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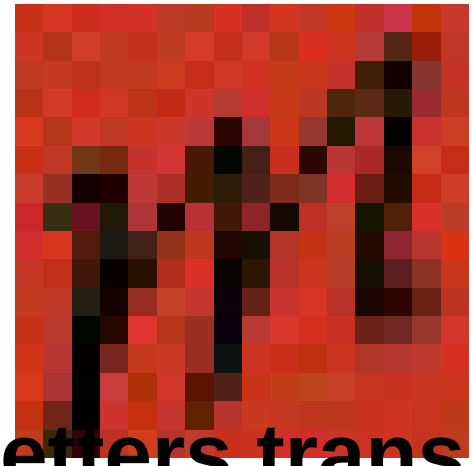

Persian Letters trans. Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard, South Bend (Indiana), St. Augustine's Press, 2017

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This third English translation of *Lettres persanes* to appear within a decade has brought the overall number to nine [1] . Like Margaret Mauldon's version, it takes cognizance of the 2004 critical edition (in vol. I of *Ruvres complètes* [2], but unlike it reverts nonetheless to the 1758 text of 161 letters. The annotation is restrained and sober but still quite satisfactory. Since Warner (he clearly is the principal translator here, assisted by Douard, so I will refer to him in the singular) does not mention previous translations, it is not clear whether he was familiar with the two just preceding his, by Mauldon and MacKenzie, which I reviewed on this site in 2017 [3] .

Since a perfect turn or phrase would not attract notice, it is hard to give examples of particular success : this would apply to any translation. So it is almost necessary to focus mostly on questionable passages, which have the advantage of provoking the most interesting reflection on the source and target languages themselves. All translators are subject to lapses, and are hardly demeaned by reasonable numbers of them.

Warner avoids most of the simple cognate errors that obviously bedevil facile or naïve attempts at translation - for example, earlier mistranslations of *nature humaine* as "human nature" when it really means humankind [4] , but then he leans over backwards translating *les hommes* as "all humankind" (117 [121]), [5] which is not really correct, and on the other hand sometimes slips into using "empire" for *empire* when it means not empire but power or sway. Warner corrects the literal rendering of *caput mortuum* as "death's head" found in earlier translations (it is in fact a chemical term for residue or precipitate), but misreads the Latin expressions *Fiat clister* and *Fiat ptisana aperiens* in letter 137 (143) as "Let there be an enema" and "Let there be a laxative potion", which don't make much sense.

There are innumerable such hurdles posed by Montesquieu's text, and not all misrepresentations are important or really likely to impede the understanding of the text, though in any kind of close reading they might throw the reader off. Any given slip can offer only a glimpse and may not be quite fair, *i.e.*, typical of the translator. Warner's translation to be sure reads smoothly most of the time and conveys the essential gist even when, viewed up close, it may appear not to be spot on.

Warner is apparently unaware that the chief black eunuch and the chief eunuch are the same person, a nontrivial matter. He translates *elles ont des revers terribles* (letter 9) as "their revenge is terrible", which mistakes the meaning of *revers* (a reversal, as in letters 99 [102] and 126 [132]), and he translates *elles me font faire de fausses confidences* in the same letter, as "They involve me in false confidences", which is evasive. Montesquieu's earliest translators - John Ozell for *Persian Letters* and Thomas Nugent for *The Spirit of Law* - were already adroitly sidestepping many passages they apparently had difficulty understanding. Details can also be less than perfect without being exactly wrong, and not all infelicities or even inaccuracies are easily or at all perceptible to most readers or have much impact on meaning.

Another good test case is how to deal with English equivalents for French words like *doux* (and *adoucir*, etc.) when they do not refer to sweetness or softness, and perhaps even more seriously *mou* (*amollir*, *mollesse*), especially when applied to people. In letter 103 (106), Usbek writes to Rhedi, who in the previous letter has deprecated the arts : *Tu crois que les arts amollissent les peuples et par là sont cause de la chute des empires. Tu parles de la ruine de celui des anciens Perses, qui fut l'effet de leur mollesse* [...]. The Warner version for this portion of the letter is : "You believe the arts weaken nations and, because of that, are the cause of the fall of empires. You speak of the ruin of the ancient Persians, which was the effect of their softness." "Weaken" is not too bad for *amollir*, but *peuples* does not mean "nations", "the ancient Persians" is inaccurate for *[l'empire] des anciens Perses* ; and "softness" for *mollesse*, as I have already suggested, absolutely will not do. A bit further on, mollesse is translated instead as "indolence," which is certainly better, at least in that context.

In the same letter, the sentence *Quand on dit que les arts rendent les hommes efféminés, on ne parle pas du moins des gens qui s'y appliquent, puisqu'ils ne sont jamais dans l'oisiveté, qui de tous les vices est celui qui amollit le plus le courage* becomes : "When people say that the arts render men effeminate, they are at least not talking about those who practice them, for they are never idle, which, of all vices, is the one that weakens courage the most." Two problems here : *on ne parle pas du moins* would be more accurately rendered "they cannot be referring to [...]" ; and more seriously, as a result of turning *oisiveté* into the adjective "idle", "which" finds itself with no antecedent.

The alchemist of letter 43 (45), esteeming himself newly rich, says to Rhedi : *Commençons par aller acheter un carrosse, et établissons d'abord l'équipage*. Warner translates : "Let us begin [...] by buying a carriage and acquiring the equipment for it." But no. Mauldon had rendered *equipage* as "a carriage and pair", which is closer, yet the word means more than just horses. The same character explains to Rhedi how he began the day : *j'ai fait d'abord ce que je fais depuis vingt-cinq ans, qui est d'aller visiter mon oeuvre,* concluding with : *[...] et je me trouve aujourd'hui un heureux adepte*. For *visiter mon oeuvre*, Warner writes : 'visit my work', reflecting unawareness that *oeuvre* has a highly specific meaning in any discussion of alchemy, and thus fails to nail the conclusion : for an adept is the alchemist (or "philosopher") who has discovered the philosopher's stone (*mon oeuvre*). "I find myself a happy adept" seems to miss the essential point.

Here is another example with a bit more context :

Ismaël, un de tes eunuques noirs, vient de mourir, magnifique seigneur, et je ne puis m'empêcher de le remplacer. Comme les eunuques sont extrêmement rares à présent, j'avais pensé de me servir d'un esclave noir que tu as à la campagne, mais je n'ai pu jusques ici le porter à souffrir qu'on le consacrât à cet emploi. Comme je vois qu'au bout du compte c'est son avantage, je voulus l'autre jour user à son égard d'un peu de rigueur, et de concert avec l'intendant de tes jardins, j'ordonnai que malgré lui on le mît en état de te rendre les services qui flattent le plus ton coeur, et de vivre comme moi dans ces redoutables lieux qu'il n'ose pas même regarder ; mais il se mit à hurler comme si on avait voulu l'écorcher, et fit tant qu'il échappa de nos mains et évita le fatal couteau. [Letter 39 (41), from the head eunuch to Usbek]

Ismael, one of your black eunuchs, has just died, magnificent lord, and I cannot refrain from replacing him. As eunuchs are extremely rare at present, I had thought of making use of a black slave you have in the country, but thus far I have not been able to get him to suffer being *consecrated for that use*. Since I see in the end that it is to his advantage, *I wanted* the other day to *use a little rigor with regard to him* ; and, in concert with the intendant of your gardens, I ordered, against his will, that he be put in that condition of rendering to you the services which most flatter your heart, and of living like me in *those dreadful places at which he dares not even to look*. But he began to howl as if we were going to skin him alive, and he struggled so much that he escaped from our hands and avoided the fatal knife [6] .

Consecrated for that use seems to suggest some kind of holy rite, which is hardly apposite to the victim contemplated here. "[...] *je voulus l'autre jour user à son égard d'un peu de rigueur*" would trip up most translators because, though this is a subtle point, je voulus in this preterite construction really means not "I wanted to" but "I tried to" ; and "to use a little rigor with regard to him" seems too euphemistic for the brute force meant by *user à son égard d'un peu de rigueur*. In addition, *ces redoutables lieux* are doubtless less "dreadful" in the sense of repugnance than simply dangerous. It is possible to get every word more or less right and still not hit on the exact meaning.

In Rhedi's letter about *un des hommes du royaume qui représente le mieux* (letter 72 [74]), Warner's version calls him "one of the best men of the kingdom at maintaining the dignity of his position", a roundabout way of getting at the idea. This same gentleman *[...] fait sentir à tous les instants la supériorité qu'il a sur tous ceux qui l'approchent* ; *si cela est*, Rica responds, *je n'ai que faire d'y aller ; je prends déjà condamnation, et je la lui passe toute entière*" : Warner renders this reply as "I completely accept his superiority, and accept the condemnation", a gist which is

largely correct (the antecedent of *la* in *je la lui passe* is indeed *supériorité*) but "accept the condemnation" makes no obvious sense.

Another of Montesquieu's curious character types brings into play another sort of tricky and non-standard vocabulary. A geometer, *martyr de sa justesse*, writes Rica, was *offensé d'une saillie* (letter 123 [128]). Warner translates : "a martyr to his own exactitude, he was offended by a witty remark", which at once seems a little odd. *Saillie* can sometimes mean a witty remark, particularly in literary contexts stressing conversation, and it is indeed used that way in letters 52 (54) and 59 (61). But its primary definition [7] is the one appropriate here, to mean that the geometer was offended by anything that was (architecturally speaking) out of line, in keeping with the comparison which continues the sentence : *[...] comme une vue délicate est offensée par une lumière trop vive*, and makes it clear the he is referring to something projecting out from its background.

The sentence : *Les rois font comme ces ouvriers habiles qui pour exécuter leurs ouvrages se servent toujours des machines les plus simples* (letter 86 [88]) is rendered : "Kings are like skillful artisans who, in order to create their products, prefer to use the simplest tools." *Font* is thus translated "are", and though in itself this is not greatly misleading, the sentence has rather to do with what kings *do* than what they *are* : that is, their behavior is analogous to that of certain artisans. "Products" is too industrial a term to apply both to workers and kings, as the parallel would require ; *ouvrage* can refer either to a particular piece of work, as in a shop, or a major public project like a road, bridge, or building ; and for the same reason, a larger scale of contrivances than "tools" is indicated by *machines* [8] . Such details are worth taking up because they are instructive, and instructive in the first place with respect to the problems, options, and limits of translation.

One final example :

Vous pouvez à votre fantaisie redoubler vos mauvais traitements. Mon coeur est tranquille depuis qu'il ne peut plus vous aimer. Votre âme se dégrade et vous devenez cruel. Soyez sûr que vous n'êtes pas heureux. [Supplementary letter X (158).]

You may, in your imagination, redouble your mistreatment of me. My heart is tranquil, since it is no longer in love with you. Your soul degrades itself, and you have become cruel. Rest assured that you will never be happy.

À votre fantaisie means "as much as you like", and not "in your imagination" ; *il ne peut plus vous aimer* means "[my heart] can no longer love you" and not "it is no longer in love with you" ; *votre âme se dégrade* is very hard both to understand and to translate, but "your soul degrades itself" is truly not English ; *soyez sûr* does not quite mean "rest assured" ; and *vous n'êtes pas heureux does not mean* "you will never be happy". Some of the points are subtle but not beyond what one should expect of a translator. One has a bit the impression that the translator was pressed to finish and taking less time to weigh the terms of both languages.

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[1] I have addressed the first seven translations in "Les *Lettres persanes* en sept traductions anglaises (1722-2008)", *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, nouvelle série, n° 134 (2013), pp. 103-126.

[2] Now on line here.

[3] Read here. I will draw here on some of the textual examples I used then.

[4] "On dit aussi, *La nature humaine*, pour dire, Le genre humain" (*Le dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1762, art. "Nature").

[5] The second number is that of the 1758 edition.

[6] Italics added.

[7] Furetière's main definition is "Partie d'un bâtiment qui avance sur la rue, qui n'est pas à plomb sur les fondements. [...] On ne permet plus de faire maintenant des saillies sur les rues."

[8] "On donne le nom de machine en général à tout ce qui n'a de mouvement que par l'artifice des hommes, comme les scènes & les théatres mobiles, les chars, les nues, les vaisseaux, & aussi ce qui sert aux hommes pour faire des choses qui sont au-dessus de leurs forces, comme les vols, les descentes, &c" (*Dictionnaire universel français et latin, vulgairement appellé dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 1743, art."Machine").