



Observations on the retranslation of Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* by Richard Philcox

Siendou Konate, PhD

To translate may arise from the need to build a bridge between the cultures that a given language represents. The rationale behind building such a bridge is making culture and history. As Octavio Paz says, “[p]arler une langue étrangère, la comprendre, la traduire dans sa langue natale, c’est restaurer l’unicité du commencement [c’est-à-dire, celui de l’époque pré-Babélique]” [to speak a foreign language, to understand it, to translate it into one’s mother tongue is to restore the oneness of the beginning of times] (Paz, 10). In other words, the bridge that translation helps build is one that facilitates cultural understanding, acceptance of differences and the subsequent imbrications of one or several peoples into one another.

Conversely, the bridge in question is also an ideological tool for the translator. The latter may have ulterior motives that prepare the ground for large-scale exploitation, oppression and subjugation. Such has been the case for the learning of African national community languages by European missionaries at the start of the industrial revolution in Europe. African languages were learnt in order to better communicate with, and understand, the natives so as to better turn them into “good children of God,” because they had no faith: their polytheism amounted to the lack of deity and/or God among them. The Bible was translated into native languages, some natives embraced Christianity, and through missionaries and their faith, the way was paved for colonial forces to enter Africa. Cultural interpenetration by way of translation would not be blamed if it were not used for colonial and imperial purposes. It is often said that when Westerners came to Africa, they had the Bible and Africans had their lands. The “guests” asked the “hosts” to close their eyes, when they did the former had the lands and the latter the Bible. The hegemonic side of translation can never be ignored.

Translation is double-edged. What about retranslation? What may be the reasons behind retranslating a work of art or a given book? These central questions are raised in



order to understand why Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, published in 1961, was retranslated by Richard Philcox in 2004, that is, forty-one years afterwards.

I

The retranslation of a work is inspired by a certain number of factors. An important factor of wanting to retranslate can be grappling with time, by way of updating the work for modern readers, thereby expunging the effect of time from the work in question. In other words, the first translation of a work can be obsolete and outmoded because of problems of understanding when the readership is removed hundred years away from the original or the first translation. The French translations of Ancient Greece's Homer in the 18th century by Mme Anne d'Acier (*The Iliad* in 1699 and *The Odyssey* in 1708), by Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle in 19th century (*The Iliad* in 1866, et *The Odyssey* in 1867), and ultimately Philippe Jacottet's year 2000 retranslation of *The Odyssey*, are an answer to temporal and spatial exigencies that are different. Among those exigencies, there is no underestimating the language factor. As a matter of factor, with time, language evolves along with the cultures it naturally bears. When culture evolves and changes, tastes and manners (chiefly manners of speaking and writing) also, of not substantially, change. Thus, the French that people used to speak in the 18th century is not, if not cannot be, easily understood by the users of this language in 19th century, let alone by those of the 20th century. According to Antoine Berman, "la retraduction surgit de la nécessité non certes de supprimer, mais au moins de réduire la défaillance originelle" (Berman 4). Every translation is imprinted with a lack, or the void of «non-translation» that needs to be filled out. The void of non-translation can be some morphological, phonological, syntactical and lexical differences affecting the taste of modern users, thereby causing them to disaffect the language. That's why linguistic and cultural updating is welcomed. Is Philcox's rationale up to date? What was the guiding reason of the retranslation of Frantz Fanon's groundbreaking *Les Damnés de la terre*?

II

When in 1961 *Les Damnés de la terre* appeared, the political and social environment compelled the African intellectual to remove himself from the comfort of



Revue Baobab: Numéro 3
Second semestre 2008

silence and thereby take part in a role that was his; that is, the consciousness raising of the poor and the oppressed. As the French existentialist and left-wing thinker, Jean-Paul Sartre writes in the 1961 preface to the book, Fanon did not want to be an accomplice of colonialism and imperialism in Africa and spaces where the oppressed people of African descent could be found. To this people Fanon sent a message of warning against the elite, personality cult, and Western culture, as Sartre has it; but most of all, he preached that the salvation of this people passed through self-introspection and self-discovery. He committed himself to confronting the problems that led the failure of the African post-colonial state.

An oblong reading and application of Fanon's interpretation of the African socio-political context by those who were not the immediate target definitely widened the circle of reception of the work. In other words, the work, through translation, reached not only Anglophone Africa, but it also made resounding echoes among people that were sharing the plight of Africans in Africa. Constance Farrington, the first translator of Fanon's work, is definitely to be credited for such a reception. A reading of Stockley Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's *Black Power : The Politics of Liberation in America* and countless radical works authored by African Americans in the 1960's will attest to the fact that a good deal of social and political activism in the Black world built on the discourse of Fanon, if not were influenced by the man. What has changed in liberation struggles and social change movements in the Black world and the world that was affected by Fanon's words to require a retranslation of his work?

According to Philcox in a protocol ("On Retranslating Fanon, Retrieving a Lost Voice") that he writes to explain the challenges he faced during the retranslation of Fanon, the lack of adequacy between the time Fanon wrote his work and nowadays political and social mapping is important, and it is one of the factors that caused him to retranslate. He felt the need to bring the work to modern readers, thereby adjusting it to their parlance and taste. Also, bookstores and libraries are devoid of Fanon's famous book in Paris where he wrote it. Philcox tells us that one day he went to the FNAC bookstore in Paris to purchase a copy of *Les Damnés de la terre*. When he asked the young lady of the



Revue Baobab: Numéro 3
Second semestre 2008

bookstore about the book, she checked in the computer and it turned out the book had never been around there.

One other factor that led Philcox to undertake his work of “rewriting” is that there was not only a multiplication of the number of the “damnés de la terre” in the world, but also there was a similarity between the condition of the colonized of Africa and the liberation movements that informed him and his work, and the present-day lumpen proletariat in Africa and in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and even the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. It goes without saying that the retranslation of Fanon obeys political imperatives and satisfies liberation movements in search of fuel, examples and directives. Homi K. Bhabha agrees with that observation in the preface of Philcox’s translation of Fanon. He believes that “*The Wretched of the Earth* emerges, year after year, in Oakland, Natal, Belfast, Tehran, Washington, Paris, to say nothing of Bombay&, or wherever you may be today as the book fall into your hands” (Bhabha “Foreward”, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans R. Philcox xxxi). Thus, through the theoretical assessments made of Fanon’s work, the globalization or universalization of the African condition is legitimized and the relevance of Fanon’s work is more than established because extrapolations show the swarming of the “damnés de la terre” everywhere in the world. The re-writing/retranslation of a work, whether literary or not, is susceptible of widening the reception of the work in question, which is more than obvious nowadays with the hyper-technologization of our world. To be sure, behind the retranslation of Fanon lies the intention of putting the work and its readers in the original language on the same wavelength as the potential non-French speaking and reading people. In other words, to put the readership on a par with the work enables the latter to draw some teachings from the experiences that were theorized, and thereby uncover the commonalities and the differences that the said experiences may entertain with the reader’s own lived experiences. A rereading, whether it is facilitated by a new translation or not, always enables the reader to reappraise, re-assess and re-appropriate the text. When a new translation is offered, it reorients towards a new reading that is paved. It is more so, however, for those who were drawn to the text owing to translation: as far as



Revue Baobab: Numéro 3
Second semestre 2008

Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* is concerned, the non-French speaking reader in Africa and abroad is given to see the work under a new light, if not with new eyes.

The retranslation of *Les Damnés de la terre* offers some terminological adjustments that time and experience command. In fact, just as people of African descent in the United States experienced changes in the way they were called throughout the history of their country, – negro, colored, black, Afro-American, African American –, the (re-)translator of Fanon here deems it necessary to re-present, “topicalize, or to update certain words with heavy connotations and ideological charges. Those words are “nègre”, “noir”, “indigène” and “colon”. Constance Farrington translates “nègre” and “noir” as “negro”, a term that was harmless back in the 60’s and the 1970’s because it would dignify, so to speak, the African person within America. The word “indigène” is translated as “native,” thereby depleted of its racist, derogatory and condescending meaning that the French colonist had in mind. “Indigène” does not mean the same thing in French as in English. In French, the word means someone who has no civilization, culture or history although in biology it is an adjective that gives account to an endemic species that evolves in a place one is referring to. The derogatory charge of the term explains why in the French colonial system, there was something called “le statut de l’indigénat”, a social class that came after French citizenship in the colonies of France. That’s why the African French-speaking person, who speaks and yet entertains a totally different historical relation with the word get startled at the mention of it. The word “colon” sends Philcox waltzing around. He reports how he grappled with translating it:

I was tempted to use the colonizer since it sounded right pitted against the word colonized. But a colonizer composes the original force that colonized the country and does not convey the meaning of the European who settled, lived, worked, and was born in the colony. Colonial has two different associations, one for the English, especially in East Africa, and one for the Americans, pertaining to the thirteen British colonies that became the United States of America or to that period; settler was being used by the media in the Mid-East crisis to refer to the Jewish settlers and -would be the immediate reference for a reader.



Philcox in the end uses the word “colonist” in agreement with his publisher. To correct, update, and fill up the gaping holes of the first translation, such is the task and duty of the second and/or new translator.

Also, in the new translation, aside from the polysemic and equivocal words the translator deals with, he operates some changes in the subtitles of Farrington’s translation. For instance, when Farrington translates “Sur la violence” as “Concerning Violence,” Philcox renders it as “On Violence.” What is the difference between these two or what motivates Philcox’s re-adjustments is not clear. There is not that much of a difference between the two renderings except for the fact that Philcox gives in literality in order to render what Farrington couches in a somewhat scholarly cloak. “About Violence” would have made a little difference, perhaps.

As for the subtitle “Grandeur et faiblesses de la spontanéité” which Farrington renders as “Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weaknesses,” Philcox renders it as “Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity.” What is the advantage of rendering a gallicism into English by the same way it is expressed in French? What about “loftiness,” “greatness” or “height,” which better render the French word “grandeur”? There has been some unnecessary reshuffling of words, and Farrington, once again has the upper hand for finding in English an equivalent for what Fanon meant.

The section dealing with the fundamental question of the psychology and/or the consciousness of the oppressed/colonized; that is, “Mésaventures de la conscience nationale”, was translated by Farrington as “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness.” Philcox provides the reader with a more spiced-up translation: “Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness.” The word “pitfall” is a made up of “pit,” which is a trap set for animal and “fall,” which can simply be seen as a hidden danger lying in wait for that animal. In other words, a pitfall is a snare, a trap, or a pit that is camouflaged or flimsily covered in order to capture a game or someone. In figurative sense, it denotes a hidden and not easily detected danger. If Philcox’s translation – “Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness” – is reproach-free, it once again does not substantially differ from what was proposed to the reader in 1963. In fact, trials conjure up the idea of a test



Revue Baobab: Numéro 3
Second semestre 2008

to, say, one's faith, patience, perseverance by way of temptation, suffering and the like, which can have the potential of annoying or discouraging someone from his/her course of action. Tribulation, "tribulatio" in Latin, originates from the verb "tribulare" meaning to press or to oppress, or the noun "tribulum", the drag used in threshing, evokes the idea of the suffering that ensues from oppression or persecution. A combination of trial and tribulation, both words in plural, evokes a trying experience one can go through. Clearly, "pitfalls" and "trials and tribulation" are semantic neighbors in such a way that one can replace the other, and when one comes first, there tends to be no need for the other. Ultimately, as for subtitles, "Guerres coloniales et troubles mentaux" is translated textually the same by both translators: the former writes "Colonial War and Mental Disorder", and the second "Colonial War and Mental Disorder," both forgetting about the plural in the formulation.

What is more, the second translation that waits for forty-one years to recalibrate meanings and fill in gaps does not hint at the first translation of the title. "Les damnés de la terre" has been translated as "The Wretched of the Earth" and the translation seems to withstand the test of time and retranslation. Philcox agrees with Farrington. According to Cassell's French-English / English-French Dictionary, "wretched" means "misérable", "malheureux", "pitoyable", "vilain" and "triste" in French. "Damné" in French means someone that is doomed to the pain inflicted by hellfire or eternal pain. It is someone that is cursed and rejected. There is a religious taint to the word. Also, "damné" is "cursed" in English. Thus, "The Cursed of the Earth" could fit if one was to dwell on the literalist logic of Philcox's. In other words, both titles are the same to such extent that one wonders why the reworking of Farrington's translation instead of a translation of Fanon's chef-oeuvre. My suspicion is that Grove Press did not accept this retranslation for the need of recalibration and adjustments such as commanded by temporal exigencies. Mercantilist reasons hide behind the undertaking.

It should be underscored that Farrington does not provides the reader with a note of the translator in order to account for the choice of terminology she made, as well as the ordeal she traversed. Philcox does, thereby shielding himself against attacks hidden in the



Revue Baobab: Numéro 3
Second semestre 2008

proverbial *traduttore traditore*. Every translator is susceptible of being charged with unfaithfulness to the original text, which can either be a deliberate ideological and/theoretical choice made by the translator. Adding to the text and excising from it is up to the translator who is the only captain of vessel that the text to be translated represents. If the translator is a potential traitor, what about the re-translator? Does s/he represent a danger to the integrity of the meaning, of the text? If the translator is not trustworthy, that is, a traitor because of the aforementioned leverage s/he has vis-à-vis the text, the retranslator seems to be doubly committing a crime of unfaithfulness. S/he endorses the crimes of the translator and his or her own. In this game of positioning the meaning, and putting the text right where it belongs, that is in the line of the authorial intent, only veritably dead authors are powerless. (Some critics believe that the author is dead, and therefore they have the freedom to temper with their word). When alive, the translator can speak up for himself or herself. Who speaks up for the dead author whose genius is assaulted by the critic/translator? Who defends Fanon and his work? Philcox, fully aware of freedom and the responsibility of the translator and right of the author, seems to relieve us of that heavy concern. He writes:

You might think that translating the dead gives you a whole lot of freedom - there's nobody there looking over your shoulder or making rude comments. But in fact there are crowds of people looking over your shoulder - from the readers of the original translation to the postcolonial scholars who have staked their reputation on Fanon's ideas. Translating a dead man means stepping very warily through a minefield littered with the debris of another time and another translation. But the very fact of looking back was a driving force to modernize the text and look ahead. In Fanon's case, translating the dead was a case of translating life itself. I felt I had to bring a dead translation back to life. (Philcox, "On Retranslating Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, 251)

Philcox tells us that he had access to audio resources that belonged to Fanon. He met with the man several times. These allowed him to "modernize the text" for a modern readership. It ought to be underscored that the canonic text of Fanon's, and by the same token any text that bears scholarly respectability and depth, is set somewhat in stone, meaning that the reader should be brought to the text, instead of the other way around. To



bring the text to the reader means tempering with it, whereas to bring the reader to the text is a gait of upholding the sanctity of authorial intent and textual integrity. That's why modernizing the text sounds like an exercise in truncating and treason. Lastly, it is true that Philcox had the blessing of the watching and questioning eye of the scholars who worked on Fanon. The panoptic gaze does not exclude the fact that some of the scholars involved built their reputation on the first translation, which, Philcox deems in need of modernization. Recourse to the original text in French imposes itself for a better comprehension.

III

In the final analysis, if retranslations are exercises in digging up for further clarity and comprehension, inasmuch as to translate is to seek to understand, the retranslation of *Les Damnés de la terre* ought to have spotted unquestionable shadowy zones in the first translation. The words and subtitles that were rephrased do have some relevance not to the point of undertaking a retranslation that is not explained. Furthermore, the retranslator seems to have simply copied and pasted the work of the translator.

Lastly, it ought to be said that to treat Farrington's translation as a dead one or to consider it as one that is out of touch with modern times is harsh judgment because it is out of its ashes that Philcox's springs.

Bibliography

- Berman, Antoine. "La retraduction comme espace de la traduction", *Palimpsestes* n° 4, *Retraduire*, publications de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1990: 1-7.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1961) *Les Damnés de la terre*. Paris: Cahiers libres/Editions la Découverte, 1987.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- Paz, Octavio. *Lecture et contemplation*. Trad. Jean-Claude Masson. La délirante, 1982.