

WESTERN TRANSLATION WITH AN EASTERN TWIST**Aspects of Eastern Strategy and Creativity
in the Field of Literary Translation
and Publishing in Pre- and Post-War France and Britain****RONALD JENN**

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to assess the influence of eastern world views, political as well as aesthetic, upon the translation and publishing of a number of major authors such as Jack London, Mark Twain, and Raymond Queneau from the 1920s to the 1950s. Indeed, a number of western publishing institutions and agents with an eastern influence or background strived at creating alternative cognitive maps over a period marked by a divide between the capitalist West and the communist East. Though traditionally perceived as static, this period, as this piece of research intends to demonstrate, was alive with transnational influences and the divide articulated with local concerns, goals, traditions, and histories.

The interaction between East and West, when it comes to translation, is often perceived in terms of the westward transfer of an eastern author via translation or vice-versa. The so-called “Solzhenitsyn Effect” (Horvath 2007) comes to mind, that is to say the impact the translation of the dissident’s book had in the West from 1973 on. Likewise, the network of publishing houses set up by and for dissidents in Western Europe has been mapped (Boel 2009).

Conversely, it is common knowledge that authors such as Mark Twain and Jack London were immensely popular in the East for literary as well as ideological reasons (Ignatieff 1955). This paper looks at a third type of transfer that has been somewhat overlooked, namely those cases when the translation of a western author in the West took place under eastern influence. The focus will be on publishing houses as well as on the paratext.

JACK LONDON’S *THE IRON HEEL*

In *The Iron Heel*, Jack London exposes his socialist views. Published in 1908, the story is presented as the rediscovered diary of Avis Everhard, a revolutionary who describes her underground ventures with her husband Ernest. It is accompanied by a preface and footnotes appended by a scholar from the future, historian Anthony Meredith, whose

foreword, dated 419 B.O.M (for Brotherhood of Men) makes clear that at the time of writing, socialist ideas prevail. The illusion of temporal and critical distance thus created is reinforced through the dense network of footnotes resulting in a complex, multi-layered narrative. The apocalyptic scene toward the end describes the massacre of protesters on the streets of Chicago by the capitalist oligarchy and its troops (Stasz 2001: 288).

Because it was written in the wake of the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, there always was an eastern dimension to the novel, but the Revolution of 1917 and the rise of the U.S.S.R. gave it a new lease on life in French translation. *Le Talon de fer* was first published in instalments in the communist daily *L'Humanité* between April (29) and July of 1923 (Lacassin 1994: 283). Ironically, these instalments would have pleased London himself, who, at the request of his American Comrades, had initially planned to have the novel serialized in the Kansas based socialist weekly *The Appeal to Reason*. This publication did not happen for financial reasons and the book was eventually published at Macmillan's¹. Translator Louis Postif was a professional of renown who single-handedly translated most of Agatha Christie's and Jack London's books. His dedication to London proved life-long and he relentlessly translated as much of his writings as he possibly could until he died in 1942, even when, in the context of the German occupation of France, there were no prospects whatsoever for a London book to make it to the market. Postif's fascination for London probably stemmed from similarities in the two men's lives. The son of a baker, Postif was forced to work at a very young age to provide for his mother after his father's untimely death. Working in a hotel as an elevator man he learnt English at the same time as he became aware of class difference. Postif's dedication was noticed by London's widow, Charmian, who made him, in 1926, the only authorized translator of her late husband's books in France (Lacassin 2000: 77), so that, to this day, there is but a single French version of *Le Talon de fer*. Translation theorist Maria Tymoczko (2000: 25–26) has argued that "[...] most translators undertake the work they do because they believe the texts they produce will benefit humanity or impact positively upon the receptor culture in ways that are broadly ideological." This applies to Louis Postif and accounts for *The Iron Heel*'s serialization in *L'Humanité*. Postif's version is rather faithful and straightforward in the sense that it does not contain any glaring manipulations. The text being a political manifesto in its own right, it did not require significant changes or bowdlerizing for it to serve its ideological purpose.

Even if the translated text is very stable with only one rather faithful version, every new French edition was accompanied by an everchanging paratext, like so many successive layers that shed light on the evolution of the novel's reception.

Le talon de fer was first published in book form in 1923 by George Crès, a high-brow house whose list of publications shows no signs of political engagement, a sharp contrast with the initial publication in *L'Humanité*. This was due to the fact that communist publishing houses were not as yet organized. What it did contain, however,

¹ For a discussion of *The Iron Heel*'s publication in the United States, see Lacassin 1994 "L'écrivain engagé" 187–206.

was a fiery preface by Anatole France, the 1921 Nobel prize laureate in literature, a politically engaged text that ends with a rather lyrical paragraph:

O you, heirs to the proletarians, O generations to come, children of the new day, you shall fight, and when cruel setbacks will cast doubt on the prospects of your cause, you shall regain confidence and declare along with noble Everhard: “For this time lost but not forever. We have been learning. To-morrow the Cause will rise again, strong with wisdom and discipline” (France 1923: 18)².

Anatole France also deems the London novel realistic in reference to the Paris Commune of 1871:

The two rebellions which are the matter of the book I am presenting to the French reader are so bloody, they present, on the part of those who trigger it so much wickedness and in its implementation so much ferocity, that one wonders whether they could take place in America, in Europe, whether they could take place in France. I would not believe so had I not had the example of those days of June and the crackdown on the Commune of 1871, which reminds me of the fact that there is little that cannot be done against the poor (France 1923: 16).

Francis Lacassin, London’s French biographer, claims that London actually based the third part of his novel on this particular chapter of French history. The preface by Anatole France, though left-wing, draws a rather bleak picture of the prospects of the Left in Europe. This is why, a decade later in 1933, two communist publishing houses took *Le Talon de fer* in their own hands: “Éditions sociales internationales” and “Gilde de l’émancipation par le livre.”³ Those very names point to a political agenda as well as to an international dimension, and they make the act of reading politically meaningful. Likewise, whereas George Crès presented the novel as a “roman d’anticipation sociale” [novel of social anticipation], that label was dropped by communist publishing houses, which intended rather to underline the likelihood of the depicted events.

In the 1933 edition, the preface by Anatole France was kept but a brand-new self-styled “introduction to the definitive edition” was added. In it, the author, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, man of letters and a leading figure of the Communist Party discusses a number of ideological issues and denounces the gaps and flaws that mar both the novel and the preface by Anatole France. Their pessimism is Vaillant-Couturier’s primary target:

... when Jack London was writing his book, Lenin, who had long beforehand outlined the organization of revolutionary activity in “What is to be done?” and

² All translations of prefaces to translations of London and Twain in this paper are mine.

³ Francis Lacassin, in his remarkable and well-documented biography of London, does not examine in detail the progress of the book in France.

was fiercely fighting against precisely this kind of pessimistic views then rampant among the revolutionary intelligentsia, refused to deem the 1905 defeat a disaster [...] (Vaillant-Couturier 1933: 9).

What is to be felt in Vaillant-Couturier's introduction is the growing centralization of the French Communist Party, which, through its affiliation to the Comintern was using its own publishing structures to spread the Party's official tenets (Bouju 2007). That is why Anatole France is blamed for not paying tribute to the USSR:

... one does not understand the pessimism of Anatole France who wrote a preface for *Le Talon de fer* in 1923 in which he accounts for "the subsiding of socialism" through the "war that is killing away minds as well as bodies" forgetting, by the way, as he enumerates the reasons for hope, to mention the U.S.S.R., which was then striving to reconstruct its economy [...] (Vaillant-Couturier 1933: 11).

From an eastern twist in 1923, what is to be felt in 1933 is an eastern grip. Indeed, by that time both the author and the novel had grown increasingly popular in the U.S.S.R. Millions of copies of his works circulated there and the Comintern ensured that it was also being published abroad: "10,000,000 copies of the works of Jack London and 3,000,000 copies of the works of Mark Twain circulated in the USSR. between the early twenties and 1940, these two authors being consistently the favourite American writers of this country" (Igniateff 1955 quoted in Inge 1984: 354). London, along with Mark Twain, was a favourite of Soviet experts on western literature:

In accordance with their doctrine, all works of the western literature can be divided into two general categories: progressive, because they expose and denounce the dark side and evil nature of the capitalist system; and conservative or decadent, because they defend reactionary societies. American writers in the first category include Mark Twain and Jack London; and the second is led by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Yet, there are a few noticeable exceptions. Of the works written by the bourgeois writers, some unconsciously criticize the evils of capitalism and were deemed helpful for workers in socialist countries. Such works helped people realize the complex but reactionary essence of all the capitalist societies. *The Scarlet Letter* hence falls into this group (Yin 1987: 551).

The Second World War prevented *Le Talon de fer* from being published again but it was soon to come back to the fore. Another communist house named Hier et aujourd'hui and created in 1944 published it in 1946, and yet another paratextual layer was added on top of Anatole France and Vaillant-Couturier's writings. The gist of the new foreword penned by another leading figure of the Party, Francis Jourdain, was that *Le Talon de fer* deserved to be regarded as a classic because its deep significance remained intact and was even proven by the historical events that had taken place between 1933 and 1946:

The honour of perceiving, from the outset, the true origins and secret designs of Fascism, goes to those men who first saw in it much more than a mere set of makeshift policies with no capacity to endure, and warned of the consequences of the engagement that lay ahead. For indeed it took some fighting, and it still does, and the only struggle left on the face of this earth is that of Democracy against Fascism. (Jourdain 1946: 10)

This is very much in keeping with the spirit of the letter Leon Trotsky wrote to London's daughter Joan (dated 16 October 1937) in which London is praised for foreseeing the advent of Fascism. Through the paratextual layers of the text, we can see how London's stance was regularly reevaluated in the light of contemporary events. Blamed for his pessimism in 1933, he was praised for his foresight in 1946.

Those three editions of *Le talon de fer* deserve one last remark. None of them features the fictitious scholar's foreword which is to be found in the original. It is well-known that para-textual elements such as introductions and forewords are prone to disappearing during the translation process, but this one proves particularly relevant to the overall frame. The dense network of the historian's footnotes, maintained by Louis Postif, still allowed for the original frame to be perceived, but, given the fact that he added his own translator's notes on top of them, it turns out to be rather difficult for the French reader to tell one from the other. The paratextual elements that accompanied every new edition of the novel all aimed at reinforcing its verisimilitude and realism. Maybe this is the reason why the original foreword has had a tradition of being removed, for keeping it might have overstressed the utterly fictitious character of the novel. This tradition of anchoring the text into reality reached a peak in 1973 when Union générale d'éditions included Leon Trotsky's letter to Joan London.

Along with *Le talon de fer*, Hier et Aujourd'hui published Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* in 1946, the other favourite of Soviet critics. *Tom Sawyer* already had a long French tradition with no less than three different versions. This latest version by G. Breton cannot be said to be a significant breakthrough as it is mainly a rewriting of the initial version of 1884 by William-Little Hughes. Written in a context of mass-schooling with schoolchildren in mind, all references to religion had been removed from it. Given Hier et Aujourd'hui's profile, it was a convenient version to work from, for financial as well as ideological reasons, and it was probably intended to compete with more bourgeois versions such as François de Gail's, penned at the turn of the century, or Pierre-François Caillé's pre-war version, which was part of Hachette's prestigious collection for children, Bibliothèque Verte. As a book, however, Hier et Aujourd'hui's *Tom Sawyer* was quite remarkable with its illustrations and bright cover which made it a pleasurable object to handle in a context of paper shortage and overall hardships after the war. Also, for the very first time in the French tradition, Tom Sawyer is depicted as a teenager rather than a child even though this cover still indicates that a younger readership was being aimed at.

A more significant contribution to the translation of American literature was made by Hier et Aujourd'hui in 1948 when it published a brand-new translation of Mark

Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Contrary to *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*'s presence within the French literary field had been feeble and short-lived with only one loose adaptation dated 1886 by the same William-Little Hughes and in the same context. The novel had failed to make a lasting impression in France and it had to be translated and presented to the French readership from scratch. Literary translators in France do not, as a rule, write the preface or introduction to their translation themselves (Vanderschelden 2000: 281) as the case of Louis Postif's *Le Talon de fer* illustrates and in the 1948 edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, this was done by Marxist historian Jean Kanapa. His much-noted preface, bluntly subtitled "Of falsification in literary history" bears testimony to the fact that the house saw this publication as a significant ideological move. Kanapa charged that Mark Twain's bolder works were suppressed in America because of his anti-imperialist views, and that *Huckleberry Finn* denounced both slavery and bourgeois values:

Yes, there are, today as yesterday, two Americas and two American literatures. Mark Twain belongs to the progressive heritage of the whole world, but his work is victimized, it is falsified, it is hidden away. Even dead, the enemies of Imperialism are a nuisance to imperialists.

In the United States, the official line of thought "forgets" Sam Clemens or performs, on his work, a series of about-turns that even members of higher education do not balk at being part of. It is no accident that in the Soviet Union, on the contrary, the work of Mark Twain is one of the most widely read by the people and is a great "classical reference."

Because, one could say, the "classics" are not always those one would think – or would have thought. In so far as this new collection of the publishing house Hier et Aujourd'hui aims at exposing "classics" that are overlooked, forgotten or disfigured – for reasons similar to those already given – the "classics" of the universal progressive heritage, one can only be thankful to see it being inaugurated with a major work of this "nuisance" of Sam Clemens (Kanapa 1948: VI–VII).

As to the translated text itself, translator Suzanne Nétillard abided by remarkable standards that later versions did in no way supersede. Set aside a few faults, it is obvious that Suzanne Nétillard painstakingly worked at rendering some of the polyphony of the original. This, also, can be construed as a political move, if one admits that polyphonic and creative texts are revolutionary because they unsettle preconceived ideas about style and writing. In 1960, a new adult version of *Huckleberry Finn* – penned by André Bay and first published by Stock, then Gallimard – came out. From an ideological point of view, Bay's version can be said to reinforce conformity and bourgeois ethics by overwhelmingly relying on clichés, stereotypes and hackneyed tropes of speech – it is less polyphonic or creative than Nétillard's text. These two translations were produced with opposite projects in mind, the former standing out as revolutionary whereas the latter version was more conservative. Still, Bay's version pushed Nétillard's translation aside. Both are today published by the same house, Gallimard, but in two separate collections. Nétillard's version is confined to "Folio

junior” a collection for children and has been augmented with pictures to comply with its new status while Bay’s version is for adults.

As the case of *Huckleberry Finn* shows, the impact of political rivalry and of the East West divide happened to be positive and stimulating. We can therefore see that an Eastern ideological influence could actually hobnob with greater literary quality. This leads us to the aesthetic dimension of the eastern twist which relied on publishing structures to spread a political message without losing sight of creativity.

Even though the exact economic status of French Communist Publishing houses remains to be established – in a word, did they pay for themselves or not? – the aesthetic dimension of the eastern twist, which has just been outlined in a strong ideological context, reverberates further on when one looks at the opposition between commercial publishing houses, which are market- or profit-oriented and the so-called private presses. The stimulating and outstanding role played in post-war Britain by Polish expatriates and artists Stefan and Franciszka Themerson needs to be highlighted. These Polish artists of many talents who started their career in their home country making vanguard films in the 1930s had lived through the turmoil of war-torn Europe and ended up in London where, after the war, among other activities, they ran a publishing house. It was called Gaberbocchus, in reference to Lewis Carroll’s Jabberwocky. What makes this publishing house special, besides its name, is that it was part of what is called the private press movement, which means that their owners were free to print whatever they chose, with no thought of having it pay its way. According to Roderick Cave, who offers a range of definitions quoting from previous scholarship, the purpose of private press printing is primarily an aesthetic one – it caters for a limited market and is not concerned with the commercial developments of printing by machinery. To Edmond Werdet (Cave 1983: xiii) and his contemporaries of the end of the nineteenth century “[...] a private press was one owned by a private individual, who used it to print whatever he chose, with no thought of making it pay its way.” To C. R. Ashbee (Cave 1983: xiii) it is a press “[...] whose objective is an aesthetic one, a press that, if it is to have real worth, challenges support on a basis of standard, caters for a limited market, and is not concerned with the commercial development of printing by machinery.” Finally according to John Carter in *English Private Presses 1757 to 1961* catalogue of the exhibition held at the Times Bookshop in London in 1961:

... the fundamental principle of private press printing; the principle that, whether or not the press has to pay its way, the printer is more interested in making a good book than a fat profit. He prints what he likes, how he likes, not what someone else has paid him to print. If now and then he produces something more apt for looking at and handling than the mundane purpose of reading, remember he is concerned as much with his own pleasure and education as with yours. (Cave 1983: xiii)

All these distinctive features are reflected in Gaberbocchus Press but the fact that Franciszka and Stefan Themerson were expatriates, who had spent some time in France, adds an Eastern twist to the venture. The list of publications on their catalogue actually

reads like an effort to create an alternative cognitive and aesthetic map. Their role as pioneers of French-English translation is illustrated by the 1951 version of Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi ou les polonais* (under the title *Ubu roi, drama in 5 acts*) regarded as the late nineteenth century harbinger of Surrealism whose advent occurred in the chaotic wake of WWI. Its translation by Gaberbocchus can in turn be construed as an aftermath of WWII. The subtitle of the play, *les polonais*, the Poles, and the fact that Alfred Jarry announced on the evening of the first performance in a memorable speech that the play took place "in Poland, that is to say: nowhere" must have played a major role in the Themersons' decision to have it translated and published. Indeed, did not the absurdity of the plot along with its outlandishness, reflect the Themersons' own trajectory in life? The book itself, in compliance with the private press tradition is a unique artefact. Indeed, translator Barbara Wright was asked to write the translated text on lithographic plates, to which Franciszka Themerson later added drawings. The text was then printed on yellow paper, the overall intention being construed as an effort to reflect the anarchic if not scatological irreverence of Jarry's play. One can also see this as the transfer of Franciszka's pre-war film-making technique of painting directly on the film.

The 1958 translation of Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* also relies on intersemiotics. Written during the German occupation and published by the prestigious house Gallimard in 1947, *Exercices de style* relates a trivial incident between two fellow-passengers on a bus, told in 99 different fashions, 99 exercises bearing a different title, and it was, for a long time, regarded as utterly untranslatable. As Barbara Wright herself wrote in the preface to the Gaberbocchus edition:

Queneau told me that the *Exercices* was one of his books which he would like to be translated – (he didn't suggest by whom). At the time I thought he was crazy. I thought that the book was an experiment with the French language as such, and therefore as untranslatable as the smell of garlic in the Paris metro. But I was wrong. In the same way as the story as such doesn't matter, the particular language it is written in doesn't matter as such. Perhaps the book is an exercise in communication patterns, whatever their linguistic sounds. (Wright 1981: 16)

Most of the credit for this groundbreaking translation has generally gone to translator Barbara Wright who rightfully deserves praise for her work, but the role played by the publishers, Franciszka and Stefan Themerson has been somewhat overlooked⁴. Beside ordering the translation from Wright and printing it in their own house, the Themersons adorned it with illustrations, photographic or otherwise, whereas the original Gallimard edition of 1947 had no illustrations, drawings or pictures of any sort. In the Themersons' edition, there is a jigsaw-like photograph of Raymond Queneau. Also, the title of each exercise has an anthropomorphic initial letter that illustrates its content. Another characteristic of the Themersons' edition is its typographic creativity. For example, the exercise entitled "Lettre officielle" imitates the style of

⁴ A close reading of the correspondence between Raymond Queneau and his Belgian friend André Blavier reveals that he was not very familiar with Barbara Wright.

a law-abiding citizen writing to the authorities to describe what he perceived as an appalling incident. As does the rest of the Gallimard edition, “Lettre officielle” uses plain font and its official character is only conveyed through style. Now, “Official Letter” in the Themersons’ edition looks exactly as if a typewriter had been used and a typo, with its handwritten correction, was even added for realism and fun. The exercise entitled “Dog Latin” (translation for “Macaronique”) uses Gothic letters. There are many other examples of such typographic creativity in the Themersons’ edition, which, incidentally, is still being published by a New York-based house named New Directions, so that the first encounter between an English-speaking reader and Queneau’s masterpiece will take place through the Themersons’ intersemiotic text. It is worth noting that not only did the Themersons act as across-channel eastern agents in the transfer of texts from France to Britain by carving out a specific space or niche for Queneau’s book through their publishing house but there also was a backlash or feedback in France indicating that what actually took place was not just transferring but circulation. Two years later, in 1960, two French editions took a leaf out of the Themersons’ book and explored the typographical dimension of *Exercices*.

What has just been presented is the translation of written works in the context of their time, but what elements relating to our time, the early 21st century, do they bring forth? If the one distinctive feature of our time is the back and forth movement between global and local, then this was adumbrated, even during the Cold War, by the circulation of western texts under eastern influence and it appears that though the war was cold, the printing presses were red-hot. We are also reminded of the fact that, when it comes to translated literature, literary fields are often considered as monolithic, the readership being supposedly endowed with a unified national taste in spite of the fact that the publishing landscape within one country, far from being united, is divided along ideological lines. The Pre- and Post-War activity of French communist publishing houses shaped the literary field and had a rather positive impact on the translation of foreign books, and not just eastern literature. *The Iron Heel*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Huckleberry Finn* came, or came back to France through the Iron Curtain as much as across the Atlantic and were sometimes (re)translated for French communist houses according to higher standards than had previously been the case. Through their alternative mapping of textual exchange between France and Britain, the Themersons blurred national lines and truly pushed back the limits of translatability. They blazed a never-ending trail of foreign versions: Greek, German, Swedish, Slovenian, Dutch, Serbian (Roubaud 1986) and a Czech version in 1994. Over that period, through regular publishing structures or individual initiatives, the limits of translatability, whether in the field of the ideologically acceptable and/or the linguistically feasible were pushed back, with an eastern twist, beyond East and West.

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