Obscuring the Sense, Sensing the Obscure: Estrangement in the Translation and Retranslation of A la recherche du temps perdu

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Scott Moncrieff's translation of Proust's great novel is still considered today to be one of the great masterpieces of modern translation, a landmark both in terms of the genealogy of European modernism and its intrinsic successes as a translation. Although there has been much criticism from Proust scholars of specific passages of the translation and in particular of the title, Remembrance of Things Past, which has now been dropped in favour of In Search of Lost Time, Scott Moncrieff’s text still forms the substantial basis of the only complete edition of Proust available in English today. I shall say more in due course about what I mean by “substantial basis”; let me just make a loose distinction here between basis and surface in order to designate the level at which this text has been re-translated. For the Proust we read today in English is the revision by Terence Kilmartin of Scott Moncrieff’s translation, a revision that has itself been subsequently re-corrected by D. J. Enright, resulting in a slippery process whereby the first “reviser,” Kilmartin, becomes, in a later edition, the “translator,” credited on an equal basis as Scott Moncrieff with having produced an “unassailable translation.” These successive revisions imply a vector of improvement, tending towards the extravagant claim of unassailability made by the publisher. What is principally at work in these revisions, then, is not merely a need for modernisation, which follows from the frequent observation that translations date while original texts transcend their period. Here we seem to have a case in which the original translation also has a timeless quality, but at the same time its “durability” is able to accommodate the various changes destined to make it “better.”

This undeniably paradoxical claim of “renewed” durability or authority was pointed up in one review of Kilmartin’s revision: “it will dismay, but not surprise, if this imperfect work inherits (...) Scott Moncrieff’s usurped repu-
tation of impeccability and definitiveness. However, should it not be remembered that definitiveness is one of those qualities, like virginity, which is either total or non-existent?" The author of this comment is James Grieve, now part of the team of translators at work on a completely new translation of Proust for Penguin, and his belief that definitiveness cannot be tampered with, just as — one supposes by his rather unexpected analogy — a "virgin" is defined as she, and perhaps he, who is still intact, was echoed notably by John Sturrock, who is also part of the Penguin team. He described Scott Moncrieff’s Proust as “pretified” or “more gentle,” compared with the ruthlessness which characterises Proust’s original exposure of the deep falsities of high society. Implicit in this comparison is the charge of deceit, which Sturrock makes even clearer when he describes Scott Moncrieff’s Proust as “clubbable,” as if the translator were guilty of drawing his author back into the forms of social hypocrisy, into the private clubs of the Faubourg St. Germain, that the novel sets out to expose.

His rival re-translators, thus, share the criticism that Kilmartin makes explicitly: that is, Scott Moncrieff capitulated when confronted with of Proust’s ruthless vision of society and thereby “obscured the sense” of A la recherche du temps perdu. The charge is that Proust’s meaning is there to be beheld, but that Scott Moncrieff was blinded by his preference for social niceties. Certainly, as we shall see, this criticism has its grounds. But the assumption on which it is made, that is, that a text reveals itself to the determined reader or translator, needs to be re-examined. My point here will be to consider the extent to which Kilmartin’s revision of Scott Moncrieff, in its attempt to rectify earlier obscurantism, in fact betrays the more obscure, more perplexing dimensions of Proust’s novel. In opposition to Kilmartin’s protests against the obscurities of the original translation, I will borrow Barbara Johnson’s insight that obscurity can be “an excess, not a deficiency, of meaning” and use it, not so much to rescue Scott Moncrieff from his detractors, as to lay out a few ideas about what this might mean for translation and re-translation. Although these will not be exactly my terms today, the question I want to examine could be formulated as a retort to Grieve’s assumption of the definitiveness or absoluteness of the state of virginity: after all, do Proust’s figurations of sexuality not demand a more nuanced or shadowy conception of sexual initiation? And if we accept that Proust’s novel is largely about the

problematic zone of experience that lies between the all and the nothing of Grieve's conclusion, what model of reading, and therefore of translation, do we need?

To put it in terms slightly closer to my focus today: when Grieve accuses both Scott Moncrieff and Kilmartin of producing "queerspeak" as opposed to "natural" English, we need to question the basis of this distinction between queerness and naturalness. In a very general way, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and arguably the tradition of the modern novel that it inaugurates, gives us no such stable categories. To quote briefly from the scene that will occupy us largely in the following discussion, Proust summarizes it in a way that could stand for his entire work: "Cette scène n'était, du reste, pas positivement comique, elle était empreinte d'une étrangeté, ou si l'on veut d'un naturel, dont la beauté allait croissant." What are the consequences for a translator of a text in which estrangement is also quite natural, or what is natural is estranging? To push the point a bit further, at the risk of being willfully obtuse in my response to Grieve: does the idea of "queerspeak" not require some re-examination in a novel that is all about queers, that is homosexuals, who do and do not "speak" the truth of their sexual persuasions?

Homosexuality is not, of course, the only question at work in *A la recherche*, but it is undoubtedly one of the main motors of the text and it exemplifies most tellingly the issue of ruthless revelation versus reactionary obscurantism. Let it be said, before beginning a comparative analysis of the original translation and the revision, that Scott Moncrieff does show some real daring in matters of contemporary homosexual slang. His use of the verb "to camp" pre-dates its introduction into the language recorded by the lexicographer Eric Partridge by six years and this is only one example of the way his translation created expressive possibilities in English, rather than merely drawing on received norms. But there is no denying his tendency to obscure the sexual dimension of homosexual encounters in the novel by favouring a form of sentimentalism. This tendency is most flagrant in my first example (See Fascicule des textes de référence). The context of the quotation is the young narrator's decision to cross the courtyard of his building in order to spy most effectively on the noisy assignation between the Baron de Charlus and the tailor, Jupien. The text is built around military and exploratory metaphors and the sub-text of initiation and conquest is barely disguised, but Scott Moncrieff nevertheless "mis-reads" the word "cour" and transforms what is a purely physical advance on the part of the narrator, which brings HIM into

literal contact with homosexual sex, into an emotional dilemma.

The second example (2) corresponds more closely to the charge most frequently levelled at the original translation, that is that Scott Moncrieff failed to recognise idomatic expressions in French and either translated them literally or inaccurately glossed their meaning. Here Charlus, the gay man who prides himself on his virility and yet looks like a woman, is described as a “personnage peinturluré, pansu et clos, semblable à quelque boîte de provenance exotique et suspecte qui laisse échapper la curieuse odeur de fruits auxquels l'idée de goûter seulement vous souleverait le cœur.” This expression of repulsion — and of course, much could be said about the narrator’s anxiety about the homosexuality of others — is completely masked by Scott Moncrieff’s decidedly odd shift from the olfactory nerve (the “odour”) to the sentimental chord (“stirs the heart”), and Kilmartin certainly comes closer with “turn the stomach.” Just as Charlus’s desire to disguise his homosexuality fails because his feminine body betrays his inclinations, so the narrator’s reaction — his repulsion — is an uncontrollable outburst, a textual expansion by means of which his comparison comes to be much more revealing of himself, the speaking subject, than of the ostensible reference of his description, that is Charlus.

The third example (3) of misplaced hearts is more complex, not least because it is reported speech, gleaned by the intruding young boy who is perched at a little window overlooking the encounter between Charlus and Jupien. Following Charlus’s enthusiastic commentary on other men in the area, Jupien accuses: “Je vois que vous avez un cœur d’artichaut.” Scott Moncrieff opts once again for the sentimental register, while Kilmartin indicates his more accurate understanding of the French expression with the word “regular” but misses the target with “flirt.” Not only is “cœur d’artichaut” an allusion to the fact of having several lovers, whereas “flirt” remains at the level of coquetry, but it is also the locus of a fundamental ambiguity in the encounter between Jupien and Charlus. For it is far from clear whether the attraction is sentimental, an affair of the heart, as Scott Moncrieff would have it, or merely physical as Kilmartin’s revisions tend to suggest. While “heartless” obscures the cause of Charlus’s cruelty, that is, his sexual desire for others, “regular flirt” makes the very exchange merely flirtatious. Yet the narrato-

rial context works hard to sustain an ambiguity here. It describes Jupien’s tone of voice as he utters this accusation as both “douloureux” and “maniéré,” which suggests a difficult combination of sincerity and artifice, and this combination is underscored in the image of him as “une grande coquette trahie,” which should give us cause for thought, for should the “grande coquette” not be she, or he, who betrays, rather than the victim of a broken heart?\(^5\) While the courtship that the narrator observes is described as a ballet of formal movements, fluidly executed, we are also given a vision of the pain involved, and we must not take its expression lightly for we will later discover, in a novel that is all about betrayal, that Jupien is the only character who remains faithful to Charlus.

Very persistently, thus, Proust makes it difficult for us to read this “cœur d’artichaut” in a straightforward way. In fact, all of the remarks that the narrator overhears have an enigmatic quality to them, signifying the unknowingness of the young boy who is only now learning to read the signs and the allusions that constitute the passwords into the particular society of homosexual men.

The crude remark “vous en avez un gros pétard” is a case in point (4). Although it is clearly an instance of willful vulgarity, referring explicitly to the baron’s posterior, and here we have no doubt the most striking case of Scott Moncrieff’s refusal to read and translate, there are nonetheless several ways in which this “gros pétard” is not merely the “big bum” of Kilmartin’s translation. First, just as in the case of the “cœur d’artichaut,” which is proverbial in origin, here we have a figurative expression that is rendered literally. But more, the dictionaries of *argot* from the turn of the century suggest that the meaning of “un pétard” was still quite unstable. Notable classics of the period, such as Delvau’s *Dictionnaire érotique* do not list the term at all, while other more general dictionaries give the meaning as a sensational work of art, omitting the alternative meaning of posterior, while others still suggest a specifically homosexual connotation, especially in the related expression “se faire empétarder.” To complicate matters further, it appears that the relevant organ was far from clearly established as two dictionaries also give the meaning as “membre viril,” while a quotation from *Gil Blas* indicates the wealth of allusion possible with the expression in the description of an amorous poet’s return from viewing a firework display:

\(^5\) *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. III, Gallimard, 1988, p. 11. This question is at the centre of how we read the story of the love affair between Swann and Odette.
Mais je le confesse,
Rentré chez moi sur le tard
Je me suis dit à moi-même :
"Ces pétards, nom d'un pétard !
Ne valent pas le pétard
De celle que j'aime."

Not only are we inclined to understand that the “pétard” of “nom d’un pétard” refers to a different part of the anatomy than the “pétard” of the desired woman, but the play on the literal meaning of “pétard” suggests that the flashy, spectacular connotations were still quite present in the image of the protruding behind. The vulgarity of Jupien’s remark is thus overwritten, but not deflected, by a series of other allusions, which crowd into the discursive space between Jupien and Charlus. Proust’s expression figures like a tight knot of meaning, with more strings than we can easily unravel, and it is further entangled by the narrator’s uncharacteristic lack of commentary, leaving us in doubt as to how he received it. The statement stands out, or sticks out, like the baron’s behind, with that same detachable quality that is implied in the pronoun “en” and in the “telles que.” Both bum and expression are exemplars — one of those bums, one of those expressions — and as such they call for a shared knowledge to supply the relevant category. In contrast, Kilmartin’s offering of “big bum” lacks any charge and has the effect of flattening the revelatory nodule of meaning. In time, I suspect, it will perhaps appear almost as unfaithful as “aren’t you naughty,” providing a good example of what Henri Meschonnic has described as “fidélité à l’époque” in contrast to “fidélité au texte.”

The question of the narrator’s unknowingness needs further thought in this context. Not only does he employ the expression “sans doute” in three successive sentences in this paragraph, creating an insistent uncertainty that is lost in translation, he also produces descriptions that confound standard associations. Looking once more at the example of Jupien’s vulgarity, we are given four adjectives to capture the tailor’s air as he compliments Charlus’s posterior, yet this descriptive zeal tends to blur our image of Jupien rather than enhancing it. While “souriant” suggests a voluntary expression of pleasure, in keeping with a flirtatious situation, “ému” has Jupien much more under the sway of feelings he cannot control. Even more strikingly, “supérieur” and “reconnaissant” suggest both an inversion of class preroga-

7. Scott Moncrieff uses the expression “must have” twice and “doubtless” once, and Kilmartin maintains this translation. (SM, p. 13, TK, p. 11).
tives and their continued relevance. Jacqueline Guillemin-Flescher has analysed the use of heterogeneous adjectives in one descriptive enumeration in reference to Flaubert, contrasting it with the preference in English for a separation of positive and negative, physical and psychological categories. Following this mode of analysis, we might expect the translation to modify the syntax. Yet we can see that Scott Moncrieff did nothing to smoothe out the heterogeneity of Proust’s description, preferring to stack up the four adjectives in front of the noun and highlight the way the text delays our discovery of Jupien’s final remark. In contrast, Kilmartin seems to have found this too clumsy and judged it necessary to introduce the coordinating expression “at once.” This, however, has the effect of pulling the text into shape by spelling out the contrast and thereby deflating the sense of disparity or of unevenness that the author is cultivating. We no longer feel quite so uneasy about how to judge whether Charlus or Jupien is the dominant figure. Our difficulty has been resolved by the equitable, unruffled “at once.” But the heterogeneity of the original is more than just a syntactical resource in French; it is an integral part of the novel’s dynamic, part of the very particular internal incoherence that destabilizes all oppositions — men/women, in/out, homosexual/heterosexual — in the text and that makes it unmistakably Proust’s.

This example brings us to the question of how much Kilmartin re-worked the syntactical structures of Scott Moncrieff’s translation. The first observation to make on this matter is that the changes are almost always limited to shifts within the sentence, respecting Scott Moncrieff’s choice to work for something close to Proust’s famously sinuous style. It is in this sense that I mean that the ”substantial basis” of Scott Moncrieff’s translation remains in place. Kilmartin has applied a degree of philological knowledge and some finesse as a grammarian, but what gave Scott Moncrieff’s text its singularity, its life, remains in place. In this respect, it seems useful to hold onto a distinction, which in subsequent editions of *In Search of Lost Time*, has been blurred, between a revision and a re-translation. But if we allow the possibility of giving a general stylistic appraisal of a text — something along the lines of “that’s pure Zola,” or “pure Milton, or “pure Scott Moncrieff,” — we cannot ignore the details that make up, in the best cases, a given literary voice. In this sense, all re-translations can also be read as revisions at the level of textual

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9 This undecidability is reinforced by the frequent slippages that characterize now Jupien, now Charlus as the “woman,” complicating Proust’s explicit theory of inversion whereby the homosexual is a woman trapped in a man’s body.
detail, even if they were not written with reference to a prior translation. The particularity of Kilmartin’s work is that we only get the details, without the strength of a new, ordering voice to rival that of Scott Moncrieff. Not all the details that he changes are significant, but others reveal that it is in the play of individual words, associations and expressions that a text produces its greatest challenges.

While we have seen that the position of the adjectives in the last example is a redundant and indeed regrettable modification, the detail of the word-order in the first sentence of example (5) seems insignificant, and Kilmartin’s version is an appropriate revision of Scott Moncrieff’s odd sentence. In this instance, Kilmartin is not so much getting closer to the difficult, unpalatable imagery of a text that was set to transform our conceptions of literature, as he is normalising the language, bringing it closer to standard English structures. This process of normalisation is the other thrust to the ambition that underpins all the successive projects to translate Proust, that is, to demystify the text. The argument goes that not only did Proust say what he meant, even though readers like Scott Moncrieff may not yet have been “able” to perceive his ruthless clarity, but also he said it in quite ordinary language, which has been regrettably lost for English readers who have had to make do with Scott Moncrieff’s distortions of the idiom. And indeed, it is not difficult to find examples of such distortion. Another striking example of necessary normalisation can be seen at the end of quotation (6). Scott Moncrieff translates the “ce n’est pas moi” as “that is not myself,” while Kilmartin modifies it to give “it isn’t me,” which is perhaps still not entirely satisfactory but a clear improvement on the first version. And there are countless other examples throughout the hundreds of pages of Scott Moncrieff’s translation of similar necessary changes.

But if we allow that the revision of a translation must have as one of its objectives to rectify syntactical problems that stem directly from differences

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10. Kilmartin’s translation seems strangely caught between the two more idiomatic expressions “that isn’t me” and “it wasn’t me.” Both of these are present in the French expression, which can be used with a passé composé: “ce n’est pas moi qui ai éteint le frigidaire” (“it wasn’t me who switched the fridge off”); and in a present tense: “Qui a les clés de la maison?” “Ce n’est pas moi.” In the last example, the English would have to be “not me” or “I don’t.” The expression “it wasn’t me” carries the connotation of denying guilt, and that is certainly one of the meanings of the French. The other meaning of “ce n’est pas moi” is more strictly about identity, made very clumsily obvious by Scott Moncrieff. Here the more remote pronoun “that,” as opposed to “this” seems preferable to underscore the denial of identity. Further, Kilmartin’s use of “it” is also made unsatisfactory by the potential pronoun interference from the immediately preceding “it,” which refers back to “a confusion.”
in grammatical structures between two languages, which are, therefore, in some way below the level of stylistic comparisons, we can only wonder why Kilmartin did not do more. The beginning of quotation (6) is a case in point. The French sentence employs a non-hypothetical “si” serving to introduce an explanation, while the English “if” implies a hypothesis, leaving in doubt whether Charlus does in fact have this bad or even evil reputation. The change of the “that” in Scott Moncrieff to a “this” in Kilmartin only makes the decision to keep this awkward formulation all the more perplexing. While we can agree that Proust himself is not responsible for all the difficulty we have when reading his novel in English, it would appear that the ordinariness of his prose is more difficult to see than Scott Moncrieff’s revisers claimed. In this instance, the brilliantly tortuous passage that ensues leads us on a series of false trails that have the effect of both destabilizing the baron de Charlus’s identity and re-affirming it in his denial of identity at the end, and we can well appreciate the translators’ decision to grasp onto the solid matter of sentence structure to negotiate their way across this terrain. But the vertigo that this passage produces should not be a reason for slippery translation. In response to Kilmartin’s description of his revision of Scott Moncrieff as a normalising, clarifying process, it seems to me to be necessary to re-assert the difficulty of Proust in order to see what reading it properly requires.

This argument can be perceived more clearly perhaps in the phrase in bold type towards the end of quotation (6). Proust’s expression is “glisser sur sa pente,” a provocative combination, I think, of two different expressions: “glisser sur une pente (savonneuse)” and “suivre sa pente,” the first being negative and the second not necessarily so. Through a slight disarticulation of two expressions, Charlus’s natural inclinations become his slippery slope, making the cause of his ruin internal to him. Apparently troubled by the amount of work that the possessive pronoun “sa” is doing here, Scott Moncrieff and Kilmartin propose a much less felicitous combination of two idiomatic English expressions: “to go downhill” or “to be over the hill.” The first might work here, although it doesn’t do much with the idea that the cause of degeneration is internal to Charlus, but it seems clear that the translation, “to go down the hill,” fails both in relation to the meaning of the original text and in

11. A further crutch that the translators deemed advisable in this tricky paragraph is the “our” introduced in the sentence “toutes les histoires qu’on racontait sur M. de Charlus s’appliquaient au faux.” The appropriative gesture “our M. de Charlus” seems inappropriate in a text that is working so hard to unsettle the sense of certainty about Charlus, even to the extent that the last assertion made about “le vrai” Charlus requires a parenthetical precision (le baron que nous connaissons) that removes all self-evidence of true identity.
terms of its conformity to idiom. This tendency to slip rather too easily over, and even to slip up on the complexity of Proust's text, reduces its contours, replacing difficulty with looseness. Something similar happens in example (5), where neither Scott Moncrieff nor Kilmartin get to grips with the image of “le ciel qui se lève.” The context is still the metamorphosis of Charlus and Jupien consequent on their chance meeting, and one of the important things happening in this image seems to me to be the idea of a new day, or a new light, reinforced by the metaphoric journey further East, towards the rising sun, which produces a subtly ironic combination in Charlus and Jupien of the purity of the new and the decadence of the Oriental. Again a slight distortion of French idiom, which in this case is attenuated by the distance between the subject and verb, enables Proust to end the sentence on the strong verb of “lever,” while the English version takes the easy option of having the sky reflected, not only reducing the intensity of the image, but also and more seriously, making it external to the protagonists, when it is clearly, and totally, they who are changed, not the sky.

To conclude, then, I shall just reflect briefly on the final example (7). The situation is comic: Mme Verdurin is the bourgeois consumer of high culture whose forehead has acquired neanderthal proportions through excessive listening to Wagner and Debussy. But the image is not fully comic; we could say “pas positivement comique,” to borrow Proust's own terms, and certainly “empreinte d'une étrangeté,” but also in some way presented as quite natural. These spheres are disturbing: “belles” but “endolories,” “brûlantes” but “laitées.” Which ever way we take them, it is impossible to reduce these adjectives to a seamless description, and if we look at the two translations, the unmanageable nature of the description is evident in the fact that each translator omits one, but not the same, adjective. The strangeness of Proust's image would seem to have a particularly resistant nature, as if the reader's attention is unable to hold it fully in view. But its naturalness is also obscured in translation. In French Mme Verdurin's temples are “like” two spheres; they are not merely “suggestive” of them. Where Proust's text states the objectivity of these overwhelming spheres, the translation takes refuge in a hint, a sketch, an idea, making the spheres the mere fancy of the narrator and allowing the text to slip into a bizarre image, which falls apart in a series of awkward approximations, destroying the passage's compelling force.12

12. The treatment of the verb “rouler” is also problematic here. While the French verb works both for the musical reference and the action of the heavenly spheres, English is torn between Scott Moncrieff's “roll” and Kilmartin's “revolve.” The problem is compounded by the preposition,
Just as with the difficult passages of *A la recherche* we tend to get looseness, so with the experience of estrangement we tend to get bluff: the demands of the image are mitigated and the inadequacy is hidden behind merely bizarre formulations like "temples [that] flung back silvery locks." Having said this, however, it seems to me that this process of calling the translator's bluff by looking at the original in detail alongside the translation is only of interest if it does not do precisely what the process of revision is designed to do, that is, to correct in the hope that the result will eventually be unassailable. In contrast to the desire for the definitive translation, which is as reassuring as the certifiable virgin or the frank homosexual, it seems to me that what we gain in this process, and therefore in the larger process of re-translating, is a series of refractions of the same text, none of which can possibly map perfectly onto the original, but all of which do something with and tell us something about its unrelieved inconsistencies. The shift in Jupien's accusation of Charlus from "heartless" to "flirt" is relevant for Proust's use of the expression "un cœur d'artichaut" in a way that neither one of the translations is in itself. A further translation would be useful, but not, I would argue, because greater rigour, determination or talent is going to bring the foolhardy translator to the "definitive" answer. The usefulness of a further translation can only supplement our understanding, not complete it, for this proverbial expression used by Jupien signifies in too many ways.

So rather than aspiring to a transparent translation, which would let the truth of the original shine through clearly, we have to acknowledge the screen that a different idiom necessarily places over a text, obscuring certain figures, but making other outlines stand out with unexpected clarity, and casting shadows that assume solidity in our perception. Retranslating cannot be a process of tearing holes in this screen, thereby gradually removing the obstacle; it has to be something more like the effect of lighting the screen from a different angle, a better angle in some respects, more compelling perhaps, more perplexing because informed by generations of commentaries on the original, but, and this seems to me to be what we can learn most from re-translating, the judgement that this new angle is "better" is made in relation to the previous effect, that is the previous translation, rather than purely in terms of faithfulness either to the original or to a static concept of idiom.

which in English implies another source for the harmonious music, while the French allows for the identity of the action and the result, the movement and the music.