces the more normal *et qu’ils sautent*.

Huck’s “I says”, comes out equal in French with the popular “*que je lui dis*”, which will be found time and time again at the end of the novel in Chapter XLI. But it’s in Jim’s direct speech that the French is most distorted, some of the r’s are removed to resemble the way black people pronounce French, but not all of them, as it would sound like “*petit nègre*”, used in literature in a derogatory way, and that’s where the creative powers of the translator are called for, the idea being to make it sound like a black man from the South of the United States without having French readers thinking it is someone from the French Caribbean, or North Africa or a peasant from the Creuse in a George Sand novel. Here you have “*tu t’aurais noyé presque*” instead of *tu te serais presque noyé* (wrong auxiliary and wrong word order); “*les poulets, y savent*” instead of *les poulets savent*. The first time we have Jim speaking in the book, in Chapter II, “Who dah?”, I have another Queneauism, “*Kikelà?*” (Michalski, also, found a nice “*Y a quéqu’un?*”; Hughes a banal “*Qui est là?*”). Jim never says *quelquefois* but “*kekfois*”, thus reproducing Mark Twain’s frequent visual markers, such as “sivilize” for “civilize”, indicating the narrator’s spelling more than the characters’ pronunciation.

Now, here is my translation of the passage:

Dans la grotte, on a étalé les couvertures pour faire un tapis et c’est là qu’on a dîné. On a rangé toutes les affaires à portée de main à l’arrière de la grotte. Assez vite, ça s’est assombri et il y a eu du tonnerre et des éclairs; c’est donc que les oiseaux avaient raison. Il s’est mis tout de suite à pleuvoir et, en plus, ça tombait comme vache qui pisse, et j’avais jamais vu le vent souffler comme ça. C’était un véritable orage d’été. Ça devenait tellement noir que dehors, on aurait dit que c’était bleu-noir, et très beau; et la pluie s’abattait, tellement épaisse

que les arbres proches devenaient flous et comme vaporeux; et puis arrivait une bourrasque qui faisait plier les arbres et montrait le dessous pâle des feuilles; et puis arrivait une rafale monstre qui faisait gesticuler les branches des arbres comme si c'étaient des bras en furie; et ensuite, quand c'était plus ou moins le plus bleu et le plus noir—pcht! aussi clair que la gloire, on apercevait un peu la cime des arbres qui ployait, tout là-bas dans la tempête, des centaines de mètres plus loin que ce qu'on voyait avant; noir comme le péché une seconde plus tard, et on entendait le tonnerre claquer dans un fracas terrible et puis gronder, maugréer, dégringoler vers le dessous du monde, comme des tonneaux vides dans un escalier, quand l'escalier est long et qu'y sautent depuis tout en haut, vous savez.

« Jim, on est bien ici, que je lui dis. Y a pas un autre endroit où je voudrais être. Passe-moi un autre morceau de poisson et un peu de galette de maïs chaude. »

« C'est que t'aurais pas été ici si Jim il avait pas été là. T'aurais été là-bas dans les bois et t'aurais dîné d'un bol d'ai', et en plus, tu t'aurais noyé presque, ça c'est vrai, mon trésor'. Les poulets, y savent quand il va pleuvoir, et c'est pareil pour les oiseaux, gamin. »

I do admit to feel this could be done better, maybe I will do so in ten years time; the translation of “chile” by “gamin” is below par. Every translation can be improved.

It goes without saying that, throughout the translation, the tense used to indicate the past is the *passé composé* and not the *passé simple*, never used in spoken language, though it was used by some of the ancient French versions of the novel. In the same way, where some of those had Jim using the *vous* form when talking to Huck, here *tu* is always used.

To conclude, when I read the few scholarly papers that have been written about this translation, despite appreciations, especially as concerns the project as a whole, the nit-picking which is the lot of all translation makes one feel that the translation should be taken anew and redone. This is the case for every translation. Someone else soon, I hope, will retranslate this novel, and I'll be able to search for trivial

errors, though I most probably won't bother. To exist, a text should be read, and reread, to exist even more, it should be translated, and retranslated. According to Joseph Brodsky, a text is the result of the existence of the original alongside its translations, so the more we'll translate, the more the text will have existence, and this is what really matters.