



## GRAAT issue # 3 - March 2008

### Translating Pynchon

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*Claro is currently working on the French translation of Against the Day, to be published in September 2008 (Paris: Seuil, Fiction & Cie). Here are translations of chapters three and five of Vers la grâce (Obernai: miniatures, 2007). This small book compiles blog entries which treat of the process of translating the novel. Following are three entries from the current blog, <http://towardgrace.blogspot.com/>, the last entry being a translation from page 70 of Against the Day.*

### 3. Shells

Let's briefly carve out a Pynchonian segment. Page 172, commenting on how difficult it is to identify each member of Butch Cassidy's gang, the author allows his sentence to sway like a wayward vahine high on *dagga*: "Did something, something essential, happen to human personality above a certain removal from sea level?" As each time, everything is unexpected, as befits a syntactic event. The subject of the auxiliary "did" (the subject of the deed...) is the recorded alteration in physical appearance. So, so, so... this said alteration, then, does something—but straightaway this something, described as essential in the following apposition, becomes subject in its turn, and demands an addition to "happen," and this to human personality. This

opening on a “did” that is severed from its subject is quite surprising in itself—and statistically not that frequent in Pynchon. But his genius is to double it up by reversing the object—“something,” a generic term, which, used by Pynchon, becomes as precise as a chemical formula—and to turn it straightaway into the subject of another transformation, another event—in a chain reaction that forces language to unhinge mischievously. Then we seem to reach safe ground with “human personality.” But by the way, should we conclude that there are such things as non-human personalities? Of course, the Master implies. And then, of a sudden, a tranquil arrow, which knows where it is going—we wish we did. “Above a certain removal from sea level.” He could have written—typical of Pynchon: each time, “he could have written”—“above sea level.” The meaning would have been the same, more or less. But the Pynch is as wary of the more as of the less. No, we're not above sea level but above the removal from sea level. And “above” loses its concise spatial preciseness, and “from” takes on an uncanny connotation of uprooting. Well, yes, of course, what he means is... all right... we get it, more or less... but he doesn't want us to understand, more or less, he wants us to read, he wants us to feel the rickety planks of the footbridge over the abyss, he doesn't want us to get it. And there is something magical about this last strand of the enchanted braid. This sea level associated to the notion of removal, apart from Darwinian echoes, also recalls Lovecraft's mystics—more than once played upon, by the way. The translator must work in the same manner, then—as a Lovecraft reader, as a tightrope artist, as an SFX man, and what else... Do not simplify. Do not complexify. The best way to handle it is to try and waver in the same rhythm, like the precise frequency of vibration at which a bridge is said to tumble down, except *you* are the bridge. You must slowly, naturally, force the sentence open, have it gape, and then allow this strange tongue to jut out, this strange language which speaks of estrangement, which speaks of a lost Eden that used to be found at sea level. And that's precisely what the sentence has done, in a succession of small degrees, rising up above a certain removal from meaning.

## 5. Voices

“The small, vibratoless voices, wind in cottonwoods” (page 203): a sentence to dream on without moderation, a sentence to chew at, nodding compulsively one morning, or one night, it depends... Seven words paving a path, a yellow brick road to epiphanic Oz, to beauty—to grace, of course. Where, oh where do these voices come from? Well, from page 203, no ambiguity about that. But in what throat were they woven? Let us take a closer look...

A certain Cooper—a lout, a biker, a suitor, a beau—sings a song full of nostalgia and, in the shade offered by poplars, the kids from the school next door sing along in their frail tones. The verb seems to have tiptoed out so as not to disturb the fragile plissé of the syllables, and the nominal sentence unrolls in three beats, but is articulated in two, the “w”s mostly following suit on the “v”s, the “n”s coming as mutes to the sibilants in “small,” “less” and “voices,” which spring up again, in extremis, in the final “s” of the trees, barely trembling in the wind. Without doubt a moment of epiphany, the only thing that matters is the event of the notes, quite apart from the personality of Cooper—a motorised badass reminiscent of Brando in *The Wild One*. However the absence of vibrato has kept its secrecy, and its magic. Celestial voices, angel voices that can't be broken. You think of the “sound of poplar trees” evoked at the very beginning of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: a sound that everybody knows, nothing too supernatural after all. Pynchon has put a definite article before these voices, but not before the wind, thus breaking the symmetry of the apposition, and suggesting an equivalence—at the very least a consonance. “*Des voix ténues, sans vibrato, le vent dans les peupliers*”? You feel you have missed out on something, something has been lost, as they say. “*Les petites voix, sans vibrato, vent dans les peupliers.*” Technically, it's all there, but the magic is still a long way away. The sound is not there, that would make up for the syntactic break. You have to look for the right undulation to the sentence. The right ripple. Try “*simples*” for “small,” instead of “*petites*” or “*ténues*”? “*Des voix simples, sans vibrato*” —bingo, I have found my “v”s and my “s”s back...—but the “*peupliers*” have lost the cloud-like texture

of cottonwoods. And by the way these cottonwoods are not... poplars, at least not the poplars that Monet, for example, painted in *The Four Trees*. The Virginia poplar, *populus deltoides*, is called "liard" in Quebec and other places. But will this "liard" do? How does it agree with my "vent"? Should I choose "brise" instead? "La brise dans les liards"? Sounds like an awful spoonerism... Argh.\* I could write "peupliers de Virginie" but as we left Utah to land in, possibly, Colorado, poor old Virginia would feel awkward in the context. In fact you need to let the whole paragraph unroll, to let yourself go along with its rhythm: then you can feel that Pynchon, like Woolf, like Faulkner, or like Monet, works in light strokes. And mainly you can see that he immediately mentions the "windless sky" – so there is no doubt about the meaning of the apposition that troubles us so. The voices are reminiscent of the song of poplars, the music of poplars, the sound of cottonwoods, whatever we end up calling it. Let's get down to it, then, or leave it as such, like some foam on the surface of a liquid, and wait for it to smooth out. And mainly, let's prick up our ears, and listen to the sound the wind makes in the trees, listen to the children's voices in choirs, hunt down the slightest vibrato. And then, if it's not raining, we'll go out of the text, with no hat on.

**Friday, September 28, 2007**

### **The day according to Pynchon**

A whole book could be devoted to the way Pynchon uses the word "day" in *Against the Day*. Apart from the title, which packs a bundle of meanings into a single syllable, each time Pynchon uses the word something happens, a sort of drifting whereby what is being referred to gains in opacity, and in meaning too. This omnipresent "day" – more than 800 occurrences – is not just the opposite of night, page after page it ends up denoting a reality in itself. A sort of awesome cliff against the face of which shadows can be seen to flutter. A time that has come to a standstill, or that

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\* In English in the text

can't help beginning again and again. A univocal truth that the least pebble can shatter to pieces. "Their own version of the day" (207). "Between dreams and the day" (222). "The thousand details of the day" (261). "Sufficient unto the day" (271). "Turning from the day" (298). Each time, you feel that "day" designates something else, something that only the texture of the novel can give substance to, against the touchstone of the world it deconstructs/reconstructs. Against the day: waiting for the day, of course, for Doomsday, but also the real day, the pure light of evanescence. Against? In intimate contact with. Against? In a fratricidal struggle with. "Day" being perhaps, in these pages, the unutterable name of "life," as made up by its infinite variants and possibilities. Against life: in touch with its duplicitous texture. And so on, until the day... when Grace takes over, and the book ends. The writer thus manages to derealize the word, to empty it of its banal substance and, page after page, to raise it to prodigious dimensions. You could draw a similar list of occurrences for other words, that are not so much diverted from their meaning as turned back against their meaning in a subdued, obstinate and joyful war. Likewise the ceaselessly proliferating "as if"s split reality, "as if" the very pages of the book were made of Iceland spar. Which is the case, after all. *Gravity's Rainbow* opened on the invisible tumbling down of a crystal palace...

**Wednesday, October 24, 2007**

### **Pynchonism**

What is a Pynchonism? It is an angle of attack, often a slanted one, to insert a notation, a banal or an extraordinary notation, into an ever-expanding body of text. It is not a way of saying, but a way of foreclosing any other way of saying... Let us take an example, from page 559—Umeki and Kit are in a room together, something is about to happen, something libidinous, possibly, it doesn't really matter much. The scene is set, in particular through these few words: "with rain in autumnal descent at the window." It sounds straightforward, simple, but in the way you speak of simple elements, chemical elements that cannot be further decomposed. What Deleuze would call

ecceity. A coincidence of events or facets of events forming a unique, ephemeral figure... We understand it is raining, it is autumn, and the rain can be seen through the window. So we have understood nothing. What Pynchon paints in the window frame, with a single stroke worthy of Cézanne, is not the rain but its vertical downward movement in a particular season. And he does it without seeming to, through compacting, reversing, shifting, balancing the basic data, so as to erase the very existence of this basis—this reality. What we are witness to is an event, which combines a space—the window frame—a time—the autumnal season—and an element—here a liquid, the rain. It all has to happen in a few words, in a *moiré* of concreteness and abstraction. A literal translation lays bare the subtle formula: “*avec la pluie en descente automnale à la fenêtre*”—three terms for an equation you thought had been solved. This “descent” is typical Pynchon, and adds both a technical and a religious dimension to what a simple “fall” would have achieved. It is also, of course, quite ironical, as Pynchon is continually conflating expressions the better to dynamite them, scour them, take them for a ride... Of course, translating them is another matter. Eight words, not a cent more. Great.\* “*La vitre battue par la pluie d'automne*”? You can see what loss that sort of approach entails, even though no French reader would object to it, of course, unless he looks up the original. Nothing could be further from the Pynchonian text than this kind of commonplace. Because in English this “autumnal descent” also refers to leaves falling, and also vaguely connotes a “descent into Hell.” So, let's step carefully. Just eight words out of nearly five hundred thousand. A delight.

**Tuesday, January 8, 2008**

### **Epychonophanie**

“Les cioux étaient interrompus par des nuages orageux gris foncé qui se déplaçaient telle de la pierre en fusion, mouvante et liquide, et la lumière qui se frayait un chemin à travers eux se perdait dans les champs obscurs pour se recomposer le long de la route blême, si bien qu'on ne voyait souvent que la route, et l'horizon vers lequel

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\* In English in the text

elle filait. Dally se sentait parfois comme éclaboussée par toute cette exubérance verdoyante, trop de choses à voir, chacune réclamant sa place. Feuilles en dents de scie, en forme de piques, longues et minces, aux extrémités émoussées, duveteuses et veinées, grasses et poussiéreuses en fin de journée – fleurs en cloches et en grappes, violettes et blanches ou jaune beurre, fougères en étoiles dans les coins sombres et humides, des millions de voilages verts tendus devant les secrets nuptiaux nichés dans la mousse et sous les taillis, tout cela passait près des roues grinçantes et cahotantes dans les ornières pierreuses, étincelles visibles seulement dans le peu d’ombre qui les caressait, une pagaille de formes minuscules en bord de route qui semblaient se bousculer pour former des rangs volontairement ordonnés, des herbes dont les amateurs de ginseng connaissaient les noms et les prix sur le marché et dont les femmes silencieuses là-haut sur les contreforts, ces homologues qu’ils ne rencontraient jamais la plupart du temps, savaient les propriétés magiques. Ils connaissaient des destinées différentes, mais chacun était l’envers secret de l’autre, et l’éventuelle fascination qui les unissait était éclairée, sans l’ombre d’un doute, par la grâce.”

(Thomas Pynchon, *Face au Jour*)

translated by Gilles Chamerois, except for the last entry of course