

# The Making of “le faulkner”: A reflection on French translation of *As I Lay Dying*

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## **Abstract**

In a certain period of literary history, some works confirm its status and (re)gain its authority due to the translation. William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying* is an example. The novel was long time ignored by American critics and it was discovered and favoured in France, then later in others European countries. The French translator contributed a lot to the acquisition of reputation and to the literary influence of the novel.

By an examination of the French translation, this paper argues the accuracy and appropriateness of some techniques and the strategy employed by the translator, for example, few deforming approaches which some translation theories criticised can be easily identified in the translation. But no doubt, the translation won the praise for the novel, then enlarged the influence of Faulkner’s style on French literature.

The French translation of *As I Lay Dying* confirms the power of the translator in multiple roles: his translation with the heavy domestication finger print, his efforts of promotion, his involvement in the publishing network, etc. As the result, *As I Lay Dying* is conserved as one of the masterpieces of Faulkner and continues to impress readers and influence writing in both its host and original countries.

**Keywords:** Faulkner, French, Coindreau

George Steiner said, “Every language is a world. Without translation, we would inhabit parishes bordering on silence”. Translation maintains the place indispensable on communication and creation in the field of literature even today we have more and more chances to read the text in the original language. When we talk about the translation, the comparison of two texts impose to the practice: the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). The lost in translation is inevitable, “since it is impossible to preserve all the ST nuances of meaning and structure in the TL”.<sup>1</sup> It is true that the most of literary translation has much to lose than to gain. There exist however some exceptions, the translated work has been better received than the original one does, or the original work is (re)discovered due to the translation. The high appreciation of William Faulkner’s fictive works in France is in the second category.

According to an article of *The Guardian*, William Faulkner was “the second most-cited writer in a poll of French magazine”.<sup>2</sup> The reporter called the relationship between Faulkner with the French intellectuals (writers and thinkers) the “strange love affair”, because Faulkner listed by the French before many French writers like Flaubert, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Camus and Céline, but only after Proust. This popularity of Faulkner in France is not gone for last decade. In 2017, eight-six years after the first publication of Faulkner in France, the most reputed publishing house Gallimard achieved the last volume of the luxury collection of the complete works of Faulkner, Le Pléiade. There are only eleven American writes entered into this collection. In the collection, the publisher unites beside the works of Faulkner, the documents on Faulkner and his works. In one of them, we found a letter Jean-Paul Sartre wrote to Faulkner, in which Sartre admired Faulkner as “the God”: “Pour les jeunes en France, Faulkner est un Dieu”.<sup>3</sup> The American writer at that time was disregarded and misunderstood in his native country.

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<sup>1</sup> Munday, Jeremy, *Introducing Translation Studies*, Routledge, 2016, pp.92.

<sup>2</sup> Dugdale, John, “France’s stange love affair with William Faulkner”, *The Gardian*, March 19, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Cowley, Malcolm, *The Portable Faulkner*, Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 24.

Sartre did not read Faulkner in English, but in French of course. And Faulkner's continued appreciation by the French intellectuals is due to a man, a translator, Maurice-Edgar Coindreau. "The American literature, is the literature of Coindreau"<sup>4</sup>, to take again the words of Sartre. It is obvious that these words express on the one hand, that the French intellectuals like Sartre, Camus and Malraux read the American literature through the translation; On the other hand, Coindreau made a large contribution to bring the American literature into the French. Here come the questions, how an American writer's southern-gothic works could be warmly welcomed by the French intellectuals? What kind of role the translator Coindreau played in the making of "le faulkner"<sup>5</sup>? What practices of translation the translator employed to obtain the reputation of this unknown writer in his own country more than in France and what social and cultural impacts brought the translation? The French translation of *As I Lay Dying* will be an excellent example on this topic.

Maurice-Edgar Coindreau was one of three principal translators of Faulkner in France. Coindreau translated 6 novels totally, including *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. He worked also on the large selection of the young American writers who were still unknown to the French readers to American readers as well at that time. Coindreau was a professor of French literature at Princeton University in United States between 1922 and 1961. During the forty-years career of professor, Coindreau's typical trajectories of holiday were to visit the Gallimard with a new American publication. Coindreau proposed to Gallimard in 1931 the French translation of *As I Lay Dying* several weeks after the publication of *Sanctuary* in US. And this would be the first French translation of Faulkner and the beginning of the establishment of his reputation.

Unlike the other translators, Coindreau did not only the translation work, but also wrote articles on the authors and their works he translated. He was first person who introduced Faulkner to the French by publishing *William Faulkner*, an article in the magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in June 1st, 1931 to prepare

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Le Combat*, 1948.

<sup>5</sup> Words of François Pitavy, in the preface of the Collection *La Pléiade*, œuvre complete of William Faulkner, Gallimard, 2017

the French public for Faulkner. This publication was the first article on Faulkner in France. He continued with this mode of working and inserted at least an article of the presentation of the author and the work for every translation he did. We can easily find the articles entitled as *William Faulkner in France*, *The Time of William Faulkner*, *William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway etc. on French presses*. Coindreau presented generally in the article the historical and social background related to the work, the outline of characteristics of the text translated to help the readers understanding for the work, but offered rarely analyses or verification of the choice of translation. The scholars of Faulkner, Michel Gresset, François Pitavy and some critics dedicated the ambassador for the American fiction in France to Coindreau and a precious advisor for the French publisher.

Coindreau's job as professor at Princeton offered him the privilege to have access to the new published works in US and his education of classic literature provided him a good sense for the discovery of new writers. We should admire Coindreau's sharp eyes for recognising young talent when they did not acquired their reputation. It was Coindreau who helped French readers to discover John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner of cause, and later Flannery O'Connor, William Goyen, William Styron and others. Some of his translations stay as the canon of the work, which is still in reprints today, such as the translation of *As I Lay Dying*.

### ***As I Lay Dying* translated by Maurice-Edgar Coindreau**

William Faulkner is probably Coindreau's favourite writer of all the American authors he translated. Coindreau received a copy of *As I Lay Dying* shortly after the publication of *Sanctuary* in US from one of his students. He wrote then to Faulkner asking the authorisation for the translation and later he managed the confirm of the publication from Gallimard. *As I Lay Dying* was the first novel of Faulkner being translated into French and the second published (by the strategy of publisher) in France. Many of Faulkner's works have been re-translated since the first publication in France, but Coindreau's version is still available today in reprint.

*As I Lay Dying* is a story of a long journey of a southern family the Bundrens in hot summer. The Bundrens carried the coffin with the dead body of the mother

inside to her home town for burying her there. And all the bad accidents possible happened to the Bundrens: the falling into the river of the coffin, then the risk of the coffin to be burned by fire. The elder son broke his leg, the daughter got pregnant, the father took the money from daughter's abortion to get new teeth and new wife after having buried the body and finally the second son became mad. The novel consists of fifty-nine sections which were written in the form of interior monologue of the characters. Each character provided his/her version of the same event or of a fragment of the same event. The Bundrens were the farmers in the southern America, Mississippi. They did not speak the standard English. The solution came out with the writing of Faulkner, the Bundrens spoke in colloquial style with the accent of the South.

It means that there is an incoherence in the syntax and the deformation on the pronunciation of the words. The Bundrens used “aint” and “was” constantly for every personal pronoun; “hit” for it, “ere” for here, “ketch” for catch, “kin” for can. And many other words of the Southern pronunciation transcribed by Faulkner on the pages, even the father reduced into “pa” in the mouths of the children. All of these elements drawing the colour of the South are disappeared in the translation of Coindreau. The variety of the grammatical incoherence in the ST, the diction, the made-up of words, the dialect, the pitfalls, etc. condensed into the matter of the register of language in the TT. Coindreau employed “ça” in the place of the formal demonstrative “ce”, “nous arriverons dans le bois ça ne sera pas moi”, “Ça voudra dire qu[e]” and another one on the same page of Dewey Dell's narration, “comme ça il s'est trouvé rempli” (*AILD*, p69).

	ST	TT	
1	“when we get to the woods it won't be me”	“Nous arriverons dans le bois ça ne sera pas moi”	P69
2	“It will be that...”	“Ça voudra dire qu(e)”	
3	And so it was full	“comme ça il s'est trouvé rempli	

4	“I ain’t a-goin’ to milk you. I ain’t a-goin’ to do nothing for them.	“J’vas point te traire. J’veux rien faire pour eux”	P131
5	“Pour Anse, I say. “She kept him at work for theirty-odd years. I reckon she is tired.”	“C’pauvre Anse, que j’dis, elle l’a obligé à travailler pendant trente ans et plus. M’est avis qu’elle en a assez.”	p83

Yes, “ça” could be the informal and oral form of “it” for the case of Dewey Dell and it is not always the case to apply to all speeches. It is also discussable if the usage of “ça” could be the representative sound for the southern farmers.

Another signature of the orality in the ST is the missing of vowels showing in sentences #4 and #5 above. The omission of vowels signalled the identity of the Bundrens and the characteristic of the orality in the direct discourse. “J’vas point te traire. J’veux rien faire pour eux » (*AILD*, p.131), this is the Darl speaking. And it is the same when Cora spoke to Tull, “C’pauvre Anse, aue j’dis, elle l’a obligé à travailler pendant trente dans et plus. M’est avis qu’elle en a assez.” (*AILD*, p.83). It is sure that the French readers won’t feel strange reading the Bundrens, on the contrary, they may feel closer to the Bundrens by their language, because the language which Coindreau chose is the classic French, the French spoken by Pierrot, by Charlotte in Molière’s *Don Juan*. It is not difficult for the French who grow up with a tradition of classic theatre. They may identify without difficulty the social status of the Bundrens. André Bleikasten identified Faulkner’s setting of language in *As I Lay Dying* as the de-Americanization, we can tell the practice of domestication in the translation of Coindreau, put the strangers (the Bundrens)’s strange story into a familiar language environment to bring the novel close to the readers. We don’t see any more the southern gothic atmosphere in the TT. Coindreau made the novel the legitimisation of the humankind: it does not sound like the dark story in the exotic Southerners, but like the one in French farmers, the pay-sants. Coindreau justified his choice, “What is most important to obtain is a translation which will give to the foreign reader the same impression that the original

text gives to the reader in whose language it was written. An error in the interpretation of a question in detail, a mistake in a technical word, and even the voluntary substitution of one word for another are only venial sins”.<sup>6</sup> We should admit that there is a sort of violence created by Coindreau’s translation, “the venial sins” in his words. This violence of translation secured the readers and pushed them to penetrate into the world of the Bundrens. The translation lost the occurrence of the SL, but gained the fluidity of language, of reading and of thinking. Coindreau’s domestication join here to the de-Americanization in order to draw the reader’s attention to the humanity.

Comparing the sentences #4 and #5, we notice the difference between the ST and the TT., the deformation is at the different levels. The translation of Cora’s narration (#5) is the manipulation of the pronunciation which doesn’t exist in the ST. Darl’s narration (#4) combined the syntactic mistake and the phonetic elliptic in the ST and the latter is maintained in Coindreau’s translation, but the first was ignored completely. The phonetic manipulation by the French classic literature may be explained as the translation strategy of Coindreau at general level. There is an omnipresence of the manipulated pronunciation in the ST. The translator needed a technique which is applicable to the most of the narration and to produce the effect of the local colour of the South, Mississippi or at least the colour of the Bundrens. The choice of Coindreau may not be completely legitimate, but by having chosen a language coming out from the classic theatre, the translator reduced the distance between the ST and the TT and pushed the write to the readers. Another point marked by this choice is the translation offered implicitly the verification of the narrative technique of Faulkner for this novel. As we mentioned before, the novel composed of fifty-nine sections narrated by the different characters. The different narrative voices allowed the readers to have multiplication of the points of view. Some characters preferred action than words, like Cash while another one is incapable of the expression, like Jewel; or one could see all the thing wrong, like Cora. Faulkner set up the time system which corresponds with the point of view of the narrator. The Bundrens’ narrations were transcribed

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<sup>6</sup> Coindreau, Maurice-Edgar, “On Translating Faulkner”, in *The Time of Faulkner*, University of South Carolina Press, 1971.

in present tense, even for Darl. He described the event in which he was absent in present tense. And the present tense is rarely to be applied in the novel, it is the tense of the direct communication and the narrative technique of theatre. Once Sartre declared what he was interested in *As I Lay Dying* is the time. It could be the time of narration, the time of humankind in the fiction or simply the time in the language structure, the tense. This won't be the same reading as the the American considered. *As I Lay Dying* is for the American a criminal novel of the gothic South for a long time. The readers from two sides of the Atlantic didn't share the same reading neither the same impression effected by the same novel. And this difference due to majorly the translation. Faulkner the author was totally aware of it.

“After reading ‘*As I Lay Dying*’ in your translation, I am happy that you are considering undertaking S&F. I want to see this translation, indeed, because I feel that it will probably be a damned poor book, but it may be a damned good one (in French, I mean, of course) but in either case, particularly in the latter it will be Cointreau and not Faulkner, just as the Rubyat wich English speaking people know is little more Fitzgerald than Khayyam”.<sup>7</sup>

No two persons read a book in the same way. The French and the American don't read the same Faulkner neither. It is not because that the latter is facing the original in English and the first is reading the translation. The flowing years after the publication of French translation of *As I Lay Dying*, the large number of translations of American writers works emerged in France. The French translations played an important role in the meditation of the literature and the cultural in the country or the intellectuals and the public as well at the time none too familiar with English. The making of a French Faulkner is first of all an effect of translation which requested the richness, the precision and the flexible adaptation of language knowledge of French. Then, the specific intellectual environment is necessary. The peak time of Faulkner's reputation in France was between 1946 and 1953. Nine translations were published (four in 1948), the Legion of Honour awarded to him in 1951. Sartre published three articles on Faulkner and

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<sup>7</sup> Gresset, Michel, “*De la traduction de la métaphore littéraire à la traduction comme métaphore de l'écriture*”, *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, 1983, pp. 501-519.



gave him credits for the foundation of theory of Existentialism. Camus cited largely Faulkner his articles and directed an adaptation of *Requiem for a Nun* later in 1956. Cointreau realised earlier that this new “American literature” could be the new blood for the French intellectuals works. And additionally, the French translation of Faulkner have an return effect in United States. In 1945, when Malcolm Cowley was preparing his book on Faulkner, he had to consult the French translation as none of Faulkner’s novels were in print in America except *Sanctuary*. The fascinating making up French Faulkner could be served as the success story of the importance of the translation and the crucial role played by translator in certain periods of history.

## Notes

1. Munday, Jeremy, *Introducing Translation Studies*, Routledge, 2016, pp.92.
2. Dugdale, John, “France’s stange love affair with William Faulkner”, *The Guardian*, March 19, 2009.
3. Cowley, Malcolm, *The Portable Faulkner*, Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 24.
4. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Le Combat*, 1948.
5. Words of François Pitavy, in the preface of the Collection *La Pléiade*, œuvre complete of William Faulkner, Gallimard, 2017
6. Cointreau, Maurice-Edgar, “*On Translating Faulkner*”, in *The Time of Faulkner*, University of South Carolina Press, 1971.
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