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June 20, 2010

The Second 'Second Sex'



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Magnum Photos*

Simone de Beauvoir, Paris, 1945

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By Carlin Romano

A book is not born, but rather becomes, a translation. The latter may be a creative reimagining of the original, a faithful mirror image, an imperfect rendering, even a scandalous distortion. Depending on one's concrete connection to the act of literary alchemy—professional translator, delighted or bemused author, satisfied or enraged publisher, savvy or naïve reader—serenity or mayhem may ensue.

All sorts of practical factors affect a translation. Doing one may make no financial sense, or so little sense that a publisher who goes ahead may make every effort to keep costs down. A work may be peculiarly intractable thanks to rampant colloquialism, great length, or recondite local detail. An author may be cooperative, useless, or permanently useless (that is, dead).

Living authors can add to the problems or aid in solving them. Umberto Eco empowered translators of *The Name of the Rose* to adjust his text in each new language, permitting, for instance, the American edition to include less Latin, and the German edition more. Carlo Emilio Gadda, another magisterial, if reclusive, Italian novelist, instructed his English translator to drop off questions in his mailbox in the morning and pick up the answers by end of day. Czech novelist Milan Kundera sometimes called his American editor in the middle of the night to question the English rendition of a Czech or French word. The editor would generally tell Kundera that the author didn't know English very well, and go back to sleep.

When translators work on serious nonfiction, the threat of catastrophe takes different forms. With most works of scholarship or journalism, an author's conventional, nondistinctive style in one language becomes a conventional, nondistinctive style in another. At the same time, literal accuracy (for those who still believe in that allegedly quaint notion) assumes a fiercer importance. According to some biblical scholars, the entire Christian doctrine of the "virgin birth" arose from mistranslation of an ancient Hebrew word into Greek. What a difference a word can make.

As translation contretemps go, the one surrounding French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) and her foundational work of modern feminism, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, first published in

two volumes in French in 1949, remains one of the most tempestuous and fascinating. For decades, Beauvoir scholars in the English-speaking world bemoaned, attacked, and sought to replace the widely used 1953 translation by H.M. Parshley (1884-1953), a zoologist at Smith College who knew little philosophy or existentialism, had never translated a book from French, and relied mainly on his undergraduate grasp of the language. A few years back, they succeeded in getting the rights holders, Gallimard in France and Alfred A. Knopf and Vintage in the English-speaking world, to commission a new translation. Now that second version has appeared from Knopf (*The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, "A New Translation of the Landmark Classic by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier," with an introduction by Judith Thurman, "Complete and Unabridged for the First Time").

If Knopf and its partners expected to be showered with feminist appreciation, they've been sorely disappointed. The Norwegian Beauvoir scholar Toril Moi, a professor at Duke and one of the foremost critics of Parshley's translation, savaged the new version in the *London Review of Books*. Francine du Plessix Gray, in *The New York Times Book Review*, also expressed reservations. How everyone involved got from vituperative discontent to hopeful triumph and back to discontent makes an instructive tale in itself and offers some lessons for what matters and doesn't in the evolution of a classic.

The attack on Parshley's translation began with Margaret Simons's groundbreaking 1983 article, "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing From *The Second Sex*?" Simons, a philosophy professor at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, brought multiple charges against Parshley's translation. First she pointed out the enormous cuts that Parshley, at the behest of the publisher, had made in the text. Simons noticed, for instance, that Parshley tended to cut Beauvoir's examples of women's anger and oppression while preserving references to men's feelings. She was the first to spot Parshley's truncation by half of Beauvoir's chapter "The Married Woman" and its elimination of Beauvoir's supporting evidence. Simons also pointed out some fundamental philosophical errors.

Toril Moi drove the blade in further in her 2002 article in *Signs*, "While We Wait," which remains the best account of Parshley's text and its problems. (Moi also provided a minihistory of the effort to get Knopf and Vintage to authorize a new translation.) In the voice of a self-appointed keeper of Beauvoir's flame, a tone that also informs her excellent book *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2009), Moi built powerfully on the work of Simons and other Beauvoir scholars, such as the late Elizabeth Fallaize (*The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*, Routledge, 1988), attacking Parshley's translation on multiple new grounds. She found it "even worse than Simons suspected," with "mistakes and omissions on every page," further worsened by Parshley's own interpolations, paraphrases, and summaries. Indeed, Moi announced that "only a tome as long as the book itself could document all the flaws" in the translator's "deplorable" text.

Moi attacked Parshley for his cuts and "philosophical incompetence" while acknowledging that the once-frequent book reviewer of texts on sexuality had meant no harm and, in fact, had championed the publication of Beauvoir's book. Sifting the evidence, Moi concluded that Parshley reduced Beauvoir's original 972-page French text by some 145 pages, a 15-percent cut. The reduction of "The Married Woman" from 11 pages to five left it, she agreed with Fallaize, an incoherent mess. Compounding the damage, the first English-language edition of *The Second Sex* had "not signaled" Parshley's cuts to the reader, though the title page of later editions stated that the book had been "translated and edited" by Parshley.

Zeroing in on language, Moi demonstrated that Parshley repeatedly failed to recognize terms of art from philosophy and existentialism. As a result, *authentique*, for instance, became "real," and *alienation* sometimes became "projection." More important, Parshley, seemingly innocent of Beauvoir's existentialist opposition to the concept of human or female "nature," and her agreement with the fundamental Sartrean principle that "existence precedes essence," repeatedly paraphrased Beauvoir in a way that suggested she believed in a special female nature—the exact opposite of her position.

For Moi, all those problems together "made it difficult to discover what Beauvoir actually thought about important feminist issues." They falsely suggested that Beauvoir wanted "women to become like men," and that she forcefully opposed motherhood. In fact, Beauvoir's original French shows that she simply wanted motherhood, or non-motherhood, to become equally free choices for a woman. On the whole, Moi concluded, Parshley's translation damaged Beauvoir's intellectual reputation because it made "Beauvoir look like the fuzzy thinker that sexists believe women in general and feminists in particular actually are."

The ideal solution was not only a new translation, Moi wrote toward the end of her article, but "a new scholarly edition," perhaps annotated and supervised by a board of Beauvoir scholars. Beauvoir herself, after reading Simons's article, wrote back to her, regretting the permission she'd given for Parshley's slicing: "I was dismayed to learn the extent to which Mr. Parshley misrepresented me. I wish with all my heart that you will be able to publish a new translation of it."

Eventually wilting under the pressure, added to by a 2004 article in *The New York Times* by Sarah Glazer that brought the translation fiasco to a wide audience, Knopf and British publisher Jonathan Cape, along with Gallimard foreign-rights director Anne-Solange Noble (who had long favored and pushed for a new English translation), agreed to commission a new version, but not the scholarly edition. The cost of the translation was reportedly \$50,000, partly paid from French government grants. In the end, the assignment went to Borde and Malovany-Chevallier, two teachers of English in Paris who have lived there for more than 40 years.

Any descent into the trenches of word-by-word evaluation of the relations among Beauvoir's original text, Parshley's abridgment, and the new translation threatens a possible one-way trip of limitless length. Nonetheless, in her *London Review of Books* takedown of the new translation, Moi indicates she is ready to buy a ticket.

While not withdrawing her criticisms of the Parshley translation, Moi, remarkably, now describes it as "lively and readable." She cites the publishing credits of Borde and Malovany-Chevallier as "numerous textbooks" and "many cookery books." The new translation, Moi declares, is not "definitive" and does not convey "Beauvoir's voice and style." Breaking out of the gate, she complains that its use of "man" and "woman" at certain points ought to be "a man" and "a woman." The following passage gives a sense of Moi's all-artillery-firing approach:

"'Feminine refusal' is also wrong: We are not dealing with a specific kind of refusal (the feminine as opposed to the masculine kind), but with the woman's refusal or resistance. (Beauvoir is not trying to tell us how the woman resists, just that she does.) The sentence structure and the punctuation are awkward. There are several translation errors: *s'assouvir* doesn't mean to 'relieve oneself' but to 'satisfy' or 'gratify'; in this context *profonde* means 'underlying' or 'deep-seated,' not 'profound.' The phrase 'reduce to his mercy' piles up errors: *à merci* is not the same thing as *à sa merci*; *réduire* in this context doesn't mean 'reduce' but rather 'dominate' or 'subdue'; thus *réduire à merci* actually means 'subdue at will.' And *force musculaire* means 'muscular strength,' not 'muscular force,' which is a phrase mostly used by scientists trying to explain the physics of muscle contractions; *permettre* here means 'enable' or 'allow', not 'permit.'"

Moi sums up: "After taking a close look at the whole book, I found three fundamental and pervasive problems: a mishandling of key terms for gender and sexuality, an inconsistent use of tenses, and the mangling of syntax, sentence structure, and punctuation."

And so she continues on like a bulldozer, shoveling parts of the new translation to the side of the road. She concludes: "The best I can say about the new translation of *The Second Sex* is that it is unabridged, that some of the philosophical vocabulary is more consistent than in Parshley's version, and that some sections (parts of 'Myths,' for example), are better than others." But, she added, the "obsessive literalism and countless errors make it no more reliable, and far less readable than Parshley. Whenever I try to read Borde and Malovany-Chevallier's translation like an ordinary reader, without constantly checking against the French, I feel as if I were reading

underwater."

Leaving aside the oddity of a Norwegian academic from North Carolina upbraiding two lifelong Parisians on the proprieties of French usage, the fray threatens to become one of those academic firestorms with no winners. Those interested in the mini-carnage can consult the [LRB Web page](#) and string of comments.

To this critical eye, the most sensible perspective is that of Noble, long one of French publishing's most indefatigable advocates of better American translation of French works. Noble calls Moi's review "vengeful," asking, "Could Moi's grievance stem from the fact that she was not part of the project?" Noble makes several more important points. *The Second Sex*, she notes, "was not published in France by a university press but by a trade publisher." Second, she regards it as "preferable that the first edition of the new translation be similar to the one Beauvoir originally published and which was still successfully selling 60 years later. Annotated editions and companion books can follow later. ... Let readers first discover this essay in English the way French readers discover it in French—and people around the world in their own unannotated editions."

Spoken like a teacher in a core humanities course: Let readers confront the primary text first, without scholarly apparatus!

Lastly, Noble adds, "Academic conferences and roundtables can be organized for decades to come to debate the subtleties of translating philosophical terms, but since few of the millions of readers (since 1949) of Beauvoir's essay are philosophers or even university graduates, these debates will remain limited to restricted circles. What is surely more important is that this extraordinary book, though not an 'easy' read (even in the original French), has changed the lives of many women, and hopefully some men, despite, no doubt, mistakes in all 40 existing translations around the world."

Forty translations!!! Has Moi checked the Korean and Arabic editions?

In the most famous line of *The Second Sex* ("*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*"), Beauvoir wrote, in Parshley's more familiar translation, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Borde and Malovany-Chevallier now render that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."

Beauvoir's point, like most in the book, comes through in either translation. And so it's a shame that the *Second Sex* Translation Follies are turning into a well-made play in which everyone acts the role assigned by theatrical cliché. Maybe a wiser way to look at things is that it's precisely because all have done so that we find ourselves in such a happy place.

Toril Moi and her scholarly colleagues, as well as the team of Borde and Malovany-Chevallier and the ever-enterprising Noble, have done yeowoman's work over the years to place Beauvoir on the high pedestal she now occupies. The unabridged material before us (including other Beauvoir writings that continue to appear, such as her student diaries) demands extraordinary respect for a writer and thinker who, earlier false images to the contrary, didn't kneel to Sartre or write off the top of her head, but argued effectively and with rich evidence for a vision of women that now dominates the well-educated West.

Pardon me, then, if I applaud Beauvoir scholars, translators, and rights people alike, without choosing sides on whether one can use the indefinite article after *être* ("*être une femme*") and *devenir* ("*devenir un homme, pourquoi pas?*"), but might (as one letter writer to the *LRB* explained) run into a problem with *naître*..

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Comments

1. fkalouche - June 21, 2010 at 04:20 pm

The main problem with the translation was not solved: scholars and experts familiar with philosophical terms related to the existentialism of the era were not deeply involved in the translation. Instead, a "popular" translation was commissioned. While this may sit well with non-experts (especially those masquerading as experts, like Romano), it is unacceptable to serious readers of philosophy (and not just readers of "French"). Once again, the Chronicle allows someone who knows nothing about philosophy to write about it; no wonder Romano is deeply set against Moi and her academic endeavors.

2. fkalouche - June 21, 2010 at 04:24 pm

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3. 22238751 - June 22, 2010 at 07:54 am

"Academic conferences and roundtables can be organized for decades to come to debate the subtleties of translating philosophical terms . . ."
--Après Moi, le déluge?

4. lauraesther - June 22, 2010 at 10:14 am

Roman refers to "the oddity of a Norwegian academic from North Carolina upbraiding two lifelong Parisians on the proprieties of French usage." In fact, what is odd here is that a classic work in French was translated into English by native French speakers rather than native English speakers. And it is shocking that a scholar writing on translation does not know that the best, most serious and professional translations are, with very few exceptions, done by native speakers of the target language (the language into which the work is being translated) and not by native speakers of the source language (the language from which the work is being translated). Translation always involves two languages, in this case French and English, not merely French. A native French speaker with an excellent knowledge of English speaks with less authority on the proper rendering of French expressions in English than does a native English speaker with an excellent knowledge of French. Romano should have familiarized himself with the basic conventions of translation before sitting down to write a piece about a translation.

5. pokkie - June 22, 2010 at 12:23 pm

Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier are native speakers of English, but have nevertheless lived in Paris most of their lives.

6. dank48 - June 22, 2010 at 01:32 pm

". . . so deeply set against Moi . . ." on the second try, and ". . . national origin . . ." on the first. Oh, well, Fkalouche.

Lauraesther makes some excellent points, but Pokkie points out that they aren't relevant.

Mr. Romano should feel privileged to be the target of critics like this.

7. 11159995 - June 22, 2010 at 02:55 pm

I usually agree with Carlin, but in this case I do not. The tragedy here is that another opportunity was missed to make this classic book available in a translation that will serve well the intellectual impact it has had in philosophy. Did we really need another "popular" translation at this point? Couldn't the original translation, as inadequate as it was, continued to have filled that need? Instead, we have a new, still inadequate translation that the publisher will surely not want to have any competition for, by granting any scholarly publisher the right to produce a really good critical edition of this work with all the appropriate scholarly apparatus that it could benefit from. The copyright on "The Second Sex" will not run out until 2056 (70 years after Beauvoir's death), so no other publisher is likely to be able to get the right to do a critical edition before then. That's a shame for all the students and scholars who deserve better--and it's a shame for Beauvoir, too, who has yet to be given an English-language translation that is worthy of the acclaim the original French work has received over the years.---Sandy Thatcher