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Monkey Talk

There is a wonderful passage in the Chinese novel *Monkey* where Tripitaka after his Illumination sees his discarded earthly body drifting downstream: "Tripitaka stared at it in consternation. Monkey laughed. "Don't be frightened, Master," he said, "that's you." And Pigsy said, "It's you, it's you". Sandy clapped his hands. "It's you, it's you", he cried. The ferryman too joined in the chorus. "There you go", he cried. "My best congratulations." In her paraphrase of the book (1930) Helen Hayes says, 'A dead body drifted by them, and the Master saw it with fear. But the Monkey, ever before him, said: "Master, do not be alarmed. It is none other than your own!" The Pilot also rejoiced as he turned to say, "This body was your own! May you know joy!"'

Vital (in the original) is the repetition of the two simple words *shih ni* 是你, 'It's you', and if one gets bored with the repetition and represents the words as only having been spoken by two people, it seems to me that one spoils the whole passage. The second thing to note is that when the ferryman says 'My best congratulations' (*k'o'ho* 可賀) he is using the ordinary everyday formula of congratulation that one would use if one met an official who had had a rise, and that it is with whimsical intention that it is applied to Tripitaka's advance from ordinary human status to Buddhahood. Helen Hayes's 'May you know joy!' so far from being a banal formula (which is what is required) is something that no one has ever said to anybody.

This brings us to the question of voices. When translating prose dialogue one ought to make the characters say things that people talking English could conceivably say. One ought to hear them talking, just as a novelist hears his characters talk. That sounds obvious and undeniable. But it does not seem to be the principle upon which translators, whether from Far Eastern or European languages, generally work.

—ARTHUR WALEY
 "Notes on Translation"
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