

John is Easy to Please
Encounters with the Written
and the Spoken Word

1971

A LITTLE WHILE AGO, WHEN I WAS LUNCHING with a friend in the Delegates' Dining Room at the the United Nations headquarters, on the East River, a stranger came up to our table and greeted my companion. "Hello, George, what's new with you?" my friend said.

"What's *new*?" George retorted, in a loud, raspy voice. "Why, Bongandanga, Bokenda, Lingunda, Balangala, Bolomba, Lulonga, Belondo, Bomputu, Imbonga, Putubumba, Lualaba, Sofumwango, Bolongo, Benungu, Basankusu, Bulukutu, Bokungu, Kingana, Tumbamami, Popokabaka, Ingololo, Bululundu, Mambirima, Musokatanda, Kamatanda, Mulungwishi, Kintobongo, Mukulakulu, Katentania, Tshimbumbula." At the end of this recitation—or, rather, routine—which I recognized somewhere in the middle as a list of names of Congolese towns, he roared with laughter. The newcomer had bright, brown eyes in a pale, round face, made rounder by a prominent forehead and a receding hairline. He was of average height and huskily built, but he didn't give the impression of being a fat man, perhaps because he talked with his whole body—though less in the manner of an

actor than in the manner of a prankster. My friend introduced him to me as George Sherry, and after some polite exchanges Sherry walked away.

From my friend I learned that Sherry, who was thirty-eight, was a senior interpreter in the United Nations Interpretation Section, of which he had been a member since 1947, and that soon he would be transferring out of interpretation to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, to work on political affairs under Ralph Bunche; in fact, my friend said that Sherry was already spending some of his time drafting cables and diplomatic notes for the Secretary-General's Congo staff. Sherry originally joined the Interpretation Section as a *précis* writer and an editor, but he switched to interpreting almost immediately; now his colleagues regarded him as one of the two or three truly superlative interpreters in memory. Sherry made his mark within days of his arrival. At that time, the U.N. was shifting from the time-consuming system of consecutive interpretation, in which successive interpreters redelivered the original speech in different languages, to simultaneous interpretation, in which the speech would be converted into several other languages sentence by sentence as it went along. Even after the changeover had begun, many of the professionals—who were mostly relics of the League of Nations, and loved remaking delegates' speeches—dismissed the whole idea of a simultaneous transmutation of language, especially if there was no advance text of a speech to work from; the human mind, they said, was incapable of working at such speed. They still saw consecutive interpretation as a great advance over translation

(a term interpreters apply only to written conversion of language), and to them the simultaneous method seemed as farfetched as the four-minute mile seemed to ordinary men before Roger Bannister. Then Sherry appeared and began successfully running the four-minute mental mile. His incredible linguistic gifts and dexterous voice took the professionals by surprise, and almost at once that voice started talking English for Andrei Yanuarievich Vishinsky, who was the Soviet Union's permanent delegate to the U.N. from 1945 to 1949 and again in 1953 and 1954. Vishinsky was one of the most difficult speakers to interpret for, because he never followed his text and was given to making rapid speeches full of literary allusions, biting wit, and violent outbursts. For six wordy Cold War years, Sherry had so many opportunities to simultaneously interpret Vishinsky that finally the U.S.S.R. began requesting him for many important meetings, and Sherry started receiving poison-pen letters that accused him of being a soulmate of Vishinsky's. Although Sherry spoke with an almost aggressively American accent, the audience so easily identified the voice with Vishinsky's fulminations that the Secretary-General himself started receiving letters that urged him to get rid of the Communist's twin.

"Without simultaneous interpretation, the U.N. would have to quintuple its meeting time—a human impossibility—and without people like Sherry delegates from different countries couldn't speak to each other," my friend said. "I remember listening to Vishinsky through George's voice. It really was unnerving. You know, Vishinsky made a profession of extemporaneous

virtuosity. Well, George's voice worked like an automatic reflex, until one felt that Vishinsky was a double-headed, double-voiced, bilingual monster, simultaneously interpreting himself."

Soon after meeting Sherry, I looked up a few facts about the men who, sentence by sentence, within the space of a few seconds, turn a speech in English, French, Spanish, Russian, or Chinese—the official tongues of the U.N.—into any of the four other languages. I learned that an applicant for the job of interpreter was required to know three of the five languages of the U.N.; that senior interpreters received (before taxes and other deductions) about sixteen thousand dollars a year; that during the plenary sessions of the General Assembly there were altogether approximately seventy interpreters at work; that the interpreters ranged in age from twenty-eight to sixty-one; and that men outnumbered women two to one. Even within an international body like the United Nations, the interpreters were remarkable for their diversity of background. Almost all of them had been bilingual from early childhood, thanks to foreign governesses, foreign schooling, or parents of mixed nationalities. (One interpreter was born in Buenos Aires of a Swiss mother and a Chinese father; another, who eventually married an Australian, had a Russian mother and a French father.) More than half of them had American citizenship, but some held French, Chinese, Argentine, Mexican, English, Belgian, Chilean, Canadian, or Australian passports. Before joining the interpreting service, some of them were teachers, journalists, lawyers, civil servants, film editors, opera producers, or police-

men. To discover exactly how one interpreter had developed, I called Sherry up, and he invited me to lunch at his home the following Sunday.