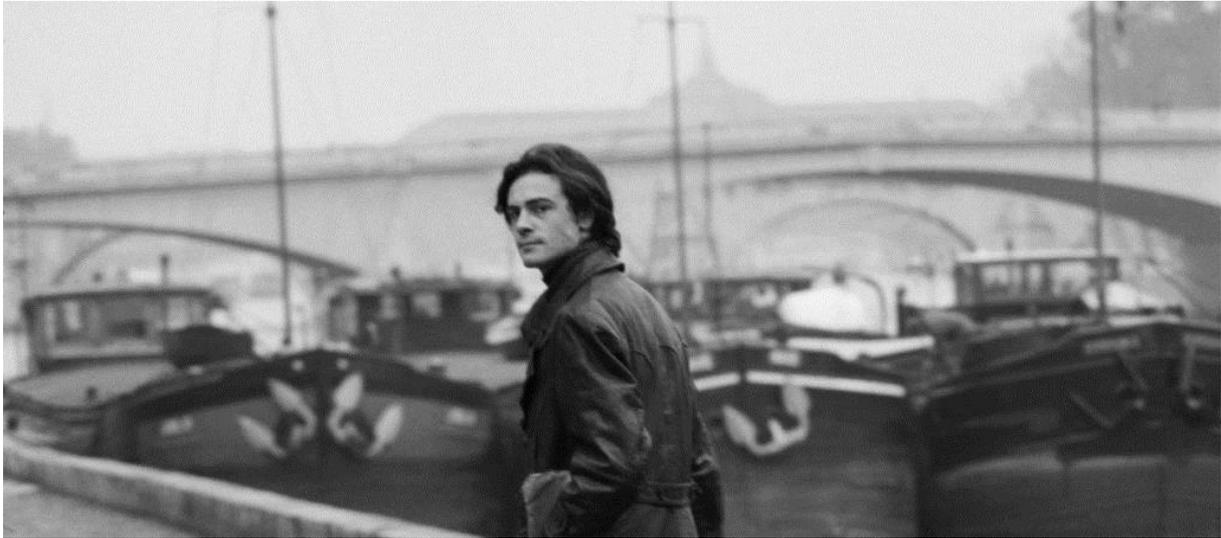


Simply Impossible By Mark Polizzotti , October 22, 2018

ARTS & CULTURE

[HTTPS://WWW.THEPARISREVIEW.ORG/BLOG/2018/10/22/SIMPLY-IMPOSSIBLE/](https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/22/simply-impossible/)



PATRICK MODIANO

Translation lore is rife with tales of linguistic derring-do in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Gilbert Adair’s e-less Englishing (or Nglishing) of Georges Perec’s *La Disparition* is one. So are James Joyce and co.’s Italian and French permutations on *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, and Henri Parisot’s (and Antonin Artaud’s) gallicizations of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky.” Less spectacular, but far more common, is a hurdle faced by nearly every practicing translator, across contexts and genres. It’s the challenge of the seemingly unadorned sentence or expression that passes so naturally it seems to “write itself.” While the translation of these sentences can sometimes occur just as naturally, more often than not it requires vast amounts of hairpulling. Few things are as difficult as ease.

As a translator, I’ve been grappling (so to speak) with the apparently straightforward prose of Patrick Modiano for the better part of a decade. Having now worked on nine of his books—his newest, *Sleep of Memory*, was published by Yale University Press this month—I’ve come to appreciate both the economy of his French and the complexities of ushering that economy into English. The familiar rule of thumb, that English is more concise than French by about 15 percent, doesn’t apply here: in my experience, Modiano is one of the rare French writers who can actually come out longer in English translation.

Appropriately, the challenges begin at the beginning. Modiano's titles often have the peculiar quality of not seeming to strive for effect while still achieving it. The title of his novella *Remise de peine*, for instance, carries the dual connotation of punishment commuted and sorrow deferred. Achieving this pairing in a single, familiar-sounding English phrase was not self-evident. But because the story also evokes the writer that the young narrator (a stand-in, as nearly always, for Modiano himself) would eventually become, I was able to shift the emphasis slightly and still produce the desired effect: the English title, *Suspended Sentences*, conveys the sense of waiting and reprieve while playing off the double meaning of *sentence* as both utterance and sanction. The title of another piece in the same volume, *Chien de printemps*, offers the literal but obscure image of a "dog in springtime" (such a canine does in fact make an appearance), as well as the phrase's more colloquial meaning, something like "goddamn spring." Since neither of these flew very high as an English title, or even made much sense, I instead looked toward the intertwined strands of photography and recollection that run throughout the novella and called it *Afterimage*.

In the case of the new novel, whose French title is *Souvenirs dormants*, I wanted to retain both the lilting quality of the original's five-syllable rhythm and its sense of latency, of something from out of the past that can still cause harm. "Dormant Memories" sounded too technical, and the word *dormant* is stranger to anglophone ears than its cognate is to French. "Sleeping Memories" seemed like something you should just let lie—another dog. *Sleep of Memory* offers the sense of past events about to reemerge, and the use of *memory* in the singular makes the phenomenon more generalized, a faculty rather than simple instances. The title acts as prelude to a novel that skips among the narrator's recollections of transformative relationships with different women, and the words capture the fleeting, unstable process through which these fragments resurface, as if from a long slumber, before sinking again into oblivion.

Delving deeper, the text itself harbored a number of other subtle traps, and one in particular can serve as a road map to the pitfalls of the whole. Again, it's from the beginning—first page, first paragraph, third sentence: "À cette époque, j'avais souvent peur du vide." Not an especially difficult sentence to understand, or even to translate, and yet ... It could be rendered literally, as "At the time, I was often afraid of the void." But immediately the problems come forward. The word *vide* in French can mean "void" or "emptiness," but the phrase *peur du vide* is also "fear of heights," and the next sentence picks up on the image: "Je n'éprouvais pas ce vertige quand j'étais seul ..." ("I never felt that vertigo when I was alone"). The English *void* does give the sense of standing above a great drop, but the word itself seems overdetermined, too literal: the narrator's fear is not of actual heights but of the dizziness provoked by being in the

company of others, “certain individuals whom I had in fact just encountered.” To preserve that sense of existential nausea, I called upon another Sartrean trope, “nothingness.”

The sentence posed further challenges as well: its structure, with the introductory phrase (“At the time”), repeated the rhythm of the two preceding sentences in a way that, in English, began to feel needlessly repetitive, which I addressed by transposing the phrase. For *souvent*, rather than the more common translation, “often,” I chose the word “prone,” which stresses the narrator’s sense of isolation and vulnerability by underscoring that his vertigo happens not only frequently, but frequently *to him*. In addition, the slightly abstract quality of *peur du vide*, while beautiful in French, seemed slightly jarring in English, a language that tends toward more concrete imagery. To soften this, I moved the mention of “vertigo” up from the following sentence, in a position of reinforcement. The final version reads: “I was prone back then to a fear of nothingness, like a kind of vertigo.”

Such adaptations might strike readers as unpardonable liberties, and perhaps they are. But maintaining the simplicity, the ease, the flow of Modiano’s sentences, in a way that wouldn’t catch on the American reader’s ear (just as the original doesn’t catch on French ears), called for some discreet rearrangements, and some not-so-discreet reworking.

That’s a claim that begs to be put to the test, so here’s the first paragraph of the French original:

Un jour, sur les quais, le titre d’un livre a retenu mon attention, Le Temps des rencontres. Pour moi aussi, il y a eu un temps des rencontres, dans un passé lointain. À cette époque, j’avais souvent peur du vide. Je n’éprouvais pas ce vertige quand j’étais seul, mais avec certaines personnes dont justement je venais de faire la rencontre. Je me disais pour me rassurer: il se présentera bien une occasion de leur fausser compagnie. Quelques-unes de ces personnes, vous ne saviez pas jusqu’où elles risquaient de vous entraîner. La pente était glissante.

This was an early draft:

Once, on the quays, the title of a book caught my eye: *The Time of Encounters*. For me, too, there had been a time of encounters, in a long-distant past. Back then, I was often afraid of the void. I never experienced that vertigo when I was alone, only with certain individuals whom I’d in fact just encountered. I’d reassure myself that, sooner or later, I could slip away unnoticed. With some of these individuals, you never knew where they might lead you. It was a slippery slope.

And this is the paragraph as it appears in the finished translation:

Once, on the quays, the title of a book caught my eye: *The Time of Encounters*. For me, too, there had been a time of encounters, in a long-distant past. I was prone back then to a fear of nothingness, like a kind of vertigo. I never felt it when alone, only with certain individuals whom I had in fact just encountered. I'd reassure myself that, when the time was right, I could steal away unnoticed. You never knew where some of those people might lead you. It was a slippery slope.

In offering these two versions, I realize that some might find my first draft more accurate, more faithful to the French, and strictly in terms of word choice and sentence construction, they would be right. But fidelity in translation is a rather equivocal concept. Despite an increasingly sophisticated discourse around the art, many people still feel that the most "faithful" renderings are direct transpositions, as if every word had its exact equivalent in other languages and that this equivalent would be the only appropriate option. In reality, the most successful translations—successful as literature in their own right, I mean—are to a large extent adaptations. They are convincing and representative by virtue of their understanding of how the original works. They have the ability to get under its skin and then to transmit that understanding via another grammar and syntax. As attentive as I was to sentence structure and vocabulary, I was equally concerned with preserving an economical directness that works slightly differently in English than in French. Real fidelity takes liberties. The translator's task, as I see it, consists not of crashing two linguistic systems together but of negotiating them as one would an *entente cordiale*, so that the target text might dance with the target reader just as the source text does with the source reader.

Is there such a thing a text that is impossible to translate? I have my doubts. There are degrees of difficulty, of course, but I persist in believing that someone with the stubbornness, the wherewithal, and probably the lunacy to keep at it will eventually solve any linguistic quandary source authors can devise. What often makes translation seem impossible is the expectation that it must, or could, or should capture every nuance, every rhythm, every sound and cultural resonance embedded in the original. The idea that there is only one "correct" translation of a given text and, as a corollary, that a good translator will avoid the imprint of personal choice.

In fact, translation is nothing but personal choices. It's rarely about finding the "right answer," in the categorical, autocratic sense, because such answers in translation scarcely exist. My choices, in the passage quoted above, are tendered not as definitive solutions, but as the

solutions that seemed right to me. There are always other choices that can be made. Possibility is plurality.

This is true of the verbal pyrotechnics of avant-garde writing, but just as true—perhaps even truer—of humble, everyday, seemingly straightforward prose. The force and drama of Modiano’s writing is conveyed with a simplicity that cuts straight to the hearts of readers of disparate backgrounds, age groups, and cultures. At the same time, that simplicity is itself an artifice, produced with a command of linguistic resources as complex and masterful as anything written by such paragons of ornateness as Marcel Proust, Henry James, or David Foster Wallace. And the translation of that simplicity requires as much thought, invention, and revision as the author put into the original.

*Mark Polizzotti is the translator of more than fifty books from the French and the author, most recently, of *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto* (MIT Press).*