Alfred North Whitehead, *Procès et réalité. Essai de cosmologie*. Traduit de l'anglais par Daniel Charles, Maurice Elie, Michel Fuchs, Jean-Luc Gautero, Dominique Janicaud, Robert Sasso et Arnaud Villani. Paris: NRF Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de philosophie, 1995. 579 pp.

The judging of a translation, however tricky, can follow a very basic rule : when a work is successful this fact remains concealed behind the stream of thought of the author ; the suppleness and fluidity of the book still undulates in unison with the founding intuition. We can then re-encounter the balanced sway of the original and, through it, rediscover the author's strokes of insight. On the other hand, it fails completely when it becomes a screen between the reader and the writer's intuition.

Now, in the case of the translation of a philosophical text, there is an additional constraint : since the ability to comprehend the intentions of the original author is not always simple, it is doubly difficult to convey these in another language. Hence, being able to refer to the original easily is essential, and the translator has to facilitate this in every way. More precisely, although some liberty can be taken with the contingent features of the text (like the unavoidable divergences of the idioms), the translation of the technicalities has to be treated with particular care — and this all the more so since PR is defined by Whitehead himself as an endeavor of categorisation. The philosopher, indeed, usually builds on the polysemiality of the language : one single key-concept carries a semantic nebulae whose coherence generates its specific meaning. (A fact which is furthermore beyond the traditional partition of equivocy, univocacy and analogy.) To say it simply : if the translator keeps changing the wording, how can the reader possibly recognise the categories involved, and organise them in the way the author intended? With this question, we reach the main paradox of the translation procedure : ideally free from all interpretation (in order not to lead the reader in a particular path), it requires a preliminary global comprehension — i.e., an interpretation — in order that we do not face the innumerable puzzles a translation generates in an undisciplined way.

Before analysing the translation itself (hereafter cited as "PRf"), let us say a word about the three main practical premises involved. All are very promising in the tangential way they approach the hermeneutical circle.

No less than seven scholars have been involved in the project. D. W. Sherburne, who was asked to give a short seminar in the Université de Nice to polish the team's understanding of Whitehead's intuitions, stated in a private correspondence that he has been truly impressed by the quality and diversity of the French scholars.

The book begins with Sasso's short presentation on the original text, in which we learn that a scan of PR (i.e., a computerised version) has been produced to support the reflections of the team. No doubt it should allow a perfect correlation of all the occurrences of (at least) the main concepts involved. PRf also opportunely mentions the pagination of the *Corrected edition*.

Janicaud wrote the introduction to the translation (a previous version of which has been published in *L'Effet Whitehead* — see its review in PS 23/4). The program he defines shows a genuine penetration of the nature of the philosophical investigation. It enables him to identify clearly the main problems with which the team will be confronted. As he claims, one has to start off again from the principles of Whitehead's metaphysics, to detect the inflexions of his mind. Their general policy will be to favor intelligibility and fluidity. Janicaud also justifies some translation decisions : first, since English and French share the same etymological roots for "prehension", "concrescence", "ingression" and "nexus", a bare transposition of these terms is possible ; second, "actual entity" and "eternal object" are respectively translated by "entité actuelle" and "objet éternel" ; third, the team found it beneficial to translate "actuality" by "actualisation" (and "actualization" by "procès d'actualisation") in order to avoid any substantialist tone ; finally, the written form "superject" is kept.

It is well known that the hurried reader (or the average Whiteheadian) is satisfied to read only the first and last parts of PR. If one browses PRf from this perspective, one discovers an excellent translation, as smooth as possible in the case of such a heterogeneous work. Similarly, another main phalanx of Whiteheadians — the ones only interested in his logico-geometrical inquiries — will be satisfied with the fourth part, whose technical linearity undoubtedly facilitates the translation work. To read Whitehead in one's own language is then simply to rediscover him.

Now, the quest for the arcanum of PR — especially as manifested in Parts II and III — casts decisive light on the way the whole translation works and destroys the first positive impression. Of course, any translation involves imperfections, some are tolerable, others not. For example, there are a few grammatical difficulties but these are passable. Some unfortunate modifications (intentional or not) of the punctuation, however, are to be deplored. The spelling and typographical mistakes are rare : of those that do occur, the more embarrassing are the disappearance, without explanation, of two sentences (PRf156 and PRf218).

Let us now echo some of the recurrent gross difficulties with significant consequences for our understanding of Whitehead's vision. Our selection is ordered in a two-folded way : on the one hand, there are doubtful translations systematized by the index ; on the other hand, discrepancies exist between the fair translation of the index and the actual translation in the body of work. (The translation as recorded in the index is identified by "i".)

The translation of "consistency" by "cohérence" (i) completely blurs the power of PR3-4's definition of speculative philosophy ; in other contexts, it very rarely makes sense. "Consistance logique" is more appropriate. "Doctrine" is rendered by "théorie" (i) — which encroaches upon Whitehead's "theory" —, or "thèse". The French "doctrine" has the same kind of semantic field, so why not use it? "Important" becomes "décisif" (i), "valeur", "prégnant", "portée", or "significatif". "Relevant" becomes "adéquat" (i),

“convenance”, or “congruence”. It is properly translated by “pertinence” only twice. “Seat” is translated by “site” (i) instead of “siège” (perhaps because they share the same pronunciation).

“Contrast”, opportunely translated by “contraste” (i), becomes also “opposition”. “Definiteness” is translated by “définité” (i), but also “détermination”, “caractère défini”, “façon de se délimiter”, “nature déterminée”, “réalité définie”. “Endurance” is translated by “persistance” (i), “maintient”, and even “durée”! “Everlasting” is translated by “durant à jamais” (i), as well as “durée sans fin”, “éternel”, “immortel”, “éternité”, “pérenne”, etc. “Initial aim” is translated by “but initial” (i), “tendance initiale”, and “visée initiale”. “Perpetual perishing” is translated by “perpétuel dépérir” (i), and also “périr perpétuel”, “perpétuellement en train de périr”.

The critical apparatus consists of four main facets.

Sasso’s and Janicaud’s forewords, already evoked, factually replace Griffin's “Introduction”. The “Editor’s Notes” have not been translated or replaced.

The translator’s footnotes cover the following topics : one corrects the *Corrected edition* itself — PRf354’s note argues for the Latin “objective” instead of the French “objectivé” of PR219 — ; two justify the translation ; three clarify PR’s cultural context ; thirteen give the reference of the French translation used ; twenty-four specify the reference of some unexplicit quotes (of Shakespeare, Descartes, Spinoza, etc.) used by Whitehead.

The English-French and French-English lexicon crystallises the cumbersome conceptual difficulties we have sampled above. Whether the lexicon itself proposes a fair translation or not, it is not always respected in the body of work!

PR’s index has been split into a (marginally enriched) index of proper names and a dubious index of terms. The serious deficiencies in the univocity of the translation made it of course an impossible task. But things are even worse when we consider that it has been reworked : if some occurrences have been added, numerous concepts have vanished. Furthermore, nothing is said on the criterion (if any) that presided in the redefinition of this major tool (using, on the top of that, the pagination of PR).

The conclusion is too obvious : whatever the literary quality of the translation, from the perspective of scholarship, it is simply not reliable.

Although the premises were excellent, and despite its potentialities for helping the discovery of PR by open-minded lay persons or hurried readers, it fails in its translation of Whitehead’s technicalities as well as being fainthearted in the transposition of his neologisms. As a result, the index and the lexicon are almost useless, embodying the innumerable difficulties evoked (plus many others). The existence of the scan was an ideal opportunity to create a *definite* critical apparatus for PR. We are forced to conclude that that opportunity was not utilized. Eventually, it goes without saying that PRf’s unsystematic slide has been facilitated by the number of translators involved. Such an

unusual risk, instead of creating a fruitful synergy between the specialisations of the actors, has proved to be a strategic mistake.

Note

This review has benefited from a private correspondence with J.-L. Gautero, D. Janicaud and D. W. Sherburne.