

Proust and the Remarkable Lightness of Foreign Language

By Alexander Price

The other day I happened to come across a long quotation, in English, from the most famous passage in Proust. Here it is:

My mother sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called “petites madeleines,” which look as though they had been molded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy?¹

What surprised me as I was reading this passage about the summoning up of memory was that despite having recently read the volume from which it is taken, I had *no memory at all* of some of the things that now leapt out at me: the contrast between the dreariness of the present, for example, and the pleasure of the madeleine (representing the richness of the remembered past). Had I really not noticed that before or had I noticed and forgotten?

Of course both possibilities—not noticing and forgetting—are probable. Whenever you read something more than once you notice different

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things, and that's especially true with a text as rich as Proust. You can't possibly take it all in at once; inevitably, you notice selectively. Likewise, unless you've really studied a passage, it is hardly surprising that you'd forget even important aspects of it. And the madeleine passage is so celebrated that it's a bit like a famous painting whose reproduction you've seen a thousand times; you might even skip over it.

But there is another factor. My previous reading of the passage had been in French, and French simply leaves less of an impression on me than my native language; the words have less weight. For me, as a non-native speaker, French inevitably has a kind of lightness.

Profanity provides the most familiar demonstration of this quality. Think how easily the nastiest, filthiest thing you can think of slides off your tongue in a foreign language. *Connard*, for example, is pretty rude, but I know that only in a more or less abstract way, whereas as a native English speaker the insult *a**hole* has an immediate, visceral impact; I almost wince as I type it. *A**hole* has a lot more weight for me than *connard*, and the reasons are obvious. I've had very little direct experience with *connard*. I can only recall one time when it was said to me directly, and I've probably heard it more often in the movies than in real life; I haven't often seen it in print. On the other hand, how many hundreds of times have I heard (and said and thought) *a**hole*? A lifetime of exposure has attached a remarkable affective weight to these words, to the point where they provoke a Pavlovian response.

The effect is the same, if less dramatic, with ordinary, inoffensive language. I particularly notice it with adjectives. Consider the French adjective *leste*. Not a particularly common adjective, not one that I've had much experience with: I know what it means because I looked it up in the dictionary. Eventually, if I come across it often enough, I'll have more of a sense of it, but for now, it is so lightly anchored in my mind that it threatens to drift away altogether. Now consider a couple of the possible English translations of *leste*, namely *agile* and *nimble*. My intuitions about these words are so strong that not only do I not need a dictionary to tell me what they mean, I can judge whether the dictionary definitions accurately capture their meaning (at least for me). I know that someone can have *nimble fingers*, but that it would normally be odd to say they have *nimble legs* (though perhaps a soccer player or dancer might have them). The sound of *nimble* (the signifier, in semiotic terminology) is so tightly bound to the concept of nimbleness (the signified) in my mind that it seems they are one and the same: what else could *nimble* mean but nimble? The word is instantly, effortlessly evocative. It will be a long time before *leste* can produce an equal effect in me; and probably it never will. Words in a foreign language are like distant relatives or exchange students: their exoticism may be charming, but ultimately they count for less; they are just visitors, passersby. Even if they settle down and you get to know them well, they remain latecomers. Words in your native language, assuming you speak it all of your life (and don't renounce it for another), *are* your life, or at least what you can share of it with others;

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they are its symbolic encoding and when summoned can decode spontaneously to conjure up images, memories, a network of associations. In your native language, every word is a potential madeleine.

All of this is relevant to the question, Is it better to read a work of literature in one's native language or in the original language, assuming you're able? Is it better for me to read Proust, for example, in English or in French? Needless to say, reading a text in the language in which it was written is the choice that is normally valorized. Serious students of a work read it in the original. Translations are secondary, second best. The question tends to be to what extent a translation is adequate to the original text, with the implication of inescapable inadequacy. Translation is loss. The only reason not to read the original is pragmatic: you're just not able to. One of the problems with this sacralization of the original is precisely that it overlooks the lightness of foreign language. It assumes that once non-native speakers can read a text with reasonable ease, their access to it is not significantly different from native speakers' and that the problem of language has been taken care of. But a good translation arguably provides non-native speakers with an experience much closer to that of native speakers: native language always retains an evocative power, a vividness and a richness of connotation acquired over a lifetime's experience—in short, a weight—that non-native language can never match. Granted, a translation is not precisely the same as the original, just as *nimble* and *agile* are not exact equivalents of *leste*. But neither is the original text exactly the same for a non-native speaker. Given this choice, between a pale, blurry experience of the original and a more vivid, focused translation, the translation is often the better choice. In his recent essay, *Le rideau* (*The Curtain*), Milan Kundera makes the point that most of the great novels of world literature are read and sometimes best appreciated in translation:

Rabelais n'a jamais été mieux compris que par un Russe : Bakhtine ; Dostoïevski que par un Français : Gide ; Ibsen que par un Irlandais : G.B. Shaw ; James Joyce que par un Autrichien : Hermann Broch ; l'importance universelle de la génération des grands Nord-Américains, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos a été révélée en premier lieu par des écrivains français...

Est-ce que je veux dire par là que pour juger un roman on peut se passer de la connaissance de sa langue originale ? Bien sûr, c'est exactement ce que je veux dire ! Gide ne connaissait pas le russe, G.B. Shaw ne connaissait pas le norvégien, Sartre n'a pas lu Dos Passos dans le texte. Si les livres de Witold Gombrowicz et de Danilo Kis avaient dépendu uniquement du jugement de ceux qui connaissaient le polonais et le serbo-croate, leur radicale nouveauté esthétique n'aurait jamais été découverte. (50-51).

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And yet, if I'm aware that reading a work like *A la recherche du temps perdu* in the original has disadvantages, the fact is I *like* reading Proust in French. Indeed, I generally enjoy reading almost any novel in French, even a mediocre one that I probably wouldn't put up with for ten minutes in English. One reason for this, I think, is that French provides the pleasure of *dépaysement*—estrangement, unfamiliarity. Foreign language makes things foreign; the everyday becomes exotic. The Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky claimed that this effect is one of the goals of art and used the term *ostranenie*, usually translated as “defamiliarization,” to describe it. He wrote:

The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.²

What else does foreign language do but “make forms difficult”? The forms and sounds of foreign language are more difficult than those of native language and so we are inevitably much more conscious of them. In this sense, foreign language breaks the spell of language, the equivalence that we normally unconsciously make between signifier and signified, that sense that *nimble* doesn't just mean nimble, but *is* nimble. In a foreign language, it is as if we can observe the process of representation through language in slow motion, as we grope for understanding. We may perceive the arbitrary strangeness of an utterance or be seized by a vertiginous intuition of its rickety inadequacy. Paradoxically, the work we do to endow foreign words with meaning may also give them the superhuman weight of Delphic oracles. Thus, for example, the two-line poem by Catullus known as Carmen 85 seems more profound in Latin than English: *Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris. / Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.* (I hate and I love. Why do I do this, you might ask. / I don't know, but I feel it happening, and am tormented.). *Odi et amo* has the simplicity, yet somehow none of the banality, of “I hate and I love.” It has the power—the weight—of an ancient incantation.

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1. Proust, Marcel (trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin). *Remembrance of Things Past: Volume I – Swann's Way and Within a Budding Grove*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982 (p. 48).

2. Cited in the Viktor Shklovsky article on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Shklovsky.

Letter from the Administrator

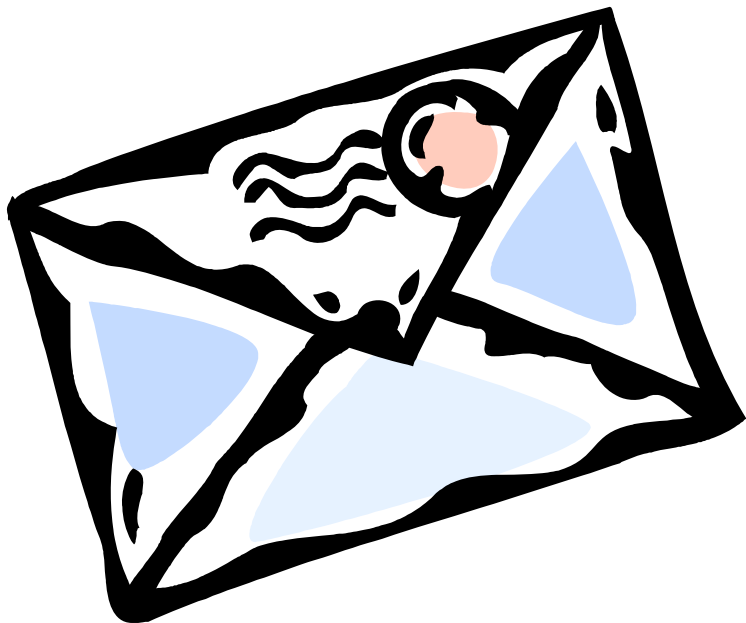
Hello and happy Fall from Colorado, where translators' thoughts are turning to our upcoming annual ATA conference in Orlando. The lineup of French-related speakers for this year looks particularly exciting and is headlined by the presence of our two Distinguished Speakers, well-known translator and translator trainer François Lavallée from Québec and Sandra Smith, the award-winning translator of *Suite Française*, who will be coming to us from Cambridge, UK. In addition, we'll be hearing from numerous volunteer presenters who are generously donating their time and expertise to help the rest of us advance our knowledge of the profession and of our specializations.

I'm looking forward to seeing many of you at Friday night's FLD wine and cheese networking hour, and at other events during the conference, including our division's annual meeting on Saturday. As you may know, my term as FLD Administrator is over at the end of the Orlando conference and I will be devoting my volunteer energies to serving as President of the Colorado Translators Association. It has been a real pleasure to serve the FLD as Administrator for the past two years, and I thank you for all of your support of our division!

Best wishes,

Corinne McKay

FLD Administrator



Got Milk? Interpreting for New Mothers

A bilingual glossary of breastfeeding terms by Barbara Collignon

Interpreting in healthcare for women can pose difficulties for those of us inexperienced in terminology related to aspects of new motherhood. It is not uncommon for first-time mothers, or even experienced mothers, to have problems breastfeeding their babies. You may have to interpret instructions from a nurse, lactation consultant or breast pump provider. Even new fathers are interested in this information.

One very good resource is Pamela K. Wiggins' *Why Should I Nurse My Baby?* (LA Publishing, 2005). This book covers reasons why breastfeeding is advantageous to the baby, instructions for breastfeeding preparation, diagrams of the breast, an overview of available devices, problems related to the mother and baby, tips for introducing solids and weaning, and advice for working mothers. Drawings and photographs by Jennifer Councill and Eric Garofalo enhance comprehension. The book is available in English and French (*Pourquoi allaiter mon bébé?* trans. Dany Gauthier) as well as five other languages at www.breastfeedingbooks.com.

Following are some sample entries from the bilingual glossary I compiled with the help of the French version of this book. For a copy of the full version (two Excel files), please contact me at bjcollig@wi.rr.com.

breast pump	tire-lait (m)
breast shield	bouclier (m)
duct/ducts	canal/canaux (m)
feeding	tétée (f)
inflow of milk	montée de lait (f)
pacifier	tétine, sucette (f)
weaning	sevrage (m)



Around the web – summer 2008

Interesting, useful and entertaining things we've found online

Blogs

Vie de Merde

Not only are these sad-but-true “petites anecdotes de la vie de tous les jours qui pourraient arriver à tout un chacun” often hilarious, but they're also an easy and fun way for the Anglophones among us who don't live in a French-speaking country to keep up with the latest trends in French slang and casual speech.

<http://www.viedemerde.fr/>

Polly-Vous Français ?

Paris-based American ex-pat Polly regularly posts thought-provoking observations on subtle differences between the two cultures, such as “Airing my clean laundry” (Jan. 24, 2008). See “One man's trash” (March 25, 2008) for some fun vintage French rebuses.

<http://www.pollyvousfrancais.blogspot.com/>

Petite Anglaise

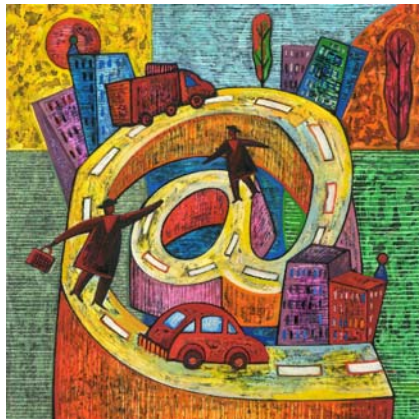
British ex-pat Catherine muses on life in Paris and the adventures of raising a bilingual child.

Don't miss archived posts such as “Wee oui!” (Jan. 17, 2005), “Caramel shoe shoe” (Feb. 1, 2005) and “Who's your daddy?” (Feb. 21, 2005) for a funny look at what happens when two languages meet.

N'importe Nawak

University of Washington graduate student Alex posts random observations on French language, culture and politics – many of which touch on translation.

<http://portnawak.info/Blog/>



Translation Workshop no. 3, part B

Below is the official translation of the source text featured in TW 3, Part A (see the spring 2008 issue), followed by comments from contributor Robert Killingsworth.

Autorité des Marchés Financiers (AMF) news release of 12 March 2008. Reprinted here with the kind permission of the AMF.

http://www.amf-france.org/Styles/Default/documents/general/8219_1.pdf

Better Regulation approach: AMF publishes simplified procedure for examining and authorising issue prospectuses for listed companies

Further to the public consultation on the simplified examination and authorisation procedure for public offerings by listed companies, the Autorité des marchés financiers (AMF) has published the new procedure approved by its Board. The procedure has been written into Article 5 of Instruction 2005-11 of 13 December 2005 on disclosure requirements for public offerings, pursuant to Title I of Book II of the AMF General Regulation.

The French financial community has unanimously welcomed the reform, which stems from the efforts of the Simple Track working group chaired by AMF Board Member Bernard Field. More generally, it derives directly from the AMF's Better Regulation approach. The aim was to carry out a fast-track review, in collaboration with the professionals concerned, of measures to simplify the ex ante control of corporate financing transactions by listed companies.

A well regulated procedure with obvious benefits

The procedure is intended for listed companies that have filed a registration document with the AMF three years in a row. On that condition, the AMF undertakes to:

- ensure that an issuer receives an answer within two business days to its application to use the simplified procedure;
- examine applications to use the simple track procedure within a short, predetermined timeframe;
- facilitate document scrutiny through the use of standard formats prepared by the French Association of Investment Firms (AFEI) and approved by the AMF.

Precisely defined parameters

The eligibility criteria for the simplified procedure are set out in Instruction 2005-11 and cover the following parameters:

- eligible companies,
- relevant transactions,
- standard securities notes (including summary),
- the documents that the AMF requires to reach its decision,
- details of how the AMF accepts or rejects the application.

The conditions for implementing the simplified procedure are set forth clearly in the AMF's rules and regulations, which will also stipulate the procedures for publishing and updating standard securities notes.

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Comments

I selected this passage knowing full well that it had already been translated: an English version of this news release is posted on the AMF's website, dated one day later than the French one. *Full credit* to anyone who guessed this would be the case and found the translation at the link given above! As with the text lifted from a French legal Code in the Fall Workshop example, if a semi-official translation is likely to exist, it is always worth having a look for it—and, if found, at it.

I do not know who the (uncredited) translator was. I can, however, explain some of the choices of terminology and wording that he or she made, in particular some that may not be obvious to US-based translators.

EU terminology. The AMF is France's securities regulator, and its agenda has been dominated by the directives and regulations issued as part of the European Commission's Financial Services Action Plan. In this text, the following equivalences are essentially dictated by the terms used in the French and English versions of EU legislation:

<i>sociétés cotées</i>	listed companies
<i>consultation publique</i>	public consultation
<i>opérations financières</i>	[securities] issues, public offerings ¹
<i>appels publics à l'épargne</i>	public offerings
<i>document de référence</i>	registration document
<i>notes d'opération</i>	securities note

The choice of British spelling and international date format can likewise be counted as EU convention.

AMF house style. Whereas in French the AMF may refer to itself for short as either the *l'AMF* or *l'Autorité*, in English it avoids calling itself "the Authority". It calls its *Collège* its "Board". Its "General Regulation" is indeed in the singular. Lowercase references to an *article*, *instruction*, *titre* or *livre* become capitalized in English: Article, Instruction, Title, Book. The "n^o" symbol is dispensed with in English.

Only a few of these strictures apply to the 195-word passage to be translated as opposed to the passage given as context. As to how the anonymous translator rendered it in English, I see several points to commend, such as the liberty taken to interpolate, for clarity, a reference to the simple track procedure in the second bullet point and the translation of *sociétés concernées* by "eligible companies".

As to what I might have done differently, I can point only to two things in the context passage.² I think "initiative" would be a better word than "approach" for the *démarche* « *Meilleure régulation* ». And for *Cette réforme a été accueillie favorablement par l'ensemble de la Place financière de Paris*, I fear I would **not** have come up with anything quite as good as "The French financial community has unanimously welcomed this reform"!

—Robert Killingsworth

1. But see later in the context passage, where "corporate financing transactions" has been substituted.

2. I would also have wanted to put "Autorité des Marchés Financiers" in English, but alas, the French capitalization practice appears to be house style.

Letter to the Editor

Several of the terms in the proposed translation (*Translation Workshop no. 1, part B, winter 2008*) are not the ones I would have chosen.

Bylaws. Unless instructed not to by the client, I always assume that I am translating for a worldwide audience. For a European company, I use EU terminology, which in this case is **articles of association**. I figure that the reader of this kind of document would not need or expect a “localized” version of an English-language document from a company incorporated in the UK or Ireland. Why should it be different for a French company?

Joint-stock corporation. Today the “joint-stock” qualifier is primarily a historical term. Arguably, it is not wrong: Britain’s joint-stock companies of the 18th century were the progenitors of all modern investor-owned corporations, which share several of their key characteristics. But this term started to drop out of sight in its homeland following the UK Companies Act of 1855, which generalized the even more essential characteristic of limited liability. Furthermore, in the US, some state statutes *define* joint-stock corporation as one *without* limited liability, although any that still exist must be vanishingly rare. For these reasons, I would put

SAS (simplified company with shares) and leave it at that. By all means, preserve the initialism SAS: this relatively new corporate form is so far unique to France. To describe it, I would borrow the “company with shares” formula common in the English-speaking EU countries. Substituting the word “corporation” seems to me unnecessary and inappropriate for a region where corporate law is known as “company law” and some “companies” are partnerships.

Preferential. The standard US/UK term is **pre-emptive subscription right**. Some other *droits préférentiels* might conceivably warrant “preferential” in English, but this one does not. Lastly, two substantive matters:

In the first line of the text, there is no excuse for the definite article in “the planned use”; it is *un projet* in French. “A planned use,” please.

In the third line, “require” for *emporera* gets the sense backward. To be sure on this point, I tried to consult Article 2078 of the Civil Code at www.légifrance.fr—but it is no longer there! (Having been on the books since 1804, this article may now have been “modernized.”) But there is still an apposite reference to it in the Monetary and Financial Code, available in English translation at the same site. Article L214-65 of said Code concludes as follows: “If the company has given its consent for a proposed pledging of units as envisaged above, that consent shall constitute approval in the event of a forced sale of the pledged units pursuant to the provisions of the first paragraph of Article 2078 of the Civil Code, unless the company prefers to buy back the units immediately after the sale in order to reduce its capital.”

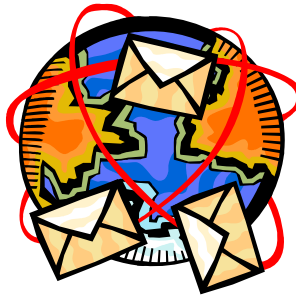
(Continued from page 10)

(The MonFin Code English translation is one of the better ones on the site, in my opinion. This particular passage applies to a form of company different from an SAS, which explains the use of “units”.)

The French text of the quoted passage follows. As you can see, the drafters of the SAS’s articles of association lifted its language virtually word for word.

“Si la société a donné son consentement à un projet de nantissement de parts dans les conditions prévues ci-dessus, ce consentement emportera agrément en cas de réalisation forcée des parts nanties selon les dispositions du premier alinéa de l'article 2078 du code civil, à moins que la société ne préfère, après la cession, racheter sans délai les parts, en vue de réduire son capital.”

—Robert Killingsworth



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