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Is there such thing as a ‘Decadent Translator’?
The case of Georges Héroelle (1848–1935)

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One never reads the biography of a translator. Translators do not seem to have a biography, their lives are of no interest to the general public and no-one seems to really care for them. Except, of course, if they are creators themselves, poets in their own right, who have endeavoured, here and there, and always for a great writer, to become translators. This is why Georges Héroelle’s personality seems so unique: he is a translator *with a biography* – and, moreover, his biography has largely determined his first steps in translation. Not that it is necessary to linger too much on his actual life, which has already been written about at length by Professor Clive Thomson.¹ I shall touch only briefly on Héroelle’s biography, but the links between his life and his work as a translator and essayist (for he has also written a short essay on his own work as a translator), are still worth examining. Our intuition – or rather our initial intuition – is that his case offers a wonderful opportunity to explore what exactly translating decadence is, particularly in French, and what the possible definition of a decadent translator could be. *Initial* intuition, for this hypothesis of a decadent translator has become progressively questionable as Héroelle’s familiarity to us has increased. He has certainly translated decadent writers with commitment and passion: but was he a decadent himself? Our newborn doubts will be addressed here in five short sections.

The Five Lives of Georges Héroelle.

Born in 1848, Georges Héroelle actually lived five lives in the course of his eighty-seven years; some simultaneously, some consecutively. The first and most public of them all, after his studies in Dijon, was his life as a professor of philosophy in several *lycées* around France: first in Vitry-le-François (Champagne), then in Cherbourg, and finally for his last twenty years in Bayonne. It was his first way of earning a living. Soon after, however, as early as his first position in Vitry-le-

François, Hérelle's passion for ancient archives led him to his second public life: that of a specialist in local history. He was commissioned to explore matters as varied as Protestantism in the Champagne region, and the province's judicial system during the Medieval and Renaissance periods.²

Hérelle's narrative talent led directly to his research being published, with those books still considered as references today. What he achieved as a local historian and archivist of the Champagne region at the beginning of his life, he similarly pursued in his final years, but with a different focus. This third life, in the Pays Basque, proved his passion for popular theatre and festivals, the modern Mysteries of the Pyrénées valleys.³ He patiently attended each festival, collected the plots of each play, transcribed them, and finally dedicated books to the subject – books that remain precious references for theatre in the Basque language to this day.⁴

But, of course, those three lives, certainly public, are not the ones which gained Hérelle his principal followers. It is his fourth life, the life of an incredibly active and prolific translator, that predominantly brought him to the public's attention in the 1890s and beyond: thirty volumes of translations, first from Italian and then from Spanish into French, and of the renowned writers of the time; writers with whom he was personally acquainted and with whom he shared an intense and sometimes volcanic correspondence – with Gabriele D'Annunzio in particular. This part of his work is certainly enough to ensure his renown and a major position as a bridge between Italy and France for at least thirty or forty years. And it is as a translator that Hérelle became known to the French public and the academics of today, as well as the readers of D'Annunzio and Blasco Ibáñez.

Finally, there is Hérelle's fifth life – probably the most interesting and one that remained secret for nearly a century, until a paper by Philippe Lejeune in 1987, Thomson's biographical study, and an exhibition organized by the Mairie de Paris, made it known: it is the life of an archaeologist or an anthropologist of homosexuality at the Belle Époque – its peculiarities, its rituals, its favourite places, and its relationships to the medical theories of the time regarding

homoeroticism.⁵ This life led Hérelle to translate a German essay on homosexuality in Ancient Greece; to write a comprehensive book on the same subject which he pursued until his death but was not able to complete, and even more interestingly to conceive of a very original questionnaire on homosexuality – half psychology, half sociology – which he asked his friends to complete for the purpose of general knowledge and science.⁶ He accumulated an extensive archive of homosexuality throughout the ages, which he organized with remarkable energy and determination and bequeathed to the Bibliothèque de Troyes, where it remains under the name *Fonds Georges Hérelle*. This archive, which includes family photographs, art photographs, but also photos of young lovers and of masculine nudes, was obviously considered by him as part of his work and perhaps even his secret masterpiece – secret, for even when he decided to publish something from this extensive material, it was only in extremely limited editions, and sometimes under a pseudonym. The donation of this archive to a public library cannot, therefore, be considered a coming out. For nothing remains perhaps more secret and less known than the archive of a French provincial town of secondary importance. ‘Only for the happy few’ – the recognizable motto of a decadent mind. But let us linger a little on the fourth of these five lives – the life of the translator, which we will address in the second of our little sections.

Why Translate?: Translation and Desire

Hérelle’s first steps into translation are themselves extremely interesting and significant, for this major translator of D’Annunzio, Grazia Deledda, and Antonio Fogazzaro, an excellent Latinist and Hellenist, did not know a word of Italian until he reached his forty-second year. Prior to this, he had no notable familiarity with Italian in his childhood and no Italian family. He made no trips to Italy before the summer of 1890 where (as he explains) he headed directly to Naples, drawn there, it seems, by an irresistible attraction:

Puisque je disposais de deux mois entiers, j’aurais pu, j’aurais dû, ce me semble, m’arrêter à Turin, à Livourne, à Pise, à Sienne, à Florence, à Rome, etc. Mais, contrairement à ce

qu'auraient fait la plupart des voyageurs, je ne mis que cinq ou six jours pour arriver à Naples et j'y demeurai un mois et demi.

[As I had two full months, I could have and perhaps should have, stopped in Turin, Livorno, Pisa, Sienna, Rome, etc. But, contrary to most travellers, I rushed to Naples in 5 or 6 days, and stayed there a month and a half.]⁷

And on his first day there, he met in his hotel an eighteen-year-old young man, Alfredo Rosati, who for two months would initiate the French traveller into the pleasures of the Italian language, and probably other pleasures of companionship. For Rosati's photograph features in the file where Hérèlle kept some of the images of young men he met on his travels and which he entitled *Amici amati (minores)*. To any French reader familiar with nineteenth-century literature, this story, of course, sounds pleasantly familiar: it is the masculine version of a story told by the great poet and novelist Alphonse de Lamartine in 1849, in his most famous novel *Graziella*. In this story, a young Frenchman (the twenty-five-year-old author himself) falls in love with a charming girl from Naples, a fisherman's daughter, who he teaches to read and to whom he introduces Romantic literature. Seen in this light, Hérèlle's lessons in Italian with Rosati under the stars in the gulf of Naples offer a homoerotic mirror version of *Graziella*, albeit with several inversions. The most striking one is that, on this occasion, it is the Frenchman who is taught by the young inhabitant of Naples, and not the reverse.

The further consequences of the trip are better known and detailed by Hérèlle himself in his short essay on translation, *Petit mémoire d'un traducteur*, published in Belgium in 2006. This describes how the traveller, now back in Normandy and endeavouring to improve his new knowledge of Italian, took a subscription to the *Corriere di Napoli*, where he discovered the novel of a writer called D'Annunzio (it was *L'Innocente*), translated thirty pages or so for fun and read them aloud to his friends. Encouraged by them, and soon by the writer himself (he wrote to D'Annunzio through the *Corriere di Napoli* and asked him permission to pursue his task), Hérèlle offered those pages for publication first in the newspaper *Le Temps* where the book was published with great success, and subsequently in a volume edited by Calmann-Lévy. 'J'étais devenu

traducteur' [I had become a translator]:⁸ so he summarizes soberly in his memoir, pointing out the easy innocence with which this sequence of circumstances had occurred. For, in spite of D'Annunzio's established fame in his country (by 1891, he was the author of several volumes of verses – the first one published aged sixteen – and most of all, of the acclaimed novel *Il Piacere*, published 1889), the writer was utterly unknown to Hérelle, the *professeur de lycée*, recently returned from a summer in Italy.⁹ *L'Innocente* was to be the first of a long series. It led to a close friendship with D'Annunzio and a very important exchange of letters between the two men throughout the years, which reveal details of the translator at work, and his struggles with the author.

To conclude this second section on the initial circumstances around Hérelle's activities as a translator, it is important to stress just how far from the academy they are. For Hérelle, translation was related to love and liberty. Learned and employed in this way, Italian becomes the language of desire (as it is for many, for Stendhal, and for all opera-lovers), but a prohibited desire, experienced in free conditions. Hérelle's mastery of Italian had not been forged in the reading of Dante, or Petrarch or Boccaccio, but in the lively, embodied experiences of wanderings with lovers in Italy. As such, it was probably the language of liberty, a release from the constrictions and conventions of *lycée* life. And perhaps it is inevitable that these experiences endowed him with the particular, typically decadent interest in bizarre languages, barbarisms of expression or neologisms. If they did, however, this is not reflected in his work as translator or essayist where he remains remarkably classic and academic in style. But if decadence for Hérelle is perhaps not emulated in style, it is to be found elsewhere: all his writings exude a very characteristic dilettantism and make him as profoundly endearing as Max Beerbohm or Richard Le Gallienne.

Dilettantism and Decadence

Briefly sketched, Hérelle's intellectual biography shows a particularly rare flexibility of mind – a quality vital to a famous translator. From the Protestant Reformation in Vitry-le-François to the pastoral Theatre of the Pays Basque, and from his translations of D'Annunzio to research on

homosexuality both antique and modern, Hérèlle appears to travel with ease and always modestly: he regularly insists on the purely fortuitous nature of his researches and discoveries. He poses as a dilettante, an amateur figure following his tastes, nothing at all like a professional researcher (although his investigations are always scientifically founded).

He thus epitomizes an attitude to life which his intimate friend Paul Bourget, with whom he was closely connected between 1867 and 1874, had famously theorized in an essay on Ernest Renan, linking dilettantism with the states of extreme civilizations or decadence. Taste and pleasure are always promoted in the dilettante's choices, as stated in the first pages of Hérèlle's memoir as a translator: '[J]'ai toujours traduit pour mon plaisir et si mes traductions ont été fructueuses, il n'en est pas moins vrai que je ne me suis jamais proposé pour objet le profit.' [I have always translated for my own pleasure, and if my translations have been successful, it is no less true that I never set out to profit.]¹⁰ He also stresses that the choice of the work to be translated is a pure question of taste: 'choisir est affaire de goût, et le goût est personnel' [choosing is a matter of taste, and taste is personal].¹¹ This contempt for money, this importance of taste, and finally this flexibility in the choices one makes, are the very definition of the dilettante according to Paul Bourget in his essay of 1883, in which he gives this famous description of the concept:

Il est plus aisé d'entendre le sens du mot *dilettantisme* que de le définir avec précision. C'est beaucoup moins une doctrine qu'une disposition de l'esprit, très intelligente à la fois et très voluptueuse, qui nous incline tour à tour vers les formes diverses de la vie et nous conduit à nous prêter à toutes ces formes sans nous donner à aucune. [...]

Sur le tard seulement de la vie des races et quand l'extrême civilisation a peu à peu aboli la faculté de créer, pour y substituer celle de comprendre, le dilettantisme révèle sa poésie dont le plus moderne des anciens, Virgile, aurait eu comme un pressentiment, s'il a vraiment laissé tomber cette parole que le scoliate nous a transmise: 'On se lasse de tout, excepté de comprendre.'

[It is easier to understand the meaning of the word 'dilettantism' than to define it. It is far less a doctrine than a mental disposition both very intelligent and very sensual, which inclines us toward diverse forms of life and leads us to lend ourselves to these forms without giving ourselves to any. [...]

Late in the life of races, and when civilisation has progressively abolished the faculty of creation to replace it by the faculty of understanding, dilettantism reveals its poetry as Virgil has perhaps sensed, when he said (if one is to believe his commentator): 'Everything ends up boring one, except understanding.'¹²

Hérelle had been very close to Bourget ten years before those lines were written and it is hard to believe they don't offer a marvellous key to understand his flickering intellectual interests and tastes, as they relate to decadence. For Bourget states clearly: dilettantism is a product of extreme civilization and affects people who are much less creators (Hérelle constantly reminds his readers he is not one) than critics. The motto of dilettantism – 'trying to understand' – is at the very core of Hérelle's activity as a translator, and of course as an amateur anthropologist of homosexuality.

The best proof of his nature as a dilettante lies perhaps in the particular use he makes of the adjective 'petit', when he speaks about his own work: thus, in addition to *Petits mémoires de la vie littéraire* and *Petit mémoire d'un traducteur*, we find his *Petit traité descriptif des courses de taureaux d'après 'Arènes sanglantes', le fameux roman de V. Blasco Ibáñez*, published by Calman-Levy in 1925.¹³ These titles indicate an attitude towards the world, and moreover about one's own work, considered as a modest, amateurish, and unspecialized activity. Defining the decadent mind in his 1950 groundbreaking essay, Vladimir Jankélévitch thus writes significantly: 'Petits maîtres, petits sujets, petites occupations' [Small masters, small subjects, small occupations].¹⁴ And Hérelle confirms it marvellously in a description of his early life as translator: 'Voici comment je suis devenu traducteur. Ainsi qu'il arrive souvent, c'est un concours de petits hasards qui a déterminé ce grand événement, le plus important peut-être de ma vie.' [This is how I became a translator. As so often happens, a combination of small fortunes has determined this great event, perhaps the most important of my life.]¹⁵ It would be difficult to find anyone less boastful in the French fin-de-siècle literary scene, where so many egos are so vastly overblown.

Focussing for an instant on the dilettante figure, it is worth recalling that Bourget, in his chapter on the same, relates the figure to that of a collector – collector of objects, of carpets, wallpapers, of moods. Modern times, that is times of decadence for Bourget, are an epoch of collectors, and Des Esseintes, like so many of his counterparts in literature (Jean Lorrain, Marcel Schwob, the brothers Goncourt, Remy de Gourmont) is first and foremost a collector. And so is

Hérelle: not so much a collector of objects, but of archives, whether they are about ancient baroque theatre or stories and images about homosexuality.

But ultimately, of course, it is Hérelle's taste for D'Annunzio's writings, entirely self-instilled, for he knew nothing about the author at first, that defines his place within decadent literature. For what exactly did he find in the first D'Annunzio he encountered? What did he find in *L'Innocente*, which he translated in 1892, *Il Piacere* in 1895 or *Il Fuoco* in 1900, but also *La Città Morta* in 1898? He found a world of wealthy individuals in refined surroundings, but where archaic, ultra-violent passions surge (Arthur Symons famously referred to 'that marvellous, malarious *Piacere*').¹⁶ It was certainly a challenge in itself – to confront this universe, all the more so as Hérelle does not seem to have held (if one gives credit to his *Mémoires de la vie littéraire*) a particular interest in the French decadent novels of his time – from Catulle Mendès to Joris-Karl Huysmans or from Jean Lorrain to Paul Adam, or even his friend Bourget. In many ways, it seems that his work on D'Annunzio is also for him an introduction to the decadent mind, to novels of interior turmoil and sinuous and complex souls. But he rose to the challenge and, to both the satisfaction of the author and the public, became an acclaimed and almost branded part of D'Annunzio's world as it crossed the borders of Italy.

Thus considered, the case of Hérelle as a decadent figure seems clear: his taste for ancient periods of history as opposed to modern times; his passion for old, forgotten papers and his compulsive, obstinate trend of collecting; his singular way of trespassing the moral conventions of his time and questioning them thoroughly; the variety of his interests and his vindicated, modest amateurship; finally the shock of his discovering D'Annunzio's prose, to the point of translating it out of pure interest; his contempt of material matters and his exaltation of personal taste – all these qualities undoubtedly gain him inclusion in an anthology of figures of decadence.

And QED, *quod erat demonstrandum*, it might seem as though we could stop our quest here. Except that one critically important matter has not been addressed: the language. For decadence is foremost a matter of language, a singular use of language, which rejects everyday talking and

common prose, replacing it with a prodigious inventiveness (neologisms, ancient tongues, specialized vocabulary, silences even, and ellipses). It creates a new prose, or poetry, very often akin to music. Music, music of the language: this is what D'Annunzio aims at, as he explains many times in his correspondence and prefaces. But it is also precisely here that Hérèlle becomes fascinatingly interesting and problematic in his efforts to translate the great Italian.

Decadent Author, Classical Translator?

There is a distinct pleasure in reading Hérèlle as an essayist, because his qualities, discernible in innumerable letters, memoirs of all sorts and thoughts about homosexuality, are blatant. His prose is, at all times and with no exception, crystal clear, remarkably scholarly, and in a tone of familiar, almost friendly, confidence that makes him, as already mentioned, deeply likeable. It is the prose of a master in French rhetoric and of a life-long professor of philosophy. But do not look for any elaborate style, any invention of words, or puns. There is never any play with language in his personal writing and his style is, as we say in French, 'plat comme un trottoir de rue' [flat as a sidewalk]. In his *Petits mémoires de la vie littéraire*, Hérèlle admits this readily:

J'étais doublement inhabile. Je ne savais pas imaginer une fable, combiner une intrigue, donner aux faits racontés la vraisemblance émouvante d'une fable réelle; et j'éprouvais une difficulté extraordinaire à exprimer verbalement ce que je voulais dire. [...] Il en est de même pour ce qui concerne les moyens d'expression, le vocabulaire et la forme des phrases; [...]. J'écris donc avec beaucoup de peine et, pour composer un roman, j'aurais besoin de recourir au procédé des fiches, comme un chartiste ou un linguiste. N'est-il pas évident qu'une pareille méthode, exclusive de toute inspiration, ne pourrait produire qu'une œuvre morte? [...] Je renonçai à l'impossible prétention de produire des œuvres originales, d'être, comme on dit, un écrivain créateur, et j'essayai de devenir un historien et un critique.

[I was doubly unskilful. I didn't know how to imagine a tale, how to combine a plot, and to endow the narrated facts with the emotional verisimilitude of a real tale. [...]; and I felt an extraordinary difficulty in expressing verbally what I wanted to say [...]. And the same occurs with all means of expression, vocabulary and shape of the sentences; [...] I hence take great pains in writing and, in order to compose a novel, I would need to make recourse to files, like an historian or a linguist. Would not such a method, so incompatible with inspiration, only lead to a dead work? I therefore renounced the impossible pretension to write original works and to be what is called a creative writer, and I tried to become an historian and a critic.]¹⁷

It is, in fact, difficult to quote one single original phrasing or one single remarkable formulation of Hérèlle's. Not that he writes badly – on the contrary – and not that he is not interested in bizarre languages (he duly notes graffiti written in slang on the walls of men's toilets and is very aware of Neapolitan dialect), but his own prose remains extremely restrained at all times. By his own admission, Hérèlle modelled his writing on the classical Latin phrase, which he claims as a solid canon for understanding Italian and Spanish: 'En fait, un homme instruit, qui sait le latin et le français, arrive presque sans étude à lire aisément les textes italiens et espagnols.' [In fact, a well-read man, who knows Latin and French, succeeds almost without study in easily reading Italian and Spanish texts.]¹⁸ This lack of an individual style has probably been an asset for his translations: as intelligent as he was, he was easily able to adapt to the style of the author he was translating.

But D'Annunzio did not always see it that way. The writer became more and more critical as he progressively grasped the lack of his translator's stylistic aptitudes. The relationship between the two men reached a point of acute crisis in 1900, as Hérèlle was translating *Il Fuoco* – a novel set in Venice and whose style is notably elaborate and flamboyant, in order to evoke the flickering lights of the city, particularly at night. It is, of course, impossible for us to explore in depth D'Annunzio and Hérèlle's year-long debate on style. Guy Tosi has analysed it remarkably, with its contradictions, in his edition of the letters in French.¹⁹ But a few examples of this debate between a writer obstinately aware of language, style, and rhythm, and his translator whose explicit aim is to make the writer intelligible to the French public, will perhaps help sketch the difficulties of the relation.

Two examples, chosen from dozens of others, can situate the debate. In the first, dated 4 May 1894, D'Annunzio states his foremost identity as a stylist in the direct line of Flaubert:

Io sono (e voglio essere), sopra tutto [*sic*], uno *stilista*. Io ho l'orrore delle frasi comuni, della *frase fatta*. Pur nella rappresentazione delle cose meno significanti, io proseguo [*sic*] una ricerca acutissima della parola.

[I am (and want to be) first and foremost a *stylist*. I cannot bear the common sentences, the *ready-made sentence*. Even when representing the most insignificant of things, I search carefully for the right word.]²⁰

To which we can oppose Hérèlle's radical claim – to be intelligible in French: 'Règle qui, selon moi, est fondamentale: une traduction française doit être écrite en français' [One rule for me is fundamental: a French translation must be written in French].²¹ Both positions seem obvious and both perfectly defensible and one would think they are reconcilable. But they appear not to have been for the two artists and are indicative of a major antagonism. It peaks in a fascinating letter of 4 January 1905, concerning his play *La Figlia di Iorio*, where all D'Annunzio's grievances rise to a climax – even if he had been immensely complimentary at times in the past:

Tutta l'opera è *banalisée* appunto perché *francisée*. Il vostro concetto del tradurre è – per me – errato. Voi tendete a trasformare in un'opera francese un'opera italiana, rifuggendo da tutte le singolarità e da tutte le asperità dell'originale, per il timore di violare il genio della vostra lingua e il senso comune dei lettori mediocri.

Dalla vostra persistenza nell'errore, vedo che è difficilissimo intenderci.

Non bisogna cercare il ritmo esatto, [...] ma cercare di riprodurre il ritmo esotico [...]. Per fortuna, i traduttori odierni [Mallarmé, Mourey] hanno compreso che un'opera tradotta *non deve* entrare a far parte della letteratura nazionale ma deve conservare la sua impronta d'origine, magari *contro* il genio della nazione che l'ospita. [...]

Voi, in vece [*sic*], vi sforzate di togliere ogni colore, ogni rilievo, ogni forza al mio stile, per mancanza di coraggio.

[The whole work is *banalisée*, precisely because it is *francisée*. Your notion of translation is, in my opinion, completely wrong. You tend to transform an Italian work into a French one, by removing the peculiarities and asperities of the original, fearful the genius of your language is violated and thus the common sense of your mediocre reader.

Seeing how you persist in your error, I think it is difficult for us to understand one another.

You should not search for the exact rhythm, [...] but rather seek to reproduce the exotic rhythm [...]. Thankfully, today's translators [Mallarmé, Mourey] understand that a translated work does not need to become part of national literature, but must retain the stamp of the original, despite the *genius* of the nation embracing it.

You, on the contrary, endeavour to remove all colour, all depth, all of my stylistic strength, for lack of courage.]²²

D'Annunzio's scathing attack on Hérèlle reveals his contempt for the translator's preference to render the text understandable for his readers, but at the expense of originality; making it clear at all costs and conforming to French expectations of the literary genius, rather than capturing D'Annunzio's original language. In another, earlier letter, addressed in French to the publisher Louis Ganderax, D'Annunzio bemoans this 'fâcheuse manie de clarté inutile' [unfortunate mania for unnecessary clarity] and complains about his translator's 'besoin de tout éclaircir' – this need

to clear everything up: ‘(pour qui? pour les idiots évidemment, qui ne lisent pas mes livres)’ [(for whom? for the idiots, of course, who don’t read my books)].²³ He even goes to the point of vindicating the importance of being unintelligible at times, or mysterious – *even in French*. In March 1896, in a letter to Hérelle, D’Annunzio writes:

Spesso tra una frase francese (ben francese) ma un po’ rara e una frase francese comune (del linguaggio corrente), voi scegliete quest’ultima. Così facendo, voi mi *tradite*, cioè è voi contrariate la mia indole di scrittore, senza che la necessità vi giustifichi!

[Between a French sentence (good French but a bit rarefied) and a common French sentence, of everyday language, you choose the latter. In doing so, you *betray* me, that is you go against my nature as a writer, without being justified by necessity!]²⁴

To Hérelle’s observation that, in French, a sentence retained ‘something gauche and almost unintelligible’, D’Annunzio replies sharply: ‘Voi mi scrivete: ‘La phrase française a quelque chose de gauche et d’à peu près inintelligible’. Benissimo! – Gauche et inintelligible – *dev’essere così*.’ [You write to me: “La phrase française a quelque chose de gauche et d’à peu près inintelligible”. Very well! – Gauche and unintelligible – *so it must be*.]²⁵ He adds later: ‘Una traduzione è un modo più o meno ingegnoso di mettere il lettore *in stato di divinazione*’ [A translation is a more or less ingenious way to put the reader *in a state of divination*].²⁶

This is absolutely crucial for our topic because, as is well known, the reproach of being unintelligible was first and foremost addressed to decadent prose and poetry (Paul Adam, Jean Moréas, Francis Poictevin, but most of all to Stéphane Mallarmé). By calling on his translator to embrace his own unintelligibility – and not to untangle it – D’Annunzio appears acutely more aware of the modern tendencies of literature promoted by decadent and symbolist prose, than his academic translator.

And Hérelle’s scrupulous respect – perhaps too scrupulous – for the boundaries of French classical style leads him, in his *Petit mémoire d’un traducteur*, to address the case of another translator, Laurent Tailhade, in a very significant way that we need to understand and explain:

La dernière sorte d’infidélité dont je parlerai [...] est celle d’un traducteur qui veut faire du style pour son propre compte. [...] Beaucoup de stylistes sont enclins à ce défaut, et je n’aurais pas grande confiance, par exemple, dans une traduction faite par Laurent Tailhade:

ce bizarre et grincheux homme de lettres, qui s'entiche de certains vocables et a un goût décidé pour ce qui est insolite et baroque, me paraît incapable de subordonner son style à celui de l'auteur qu'il traduit, et doit chercher toujours l'expression qui va au-delà du texte.

[The last infidelity I will mention is the translator's desire to create his own style. Many stylists fall into this trap and it is the reason why I would not trust a translation by Laurent Tailhade, for example: this strange and grumpy man of letters who is obsessed with certain words and has a particular taste for the bizarre and the baroque, seems unable to suppress his own style in favour of the author he is translating. He always seeks an expression that goes above and beyond the text.]²⁷

So who exactly was Tailhade, this grumpy translator, whom Hérelle does not like and whose *bizarre* style he despises? He was precisely a decadent poet: the author of a volume of anti-bourgeois verses called *Poèmes aristophanesques* (1904), but he was foremost the ground-breaking author of a new translation of Petronius' *Satyricon* in 1902. Hérelle admits he has not read this, but is certain, nevertheless, that it has distorted the Latin original: 'Je ne connais pas sa traduction de Pétrone, mais je parierais bien, sous prétexte de faire une traduction très vivante, qu'il a complètement défiguré l'original' [I do not know his translation of Petronius, but I bet that on the pretext of creating a lively translation, he has completely disfigured the original].²⁸

All these little clues tend to show that Hérelle's role in D'Annunzio's reception is to make the novelist more academic or classic than he actually was. And, his inclination was also to somewhat erase a part of the Italian writer's stylistic audacities or oddities. Tosi speaks of the edulcoration of the original, which is a form of toning down of the original text.²⁹ And a remarkable paper in ethnology, published in 2006 in the journal *Ethnologie française*, with the title 'D'Annunzio à l'usage des Français' [D'Annunzio for the French] goes even further and proves that the translator exercised, in the case of Hérelle, a very subtle and secret censorship of the writer's moral audacities, in the name of what was and was not acceptable in French novels (and particularly French magazines of the 1900). This is all the more ironic as we have seen Hérelle's own biographical and intellectual issues with conventions and morality.³⁰ In their paper, the authors reveal the type of cuts Hérelle encourages D'Annunzio to make for the French versions of all his books (he never made cuts on his own initiative), under the pretext of making the text

more accessible for the French public. This even reached the point where D'Annunzio anticipated and was the first to ask for some expurgations for the French version.

Translating: Sexing Down?

Hérelle himself points out an example to illustrate the difference between the Italian and the French version of *Il Fuoco*. It is a moment where the hero speaks of the actress La Foscarina, a transposition of Eleonora Duse, the famous Italian tragic muse who had actually been D'Annunzio's mistress. The Italian version reads:

Il suo desiderio fu insano e smisurato, contenne il fremito delle moltitudini vinte et *l'ebbrezza degli amanti ignoti e la visione delle promiscuità orgiache*; fu fatto di crudeltà, di rancore, di gelosia, di poesia e di orgoglio. Lo punse il rammarico di non aver mai posseduta l'attrice dopo un trionfo scenico, ancora calda dell'alito popolare, coperta di sudore, ansante e smorta [...]. Egli la vide in un lampo riversa, piena della potenza che aveva strappato l'urlo al mostro, palpitante come la Menade dopo la danza, *assetata e stanca ma bisognosa d'essere presa, d'essere scossa, di contrarsi in un ultimo spasimo, di ricevere il seme violento, per placarsi infine in un sopore senza sogni*.³¹ [Emphasis added]

In 1900 Cassandra Vivaria translated this into English as:

His desire lost all proportion and became mad, full of the quiver of conquered multitudes and *the intoxication of her unknown lovers and the vision of orgiastic promiscuities*; cruelty, rancour, jealousy, poetry, and pride were in his desire. Regret stung him for never having possessed the actress after some theatrical triumph, still warm with the breath of the crowd, covered with sweat, pale and panting [...]. For the space of a lightning-flash he saw her outstretched, full of the power that had drawn a howl from the monster, throbbing like a Maenad after the dance, *parched and tired, yet needing to be taken, to be shaken, to feel herself contracting in a last spasm, to receive some violent germ, in order to quiet down at last to a lethargy without dreams*.³² [Emphasis added]

Note the very explicit language ('orgiastic promiscuities'; 'the last spasm'; the 'violent germ' followed by a 'lethargy without dreams'). And contrast it now to Hérelle's French translation:

Son désir fut insensé et sans mesure, fait de cruauté, de rancune, de jalousie, de poésie et d'orgueil. Il regretta de n'avoir pas possédé l'actrice après un triomphe scénique, chaude encore du souffle populaire, couverte de sueur [...]. Dans un éclair, il la vit abattue, pleine de la puissance qui avait arraché le hurlement au monstre, palpitante comme la Ménade après la danse, *assoiffée et lasse*. [Emphasis added]

[His desire was mad and without limit, made of cruelty, rancour, jealousy, poetry and pride. He regretted never having possessed the actress after some theatrical triumph, still warm with the breath of the crowd, covered in sweat [...]. In a flash, he saw her knocked down,

full of the power which had drawn howling from the monster, throbbing like a Maenad after the dance, *thirsty and tired*.]³³

It is clear how the French version is a distinctively sexed down, sanitized version of the Italian. But Héréelle vehemently denied he was the one who asked for these expurgations, insisting they were requested by D'Annunzio, to avoid offending La Duse by the brutality of the description: 'Aucune des différences qu'un lecteur attentif pourrait trouver entre la rédaction italienne et la rédaction française ne m'est imputable' [None of the differences an attentive reader could find between the Italian and the French version is attributable to me].³⁴ And he adds: 'Pour le fond c'est lui qui a fait les remaniements, les coupures, grandes ou légères, par lesquels la traduction se distingue de l'original' [As to the content, [D'Annunzio] has made the changes, the cuts – important or light – which account for the discrepancies between the translation and the original].³⁵ It might very well be that Héréelle was not responsible for this particular bowdlerizing of the Italian text, but it is known that in many instances, he frequently used the French language and public as arguments to reduce D'Annunzio's audacities and indeed morals, rather than defend them – in spite of his motto being that fidelity was paramount.

Let us be absolutely clear, however, that neither Héréelle's probity as a translator, nor his ability is questioned here. But certainly what can be questioned is his comprehension of what was, and of what is, decadence at the end of the nineteenth century, in its wonderful reinvention of form and its taste for the crisis in language (the 'Crise de vers' as Mallarmé puts it).³⁶ If D'Annunzio had (as has been proven many times) a deep understanding of symbolist prose and decadent language, so Héréelle had not.

We might ask one final question: why did he not? But the answer will be somewhat disappointing – for it is mainly sociological. Decadence was essentially an urban phenomenon, and a collective one, located in Paris, London, Munich, Vienna, and Brussels, where groups of poets gathered, who read each other, were published by the same reviews and ultimately the same publishers. In a vast system of echoes and travels across the borders, they built up a type of

informal community of imagination and conception of languages – a taste for the bizarre which is so foreign to the Professor of a *lycée*. Vitry-le-François, Cherbourg, Bayonne are so far from this buoyant, frenetic, urban scene, that a translator, however scrupulous, excellent, and passionate as Hérèlle was, was too distant to completely grasp the poetic audacities of this world. Gathering from his comments on Laurent Tailhade’s translations of Petronius and, most of all, from the silence he kept regarding the French literary scene, one can reasonably claim he was not aware of the decadent movement of his time. His exchanges about style with D’Annunzio tend also to prove his ignorance of that larger, European literary context. And it is not the least paradoxical to pledge that the very translator of *Il Piacere* into French had probably not grasped he was dealing with one of the first major Italian contributors to decadence – as Benedetto Croce later famously described D’Annunzio: ‘With him, a note which had hitherto been absent was sounded in Italian literature, sensual, decadent, brutal, clearly audible even in his earliest verses’.³⁷

And so it seems that the excellent Georges Hérèlle, to whom we owe much of D’Annunzio’s French reception and many ground-breaking thoughts on homosexuality at an age when it was not studied (as he studied it), was not much of a decadent translator, even when he was translating an author who was certainly decadent in many ways.

¹ Clive Thomson, *Georges Hérèlle. Archéologue de l’inversion sexuelle ‘fin de siècle’* (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 2014). Hereafter abbreviated as *Archéologue*.

² See Georges Hérèlle, *La Réforme et la Ligue en Champagne*, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1887–1892), and *Notice sur la création de l’échevinage de Vitry-le-François, d’après des documents inédits* (Vitry-le-François: Bitsch, 1882).

³ This includes (among several other titles): Georges Hérèlle, *La Musique et la danse au théâtre basque* (Bayonne: Feltzer, 1912), and *Études sur le théâtre basque. La représentation des pastorales à sujets tragiques* (Paris: Champion, 1923).

⁴ See Georges Hérèlle, *Le répertoire du théâtre tragique, cycles de l’Ancien Testament, du Nouveau Testament, de l’hagiographie, de l’Antiquité profane, des chansons de geste, des romans d’aventures et de l’histoire légendaire* (Paris: Champion, 1928). See also Florence Galli-Dupis’ excellent paper, ‘Un ethnographe, érudit historien et traducteur littéraire: Georges Hérèlle (1848–1935) et la pastorale basque’, *Garae-Ethnopôle* (2007), <<http://www.garae.fr/spip.php?article220>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

⁵In addition to Thomson’s *Archéologue*, see Philippe Lejeune, ‘Autobiographie et homosexualité en France au XIX^e siècle’, *Romantisme*, 56 (1987), 79–100, and Philippe Artières and Clive Thomson, eds, *Fières archives: Documents et images autobiographiques d’homosexuels fin-de-siècle* (Neuilly: Atlande, 2017).

⁶ See M. H. E. Meier, *Histoire de l’amour grec dans l’antiquité*, trans. by G. Hérèlle, under the pseudonym of L. R. de Pogey-Castries, under ‘Päderastie’, in *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, ed. by J. S. Ersch and J. G. Gruber, 9th section (1837), pp. 147–89; and Manuscript, Bibliothèque de l’Agglomération troyenne.

⁷ Georges Hérèlle, *Petit mémoire d’un traducteur*, ed. by Jean-Marie Van der Meerschen (Brussels: Éditions du Hasard, 2006), p. 20. Hereafter abbreviated as *Traducteur*. All translations my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

- ⁹ Remembering his discovery of *L'Innocente* in the *Corriere di Napoli*, Hérèlle shows his ignorance of everything related to D'Annunzio's career, as he writes: 'Le nom de l'auteur m'était inconnu et je m'en étonnais. Comment était-il possible qu'un écrivain de ce talent n'eût point acquis déjà la célébrité? Était-il donc très jeune, si jeune que cette œuvre fût à la fois un coup d'essai et un coup de maître?' [The name of the author was unknown to me and it astonished me. Was it possible that a writer of that talent had not yet reached fame? Was he so very young, so young that this book was at the same time a first attempt and a stroke of genius?] (*Traducteur*, p. 22).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ¹² Quoted in Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and Its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the Fin de Siècle* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 87–88. Translation modified by Guy Ducrey.
- ¹³ The *Petits mémoires de la vie littéraire* (Fonds Hérèlle MS 3170) has been reproduced in its entirety within *Archéologue*, pp. 259–85.
- ¹⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, 'La Décadence', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 4 (October-December 1950), 346.
- ¹⁵ *Traducteur*, p. 20.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87.522 (1893), 858–68 (p. 866).
- ¹⁷ *Archéologue*, p. 271.
- ¹⁸ *Traducteur*, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ See *Gabriele D'Annunzio to Georges Hérèlle, Correspondance accompagnée de douze Sonnets cisalpins*, ed. by Guy Tosi (Paris: Denoël, 1946), p. 436. Hereafter abbreviated as Tosi.
- ²⁰ *Lettere a Georges Hérèlle*, ed. by Maria Giovanna Sanjust (Bari: Palomar, 1993), p. 131. Hereafter abbreviated as Sanjust.
- ²¹ *Traducteur*, p. 21.
- ²² Sanjust, p. 275.
- ²³ Tosi, p. 78.
- ²⁴ Sanjust, p. 193.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- ²⁷ *Traducteur*, p. 75.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Tosi, p. 104.
- ³⁰ Loué Thomas, Wilfert-Portal Blaise, 'D'Annunzio à l'usage des Français. La traduction comme censure informelle (fin du XIX^e siècle)', *Ethnologie française* (2006), 101–10.
- ³¹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Il Fuoco* [1900] (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1907), p. 189.
- ³² Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Flame of Life* [*Il Fuoco*], trans. by Cassandra Vivaria (Boston: L. C. Page, 1900), p. 133.
- ³³ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Le Feu*, trans. by Georges Hérèlle (Paris: Calmann-Lévy n. d. [1900]), pp. 141–42.
- ³⁴ *Traducteur*, p. 42.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ³⁶ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers' ['Crisis of Verse'], in *Divagations* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1897).
- ³⁷ Benedetto Croce, *The History of Italy. 1871–1915* [1928], trans. by Cecilia M. Ady (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), p. 104.