



John Rodker, Revising Author and Revised Translator

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1 John Rodker, revising author and revised translator

Patrick Hersant

The *archival turn* in translation studies has recently inspired innovative and wide-ranging research focusing on documents that have up till now been difficult – or downright impossible – to access, ranging from draft manuscripts, revised typescripts, letters to and from source text authors, publishing contracts, and textual interactions with copyeditors. When put together, these and other documents create a genetic dossier for a particular translation (Munday 2014). The emergence of a “genetics of translation” (Cordingley and Montini 2015) has allowed us to better separate and define the often unseen steps that lead from an editorial request for a translation to a final publication, and, perhaps more importantly, to define the various processes, equally invisible, which make up the practice of translation – decision-making, hesitations, revisions and copyediting, to name but a few.

In the absence of material traces, the author–translator collaboration is difficult to fully fathom in all of its complexity. Before any access to the archive was possible, what could we really know about the exchanges that, at least in certain cases, accompany or precede translation? A pioneering article published in 1998 – i.e., just before the *archival turn* and indeed before the setting up of proper translators’ archives – examines author–translator collaborations using non-archival documents such as “interviews, round tables, diaries, prefaces, and memoirs” (Vanderschelden 1998, 29). These are unquestionably useful sources, which shed light on parts of a multifaceted and complex practice. But these sources are often fragmentary, reconstructed, and can be of questionable authenticity. In particular, they do not supply the precise and verifiable examples that might confirm or deny the *post hoc* statements of the translator or the author in question. In an interview cited by Vanderschelden (1998, 24), the French translator Anne Saumont speaks of her work relationship with the English writer John Fowles: “Sometimes, he would say to me, ‘This is what I meant. Is it what you said in French?’” In the same article, we learn that Antonio Tabucchi “intervened in the work of [his] translator to explain some specific words or regional idiomatic phrases.” Such statements are certainly interesting, but they would be even more so if we had in front of us a transcription of an epistolary exchange between the author and translator – or, better yet,

a translation manuscript with the changes (or lack thereof) requested by the author. The non-archival approach remains limited, incomplete, and often frustrating. By turning away from *a posteriori* statements and focusing instead on translation manuscripts revised by the author or on detailed epistolary exchanges, researchers have arrived at more diverse, more precise, and better documented conclusions.

Having accessed the translation-related documents conserved at the Fondation Saint-John Perse, Esa Hartmann cites and analyses in detail the suggested revisions by the French poet to his American translator Robert Fitzgerald, for example, about the line “du rose d’insectes des marais salants.” Five back-and-forths took place before they arrived at the following:

Yes, I had accepted your transposition, but the French text meant indeed the ‘*larvae*’ of *aquatic insects*, such as the *miniscule molluscs of floating plankton*, which sometimes and under certain conditions adopt a *pink colour*, like in the extreme phases of decantation of the salt marshes.

(Hartmann 2021, 47)

Having painstakingly analysed several examples, Hartmann comes to the conclusion that the revisions of Saint-John Perse “point out the conservation of original etymologies in the English translation, the creation of new alliterations and assonances in the English text and the importance of rhythmic equation and semantic correspondence” (2021, 44). Based upon the correspondence between Guillermo Cabrera Infante and his Dutch translator Fred De Vries, July De Wilde notes how the Cuban novelist invited his translator “to substantially modify the source text, add new puns and intertextual references. De Vries declared that the written remark gave him some kind of psychological liberty to add compensating neologism and language play” (De Wilde 2010, 22). Analysing the myriad, minute corrections suggested by the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky to his American translator Daniel Weissbort, Zakhar Ishov concluded that “rhymes and verse metre were for Brodsky the essential and the most important elements of his originals to be preserved across translation” (2018, 137).

Archival documents speak to how collaborative translation – even when merely a list of questions-and-answers or author revisions – will often take on a hermeneutic dimension that elucidates the source text, the target text and the act of translation itself. Archival research produces as many unexpected discoveries as dashed hopes, and it is possible to find in the papers of a single writer evidence of his or her interactions with numerous people and in more than one capacity. As a translated author, John Rodker carried on a lengthy correspondence with his French translator, which shows how genially and carefully he answered her many questions about syntax and word choice. As a translator, Rodker was in touch with famous French writers whom he was translating, and these writers often revised his translation manuscript drafts.

1.1 John Rodker: publisher, writer and translator

Perfectly exemplifying the diasporic nature of translation archives, Rodker's work papers are held in four separate archives: his personal papers are conserved at the Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC) in Caen, France; his professional documents, especially those related to his activities as a publisher, are found in the Special Collections of the Reading University Library; part of his correspondence with his translator is found in the private collection of the Savitzky estate, in the Loire Valley; and, finally, the John Rodker Papers, conserved in the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin,

comprise his correspondence, manuscripts, publication files, contracts, financial records, and photographs, [...] the records of Rodker's broad publishing activities from 1920 on, [...] significant files relating to titles issued under the John Rodker and Pushkin Press imprints, [...] handwritten manuscripts, typescripts, and carbons, many with Rodker's corrections in manuscript. A number of his translations are present [with] interesting letters from James Joyce.

(Taylor 2003)

John Rodker (1894–1955) was educated in the East End of London, where he attended a boarding school and the Jews' Free School, while assisting at his immigrant father's corset-making business. After leaving school at 14, he worked as a clerk at the London Customs House and at the Post Office, while attending evening classes to learn French and German. His fascination for literature and languages led him to pursue a literary career, and he published poems and essays in avant-garde magazines such as *Poetry*, *The Egoist* and *The Little Review* (Heinz 2019a). In London literary circles, he met several modernist writers and befriended the American poet Ezra Pound. In 1914, as a conscientious objector, he was arrested and posted to a regiment, went missing, was arrested again and returned to the barracks, then court-martialed and imprisoned. The six months he spent in prison and then in a work camp would become fodder for his own writing. In a letter to James Joyce dated 17 March 1917, Pound expresses cautious interest in the literary value of his friend and future publisher: "A chap named Rodker has writ a short novel, badly, with some stuff in it" (Joyce and Pound 1967, 102). Three months later, however, in a letter to Margaret Anderson dated 11 June, pressing the editor of *The Little Review* to publish more poems by Rodker, Pound writes in a more genuinely supportive way:

The [...] John Rodker stuff is not a compromise but a bet. I stake my critical position, or some part of it, on a belief that [he] will do something. I am not risking much, because I have seen a lot of [his] mss. Rodker has convinced me at last, that he "has it in him". [...] Rodker

[...] ought to be up to regulation standard in a few years' time. He will go farther than Richard [Aldington], though I dont [*sic*] expect anyone to believe that statement for some time. He has more invention, more guts. His father did not have a library full of classics, but he will learn. He is in the midst of these tribulations.

(Scott 1988, 62–63)

After the war, Rodker succeeded Pound as a foreign editor of *The Little Review* (Scott and Friedman 1988, 259). In collaboration with modernist writer Mary Butts, his future wife, Rodker set up the Ovid Press, which between 1919 and 1922 printed and published T.S. Eliot's *Ara Vos Prec*, Pound's *Fourth Canto* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and his own second book of poems, *Hymns* (Heinz 2019c; Cloud 2010). Afterwards, he spent most of his time in Paris, acting as the publisher of the Egoist Press's edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Read 1967, 181–182). In 1921, he was introduced to the Franco–Russian literary translator Ludmila Savitzky, and, along with Pound, he persuaded her to translate into French Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Livak 2013, 54–55; Hersant 2020). Savitzky then translated two of Rodker's manuscripts, *The Switchback* and *Dartmoor*. Back in London, Rodker first established the Casanova Society, specializing in limited editions of (largely French) literature in newly commissioned translations (Heinz 2019b), then a publishing venture under his own name, the Rodker imprint, which also published limited editions of translated works. From 1929, he decided to complement his publishing and writing activities by translating Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, and, in 1930, he published translations of contemporary French authors such as Henry de Montherlant and Jules Romains. In 1937, Rodker established the Pushkin Press, which published a dozen titles, including Blaise Cendrars's *Antarctic Fugue* (1948). Long an enthusiast for psychoanalysis, Rodker set up the Imago Publishing Company in 1940 to supervise the republication of Freud's works in German, a monumental project he undertook with Freud's daughter Anna who worked as the editor for the new edition (Amoroux 2011). In 1951, Rodker took as his third wife the daughter of his translator Ludmila Savitzky.

Translation played a central role in Rodker's personal and professional life. Modernist culture and translation had what Ian Patterson (2003, 88) has called an “odd” relationship: often indispensable to the development of the personal voice of an author, translation was frequently ignored to the point of opting for “non-translation” (Harding and Nash 2019). Modernist poets like Pound or Eliot were themselves translators who incorporated lines of poetry from foreign languages into their own poems, who oversaw minutely the translation of their work into foreign languages, but “none was as deeply involved with translation, or on as many fronts, as John Rodker. [...] For in fact hardly any aspect of his career as a writer was unmarked by translation” (Patterson 2003, 89–90). It is this involvement

“on many fronts” that the documents in Rodker’s archives confirm and illustrate.

1.2 “Please please yourself”: Rodker and Savitzky

Thirty years before becoming his mother-in-law, Savitzky was the translator of several of Rodker’s works: *The Switchback* (1923), *Dartmoor* (1926), *Adolphe* 1920 (1927) and *Trains* (1929). The first two appeared in French long before they were published in England, where Rodker’s reputation was not as strong; and the last existed in English only in typescripts sent to Savitzky so that she could translate them into French. They first met in 1921. “[The magazine] *Les Écrits nouveaux* asked me to translate one of Rodker’s novels, which I will do,” she wrote to her mentor and friend, the poet André Spire (Savitzky and Spire 2010, 293). Then, the following April, she wrote, “[m]y Rodker translation is coming out. [...] But translating is truly thankless and tiring work” (2010, 318). The professional contact between Rodker and his translator would develop over the years under the various forms that correspond to the four categories of my typology (Hersant 2016) of author–translator interactions: recommendations, revision, questions-and-answers and back-and-forths.

Their interactions began as soon as Savitzky took on the task of translating *The Switchback*. Here are three representative excerpts, chosen from among the hundreds of letters from Rodker to Savitzky in the archives at IMEC and from Savitzky to Rodker conserved at the Savitzky estate.

Rodker to Savitzky, 30 November 1921

Please go on translating idiomatically. I’m sure that’s better in the case of this book than a literal translation. Don’t you think “Les Montagnes Russes” is a good rendering of *The Switchback*?

Rodker to Savitzky, 31 January 1922

I got the translation today & have just read through it & must thank you infinitely for the trouble you have taken and the admirable story you have made of it. I append a list of some things which seemed rather curious, but you will of course do as you think about them: there they are:

could the <i>bank</i> be left as it is?	but please please yourself
surmontaient <i>les faux cils</i>	surmontaient <i>de faux cils</i>
acajou poli	poli
eut un possesseur	appartenait à quelqu’un
ses iniquités	ses torts. It means people have injured/ hurt/pained him
épicerie	should it not be quincaillerie or don’t they sell rat poison?
half-crown	demi couronne ou demi écu
les défauts du marbre	les veines
estomac dilaté	should be abdomen dilaté

Really I can't say how grateful I am to you for taking this job and it is with great humility that I accuse myself of having perhaps been the cause of your time having been wasted on a very thankless task.

Rodker to Savitzky, 22 February 1923

...as from tomorrow is an official expression merely meaning, *dating from...*
The stoves: *Des ailettes pour augmenter la surface de chaleur* is exactly it.
Lay down is the same as *stood in a row* along the middle of the floor of the hall.

Mop is *toupet*.

Tow-coloured: a dirty flaxen colour.

Tors is the local name for the hills which are rather monticules than mountains.

Lords is a café.

Strikingly, this brief glance into their epistolary exchanges exemplifies almost all of the forms that the collaboration of author and translator can take. First, we find a rather target-oriented recommendation to his translator: "Please go on translating idiomatically." It is striking to note the similarity between this passage and one of Joseph Conrad in a letter dated May 1916 addressed to André Gide about the translation of *The Arrow of Gold*: "My style is almost always entirely idiomatic. One can therefore translate me faithfully by seeking the equivalent French idioms" (Conrad 1996, 592). In the epistolary exchanges between author and translator, a poetics of translation emerges through Savitzky's description of her working method.

Savitzky to Rodker, 17 October 1928

My first draft is to penetrate deeply into the text's meaning, which you can't do simply by reading, I mean, the precise way each word is used, and why it's there, and where in the sentence it should go to produce the right sound in the ear of the French reader. Then, I have to set aside the manuscript, almost forget it, take time to become French again in order to write, after having been English in order to understand.

This striking image aptly illustrates the idiomatic, or target-oriented, approach favored in translational and editorial practices at the time. In a letter dated 1922, Conrad thanks Philippe Neel for his "excellent translation" of *Lord Jim*: "I read your translation as if it were a French work" (Putnam 1999, 79). Likewise, Rodker recommends to his translator, "I would like if possible the book to read like a French book and for the reader to forget the author was English" (23 September 1927), and Savitzky seems flattered that her translation was received as an original work: "Dorothy Pound writes to

me saying she and Ezra liked it very much, and they didn't feel like reading a translation" (17 March 1926).

The lists mentioned above are of two types, which we find present in almost all of Rodker's interactions with his translators: on the one hand, questions-and-answers, or lists of specific questions that have to do with the meaning of a single word or expression, addressed by the translator to the author while in the midst of drafting a translation manuscript; on the other hand, revision, or lists of comments or corrections that have to do with the meaning or the register of a single word or expression, addressed by the author to the translator. The first type of list is almost always made up of words that cannot be found in the dictionary (*tors*), idiomatic expressions (*as from tomorrow*) or cultural references (*Lords café*). The second type of list – not only those found in Rodker's communication with Savitzky but also with all the other authors that Rodker himself translated – are made up essentially of corrections (*défauts* > *veines*), verifications ("should it not be *quincaillerie*?") and source-oriented calls for reproducing as nearly as possible the lexical choices or the syntax of the original ("could the *bank* be left as it is?"). In the IMEC archives, in the margins of translation manuscripts, we find hundreds of similar questions-and-answers (Figure 1.1). To these two types of lists should be added the category of back-and-forths – series of questions and answers that bear upon a single translational problem, exemplified in a discussion (IMEC: SVZ 33; HRC: 38.2) about two particular words from Rodker's autobiographical narrative *Trains*:

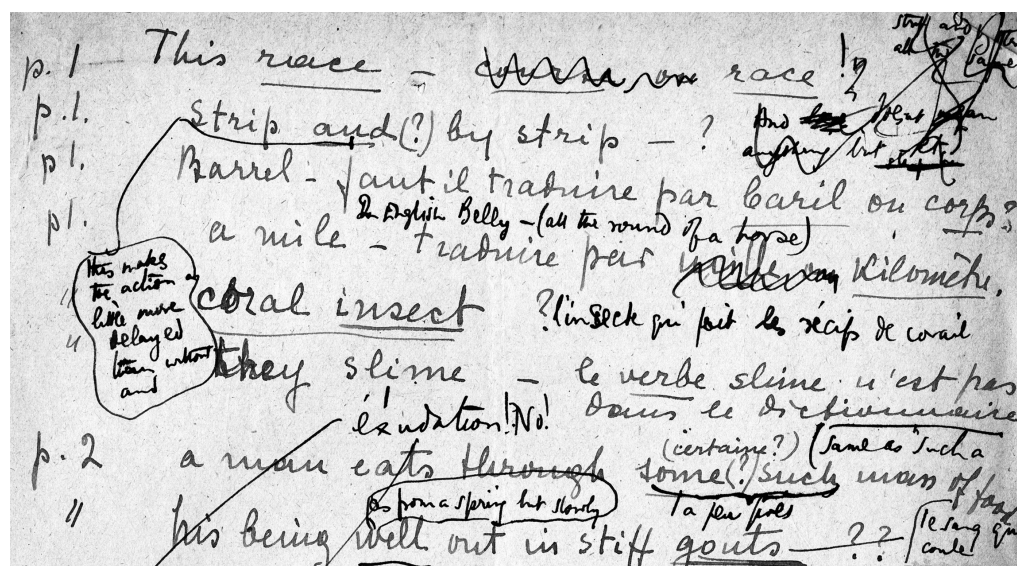


Figure 1.1 Ludmila Savitzky, list of questions regarding her translation of John Rodker's *Trains* with the author's responses, 1929. Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine, Caen, Fonds Ludmila Savitzky.

Original English Text

At the moment of writing I had needed the image of some distraught queen among Troy-like ruins, fallen towers, flames and rolling smoke, the distracted woman dragging her children through a city once familiar and not inimical then to them... Not the *mob-led* queen but the *mobeld* queen as misled for me once (when reading was still strange and filled my mind with shapes too large for it that after left it changed) was misled, whose meaning was unknown and had of course to stay unknowable. So here the word I sought that would for me say all of this was Clytemnestra.

Savitzky to Rodker, 15 March 1929

Explain to me what exactly you mean by “Not the *mob-led* queen but the *mobeld* queen as *miseld*... was misled.” How do you want me to translate that?

Savitzky to Rodker, 19 March 1929

You didn’t understand what I was asking you. I wanted to know exactly what meaning these words *mob-led* and *mobeld*, etc. have for you intuitively – what nuances, what differences – so that I can seek equivalent expressions in French. And also what nuance is apparent in the word *quean* – and whether it’s necessary to account for that in French.

Rodker to Savitzky, 22 March 1929

Mobled: that is simple – it means led by the mob, i.e., crowd; in fact *bousculé*. On the other hand *Mobeld* does not seem to have any meaning except a general feeling of muddled, distracted, mad, and so on. It is, you will remember, the description of Hecuba in *Hamlet* when the players are acting their parts.

Quean comes from the same passage and is today used of prostitutes, but was once the way in which queen was spelt. The close equivalent in French is *roïne*, which I believe is an ancient spelling for *reine*. Perhaps we could find in Villon some equivalent term. I hope this is all quite clear, but perhaps it would be best to leave this note out for it is, I agree, a complicated one.

Final French Version

Et cependant au moment où j’écrivais, j’avais cherché une image de reine égarée parmi des ruines troyennes, des tours abattues, des flammes, des fumées qui roulent, – une femme éperdue, traînant ses enfants à travers une ville jadis familière... Le mot que je cherchais, et qui pouvait suggérer tout cela, était Clytemnestre.

(Rodker 1929, 1907)

In the dialogue reconstituted above from the dispersed archival sources, several things stand out: the precision and the accuracy of Rodker’s explanation about the two words missing from the dictionary, *mobeld* and *quean*, which are not here chiefly lexical difficulties but rather cultural or intertextual ones,

since both are based on Shakespeare; Rodker's politeness, who pretends to believe that Savitzky – who, it is true, was extremely cultured and a great theater lover – can recall *Hamlet* (in English!) well enough to pick up an allusion to Hecuba; Rodker's remarkable understanding of the French literary tradition, who alights upon an almost miraculous equivalent for *quean*: "The close equivalent in French is *roine*, which I believe is an ancient spelling for *reine*. Perhaps we could find in Villon some equivalent term";¹ finally, the translator's renunciation of her task: despite the detailed explanation furnished by the author, Savitzky remains incapable of translating the passage in question and asks Rodker, "How do you want me to translate that?" before, in her following letter, returning to this point, she asks, "What should I put in French?" This request for self-translation was never taken up, and Savitzky decided to excise rather than translate: in the version published in May 1929 in the *Revue européenne*, the problematic sentence had simply disappeared.

Another recurrent phenomenon in author–translator exchanges is noticeable: compliments, at times exaggerated for obvious psychological reasons since they often accompany corrections and reproaches. It is a matter of making up for a critical remark with more or less sincere congratulations – as a professional proofreader points out, "no one likes to be wrong; the reviser must show tact and sympathy" (Zuccolo 2013, 47). When Rodker writes, "thank you infinitely for [...] the admirable story you have made of it," even if he means it – Savitzky's translation is indeed remarkable – he also flatters a woman of letters who is taking pains to introduce him into Parisian literary circles. Rodker's compliments about *The Switchback* and *Dartmoor* are repeated for the translation of *Adolphe* 1920, "I think parts of the translation are magnificent" (23 September 1927), and for the translation of *Trains*, "I am lost in admiration at the quite admirable way it is translated" (13 March 1930).

These recurrent elements constitute the basis of discussion not only in Rodker's case but also in many other cases of author–translator collaboration: lists of translator questions, author revisions upon receiving a carbon copy of the typescript, and compliments.

1.3 "Why not a word-for-word of my text?": Rodker and Montherlant

During the 1930s, to address bankruptcy brought on by failures in his publishing endeavors, Rodker tried to improve his financial situation through translating several French novels by contemporary authors such as Jules Romain, Henri Barbusse, Jean-Paul Sartre and Pierre Jean Jouve (Heinz 2018, 29–30). It was in this context that, between 1937 and 1940, he published with Routledge translations of three of the four novels of the cycle *Les Jeunes filles* by Henry de Montherlant: *Pitié pour les femmes* (1936), *Le Démon du bien* (1937) and *Les Lépreuses* (1939).² With more than a million copies in circulation, these four novels had created in France extreme tension between the two sexes. Men and women were depicted like two rival groups, equally dishonest and hypocritical; and the couple is described as locked in a perilous dance leading from rape to

marriage, a slow death where adultery and arrogance intermix: “Divorce is the principal act of marriage” (Montherlant 1939, 102). Rodker, who had been called upon by his translator so many times over the years, found himself in the position of asking someone for help, whether the author, the author’s literary agent, or his own translator.

1.3.1 *Pity for Women*

The manuscripts for the English translation of *Pitié pour les femmes* (hereafter PW) were never conserved, and so the genetic dossier in this case is limited to two small bundles, both kept at the Harry Ransom Center (John Rodker Papers).³ These documents are not signed, but it is easy to recognize the distinctive handwriting styles of Rodker and Savitzky; indeed, for his first translation of Montherlant, it seems that Rodker did not yet have the courage to get in touch directly with the important French novelist, preferring rather to ask Savitzky, his translator and subsequently close friend, whose linguistic competence he had experienced first-hand.

The following examples are, in order, the passage in question in the original text following the pagination of the Grasset 1936 edition; Savitzky’s response to one of Rodker’s questions (unknown, but easy to surmise); and the final English version following the pagination of the Routledge 1937 edition.

Original	“Quand même! Comment ils sont!” se disait de nouveau Costals, un peu stupéfait, quoi qu’il en eût. (1936, 256)
PW1.1	<i>Quoi qu’il en eût</i> : The Grand Larousse says that this is a “very ambiguous French expression.” It must be interpreted according to context. Can mean <i>anyhow</i> , <i>nevertheless</i> ... Here, perhaps “un peu stupéfait <i>despite himself</i> ” or “ <i>although he expected as much</i> ,” or just “un peu stupéfait <i>all the same</i> .”
Final	“Really! How they go on!” thought Costals again, with a shade of bewilderment. (1937a, 402)

Here is probably the most common type of question in the exchanges between author and translator: the meaning of an expression or a word, whether it be rare, outdated, idiolectic, slang, or idiomatic. Most French readers today will likely not understand the phrase “quoi qu’il en eût”, whose meaning is not easy to guess despite (or because of) the extreme simplicity of its words. Savitzky gives a general dictionary meaning, cautions that context is key for translating, and proposes a half-dozen possibilities. Among these, only one – “malgré lui” – fits perfectly; but she cannot convince Rodker, who prefers to delete the syntagm.

Original	[...] être pris pour un M. de Charlus, et cela par une femme intelligente, lettrée, pleine de lueurs, et qui connaît votre œuvre sur le bout du doigt!	(1936, 233)
PW1.3	Une femme pleine de lueurs = expression is entirely personal, not common; <i>a glimmering woman</i> (<i>a sparkling woman?</i>) or perhaps better a woman who often <i>has glimpses of</i> intelligence, understanding, in an intermittent way.	
Final	[...] and then to be taken for a M. de Charlus by an intelligent, cultivated woman, who has moments of inspiration, and has every word one has written at the end of her fingers!	(1937a, 387)

This new example differs from the previous one in one crucial way: in addition to the precise lexical explanation which can be found in both comments in French and suggestions in English, Savitzky makes clear that one “expression is entirely personal, not common.” With this properly literary comment, she invites Rodker to translate not merely the meaning of the expression but its rare and even unique character. Once again, Rodker does not take into account Savitzky’s clarifications – “moments of inspiration” does not sound very inspired – and prefers a less creative, and so less literary, solution. It is a scenario that we have already seen in the previous example and that we will find again further on: the explanations and suggestions that come to translators do not always have a perceptible effect on the final translation. We must recall that Savitzky, who was born in Russia and who arrived in France in 1901, knew French remarkably well but not perfectly. Certain expressions are unknown to her, and she frankly admits, “Never heard of it” or “impossible to understand without the text.” For example, when asked about the expression *baroud d’honneur* [last stand], she replies: “Are you sure you copied the word down correctly? I can’t find *baroud* or *barond* in any dictionary.” Did Rodker figure out that Savitzky, who was not the author of the novel and whose proficiency in French was both admirable and imperfect, was not the ideal person from whom to receive semantic clarifications and a critical rereading of the manuscript? The fact remains that for his next translation Rodker chose to address the author, first through Montherlant’s literary agent, then directly.

1.3.2 The Demon of Good and The Lepers

The translation archive of *Le Démon du bien* (hereafter DG), also kept at the Harry Ransom Center (John Rodker Papers), is made of two distinct parts: questions-and-answers and a detailed revision by the author.⁴ The first letter is accompanied by a message addressed to William Bradley:⁵

Dear Bradley, I have been translating Montherlant's *Démon du bien* and would be glad if you could get me answers to the following points, about which I am not too clear. [...] Please let me have these answers as soon as possible. I will then incorporate them in the translation, and let you have a copy of the Tss. for Montherlant to OK.

(DG1.1)

The chain of contact can seem unhelpfully complicated (and it will be simplified for the next novel), but there is no document that attests to why Rodker did not directly address the author for his first Montherlant translation. The letter to Bradley raises the same types of question as in his exchanges with Savitzky. Oftentimes, Rodker pairs words or expressions whose meaning lies in doubt with a proposed translation, which Montherlant accepts or rejects: "La cote Desfossés: is this a Stock Exchange quotation list? – Yes"; "Il a un côté sale gosse: vindictive? – No, an imp" (DG1.1). As Rodker showed in replying to Savitzky, Montherlant proves to have an excellent grasp over word meanings and history: "Couleurs de berlingot: more elaborate description wanted – Lively, brash colours, like those of the hard candies known in France as *berlingots*"; "Scottish showers – In France, the type of shower that alternates rapidly between hot and cold water"; "comme un plat que l'on sauce" – "The act of cleaning off the plate we are eating from by soaking up with a bit of bread everything (all the sauce) and then eating the bread" (DG1.3).

Just after *The Demon of Good* was published by Routledge in London, Rodker began the translation of the last novel in the *Jeunes filles* cycle. His exchanges with Montherlant (question-and-answers, then revisions) about *Les Lépreuses* (hereafter TL) are very similar to those from the preceding year.⁶ Rodker asks for help in regard to words or expressions whose meaning he does not understand in context (*cachets*, *mesura*, *peau de lapin*, *belote*, *creux de genou*, *plaisanteries chevronnées*, *visage marqué*, *se gargariser*); idiomatic expressions (*fil à la patte*, *le sang tourné*, *montons-nous bien la tête*, *j'ai le cœur noyé*); particularly nettlesome syntax, which even a French reader today would have a hard time understanding (*Et ce n'est pas de rencontrer, que ne le disiez-vous, que vous auriez dû le moins accepter, n'y aurait-il que les pires bêtes*). Hundreds of such questions are answered, in the form of an explanation, a translation suggestion, and sometimes even a drawing to convey a complex meaning (Figure 1.2).

Among the hundreds of comprehension problems and translation difficulties documented in the 38 dense pages from the revisions of *The Demon of Good* and of *The Lepers* (DG3, TL2 and TL3), several recurrent features rise to the surface and give a sense of coherence to the often-dizzying profusion. Five categories would seem to be of particular interest since we find them in all of the translation collaborations that Rodker undertook with authors, but also in most author–translator interactions found in the archives.

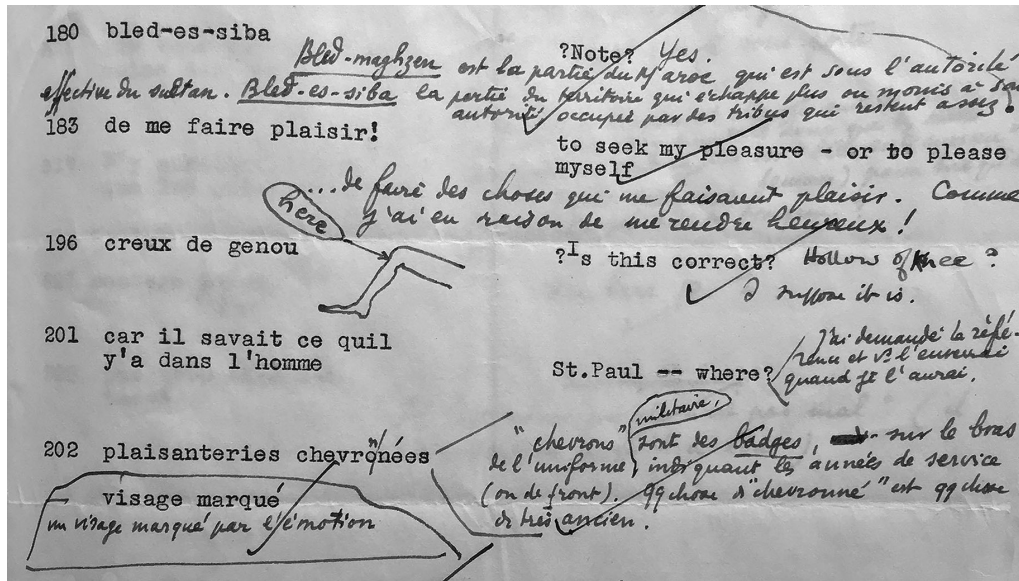


Figure 1.2 John Rodker, list of questions regarding his translation of Henry de Montherlant's *Les Lépreuses* with the author's handwritten responses, 1939. John Rodker Papers, Harry Ransom Center.

1.3.2.1 Nuance

Armed with his considerable linguistic knowledge, Montherlant pays special attention to certain subtleties, which Rodker's translation seems to flatten. For example, concerning the sentence "Je vous épouse, non pas pour me rendre heureux, moi, mais pour vous rendre heureuse, vous" (Montherlant 1937b, 56), he clarifies: "The idea is 'Let me make you happy' – Which isn't quite 'I can make you happy,' I think" (DG3.2). Then, about the sentence "Le mariage des grands hommes, c'est leur part inavouable" (Montherlant 1937b, 23), he writes: "[L]eur part inavouable doesn't mean in this case 'the part that they will never admit' (because there are moments when they do admit it), but the part of them that is not worth admitting" (DG3.1). Further on, he writes, "Isn't there an English expression analogous to *cure de silence*? The French expression is slightly ridiculous, which the phrase 'silence is restful' doesn't capture"; "Is *vulgarity* really *grossièreté*? A person can be coarse without being vulgar – for example, the nobles at the court of Louis XIV [cf. Saint-Simon] were coarse but not vulgar. *Rudeness*? *Coarseness*?" (TL3.1). Or the following example, which presents in succession the French of the 1939 Grasset text, a question from Montherlant about the translation, and the English version published by Knopf in 1940:

Original Derrière l'autel, de beaux gosses à ailes font sortir d'une coquille, comme jadis Aphrodite, l'Aphrodite moderne, Madeleine, la puta sainte...

(1939, 241)

- TL3.3 *beaux gosses* is a somewhat cheeky French phrase. Can this nuance be rendered in English?
- Final Behind the altar, handsome winged urchins, from a shell, bring forth, as once Aphrodite, the Aphrodite of today, the Madeleine, the holy *puta*.
- (1940, 403)

1.3.2.2 *Literary aims*

Of course, to render the exact meaning of words is not enough for a good translation, and the novelist shows himself to be very sensitive to phenomena like tone, sonority and repetition. For example: “Long and clumsy. Can you render the brevity, the elliptical quality of my text?” (DG3.17); “I’d keep your first option, which sounds better” (DG3.18); “unfortunate assonance: *leaps/lip*”; “*Jouant* is odd in French, but this sentence is meaningful precisely because of this oddness” (TL3.11); “*J’ai volé au-dessus des guerres* is odd in French. Can’t you carry over this oddness into English?” (TL3.18). Here are two further, more detailed examples: first, a passage in the original text from the 1937 Grasset edition; Montherlant’s comment, or correction; and the final English version from the 1940 Knopf edition.

- Original “Nous nous mêlons en silence comme des ombres. Voilà tout ce que je fais, et je n’en ai pas de plaisir.”
- (1937b, 278)
- DG3.18 “There you have all my activity” is *quite impossible*! Can you imagine such a sentence in the Bible? Now this entire passage is written in a form recalling that of the Scriptures. You will have to find something as simple as “Voilà tout ce que je fais.”
- Final We mingle in silence, like shadows. That is all I do, and it gives me no pleasure.
- (1940, 152)

1.3.2.3 *Efforts at diplomacy*

These, more or less successful, signal to Rodker errors or omissions that end up truly irking Montherlant. In the vast majority of cases, his words convey extreme politesse (“perhaps one could...”, “how about changing this...”, etc.), but signs of irritation become increasingly frequent in the manuscript. The tone becomes more terse, almost edgy: “Better not to translate at all the Latin line than to translate it like that” (DG3.1); “*To bring that* etc. is extremely long and clumsy. And you don’t translate *aussi*. Is it possible that the English language can never be vivacious?” (DG3.11); “Not that!” (DG3.5); “No, see my text” (DG3.9); “I’m not sure your translation conveys this. No, probably not” (DG3.14). Or the following, more detailed reaction:

Original	Et elle, marchant de long en large, vive et belle d'émotion, elle avait l'air d'une panthère encagée.	(1937b, 240)
DG3.14	"vive et belle d'émotion" is clumsily translated by <i>embellished by her rage</i> ! And then, <i>rage</i> isn't <i>émotion</i> .	
Final	And she, striding up and down, vital and lovely with her emotion, was like a caged panther.	(1940, 179)

1.3.2.4 Montherlant's linguistic errors

These remind us that one of the principal requirements for a successful collaboration is the author's proficiency in the target language. While reading the comments that dot the pages, we can tell that the French novelist knows English sufficiently well that his comments would merit being taken into consideration, and this allows Montherlant to point out numerous translation errors in the typescript manuscript. But his English is far from being perfect, and certain of his *corrections* can seem either out of place or peremptory in tone. Montherlant writes about the sentence "lui effleurant le visage de la pointe de ses gants..." (Montherlant 1937b, 50) that "Effleurer is: *to just touch*. Not at all *brush*!" (DG3.2) – while "brush" is a perfect translation of *effleurer*. Here are three more examples of misguided questions: "It's *serious* is really *c'est grave*?" (DG3.13); "Does *to pardon* have the juridical sense of *gracier, acquitter*?" (DG3.14); "How can *automatique* be translated as *axiomatic*???" (DG3.12). Here is a more detailed example:

Original	"Je me refuse à dîner en ville, en d'autres termes à faire la conversation avec une inconnue, ma voisine, dont je ne sais même pas le nom..."	(1937b, 121)
DG3.3	"Some strange woman": Won't the reader think that she's a foreign woman?	
Final	"I refuse to go out to dinner parties – in other words, to make conversation to some woman I find beside me, whose name I don't even know..."	(1940, 87)

Rodker might have replied to Montherlant that, in this context, no English reader would have interpreted *strange* as *foreign*. In most cases, when the author creates an imaginary translation problem betraying his imperfect control of English, Rodker retains his original choice – *brush*, *bewitched* and *serious*, for example, are found in the published version. In the final

example, however, we see that the translator suppresses “strange” for no other reason than to show his goodwill to the author.⁷

1.3.2.5 *A desire for literal translation*

Throughout the dozens of pages of his revision, the frequency of one particular request says a lot: “Translate more literally” (DG3.1); “Can’t you make this more literal?” (DG3.2); “Why not translate like in the original text?” (DG3.7); “Can’t you translate more literally?” (DG3.9). This desire to see a literal translation shows itself in his corrections, for example concerning a sentence in *Les Lépreuses* that he thinks can be translated word-for-word into English:

Original	Non, il n’épouserait pas, pour en faire l’infirmière d’un lépreux, la fille qu’il n’avait pas voulu épouser quand il s’agissait...
	(1939, 234)

TL3.5	Couldn’t we say: No, he would not marry, to turn her into a leper’s nurse, the girl he had not wanted to marry when what was in question...
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In many instances, it seems as though Montherlant would be happy with a calque of his novel – a translation in another language to be sure, but one that would present the same syntactical patterns as in the French. Not only does the concept of “the insipid word-for-word translation that is unfaithful due to its servile fidelity” (Larbaud 1946, 62) seem foreign to him, but he invites Rodker (whose interactions with Savitzky illustrate an opposite preference for “idiomatic” translation) – to abide by his source-oriented approach, which, in his eyes, is the only type that respects the original text. When the text presents a transposable cultural allusion, like a character that starts talking as though in a play by Molière, or the reference to a fairy tale, he always asks Rodker to add a footnote (there are 30-odd such requests) instead of giving him permission to recreate in English the effect produced by the change of register or an inter-textual conceit. And Rodker, perhaps tired by the incessant requests from the author for a literal rendering, often gives in, to the detriment of the translation.

Original	Ignorez-vous aussi le vieil adage: “En mariage, trompe qui peut?”
	(1937b, 111)

DG3.6	Translating this by “all’s fair in love and war” isn’t entirely correct; here, the topic is marriage.
Final	And are you unaware of the old saying, “All’s fair in marriage?”
	(1940, 79)

While Rodker proposes an entirely acceptable transposition, Montherlant demands that the word “marriage” be retained – the problem being that “All’s fair in marriage” is not an “old saying” and that the English dialogue seems, as a result, rather awkward. Oftentimes, but not always, Rodker accepts suggestions without discussing the matter with the author, even when it is likely that he preferred his own version.

Original	Sur la route de Bagatelle nous nous arrêterons aux lacs, pour y voir des animaux.	(1937b, 17)
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DG3.1	Why not “to watch animals?” Nous nous arrêterons: <i>we shall linger</i> .
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Final	On the way to Bagatelle, we shall linger by the lakes to watch the creatures there.	(1940, 3)
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Kilmartin	On the way to Bagatelle we shall stop by the lakes to see the animals there.	(1968, 323)
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Rodker takes up Montherlant’s two suggestions without flinching, however open to discussion they are and uncharacteristically non-literalist (*voir* is indeed translated by *see*, *regarder* by *watch*; *s’arrêter* is translated by *stop*, *s’attarder* by *linger*), and so the translation wanders curiously away from the original. To the exchange documented above, I have added a later translation by Terence Kilmartin which probably corresponds word-for-word to Rodker’s translation before revision. Finally, two more examples. In a passage in the novel full of biblical overtones, Rodker translates “ils te lapideraient” by “they would stone you with stones” – a phrase borrowed from the King James Bible. But Montherlant asks: “If *to stone* means *lapider*, then why add *with stones*?” In another passage, the author proposes again the perfect loan translation (and in practice a barbarism), “Why not *felt it rose shallowly*, word-for-word from my text?” These appeals to literalism and word-for-word translation, even if they are not always implemented by the translator, squelch his creativity not only in the passages in question but throughout the entire process of translating the novel, since Rodker knew how the author would scrutinize his translation.

1.4 Concluding remarks

Even in the absence of translation manuscripts, the paratext constituted by the exchanges between authors and translators provides useful insights into what takes place at this stage of translation. Epistolary exchanges between authors and translators illuminate their method and the rhythm of their work, their proficiency in foreign languages, and their more-or-less open-ended translational suppleness in these two steps where the plasticity of the

translation is still considerable – first, the translator’s questions, and then the author’s revision. The translator’s asking of questions is a more essential process than one might think – Italo Calvino actually deemed it essential: “I strongly believe in collaboration between the author and translator. Rather than a revision of the translation by the author, this collaboration emerges out of the translator’s questions to the author” (2002, 81). When obscure passages are pointed out by the translator, the author decides upon what course to follow – simplification, suppression, addition of a footnote – and thus directly affects the English version of his novels. It is here that the author initiates a dialogue with the translator that can change shape into a negotiation. As for revision, this stage reveals how Montherlant is at once courteous and rude, a lexicographer beyond compare and someone with a middling grasp of English, and especially worried about preserving the literary dimension of his text – tone, register, deliberate anaphoras and unfortunate repetitions, intertextuality, and sonorous effects – which is in the process of becoming someone else’s.

In the case of Savitzky and Rodker, the lasting impression is that we are witnessing a friendly dialogue, always precise and enlightening, as though Rodker was aware that his oeuvre would be better received abroad than at home, a fact that Patterson notes, writing that Rodker was keen “on having his own writing recognized in the disguise of Ludmila Savitzky’s French translations” (2003, 102). Rodker would have been able to say to Savitzky, as Gabriele D’Annunzio remarked to his French translator: “From now on, in France, we are *one person*” (1946, 170). The stakes were so large for Rodker – his literary career depended on his success in France – that we can easily understand his constant attention to the translational process and the unwavering courtesy with which he revised and corrected each translation. In the case of Rodker and Montherlant, there are numerous items pointed out or corrected (on average, one per page in the novel), and yet these are rarely the source of disagreement. Their palpable effect on the published English translation – which is to say, the collaborative efficiency of their exchanges – is difficult to measure. But it is clear that, overall, Montherlant’s interventions helped avoid many translation errors. Certainly, the novelist knew better than anyone the literary and biblical allusions of certain passages, or, otherwise, the references to French daily life he describes. But, like many authors before and after him, Montherlant gives the impression that a syntactical calque remains for him the ideal translation. While Rodker the author gives free rein to Savitzky to make a completely new French text from his own, Rodker the translator finds himself with his hands tied.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, we find in “Ballades des dames du temps jadis” (1461) by François Villon, “La roine Blanche comme un lis/Qui chantait à voix de sirène”. It should be

- mentioned that, in 1924, Rodker's Pushkin Press had published *The Testaments of François Villon*, translated by John Heron Lepper.
- 2 The book *Pity for Women*, which Routledge published in 1937, contained the first two novels of Montherlant's cycle: *Pity for Women*, translated by Rodker, and *Les Jeunes filles (Young Girls)*, translated by the Irish poet Thomas McGreevy.
 - 3 PW1 = four manuscript pages, front only, 1937: 36 responses from Ludmila Savitzky to Rodker's questions concerning his translation for *Pitié pour les femmes*; PW2 = a page of lined notebook paper, front and back, 1937: 19 responses from Savitzky to Rodker's questions.
 - 4 DG1 = three typewritten pages, front and back, dated 18 December 1937, addressed to W.A. Bradley, with Montherlant's handwritten responses; DG2 = three typewritten pages, front and back, numbered from 1 to 3, 1937: 33 responses from Montherlant to Rodker's questions; DG3 = nine handwritten pages, front and back, numbered from 1 to 18, dated 23 September 1938, signed by Montherlant: 220 corrections and clarifications by Montherlant, written in part in English.
 - 5 William Aspenwall Bradley (1878–1939) oversaw a literary agency at 18 quai de Béthune, Paris, in the Fourth Arrondissement, with his wife Jenny Serruys.
 - 6 The translation archive of *Les Lépreuses* (John Rodker Papers, HRC) is made up of the following materials: TL1 = four typewritten pages, front and back, numbered from 1 to 4, dated 29 October 1939: 35 questions from Rodker to Montherlant, with the author's handwritten responses alongside the questions; TL2 = three handwritten pages, front and back, numbered from 1 to 6, 1939: 80 corrections and clarifications from Montherlant, written in part in English; TL3 = five handwritten pages, front and back, numbered from 1 to 10, 1939: 136 corrections and clarifications from Montherlant, written in part in English; TL4 = one front-and-back page, 1939: 13 corrections and clarifications from Montherlant.
 - 7 In a more recent English version of the novel (Montherlant 1968, 75), Terence Kilmartin translates, "make polite conversation to some strange woman in a diamond necklace."

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