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FACE TO FACE ON THE FOREIGN STAGE Translating contrast and symmetry in two scenes by Wilde and Shaw

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Abstract:

The rules and stakes of translation in the theatre are modified by the immediate impact of the dialogue as well as its incarnation in the voice and body of the actors. Using two precise examples of confrontation in the comedy of manners, this article focuses on how to translate into French the critical stance of the Irish playwright observing London society, and explores some of the linguistic and rhythmical difficulties implied by the complex use of tone and accent.

Résumé:

L'impact immédiat du dialogue, et son incarnation par la voix et le corps des comédiens, modifient au théâtre les enjeux de la traduction. A partir de deux exemples précis de face à face humoristique dans la comédie de mœurs, cet article s'intéresse à la traduction en français du regard critique irlandais sur la société londonienne, et s'efforce d'explorer quelques-unes des difficultés langagières et rythmiques qu'impliquent le jeu sur les tons et les accents.

Key-words: Translation. Theatre. Comedy of manners. Tone. Accent. Rhythm. Dramatic efficiency. Wilde. Shaw.

Mots-clés: Traduction. Théâtre. Comédie de mœurs. Ton. Accent. Rythme. Efficacité dramatique. Wilde. Shaw.

My dear Shaw,

I must thank you sincerely for Op. 2 of the great Celtic School. I have read it twice with the keenest interest. I like your superb confidence in the dramatic value of the mere facts of life. I admire the horrible flesh and blood of your creatures, and your preface is a masterpiece—a real masterpiece of trenchant writing and caustic wit and dramatic instinct. I look forward to your Op. 4. As for Op. 5, I am lazy, but rather itching to be at it. When are you coming to the Haymarket?

Sincerely yours, Oscar Wilde¹

In these lines addressed to his fellow playwright and Irishman George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde appears to be heralding the development of a new dramatic tradition. The letter dates from 1893, and therefore refers to the early works of both playwrights; indeed Wilde is ranking Shaw's first play *Widower's Houses* along with his own *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* as beacons of what he calls, somewhat ironically, the Celtic School.

It is a well known fact that Wilde and Shaw, born in Dublin two years apart from each other, both left for England at the age of twenty, never or hardly ever to return. They spent most of their lives in England and abroad, each in his own way becoming a striking public figure, as well as a man of the stage and a social critic—whether through the advocacy of individual freedom and aestheticism, or through the Fabian society and the promotion of political consciousness on and off stage; to put it roughly. The aim of this article will not be to ascertain how or whether Wilde and Shaw fit in with the other Irish playwrights, but to show

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The letters of Oscar Wilde [1875-1900]*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, London, Hart-Davis Ltd, 1962, p. 339. The letter is dated May 9th, 1893. A note identifies the plays as follows : Op. 1: *Lady Windermere's Fan*; Op. 2: *Widower's Houses*; Op. 3: *A Woman of No Importance*; Op. 4: *The Philanderer*; Op. 5: *An Ideal Husband*.

how they dramatise England and how this will, in turn, need to be taken into account in any translation into French. Using two confrontation scenes in which the tension of the dialogue results from contrasts, parallelisms and rhythmical effects, we will study how the society of London is portrayed in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Pygmalion*.

In *Earnest*, we will focus on the end of act II, when Algernon and Jack fight over the plate of muffins and the right to be christened by Dr Chasuble, in a clever duet of echoing accusations, claims, and aphorisms. In *Pygmalion*, we will study the beginning of act II, when Eliza unexpectedly shows up in Wimpole Street in her best feathered hat, asking for lessons in phonetics, which triggers a comical power struggle between Higgins and her, under the critical glance of Mrs Pearce and Colonel Pickering².

Both playwrights depict a society in which they are at once insiders and outsiders, perhaps the Irish (“Celts”) observing the English (“Saxons/Normans”). This *observer’s stance* is highly theatrical, as it leads to an acute awareness of the processes of speech, its rhythms, vocabulary, mannerisms and sounds—an awareness sometimes bordering on caricature. Pierre Larthomas, author of an enlightening study on dramatic language, writes that in the theatre language is “caught in the act”, intercepted and placed in front of us for our amazement: « *Le théâtre, c’est du langage surpris. Le langage est comme placé devant nous pour que nous l’admirions* »³. I wish to study the dramatic efficiency of this continual foregrounding of language, and to study it through the angle of translation.

Translation acts as a filter, a screen. Just like acting or directing, it becomes an encounter of subjectivities, sensitivities and modes of expression, through which the dramatic text can be achieved, disfigured, recreated—sometimes revealed. In order to explore this idea of recreating the text, let us analyse the stuff comedies of manners are made of, and study the rendering of social boundaries, tone and accent in both plays: thus we will be able to see how translation can invent voices for the characters, and create tools for the actors.

Social and geographical situation

Although *Pygmalion* is presented as “A romance in five acts”, it offers such a comical array of social types, from the dustman to the duchess, sparing neither convention nor eccentricity, that it also fits the genre of the comedy of manners. And *Earnest*, epigrammatically termed “A trivial comedy for serious people”, belongs to that same tradition, with its dandies, determined young ladies, sentimental governess and its paragon of Victorian society called Lady Bracknell. The two plays therefore take their place in a long line of comedies, which also includes the works of Congreve or Sheridan.

Unlike tragedies, whose setting can remain indefinite or allegorical, comedies of manners are necessarily fraught with cultural allusions, since by definition they give a satirical portrait of a certain social group at a certain time. Hence the following question for directors and translators alike: how can such comedies still work when the spectators are far removed from the characters in time, or space, or both? The question of adaptation—be it to update the costumes or to modernise the language—emerges in fact as a secondary one, to be considered after the more essential points of recreating the comic structure and dramatic efficiency. While clarity is necessary, transposition is not. Tom Stoppard makes a similar point when he draws the following conclusion from contemporary ideas on staging Shakespeare: “I don’t think theatre works as parable; it works as metaphor. [...] [T]he power

² Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 136-144.

George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (1913), in *Collected Plays*, London, The Bodley Head, 1972, pp. 687-698.

All references to the text of the plays will be given in these editions. Additional page numbers will be mentioned only for quotations outside these two scenes, with the letters *E* for *Earnest* and *P* for *Pygmalion*. As for the translations, where no particular reference is given, they are my own.

³ Pierre Larthomas, *Le Langage dramatique, sa nature, ses procédés*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1972, p. 60.

of metaphor is that it impacts, and just goes where you happen to see it from”⁴. In other words, an audience can be trusted to find meaning in a play, no matter how strange or remote the setting. In the case of a comedy of manners, the satirical portraying of human nature remains intact, while the significance of the cultural context shifts slightly, losing some of its direct impact and political resonance, but acquiring a “period” charm, which ironically provokes a mistaken sense of superiority in the modern spectator. In both *Pygmalion* and *Earnest*, the distance between the French spectator and the English characters becomes part of this *observer’s stance* earlier alluded to. It ties in with the distance between the Irish-born playwright and his English target, and enhances the plays’ liberating, ironical exploration of the absurdities of social conventions. It paves the way for translation.

In their opening stage directions, both plays are significantly situated in time and space. Wilde simply uses a name, “Half-Moon Street”⁵, to indicate the elegant atmosphere of Algernon’s flat and his bachelor’s style of living, which in French editions leads to the addition of a footnote for the use of set-designers. As for *Pygmalion*, it opens with one of Shaw’s characteristically detailed stage directions:

London at 11:15 pm. Torrents of heavy summer rain. Cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions. Pedestrians running for shelter into the portico of St Paul’s church (not Wren’s cathedral but Inigo Jones’ church in Covent Garden vegetable market). [...] [THE DAUGHTER is standing] in the space between the central pillars, close to the one on her left. (P 669)

Whether an audience in Paris or New York would know which particular church the set is meant to represent remains doubtful, but they would nevertheless recognise a London setting, and relate to the electric mood of a large city during a storm. Shaw’s precise indications create an atmosphere which is efficient both in terms of realistic impressions and in emotional terms, the perfect setting for the sensational effect which Professor Higgins is about to have on the motley crowd huddling under the pillars of St Paul’s.

Defining social class: ladies and taxis and stockbrokers

In both plays, the characters are interested either in preserving social hierarchy, or in playing with it. Eliza Doolittle and Jack Worthing both manage to create parallel personalities for themselves—the Hungarian princess and Ernest—and in order to achieve their goals, both must prove their worth in good society (though what Jack can only prove through others by acquiring an aristocratic family, Eliza can prove on her own, through her constancy and merit in learning to speak “more genteel”). The rules and boundaries of society consistently remain in the background, a fact betrayed, for instance, by the constant use of titles: “Lord”, “Lady”, “Colonel”, “Professor”, “Gentleman”, etc. Mrs Pearce uses such an argument to reprove Eliza for her forwardness:

ELIZA: Did you tell him I come in a taxi?

MRS PEARCE: Nonsense, girl! What do you think a gentleman like Mr Higgins cares what you came in?

ELIZA: Oh, we are proud! He ain’t above giving lessons, not him: I heard him say so.

The housekeeper sticks to conventional class distinctions, and contrasts a deprecatingly unqualified pronoun, “you”, with the expression “a gentleman like Mr Higgins”, imposing enough to speak for itself. Eliza, on the contrary, brings the discussion back to the grounds of money, or what she calls “business”: the taxi, indicating wealth, and the fact that Higgins, no matter how superior his attitude, gets paid to teach phonetics, establish her full right to be there as a client. She later claims respect on similar grounds: “I won’t be called a baggage

⁴ Tom Stoppard, “The Event and the Text”, in *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, ed. by Paul Delaney, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 207.

⁵ “*Morning-room in Algernon’s flat in Half-Moon Street*” is the first stage direction of the play (Half-Moon street was a fashionable street for bachelors in Westminster), p. 1.

when I've offered to pay like any lady", which could be rendered as "*j'propose de payer comme les dames*", though most translators choose to use the English titles ("*comme n'importe quelle lady*", "*un gentleman comme monsieur Higgins*"⁶), preferring to keep the picturesque aspect of the original words, and giving the actress playing Eliza an added opportunity to mispronounce something.

To this background tableau of Lords and Ladies, Wilde ironically adds parallel social groups, such as that of stockbrokers ("It is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stockbrokers do that, and then merely at dinner-parties"), or that of vegetarians ("I never go without my dinner. No one ever does, except vegetarians and people like that"). Such authoritative phrases sound delightfully nonsensical, while providing a double satire: that of people who behave in unusual or uneducated ways, and that of the all-powerful reign of categories and class boundaries. Here the translator must make sure that the phrasing sounds sufficiently superior, especially for the euphemistic and disapproving "people like that". For example: « *Il n'y a que les gens de l'étoffe des agents de change pour se comporter ainsi* » or « *Personne ne se comporte ainsi que les végétariens et leurs pareils* ». This can help the French actor recreate the satirical and narcissistic streaks in Algernon's tone.

Awareness of language and tone

Tone proves indeed a crucial element in translation. There lies most of the comedy, aside from the more farcical visual elements. In both plays the characters are supremely conscious of the powers attached to mastering language.

Algernon uses this power to tailor reality to his own wishes, relying on wit and repartee to imprison his friend in the web of his own lies. Thus, he pursues the conversation unto absurdity and manages to destabilise his opponent, arguing that Jack should not get christened since his imaginary brother recently died of a severe chill, which the latest improvements in science have declared to be hereditary. Imaginary science and fictional brothers, when phrased logically, can thus fetter reality. As for Higgins, he is professionally aware of what language can do, and delights in analysing it. He admires the rhetorical skills of Alfred Doolittle: "Observe the rhythm of his native woodnotes wild. [...] Sentimental rhetoric! That's the Welsh strain in him" (P 707), and claims to use swearwords to strictly poetical ends. He indeed maintains that the adjective "bloody", when applied to his boots, the butter and the brown bread, is: "Mere alliteration, Mrs Pearce, natural to a poet" (P 703).

All this implies that the features of the characters' speeches are not only theatrical but also socially significant, and must be recreated in French. The scene from *Earnest* thus calls for particular attention in the translation of adjectives and adverbs, which are often hyperbolic, and enhance the impression of a humorously superior attitude. Adverbs such as "perfectly", "absolutely", "thoroughly", "particularly" or "entirely" punctuate the text at every line, while the many adjectives are either extremely positive, "wonderful", or extremely negative, "ghastly". Frequent exclamations such as "Good Heavens!" and constant dismissive judgements through "Nonsense!" or "Absurd!" also support the notion of language as permanently excessive. Two of the attributes applied to the characters, "heartless", and "exploded", prove more difficult to translate than the rest, for they occur several times in different grammatical contexts⁷. Savine literally translates "heartless" as « *sans cœur* », which

⁶ These are the choices made for instance by Michel Habart in his translation, *Pygmalion*, Paris, l'Arche, 1983, p.26-27.

⁷ The following translations/adaptations of Wilde's play are the four most frequently published and produced in France. Anouilh's version does not feature our scene at all ; the other three have been taken into account : Nicole et Jean Anouilh, *Il est important d'être aimé*, Adaptation d'Oscar Wilde, Paris, Papiers, 1985. Pascal Aquien, *L'Importance d'être Constant* d'Oscar Wilde, édition bilingue, Paris, Flammarion, 2000.

proves problematic when used as a noun: « *c'est être un parfait sans cœur* ». Déprats and Aquien prefer to use the noun and adjective « *insensible/insensibilité* », which offer greater grammatical flexibility. Another possibility could be the term « *scélérat* », whose combination of sibilant and harsh consonants is similar to that of “heartless”, with equal possibilities of added vocal stress, and which seems to fit the image of an exaggerated accusation: « *c'est te conduire en parfait scélérat que de manger des muffins* ». The difficulty with “exploded”, on the other hand, is that the author plays with several meanings of the word. Here Jack uses it to mean “exposed”: “your friend Bunbury is quite exploded”; but when it appears again in the next act Lady Bracknell understands it differently: “Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage?” (E 156). Some of the published translations fail to use the same word in both scenes, thus missing the coherence of Wilde’s pun; the only way to use the notion of explosion in French, it seems, is to switch from a past participle to a noun: « *la seule satisfaction que je trouve dans cette déplorable affaire, c'est l'explosion totale de ton ami Bunbury* »; otherwise, translators have looked for different images which work both concretely and metaphorically, such as Aquien’s « *ton ami Bunbury s'est littéralement volatilisé* ».

Professor Higgins, too, displays a towering personality and strong command of language in his use of adjectives, which are carefully-chosen, forceful and often alliterative:

A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don’t sit here crooning like a bilious pigeon. (P 679)

“Bilious pigeon” is just one of the many colourful, deprecating images which Higgins uses to refer to Eliza, such as “creature”, “baggage”, “squashed cabbage leaf”, “incarnate insult to the English language”, and “draggletailed guttersnipe”. The difficulty here is to preserve the misogynistic eccentricity of Higgins’ insults, while still not sounding completely improbable (which would be the effect of « *colis* » for “baggage”), or falling too easily into the trap of French clichés, such as « *petite effrontée* » or « *épouvantail* », which, though accurate, tend to flatten the powerful effect of the Professor’s idiom. Literally “this draggletailed guttersnipe” translates as « *cette bécassine [oiseau] des rues qui traîne sa queue dans le caniveau* ». This sounds a little too outlandish to be understood, but on the other hand Michel Habart’s choice of « *ce traîne-jupons, cette petite piaf des rues* » replaces the Cockney flower-girl with a clearly Parisian reference, endowed with certain sentimental connotations. Perhaps something along the lines of « *ce traîne-jupons, cet oiseau des caniveaux* » would preserve the inventive rudeness of the expression, while still making enough sense for the image to be real and vivid upon a first hearing.

Accent

Finding a voice for Jack, Algernon and Professor Higgins in French leaves us facing the last and most delicate question of Eliza Doolittle’s grammar and accent, to which there is no ideal answer.

Accents are a recurring problem when it comes to the translation of Anglophone drama, as well as the dubbing of films, for they are used consciously, for effect. The world-wide variety of accents in English, whether national, social, or both, obviously has no easy or absolute equivalent in French, and the solution is bound to be a compromise. To take an example from a different context, Tennessee Williams, rightly perceived as a playwright of

Jean-Michel Déprats, *L'Importance d'être Constant* d'Oscar Wilde, pour la mise en scène de Jérôme Savary au théâtre national de Chaillot, Paris, *L'Avant-scène* N° 981, 1996.

Albert Savine, *L'Importance d'être Constant* (1911) d'Oscar Wilde, in *Œuvres*, Paris, Librairie générale française, 2000.

the American South, whose writing is pervaded with instances of southern turns of speech and vowel-lengthening, can also surprise us when he uncharacteristically switches to very British phrases and modes of expression in the short play *I Rise in Flame, Cries the Phoenix*, staging the death of D. H. Lawrence. How can we make such a radical change, within the coherent rhythms and images of the same author, palpable in translation?

A similar question is raised, obviously, with added political resonance, when it comes to any Irish playwright who uses Hiberno-English. Accents are rarely used to produce a purely picturesque effect, and perhaps a different solution can or must be found each time, depending on what use the playwright makes of them. They define characters—age, education, aspirations—and situate them with regards to each other; therefore the first question to be considered is whether or not these accents are presented, within the system of the play, as deviating from a norm. This is the case in *Pygmalion*. Several creative attempts have been made by translators to transpose a regional accent into the target language by seeking a close linguistic or historical equivalent. Judith Lavoie thus recommends the use of French « créole » to render Jim’s dialect in *Huckleberry Finn*, while Bill Findlay and Martin Bowman tap the linguistic resources of the Scottish vernacular in order to translate the « joual » of French Canadian playwright Michel Tremblay. Françoise Morvan’s versions of Synge, for their part, take their inspiration from the dialects of Brittany⁸. While such approaches often lead to texts that are verbally inventive and rhythmically efficient, they do raise some theoretical issues as to the size and sense of belonging of the receiving community, as well as the political significance of the accents, which can be materially altered. They would also deserve an analysis of their own, which cannot be attempted here.

Suffice it to say that in *Pygmalion*, the social and political implications of Eliza’s Cockney, which according to Shaw himself would prove “unintelligible outside London” (*P* 671), prove crucial to the story as well as the comedy. The entire plot rests on the progress of a girl from the slums of Lisson Grove to Higgins’ “laboratory”—aptly situated in a “medical” street—and then on to the genteel atmosphere of a Chelsea drawing-room, or the splendours of an embassy party. The emphasis on the word “romance” in the title and the prevalence of humour tend to down-play the general social criticism in favour of the particular story, but all the same the implications of accent are discussed at length, given that “this is an age of upstarts” (*P* 679). Phonetics and social geography go hand in hand, a theme which according to Nicholas Grene can be traced back to Shaw’s experience upon moving to England, and the self-consciousness surrounding his own Dublin accent. Grene quotes Shaw’s review of Mrs Patrick Campbell in Sardou’s *Fedora* (1895), in which he criticises the imperfect diction of the actress who was later to create the role of Eliza:

In order to secure refinement of tone, she articulates with the tip of her tongue against her front teeth as much as possible [like] the snobbish Irishman who uses it as a cheap recipe for speaking genteel English.⁹

It is this deep-rooted awareness of the mechanisms and significance of phonetics which leads Shaw to declare in his preface: “The reformer we need most today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made such a one the hero of a popular play” (*P* 659). Eliza’s faulty English is defined against the standard of Higgins’ apt command of language and tone. Shaw abandons his attempt to transcribe the Flower Girl’s dialect phonetically after a mere

⁸ See Judith Lavoie’s thesis, or her article, « Le français créolisé comme option de traduction du vernaculaire noir américain », *Présence Francophone*, n°51, 1997, pp. 117-138. Several plays from Québec have been translated into Scots by the Traverse Theatre Company ; for example Michel Tremblay’s *Messe solennelle pour une pleine lune d’été*, translated by Bill Findlay & Martin Bowman as *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2000. And as for Synge, see for instance Françoise Morvan’s version of *Baladin du monde occidental (Playboy of the Western World)*, Bedée, Folle Avoine, 1993.

⁹ Quoted in Nicholas Grene’s insightful introduction to a recent edition of the play, *Pygmalion*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. vii.

three lines, but he continues to write using her mistaken grammar and syntax, which the translation should seek to emulate.

Eliza's English features the usual cockney characteristics, such as double negatives ("I don't want no gold and no diamonds"), mistaken verb forms such as "ain't", "I come in a taxi" or "if you was a gentleman", as well as missing agreements such as "Woolly towels, there is" or "I know why ladies is so clean". Phonologically, Shaw insists on the h-dropping, the frequent condensation of two words into one ("Garn!"), and the lengthening of vowels with the frequent addition of the vowel for which there is no letter, /ə/. Though grammatical errors in English and French are not exactly symmetrical, it is usually possible to recreate approximately the same number of mistakes, even if it means using the wrong noun instead of the wrong verb, and vice versa. For "if you was a gentleman", we can rely on a similarly common mistake in French to render the inaccuracy and write « *si vous seriez gentleman* ». For "Did you tell him I come in a taxi?", on the other hand, it seems difficult to use the wrong verb form, but it is possible to alter the structure of the interrogative clause, with « *Vous lui avez dit comment qu'je suis v'nue en taxi?* » Besides, elisions provide an efficient way to indicate the relaxed and inaccurate quality of Eliza's diction.

Eliza on a French stage will not be Cockney. She may become a little Parisian, because through analogy the actress may well tend to play her as a variation on the « *titi parisien* »—or she may simply be speaking a form of inaccurate French in which each mistake is recognizable, but which is impossible to place precisely because it was more or less *invented* by the translator. This is perhaps what translation should aim for; the rest being up to the vision of the director and the talent of the actor. The language of theatre is in essence not real, more dense, more pure and more efficient than everyday speech. It is written for effect, and to carry dramatic potential. Which is why the best strategy may well be to translate the accent and inaccurate grammar within the system of the play, paying particular attention to the way in which the original proceeds, rather than to start with a preconceived idea of what a character should sound like in French. Antoine Vitez warns us against the dangers of transplanting a character too clearly into one particular region or character-type, arguing that the added connotations of the translation end up blocking our view of the original, and adding that although there is no definitive solution, there is a creative process which strives to transform the receiving language little by little:

Il n'y a pas de solution, il n'y en a pas de définitive. La solution ne peut pas être scientifique. Elle ne peut qu'être artistique au sens propre : de la nature de la *métamorphose*. De la *transformation*. [...] Pour cela il faut jouer sur la syntaxe. Légèrement la gauchir, la transformer...¹⁰

This process is never "comfortable", but not only is it quite respectful of the original, it is also truly theatrical, relying on the actors' input to complete the equation.

Tools for actors

Peter Brook states that "In the theatre, every form once born is mortal, every form must be reconceived"¹¹, and this seems to be equally true of acting and translating. The two have a lot in common; both being processes of re-creation, which involve struggling with the text and identifying with it in order to present a version of it. This is symbolised by the French term « *interprète* », which refers to both actor and translator, and enables Jean-Michel Déprats to write: « *Le traducteur est le premier interprète de l'œuvre* »¹². The analogy does not

¹⁰ I am borrowing this quote, which can originally be found in Vitez' *De Chaillot à Chaillot*, from Jean-Michel Déprats' discussion of dialects in the theatre, « Traduction des dialectes, patois et parlers populaires au théâtre, *Quatorzièmes Assises de la Traduction Littéraire*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1998.

¹¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968), 3 ed., London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 17.

¹² Jean-Michel Déprats, « Traduire Shakespeare. Pour une poétique théâtrale de la traduction shakespearienne », *Shakespeare : Œuvres Complètes*, I, Paris, Gallimard, bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2002, p. cxiii.

merely work metaphorically, but concretely as well, even physically—the dialogue has to go through the body and imagination and breathing rhythms of the translator as much as it does in the case of the actor.

Let us therefore finish by stressing this notion of rhythm, which is perhaps the most important tool a translator can provide an actor with. Small details, for instance parallel adverbs in the beginning of sentences, can be instrumental in enhancing the mirror effect which Wilde creates between the lines of his two dandies: “Well, that is no business of yours” / “Well, I can’t eat muffins in an agitated manner”. In spite of their apparent insignificance or superfluity, it is important to translate the symmetrical way in which these elements help tie the dialogue together: « *Enfin, il faut bien prendre quelque chose au sérieux* », « *Enfin, la seule petite satisfaction que j’éprouve...* » Similarly, Eliza punctuates many of her sentences with tags and repetitions: “I’m come to have lessons, I am”, or “He ain’t above giving lessons, not him”. Although French does not feature the same grammatical possibilities, the translation should strive to reproduce the rhythm of these sentences, indicating that the flower-girl is trying to reassure herself at the end—her favourite declaration being: “I’m a good girl, I am”. The French translation could read: « *J’suis v’nue pour prendre des leçons, voilà pourquoi* » and « *Il a pas honte de donner des leçons, ça non* », recreating this effect of enhancing the assertion by repeating one of its elements, and placing a strong and stubborn emphasis on the end of the line. The use of monosyllables should not be neglected either, since they offer many possibilities of varying intonations and stress on a particular word, for instance: “I don’t want you here”, « *Je ne veux pas de toi ici* ». This sounds simple and obvious enough, but such a vigilant awareness of the importance of rhythm in speech, of the vocal and breathing effects to which tempo can lead, may be the key to writing a translation which is dramatically efficient.

As a final, and perhaps more striking example of patterns in rhythm, we can note that a recurring effect in scenes of confrontation is sentence symmetry—stichomythia in verse—of which we find a derived version in *Earnest*:

JACK: I wanted to be engaged to Gwendolen, that is all. I love her.

ALGERNON: Well, I simply wanted to be engaged to Cecily. I adore her.

JACK: There is certainly no chance of your marrying Miss Cardew.

ALGERNON: I don’t think there is much likelihood, Jack, of you and Miss Fairfax being united.

The logic of this passage is a combination of mirrored sentences and efforts to outbid each other. Some of the effects prove fairly easy to render, such as the gradation « *je l’aime/ je l’adore* », or the double rhythm of Jack’s first line: “that is all. I love her”, which becomes « *voilà tout. Je l’aime* », giving us two words instead of three, but still the same number of syllables in French. As to the rest, given that these lines are meant to be spoken fairly quickly, it seems best to avoid structures that are too involved or difficult to wrap one’s tongue around, especially since impersonal turns of phrase often sound clumsy in French. One possible translation, therefore, is:

JACK : *Je souhaitais me fiancer à Gwendolen, voilà tout. Je l’aime.*

ALGERNON : *Eh bien moi, je souhaitais simplement me fiancer à Cecily. Je l’adore.*

JACK : *Il est certain que tu n’as aucune chance d’épouser Miss Cardew.*

ALGERNON : *Je ne vois guère de probabilités, Jack, en faveur de ton union avec Miss Fairfax.*

Having created a world of doubles, and a situation where two young men, both provided with fictional “rascally” counterparts and with parallel love troubles, farcically find themselves face to face around a single plate of muffins, Wilde composes his dialogue with the rigorous symmetry of a “verbal opera”¹³, using balance and precision in language to enhance the comedy by combining farce with sophistication.

¹³ W. H. Auden declared *The Importance of Being Earnest* “perhaps the only purely verbal opera in English”. Quoted in Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003, p. 170.

We could thus apply to Wilde and Shaw the words in which Virginia Woolf describes the plays of Congreve: “Miraculously pat, on the spot, each speaker caps the last, without fumbling or hesitation, [...] alive and alert to their fingertips”¹⁴. Rendering this sense of immediacy and equilibrium makes translation efficient, providing actors with possibilities for symmetry and contrast in tone and gesture. Translation can thus recreate on the French stage the critical point of view of the observer, turning the added distance between characters and audience not into an obstacle, but into a different set of echoes and resonances.

Comedy bears the deceptive appearance of a light, polished surface, but it requires accuracy, attention to rhythm and a knowledge of how actors work with the text, on the part of the translator. Shaw pinpoints this false notion of simplicity when he ironically replies to Wilde’s critics in his review of *An Ideal Husband* (having begun this article with Wilde on Shaw, it seems only fair to conclude it, symmetrically, with Shaw on Wilde):

[His critics] protest that the trick is obvious, and that such epigrams can be turned out by the dozen by any one lightminded enough to condescend to such frivolity. As far as I can ascertain, I am the only person in London who cannot sit down and write an Oscar Wilde play at will. The fact that his plays, though apparently lucrative, remain unique under these circumstances, says much for the self-denial of our scribes.

[Mr Wilde] plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre. Such a feat scandalizes the Englishman, who can no more play with wit and philosophy than he can with a football or a cricket bat. [...] All the literary dignity of the play [...] cannot quite overcome the fact that Ireland is of all countries the most foreign to England, and that to the Irishman (and Mr Wilde is almost as acutely Irish an Irishman as the Iron Duke of Wellington) there is nothing in the world quite so exquisitely comic as an Englishman’s seriousness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Congreve’s Comedies”, in *Congreve Comedies, A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. By P. Lyons, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 96.

¹⁵ George Bernard Shaw, “Review of *An Ideal Husband*”, *Saturday Review* (12 Jan. 1895), reproduced in Karl Beckson: *Oscar Wilde, The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge, 1970, p. 176-177.