Meursault's Doppelgängers

In a typical story, vivid imagery and elaborative prose would equate to lively and engaging storytelling. But in Albert Camus' French novel *The Stranger*, it is difficult to find the typical in Meursault's absurdist world of inexplicable actions and emotions. Two translators, Stuart Gilbert and Matthew Ward, approach the translation of the novel into English and attempt different degrees of character and plot development that play with the idea of the typical. In Gilbert's translation of *The Stranger*, the diction and structure created by the consistent use of colloquialisms and structural rhetorical devices focus on making Meursault a more understandable character, normalizing his life and appealing to a more modern audience. But Ward's translation, with plainer diction and sporadic use of stylistic risk, creates a storyline emphatic of Meursault's indifference.

It is first important to note that there is not much to infer about Meursault's character in and of himself; he is a bland person with a straightforward view. Specifically, he claims that "[his] physical condition at any given moment often influenced [his] feelings" (Gilbert 61), which paves the path for Gilbert's emphasis on the material surroundings of Meursault. This description is accompanied by Meursault's open reception to the "gentle indifference of the world" (Ward 122) that Ward finds to be the central theme of the novel. Thus, in order to fulfill these doctrines of their translations, Gilbert and Ward drift apart in meaning and style.

Sometimes it is simply word choice that differentiates the two translators' work, to different effects. Ward views the dead Arab as "motionless" (Ward 59) and Gilbert describes the body as "inert" (Gilbert 39). Both imply that the body lies still, but "inert" implies that not only is the body motionless now, but it is incapable of moving, is motionless forever. Ward simply states the obvious, the superficial and apparent lack of motion. While visible immobility is sufficient to tell the stillness of the body, Gilbert's version uses a word that implies more to the reader via its connotations.

But no words strike such an impact as a name, something that associates a title and a behavior to the word. It was not a indecent comportment or social inadequacy that fatefully pitted the Montagues and Capulets against the love of Romeo and Juliet, but rather the familial hatred, the preconceived sentiment. Likewise, it is the name that can often strike a more meaningful chord in the audience. The caretaker at the senior home offers Meursault "*café au lait*" (Gilbert 7) in Gilbert's translation, while "coffee with milk" (Ward 8) is the drink given to Meursault in Ward's story. In Gilbert's story, there exists a sensory connection with the reader, a positive olfactory and gustatory sensation that comes with drinking the beverage, the particular drink captured to emphasize the importance of that moment, of the *present* that Meursault infatuates himself with. Meanwhile, Ward maintains that Meursault is incapable of understanding or caring about the true nature of the beverage, separating the drink into its

components: ordinary coffee and ordinary milk. Nothing special about it, nothing to break the impartiality the universe's indifference bestows upon him.

The difference in the author's culinary arts—resulting in bland drinks for the casual absurdist coffee-drinker to the enjoyable sensation of *café au lait*—is perhaps the hallmark of their translations. How will coffee be served today? And to whom?

On a similar note, the two translations offer different means of introducing characters, different ways to create the aforementioned connotations that drive the presentation of the story. This is especially prominent in the opening word: Ward's use of "Maman" (Ward 3) is noticeably more intimate than Gilbert's "Mother" (Gilbert 4). Ward emphasizes the role of Madame Meursault by using the familiar term "Maman" because of her prominent role in the exposition with the funeral, as well as later with the examination and the trial. To Gilbert, however, Madame Meursault is already a dead thing; because Meursault worries about the present, his mother is of little importance to him anymore after her death. This is supported by Meursault's reflection that "one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed" (Ward 24). The fact that he places his mother's death in this list with everyday activities such as working and the passing of a Sunday truly evidences his high regard for the present.

Interestingly, in the case of the mention of Meursault's mother, there is some overlap in the purposes of the two authors. The indifference in Gilbert's tone when he connects the death of Madame Meursault to ordinary events cannot be ignored; similarly, there is a great connotation of love in the word "Maman" that intersects the use of more meaningfully-charged terms that Gilbert uses. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that Gilbert and Ward are opposites in their pursuits of different claims, but rather that their paths move independently and may cross freely. That being said, these junctions offer the most meaning into Meursault's perspective, given both sides to his absurdist views on society.

But while most of the translation is absolute and differences vary only with synonyms that vary minutely in meaning, phrases can be shifted from a direct translation to meddle with degree of specificity. Ward chooses to leave less up to the reader, giving again a strict, literal mindset fitting for Meursault. Shooting the Arab allowed his Meursault to knock on the "the door of unhappiness" (Ward 59). The door of unhappiness, however, pales in comparison to Gilbert's "door of [Meursault's] undoing" (Gilbert 39). "Unhappiness" is a simple, one-directional sentiment that leaves little up to interpretation. "Undoing" is a phenomenon that can be unique for every person; rather than being explicit here as Ward is, Gilbert decides to leave a little suspense in the form of foreshadowing. Will it be revenge from the Arab's friends that causes this undoing? Legal consequences? Unhappiness? Alas, it is the latter, which Ward is sure to explicate.

Ward keeps the advantage of understanding here by maintaining a simplistic clarity. A flaw of Gilbert's translation is that, being built off of so many connotations, it is easy to lose an implicit connotation to a word. Losing the exact meaning of "undoing" gives the false sense of a mystery that the novel was not intended to be. Ward stays conventional, sticking to the safety of unambiguous diction.

But the use of the a more colloquial speech has another purpose as well.

Using informal expressions of speech give Gilbert a more sophisticated sense of audience. He interprets a thought by Meursault as: "I hadn't done x, whereas I had done y or z" (Gilbert 74), which uses the non-literal English "x, y, z" structure with the letters as casual substitutes for nouns. Knowing that his audience is English, the use of a conversational phrase expresses a more natural thought that should be more meaningful to an English audience. Meanwhile, Ward translates the same sentence as: "I had done this and I hadn't done that" (Ward 121). Vague and not striking a familiar note. Gilbert focuses on using a familiar statement to normalize Meursault to the reader; Ward uses a simpler structure that attempts to stay consistent with the plain diction he uses throughout.

Gilbert also employs the ellipsis in a non-conventional sense to augment the flow of Meursault's thoughts to the audience. While Ward's writing is largely composed of block-paragraphs that number only two a page, Gilbert's text is broken up much more like a modern novel: dialogue is clear and all quoted directly in quotation marks, there is a liberal separation of paragraphs whenever a new idea comes into play, and there is also some rhetorical play with the informal use of the ellipsis. As Meursault contemplates his mother's death, he thinks that "the funeral will bring it home to me, put an official seal to it, so to speak. …" (Gilbert 4), with the ellipsis included verbatim into the text. Interestingly, it is not the em-dash or ellipsis directly after the text that might indicate a cut-off or trailing thought—rather, it has the complete stop of a period followed by the ellipsis. It is the caboose of a full train of thought, ready for a completely different next clause—in this case, Meursault immediately transitions from this personal reflection into the physical action of traveling to the funeral. To the reader, this creates an unmistakable break, a clearly discernible and understandable structure. No such separation is so clear in Ward's novel: the end of a paragraph is an ambiguous action, unmarked and unimportant to Ward.

A translator has free rein to interpret an original novel in his own way. In the case of Camus' book *The Stranger*, Ward's decides to focus on character and continuity, while Gilbert hones in on character and the moment. The content is the same, the meaning alike; the understanding, however, is a world apart. The translated Meursaults are not clones but doppelgängers—ghosts living in reworked interpretations. Their world is not Camus', but engineered, Americanized marionettes of the translators. Alike in stature, alike in form, different in perspective. In the end, it is up to the reader to choose a puppet to play with, a puppet to act out the life of Camus' true Meursault.

Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Knopf, 1988. Print.
Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. Toronto: Knopf, 1946. Print.