Placing the Commonplace: Translation according to Jean Paulhan

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The term "commonplace" differs from either that of the cliché or the stereotype not just in that it itself necessitates translation, but also and relatedly because it finds its origin in an ancient rhetorical tradition, where it had none of its modern negative connotations. There are no doubt differences in the way the term “commonplace” is used in English and French. In English, for example, it serves also as an adjective, and one can even talk about “commonplace arguments”, but for the purposes of this paper I will take “the commonplace” and “le lieu commun” to be equivalent, and I will only address the meaning of the noun.

However, it is important to distinguish this notion from its near synonyms of cliché and stereotype. For the purposes of brevity, I shall accept the stylistic definition of the cliché, which is developed by Michael Riffaterre and followed by Ruth Amossy: in other words we will define the cliché as an identifiable lexical unity, stable in form, and capable of receiving a variety of discursive applications. The stereotype, in contrast, again following Amossy’s theoretical guidelines, operates at the level of conceptual generalizations, of cultural representations, and has none of the necessarily formulaic nature that characterizes the cliché. In Les Discours du cliché, Amossy assimilates the commonplace with the stereotype, calling it “une stéréotypie de la pensée”, and invoking the classical distinction between inventio and elucutio, the former referring to the content of the discourse, the latter to the expression or style adopted. I propose to extract the commonplace from this assimilation with the stereotype, follo-
wing what I perceive to be its semantic field in contemporary speech, where it also carries the formulaic connotations of the cliché, and is defined by *Le Grand Robert* as “un fait de style qu’un emploi trop fréquent a affadi” as well as an “idée ou sujet de conversation que tout le monde utilise.” The definition that I propose of the commonplace lies, then, between the poles of the cliché and the stereotype, neither entirely stylistic nor sociological, neither lexical nor ideological. For want of a better word, I have to call it theoretical, since it concerns precisely the way in which we theorize the relation between language and representation, between words and ideas.

This was precisely the definition of the commonplace that Jean Paulhan arrived at, although he reached it by observing a whole range of conflicts that can arise concerning language and in this respect his focus is much broader than ours today. For Paulhan the commonplace is emblematic of the essential polyvalency or duplicity of language. By polyvalency he was not referring only to the multiple meanings that a word can have, nor even to the opposing meanings that certain words, known as primal words, can have. Rather he focused on the more fundamental polyvalency of language that concerns the capacity that a word has to be considered either in terms of its meaning, what we could call its semantic force, or in terms of its syntactical composition. In most discursive situations we use language as an instrument of communication and we are completely focused on what is said, not on how it is said. But in all instances, not exclusively in relation to literature, and this is a point I shall come back to, the “how” of our speech, what we could term variously as the question of rhetoric or of style, remains present. It is the “how” of language that is at play when we turn our attention to the figurai dimension of speech, admiring the images employed, or objecting to the formulaic nature of the expression. Paulhan dedicated an important part of his work to the objection leveled against clichés, particularly in the discourse of literary critics who accused writers of being derivative, of failing to express themselves, relying on rote expressions to do the work. Literature, he states, has to answer the stipulation of originality. Any feature of a literary text that does not meet this requirement, any standard expression or image, is therefore read as a sign that the writer has failed to communicate her personal vision or imagination. The commonplace is dismissed as mere words, lacking any subjective motivation, empty of the sort of meaning that the reader expects from a literary text, that is, original meaning. The polyvalency of language is therefore complicated by an issue of power: in normal situations we assume that language serves our expressive or communicative needs; in the case of the commonplace or the cliché we seem to have an instance of language obstructing the writer’s originality,
coming too easily to the pen and relieving the lazy or inadequate writer of the work of self-expression.

But what, asks Paulhan, if the writer meant exactly what the cliché says; what if she believed herself to be inventing the cliché, experiencing it as a new metaphor, carefully crafted, rather than as a worn-out phrase that she let unwittingly infiltrate her prose? In other words, what if the writer came to the cliché as her own original idea, rather than as an established expression? Relatedly, is it not possible for one reader to detect a cliché where another is captivated by the meaning of the expression, unaware that she is in the presence of a “fait de style”? The importance of the commonplace in a text is that it affords both possible readings: it can be read as a locus of thought —Paulhan writes, “idée générale, argument, preuve,” referring back to the sense of inventio— and as a mere expression, a sign of the fact that a writer is always necessarily contending with the shared medium of language. Normally these readings are mutually exclusive, but when deployed in such a way as to leave the reader in doubt about how to read the expression, the commonplace offers the possibility of revealing the two facets of language: its semantic force and its syntactical constraints. In other words, in ideal circumstances, circumstances that cannot be quantified as such, the commonplace has the capacity to be at one and the same time new and derivative, an original idea and a fixed expression.

This fundamental polyvalency can only be perceived, however, if the commonplace is deployed in such a way as to make the reader hesitate over a text, unsure whether the sense of the expression motivates the figure, or rather the figural dimension supersedes the meaning. Moreover, any translation of the commonplace that fails to consider the way in which it is deployed or placed risks reducing the text to the “univocity” of either a cliché or an idea, losing the essential duality of an expression that is both standard and particularly compelling. Paulhan saw the most likely danger for translators as lying in the fact that as non-native speakers of the original language, they would tend to come at clichés with a fresh eye, ignoring the hackneyed nature of the expression and therefore focusing on the image or association. This is a danger that he sees as common to all anthropologists or explorers:

Nous continuons d’admettre (et plus d’un livre sérieux n’a pas d’autre sujet) que l’argot et les langues lointaines sont imagés et concrètes, mais notre propre langue fort abstraite. Si je cherche la raison d’une illusion constante, voici ce que je trouve : c’est que toute traduction, et plus elle
est fidèle, a pour premier effet de *dissocier les stéréotypes* d’un texte. Elle rend leur indépendance aux éléments de sens que la première langue associait.

In other words, the translator tends to render the cliché as if it were an original configuration of ideas or images, an original metaphor, ignoring the fact that these images are systematically associated in the minds of native speakers. In order to remedy this problem, he proposes that “il faut obtenir du lecteur qu’il sache *entendre en cliché* la traduction comme avait dû l’entendre le lecteur, l’auditeur primitif, et à tout instant *revenir* de l’image ou du détail concret, loin de s’y attarder.” The key to a successful translation lies in placing the commonplace in such a way as to signal to the reader that this expression requires a double movement: from the image or metaphor to the stock expression, which mirrors the renewal of the cliché that occurs within the source language when we perceive the possibility of reading it as idea as well as mere words.

In his best known essay, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, Paulhan focuses on one case in particular where the cliché is almost systematically deployed in such a way as to receive a double reading. He is referring to the title which “en ménageant autour du cliché comme une zone de réflexion, suffisant à nous avertir que nous pouvons y aller”, que nous ne risquons pas d’être dupes, et que l’auteur et nous sommes bien du même côté du lieu commun [...].” Beginning then with what Paulhan presents as the most obvious way of signalling the presence of a cliché, forcing the reader to weigh its function in the text, I shall examine the title and subtitles of an article published in a magazine that anyone may have had an opportunity to read: the *Eurostar Magazine*. The choice of this text is in part expedient: Paulhan’s thinking on the commonplace is intentionally paradoxical and in the light of this it seemed preferable to discuss a highly accessible text. My intention is to move on from this text to an apparently more demanding one, that is the poem “The Hollow Men”, by T.S. Eliot, a poem which was first published in French in the review *Commerce*, where Paulhan played a very active role, translated by Saint-John Perse, a friend of Paulhan’s. But the combination of a literary example and a journalistic example — one contemporary with Paulhan’s reflections on translation, the other not — is also entirely in keeping with Paulhan’s approach to literature and language. He was convinced that ordinary language holds just as many mysteries, offers just as

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2. Ibid., p. 66.
many occasions for confusion, hesitation and the need to “re-consider” the text as literature, a view which finds its counterpart in the observation that literature inevitably contains the same apparent banalities or clichés as the press. Whether dealing with texts that present themselves as straightforward vehicles of communication, or with literary works, which frequently reveal a self-conscious problematization of the signifying process, Paulhan is always alive to the complexities of language that force the reader’s attention onto the syntactical as well as the semantic dimension of language.

So turning to our first title, which announces the opening of an exhibition of Picasso’s ceramic works: “Pots of Picasso in London”; “Picasso touche terre à Londres.” (A) Not by any means a faithful translation, but in Paulhan’s terms a highly successful one. Both titles manage to incorporate not just a cliché, but also an alliteration — “pots of Picasso,” and “touche terre” — which combine to call the reader’s attention to the level of the signifier, prompting, I would suggest, an appreciation of the playfulness of the journalist, an appreciation that is only increased when we read on to discover that the article is precisely about pots and earthenware. The clichés “pots of” and “touche terre” thus appear as triply motivated in both languages. In English we can read the expression as 1) a clichéd way of saying “lots of” at the same time as 2) we re-discover the metaphor at the base of the expression and 3) enjoy the punchy alliteration. In French, we have the combination of the fact that Picasso’s work is journeying to London and, as opposed to a re-motivation of the original image, a deviation of the sense whereby “touche terre” also comes to mean to manipulate clay. Both titles thus exemplify the catchiness of a good title: the combination of the clichéd expression and the alliteration gives them a syntactical unity which produces a sense of necessity. Yet they are not just a funny but ultimately meaningless way of announcing an article on Picasso: they are also semantically motivated. All this said, the question remains whether we can call this a translation as such.

We need to consider what our alternative options might be. If we take the expression “pots of,” in French we could try “plein de,” or perhaps “un tas de,” or the prosaic “beaucoup de,” but none of them will give us the double effect of both cliché and meaningful image. Otherwise, we could venture into the trap that confronts all translators and properly re-activate the image in the expression by producing either the incongruous “pots par Picasso,” or the banal “poterie de Picasso.” Neither of which is satisfactory. Beginning with the French title, we face the same problems. Although earth has the same semantic link with clay, the verb “touche” would have to be translated as “to come down to,”
losing the sense of “to manipulate” or better in French of “palper,” as well as the perhaps more embedded sense of “to play” as in “toucher le piano,” which corresponds so well to the nonchalant skill with which Picasso took up the art of ceramics. On top of this, the English expression that is apparently most faithful to “toucher terre,” that is “to come down to earth,” has a whole series of connotations of becoming reasonable or realistic that would constitute a veritable “faux sens” in the context of this article. In the light of these unsatisfactory alternatives, we are inevitably drawn back to what we could call the free translation offered in the Eurostar Magazine. What we have to notice is that this translation works precisely because it suspends the priority that we normally accord to the semantic dimension of a text. In other words, it suspends the translator’s commitment to reproducing the meaning of the text, as if the sense were an inviolable entity that could be variously rendered in different idioms. Rather than operating according to a model of faithfulness to the original, it produces the same double-take in the target language that the reader experienced in the source language. Whether reading the French or the English, we get a sense of the interplay between the forms of expression and what they mean, between words and the sense we make with them, between the signifier and the signified. As translation theorists, or merely bilingual readers, we get the added insight that each language differs in its oddities and its opportunities.

None of the following subtitles achieve quite the same dexterity as the main title, but they do offer some interesting features and serve as a counterfoil for the previous commentary. “Mère médiiterranée” (B) is obviously a play on the sense of a return to the origins and the place of those origins, that is classical Greece, which was the primary reference for Picasso in his ceramic work. Through it we also hear the cliché of the “berceau de la culture.” Both the cliché of the “berceau” and the play on the word “mère” connect well with a series of references throughout the article to the childish exuberance and naïveté of Picasso’s pottery. The English title, “Metamorphic vision,” is prosaic in comparison, offering only a pale equivalent of the French play on the signifier with the word “metamorphic” which is patently of Greek origin.

The last subtitle, “les doigts dans la tête” and “light touch,” (C) is positively perplexing, particularly in French. In English “light touch” works well again by combining the syntactical necessity of the cliché and the literal meaning of dexterity and grace that characterizes the way in which Picasso handles and paints the clay. It is another good example of Paulhan’s sense of the commonplace, both a linguistic automatism and a particularly compelling way of
evoking Picasso's art. It also participates in the network of references in the article to sunlight and the Arcadian lifestyle. The French is much more problematic. "Les doigts dans la tête" sounds as if it should be a recognizable expression: it recalls the expression "avoir de l'esprit jusqu'au bout des doigts," or perhaps "avoir un morceau de musique dans les doigts," but there is an essential displacement with regard to these fixed expressions.\(^4\) The fingers migrate upwards to the head, rather than the head — the memory or intelligence — revealing itself through the activity of the fingers. This displacement is, of course, entirely fitting in the context of Picasso's art, and the accompanying photo shows a clay figure of a woman with a long neck and head that looks like a raised finger. In this respect, we could say that the title merely copies the art. But this ignores the way in which it also activates the same reflection as the clay figure, playfully subverting the standard idea of knowing something "sur le bout des doigts," that is, so well that one cannot be challenged on it, and participating in the same perplexing combination, which defines Picasso's art, of intellectuality and spontaneity, theory and sheer virtuosity, ideas and practical exuberance. It works by means of the same formal excess as Picasso's mode of figuration, pushing against the standard code of representation or language, forcing a second thought, or a laugh, or, of course, like Picasso's art, the accusation that it is facile nonsense. In comparison, "Light touch," despite its own effects, seems terribly weak.

The poem by T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men", with all its canonical prestige, would seem at first view to require a much more measured or cautious approach, attentive to the creative intention of the poet. But in fact the poem immediately challenges this voluntary subordination to the original by presenting the translator with a paradox. Although what we have here is self-evidently a poem, signed by the most prominent English poet of this century, it is also not only about, but also in some sense an enactment of the refusal to speak, the refusal of self-expression. In the fourth stanza we read "In this last of meeting places/ We grope together/ And avoid speech." (D) Pierre Leyris's translation, "Evitant de parler," is somewhat unfortunate in its use of the verb, as if the "hollow men" could speak if they so chose, when the English gives a sense of the physical shunning of speech, as if it belonged to a different state of being. Perhaps a better translation would have been "Evitant la parole." The title is also highly significant in this respect: "The Hollow Men" and the very effective translation "Les Hommes creux" both echo the fixed locution of "hollow words" and "les paroles creuses." These "hollow men" speak only a hollow lan-

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4. The expression is perhaps derived from the film of the same title by Jacques Doillon.
language, that is, a language of clichés, abstracted to death. We remember that Jean Paulhan viewed the impression that one’s native language is more abstract than a foreign idiom as an illusion, based on a habitual blindness to the sleeping metaphors of one's speech. T.S Eliot’s poem is precisely an attempt to make the abstraction of one's most familiar language resonate; in other words, to sustain the expressivity of a language that is about to lose all force, that is about to collapse. In this sense, this poem presents an archetypal case of the danger that Paulhan sees as looming over translators: any re-animation of the language detracts from the effect that Eliot achieves. We will see that the two quite different translations of “The Hollow Men” given in Fascicule des textes de référence fall foul of this danger.

The very first line, which also serves as a subtitle, “A penny for the Old Guy,” can serve here to remind us of the two obvious options that Paulhan saw as open to the translator of the cliché, both of which are eminently unsatisfactory. Saint-John Perse chooses to translate the image, transcribing the original meaning and embellishing it with the alliterative effects linking “aumône” and “aux hommes” and “peu de poids,” (E) to produce an inappropriately weighty line of verse. Pierre Leyris takes the other option and stays rigidly close to the syntactical formation of the original, but at the expense of all meaning, since “un penny pour le vieux Guy” evokes nothing and has to be backed up by a lengthy translator's note. In English, “a penny for the Old Guy” opens the poem on a derisory note, a hollow phrase that children intone to gather small sums of money. It is nothing more than a ritualistic phrase where “Guy” refers to the stuffed man, only vaguely connected in memory to the original Guy Fawkes who attempted to burn down Parliament in 1605. What was a proper name has been transformed into a standard noun through a process of repetition that corresponds to the slide from original image to cliché. The words are now mere empty ciphers of long-dead rivalries, just as the Guy is but a simulacrum of the historical figure; but they are also the sign or the trace that this history lives on in language. Both translations fail to achieve this effect of a palpable deterioration, of a loss of meaning that nonetheless commands our attention, and in this they reveal the inherent impossibility of making one language converge with another in a perfect translation.

I have two more quick examples to illustrate this inevitable failing of translation when dealing with the commonplaces of an idiom, both drawn from the last lines of a stanza and again, therefore, placed in a prominent position, forcing the reader to pause. The first example comes from the very end of Eliot’s poem and is a fragment of the cliché “to go out with a bang”: “This is the way
the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.” (F) The use of the cliché here is itself the whimper of which it speaks, a pathetically limp end. Leyris's translation strains to achieve the same meaning, but at the cost of a strangely un-idiomatic expression — “sur un boup” — and the over-poignant “murmure” which loses all sense of shameful renouncing.

Geoffrey Hill, whose poetry bears important affinities to that of Eliot, accomplishes a similar effect with the line “innocence is no earthly weapon” from “Ovid in the Third Reich”:

I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.
Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon. (G)

Here the cliché “no earthly good” is displaced or buried by the new expression, but we nonetheless hear it in the exasperation in the poet's voice. Caught in the trap of trying to explain the things that happened during the Third Reich, the poem seems to lash out with the unthinking phrase “no earthly good.” The harshness of the expression contrasts sharply with, and ultimately undermines, the opening attempt to aestheticize the silence of ordinary Germans during the war, just as Eliot's cliché “not with a bang but a whimper” subverts the rhetorical flourish of the End. But Hill's line is not only a blurted-out cliché, a sign of an absence of thought or attention. It is also a literal statement that innocence is not of this earth, that it is quite precisely heavenly. The translation captures this sense nicely, “L'innocence n'est pas arme terrestre” (H), but obviously without the connotations of the frustrated exclamation that contrast so effectively in the original with the careful wording of the first lines.

But if the subtitle of Eliot's poem and these two last lines announce the imperfection or inadequacy of translation where commonplaces are concerned, the main body of the two translations of Eliot's poem show that the fundamental differences between languages allows the translator to activate linguistic effects that do not exist in the original, counter-balancing the inevitable loss that occurs when we translate an isolated fixed locution. Saint-John Perse achieves this with his expression “hommes faits de paille” (I), which is awkward in its literalness or its prosaic character, close to the cliché “hommes de paille,” but slightly disjointed, just as “hommes creux” slightly displaces the expression “paroles creuses” or “discours creux.” We note that his translation depends on a cliché that does have its equivalent in English - a straw-man - but which is absent from Eliot's poem. In other words, Perse accomplishes the same
faltering resuscitation of dead language as Eliot, but by means of a commonplace that does not appear in the original text. His “hommes sans substance” (J), in contrast, is at first view too cumbersome for Eliot’s “hollow men,” but it does have the advantage of its abstract, philosophical connotation, which signals the overall transformation that Saint-John Perse effects by favouring a conceptual vocabulary instead of Eliot’s choice of most everyday words. We can see this in the translation “stérile” for “dried” and “dry” and “foule fraternelle” for “together.” There are certainly arguments to justify this shift in register, and it is perhaps not in this respect that the translation fails. The discomfort that we feel reading Saint-John Perse after Eliot stems more from the excessive use of repeated sounds and alliteration that detracts from the monotone effect of Eliot’s original.

Leyris’s translation is more apparently faithful to the syntactical structure of Eliot’s poem, as we saw in his version of “A penny for the Old Guy,” but the main body of the text tends towards an excessive precision in vocabulary, losing the flat, barely expressive tone of the original. This is the case with “caboche,” which has a strong figurative sense that is absent from “headpiece”, and with “sourdes,” “inanes,” “chaume” and “trottis,” all of which signify a certain expressive effort, exploiting the peripheries of the language, while Eliot’s vocabulary is conspicuously ordinary. More successful, however, is his translation “cherchant appui ensemble” (K) for “leaning together.” We have already seen that Saint-John Perse introduced a sense of solidarity with his adjective “fraternelle;” here Leyris brings the same connotation with “appui,” evoking the fixed expression of “chercher un point d’appui.” This echoes nicely with the idea of political or ideological leanings that is present in Eliot’s “leaning together,” over-determined by the muted reference to the partisan Guy Fawkes. And it also keeps the prosaic form of the original that is lost in Saint-John Perse’s text. Again, then, the most satisfactory verse in the translation works by way of a fixed expression, a cliché of the French language, that is slightly dis-articulated, signalling both the presence of the standard locution and the re-literalization of the idea of “appui” in the image of straw-men propping one another up. The play on the fixed locution is particular to the translation, since in Eliot we have to make do with the semantic range of the word “leaning” alone.

So if “A penny for the Old Guy” and “innocence is no earthly weapon” reveal the insurmountable differences between idioms, even idioms as historically close as English and French, the respective translations of Saint-John Perse and Leyris nonetheless give an indication of the sort of transformation that can be
achieved in translation. Stepping out of the bind that necessitates choosing between semantic and syntactical fidelity, the translator has to use the resources of the target language to achieve the same essential indetermination in the relation between words and ideas, the same duplicity that causes the reader to question whether this expression is merely an automatism, indicating a withdrawal of the writer behind the forms of language, or whether it means just what it says. In other words, the translator has to accept the same risk as the writer: his or her meaning is always inseparable from the possibilities and particularities of the target language, that is, of his or her native language. But this must not only be understood as a limitation, as if translation is necessarily an impoverishment of the original. A successful translation results, on the contrary, from an appreciation of the ways in which one's native language can surprise and defeat our attempts to make sense. It depends on the same writerly attention to our own language as the original text demands of us as readers. If Saint-John Perse and Leyris may disappoint us in their respective ways, despite their relative accomplishments, the translation in the Eurostar Magazine should cheer us all. For, as I somewhat awkwardly but consciously chose not to disclose, the original article was written in English, but the French text, the translation, is by far the more compelling and amusing piece of writing. It also makes a much more advantageous use of clichés.

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