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Intentions, Extensions

Creative Editing and Translation Practice in *A Sauvage Reader*

Daria Chernysheva

ABSTRACT

Translation and editing may be defined as highly similar practices yielding an independent text that bears a relationship to other texts. This article offers examples from the author's ongoing project A Sauvage Reader to demonstrate how it may be possible to emphasize the bonds of correspondence that emerge, via translation and editing, between texts, as opposed to anxieties about the search for and fidelity to a definitive text.

I INITIALLY APPROACHED MY PROJECT MERELY AS A TRANSLATOR: the goal was to translate selected works of the French poet Cécile Sauvage (1883–1927) into English for a modern audience. I say “as a translator” to mean that I was, at the time, flummoxed by how to reconcile the wearing of many hats as demanded by this interdisciplinary and creative project — those of reader, translator, critic, editor, and scholar — and I thought it would be easier to compartmentalize and consider each of these positions in turn as I went. However, the actual, ongoing doing of the project has shown this to be impossible and has revealed considerable overlap between the many aforementioned positions, so that consideration of one influences my approach to another. I have found translation and editing to be the two processes that are most difficult to separate — and, indeed, questioned how extensively I ought to separate them, wondering what would emerge out of treating both as a combined process that extends a source text (or texts) into the future. Both translation and editing may be viewed as fundamentally version-making processes: they create texts that stand in relation to other texts. There appears to be a parallel between the movement away from the quest for definitive texts in editorial scholarship and the injunction by certain Translation Studies scholars, such as Lawrence Venuti, to create translations that are “relatively autonomous” from their source texts (2019, 2), or, in other words, are conscious of being interpretations.

When Jerome McGann writes, “Editors (and readers) ought to have an altogether different object in view than the approximation of an ‘authoritative text’” (1993, 163), he echoes the translation practices of scholars such as Venuti and Clive Scott, who also have a “different object in view” than a target text that pretends to be representative of what is traditionally perceived as the authoritative source text. Such practitioners prefer instead to create translations that are acts of overwriting as much as rewriting, palimpsestic and ungovernable (see SCOTT 2012 and VENUTI 2013). I am especially influenced by Scott’s proposed concept of “translationwork” that emphasizes a translation’s perpetually unfinished state and its resistance to being circumscribed (2018, 4). Coupled with McGann’s idea that editing is a way of “corresponding” with texts (1993, 163), my attempt at translating Sauvage’s poetry into English is an experiment in creating a corresponding-yet-autonomous target text. I like to think that such a text is an extension, rather than a replication, of the author’s intentions, which opens up the work of editing and translating to opportunities of difference and play.

Sauvage’s poetic oeuvre is significant in that it offers an interesting glimpse into French literary production during the Belle Époque. She was part of a proliferation of women writers during what was perceived as a move towards “natural” expression in the wake of Symbolism (see IZQUIERDO 2010). Like many of her contemporaries, Sauvage preferred the themes of love and nature, particularly the expression of the first through the imagery of the second. If she favored classical rules in her composition, she was unafraid to break them for stylistic effect, resulting in a curious bridging of orthodox and modern traditions. But it is the instability of Sauvage’s texts that makes her such an engaging writer to work on — or perhaps I should say to *work*, for “working Sauvage” echoes Scott’s vision of “translationwork” and suggests the shaping of literature into a new form. Sauvage’s surviving oeuvre is marked in parts by fragmentation, incompleteness, and heavy editorial influence, especially as performed by Pierre Messiaen, the husband who survived her. Sauvage published only two poetry collections during her lifetime, *Tandis que la terre tourne* (1910) and *Le Vallon* (1913). A few years after Sauvage’s death, Messiaen published a compilation of his wife’s works: this volume consisted of *Tandis que la terre tourne* and *Le Vallon* (with omissions), an unfinished and previously unpublished collection that Messiaen indicated was titled *Primevère*, and an eclectic selection of loose writings by Sauvage that Messiaen dubbed “fragments and extracts” (SAUVAGE 1929). In 1930 Messiaen also published a slim volume of Sauvage’s letter extracts. In 1987, Sauvage’s most famous sub-collection, *L’âme*

en bourgeon (which had appeared both as part of the 1910 volume and the 1929 collected works), was reprinted with an introduction by Sauvage's son, the celebrated composer Olivier Messiaen. In 2002, Pierre Messiaen's 1929 edition was reprinted in mass market paperback — but this twenty-first century edition somehow acquired the misleading title *Œuvres complètes* (*Complete Works*), which Messiaen's compilation had never claimed to be. In 2009, French scholar Béatrice Marchal published an edition of never-before-seen texts by Sauvage: this publication includes a resituated version of *Primevère*, a collection that, per Marchal's argument, Pierre Messiaen had heavily cropped and altered for its inclusion in his 1929 edition. Marchal reconstructs the collections from Sauvage's holograph manuscripts. In her introduction and footnotes, Marchal accuses Messiaen of performing no small adulteration of his wife's work, supposedly in order to cover up an instance of marital adultery on her part.

This French-language history of reprinting, recollecting, and rediscovering one poet's oeuvre excellently demonstrates the perpetually open-ended nature of editing. It shows how Sauvage was read and presented differently by each of her editors. Pierre Messiaen, Béatrice Marchal, and even to some extent Olivier Messiaen acted as Sauvage's creative directors, deciding on a version of the poet to offer before the world. I see my own planned edition of translated works by Sauvage as reaffirming the translator's/editor's creative directorship, while emphasizing the relationship between the intentions of writer and translator/editor and exploring how translation and editing may be acts of extending source texts from past into future, rather than acts of "tinkering with a master-copy" (SCOTT 2018, 14).

The title of my project is *A Sauvage Reader*. This is meant to be a nod to the introductory "readers" or anthologies in literature survey courses — one of my intentions being to introduce the anglophone readership to Sauvage's poetry — and it is a simultaneous reference to myself as a reader of Sauvage. I believe this move achieves something subtler than the mere foregrounding of myself as translator and editor: it answers the question, Who is reading whom? I am made visible in relation to the subject matter and not at its expense, as is frequently suggested by the vocabulary of violent takeover that describes translator-centred practice and other acts of rewriting, such as "betrayal", "invasion", "corruption", "poaching", and even "hijacking" (see JENKINS 1992 and VON FLOTOW 1991). If we are to truly view translation and editing as the creation of independent texts made to stand in relation to other texts, we ought to move away from a vocabulary of territory and hierarchy and towards a vocabulary of relativity. McGann, in observing that an edition "is a formal choice about how to correspond

with the texts that are coming down to us” (1993, 163, *emphasis in original*), provides not only an excellent word for thinking about the similarities between texts — for “correspondence” denotes alignment, conformity, and a degree of parallelism — but likewise offers the suggestion that editing and translation are in some ways akin to an epistolary exchange. Who is reading whose words? Who is writing back to whom?

It is my intention that *A Sauvage Reader* reveal this correspondence between myself and Sauvage and exist as a new iteration in what is already a sequence of versions of her work. Some of Sauvage’s source texts exist as fragments, and yet others are indefinite, existing in the form of multiple drafts. “Indefinite” suggests not only a state of imprecision calling out for definition or stabilization (for example, for an editor to establish which of two drafts is the later one and give it preference), but also a state of continuation. I am interested in focusing on such continuation and discovering what it may mean, for translation, to extend authorial intention rather than make a firm decision to translate one version of a text over another.

To select a version of a text to translate prior to translation implies that both translation and editing are finite processes and that there is a correct order as to their arrangement: edit first, then translate the edited text. As Scott observes, this approach is rooted in a traditional vision of translation-as-transfer that absolutely requires a definitive text to exist before the invariants it contains may be identified and carried over. He writes, “Clearly, those notions which must play a considerable role in translation for the monoglot reader — fidelity, reliability, equivalence — can only come into operation with texts reckoned to have *achieved stability at the point of translation* (even if of a temporary kind)” (2018, 8, *my emphasis*). Working with definitive texts results in an understanding of translation as a process that gives the target reader access to the source text, via notions such as fidelity and equivalence; it supposes that translation, too, is terminable, and is terminated once the appropriate degree of transfer has been achieved. An unstable or indefinite source text pre-empts notions such as fidelity and equivalence and makes it possible for other types of translation to occur.

The question is what such a translation — a text that corresponds to/with the source text(s) but is not necessarily anxious about equivalence — may look like. I now offer one example from Sauvage’s oeuvre in which the multiplicity of her drafts actually helps me, as her translator, to better grasp what she is trying to say. I imagine these drafts as adding up to the next iteration, my translation; the drafts prove to be orienting, rather than conflicting. Below are two different versions of one sentence from Sauvage’s prose poetry collection *L’Étreinte mystique*, written 1914–1915 and transcribed by Marchal in 2009. Marchal’s annotations indicate that

Sauvage wrote out the following text three times, altering it between the first and second drafts (SAUVAGE 2009, 68):

Ms 1: D'un pied négligent et nu tu repoussas vers le foyer cette bûche de braise et je songeais à ces carabes verts des jardins qui s'attablent à quelque fruit tombé et déjeunent sans cependant interrompre leurs intimes confidences . . .

[With a careless and naked foot you pushed towards the fireplace that smouldering log and I thought of those green beetles in the garden that sit down to dine upon some fallen fruit, but without interrupting their intimate confessions . . .]

Ms 2/3: D'un pied négligent et nu tu repoussas vers le foyer cette bûche de braise et je songeais aux insectes du ciel qu'un choc déplace et qui changent de branche sans rompre cependant le nœud recueilli de leurs profondes confidences . . .

[With a careless and naked foot you pushed towards the fireplace that smouldering log and I thought of the insects of the sky who are displaced by a shock and who change branches, but without breaking the meditative knot of their deep confessions . . .] (SAUVAGE 2009, 68)

My translation: With a careless, naked foot you pushed that smouldering log back into the fireplace. And I thought of those insects who live in the sky and, when knocked aside, alight on a different branch without interrupting the absorbed tangle of their intimate exchanges . . .

Considering both French versions together helps me better understand where it is Sauvage would like the text to go. She appears to want to land on an insect-related image that provides a metaphor for how the lover's action nevertheless leaves his attentions uninterrupted. I have opted to create what I like to think of as a third text containing elements of both previous versions, thus emphasizing the revision process that the sentence has already undergone, as well as reflecting my own input and composition. My translation speaks of flying insects (*insectes du ciel*) instead of the "green beetles" (*carabes verts*) of Sauvage's first draft, but I also opt to translate the "intimate exchanges" (*intimes confidences*) present in the first draft, rather than the "deep exchanges"

(*profondes confidences*) of the second version, because this reference to intimacy more effectively connects the image back to the human interaction it is describing. The English word “knock” is a sonorous rather than strictly denotative extension of the French *choc* and the English text has acquired new internal rhyme and assonance through the use of “sky”, “aside”, “alight”, and “absorbed”. This is a way of communicating with authorial intention while also allowing the translation to be an autonomous text. My translation does not aspire to transfer the French words of either draft into English with the greatest possible equivalence of meaning, but to indicate that I have understood the direction into which Sauvage has launched her phrases and am intent on continuing that trajectory.

Beyond the question of unstable source texts lies the question of which texts from Sauvage’s corpus are to be included in *A Sauvage Reader*. Such anthologizing is a form of editing and likewise reveals the complex relationship between editing and translation. There is no reason to assume that, once translated, a poem will hold the same relationship to its neighbours as it did in the source language; indeed, the poem in the target language no longer fits into the same slot as it did in its source language collection and in fact harbors entirely different lexical networks and cultural implications. This is what Venuti means when he writes, “Translation changes everything” (2013). It is therefore not a fact that the “editor’s job” (selecting texts in the source language to be anthologized) should precede “the translator’s job” (translating the editor’s selection). Such a project — the translation of anthologies — can be a valid pursuit, especially when the source-language editor and translator are different people. But in my case the task is more intricate: doing one (selecting or translating) potentially changes or challenges the configuration of the other, similar to fiddling with a Rubik’s cube.

A Sauvage Reader emphasizes the subjective nature of anthologizing. It offers one possible arrangement of Sauvage’s texts. Any presentation or sequence of poems in *A Sauvage Reader*, in tandem with word choice in translation, will strengthen or soften the lexical networks and recurring imagery present in the French-language texts. For example, the two poems below are translations from the collection *Prière* that Sauvage wrote between 1914 and 1915. The poems have obvious correspondences in French, notably the same addressee; but they are separated in the manuscripts by other poems and are different in form (the first octosyllabic with an irregular rhyme scheme, the second in alexandrines). But presented as they are on this page and in English, the poems gain a new proximity — not only physical, but also the kind that arises out of the new textual similarities between the translated texts, such as the correspondence of the end rhymes “Louis”,

“me”, and “cede” and the irregularity of rhyme that has now been extended to the second poem. This new arrangement will lead a reader to encounter the “pale” subject of both poems differently from the way he may have been encountered in the source texts; notably, the reader of the English-language version is more aware of the subject’s rapid transition from prince to corpse:

Ah ! Soulever avec mes lèvres
Ta moustache tombant à peine
Et trouver ce moelleux dessin
À la fois pervers et câlin
De bouche au retroussis mutin
Qui te donne avec tes yeux clairs,
Ton nez busqué, ton frêle ovale
L'air d'un jeune prince un peu pâle
Sous Louis quinze. Ô bouche fine
Légère, ambiguë, et câline,
D'un rose tendre de pastel.
Et je te vois dans les dentelles
En des culottes de satin,
Nonchalant, jouant de la main
Avec une rose royale.¹

Ah to lift
The trim of your moustache with my lips
And find there the soft outline
Of your sweet, wicked mouth,
Your lips turned up mischievously.
(O light slight mouth of pastel pink,
Cryptic and coy!)
You know, with this frail face,
Curved nose, bright eyes, you seem to me
A pale prince at the court of some Louis.
I see you in a lace cravat
And satin britches. You blithely stand
Playing with a royal rose in one hand.

Alangui et suant, beau comme un jeune mort,
Te voilà dans mes bras si pâle si candide,
Tes cheveux sont collés à tes tempes humides
Tes yeux se sont fermés et ton corps est plus lourd.
Te voilà dans mes bras tout endormi d'amour,
Elle s'est endormie aussi ta main inerte,
Vide de tout désir elle demeure ouverte
Et je retiens sur moi ta jeunesse embaumée,
Amour, ta chair suante et si abandonnée.
(SAUVAGE 2009, 102–107)

You lie in my arms like a beautiful corpse, pale
And slick and frank and languid. Your hair
Sticks to your wet temples, your eyes are closed,
Your body heavier than it had been before.
And felled by love you lie in my embrace,
Asleep. Your hand, too, lies dreaming, quiet,
Half-open it rests empty of desire.
I hold your embalmed youth atop of me,
O love, the flesh that you so freely cede.

1. Marchal indicates in her notes that Sauvage’s manuscript displays pronoun edits that change the address of this poem from third-person to the more intimate second-person (SAUVAGE 2009, 102–03).

This is just one example of how translation and editing — whether considered as a process of evaluating manuscript drafts or arranging texts in a new edition — interact to yield new, autonomous textual configurations. Even a quick visual comparison of the source texts and my translations above reveals degrees of difference and innovation. It should be possible to engage with authorial intention without first having to establish a single definitive text; indeed, this is what permits a shedding of traditional translators’ anxieties about fidelity and equivalence. The absence of the definitive allows for texts to be “worked” and for editing and translation to be viewed as open-ended processes of composition.

University College London

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