

A Comparison of Translation Styles

William Bryant

Volume 17, Number 3, septembre 1972

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002173ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/002173ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Bryant, W. (1972). A Comparison of Translation Styles. *Meta*, 17(3), 160-164.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/002173ar>

a
comparison
of
translation styles

There are two contrasting schools of thought with regard to translation, according to Theodore Savory, the school which opts for « faithful » translations and the one which favors « free » translations¹. No one will argue that some translators, « freer » in their persuasion than others, are not more interested in the spirit than in the letter, more intent on producing an accurate over-all rendition of the central ideas and tone of the original than on merely squeezing out an interpretation on a narrow word-by-word, one-to-one basis. It will be seen, however, that a so-called free translation can often be more faithful to the original than a more literal version, and that the real dichotomy is not between « faithful » and « free » but rather between good and bad translations.

Two prime examples of this « faithful-free » polarity among translators are Louise Varèse, one of the « faithful », and Norman Cameron, one of the « free ». In a comparison of the different approaches that they use in their translations of Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*², certain stylistic strategies stand out, as would be expected, which point up their differences. A few examples in each category should suffice to demonstrate the major techniques utilized.

While both Varèse and Cameron make extensive use of literal translation, many of the former's renditions seem rather stiff and unnatural; Cameron's version is much more fluid and sounds less like a translation. The following instances will illustrate the absurdity to which an overscrupulous fidelity to literal translation may lead :

RIMBAUD

1. *Quel siècle à mains*³ !

TRANSLATIONS

Varèse : *What an age of hands!*

Cameron : *What a manual age!*

1. Theodore Savory, *The Art of Translation*, 2nd ed., Boston, The Writer, 1968, p. 50-51.
2. Norman Cameron, trans., *A Season in Hell*, by Arthur Rimbaud, London, John Lehmann, 1949; Louise Varèse, trans., *Une saison en enfer et le Bateau ivre. A Season in Hell and the Drunken Boat*, Norfolk (Conn.), New Directions, 1961.
3. Italics mine.

2. Ô mon abnégation, ô ma charité merveilleuse ! *Ici-bas, pourtant !*
 V. : O my abnegation, O my marvelous charity ! *here below, however !*
 C. : Think of my self-abnegation, my marvelous charity — *and down in these depths, too !*
3. Je n'aurai jamais ma main.
 V. : I shall never *have my hand.*
 C. : I shall never *be capable with my hands.*

As is evident, Varèse's « faithful », overprecise interpretation misses the mark : it not only sounds « foreign » in its manner and style, but it hardly makes sense in English, whether in context or not.

In addition to literal translation, the translator has another procedure at his disposal, « abridgement », which is simply a shortening, a concentration, a reduction in compass or scope with the retention of relative completeness. Neither translator uses this mode very much, due no doubt to the fact that Rimbaud's phraseology, in its poetic compactness, is already at a level of an almost irreducible minimum of terseness. Note the following examples :

1. cet élégant jeune homme, entrant dans la belle et calme maison...
 V. : going into the beautiful, calm house...
 C. : going into *the fine house.*
2. Faim, soif, danse, danse, danse, danse !
 V. : Hunger, thirst, shouts, dance, dance, dance, dance !
 C. : Hunger, thirst and shouting, *dance, dance, dance !*
3. Trois fois béni soit le conseil qui m'est arrivé !
 V. : Thrice blessed be the counsel that came to me !
 C. : Thrice happy the thought !

We note, in the first example given above, that Cameron has condensed Rimbaud's thought by reducing the two original adjectives *belle et calme* into one, « fine ». Varèse, on the other hand, is content to give a literal translation, as is her custom. Cameron's version seems to ring truer, and the beauty of the original phrase has not at all been diminished in the movement from one language to another.

Diametrically opposed to the procedure of abridgement is the technique of « amplification⁴ », a lengthening or enlargement of the original thought. This stylistic manoeuvre is brought into play where the source language utilizes fewer words than the target language to express the same idea. Cameron uses this device quite often, whereas Varèse does not, a principle which can be seen clearly in these sentences :

1. Mais ! qui a fait ma langue perfide tellement...
 V. : But who gave me so perfidious a tongue...
 C. : But, *here's a question.* Who made my tongue so deceitful ?
2. Puis quoi !... *Aller* mes vingt ans, si les autres *vont* vingt ans...
 V. : What of it... To go my twenty years, if others go their twenty years...
 C. : What of it ? *I shall go through with my twenty years, if the others will go through with theirs.*

4. For some of the terminology employed herein, I am indebted to J. Darbelnet and J.-P. Vinay, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, rev., London, George G. Harrap & Co., 1960, *passim*.

3. Les femmes *soignent* ces féroces infirmes V. : Women nurse those fierce invalids, home
retour des pays chauds. from hot countries.
C. : Women *love to look after* these ferocious
invalids, back from the hot countries.

In the first instance, the amplification « here's a question » is not absolutely necessary, nor indeed is it expected, but it does lend a greater fluidity to the English sentence. In the second example, the amplification « I shall go through with » is almost obligatory ; otherwise, the whole sentence falls flat and sounds rather foreign, as does Varèse's translation in this case.

Finally, at the disposal of the translator are different types of what might be called « variation », a cover term that includes a variety of stylistic actions. Concerning the position of a word in a series, it need not be pointed out that what is permitted syntactically in one language is sometimes not allowed in another. Thus, in a procedure which we shall call (for want of a better term) « permutation of serial components », words in a sequence or in series may sometimes be rearranged in their order of appearance in the sequence by the translator with no toxic effect. Sometimes this rearrangement or permutation is optional, sometimes obligatory. Surprisingly, Cameron does not utilize this mode at all. We see this in operation in these excerpts :

1. *patrie de l'ombre et des tourbillons.* V. : home of whirlwinds and of darkness.
C. : country of darkness and whirlwinds.
2. *J'ai appelé les fléaux, pour m'étouffer avec
le sable, le sang.* V. : I called to the plagues to smother me in
blood, in sand.
C. : I summoned all plagues, to choke me
in sand and blood.

It is not surprising that Cameron does not utilize this mode at all, for it is, after all, just another aspect of literal translation and thus perhaps not very challenging to a « free » translator.

A much more frequently used translational device is that of « displacement », which is the positional shift of adjectives, adverbs, noun phrases, verb phrases, and prepositional phrases from one part of a sentence to another. The data from the corpus show that Varèse often displaces the adjective, while Cameron does not. Conversely, Cameron frequently moves the adverb, while Varèse does not. Moreover, while Varèse will occasionally shift the position of phrases, she does not do it enough for it to be called one of her tendencies. Displacement is, however, a striking feature of the *modus operandi* of Cameron. One can be certain that he will almost always move the position — however slightly — of one of the above-mentioned phrase types. Witness these projections :

1. *Je n'en finirai pas de me revoir dans ce
passé.* V. : I shall never have done seeing myself
in that past.
C. : *Within this past*, there is no end to my
reminiscent vision of myself.
2. *il faut que je sache, s'il doit remonter à un
ciel...* V. : I must know if he is to ascend into some
heaven again...
C. : *If he is to rise again to some heaven*,
I must be informed.

3. *Adieu* chimères, idéals, erreurs !

V. : Farewell chimeras, ideals, errors !

C. : Fancies, ideals, errors — *farewell!*

There being no apparent syntactic or phonological necessity for the displacement shown in the above examples, one can only conclude that it is for stylistic reasons alone that Cameron employs this linguistic device. The only advantage achieved, it would seem, is that the sentences become somewhat more dramatic in tone in that the main idea in each sentence appears at the end instead of at the beginning.

« Transposition », a movement from one part of speech to another, changes an element's grammatical category without, however, changing the basic meaning necessarily. It is used quite extensively by Cameron but only rarely by Varèse. There are, it will be seen, many kinds of possible transpositions : adverb/verb ; verb/noun/ noun/past participle ; verb/preposition/ past participle/noun ; adjective/noun ; adverb/adjective, and so on. The first of the following examples demonstrates the transposition of a verb in the original corpus into a noun in Cameron's translation. The second example displays the transition of a simple verb into a verb phrase, or from another point of view, the transition of a functive verb into a stative verb.

1. la foi *soulage, guide, guérit.*

V. : faith assuages, guides, restores.

C. : faith *is easement, guidance and healing.*

2. Le monde *marche!*

V. : The world marches on !

C. : The world *is on the march* —

3. Satan, farceur, tu veux me *dissoudre*, avec
tes charmes.

V. : Satan, you fraud, you would dissolve
me with your charms.

C. : Satan, you trickster, it's my *dissolution*
you want, you with your charms.

In the last example, one notes that the verb is transposed into a noun, thereby losing some of the dynamic quality of the original statement yet perhaps being somewhat more satisfying from the point of view of English style and diction. Stating that the same semantic values can hide behind different parts of speech, Darbelnet and Vinay call transposition « ... *sans nul doute, le type de « passage » le plus fréquent auquel doit faire face le traducteur*⁵ ». It will be seen, moreover, that this particular stylistic mechanism is no more difficult for the translator to manipulate than the aforementioned ones, and can be extremely productive in the hands of a skilled interpreter.

« Modulation » is the term proposed by Darbelnet and Vinay to designate variations which are required when the passage from the source language to the target language cannot be made directly. This sort of variation, the last one which we shall discuss, is obtained in effect by changing the point of view or the conceptual base of the original. It is essentially a re-casting of thought, and is appropriate where literal translation, or even transposition, results in a phrase that is grammatically correct but which collides with the genius of the target language. As could be expected, Cameron makes full use of this stylistic device, while Varèse uses it but rarely. Consider the following excerpts :

5. J. Darbelnet and J.-P. Vinay, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, p. 96.

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Gagne la mort avec tous tes appétits...</i> | V. : Attain death with all your appetites...
C. : <i>Carry with you to your death</i> all your appetites... |
| 2. <i>Vite ! est-il d'autres vies ?</i> | V. : Quick ! Are there other lives ?
C. : Quick ! Are there other <i>ways of living</i> ? |
| 3. <i>Faiblesse ou force : te voilà, c'est la force.</i> | V. : Weakness or Strength : there you are, it's strength.
C. : Weakness or Strength — <i>see, you stand for strength.</i> |

The conceptual base of the original has been changed in the above examples, resulting in a changed point of view or different metaphorical bases in the target language. As can be seen, a literal translation of lines such as these completely invalidates and destroys the effectiveness of the English version. Let it be said in passing that the ability to use modulation correctly is the mark of a sensitive and experienced translator, requiring an enormous amount of creativity, insight, and resourcefulness.

When all is said and done, Louise Varèse leaves much to be desired as a translator of Rimbaud. Translating too literally too much of the time, a procedure which gives a cold, stiff, lifeless tone to many of her lines, Mrs. Varèse is a timid translator who is apparently afraid of venturing too far from the individual words, which seem to have magnetized her.

Cameron, on the other hand, has not been afraid to enter creatively into his work. While remaining « faithful » not to the individual words of Rimbaud but rather to the spirit of what Rimbaud wrote, Cameron has, in clear, naturally-flowing English, recast Rimbaud's French phraseology and ideas into linguistic and conceptual configurations that are music to the ear, if one may be permitted such a subjective appraisal. Using quite freely the techniques of amplification, abridgement, transposition, displacement, and modulation, Cameron considers not only the individual word but also larger units of thought as well ; namely, the phrase, the clause, the paragraph. In short, he has bridged the intra-language gap successfully and poetically, and his interpretation is most certainly an act of poetry in itself.

WILLIAM BRYANT