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Eudora Welty in France: Questions of Obliqueness

- 1 Ten years ago the Summer 1999 issue of the *Eudora Welty Newsletter* opened on a section on “Welty and France”. The main article, “A Translator’s Perspective” was by Welty’s chief translator in France, Michel Gresset. Gresset lamented that Welty “had not fared as well” in France as other Southern writers like Faulkner or O’Connor, and he wondered if it was because she had not been translated by Maurice Edgar Coindreau. Michel Gresset’s article traced the history of the late and haphazard story of Welty’s translations in France and of the circulation of her books, since the publication of the first translation, that of *Delta Wedding* by Lola Tranec in 1957 for Gallimard, the only Welty book translated into French until *The Optimist’s Daughter* (translated by Louise Servicen) in 1974. Gresset had a hand in all the subsequent translations of Welty into French. The only new edition that came out since 1999 has been a one-thousand page compendium of Welty’s *Fictions*, published by Flammarion with a preface by Gresset, in 2000—except for *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*. *Losing Battles* remains unpublished to this day.
- 2 Ten years later, Welty has gained some visibility, but not that much. In a recent phone call to her publisher, Flammarion, the response was, I am afraid, pretty much “Eudora who?” French scholars have not been inactive though: in 2002, Danièle Pitavy-Souques and Géraldine Chouard co-organized an international conference entitled “Eudora Welty: the Poetics of the Body” in Rennes in October 2002, with major international Welty specialists like Noel Polk and Pearl McHaney (who also contributed a research note on Welty in the first issue of *Transatlantica*). The conference was held at the Faulkner Foundation in Rennes, and an exhibition of photographs (curated by Géraldine Chouard) hosted by mayor Edmond Hervé at the city hall allowed for the public to share the event. The event was publicized by *Le Monde*, with a full-page article in its cultural pages devoted to “The Eye of Eudora Welty” (Oct. 25, 2002).
- 3 The centennial this year was marked by a short symposium as a preamble to the Southern Studies Forum conference this past September in Versailles, completed by an exhibition of photographs, posters and documents at the Bibliothèque Universitaire of the University of Versailles St Quentin en Yvelines, organized by Géraldine Chouard with the kind help and contributions of Pearl and Tom McHaney, Noel Polk and Isabelle Mattéi. Isabelle Mattéi is the latest member of the small community of a dozen French Welty scholars who are carrying the torch. According to the *Fichier national des thèses*, the national register of PhD dissertations in the humanities, and the national interlibrary catalogue, ten doctoral dissertations on Welty have been completed—six on Welty alone, and of these, only one in this century. It is interesting that this dissertation is a linguist’s study of the translation of Welty’s use of the progressive form¹. Three or four more dissertations appear to be in progress.
- 4 Half of Michel Gresset’s article was devoted to his translation of *The Golden Apples* with Sophie Mayoux—and he writes, as I also remember hearing him saying, that “this was the most difficult book [he had] ever translated. The reason has less to do with the local English that Welty uses especially in the dialogues than with the obliqueness of her style.” He gives a few examples of what he means—an uncertainty in the attributions in the text.
- 5 The latest issue of the *Faulkner Journal*² is largely devoted to the issue of translation, and in her excellent introductory essay, “Faulkner and Translation,” Barbara Ladd states the basic dilemma of the translator, one I have indeed often been caught in with Faulkner, but that I realize is even more serious with Welty. She reminds that “translation” means “crossing over”—in this adaptation of a foreign author to one’s native language, two attitudes are basically possible: either “naturalizing”, assimilating the language, so that the text sounds to the reader of the translation as if it had been written in the target language; or attempting to give access to a sense of the peculiar features of the author’s style, even if it means venturing away

from familiar forms of the language. This may be about paying attention to the differences between cultures, an issue dear to Claude Lévi-Strauss: translation contributes to cultural anthropology. The question rests whether “invisibility” is a relevant notion in terms of literary style; conversely publishers will want to sell books, and so readability is something they will insist on—after all, except in a few occasions, the translator’s role is not to change the language. In most cases—and this was the case for some Faulkner novels even when he had been crowned with the Nobel Prize—the publisher is not too particular with the respect for the original text.

6 Jorge Luis Borges’s iconoclastic position about translation may be refreshing: he provocatively asked to what extent the original could be unfaithful to a translation. It has been argued, with Proust, that works of literature are written in a sort of foreign language, a formula which suggests that a great work of art actually changes the language it is written in for ever. If this is true, having too transparent a translation will erase the identity of the style of the translated text, and then obviously something will be lost. Borges knew this so well that his work as translator was a component of his work as a writer. As Efraín Kristal writes, “according to Borges’s own doctrine of literary influence (generously acknowledged by Harold Bloom), a new work of literature invents its precursors, preparing future readers to identify features that could not have been recognized when the work was written” (Kristal xvii). Borges’s translations are creative works that claim to elaborate on the potentialities of his precursors in order to bring to light what they did not necessarily realize they were pregnant with. Naturally this could apply to Welty as she re-reads previous traditions, as she does in *The Golden Apples*.

7 Not everyone is Borges. Most translators are more modest and will strive for invisibility. But what does invisibility mean when it comes to Welty? How have these issues affected the work of Welty’s translators in French? Welty’s prose is one with which the dilemma is particularly acute. Take her talent in the powerful rendering of common speech—it is all but impossible to translate her with accuracy while keeping the richness of the imagery and the colorful rhythm of the description. Michel Gresset and his translator friends, Armand Himy, Sophie Mayoux, André Davoust, Emmanuelle Bouet and Gérard Petiot, who were not only wonderfully experienced translators but also involved in the teaching of literary translation, were undoubtedly aware of the choices they had to make.

8 Take *The Ponder Heart*: right with the title one has to drop the implications in the name “Ponder”, or insist on the possible implications in a necessarily heavy-handed footnote. As it turns out, incidentally, Gérard Petiot’s elegant 1997 translation of this novella seems to be the last translation which came out, under the title “*Oncle Daniel le Généreux*”, as *Losing Battles* still remains to be translated. Petiot and/or his publisher had the problem right away with the title—it was not suitable for literal translation, although another title implied losing the reference to the title present in the text. The French title is fine, suggesting a figure who has been turned into a legend in his family, like a saint (in the French context, the form of the title may be reminiscent of Flaubert’s mock *vie de saint*, “la Légende de St Julien l’Hospitalier”). Uncle Daniel is such a legend in the story. But the original singles out the Ponders as a special case. The narrator of the story does underline that the Ponders are definitely not like the Peacocks—so the story is not just about Uncle Daniel, but about the whole tribe he belongs to. “*The Ponder Heart*” is a heart which runs in the family—Noel Polk has suggested that this is not a very generous heart, but a heart that is mentioned as failing (Bonnie Dee’s), racing (Uncle Daniel) or breaking down (Grandpa’s) —“the sort of heart that must escape or cave in, or in any case break.” (Polk 195) Something to have us *ponder* indeed—as Noel puts it again, “the family’s name is an invitation, indeed an instruction, for us to think seriously about this organ” (Polk 198). Suggesting the double meanings behind this title was possible, but translating a name is impossible to do transparently.

9 Petiot’s translation excels at rendering the fluid oral style of the narrator, Edna Earle. But his quest for invisibility leads him to erase some of the oddities of the narrator’s speech, which could cause the reader to pause and wonder (ponder?) whether the translator hasn’t missed something. The passage in which the behavior of the Peacocks at the trial shows this: Welty

wrote “The Peacocks were all looking around again. I don’t know what they came expecting.”³ Petiot translates “Je ne sais pas ce qu’ils attendaient.” which wears out the suggestion of an intentionality in the original—that Edna implicitly suspects that these restless white trash *would* come to the trial for fun.⁴

10 In other instances, the translator does not hesitate to expand—this is especially necessary at the beginning of the text, so that French readers, not likely to be very familiar with the local context, can become aware of the dialogic dimension of the text: there is an implied common ground between the author and the reader which constitutes irony. Each passage will reflect the narrator’s voice, but also the ironic commentary of the community, or of the author—this is especially difficult to render in translation. When Edna Earle says “I was [grandpa’s] favorite grandchild, besides the only one left alive or in calling distance”, Petiot translates all the implications, which demands a much longer development: “J’étais celle qu’il préférait, parmi tous ses petits-enfants, mis à part le fait que j’étais la seule encore en vie, et que j’habitais pas trop loin, ce qui fait qu’on pouvait se voir de temps en temps.” (CN 340, F 706). In English Edna Earle’s concession was concise, almost bashful, whereas in French it becomes an elaborate justification, but this difference is justified: a French reader might otherwise pass the oddities in the community that Edna Earle portrays as documentary evidence on a furiously exotic South.

11 Another context which is difficult to account for is the wealth of literary allusions. Few French readers will be aware of Yeats’ poem “The Song of Wandering Aengus” as the background subtext for *The Golden Apples*, the source for its title. A translator has to suggest this presence in a preface, or through footnotes, as Gresset does—otherwise, how many non-academic English-speaking readers would be aware of the inter-text? This is of course also the case for many allusions to silent movies in “June Recital”.⁵

12 This will be one of the major challenges, I assume, in translating Welty: the translator must preserve the author’s dialogic perspective within the monologic discourse of the focal narrator. As Susan Donaldson put it, in “Shower of Gold” as well as, more generally, in *The Golden Apples*, “[w]ithin [Katie Reiney’s] words is hidden the powerful urge of the community to reinforce its hegemonic control through monologic language, language that refuses to recognize those different and exterior except on its own terms.” (Donaldson 495-6) This misunderstanding can be compounded when, as in “June Recital” (Gresset’s favorite) the foreign reader/other watches Miss Eckhardt through the uncomprehending telescope of Loch’s sick imagination, running wilder because of his malaria-induced fever, as she projects the cultural motifs of gangster movies on Miss Eckhardt’s ticking metronome that he keeps interpreting as a box of dynamite sticks with its timing device.

13 This is how Welty describes Loch as he watches Miss Eckhardt set fire to her old studio:

She bent over, painfully, he felt, and laid the candle in the paper nest she had built in the piano. He too drew his breath in, protecting the flame, and as she pulled her aching hand back he pulled his. The newspaper caught, it was ablaze, and the old woman threw in the candle. Hands to thighs, she raised up, her work done.⁶

14 In this scene Loch is still the watcher, studying the old woman he does not understand as a foreign object, but simultaneously, Welty’s syntax suggests, he identifies with her, the way a teenager would identify with a character in a film: he is Miss Eckhardt, bending painfully—“he felt” might mean “he imagined, he thought”—suggesting a cognitive process—but could also be taken literally: he felt physically, as she does in her body—an interpretation bolstered by the way Loch’s body mimics Miss Eckhardt’s, as he too holds his breath and pulls his (now) aching hand back from the flame.

15 In Gresset’s translation the ambiguity, the merging between voyeurism and empathy, is impossible to retain. Gresset first decides to favor voyeurism: “Elle se pencha, non sans mal, lui sembla-t-il, pour mettre les chandelles dans le nid de papier qu’elle avait préparé.” (F 518) But in the following sentence the identification is not lost—if anything it is emphasized: “Il retint son souffle, lui aussi, pour protéger les flammes, et quand elle retira sa main douloureuse, il en fit autant.” The last words of the paragraph can be translated literally, as well as the fusion between identification and interpretation: “She raised up, her work done.”/“elle se releva, son travail accompli.”

16 “The Whole World Knew” (“Ce n’est un secret pour personne”), with its visibly experimental structure, presents more instances of the kind of difficulties Borges identified, when he differentiated between what he called “the language of ideas” and “the language of emotions”. Emotion was what Welty stemmed from: take the scene where Ran comes home in the heat with Maideen and listens to the ferns. The scene is full of quaint notes, slightly off-putting to a careless reader: “In rockers—we sat on the back porch—we were all not rocking”: Welty does not write “we were not all rocking”, but here Gresset refrains from or anyway does not jolt the reader and translates as if the original read the more likely “we were not all rocking”—“nous ne nous balançons pas tous” (*SEM* 455, *N* 593). On the other hand, he *is* cautious with the more important sensory detail at the end of the same paragraph: “I could listen to women and hear pieces of the story, of what happened to us, of course—but I listened to the ferns”—even though he has to lift some of the ambiguity: he translated “what happened” as if it was “what had happened”, while “I listened” is correctly translated in the simple past rather than in the more likely imperfect: “j’aurais pu écouter les femmes et découvrir l’histoire par bribes, l’histoire de ce qui nous était arrivé, bien entendu—mais j’*écoutai* les fougères.” (my emphasis)

17 The next paragraph presents another challenge:

No matter, [the story] was being told. Not in Miss Lizzie’s voice, which wouldn’t think of it, certainly not in Jinny’s, but in the clear voice of Maideen where it had never existed—all the worse for the voice not even questioning what it said—just repeating, just rushing, old—the town words. (*SEM* 455)

18 Translating this paragraph confronts the French translator with the grammatical differences between French and English: *which* unambiguously refers to Miss Lizzie’s voice, but the French relative pronoun is more ambiguous: it can refer to the voice or to Miss Lizzie. In the next sentence Gresset compensates this ambiguity by making clear it is the quality of the voice that matters, even though the mosaic of juxtaposed meanings gets somewhat lost in this distinctly longer translation:

On la racontait, c’était le principal. Pas par la voix de Miss Lizzie, qui n’y aurait pas songé, encore moins par celle de Jinny, mais par la voix claire de Maideen, dans un registre qui lui était totalement inconnu—et c’était pire du fait que la voix ne mettait même pas en question ce qu’elle disait—une voix qui se contentait de répéter, de se dépêcher de répéter les vieux mots des habitants. (*N* 593-4).

19 Translating Welty is thus, as much as it ever is, a form of literary criticism. One thought of Borges may be particularly relevant to comment on the comparative modesty of the reception of Welty in France: Welty would have to be adapted by French writers, the way they responded to William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor. If Welty resonates, it may be through other American readers/writers like Richard Ford or Toni Morrison.

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Notes

- 1 “La forme progressive dans l’œuvre de Eudora Welty: problèmes contrastifs”, Laurence Gouaux, Bordeaux III, sous la dir. De Nicole Ollier. thèse soutenue en novembre 2003.
- 2 *The Faulkner Journal* 24.1 (Fall 2008): “Faulkner: Beyond the United States.”
- 3 Eudora Welty, *The Ponder Heart*, in *Complete Novels*, ed. Richard Ford & Michael Kreyling (New York: Library of America, 1998), 395.
- 4 Eudora Welty, *Oncle Daniel le Généreux*, tr. Gérard Petiot, in *Fictions*, ed. Michel Gresset (Flammarion, Mille et une pages, 2000), 766.
- 5 Explained by Dina Smith in “Cinematic Modernism in The Golden Apples”, in the *Mississippi Quarterly* Eudora Welty Centennial Supplement (April 2009), 81-100.
- 6 Eudora Welty, “June Recital”, in *Stories, Essays, & Memoir*, ed. Richard Ford & Michael Kreyling (New York: Library of America, 1998), 384.

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