

Some Remarks on Mark Twain and Translation

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Translated by Frédéric Dumas

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A Tramp Abroad: to translate or not to translate

I have a prejudice against people who print things in a foreign language and add no translation. When I am the reader, and the author considers me able to do the translating myself, he pays me quite a nice compliment,—but if he would do the translating for me I would try to get along without the compliment. (*A Tramp Abroad*, 64)

Twain's own narrative in *A Tramp Abroad* is accordingly devoid of such a flaw—at least until he delegates Harris, his agent, to visit a few Swiss landmarks “for insertion in [his] book” (153). Upon his return, Harris tenders his report; the following passage is an attempt at catching the literary spirit of his lengthy account:

we [...] arrived at the *maison* [...] in a little under *quatre* hours. The want of variety [...] made the *Kahkahponeeeka* wearisome; but [...] no one can fail to be completely *recomposée* for his fatigue [...]. [...] a *pas* further has placed us on the summit of the Furka [...] at a *hopow*

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of only fifteen miles [...]. [...] no other prominent feature in the Oberland is visible from this *bong-a-bong* [...].

we formed a large *xhlvoj* as we descended the *steg* [...]. [...] the wider track [...] connects the Grimsel with the head of the Rhone *schnawp* [...]. [...] the gap was certainly not larger than a *mmbglx* might cross with a very slight leap. [...] the Wellhorn [...] completes the enchanting *bopple*. [...] we were again overtaken by bad *hogglebungullup* and arrived at the hotel in a *solche* [...]. [...] we hoped to find *guttten Wetter* up above [...]. [...] the rain was exchanged for *gnillic*, with which the *Boden* was thickly covered, and before we arrived at the top the *gnillic* [...] at more than twenty *poopoo* distance [...]. [...] there must have been at least twelve *dingblatter* of frost (153, 6)

Twain includes the full report in his travelogue, though several passages contain so many foreign terms as to be incomprehensible. His reaction is ruthless. He first assumes the role of a lost reader, picking up some particularly indecipherable words and asking for the suitable English equivalent. In so doing, he voices his average reader's puzzlement, deciphers a few meaningless sentences and initiates his conception of the reception of a text:

“What is ‘*dingblatter*’?”

“*dingblatter* is a Fiji word meaning ‘degrees.’”

“You knew the English of it, then?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What is ‘*gnillic*’?”

“That is the Eskimo term for ‘snow.’”

“So you knew the English for that, too?”

“Why, certainly.”

“What does “*mmbglx*” stand for?”

“That is Zulu for ‘pedestrian.’”

“[...] What is ‘*bopple*’?”

“‘Picture’ It’s Choctaw.” [...]

“What does ‘*hogglebungullup*’ mean?”

“That is Chinese for ‘weather.’”

“Is ‘*hogglebungullup*’ better than the English word? Is it any more descriptive?”

“No, it means just the same.” [...]

“And *dingblatter* and *gnillic*, and *bopple*, and *schnawp*—are they better than the English words?”

“No, they mean just what the English ones do.”

“Then why do you use them? Why have you used all this Chinese and Choctaw and Zulu rubbish?”

“Because I didn’t know any French but two or three words, and I didn’t know any Latin or Greek at all.” (158)

Harris’s English is faulty because of his ludicrous use of untranslated words: words in languages that have nothing to do with the region he has just explored. Unlike the foreigners who deal with American tourists, he does not have the excuse of having to grapple with English in order to make a living. He admits he does not know French so as to suggest that he actually speaks Chinese, Choctaw and Zulu. His initiative stems from sheer pretentious snobbery at suggesting his mastery of different tongues and from his complacent adherence to a generalized trend in the field:

“Why should you want to use foreign words, anyhow?”

“They adorn my page. They all do it.”

“Who is ‘all’?”

“Everybody. Everybody that writes elegantly.” (158)

Just as art critics end up ignoring the intrinsic quality of the object of their study so as to create a flowery yet empty linguistic display, Harris falls victim to a widespread self-indulgent streak that prompts him to write a text for its decorative value only. The Swiss mountains he discovered, and whose beauty he was to give a faithful account of, have become obliterated by his bastardized English and readers may only guess at the type of sights he is depicting. The “elegance” he invokes is purely ornamental and on the whole quite predictable, for it is based solely on the

tastes of the majority as assumed by like-minded authors. In this case the spoiled masterpiece is both that of Nature, of which Harris's bloated style prevents Twain's reader from getting a clear representation, and the persona's own literary creation marred for a few pages right in its middle by an intrusive intradiegetic narrator.

Twain challenges such an inappropriate attitude on several grounds; his answer amounts to an aesthetic manifesto that distinguishes between highbrow and lowbrow literature. Placed at the heart of his book, this pivotal clarification defines his readership and enunciates his programmatic statement:

When really learned men write books for other learned men to read, they are justified in using as many learned words as they please—their audience will understand them; but a man who writes a book for the general public to read is not justified in disfiguring his pages with untranslated foreign expressions. It is an insolence toward the majority of the purchasers, for it is a very frank and impudent way of saying, 'Get the translations made yourself if you want them, this book is not written for the ignorant classes.' (158)

The implied reader of *A Tramp Abroad* is first and foremost a "purchaser," a consumer involved in a business deal that, in an ideal mercantile system, must prove profitable for both parties. His trustful investment must be rewarded. Alienating him from total understanding comes down to a breach in the implicit contract that binds the writer/producer to his reader/buyer. As for the "disfiguring" of the pages, it contradicts the supposed elegance intended by fatuous authors who "adorn theirs with insolent odds and ends smouched from half a dozen learned tongues whose *a-b abs* they don't even know" (159). [...] the tourists' mother tongue is a sign of aristocratic election: "the foreign words and phrases [...] have their exact equivalents in a nobler language—English" (159). This elitist conception is rooted in the tradition of the Grand Tour, of which Twain's cruise composes a pathetic modern equivalent: "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many European men of culture liked to boast of having made more than one country their own. To travel was to become a man of the world" (Boorstin, 82).

After temporarily relinquishing his narrative authority for including Harris's account, Twain resumes his story and takes on full responsibility for the integrity of a text that logically abides by his uncompromising theory. Just one chapter and a

few pages later, though, as he arrives at a cosmopolitan hotel, he blatantly lapses into the fault he so pitilessly condemns:

The table d'hote was served by waitresses dressed in the quaint and comely costume of the Swiss peasants. This consists of a simple gros de laine, trimmed with ashes of roses, with overskirt of sacre bleu ventre saint gris, cut bias on the off-side, with facings of petit polonaise and narrow insertions of paté de foie gras backstitched to the mise en scène in the form of a jeu d'esprit. It gives to the wearer a singularly piquant and alluring aspect. (167)

This description obviously echoes Harris's, as well as countless others written in the same vein. This time, the foreign words are not italicized, as if using them followed naturally.

To some extent the device might be justified by Twain's attempt at reproducing the jumbling phrases heard in the hotel, where "one heard all sorts of languages" (167). This stylistic option, however, is highly unlikely, for in that touristic atmosphere such a linguistic situation is "as usual" (167) and the persona mixes English with French only. His provocative choice seems to have been inspired by the waitresses' "costume of the Swiss peasant," which makes them a theatrical embodiment of (French) Swissness devised for the tourist crowd and which Twain lampoons by using what little French the average foreign tourist might grasp in his travels or remember from clichéd representations of French culture. [...] In that case the reader unfamiliar with French may not fully comprehend the Rabelaisian comic tableau, but the hackneyed "paté de foie gras" guarantees he will perceive the absurdist quality of the moment as food catering waitresses are wearing dresses made of highly edible and desirable material. As for the Francophones, they will definitely appreciate the brief surrealistic, burlesque scene for its own diegetic sake. At any rate, the attentive reader will notice that the last two instances of French—"mise en scène" and "jeu d'esprit"—turn out to condense at once the playful spirit of the whole construct and its fundamentally textual nature. Despite Twain's avowed claim, *A Tramp Abroad* also displays highbrow concerns; unlike the pedantic stories it satirizes, the narration proudly displays its meta/intertextual quality and demonstrates that it is still possible to instill life into the apparently exhausted genre of travel writing.

Twain the Translator: the Case of “The Jumping Frog”

“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” was published in 1865 in *The Saturday Press*, a New York literary journal, as “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog.” It contributed to Twain’s reputation as a major American humorist and was translated into French in the respected *Revue des deux Mondes* in 1872. Thérèse Bentzon’s translation was particularly clumsy [...]. Twain felt greatly offended, all the more so since as a preamble she stated that “it is rather difficult [...] to understand the roars of laughter it has aroused [...], its numerous publications, the epithet ‘inimitable’ that English reviewers have lavished on it” (314).¹ Right from the start, her savage attack on Twain coincides with a pro-French celebration: “although it is a product of wit, whose true birthplace is France, humor remains unfamiliar to us” (313).² In 1875 Twain published his answer in vindication of what he claimed was unfair treatment inflicted upon his writing. The provocative title obliquely ridicules Bentzon’s jingoism: “The Jumping Frog: In English. Then In French. Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil,” comprises the original story, followed by a great part of its French translation, which Twain himself retranslated into English.

In his opinion, Bentzon “has not translated it at all; he [sic] has simply mixed it all up; it is no more like the Jumping Frog when he gets through with it than I am like a meridian of longitude.” He then stakes his claim to the task; his not being a professional linguist does not rule him out as a competent translator, far from it, for he belongs to a highly considered national type—i.e., the self-taught, hard-working citizen. The notion is introduced as early as the title in the allusion to the author as “patient” at his “toil,” pursued as the prolegomenon refers to his “having scarcely rested from [his] work during five days and nights.” In a country owing so much to individual enterprise, such arguments as “I cannot speak the French language, but I can translate very well, though not fast, I being self-educated” cannot fail to impress the average reader favorably. From then on, asking the latter to “run his eye over the original English version of the jumping Frog, and then read the French or my retranslation, and kindly take notice how the Frenchman has *riddled* the

¹ “Il nous est assez difficile [...] de comprendre les éclats de rire (*roars of laughter*) qu’il souleva [...], les nombreuses éditions qu’il obtint, l’épithète ‘d’inimitable’ que lui ont décernée à l’envi les critiques de la presse anglaise.” (my translation)

² “l’humour, bien qu’il relève de l’esprit, dont la vraie patrie est en France, nous demeure étranger.” (my translation)

grammar”¹ will amount to a mere rhetorical question, especially after adding “I think it is the worst I ever saw.”

The reader’s approval is essential to Twain, who is often impossible to distinguish from his persona in his mix of common sense and unmistakable bad faith. His foreword has a lot in common with a speech delivered before an audience, in a straightforward style sometimes devised to trigger the spectators’ approval.

Twain was a master showman and his provocative stance recalls the live performances he was so famous for. The analysis of his translating method proves enlightening, for it provides keys to both his conception of translation and its inclusion in his narrative scheme. The present study does not aim to present a full scale study of Twain’s *modus operandi*. It focuses on an exemplary textual portion so as to bring out the complexity of his ambivalent response to what he considers literary betrayal (his preamble begins like a defense lawyer’s opening speech: “Even a criminal is entitled to fair play”)

When the departure text reads “I don’t recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other,” the *Revue* publishes “je ne me rappelle pas exactement. Ce qui me fait croire que c’était l’un ou l’autre”- which is a faithful equivalent. Twain surprisingly translates the French into “I no me recollect not exactly. This which me makes to believe that it was the one or the other.” This gibberish has nothing to do with Bentzon’s correctness and on the technical plane results from a literal transformation that flouts all linguistic logic. In this context “to recollect” is an intransitive verb, and any proper dictionary will suggest a reflexive one for the French, as the *Revue* did.

As for the nonsensical remainder of the extract, it is merely a rigorous calque. [...]

An Anglophone reader unfamiliar with French will perforce skip Bentzon’s text; the ensuing comparison of the two radically different English versions should definitely guarantee the author the support of his readership. Those familiar with French may notice the appalling quality of the *Revue* version while perceiving Twain’s trickery, without necessarily holding it against him. For the original “Jumping Frog” was blatantly betrayed and the wronged author’s defense does deserve to be heard, especially since his exaggerated manipulation of the French version is in total harmony with the hyperbolic comic humor that has become his hallmark. To a great extent, his story as retranslated by himself is a new “Jumping

¹ My emphasis.

Frog” that will from then on stand alongside the original; its English is broken so horrendously that it may be said to bear the Twain seal of authenticity. The three versions of the same story, put together by the author himself, have now become an integrated whole within the wider context of the Twain corpus. Framing a faulty translation (and making sure the reader cannot miss how faulty it is) between two easily identifiable Twain stories amounts to a narrative choice equivalent to the author’s common practice of inserting an intradiegetic account within his persona’s adventures. The persona being so close to the empirical author, the annexed part becomes another piece in the latter’s master plan; publishing the three stories together gives Twain the opportunity to control the reception of his corpus by neutralizing the potentially negative impact of Bentzon’s translation.

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