1984. Translating terror

By *Josée Kamoun*

Translated from the French by *Steven Corcoran*

The following considerations are reflections on an experience, which I do not propose to present smoothly, devoid of its details, through a retrospective approach that would make it seem planned from the start. On the contrary, I aim to restore its unforeseen twists, its developments, its stutters and readjustments.

1984, which, written in 1948, Orwell had planned to call 1948, has long been a classic; it is a cult novel, has been used for several films, is part of school and university syllabuses, and the subject of numerous theses; there are literature and philosophy professors who have become Orwell specialists. Since then, several of the first translation's choices—which seem to have barely aroused any comments at the time—have become part of the French language. Two of them have in any case, namely *novlangue* [newspeak] and *police de la pensée* [thought police], and to such an extent that some readers end up unconsciously confusing this first translation with an original, thus conferring on the former a legitimacy independent of its merits and/or demerits, which there can be no question of discussing here.

Here's the background: one day, a publisher for whom you are working asks you to read an existing translation and consider how appropriate it would be to propose another one. This is what Gallimard had me do in the case of *1984*, aware that the novel would be in the public domain two years later and that the translation on sale was already 70 years old. You remember the novel, which you read as a young adult in the English original; you have no trouble recapturing the impression of terror, the crushingness and the feeling, upon closing the book, that you would never get back on your feet again. You remember that this is political fiction rather than science fiction; the novel is often compared to Huxley's *Brave New World*. Dystopias, nightmarish futures that 'warn' us of what the future could be like 'if we are not careful,' according to an expression that recurs often, at least in the media. Accordingly, it has been said, especially after the election of Donald Trump, that we have entered an Orwellian world, which means a society of surveillance and information manipulation.

1. Points of Orientation: The Devices of Terror

This time, you reread the text... immersed in it, several aspects strike you. There is the impression of terror, which a rereading of the work has not dulled, on the contrary; there is the paradox of suspense despite knowing that Winston will end up being tortured in Minilov's underground chambers (the famous gun of Act 1 in Chekov); but there is also the complexity of a literary composition that is not limited to a two-dimensional picture. For if one considers *1984* a novel of political fiction, one quickly suspects that there will be 'more', some 'remainder' – something 'other'. And how so!

How does Orwell build the terror, and what are its devices? What possible consequences are there for translation?

1984 is presented as a ‘classic’ story, which is to say, it opens with some expository pages; the information works to establish the Big Brother regime, in this case through a scene from everyday life: Winston, the protagonist, goes home for lunch, drinks a glass of gin and opens a newspaper, all activities that are more or less harmless, at least in the society in which the reader lives. But the threat is everywhere and it’s not just an image. It is outside with the ‘Big Brother is Watching You’ posters and all the ambiguity of ‘watch’ (watch over or spy on); it lurks in the helicopters that hover in front of the windows and that are nevertheless nothing to worry about compared with the thought police – a shocking collocation.

The threat also comes with the four ministries, whose disproportionate size, whose gigantic pyramidal structures, literally crushes the view of London, and vaguely evoke the Aztec temples where human sacrifices were carried out – again, the impact on the reader-viewer is intensely visual. This becomes clearer in the description of the surroundings of the Ministry of Love: ‘gorilla-faced guards in black uniforms, armed with jointed truncheons’. The idea of these truncheons handled by brute beasts is terrifying. What is one afraid of? Answer: of being hurt. It couldn't be more concrete, even primary, instinctive, visceral. Of course, the fear will be amply developed in the third part. Of course, the threat is, again, inside as well as outside, thanks to the telescreen that monitors one’s every move 24 hours a day. At this stage of the orientation, the translator can say that the terror, as aroused by the staging and the images, will indeed translate itself by itself, but has a vague feeling that some difficulty lies in wait.

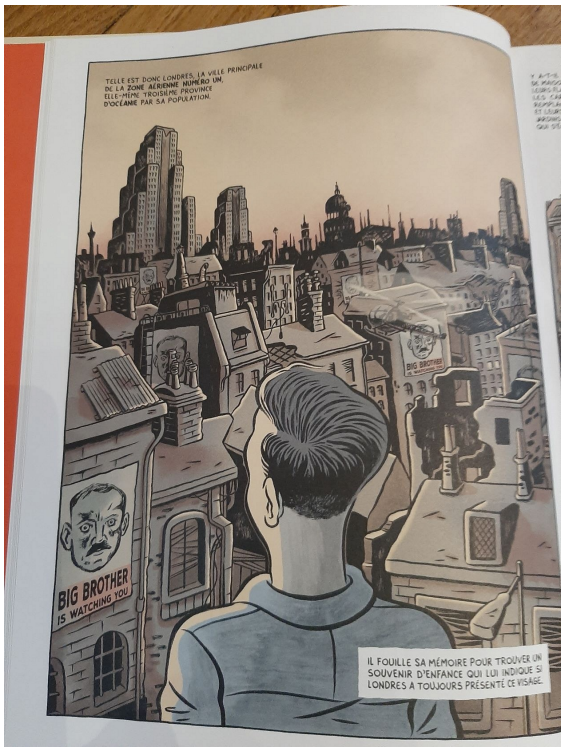
This terror also draws on the situation of enunciation. We are technically in a third-person narrative with an internal focalisation; the remaining question is whether any instance higher than Winston's consciousness will exceed this focalisation. Certainly, the author has to present Winston and his surroundings to us in these opening pages. So, strictly speaking, W is not the one who is viewing himself as a puny and blotchy nearly forty-year-old; he is not the one who describes the London where he lives as if he needs to remind himself about it. However, neither in these pages, nor in the rest of the novel, will the reader find the least information that W does not possess, the least comment that he cannot make himself; the reader is thus imprisoned within the character’s consciousness, placed in a sort of mimetic situation. The reader is unable to take any distance. This situation of enunciation is not without a bearing on the choices that the translator has to make.

Third fundamental point concerns the naturalism of Orwell’s style – and by naturalism is classically meant a refusal to idealise the real or psychology, motives, etc.; the appearance of objects or of not very pleasant sensations, and – of course – bodily functions, manifestations. The novel opens with the smell of boiled cabbage and old doormats (this world is dysphoric right down to the details of everyday life); W is introduced through his physical ailments: a varicose ulcer and shortness of breath. When he is about to commit his initial and irreversible transgression, we read: ‘A tremor had gone through his bowels’. It might be argued that we are dealing with a physiological approach to terror here. Let us pause for a moment to consider the word ‘bowels’ as we will later find the word ‘belly’ and recall that at the time these words were considered very crude in an era when no mention was made of any organ between the knee and the solar plexus; to defecate is rendered as ‘to move one's bowels’. There are several mentions of the diarrhea that fear causes; when Winston runs into Julia, whom he takes for a spy, his ‘bowels turn to water’. When the unfortunate Parsons is incarcerated in the Ministry of Love, in the white cell with the

toilet, he ‘relieves himself’, publicly of course, this violation of privacy being part of the process of crushing all resistance.

If looking into the strategies that Orwell uses to build terror we come upon a prevalence of the body, the body does not only experience terror, but also disgust, lack of appetite, desire, excitement, ecstasy. In other words, the orientation undertaken at the start ‘with the intention of translating’ suggests that the political demonstration takes into account the emotional and physical fallout of totalitarianism.

This ‘naturalistic’ treatment does not sit well with the anodyne, or even refined, French that was nonetheless perhaps the only acceptable idiom when the first translation was undertaken, or at least the only one acceptable *in* translation precisely. In 2021, this is no longer necessarily true.



George Orwell, Fido Nesti, Josée Kamoun: *1984*. Grasset, 2020.

2. The work

The *passé simple*. What about *You*? Levels of language, vocabulary.

Once you have completed, or provisionally completed, the initial orientation, you begin, unsuspectingly, to use the *passé simple* and it misses the mark; you do not feel the terror you felt in the original. After three weeks, with 30-40 pages translated, you are suddenly inspired to use the present tense, and absolute terror seizes you. But, says the scrupulous traitor, is this license ‘licit’?

After having yielded to this ‘intuition’, the English preterite is worth contrasting with the French *passé simple* in terms of usage and language level. Whatever its linguistic relevance, its aorist value, its semantic proximity to the preterite, features that make it seem a tempting equivalent, the French *passé simple* is not part of everyday language,

whether spoken or written, except in literary contexts. A personal or administrative letter, a report, not to mention a newspaper article – all get written in the present or the perfect tense. The *passé simple*, which could therefore be said to be affected by an index of fictionality, has two disadvantages: it acts as a filter, distancing literary language from everyday language in a way that does not occur in English, and thereby reducing the impact of the original text; and moreover, adopting it necessarily leads to a stream of past perfects and imperfect subjunctives, the latter of which are increasingly unfamiliar to the twenty-first century reader. Finally, the simple preterit of the narrative is matched with the use of simple preterite for the description, which, as it is rendered by a French imperfect tense, does not help matters as we shall see:

He took down from the shelf a bottle of colourless liquid with a plain white label marked Victory Gin. It gave off a sickly oily smell as of Chinese rice-spirit. Winston poured nearly a teacupful, nerved himself against the shock and gulped it down like a dose of medicine. Instantly his face turned scarlet and the water ran out of his eyes. The stuff was like nitric acid, and moreover, in swallowing it one had the sensation of being hit on the back of the head with a rubber club.

> *Il prit sur l'étagère une bouteille d'un liquide incolore qui portait une étiquette blanche ou s'inscrivaient clairement les mots gin de la victoire. Le liquide répandait une odeur huileuse, écœurante comme celle de l'eau de vie des Chinois. Winston en versa presque une pleine tasse, s'arma de courage pour supporter le choc et avala le gin comme une médecine Instantanément son visage devint écarlate et des larmes lui sortirent des yeux. Le breuvage était comme de l'acide nitrique et on avait l'impression d'être frappé à la nuque par une trique en caoutchouc.*

> *Il prend sur l'étagère une bouteille de liquide incolore dont l'étiquette blanche indique simplement Gin de la Victoire et qui exhale une odeur malsaine et grasse, comme celle d'un alcool de riz chinois. Il s'en verse une pleine tasse ou presque, se blinde au choc et la descend cul sec, comme on avalerait une purge.*
> *Aussitôt son visage s'empourpre et ses yeux larmoient. De la nitroglycérine, cette gnôle, un coup de trique sur la nuque.*

The brutality of the original can thus either be underscored or it can be attenuated, and this alternative also arises in the choice between *vous* or *tu*, which clearly does not arise in the original. 'What about you'? one might say – 'you' being equivalent without being so to the French impersonal *on* – nevertheless cognizant that the English 'one' is even more impersonal and can represent the speaker/writer himself. The 'impersonal' value of this 'you' is therefore to be pondered. Of course, this 'you' is collective, since one is referring to conditions of life, to a political regime. This argues for the French *vous*. But if the plural-singular difference does not exist in English, the you is also one to whom Winston addresses himself, so the possibility is twofold. Hence the translation of some 'you's by *tu*, whereby the effect of stalking is far superior because the threat is, so to speak, more internal. And if the *tu* brings the terror closer, it also expresses more forcefully the frustration and revolt that characterise the character.

He took a twenty-five piece out of his pocket. There too, in tiny clear

lettering, the same slogans were inscribed, and on the other face of the coin, the head of Big Brother. Even from the coin, his eyes pursued you. On coins, on stamps, on the cover of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrappings of a cigarette packet. Everywhere. Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in bath or in bed – no escape. Nothing was your own, except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull.

> *Il prit dans sa poche une pièce de 25 cents. Là aussi, en lettres minuscules et distinctes, les mêmes slogans étaient gravés. Big Brother dont les yeux, même là, vous poursuivaient. Sur les pièces de monnaie, sur les timbres, sur les livres, sur les bannières, sur les affiches, sur les paquets de cigarette, partout . Toujours ces yeux qui vous observaient, cette voix qui vous enveloppait. Dans le sommeil ou dans la veille, au travail ou à table, au dedans ou au dehors, au bain ou au lit, pas d'évasion. Vous ne possédiez rien, en dehors des quelques centimètres cubes de votre cerveau.*

> *Il sort de sa poche une pièce de 25 cents. Les slogans s'y inscrivent aussi, en minuscules bien nettes, tandis que le côté face est frappé à l'effigie de Big Brother. Et même sur la pièce, il te suit des yeux. Sur les pièces, les timbres, la jaquette des livres, sur les banderoles, les affiches, les paquets de cigarettes – partout. Partout ses yeux te suivent, partout sa voix t'enveloppe. Dans la veille comme dans le sommeil, au travail comme à table, dedans comme dehors, au bain comme au lit – tu ne lui échapperas pas. Tu n'as rien à toi sinon quelques centimètres cubes au fond du crâne.*

The present has a carceral vocation, which the *tutoiement* intensifies.

Orwell had a fine ear. He did not make all his characters speak in the same way. The proletarians are heard with the idiosyncrasies (including phonetic) of their speech. In the first translation, the comrades are addressed as *vous*, which is not their custom anywhere, and Orwell himself (a French speaker through his mother, remember) noted the change from the *tutoiement de rigueur* in the armies of Catalonia to the *vous,* or equivalent, in a significant return to a certain form of order and hierarchy. The husband and wife, Winston and his wife, similarly address each other using *vous* in the first translation, even though they are 'comrades', at least statutorily, and there is nothing, on the other hand, to justify this usage between them. From beginning to end, the dialogue between Winston and O'Brien follows the same usage. However, the stifling nature of their deeply unequal relationship—unequal both because of W's admiration-fascination for OB and because of OB's power over him intellectually, politically and physically—this stifling relationship, which translates into a 'pedagogical' display that goes so far as torture, with all its perverse irony and its mask of egalitarianism, does not get conveyed as well by the *vous* as by the *tu*.

If we consider the first translation, if we render consistent the use of the *passé simple* (and the imperfect subjunctive), the *voussoiement,* and the idealisation of the vocabulary, or the permanent attenuation of its naturalism (*éructer* for 'belch', *entrailles* for 'bowels'), and the watering down of proletarian language, the sense is that a distance from the text is created, that it gets placed on a pedestal of academicism, or that it gets 'hidden' in art (in a beautiful work of art, one 'speaks well'.

Apart from the aims it pursues, it is a tribute to ‘beautiful language’).

Interval

The aim here is clearly not to draw up a catalogue of the contrasting bits of praise and anathema that this new translation has elicited. However, it is interesting to sketch a typology of them. Some critics have praised the ‘dusting off’, the restoring of a nervy writing style, the discovery of a ‘real novel’, or even a ‘love story’; others have been approving of the shift to the present tense, convinced that students are no longer able to read in the *passé simple* – this supposed trick puts the text within their reach. These reactions characterise a sort of camp of those who are ‘modern’, while others present themselves as clearly ‘conservative’, and go so far as to accuse the translator of amateurism (!), laxity and demagoguery, with some columnists even claiming that the translator has simplified and shortened the novel’s sentences.

Equally surprising but far more stimulating is the critique of lexical choices. Whether or not one sees them as satisfactory translations at the outset, no one would dispute that the word *novlangue* and the expression *police de la pensée* have become part of everyday language. But this is the precise reason for proposing something different. But let’s not be too hasty. Unlike the treatment reserved for Goldstein’s banned ‘book’, ‘one’ methodically states the Newspeak principles in the appendix, and not in the body of the story (why?); one also states their ultimate goal, which is to prevent not only all heterodox – i.e. heretical – thought but *all* thought as such. Newspeak (Orwell did not choose newlang) is, to associate it with a current image, a virus that introduces itself into the software of language and destroys it.

You might be justified in wondering whether this is not a difference of nature rather than of degree, and whether we are not arriving at a paradoxically surreal effect through the effect of reality (Orwell’s concern for linguistic coherence translates into a methodical invention). You might also dwell on the verbal form of the neo-terms to doublethink and to newspeak: infinitives, always, a mode outside of time, impersonal, outside of the ‘subject’ as it were, which admirably serve the project of eradicating memory, and ultimately of eradicating the consciousness of the subject as such. *Police de la pensée* (thought police), which we have contested in the name of a compactness deemed essential, has ended up becoming more or less synonymous with political correctness by a fringe of opinion that wishes to express itself ‘without complexes’ and does not intend to be censored by any notion of ‘right thinking’. The threat of this thought police, which we discover on the opening page, is all the more terrifying because, as we see later, to escape it, it is prudent to hide *from oneself* any vague desire for heterodoxy. In other words, it is prudent to become the cop of one’s own thinking. By opting to translate it as *mentopolice*, we opt for compactness but also retain something of the ‘mentalists’ who place themselves in the shoes, i.e. the mind, of the criminal. The ultimate threat is that which inserts itself in your thinking, and not only that which monitors thought’s manifestations (oral and written statements, but also gestures and facial expressions) from the outside.

3. When the question of genre returns

Milan Kundera, as is well known, did not like *1984*, finding that the novelistic genre did not add anything to the political subject matter and even made it considerably more insipid.

Has Orwell wrapped his demonstration up in the charm of fiction as in the saccharine excipient of an overly bitter medicine?

Let's go back to the 'supplement' mentioned at the beginning of the journey. The importance vested in the body develops and stages this Orwellian idea that the body is somehow unsurpassable, that man is corporeal, that his body belies and betrays the romanticism of his feelings, his heroism. The author, being post-Victorian, hates the Puritanism of his time and denounces the lie of this pseudo-idealism as just more propaganda. His approach to the relationship between Winston and Julia has something of D. H. Lawrence’s naturalism: lovers, friends, comrades in the true sense, in tune with nature, in the candour of their nakedness.

The supplement is also an explicit and implicit discourse on seduction and control between men, within an ideological system; while Julia discloses sex, O’Brien is Winston’s object of desire (and this man is curiously evoked two or three times through the contrast between his boxer physique and his refined intellect), a desire on the nature of which we might well speculate.

The supplement is again the novel’s offer to leaf through the theme of memory. Of course, the theme of the confiscation of collective memory in a totalitarian regime has been commented on at length and quite legitimately. But the fact is that Winston’s memory comes back to him, at least in part. And his melancholic, lacunar memories are imbued with a diffuse and growing sense of guilt; indeed, he blames himself for having 'killed', metaphorically speaking at least, his mother and his little sister (as a perpetually hungry growing boy, he hogged what little food was available). Even if the cruelty of this situation comes down to a political problem of organising scarcity, even if the theme of memory is thus articulated on that of the body, its treatment leaves us with a difficulty. Memory essentially returns through dreams, which is also a significant choice of the author.

The supplement is finally this door, which we will just open and leave ajar, namely the nature of the determinism at work in the story. Because, driven into a corner, you reread the text and discover in a completely methodical and unexpected way, *including for yourself*, its flagrant affinities with the genre of fantasy.

*****

1984 leads the reader through a palimpsest-city that has become indecipherable to its own inhabitants, right down to the working-class suburbs where a curious second-hand shop – a witness to other times and customs – is hidden, a shop adorned with a strange nostalgic charm (poetry is another of the book’s ‘supplements’). As the plot progresses, the suspicion arises that its motive forces and peripetia go beyond a strictly rational framework. But the subject matter of the book is so strong, the suspense so unbearable, that its ‘strange part’ is forgotten, or put down to the sense of temporal disorientation. The fact remains that the diurnal narrative is coupled with a nocturnal counterpoint that is characterised by the frequent evocation of dreams, some of them premonitory, by troubling chains of circumstances, and by ambiguous expressions that resonate from page to page and are never given any rational elucidation – all features that pertain to the novelistic strategies often present in the so-called fantasy genre and that work to transform chance into fate.

What do the strange and the magical bring to the novel’s masterly political

demonstration? Do they distract, or, on the contrary, do they have a potentiating effect, like a sort psychotropic drug taken with alcohol? Another question linked to the first one: does the dystopia, here a form of tragic satire, simply magnify a characteristic of historical reality, and thus entail a difference of degree with this reality? Or, does it present us, in the final analysis, with a difference of nature? Is the manifest political purpose perhaps coupled with another, latent one, whereby the subject's backdrop in a totalitarian regime is one of the guilt that precedes all, whereby this would be what leads Winston to acquiesce to an indecipherable and implacable Law of which the Party is the emanation? Ought we thus not seek some affinities with Kafka's *The Trial* or *Before the Law* or *In the Penal Colony*.

A diurnal terror, which is all too rational in a totalitarian regime in the full sense of the term; and a nocturnal terror, with more chthonian springs – such is the twofold writing of George Orwell...



© Ilyès

Josée Kamoun, born in 1951 is a French translator, a graduate in English and a Doctor of Letters. She has translated more than fifty books, including many novels by John Irving, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Virginia Woolf and Jack Kerouac. She taught English literature in literary preparatory classes from 1988 to 2003 and was Inspector General of the French National Education System from 2003 to 2012. Since 2012, she has devoted herself exclusively to translation. Her new translation of George Orwell's *1984* was published in 2018.

Dies ist ein automatisch generiertes PDF der Webseite www.toledo-programm.de. TOLEDO ist ein Programm des Deutschen Übersetzerfonds.
https://www.toledo-programm.de/talks/3788/1984-translating-terror
Veröffentlichungsdatum: 20.01.2022
Stand: 29.03.2024
Alle Rechte vorbehalten.