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The French translations of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1727-2017) : « a faithful history of my travels »?

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After having returned from his last Voyage, that to Houyhnhnms land, here is how Gulliver famously parts with his reader in the last chapter of the book : « Thus, gentle reader, I have given thee a faithful history of my travels for sixteen years and above seven months : wherein I have not been so studious of ornament as of truth[1]. »

This concern with « faithful history » is at the very core of my thesis dissertation, which consists in retracing what I would hope to be a faithful history of Gulliver's travels in a less exotic country, France, and for quite a longer period : one that spans over two hundred and ninety years, that is to say from the first French translation which was published in the Hague in January 1727 until 2017. Indeed, my aim is to work on a diachronic study of *Gulliver's Travels'* fourteen complete French translations, which could highlight the evolutions of the work's reception across the channel, or in Blefuscu, depending on which map, whether fictional or accurate, one would rather use.

However, it soon appeared that this task was challenged by the very nature of the text of Gulliver and by the interpretation of what the narrator calls a faithful history. One of the first risks which faced the study was the temptation to direct the history of these fourteen translations towards a possible end.

Indeed, most translation studies specialists, from Antoine Berman[2] to Walter Benjamin[3], tend to view the successive translations of a book from a teleological point of view. Each new translation is often seen as getting closer to the original truth which is thought to be enclosed in the source text. The sole exception to the teleology of retranslations is that of what specialists call « great translations[4] », and which they are quite at pains to explain. These great translations would be the somewhat mystical result of a fortunate meeting between a translator – often a writer in these cases – and an author. Common examples would include Charles Baudelaire's Edgar Poe in French, or Dostoievski's Balzac in Russian. When dealing with Gulliver, however, none of the fourteen existing translations have managed to acquire this status of greatness. The *topos* of teleological translation, however, thrives : every single preface blames the previous French versions for being « absolutely awful[5] », for having « severely maimed the original text[6] » or for displaying « the wildest cuts, additions and misunderstandings[7] » (Gausseron 1884).

Yet, these claims seem to solely serve a rhetoric purpose. Indeed, when one closely studies the variations from one *Gulliver's Travels'* French translation to another, one quickly finds out that their succession hardly forms the trail of an arrow gradually pointing nearer and nearer to the original text. The first French translation, which was anonymously published in The Hague in January 1727, remains quite faithful to the original *Gulliver* : very few passages are amended, the

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[1] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Dublin : Faulkner, 1735), p. 383.

[2] Antoine Berman, « La Retraduction comme espace de la traduction », *Palimpsestes* 4 (1990) : pp. 1-7.

[3] Walter Benjamin, « La Tâche du traducteur », in *Œuvres I* (Paris : Gallimard, 2000), p. 247.

[4] Jean-René Ladmiral, « Nous autres traductions, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles... », *in Autour de la retraduction : perspectives littéraires européennes* (Paris : Orizons, 2011) pp. 29-48.

[5] Swift, *Voyages de Gulliver*, tr. Desfontaines (Paris : Jacques Guérin, 1727), p. xix.

[6] Swift, *Voyages de Gulliver dans des contrées éloignées*, tr. anonyme (Paris : Furne et Fournier, 1838), no page number.

[7] Swift, *Voyages de Gulliver*, tr. Gausseron (Paris : A. Quantin, 1883), p. x.

matter-of-fact level of language is mostly kept, and the edition retains most of the original's paratextual elements such as Gulliver's portrait, the four maps of the lands which the captain has discovered and the two diagrams. The second French translation, however, which was released in Paris in March 1727, is the epitome of what George Mounin has coined as les « belles infidèles[8] », the beautiful unfaithful, that is to say of classic translations which heavily rearranged their source texts so that they would better fit the proper taste, *le bon goût*, which ruled in 18th century France. The author of this second translation, Desfontaines, a renowned character of the literary world and one of Voltaire's future archenemies, has thus happily adapted the text, cutting entire passages and adding many lines which pleased his fancy. In a sense, the first French translation is actually a little closer to the original than the second is. When going back to Gulliver's last words to his reader, one might be tempted to think that the differences in translations might depend on the way in which they understand Gulliver's « faithful history ».

Desfontaines is subjected to the classic French rules for fiction and finds that the English *Gulliver's Travels* fail to meet with France's idea of verisimilitude. In his preface, he goes as far as to say that the tales in the text are « unreasonable, and will revolt the serious spirits who expect truth and reality, or at least verisimilitude et possibility everywhere[9]. » Therefore, he cannot embrace the idea that Swift's text could be a faithful history, whether history be understood as a chronological and faithful science or as a purely fictional tale. This point of view fully contradicts the original text since, as Angus Ross puts it « to pin down one meaning in the book, one moral, one conclusion » would lead to confusion whereas « a pluralist way of taking the book allows the reader to access several 'meanings' which it has'[10] ».

The plurality which characterises the text of Gulliver thus questions the teleological conception of retranslations while the history of these retranslations curiously echoes Gulliver's fragmented travels. Alain Bony[11] and Jean Viviès[12], have both shown how Gulliver fails to learn anything from his experience, and how the book appears to go against the then budding genre of the *bildungsroman*. In quite a similar manner, the French translators seem unable to learn anything from one another and to follow a common goal which would amount to a final revelation, that of the truth of the original. Contrarywise, the French translations rather appear to form a discrete series of stops. Quite as Gulliver does not return to England enriched by his manifold experience of the world, the French Translators do not keep their promise of sailing back to the source text, whose origin has been lost, perhaps even blocked by the evolution of text's reception in France. In order to retrace a « faithful history » of *Gulliver's Travels* in France, one thus has to resort to the full ambiguity of the expression, rather than to content oneself with the commoner teleological approach of retranslations.

Now, as opposed to Gulliver, this study is not only concerned with a quest for truth or veracity, but is actually quite studious of ornament, which is here understood as a means of disguise of the voices at play in the book. Much has been said about Swift's masks and Gulliver as a persona[13], two forms of ornaments of the voice and which, to quote Ross again, relieve Swift from « keeping up a consistent authorial voice[14] ». The way in which translations tackle these masks,

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[8] Georges Mounin, *Les Belles infidèles* (Paris : Cahiers du Sud, 1955).
[9] Swift, *Voyages de Gulliver*, tr. Desfontaines, p. xxi.
[10] Angus Ross, *Swift :* Gulliver's Travels (London and Southampton : Edward Arnold,1968), p. 11.

[11] Alain Bony, *Discours et vérité dans « Les voyages de Gulliver » de Jonathan Swift* (Lyon : Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2002).
[12] Jean Viviès, *Revenir/Devenir Gulliver ou l'autre voyage* (Paris : Éditions rue d'Ulm, 2016).
[13] E.g. William Bragg Ewald, *The Masks of Jonathan Swift* (New York : Russell & Russell, 1967).
[14] Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

these ornaments, raises quite a few questions about the reception of the book in France. Indeed, translators tend to hear their author as a monolithic voice, that is to say as a single addresser carrying a single message, both instances which could thus find a binary equivalence in the target language. The practice of translation hence relies upon a certain faith, a certain belief in the idea that one voice might find a direct parallel into a different language. However, Gulliver's satiric mirror confronts translators with a paradoxical image of their activity, warning them that if they are lured into believing that « words are but names for things[15] », they might end as the fools of the Academy of Lagado who have to carry their vocabulary as objects bundled on horseback.

Apparently quite fearful of the image which Gulliver's mirror holds out to them and of the book's polyphonic discourse, French translators have to resort to new masking strategies in their turn.

With Desfontaines's translation, the mask of fiction slips. Whereas the text was anonymously published in London in 1726, playing on a pretence of veracity, Desfontaines forces Swift to go bare-faced and announces in his preface that he is the actual author of the work[16]. Yet, for him to be able to introduce the text in France, he has to wear a new form of twofold disguise. As a writer, he must put on the mask of a translator while also cloaking himself in Swift's clothes : Desfontaines is thus dressed in what appears to be a motley guise, half translator and half impersonator.

In 1838, the play on masks seems to shift towards a play on façade. Indeed, this new translation, which pretends to repair Desfontaine's infidelities to the text actually is a mere rewriting of the 1727 version of Gulliver. However, this forgery is shrouded by the abundance of illustrations by the famous caricaturist Grandville, which could actually be seen as the actual new translation of the text.

At the end of the 19th century, Bernard Henri Gausseron denounces the masquerade in which the previous French translations have played a part. Wishing to put an end to this mummery, his translation could be equated to quite a different show, that of a ventriloquist act where the comedian tries to bond again with the original voice of the author. In other words, Gausseron hopes that, to quote Gulliver when he meets the sovereign of Luggnagg, Swift's « tongue is in the mouth of my friend[17] », which goes « *fluft drin Yalerick Dwuldun prastrad mirplush* » in the indigenous language. Yet, despite Gausseron's efforts, French critics and journalists overlooked the faithful translation, preferring the ornaments which it came with, in the form of brightly coloured illustrations which imitated watercolours – a technical prowess at the time.

The original Gulliver hence keeps being masked and shrouded, by false pretences up until the 20th century : Gallimard's translator, Emile Pons, claims to restore the text to its original complexity yet tends to focus solely on satiric binary equivalences.

In this sense, the history of *Gulliver's Travels* in France strongly relies upon different strategies of ornament rather than on an attempt to stay faithful to the text, and one might wonder if the surgeon's voice, in France, is condemned to the same silence which characterises the Struldbruggs, the immortal inhabitants of Luggnagg, who cannot be understood after a couple of centuries of existence.

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[15] Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 234.
[16] Swift, *Voyages de Gulliver*, tr. Desfontaines, p. vii.
[17] Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 263.

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