

## A Certain Slant of Light: Richard Wilbur as Translator of French

Albert Waldinger

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Article abstract

This article details the career of major American poet, Richard Wilbur, as a translator of French. The dual capacity of poet and translator propelled Wilbur into translating Molière, Racine, and important works of French lyric poetry, in a linguistic and literary accomplishment of the first magnitude. The article analyzes the stylistic strategies that made these translations successful and stresses the national, multicultural, and bilingual scope of the enterprise.

# A Certain Slant of Light: Richard Wilbur as Translator of French

albert waldinger

*Defense Language Institute, Monterey, USA*

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit la carrière de Richard Wilbur, grand poète nord-américain de langue anglaise, en tant que traducteur du français. Cette double fonction le poussa à traduire des chefs-d'œuvre de la poésie lyrique française, c'est-à-dire Molière et Racine, un accomplissement de premier ordre. S'appuyant sur la portée nationale, multiculturelle et bilingue des traductions de Wilbur, l'article fait l'analyse des stratégies stylistiques qui en ont fait un succès.

## ABSTRACT

This article details the career of major American poet, Richard Wilbur, as a translator of French. The dual capacity of poet and translator propelled Wilbur into translating Molière, Racine, and important works of French lyric poetry, in a linguistic and literary accomplishment of the first magnitude. The article analyzes the stylistic strategies that made these translations successful and stresses the national, multicultural, and bilingual scope of the enterprise.

In an early poem, Richard Wilbur wrote of the “tall camels of the spirit” who in search of “sensible emptiness” learned to drink “pure mirage,” and remarked that “such deceptive shinings” need to be shaped and borne (1987: 283). He accomplished this “shining” by what Emily Dickinson called a “certain slant of light,” the refulgent perspective of translation (1955: 154).

Wilbur's connection with Emily Dickinson was not merely the result of his years in her home town of Amherst, where he studied literature from 1938 to 1941 (Butts 1990: xv). Aside from her clear-eyed depiction of New England, Dickinson's chief truthfulness lay in her insistence that “the soul selects its own society,” that a poet-translator should release feeling from a text just as man's imagination should move freely despite confining rooms.

Full of this insight, Wilbur learned to translate French from a fellow graduate student at Harvard, André Bouchet, whom he asked to translate his own poetry into French (Butts 1990: 162). This was a useful, even shocking exercise in expressive relativity since Bouchet was himself a poet, and to absorb the shock Wilbur plunged back into his own work, published as *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems* in 1947. He saw the act of translation as culturally empathic involvement that promoted creativity and “beautiful change” (Wilbur 1976: 169):

One thing that moves a poet to translate from other tongues, as I know from my own experience, is the urge to broaden his utterance through imposture, to say things he is not yet able to say in his own person.

To stimulate such growth, Wilbur set out on a life-long career of lyric translation that was to include Charles d'Orléans, Villon, Du Bellay, La Fontaine, Voltaire, Baudelaire, Nerval, Apollinaire, Valéry, Francis Ponge, and René Char (Wilbur 1987, 1982). Among other things, he engaged in phrase-for-phrase correspondence with Paul Auster over "*Le Pont Mirabeau*," a poem by Apollinaire to be included "recto-verso" in Auster's anthology of 20th century French poetry (Wilbur 1989: 228-234). Also to appear in the anthology was his rendition of Ponge, whose "heartfelt subservience to the external" he had undertaken to reproduce as early as 1950 (Wilbur 1976: 218). Such modern poetry served as his apprenticeship in concretizing the Latinate component of the French vocabulary, whether by nativizing it (the *precipitation sempiternelle* of "*Pluie*" becomes "everlasting," Wilbur 1982: 32) or by authenticating and maintaining the source (the *gouttes individuées* of the precipitation are "individuated," Wilbur 1982: 32). Moreover, the native and the Latinate, the concrete and the abstract, can be mixed: in "Fauna and Flora" (Ponge 1982: 314), the "tableaux vivants" of plants can show both "unruffled strength" and a "peculiar dialectic in space" — "peculiar" referring to the roving botanist in Wilbur, the Thoreau-like collector of the "original" who is both down-to-earth and learned.

In 1952, New Directions was preparing a new version of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* and Wilbur was asked to translate "*L'albatros*," "*L'invitation au voyage*," and "*Correspondances*" (Butts 1990: 166). These formed the cornerstones of the edifice he was building: after all, Martin Turnell had claimed in *The Classical Moment* (1946: 247), a book that Wilbur (1976: 225) valued highly, that Baudelaire and Racine (whom he also translated) made up one melodious and unbroken tradition.

Most importantly, Wilbur is in touch with Baudelaire's affective range; in "The Albatross" the sailors do not merely *prennent* and *suivent* but, in an act of rapacity condensing the two verbs, "ensnare" the hapless bird (Wilbur 1982: 20). Moreover, not only is the bird *maladroit* and *honteux*, full of "stricken pride," but this "cripple who once flew" (*l'infirme qui volait* in *The Penguin Book of French Verse* 1957: 149) also has a "trammelled gait."

"*Mal*," then, is highly rhetorical, and structured according to meter and rhyme, a formality that Wilbur explained to the poet-translator W.D. Snodgrass as basic to the nature of poetry in being "optative, since it has to do with exerting oneself, getting things said, getting them into form" (Butts 1990: 217). The writing and translation of a poem must entail stringency and discipline if one wants to liberate the idea: the albatross, unliberated, weighs the poet down with the "exiled" burden of unreleased thought and feeling. The "option" is to carry such a burden as willingly and gracefully as possible.

Wilbur was satisfied with his rendition of "*L'invitation au voyage*," while conceding that it had to end in "failure, though a less ludicrous failure than that of others" (Butts 1990: 166). This poem is archetypal Baudelaire in the same sense as "*Le voyage*" (1957: 167-175), the projection of a paradise based on the scum of life. But "*L'invitation*" is vastly more unpolluted: at the end of the voyage into dream, "There is nothing else but grace and measure, / Richness, quietness, and pleasure" (Wilbur 1987: 284).

Two kinds of transposition are here at play — syntactical and semantic. The original places *ordre* before *beauté* (*tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté*, from the 1857 edition of *Les fleurs du mal*, reprinted in Chassang 1952: 462), but in Wilbur's rendering the

classical virtue of measure is ultimate and *beauté*, rather than being yoked to *volupté*, is only “grace.” At first sight, this seems false, but when one considers that “*la caresse médusante de Racine*” (the phrase is from René Char 1983: 722) informs the melody of Baudelaire and is the “hypnotic caress” stroking his lines, we can understand that this “grace and measure” contains the transcendence of sensuality. In addition, the pair is in harmony with such expressions as *calme* and the vision of a world in which the usually “wandering” (*vagabonds*) ships sleep after “plying through all the waters of the earth to satisfy your least desire” (Wilbur 1987: 255 from *C’est assouvir / Ton moindre désir / Qu’ils viennent du bout du monde*). The whole is “appeased,” so that Wilbur’s final caress, “Slowly the land is rolled / Sleepward,” constitutes a stroke of submission in which the action of “rolling into sleep,” like the movement of a deck and the ease of a child sinking into his “land of Nod” at bedtime, rhymes with “gold” as emphasized by Wilbur’s colon. It seems, then, that the whole is meant to end in “a sea of gentle fire,” the American poet’s “independent,” synergetic and unslavish way of integrating the maritime imagery with the French poem’s tenderly subdued desire.

The transposition of syntactic members as forced by rhyme can subserve meaning. Thus in “*Correspondances*” the initial lines of the concluding sestet (this is, after all, a Petrarchan sonnet) are “relocated”: instead of beginning with “scents as cool as the flesh of children” (*Parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants*, Baudelaire 1957: 155), Wilbur displaces the phrase to rhyme b of the sestet, phrasing it as “fresh as a child’s caress” and exchanging the first half of the second line (*doux comme des hautbois*) — “sweet as the oboe’s sound” — as rhyme a (1982: 20). This is a “reordering,” as Malone terms it in *The Science of Linguistics in the Art of Translation* (1988: 98), this time used to make sense of a symbolist refrain.

Actually, Wilbur felt that “child’s caress” would have offended Baudelaire’s “fastidiousness” (Butts 1990: 166) and this is probably true. However, the “caress” furnishes a structural bridge lacking in full in the original: its rhyme with “pervasiveness.” Though not as resonant as *prairies / infinies*, it makes an even firmer semantic connection in tune with Wilbur’s 1976 belief (222) that harmony of sound provides cognitive support.

Accordingly, the network of assonance stresses the “correspondences.” In replacement of the doubled nasals of *les sons se répondent* at the end of the second quatrain, a pivotal location in a sonnet, Wilbur piles on the schwas of “unison,” “colors,” and “in one,” all good preparation for the “sound / profound” echo of the concluding sestet. He thereby enlists Baudelaire in the English language tradition.

Wilbur also became adept at the translation of the mystical, semi-surrealistic work of René Char, for whom the symbolist mastery of Baudelaire was “the most human [and humane] force in Christian civilization” (1983: 731). But there was one sense in which the two differed: whereas Baudelaire was “discursive” — necessitating energetic re-integration in the work of translation — Char was “explosive” (Roudaut 1983: xxxvi), each poem constituting a pulsating birth pang in the delivery of “*Les transparents*” (or “vagabonds of the sun and moon,” as Wilbur (1982: 23) renders these *luni-solaires* [Char 1983: 295]). These are multiple forces of nature in “a poetically polytheistic universe” (Roudaut 1983: lvi), which course through multifaceted humanity: Pierre Prieure, Diane Cancel, and the gravestone of the Comte de Salut (Char 1983: 296, 297, 301; Wilbur 1982: 24, 26). In no sense did the ensuing dialogues need the mediation of extreme reworking.

Instead, it was the translator's task to reproduce the sacred "transparency" of Char's troubadour-like flashes. Thus, godlike night speaks gnomically and romantically to Pierre about "the nightingale and the loud impossible love to be lulled in her heart" and Diane Cancel is told about "the rose with which my heart's consoled," the consummate richness and "everlasting dynamics" (Roudaut 1983: xxxiv) of courtly Christian civilization in the "household god's" (*casanier* or "homebody's") "permanent care" (*La rose de mon souci*). Moreover, the divinities can read the epitaph of the Comte de Salut: "Prefer, O Passerby, the eglantine / Whose *amorous thorn* I am / Surviving *thy* effusions," the transient but beautiful expressions of romance slightly reminiscent of Coleridge's "To a Knight's Grave." From this time on, Richard Wilbur's challenge was to formulate the mixture of love and pain in the "effusions" of French Neoclassicism and make it available to the twentieth century American.

Wilbur began to spread this culture by adapting *Candide* to the Broadway musical stage at the end of 1956,<sup>1</sup> rendering "*Il faut cultiver son propre jardin*" in a final song of "the entire company" as (156):

We're neither pure nor wise nor good.  
 We'll do the best we know.  
 We'll build our house and chop our wood,  
 And make our garden grow. (bis).

In addition, *Candide* poked Molièresque fun at the optimistic pedantry of a Pangloss (18-19), who sings about marriage as "a harmless outlet for / Emotions which could lead to war / Or social agitation," to which the chorus chimes ironically that this is "a brilliant explanation" and that "All's for the best / In the best of all possible worlds" ("*Le meilleur des mondes possibles*"). Moreover, Cunegonde's question (18) is a good archetype for Molière's Agnès, whose words Wilbur translated in 1971:

Dear master, I'm sure you're right  
 That marriage is splendid.  
 But why do married people fight?  
 I cannot comprehend it.

Likewise, even the issues that upset Célimène's fashionable ease in *Le Misanthrope* (which Wilbur translated in 1955) were fully brought out in a Broadway Voltaire: the New York playgoer could relate to Cunegonde's misconception (155) — "I thought the world was sugar-cake, / For so our master said..."

And so, *The Misanthrope* began to take off, although Wilbur had begun his translation in the quiet, scholarly context of a fellowship as early as 1952 (Butts 1990: 169). It became a text in a university anthology on *Comedy: Plays, Theory and Criticism* in 1962, a collection that included Martin Turnell's model essay on it, and gained more acclaim in The Dramatist's Play Service in 1965. From its original performance at The Poet's Theater in Cambridge to a recent production at the Marquee Theatre Company at the Glencoe (Illinois) Union Church<sup>2</sup>, it was widely performed, proving that extreme sophistication could be appreciated far from the court of Louis XIV.

The play was rooted in urbanity. As one critic has it, the *Maximes* of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld "sketch the anthropology in which *Le Misanthrope* is best understood" (Moore 1966: 183). The tone is best set by a disillusion with "*amour propre*" (overweening pride of self), the most "cajoling of flatterers" (Galpin 1965: 17, no. 1) in which "*L'esprit est toujours la dupe du cœur*" (Galpin 1965: 21, no. 49). This *duperie*

is brought out both on the stage of the theater and of life, thereby showing that *nous sommes si accoutumés à nous déguiser qu'enfin nous nous déguisons à nous mêmes* (Galpin 1965: 18, no. 12). It is therefore the function of the comic dramatist to unbury the heart of this disguised self in order to bring about both self-knowledge and healing. As Wilbur put it in his "Introductions to Molière" (1976: 225), Alceste, *Le Misanthrope's* anti-heroic hero, "seems an unconscious fraud who magnifies the petty faults of others in order to dramatize himself in his own eyes." At the same time, Wilbur (1976: 225) sees in him a potentially misunderstood "moral giant misplaced in a trivial society, having (in George Eliot's phrase) 'a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity.'" As such, he was the Romantic rebel forced into a Neoclassic straitjacket; no wonder that Alfred de Musset (quoted in Collinet 1974: 137) praised the play's "bitter truth," its "sad and male gaiety," and its hero so proud and divinely "*naïve*" (in the original sense of "unspoiled") that his rebellion should have evoked tears rather than laughter. Rousseau was of the same mind, blaming Molière for the "impardonable sin of ridiculing virtue" (Collinet 1974: 200). Any Glencoe, Illinois theatregoer, responding from his moralistic side, could agree. However, from the vantage point of a post-Freudian "unrepressed" and acquisitive society, he could laugh at the "*amour-propre*" just as Molière had intended.

This theatregoer has an updated version of 17th century "*honnêteté*," which Doumic (1966: 158) loosely defines as "good order applied to the practice of life" — what the English 18th century, Thomas Paine included, called "common sense." Its "practical reason" is eminently pragmatic: human uprightness, the ideal, would inevitably emerge from the concrete reality of the variable social code, in which the *honnête homme* is well versed.

As Pascal wrote (cited in Doumic 1966: 158), the most difficult part of being such a man consisted in suiting character to action. Accordingly, Molière had to bring the heart of this character onto the stage, not through the lapidary one-liners of a Rochefoucauld but through the developed evocation of love — which "Reason doesn't rule, you know," as Alceste remarks (cited by Turnell 1962: 280). He had to ignore Neoclassical rules — as did Racine — in order to speak freely to his audience. Faguet (1925: 279, 283) calls this transcendence in the interest of reality and nature, and Turnell (1946: 57) sees it as a supra-generic dramatic strategy where,

the mind of the spectator is suspended between two impulses — pity and laughter — which superficially appear to exclude one another, and comedy is felt to be a continued oscillation between what one writer has called *la vie tragique* and *la vie triviale*. It is not, however, an alternation between tragic and comic emotions. The two are fused into a single new emotion which differs from them both and is proper to comedy.

Molière creates this fusion by combining self-realization and the address to the other, the lady. Wilbur adds that the first part of Alceste's speech to Célimène in which he "calls her on the carpet" is an "aside," turned to himself with her ("she" in the translation, not merely an impersonal "*on*") on his mind:

Good God! Could anything be more inhuman,  
Was ever a heart so mangled by a woman?  
When I complain of how she has betrayed me,  
She bridles, and commences to upbraid me!  
She tries my tortured patience to the limit;

She won't deny her guilt; she glories in it.  
 And yet my heart's too faint and cowardly  
 To break these chains of passion, and be free,  
 To scorn her as it should, and rise above  
 This unrewarded, mad, and bitter love (pp. 264-265).

Wilbur steps out of the comic buskins of a quite different emphatic tradition, one which calls Célimène an "*ingrat objet*" (Molière 1936: 372, l. 1380), in order to blast unrequited love with a series of bitter adjectives in the English style and to prepare for them by another series — "mangled," "betrayed," and "upbraid" — of which the latter two are not only alliterative but comically rhymed in the fashion of *Don Juan*. In contrast, Molière has nothing more outraged than *Jamais cœur fut-il de la sorte traité?, d'un juste courroux je suis ému contre elle, and c'est moi qu'on querelle* (1936: 371, ll. 1372-1374), the latter a rather weak-kneed "*tour de présentation*" (Vinay 1958: 210) like *C'est toi qui n'as pas voulu*.

I have said that the tradition of French heroics was "differently emphatic": the emphasis is largely syntactic and lexical. Thus, the repetition of *tout* in *On me laisse tout croire, on fait gloire de tout* (Molière 1936: 371, 1376) emerges as "She won't deny her guilt; she glories in it," a line that renders this repetition perfectly. Moreover, it has a prescribed hemistich just like a well-formed Cornelian line, giving point to Turnell's observation that many speeches in *Le Misanthrope* are parodies of Corneille's tirades (Wilbur 1976: 225). In this one, Cornelian "*gloire*" is demoted to a lowly verb.

In addition, the "denial" carries over to the "black transgression" of which Alceste accuses Célimène (Wilbur 1962: 81, ll. 249-254):

Ah, traitress, in how confident a fashion  
 You take advantage of my helpless passion,  
 And use my weakness for your faithless charms  
 To make me once again throw down my arms!  
 But do at least deny this black transgression;  
 Take back that mocking and perverse confession...

The chivalrous clichés are infractions of the code of love ("traitress," "helpless passion," "faithless charms," "black transgression," "perverse confession" for *perfide, faiblesse extrême, excès prodigeux, fatal amour, crime qui m'accable* [Molière 1936: 372, ll. 1382-1385]). That Alceste is ridiculous, not really courtly, is clear from the unrelied violence of his vituperation and the sour demand that Célimène "Pretend, pretend, that you are just and true, / And I shall make myself believe in you" (Wilbur 1962: 81, ll. 257-258). She sees this as no more than the ravings of a "jealous dunce" (line 259 from *fou dans vos transports jaloux* [Molière 1936: 372, l. 1391]), quite unlike the divine folly of a Tristan, and considers the suggestion of "pretense" as an insulting "*bassesse*" (l. 1394) for someone already close to reality as conceived by commonsensical society — and thus superficially "*honnête*". In the name of this society, she strips the prude Arsinoë of her disguise (Wilbur 1962: 76, ll. 165-168):

She shows her zeal in every holy place,  
 But still she's vain enough to paint her face;  
 She holds that naked statues are immoral,  
 But with a naked *man* she'd have no quarrel.

Wilbur translates “*amour pour les réalités*” (Molière 1936: 355, l. 944) as bold and naked humanity in the spirit of Rochefoucauld and stresses the “manhood” — the italics are missing from the French. Moreover, the disillusionment behind the desire to expose goes well beyond the ideal of “honour”: the problem of becoming an “*homme d’honneur*” (Molière 1936: 396, l. 1806) becomes the search for a “new frontier” where Alceste can find room for his “honest heart” (Wilbur 1962: 86, l. 374).

The most suitable “*Maxime*” for *Tartuffe*, which Wilbur translated in 1963, the same year that he became co-recipient of the Bollingen Prize for the best translation of poetry, is a couplet from Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard” (ll. 39-40): “There stern Religion quench’d th’unwilling flame, / There dy’d the best of passions, Love and Fame” (the latter in the sense of “*gloire*”). The movement is similar to Molière’s *Mon Dieu, le plus souvent l’apparence déçoit, / Il ne faut pas toujours juger sur ce qu’on voit*, as printed in Petit’s *Dictionnaire des citations du monde entier* (1960: 35, 227). In fact, the hypocrisy of Tartuffe’s plots to “quench” Mariane’s “unquenchable” feelings and unreflective, healthy nature (represented by an ingénue as usual in Molière), result in finding herself up against “impious mummery” (Wilbur 1978: 334 from *sacrilège et trompeuse grimace* [Molière 1936: 416. 362]). Moreover, because the “specious piety” (Wilbur 1978: 334 from *zèle spécieux*, Molière 1936: 416, l. 360) is so deceptive and the youth so unreflective, the problem takes on the scope of the grounding of belief in a world of appearances.

One way to formulate this belief is by placing descriptive terms appropriately, whether these express an axiomatic identity close to the noun, simply describe the nominal entity or are removed from it, or have a definition of a headword, modifiers, and required placement that is expressively flexible. In 17th century French, a good 50% of the adjectives could come either before or after the noun, though there was already a strong tendency to the post-nominal position of modern usage (Wartburg 1967: 175; Tremblay 1971: 105).

The norm in English is pre-nominal: thus, “*véritable zèle*” (l. 358) and “honest zeal” (Wilbur 1978: 334) are in effect near equivalents, though the perceptual quality of the “zeal” is not as markedly moral as in English. Moreover, the Augustan addition of “fair religion” (Wilbur 1978: 335) to Molière’s text, perhaps inspired by *l’intérêt de Ciel* (1936: 417, l. 376), reduces an adjectival complement (“de +”) to a pre-nominalized epithet like *les dévots de cœur* (l. 382) / “true piety” (335). In addition, normative adjective placement in French may create a more analytic impression than is intended. *Le dehors plâtré d’un zèle spécieux* (l.360), in which the post-positional and descriptive tendency of the language is strong, prevents the sleazy unity of Wilbur’s Pope-like eloquence — “specious piety’s dishonest face” (334).

Moreover, pre-posed adjectives encourage a stylistic parallelism that enhances French nominal pairing and works along with 17<sup>th</sup> century French patterns of modification: in place of *sacrilège* and *trompeuses grimaces* (l.362), Wilbur gives “*impious mummeries and hollow shows*” (334). Such adjectival usage is freewheeling in spite of syntactic constraints. Thus, when several descriptive words precede a head noun, the “axiomatic” nature of the original loosens, making the phrase more meaningful and less automatic: instead of *sainte ferveur* (l. 358), Wilbur has “true religious fire” (334).

This meaning is expressed by the sober and relativistic Cléante (Relyea 1976:50), whose character of “philosophe” becomes an attributive tag rather than merely a headword in *Le Misanthrope*: “My phlegm’s as *philosophic* as your spleen,” Wilbur



(1962: 67, l. 166) has Alceste's friend say in a usage "more tripping on the tongue" than *philosophique*, as well as more theatrical and current (Doumic 1966:201-202). However, the non-Encyclopedic, "comic logician" of *Tartuffe* is Dorine (Relyea 1976: 48), the commonsensical maid representing folk wit in the family. She ridicules Tartuffe as a hell-fire preacher pushing his way into a conventional home (Wilbur 1978: 324):

He sermonizes us in thundering tones  
 And confiscates our ribbons and colognes.  
 Last week he tore a kerchief into pieces  
 Because he found it pressed in a Life of Jesus.

Wilbur was against evoking a culture-specific picture (Butts 1990: 166, 214), whether a "fundamentalist" Catholic or American evangelical, though it would be hard for an American not to think of the latter. Instead we are given a generalized religious bigot, one who "sermonizes" rather than merely "delivers a sermon," the rough equivalent to *sermonner* (l. 205) (suggestive of the contrast *chanter / chantonner*). What's more, his *yeux farouches* (l. 205) do in fact give off Bible-thumping "thunder." Moreover, he doesn't only "throw" (*jeter*; l. 206) the finery out; he "confiscates" it. All of this makes for a pious temper tantrum (the translator's contribution to Molière's characterization), to the degree that Tartuffe can rip a handkerchief into "pieces" because it is used as a profane bookmark for a "Life of Jesus." The rhyme is a more modern and "reformed" deflation than the original — *mains* paired with *Fleurs des Saints*, "a weighty tome by the Jesuit Ribandeira" (Molière 1936: note. to l. 208).

It is Dorine who identifies Tartuffe's false piety as a hoax (Wilbur 1978:348), made particularly telling in the fast-paced exchange presented by the Stratford National Theatre of Canada in 1973:<sup>3</sup>

dorine  
 No, don't believe your father; it's all a hoax.  
 orgon  
 See here, young woman...  
 dorine  
 Come, Sir, no more jokes;  
 You can't fool us.

At this point, Dorine laughs at the "joke" and refuses to take her employer seriously. But her seeming disrespect is really no more than comic wonder at his "misperception" ("Yes, yes, of course. Go on and have your fun" is the way Wilbur (1978: 348) translates the relatively anodyne *Oui, oui vous nous contez une plaisante histoire*, of l. 466, Molière 1936).

In addition, Wilbur's Dorine pins down this joke to a name: the "spoof" of the planned marriage rhymes with the proposed bridegroom "Tartuffe" (347), a completely different tag from the original *nouvelle / bagatelle* (Molière 1936: ll. 461-462). Moreover, she transmogrifies the name into a verb, "tartuffified" (365), just like the original (Molière 1936: l. 674), thereby stressing the source and impressing it on the theatregoer's mind.

Dorine's identification is infectious, spreading even to Cléante, whose accent in the Canadian production is House of Lords but who descends to the Colonies in

referring to Tartuffe's sanctimoniousness as "hocus-pocus" to rhyme with Orgon's "out of focus" gullibility (330 from the totally unremarkable *aujourd'hui / lui* of ll. 263-264 of the original). Consequently, both Dorine and Cléante have the last word in an English form of what Vinay and Darbelnet (1967: 210) exemplify by *C'est moi qui l'a fait*. Cléante's moralistic *C'est par leurs actions qu'ils reprennent les nôtres* from l. 394 of the original becomes "They show, by deeds, how Christians should behave" (Wilbur 1978: 335) and Dorine's *C'est une conscience que de vous laisser faire une telle alliance* from ll. 549-550 is rendered smoothly as "If I didn't protest / This sinful marriage, my conscience couldn't rest" (353). In both cases, the "tour de présentation" becomes direct and undelayed. The verb phrase dominates, either by complementation ("show + how"), or by verb plus object collocation ("protest + marriage") enjambling onto the following line. Moreover, in Dorine's speech, the empty carrier *ce* is given substance by shifting its reference (*conscience*) to a main clause, thereby eliminating the mediation of *que*. In both verses, Wilbur fills the "presented" space with opinions about the "clear and present danger" of hypocrisy to Christianity, tolerance, and marriage in response to the emergency that Orgon creates by removing family loyalty from those around him. Molière thereby fashions "an atmosphere which is the comic equivalent of King Lear's. All natural bonds of love and trust are strained or broken; evil is taken for good; truth must to kennel" (Wilbur 1976: 230).

In an attempt to make the national examination in French literature more manageable, and to bring "the dog of truth out of the doghouse," Classiques Hachette gathered together model *explications de texte*, one of which was from *L'école des femmes*. Chosen by Pouget (1952: 44) was Arnolphe's response to his ward Agnès, who protests that "she would gladly love [him] if [she] could" (Wilbur 1971:131):

You can, my little beauty, if you'll but try.

(He sighs)

Just listen to that deep and yearning sigh!

Look at my haggard face! See how it suffers!

Reject that puppy and the love he offers...

Wilbur adds the stage directions for the sigh. Not content with conveying the romantic automatism *amoureux* (Molière 1950: 145) literally, he expands it as "deep and yearning." In addition, the look is not only *mourant* (145), but "haggard" like that of the most pathetic "swain." The translator, speaking from a post-Romantic world that has absorbed Romantic tears while often rejecting the sentimentality of Romance, does not let us forget that Arnolphe is a smitten and fuddy-duddy bachelor, "one of Molière's coercers of life" (Wilbur 1976: 234). It is laughable to hear such a person sigh.

Of course, Arnolphe tries earnestly. To match his "deep and yearning sigh," he promises "clothes and jewels" (131), the nominal reflex of an original adjectival pair, *brave et leste* (Molière 1950: 145). Moreover, he promises tenderness (131): "I'll pet you night and day; you shall be showered / With kisses; you'll be hugged, caressed, devoured..." The expression "to shower with kisses" evokes more ridicule than simple *baiserai* (145), and has the virtue of continuing onto the next line with conversational fluency rather than end-stopped finality. At the same time, its rhyme word *caresserai* is absorbed by the stream.

There is derivational as well as etymological justification for the translation of *bouchonner* as "hug": *mon petit bouchon* was a *terme d'affection mignarde* parallel to

flippant *fripponne* and *d'après le sens caressant de chiffon* according to *Le Grand Larousse de la langue française*, 1971. It is a sweet version of the bittersweet *sermonner* / *sermon* that Wilbur garnished with an agentive *-ize* in “Tartuffe.”

But Arnolphe is no Tartuffe and is even farther from Lear: calling Agnès “Miss Back-Talk” (129 from *La belle raisonneuse*, Molière 1950: 144), only to fall in love with her as “my little beauty,” is far removed from the hanged Cornelia whom Lear terms “poor fool” (Shakespeare 1950: V, iii, l. 377). For all his bumbling tenderness, Arnolphe never sees himself and his ward as occupying the same “cage” (Shakespeare 1950: V, iii, l. 10). The cage, in fact, is of his making and full of phony “marriage maxims” and drolly translated admonitions like “Don’t emulate those flirts whose *indiscretions* / Are told all over town at *gossip-sessions*” (66 from *Gardez-vous d’imiter ces coquettes vilaines / Dont par toute la ville on chante les fredaines*, Molière 1950: 115). The cage is for Agnès alone and Arnolphe exploits her “for his pride’s sake only,” making the play, in the words of J. D. Hubert, merely “burlesque tragedy” (cited by Wilbur 1976: 234). Love, far from being a serious fatality as in Racine or Shakespeare, is a subject for antics.

Nonetheless, these antics are masterful and all the more impressive for being encased in formal language that expresses such knotty problems as those of authority versus individual desire. Arnolphe moans about the “spell” that Horace, Agnès’ beloved, “*must have cast on [her]*,” Simplification (Wilbur 1971: 131) of a “*tour de présentation*” plus complex verbality — *C’est quelque sort qu’il faut qu’il ait jeté sur toi* (Molière 1950:146). The subjunctive makes possible a complaint about the incompletely exercised pull of youth. Likewise, *The Learned Ladies*, the English title which Wilbur gave to *Les femmes savantes* (1673) in 1976-77, expresses authority being denied by subjunctive wish fulfillment, a wish that is uncertain of realization. Henriette, the ingenue in this play, *would like* her father to exercise his authority in the name of youthful natural rights and “the marriage of true minds”: “Ah, Father, that’s my dearest wish. *I pray you, / Crown my desire by making me obey you*” (Wilbur 1978: 619 from *Hélas! vous flattez là le plus doux de mes vœux; / Veuillez être obéi: c’est tout ce que je veux* (Molière 1950: 344).

The strength of love as proven fatality was “the Matter of Racine,” whom Wilbur translated next, translating *Andromaque* in 1981 and *Phèdre* in 1984. Unlike Molière, Racine was a tragic dramatist in an age when genres like tragedy and comedy were kept strictly separate. His tragedies showed “qualities of belief and feeling strongly influenced by the stern Jansenists and those who believe that we have no free will,” seventeenth century traits that are hard to translate and even harder to assimilate (Wilbur 1976: 248).

On the other hand, as Wilbur (1987: 233) wrote in “Love Calls Us to the Things of the World,” lovers are fated to be undone even though they are “fresh and sweet.” Nemesis and love are, after all, true for all time, even though their expression may change, and such change is the translator’s province. It is no wonder, then, that Wilbur absorbed *Andromaque* intensively some twenty years before actually translating the drama and that this involvement was initially concurrent with his translation of Molière (Wilbur 1981: xiv).

Consequently, the transition from comedy to tragedy was a natural one. After all, in addition to the fatalistic theology of Port-Royal and the literary theories of Boileau, the Legislator of Neoclassicism, Racine was directed by the stagecraft of

Molière (Faguet 1925: 305). The comic dramatist had produced Racine's first tragedy in 1667, only two years earlier than *Andromaque* (Turnell 1946: 155). Most significantly, Molière had signified the puncturing of the Age of Corneille in which "*l'honnête homme*," formerly a man of heroic initiative and grandiose speeches, ended up a man of banter, philosophic diatribe (*Alceste* and *Cléante*), and lyric declaration. As Turnell (1946: 46) puts it: "There is no genuine volition in *Alceste's Je veux*." Accordingly, the universal entrapment of willpower is the theme of Racine, whose world is less social and more inwardly passionate, less like the optimistic expansiveness of a Cornelian tirade and more akin to pessimistic confession.

This kind of formality, in the words of Turnell (as cited by Wilbur 1981: xii), consisted of

the contrast between extreme violence and the tightness of the form, between the primitive passions simmering just below the surface of civilized society and the versification which reflects the outer shape of that society.

Versification hides subversion. Rhyme and meter had been justified by Wilbur in the translation of Molière's drolly subversive "tragic burlesque," and were all the more necessary in the rendering of Racinian repression, sublimation, and "subliminity."

A measured example is Oreste's "complaint" to the beloved Hermione: "I well see what's to be my sorry part: / I have your wishes, Pyrrhus has your heart" (Wilbur 1981: 34 from the equally caesural *Je vous entends. Tel est mon partage funeste: / Le cœur est pour Pyrrhus, et les vœux pour Oreste*, (Racine 1973: 58). Faguet (1925: 311-312) finds these lines comic, as well as the whole confrontation between Oreste and Hermione, and Voltaire went so far as to disparage Racine for an "impurity more like Terence [Roman comedy] than Sophocles." They are right — from an "unmixed and unadulterated" point of view. But Racine's Oreste is not the hero of *The Libation Bearers* by Aeschylus (Lattimore 1953: 93-131). He is an anti-hero for whom *funeste* may be no more than a well-meaning "*love-stricken* soul," a "sorry part," and a pathetic albatross. In a rendering adapted to the American twentieth century, he is a sadsack from the family of Agamemnon in French Neoclassical dress and modern English.

In his preface to the first edition of his first major play, *Les précieuses ridicules* (1660), Molière pointed out that one of his main "charms" was "tone of voice" (1967: 38). With this in mind, Pouget selected a scene of tonal and gestural rather than openly verbal tragedy to illustrate Racine: "*Andromaque aux genoux d'Hermione*" (1952: 56). This is a face-off between two royal ladies in which Hermione's cold sympathy — "I feel for you" (Wilbur 1981: 59 from the intellectual *Je conçois vos douleurs* of Racine 1973: 76) — has some of the haughtiness of *Célimène's* refusal to read a letter "proving her infidelity" ("I don't care to" [Wilbur 1962: 80, l. 225] from the impersonal *Il ne me plait pas, moi* [Molière 1936: 371, l. 1357]). Likewise, there is gestural and conceptual rejection in Hermione's justifying continuation — "but duty curbs my will / And when my father has spoken, I must be still" (Wilbur 1981: 59). The "curbing" is a concretely equivalent rendition of the Racinian chestnut "*devoir austère*" (1973: 76), especially prominent in *Bérénice*, and slightly reminiscent of the "burlesquely tragic" lines of Arnolphe in *L'école des femmes* — "*d'austères devoirs le rôle de femme s'engage*." "Being still," then, is an appropriate and evasive response to *Andromaque* based on the authoritarianism both queens share.

The translation thus has much opportunity to make tangible the disdain expressed in such terms as *fléchir* and *régner*; the original (1973: 77) has Hermione say, *S'il faut fléchir Pyrrhus, qui le peut mieux que vous? / Vos yeux assez longtemps ont régné sur son âme*, while Wilbur (1981: 59) loads this with emphatic irony — “But who / Could touch the heart of Pyrrhus as well as you? His soul has long been subject to your spell.” Andromaque’s evocation of Hector as the victim of “Achilles’ cruel sword” (Wilbur 1981: 58), is thereby checked by Hermione’s jealous haughtiness.

The language in which this happens has, whatever Racine’s detractors may say, none of the diffuseness of aria or pompous oratory; the characters address their predicament, or each other, in a spare, clear style, which is often, as Lytton Strachey says, “compact as dynamite” (Wilbur 1981: xiv).

Racine, in other words, would seem to be the source of the legendary “*style sec*” of French.

Henri Peyre (1966: 323) compares this style to Elizabethan “luxury” (part of Wilbur’s tradition) and notes (310) that Racine’s phrases, especially in *Phèdre*, have been touchstones for generations of French youth:

It would be no exaggeration to say that the magnificent love declarations in the play and its burning picture of jealousy have done much to frame the French conception of love and even the behavior of French men and women when possessed by the sacred malady — as all of them are convinced they must be before they become truly civilized and resigned to a serene and dignified existence in the provinces.

*Phèdre* represents a last fling, a final burst of conviction. Since it was a “*rite de passage*” and an essential part of maturity, Wilbur felt obligated to translate it for the American theatergoer.

Hippolytus, Phaedra’s untried beloved, refers to his hot blood as “love’s delirium” (Wilbur 1984: 13 from the charged “*fol amour*” [Racine 1936: 585, l. 113]), later echoed and explicated by Phaedra’s confession — “I feel *crazed* with a *passion* which I can’t conceal” (Wilbur 1984: 45 from *Je m’égare, / Seigneur, ma folle ardeur malgré moi se déclare* [Racine 1936: 606, ll. 629-630]). In other words, “*fol amour*” gives rise to inescapable inebriation like the potion that inspired Tristan’s fatal passion for Ysolde. Phaedra’s feelings have all the “crazed” romance of “Love in the Western World.”

Accordingly, her “*égarements*” (Racine 1936:59, l.250) are not merely “wildness”: they mean rejection by the gods of the universe who must be invoked in these terms (Wilbur 1984: 17):

Founders of our sad race, bright god of fire,  
You whom my mother dared to boast her sire,  
Who blush perhaps to see my wretched case,  
For the last time, O Sun, I see your face.

The propitiation, running from “founders” through “god of fire” and “you” to “O Sun,” emphasizes the mythic dimension even more than the original (see Racine 1936: 587-588, ll. 169-172).

In order to further stress the mood, Wilbur even invents a Racinian epithet “wretched case” in rendering the “dry” *trouble où tu me vois* (Racine 1936: 588, l. 172) as an ironic comment on what happens in the “pleasant Troezen” announced at the

outset (9) and as an anticipation of Oenone's description of her mistress's madness as a "morbid wish" (17) (from *cruelle envie* [Racine 1936: 588, l. 1734]). In addition, he breaks down the uncomfortably tight bond between epithet and noun by casting Phaedra's *funestes apprêts* (Racine 1936: 588, l. 175) as an open "pact with death" (17).

Most importantly, he forges a more concrete picture of a Phaedra so desperate that everything bothers her: the *importune main* of a maidservant doing her hair, hampered by the tight union between adjective and noun, becomes actively "meddling," and the act of "forming these tresses" (*formant tous ces nœuds*) becomes "twining" and "making an intricate braid" (Wilbur 1984: 16 from Racine 1936: 587, ll. 1459-60). With similar concreteness, his Phaedra wishes for a tangible Phoebus Apollo and for a sunlit age of gold, in lines recalling both Marlowe and Shakespeare: "When shall I witness, through a *golden wrack* / Of dust, a chariot flying down the track" (Wilbur 1984: 17). The expression is like Marlowe's picture of Hero, "Venus' nun," in "Hero and Leander," whose "treasure suffered *wrack*" (Potter 1928: 93), as well as of Elizabethan ladies in general (like "untuned *golden* strings all women are" [Potter 1928: 95]), and of a song from *The Winter's Tale* ("Fear No More the Heat o' the Sun"): "*Golden* lads and girls all must, / As chimney sweepers, come to dust" (Potter 1928: 194). Thus we have English tenderness interpreting Racine's *noble poussière* (1936: 588, l. 177).

Of course, given a language full of consonant clusters and obscured vowels, Wilbur was prevented from reproducing the full euphony of Phaedra's "bewilderment" (another meaning of *égarement*). Still, just as the Neoclassical eighteenth century of Pope preferred to end a heroic couplet on a long vowel or glide for greater eloquence (Tillotson 1968: 225), Phaedra's address to the sun ends with an [ay] ("fire / sire") and an [ey] ("case / face"). Likewise, her distraught state — "These veils, these baubles, how they burden *me*" (Wilbur 1984: 16 from *Que ces vains ornements, que ces voiles me pèsent!* [Racine 1936: 587, l. 158] — ends on an [iy] to rhyme with "misery," and the mention of the hairdo gives rise to another glide, [ey] in "made / braid." These lengthenings compensate for the short vowels carrying the English rendition of the peerlessly harmonious *tout m'afflige et me nuit, conspire à me nuire* (Racine 1936: 587, l. 161): "oppress me, vex me, do me ill" (Wilbur 1984: 16). In addition, the alliteration of "meddling / made" and "bauble / burden / brow / braid" ("What meddling hand has twined my hair, and made / Upon my brow so intricate a braid?"), none of which is in the phonic stock of the original French, creates a new, redistributed force which is consonantal and syntactically emphatic. In Dryden's words, it has "the bulk and body of a mastiff" rather than "the nimbleness of a greyhound" (1968: 271).

But such prosodic weight doesn't have to mean emotional and thematic forwardness. Robert Lowell (1966: 133, 134) paints the picture of a Phaedra devastated by desire, "sensual lightnings" (l. 115), and a body "plowed with [a] horny thrust" (l. 123). She shocks Hippolytus by comparing a weapon of war to a phallus: "I want your sword's spasmodic final inch" (l. 147).

Wilbur is much more restrained and text-bound: instead of the "sensual lightnings," he presents a series of verbs — "I pined, I withered, scorched by many a tear" (47) — in imitation of a reticent and Romantic Racine (1936: 608, l. 690): *J'ai languï, j'ai séché, dans les feux, dans les larmes.*

Lowell's rendition — it would be more accurate to speak of an "adaptation" — is nevertheless valuable for its expressiveness: free enjambment and compounding give movement to Phaedra's passion. But it is too holistically inaccurate and impressionistic to reproduce the drama. The vision of Theseus as "the lascivious eulogist of any belle" (l. 61) does make him more interesting than Wilbur's "fickle worshipper of a thousand maids" (45), but his rendering is more in the spirit of Wallace Stevens' "Connoisseur of Chaos" than of a French rake translated to Cambridge, Massachusetts or Glencoe, Illinois.

Wilbur understood that the art of such translation may often be secondary to the poet's creative drive, which is so imperious that "poets often want to take over something... and incorporate it into the body of their own work" (1976: 32). Lowell belonged to this tradition of "Poundian imperialism" in translation, according to which one could "incorporate" real Chinese characters to give the text a semblance of authenticity, without however producing a reliable "equivalent" (Wilbur 1976: 32-33). Lowell's "re-ordering" was far too "Dionysian" for the cool and "Apollonian" task of rendering Racine.

On the other hand, the "re-ordering" that Malone (1988: 15, 66-68) illustrates at length is a calculated "trajection" in which the modifiers of a verb are placed before the syntactic focus of the action. Alexandrines are frequently "reordered" in this manner, the inverse of normative French (Turnell 1972: 343). An example is the objective report of Hippolyte's death by Thérémène, whom Spitzer (1962: 104) calls a "humanistic historiographer" like Racine himself — the dramatist ended his life as "*Historiographe du Roi*" and his major drama also ends on a chronicle. In this spirit, Wilbur (1984: 100) humanizes the narration: "our blood" doesn't wait until the end of the line to "freeze" (*notre sang s'est glacé*, Racine 1936: 638, l. 1511); instead, "our hearts *congeal* and the blood *freezes* in our veins" — translating one verb with two, and never deforming normal order. What Wilbur does is allocate to the preliminary modification (*jusqu'au fond de nos cœurs*) a verb of its own, thereby reinforcing the verbal "pointe" of the line.

Likewise, he intensifies the shock of Hippolytus' steeds, whose "manes bristled" (*le crin s'est herissé*, Racine 1936: 638, l. 1512, a verb-centered echo of *s'est glacé* in the previous line) by rendering their pricked ears as participially "hearing," not merely adjectivally *attentifs*. Also, he adds a particle to the "bristling": the horses now "bristle up their manes." "*L'aspect vectoriel*" of English brought out by Vinay and Darbelnet makes the ocular witness more vivid and credible (1967: 82-83).

In English, all forms, even static adjectival ones, tend to approximate verbs: thus Wilbur (1984: 100) renders the mountain of water overcoming Hippolytus as a "seething crest" in response to the nominality of the original (*à gros bouillons*, Racine 1936: 638, l. 1514). This is why Vinay and Darbelnet (1967: 102-103) speak of "the predominance of the substantive in French" compared to a predominantly verb-focused English, and why Wilbur (1984: 100) renders Racine's sea monster — *sa croupe se recourbe en replis tortueux*, 1936: 639, l. 1520 — as the heavily verbal "His thrashing tail contorts in fold on fold." It is also why an analyst of French stylistics, in presenting a text by Roman Jakobson (Sumpf 1971: 116-117), prefers to replace the latter's original citation of Gerard Manley Hopkins, dynamo of English accentual rhythm, with the latent dynamism of a preponderantly static Racine.

In line with this verbal thrust is Vinay and Darbelnet's description of "dilution," a linguistic strategy that sounds like weakening but in fact means the diffusion of conceptual strength, either nominal or verbal, over several members (1967: 183). A verb — for example, *ruminer* ("to chew cud") — spreads its action onto an object. When this spreading spills out onto a juxtaposed line, the result is enjambment, rare in Racine except for direct dramatic address (Turnell 1972: 342) but common in Wilbur. Thus, when the monster emerges from the "waves," "the spray *unveils* / *A body* covered all with yellow scales" (1984: 100). The "unveiling" calls for "a body" and gets one in the next line. However, in the original, the frightening appearance is rigidly apportioned to one alexandrine — *Tout son corps est couvert d'écaillés jaunissantes* (Racine 1936: 638, l. 1518) — without any "spilling over" from the previous couplets adumbrating "unveil."

The result is a rapid flow of affectivity in the translation (1984: 101):  
 [Theramene] runs to [Hippolytus] in tears; his guards are *led*  
 By the bright trail of noble blood he shed;  
 The rocks are red with it; the briars *bear*  
 The red and dripping trophies of his hair.

The latter line and a half (...*les ronces dégouttantes* / *Portent de ses cheveux les dépouilles sanglantes*, Racine 1936: 640, ll. 1557-1558) may not deserve punishment by Neoclassical law, but it does show Racine's overmastering desire to span subject and verb under the pressure of emotion.

Wilbur understood this pressure. The "tragic tradition" that he felt "called to recall" (1976: 156) was full of such syntactic overflow: the Prologue to *Henry VIII* alone has three cases of verb-object collocation with "see" (Shakespeare 1925: 1-2) in a stream of syllabically metered iambic pentameter much like Wilbur's own renditions of Molière and Racine. Moreover, this play represents the styles of dramatists like Fletcher and Massinger (Shakespeare 1925: 156-157), so that Wilbur's style encompasses Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Neoclassical tradition in English as well as having a background in modern American poetry, especially Robert Frost.

He interpreted the latter's "the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" in a manner descriptive of the morale of translation: "the words [should be] lovingly adequate to the plain truth" (Wilbur 1976: 104). In a discussion of the art of translating poetry led by Alan Tate in 1970, not long before which Wilbur was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Yehuda Amichai elevated this craft to the status of a restorer of the "original metaphoric value" (1972: 24), an Apollonian inspiration that bestowed the precision of fact along with the vista of dream. Wilbur's service to French performs this inspiration.

## NOTES

1. Available on cassette. The original had a book by Lillian Hellman, lyrics by Richard Wilbur, music by Leonard Bernstein, and direction by Tyrone Guthrie, and was first performed on December 1, 1956.
2. Computer-generated information plus "Chronology" in Butts (1990).
3. Caedman CDL 533: taped performance of the Stratford National Theatre of Canada, 1973, starring William Hutt and Douglas Rain, and directed by Jean Gascon.



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