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Charting the Future of Translation History

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Published by University of Ottawa Press

Bandia, F. & Bastin, L..

Charting the Future of Translation History.

Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006.

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The Role of Translation in History

The Case of Malraux

Whoever writes history may well control it. Indeed, this is the desperation in historiography: whoever records the present may control the past and hence the future as well. How can we learn from history when the records have been falsified? Or erased? Especially when or where historiography as the West extols it is moot? The case of André Malraux (1900–1976) suggests that *belles lettres*, rather than historiography, may preserve more reliable insights. Further, his translators, who expanded his reading audience, have kept the record accessible.

Malraux's China novels were read as fictionalized reportage (or even self-glorifying fictionalized autobiography) at the time of publication. As such, they competed then with more overt journalism and political commentary.¹ Now at least two of them — *Les Conquérants* (1928, "The Conquerors," translated by Winifred Stephens Whale in 1929 and Stephen Becker in 1976) and *La Condition humaine* (1933, "Man's Fate," as translated by Haakon M. Chevalier in 1934 and "Storm in Shanghai" as

rendered by Alastair MacDonald, also in 1934) — can be read as history.² If we may take library holdings as a sampling, these novels are read in translation as much as in French.³ Hence, translators as intermediaries have a major role in revealing the ultimately self-destructive colonial attitude. (I shall limit my remarks to the English translations.)

The day may perhaps come when Saigon, Canton, and Hong Kong, political flashpoints where the French colonial presence was waning in the 1920s and 1930s, are fully documented in the purest Leopold von Ranke tradition. In the meantime, as we wait for the unlikely apotheosis of neutral historiography, these Malraux novels let us enter the eerie hurricane eye of a society which was itself a doomed “meanwhile.” If the subtexts in them had been perceived, could some of the subsequent events, which seem like the inescapable dynamics of humankind, have been prevented? or ameliorated? Moot questions. Leo Trotsky claimed in an essay for the *Nouvelle Revue française*, February 9, 1931, that the insights came not from Malraux but from the unfolding of events “à l’insu de l’auteur et témoignent contre lui” (“of which the author is unaware and which are testifying against him”).⁴

In any event, the record is here for us to read and adumbrate in French and English. Of course, we cannot read these novels over seventy-five years later with the socio-psychological lenses of their contemporaries, nor should we. In the meantime, we have read other records of the collapse of the colonial empires. With the sites just mentioned: Saigon — as an American of my generation, I followed with protest the war in Vietnam as I witness now its subsequent recolonization. With Canton, now Guangzhou, we tried to gauge the upheavals of China that came after Chiang Kai-shek. With Hong Kong, we watched as the British lease expired. Yet, I should advance, the seed of all these developments could have been inferred from these two novels where any victory, even off-camera, is pyrrhic.

These novels received accolades that guaranteed their translations by talented and conscientious translators. *Les Conquérants*, a commercial success, occasioned a public debate sponsored by the Union pour la vérité,⁵ and *La Condition humaine* was the unanimous jury choice for the

Prix Goncourt. Critics as politically divergent as Leo Trotsky and Edmund Wilson went into print with their opinions. I would like to examine some typical instances where the translators transmit Malraux's clairvoyance. Textual comparisons make for a Benjaminian reading: the translations, even when they present slight omissions or infelicities, add to the texts.

Both novels rely on firsthand experience. The characters usually had real-life prototypes and interact with historical personages whom, however, Malraux cagily keeps offstage. The fictional characters choose either to engage or evade socially momentous situations. Both novels take up early events of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party founded by Sun Yat-sen and taken over by Chiang Kai-shek). *The Conquerors* follows the 1925 strikes in Shanghai, Canton (Guangzhou), and Hong Kong, from May through August. (Sun Yat-sen had died in March.) It ends with an upturn of Bolshevik ascendancy under Mikhail Markovich Borodin (1884–1951, also known as Michael Grussenberg, Gruzenberg, Grossenberg) and the departure for Europe of Garine, a professional revolutionary of anarchist leanings, whom the first-person narrator has been accompanying. *Man's Fate* follows Chiang Kai-shek's consolidation of China in 1926–1927 from the perspective of the leftists whom the Comintern sacrifices to the realpolitik of the moment. (Among the few to escape these Chiang Kai-shek executions were Cho En-lai and Mao Tse-tung.)

The Conquerors is a first-person narrative, presumably by a journalist, who, partly because of his fluency in Cantonese, joins the entourage of Garine, the chief protagonist. Part One, the "Approaches," coordinates the geographical and political; that is, as the journalist begins his investigation from Saigon, he comes closer to the real sources of action. In Part Two, "Powers," the narrator joins the entourage of Garine and becomes enmeshed in the intricacies of the power struggle. Whatever the genuine problems of the native population, the novel is concerned only with the individuals involved in the intrigues and the shifting alliances. The families of the foreign missions leave Canton, so it is reported, and the section ends with the announcement that Robert

Norman, an American lawyer with the Cantonese government, has left. This means that henceforth Russians will be in charge of all military operations. Part Three, "The Man" [Gariné], begins with the announcement that the British in Hong Kong have broken the strike with manpower from Japan and French Indochina. Gariné is outmaneuvered by Borodin, partly because of policy, partly because of his own physical disability. Despite his confession to the narrator that there have been moments in his life when he has felt pity, the reader's last glimpse is a scene of gratuitous brutality. The approaching commotion of the Red army coming in for what will be a short-lived triumph rocks the room as Gariné embraces the narrator in the final brief paragraph.

What stands out when the novel is read now is the colonial mentality. In its most benign form it is a complacent, kindly view of the "natives" as other. In the second paragraph of Part Two, the narrator is going by motor boat just past the Shameen (European section of Canton). He is entranced by an alien setting:

A l'avant, des femmes presque toutes âgées cuisent sur des trépieds, dans une intense odeur de graisse brûlée; souvent, derrière elles, apparaît un chat, une cage ou un singe enchaîné. Les enfants nus et jaunes passent de l'un à l'autre, faisant sauter comme un plumeau plat la frange unique de leurs cheveux, plus légers et plus animés que les chats malgré leurs ventres en poire de mangeurs de riz. Les tout-petits dorment, paquets dans un linge noir accroché au dos des mères. La lumière frisante du soleil joue autour des arêtes des sampans et détache violemment de leur fond brun des blouses et les pantalons des femmes, taches bleues, et les enfants grimpés sur les toits, taches jaunes. Sur le quai, le profil dentelé des maisons américaines et des maisons chinoises; au-dessus, le ciel sans couleur à force de lumière, et partout, légère comme une mousse, sur les sampans, sur les maisons, sur l'eau, cette lumière, dans laquelle nous pénétrons comme dans un brouillard incandescent. (163–164)

Whale stays rather close:

In the bows [of the sampans] are women [no indication of age] cooking food on tripods giving forth [he removes an ellipsis] a strong smell of burning fat; behind them frequently a cat, a cage, or a chained monkey. Flitting from one to the other are the children, yellow little naked bodies [less rhythmic than *jaunes et nus*], shaking their fringes of straight hair, more lively and animated than the cats though their little stomachs are bulging [less metaphoric than "pear-shaped"] with nothing but rice. The babies, bundles of black linen [*linge* is not necessarily "linen"] tied to their mothers' backs, are asleep. The golden sunshine [*frisante*, perhaps untranslatable, suggests "encroaching," but it has no colour denotations] playing around the sampan awnings makes the women's blouses and trousers stand out boldly in blue patches against the brown background, while the children climbing on the roofs look like yellow dots. On the quay the irregular line of American and Chinese houses; above, the sky, colorless in the dazzling brightness; and everywhere, over sampans, houses, water, light as froth, the gleaming sunshine into which we sail as into a mist. (66)

Becker's version is smoother and perhaps more touristic; perhaps as a result, more postcolonial:

On their bows [of the sampans], some women, almost all of them old, are cooking over tripods that smell of hot pungent fat ["pungent" sounds delicious]; behind many of the women sits a cat, a chicken coop [information added], or a chained monkey. Naked, yellow children scamper from one attraction to another ["scamper" is more appealing than "ran back and forth"], their characteristic bangs flying like whisks, more graceful and lively than the cats [instead of "lighter and quicker"] in spite of their round, rice-eaters bellies [instead of "their stomachs, pear-shaped from their rice diet"; does Becker sense malnutrition?]. The infants sleep, little parcels

wrapped in black cloth hung on their mothers' backs. Glowing sunlight plays on the sampans' awnings, accenting the women's shirts and trousers, blue swatches, and the children on the roofs, yellow swatches. [The brown background provided by the sampans has been erased.] Along the waterfront, the irregular skyline of Chinese and American business houses [information added]; above, a sky bleached pale [a Westerner's disorientation is emphasized] by the intense sunlight; and everywhere that same light, fragile as froth, lying on the sampans, houses, river, an incandescent fog as we knife through. (57)

In its more vicious form the colonial mentality is shown in the treatment of non-Europeans as objects. In the next to last scene of the novel, Garine kills a Chinese prisoner whose information would no longer be valuable:

Une fois de plus je dis au Chinois de répondre. Il fait un geste d'impuissance. La détonation. Le corps du Chinois ne bouge pas; sur son visage, une expression intense de stupéfaction. Nicolaïeff a sauté et s'appuie au mur. Est-il blessé? Une seconde . . . Deux . . . Le Chinois s'effondre, mou, les jambes à demi pliées.

Et le sang commence à couler. (263)

Whale is interpretive, making the situation clearer:

Once again I tell the Chinese to reply. He signifies that he cannot. [A somewhat awkward interpretation.]

The bullet is fired [an explanation, rather than the effect]. The body of the Chinese stands rigid, a dazed expression [intensity is gone] on his face. Nicolaïeff has started; he leans against the wall. Is the prisoner [more explicitness helpful since Nicolaïeff had jumped] wounded?

One second . . . two. The man drops loosely [instead of "goes slack"], his legs half bent; and his [specificity] blood begins to flow. (167)

Becker is closer to Malraux's camera:

Again I tell the Chinese to answer. He gestures helplessly.

The shot explodes [an explosion can be seen; a detonation is heard]. The Chinese does not budge [humanizing "the body of the Chinese"]; on his face is a look of intense astonishment. Nicolaieff jumps in his chair, and leans against the wall. Is the prisoner hurt [clarification of the injured, since Nicolaieff had jumped]?

A second shot . . . two . . . The Chinese collapses, inert, legs askew ["buckled" would have been the technical choice]. And the blood begins to flow. (168–169)

Throughout, both translators' choices mute the narrator's objectification of the Chinese.

Since Garine is a dying man soon to set out for Norway, it might be assumed that justice will prevail after the novel ends. But Malraux's narrative voice has prepared us to admire this flawed revolutionary of dubious commitments who believes only in momentary and limited fraternity. Readers can see, at least after the fact, that the Chinese whose consciousness have been raised remain raw material for the clash of egos in geopolitical power plays. As Trotsky notes regarding *La Condition humaine*, Malraux's evidence testifies against the narrator's bias.

Certainly, *Man's Fate* and *Storm in Shanghai* ("La Condition humaine" translates literally as "the human condition") shows a more cynical overall assessment and in the hindsight of history is even more pessimistic. As in *The Conquerors*, Malraux provides precise time indications. Six of the seven parts of the novel take place, March 21–April 12, 1927, in Shanghai; Part Seven catches up in July with characters who have escaped to Kobe and Paris. Readers in 1933 might have assumed that somehow justice would prevail; readers from, say, 1936 to the present have known that the situation became catastrophic and only partially and intermittently ameliorated.

Malraux as cineaste moves quickly from scene to scene, with characters' thoughts exposed as if in voice-over or through dialogues. There is

constant action with success dependent upon luck and timing. The hourly indicators help a reader integrate sometimes nearly simultaneous occurrences.

The camera, however, is never neutral. Its focus is influenced by the emotional state of the consciousness it is in. It sees only what the emotional state of that consciousness is able to take in and in the order in which it classifies perceptions. In the opening scene Ch'en, the terrorist, goes into a paroxysm of fear due to the mewling of a cat in a hotel room window.

Et à côté d'elle [une tache de sang], grandissant comme elle, parut l'ombre de deux oreilles pointues.

La porte était proche, le balcon plus éloigné: mais c'était du balcon que venait l'ombre. Bien que Tchen ne crût pas aux génies, il était paralysé, incapable de se retourner. Il sursauta: un miaulement. A demi délivré, il osa regarder. C'était un chat de gouttière qui entrait par la fenêtre sur ses pattes silencieuses, les yeux fixés sur lui. Une rage forcenée secouait Tchen à mesure qu'avançait l'ombre; rien de vivant ne devait se glisser dans la farouche région où il était jeté; ce qui l'avait vu tenir ce couteau l'empêchait de remonter chez les hommes. Il ouvrit le rasoir, fit un pas en avant: l'animal s'enfuit par le balcon. Tchen se trouva en face de Shanghai. (514)

Chevalier, the American translator, is exact and eloquent:

And beside it [the blood of the man just fatally stabbed], growing too, appeared the shadow of two pointed ears. The door was at a distance, the balcony was nearer; but it was from the balcony that the shadow loomed. Although Ch'en did not believe in spirits, he was paralyzed, unable to turn round. He jumped; mewling! Half relieved, he dared to look. It was an alley-cat. Its eyes riveted on him, it stalked through the window on noiseless paws. As the shadow advanced, an uncontrollable [*forcené*e has more affect than

"uncontrollable," perhaps "fanatical"] rage shook Ch'en — not against the creature itself, [insertion of qualifying kindness not found in the text] but against its presence. Nothing living must venture into the wild region where he was thrown: whatever had seen him hold this dagger prevented him from returning to the world of men. He opened his razor, took a step forward: the creature fled by way of the balcony. Ch'en pursued it . . . He found himself suddenly facing Shanghai. (14)

MacDonald, the British translator, renders it thus:

And next to it, becoming larger too as it [apparently referring back to the blood] became larger, he saw the shadow of two pointed ears.

The door was a good way off, the balcony closer; but it was from the balcony that shadows came. Although Chen did not believe in evil [a genie is not necessarily evil] spirits he stood rooted where he was. Something miaowed; he gave a start. Half-way to deliverance, he now dared to look. A gutter cat glided in front of the balcony on silent pads, its eyes fixed on him. A furious rage shook Chen as this shadow advanced towards him, anger not against the animal itself but against its presence here; nothing that had life ought to enter this strange region into which he had sunk; this thing that had observed him knife in hand barred the way to his return to reality. He opened the razor, took a step forward; the creature fled through the window. Chen dashed after it — and found himself face to face with Shanghai. (5)

My preference here, probably subjective, is for Chevalier's translation.

Part One covers the period from midnight to five a.m., March 21. Here the chief protagonists are introduced as they mobilize for a sustained insurrection either the next day or the day after. We have just seen Ch'en killing an arms dealer to get the bill of lading. Following

abortive riots in February, a professional revolutionary, Kyo Gisors, half-French and half-Japanese, has been charged by the Communist Central Committee with the coordination of all the factions. Part Two goes from eleven a.m., March 21 to four p.m., March 22. The chances for a successful outbreak look good to Kyo and Katov, his Russian second-in-command. The government's armored train has been sabotaged. Their own forces are marching on Shanghai. Yet as the day veritably explodes, it is clear that the Central Committee has allowed the Kuomintang to take over the "revolution." At almost the exact halfway point of the novel, Malraux stages one of his signature climaxes. Kyo, Katov, and Ch'en have just received a request from a Kuomintang officer to share arms. They hear a distant rumble (*la rumeur*, an insidious noise of human origin, English "rumour"), "but so confused (*confus*, 'blurred' or 'muddled') that they had to strain their ears in order to make out what it was."

Il semblait qu'elle montait de la terre. . . .

Mais les cris approchaient comme s'ils fussent venus de la banlieue vers le centre. De plus en plus forts. Impossible de distinguer les paroles. . . .

Les cris, toujours sans paroles, devenaient de plus en plus proches, comme si quelque nouvelle capitale eût été transmise de foule en foule. Luttant avec eux, un autre bruit se fit place, devint enfin distinct: l'ébranlement régulier du sol sous les pas. (604)

Chevalier:

It seemed to rise from the earth . . . the cries seeming to come from the outskirts towards the center. Louder and louder. Impossible to make out any words. . . .

The shouts, still indistinguishable, were coming closer and closer, as though capital news were being passed from crowd to crowd. Vying with them, another sound was making itself heard, and finally

became distinct: the rhythmic beating (a little weak for *l'ébranlement*, "quaking") of footsteps on the ground. (135)

MacDonald:

It seemed to rise out of the ground. . . . The shouts seemed to be coming in towards the centre of the city, from the suburbs. Louder and louder. It was impossible to catch any words . . .

The shouting, still unintelligible, came nearer and nearer, as if some news of vital importance were being passed along from one crowd to another. But another noise struggled to make itself heard, succeeded, and at last grew distinct: the regular tramp of marching men was shaking the ground. (131)

The footsteps changed direction towards the armored train. Then the men in the train must have decided to go down firing:

Le train même entrain dans une transe furieuse. Tirant toujours de partout, ébranlé par sa frénésie même, il semblait vouloir s'arracher de ses rails, comme si la rage désespérée des hommes qu'il abritait eût passé dans cette armure prisonnière et qui se débattait elle aussi . . . c'était le frémissement des rails qui maintenaient tous ces hurlements ainsi qu'une camisole de force. . . . Trente secondes, le fracas cessa. Au-dessus de l'ébranlement sourd des pas et du tic-tac de toutes les horloges de la boutique, s'établit un grondement de lourde ferraille: l'artillerie de l'armée révolutionnaire. (605)

Chevalier follows suit:

The train was working itself into a frenzy . . . it seemed to want to tear itself from its rails as if the desperate rage of the men it sheltered had passed into the imprisoned armor, which was also struggling. . . . it was the quivering of the rails which resisted all those roars [omit-

ted in English: *comme une camisole de force* "like a straight-jacket" . . . Thirty seconds, and the uproar ceased. Above the dull reverberations of the footsteps and the tictac of all the clocks in the shop, a rumble [*le grondement*, also "thundering"] of heavy iron became dominant [*s'établit* "took over"]: the artillery of the revolutionary army. (136–137)

MacDonald:

The train itself appeared panic-stricken. Firing continuously from every aperture, shaking itself violently in its frenzy, it seemed to be trying to wrench itself from the rails, as if the hopeless rage of the men whom it sheltered had infected the armour which imprisoned them, so that it, too, was struggling for freedom. . . . the shuddering of the rails which held all these screaming wretches fast, like a strait-jacket: . . . thirty seconds later the din ceased. Through the dull vibrations of the marching feet and the ticking of all the clocks in the shop, a creaking of massive metal made itself heard: the artillery of the revolutionary army. (132)

MacDonald makes no mistranslation *per se*, and his use of English is a matter of taste.

In the remainder of the novel, Malraux continues to imagine history from the inside. Part Three, March 27 (in translation, March 29 in French), Kyo goes to Hangkow to try to persuade the Central Committee, none of whom is Chinese, to resist the Kuomintang. He is aware that Ch'en, obsessed with assassinating Chiang Kai-shek, is in Hangkow as well. Part Four, the longest of the novel, goes from noon, April 11 to five a.m. April 12. Kyo is alerted through various connections that he will be liquidated if he does not flee, and Ch'en fails in his plot to destroy Chiang Kai-shek with hand grenades; the Generalissimo was not in the car. Ch'en finishes himself off with a revolver in his shirt pocket (a grenade has destroyed his legs) as the

section ends. Part Five picks up immediately with competing rumours about the assassination. In these six hours the featured characters are arrested, dead, or on the run as the Kuomintang begins to wipe out the opposition. Part Six, beginning five hours later, goes until six p.m. the following day when Kyo takes cyanide after interrogation, and Katow, having given his cyanide to two young prisoners, is taken off to be killed in a train locomotive. Part Seven is the aftermath, three months later; the supporting characters, especially the foreigners, have retreated to safer spots in the world: Kobe and Paris.

Readers of the English translations — both Whale's and Becker's *The Conquerors*, Chevalier's *Man's Fate*, and MacDonald's *Storm in Shanghai* — had at the time the option of thinking that Westerners still looked good in this cultural clash. Americans, whose Protestant missionaries had presumably established a solid educational base, could even be smug. (Ch'en — like Chiang Kai-shek by his second marriage — is a Methodist.) Did the translations allow them to be smug? If they wished. Becker's translation of *The Conquerors*, published the year of Malraux's death heightens, albeit subtly, the postcolonial superiority to which Trotsky had objected (303).

The Chinese whose consciousness had been raised remained raw material for the clash of egos in the geopolitical power plays of Russia and capitalism — American, European, and Japanese. The megalomania of Chiang Kai-shek can be inferred; the institutionalized solipsism of the Westerners is blatant. (Malraux misses only the imminent danger of the Japanese.)

The pre-Existentialist reading which these novels elicited after World War II is still valid, but now we can see these exposures of heroism and altruism contaminated by an imperialist egotism and opportunism. The outsiders die bravely but intervene grievously. The abortive revolutions that Malraux animates in fiction make subsequent mainland Chinese history — to the extent we know it — comprehensible. Our reading has changed, and the English translators have helped us, forcing us to analyze the French more closely.

The translations still read as though freshly made. The translators, their task completed long ago, constructed an afterlife where the colonial mentality, while perhaps muted, can clearly be inferred.

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Notes

1. Whale's translation was published in 1929 by Cowle Books (New York) and Jonathan Cape (London); Becker's in 1976. According to World Cat, March 9, 2004, 326 copies of Whale's translation may be found in libraries; 809 copies of Becker's in libraries in editions by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, University of Chicago, and Grove Press. According to World Cat, March 29, 2004, 1,827 copies of Chevalier's translation *Man's Fate* (1934, copyright renewed, 1961) are in libraries; 312 copies of MacDonald's *Storm in Shanghai*. All citations are from the first editions. French citations are from *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard NRF, 1989).
2. Serious establishment commentators ignored the novels altogether. The *Revue des deux mondes* had consistent commentaries during 1929–1930. These take up the actions of the chief Russian organizer Mikhail Markovitch Borodin, but do not mention Malraux. See, for example, Henri Lormian 1930; also "La Politique coloniale et le Bolchévisme" 1930. Incidentally, Lydia Holubnychy 1979 makes no mention of Malraux. Dan N. Jacobs thinks Garine may echo Borodin's remarks (Jacobs 1981, 153).
3. To tell the truth, in the library catalogs consulted, these books were on the shelves!
4. Trans. Madeleine Etard, no. 211, 1931; reprinted in Malraux 1989, 302.
5. Proceedings in *Variétés*, 6, 15 octobre 1929; reprinted in Malraux 1989, 1, 287–294.

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