

MAILER IN TRANSLATION: *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD*

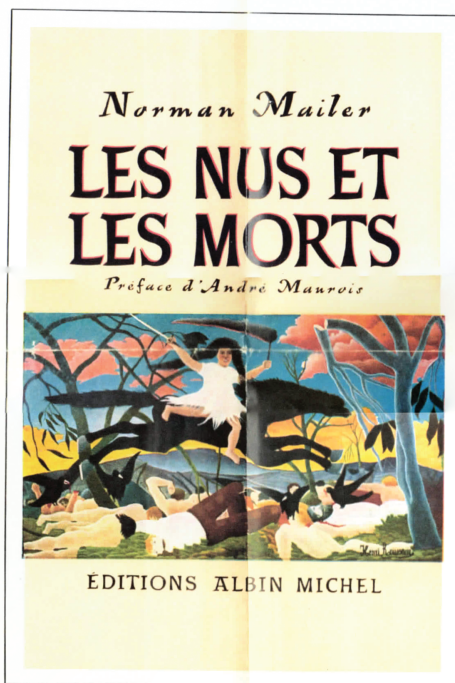
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BY DIVINE INTERVENTION, PURE CHANCE, OR KARMA, Norman Mailer and Jean Malaquais met in Paris in 1948 for the first time. It was the beginning of a fruitful friendship, one that would benefit and enrich both writers in many ways and on many different levels.

At that time, Mailer was on the threshold of fame, and Malaquais was an established “French” intellectual. The expatriate, Polish born Malaquais (*né* Wladimir Jan Pavel Malacki), had settled in France after a long period of wandering in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. A *flâneur* before the fact, he presented himself as a kind of intellectual vagabond: “Morally and intellectually I was a tramp, a companion of the dispossessed” (Lennon 100). Such a self-assessment certainly would have appealed to the anti-establishment Mailer, as it had to the French intellectual community. Fifteen years Mailer’s senior, Malaquais had learned much the hard way. Mailer, uncharacteristically self-effacing, remarked that “Malaquais had more influence on my mind than anyone I ever knew from the time we had gotten well acquainted while he was translating *The Naked and the Dead*” (Lennon 101).

By any reckoning, Malaquais had to be one of the most intelligent and fascinating people the young Norman had ever met. Primarily an autodidact, Malaquais came from a learned family: his father was a Classicist and his mother was a musician, but having left home at the age of seventeen, Malaquais had to earn his living doing manual labor and read and study on his own. Without knowing it, he had followed the educational precepts of Michel de Montaigne (1539–1592) in that he traveled before settling down to reading, books and all that is meant by “education.”

L'HOMME NU DEVANT LA MORT



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LA GUERRE JUGÉE-ET CONDAMNÉE

Malaquais is a wizard—a Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov rolled into one. Not a native speaker of either English or French, he achieves a *tour de force* in his translation of Mailer's immense novel. Malaquais faces some linguistic challenges both cultural and semantic that the two languages present. The vagabond years of Malaquais prove valuable in his translation. He understands the use of informal speech as well as that of downright vulgar vocabulary. From his experiences as a laborer in the silver mines in Provence and at Les Halles, the gigantic food market in the heart of Paris, to his friendship and correspondence with André Gide, the translator can communicate in any register. Malaquais is in command of the sophisticated nuances that the French language affords and he applies them to Mailer's narrative where appropriate.

Writing about the translation of Mailer's novel remains a daunting task; so, instead of tackling the macrocosm, the entire novel, the microcosm, a few chapters of *The Naked and the Dead*, will be examined. Reading the chapters one paragraph at time, first in English and then in French, is a revelation. It is important to remember that the first chapter recounts the night before the invasion of Anapopei. The characters in the chapter deal with their anxiety in different ways: some men are asleep or trying to sleep; one group is playing poker; one man goes on deck and reflects on his life, his mates, his fate; two men talk about their wives and fidelity or lack thereof; the final one does not appear, but Martinez is described as a veteran of many battles and permanently terrified of noise. Malaquais depicts all that occurs with complete fidelity to Mailer's text. Nonetheless, a few surprises and some challenges occur.

There are two major advantages that French affords the translator: First, Malaquais was not censored. As we well know, Mailer was constrained; he could not use the word "fuck" in all its forms: verb, noun, adjective, interrupter because of the puritanical nature of American society, and used instead a made-up word: "fug" in all its forms, which remains painfully hypocritical. It is a flaw in the novel that unfortunately provoked numerous jokes regarding the omission or distortion of the real word.

The French language has plenty of words considered "indecent," "taboo," and "vulgar," and all were allowed in the French translation. As might be expected, Malaquais takes full advantage of the opportunity to use them. This freedom represents an exercise in revenge on American publishers, Ameri-

can mores, and their complicit hypocrisy that Mailer and Malaquais must have relished.

That is not to say that no one objected to the rough vocabulary in the book. André Maurois, in his Preface to the French edition, mentions this aspect of the book when he describes *The Naked and the Dead* as “difficult, unpleasant sometimes irritating” just before he adds “but unforgettable” (Fuchs 184). Maurois comments that upon publication of the novel in England (note that it is England and not France where the problems arise) “some legions of decency were alarmed and attempted to have the book banned” (Fuchs 184). The Attorney General of England denied that demand on the grounds that “The intention to corrupt was absent and the quality of the work justified its tone” (Fuchs 184). Maurois also stresses that “the brutal and obscene” nature of the characters was “inevitable” and resembles the way French soldiers behaved and spoke in a novel written about the Dunkirk invasion, which had won the prestigious Prix Goncourt¹ (Fuchs 184).

First, the vocabulary needs to be examined. There are three verbs in French that all mean “to fuck”: “*baiser*,” “*foutre*,” “*enculer*,” and “*s’enculer*” (the reflexive form of “*enculer*”).

“*Baiser*” as a noun is innocuous and simply means a “kiss” (*le baiser*); over time, starting about in the Sixteenth Century, it came to mean sexual intercourse and is not used in polite conversation; “*foutre*” as a noun means “sperm” but as a verb it means the same as “*baiser*”; “*enculer*” also means the same as “*baiser*” but it has two extra added attractions: it refers to anal sex with “*cul*” as its root, which means “ass” and used reflexively, it can mean something you do to yourself, or something you can tell others to do to themselves. All three verbs, in one form or another, are used in Chapter 1 of the novel.

Then, there are nouns that are vulgar and essential to the narrative: one is derived from the verb “*enculer*”: “*l’enculé*” and means “asshole”; the men refer to “*les enculés*” several times. Gallagher uses the verb when referring angrily to how many times Levy is shuffling the cards (think of the motion of card shuffling and the link becomes clear): Gallagher screams, “*Arrête de les enculer et qu’on joue*,” to Mailer’s, “Let’s stop shuffling the fuggers and start playing” (7 & 21).²

Another noun, “*con*,” which is the same as the “c” word in English, is used as “pussy” when Wilson talks about the woman, the wife of a friend, with whom he had repeated sex, which he thoroughly enjoyed. However, “*con*” is

one of the most commonly used curse words in French. It is also used as an adjective and means “stupid” in an obscene way: “*il est con*” could mean “he’s fucking stupid.” The second advantage that the French translation provides over English is the use of the familiar form of the verb, the second person singular: “*tu*”; it is most appropriate in the situation the characters in Chapter 1 are in, as well as throughout the novel.

When the soldiers speak to one another, they “*tutoyer*,” which is a verb that means to use the familiar or “*tu*” form of the verb.

In French, the “*tu*” form is used with family, among students and intimates, and in prayer.³ In addition, Malaquais often contracts the form: the “*u*” in “*tu*” is dropped and elides it with the verb: instead of “*tu as*” (you have) the character speaking often says “*t’as*” (think “gonna” “wanna”), which is colloquial speech. The familiar form underscores the register of language used among the soldiers and is especially salient when men are preparing for battle, are vulnerable, and their nerves are strained. They are also equals in terms of their existential situation. Another colloquial way of speaking is to omit the first part of the negative, the “*ne*.” There are two parts to a negative in French: *ne* + verb + *pas*, so “*je n’ai pas*” (I don’t have) becomes “*j’ai pas*.” *Je “n’ai pas d’argent”* (I don’t have any money) becomes “*j’ai pas d’argent*.”

The informality of the language indicates either the class similarities among the men or the differences between the men and the officers; it also underscores camaraderie among the men. They are literally in the same boat.

On the other hand, when any of the men addresses an officer, the formal “*vous*” (second person plural) is always used. In Part 11, chapter 2, when Sergeant Croft speaks to Captain Mantelli about replacements for his squad, he and Mantelli both use “*vous*.” All officers use “*vous*” with one another and the men and officers all use “*vous*,” the formal form, when speaking to one another. Of course, “*vous*” is not only the plural form but is also the singular polite form.

One challenge for Malaquais is that there is no way to use “goddam” as an adjective in French. It is not awkward; it is just impossible. Mailer uses “goddam luck,” “goddam drinkin,” “goddam army” and they come out as “*sacrée veine*” (holy luck), “*sacrée armée*” (holy army). “*Sacré*” means “holy” (like holy Moses, holy Toledo, holy cow). So “sacred” or “holy” is used ironically—a nuance of the language. But when it comes to “goddam drinkin,” Malaquais can’t use that parallel, so he uses a whole sentence to transmit Wilson’s

thought: “... *j’en ai pourtant bu de la gnole* . . .” (with all the goddam drinkin’ I’ve done . . .) then he adds, “I still can’t remember what the stuff tastes like even when I have the bottle in my hand” (5 & 19).

Sometimes, Malaquais changes a word that Mailer uses because it is also less formal or more idiomatic. When Red thinks about the “hot nauseating breakfast” the men will get in the morning, the translator replaces the word “breakfast” (*petit déjeuner*) with “*casse-croûte*” which is more colloquial and means “break bread” (sounds Biblical in English but not in French). Malaquais also changes a verb: When Red thinks, “there was nothing to do but go from one day to the next.” He replaces “go” (*aller*) with “live” (*vivre*), which is an improvement especially given the circumstances (12 & 27).

Then there are words like “cracker” to describe Wilson, which is pretty much untranslatable; he uses “*un crétin de vantard*” which is “stupid braggart” (6 & 21); that expression misses the regional aspect of Wilson’s character and the many connotations it holds in English—at least in American usage. When Red, who is on deck, thinks about Hennessey who worries about “every gimcrack” in his life, “gimcrack” becomes the equivalent of he worries about “nails,” unimportant items like “nails”; “*les clous*” equals “nails” (14 & 31).

Another problem for Malaquais is to translate “Jap” and “Japs” since both carry negative connotations in English; moreover, the word is sometimes used as an adjective, as in “Jap artillery” then as a noun “Japs on the beach” and “those Japs.” Malaquais simply uses “*artillerie japonaise*” and “*les Japonais*.” Unlike the Germans, for whom the French have many pejorative words, the Japanese have not been a traditional enemy.

On the other hand, English has the largest vocabulary of any world language, so there are some words that do not exist in French. Malaquais navigates these instances gracefully. For example: there is no word for “giggle.” So, it becomes “*un petit rire*” (a little laugh) or no word for “grin”; “he grinned” becomes “*il sourit*,” “he smiles.” There is also no French word for “daydreaming.” Malaquais uses “*rêver*” (to dream). While the word “*la reverie*” exists in French, it still connotes more thinking and reflection than does the English “daydreaming.”

Another challenge for the translator is how to render Wilson’s southern accent. Generally speaking, it cannot be done. Malaquais does, however, use a lovely expression to indicate an accent: “*Je te le dis, il annonca à Croft, de sa*

molle voix de Meridional,” which is an exact translation of Mailer’s phrase: “I’m telling you, he said to Croft, in his soft Southern voice” (4 & 19).

Malaquais does take a stab at Gallagher’s Boston Irish accent, but that is only because the words used are cognates in English: “cards” for “*cartes*,” so he drops the “r” and gets “*caaates*.” It is important to remember that it is Levy who is dealing and he is glad to poke fun at Gallagher, who has been in an angry mood all through the game, by imitating Gallagher’s accent. These issues are trifles compared to the scope of the translator’s accomplishments, but they are important trifles that reveal close attention to detail and thoughtful choices. Ultimately, the challenges he faced, combined with the advantages afforded by the French language, help Jean Malaquais to achieve a masterful translation of Mailer’s masterpiece.

To close, I would like to cite the hauntingly sober first paragraph of the novel, first in English and then in French. It is timeless in both languages.

The Naked and the Dead

No one could sleep. When morning came, assault craft would be lowered and the first wave of troops would ride through the surf and charge ashore on the beach at Anopopei. All over the ship, all through the convoy, there was a knowledge that in a few hours some of them were going to be dead (3).

Les Nus et les Morts

Personne ne pouvait dormir. Quand le matin sera venu, les embarcations d’assaut seront mises à la mer et une première vague de troupes piquera à travers le ressac et débarquera sur la plage d’Anopopei. Dans le convoi, à bord de chaque navire, l’on savait que dans quelques heures quelques-uns seraient morts (17).

The solemnity and the elegiac tone of the passage resonate in both languages. Despite the movement implied in the scene to come, there is a profound silence that is echoed in the chapter that follows, in many ways by the men themselves, even those who speak and wake others. The mood is sober and silent in the convoy as conveyed so well by Red’s thoughts—as he is all alone on deck.

NOTES

1. *Weekend in Zuydcoote* by Robert Merrill won the Prix Goncourt in 1948.
2. The first page number refers to the page in the English edition; the second page number refers to the page in the French edition.
3. In modern English usage (except for the Quakers) the second person singular, “thou” is not used; however, it still occurs in prayers: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with **thee**, blessed art **thou** . . .”; poetry; Shakespeare; and the Bible.

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