

## From the review by Ruth Morse of *Have Mercy on us All* by Fred Vargas translated by David Bellos

The Times Literary Supplement. October 17, 2003

[...]

The translator has simplified, adapted and anglicized throughout, diluting the specificity of Vargas's well-modulated French. This is not a matter of competence, but of style choices. David Bellos's translation is so free as to amount to wholesale rewriting, at the expense of the atmosphere. Reading his prose is like watching a hastily dubbed film. No single reservation quite makes the point, which is about the overall effect. An old woman who says "Je m'en fous bien de ton fameux confort" has not said "Mod cons don't mean much to me anyway"; when Adamsberg says "il fait de la surpuissance", he is far from the slangy "he's into being the great Almighty". It matters that several of the characters are linked by their being from Brittany: here their characteristic speech (as well as some place names) have been anglicized. When the learned, aged, teacher says, "S'il doit en rester un qui se tiendra debout contre les vagues mortelles de la superstition, ce sera moi, Ducouedic, parole de Breton. Moi, et Le Guern. Et Lizbeth. Si vous voulez vous joindre a nous, vous serez le bienvenu dans notre quarteron", he is speaking in his own archaizing way.

What he is saying is very different in tone and meaning from, I've taken my stand against morbid superstition. I'll fight it on the beaches, I'll fight it in the streets, I'll never surrender! I, Ducouedic (sic), Herve, Breton by birth and obstinate by nature, will stick my finger in the dyke until my dying day! Alongside Le Guern. And Lizbeth. You are cordially invited to join the resistance.

It is not clear what legitimates Bellos's additions from Winston Churchill and the little Dutch boy. If French books are to attract anglophone readers, surely capitalizing on their Frenchness is more effective than making them seem comfortably familiar.

It is a pity, because unless you require the current fashion for extravagantly violent sadomasochistic voyeurism, car-fetishism, designer labels and haute cuisine, Fred Vargas has everything: complex and surprising plots, good pace, various and eccentric characters, a sense of place and history, individualized dialogue, wit and style.

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## Response by David Bellos

The Times Literary Supplement. October 31, 2003

Sir, - There's no disputing taste, in translation as in the other arts, but I must protest against the inaccuracies, overstatements and insults put about by Ruth Morse in her review of *Have Mercy on Us All*, by Fred Vargas (October 17).

Ruth Morse was alert enough to notice that the translation replaces some metaphors and cultural allusions with ones judged to be functionally equivalent in English.

These superficial liberties are taken - in full and lengthy consultation with the author - so as to pass on some of the fun and punch of the original without requiring readers to pre-qualify by taking an honours degree in French. But it's a great pity that your reviewer didn't. She might then have known what it is that "legitimates Bellos's addition of Churchill" to the translation of a passage, which she quotes in full, and which is a charming riff on Victor Hugo's declaration of eternal resistance to Louis-Napoleon, from a cliff-top in Guernsey.

But I don't know what, short of paying attention to the words on the page, would have stopped Morse from making her other false claims about the translation.

Let me just reassure readers that the place names in Vargas's detective fiction have not been anglicized, and that nothing in this novel has been "simplified" or "adapted". Where there are (minor) differences between

the French and the English, there are good reasons: in a couple of cases because there was a slip in the French, already corrected in the German translation; and in others because the author took the opportunity of English translation to revise or to cut. I therefore reject most vigorously Ms Morse's claim that my translation amounts to "wholesale rewriting" by the translator. If I may quote the reviewer's own innovative phrasing, her assertion "strains credulity" to the limit. But she really gives her game away when she says that "no single reservation quite makes the point". Certainly not the three examples that she gives of rather clever English transpositions of Fred Vargas's French.

What is most objectionable about Morse's style of denigration is its assumption of superior knowledge. Your reviewer asserts, for example, that "the several Breton characters" in the novel (actually, there are precisely two) have a "characteristic speech" which the translation has somehow "anglicized". She sounds as though she knows her French onions, but she doesn't. There is no conventional form of written French which represents Breton origins - absolutely nothing like the "och ayes" and so forth which in English suggest Scottishness, for instance.

The Breton sailor in this novel talks like a sailor, and the Breton teacher talks like a bookworm. That they are both Breton is not insignificant to the plot, but it has no incidence on the language they use. Ms Morse's strictures on this point are based on a linguistic fantasy which the man in the Montparnasse omnibus, not to mention Morse's colleagues at the University of Paris, could easily have dispelled. What Morse also fails to recognize is that even if some form of conventional "Breton-speak" did exist in written French, Fred Vargas would not have used it. The verbal tics Vargas gives to some of her characters - Marie-Belle's "automatiquement", Mane's "treve de conneries", for instance are not real turns of speech at all, but linguistic fabrications.

Similarly, there is nothing you could call "authentic" about Vargas's description of the Paris through which her characters move. You never find out exactly where the Brigade criminelle's headquarters are, just as you never see a Renault car nor any trademarked product. When Morse grumbles about the loss of "atmosphere" and local colour in my translation, I can only conclude that she hasn't read the original - or the translation - with sufficient attention or sensitivity.

To conclude her attempt at demolishing my work, Morse makes the following pronouncement: "If French books are to attract anglophone readers, surely capitalizing on their Frenchness is more effective than making them seem comfortably familiar". It's not easy to unscramble the meaning from the syntax of this pontification. But if Morse means that what Lawrence Venuti calls "foreignizing translations" have been more effective in bringing English readers to French texts, then she is wrong, as a matter of historical fact, as far as post-war Britain is concerned. But if she means, as I suspect she does, that pernicky literalism ought to be more effective, then she should perhaps spend more time putting this "ought" into published practice than sniping at translators with a kindlier view of their readers.

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## Response by Ruth Morse

*The Times Literary Supplement*. November 7, 2003

Sir, - Readers will have been able to judge for themselves, from the examples given in my review, of the latitude David Bellos allowed himself in translating Fred Vargas's *Have Mercy on Us All*. In his long and intemperate letter (October 31), Professor Bellos does not directly address the striking divergences from the original that these examples illustrate, but is pleased to describe his versions as "rather clever English transpositions" of the French. Readers can consult the passages which I quoted in full: no one but Bellos could describe the differences as "minor", given the substantial alterations and importations clearly evident, and I rather wonder whether anyone but he would describe his versions as "clever". Thus, to take just one further example, when Commissaire Principal Adamsberg says he doesn't think his "divisionnaire est dans un extreme abbatement . . . il aurait plutot tendance a . . . abbatre les autres", Bellos's version has him alluding to (the very Protestant) Pilgrim's Progress: "I doubt the Super has fallen into a slough of despond . . . he's more inclined to throw other people into a pile of shit". It is mere bluster to suggest that anyone who expresses reservations about this degree of rewriting must be committed to "pernickety literalism": no

experienced translator, and no experienced reader of translations, for that matter, would be likely to take “pernickety literalism” as their ideal, as Bellos must know. (And I hope it is not too pernickety to insist that there are not precisely two Breton characters in this book; that would be to overlook the ancestral Breton crier and the Breton ship-owner, in addition to Ducouedic and Le Guern.) I said explicitly that “this is not a matter of competence but of style choices”.

Professor Bellos chooses to try to present it as a matter of competence, and my alleged lack thereof. I shall ignore his *ad feminam* comments, but it should just be recorded that not only was my review a warm recommendation of Vargas’s novel (the translation of which I read attentively in both proof and published form, though with mounting consternation), but an earlier piece by me on recent French crime fiction (May 23) drew on Fred Vargas’s entire oeuvre with admiration. It would be a particular pity if David Bellos’s unjustified aspersions and complaints should distract attention from the claims of an interesting and attractive writer who is, I hope we could both agree, still too little known among an anglophone readership.