

Christine PAGNOULLE*
University of Liège

The "Voice" of E.K. Brathwaite into French: Grappling with the Untranslatable**

In order to be as close as possible to the original text, in order to capture and render a maximum of what the poem conveys, translation of poetry demands adaptation and re-creation, if only in the form of compensation and displacement. This radical paradox applies with particular force to the kind of poetry written by E. Kamau Brathwaite: a poetry that is punning, recessive, allusive and highly oral, a poetry in which the use of sound and rhythm calls for the chanting quality of the poet's rendering of his work.

In his essay *la traduction et la lettre* (1) Antoine Berman writes "L'acte éthique consiste à reconnaître et à recevoir l'Autre en tant qu'Autre" (p.88). The prerequisite is that we translators must not change anything to the original text in order to make it fit the target language. We mustn't "accommodate the text to our own language. We mustn't conquer and colonize, we should discover and serve. Brathwaite is "l'Autre" with a vengeance. His voice is altogether different from what we are used to hearing, mainly because of the creative dislocations he boldly forces upon language, or upon languages. Indeed he blends two languages: the emerging "voice" of the Caribbean which he describes in his essay *History of the Voice* (2) and what may be called "standard English", the idiom that has been polished by Western writers for centuries. Brathwaite is a West-Indian of African descent. He claims and proclaims this complex identity. But in many ways Brathwaite's roots are also steeped in European culture, and this too he acknowledges. His education, even before he went to Cambridge in order to read history, was patterned on exactly the same curriculum as that of pupils in the metropolis. He was fed on Chaucer and Shakespeare, on Keats and Tennyson, and on the Bible. Besides, he is a historian, and this partly determines his understanding of how the disintegrating expansion of Europe has destroyed and shaped the fate of the Caribbean.

The few considerations I intend to develop should qualify Antoine Berman's emphatic demand for literal adherence to the text while also pointing to what I think is essentially valid in his insistence that translators must recognize "the Other" and not compulsively try to make the translated text sound familiar:

A propos de la traduction, on parle depuis toujours de *fidélité* et d'*exactitude*. Ce sont deux mots fondamentaux, deux *Grundwörter* qui désignent l'expérience de la traduction... Fidélité et exactitude renvoient toutes deux à une certaine tenue de l'homme vis-à-vis de lui-même, d'autrui, du monde et de l'existence. Et vis-à-vis, bien sûr, des textes également. Dans son domaine, le traducteur est possédé de l'esprit de fidélité et d'exactitude. C'est là sa passion, et c'est une passion éthique, non pas littéraire ou esthétique.(3)

While this may be true, and indeed gratifying, it glosses over the real difficulties that translators, and especially translators of poetry, often encounter.

* Along with Dr Juliette Dor, Christine Pagnouille teaches a course in literary translation for post-graduate students.

** The present article is adapted from a paper read at the F.I.T. Congress held at Maastricht in August 1987.

l'élaboration préalable d'une théorie générale des catégories mais d'autre part elle apparaît comme le lieu privilégié et quasi exclusif où se manifeste et fonctionne pleinement le processus relationnel décrit par ces catégories. D'où un certain rapport de circularité entre la sémiotique et la théorie des catégories." in CARONTI E., *L'action du signe*, Cabay, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982, p. 13-14.

- (10) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.228), 1978, p. 121.
- (11) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.229), 1978, p. 121-122.
- (12) MORIS CH., *Foundations of the theory of signs*, 1938 repris dans «Writings on the general theory of signs», Mouton, The Hague-Paris, 1971, p. 19, 21-22.
- (13) Nous n'entendons pas ici définir trois branches distinctes de la sémiotique (à ce sujet cf. DELEDALLE G., *Théorie et pratique du signe*, Payot, 1979, p.70 et sv) mais simplement reléguer les différentes tensions qui l'animent.
- (14) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.274), 1978 (p. 147).
- (15) GROUPE II (DUBOIS J., EDELINE F., KLINGENBERG J.M., MINGUET P., PIRE F., TRINON H.), *Rhétorique générale*, Seuil, Paris, 1982, p. 23-24.
- (16) Ibidem, p.24.
- (17) FLAHAULT F., *La parole intermédiaire*, Seuil, Paris, 1978, p.28
- (18) GROUPE II, *Rhétorique générale*, op. cit., p.24.
- (19) FLAHAULT F., *La parole intermédiaire*, op. cit., p.36.
- (20) BEVENISTE E., «De la subjectivité dans le langage», in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, tome 1, Tel Gallimard, Paris, 1966, p.259.
- (21) BAURILLARD J., «Requiem pour les media» in *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Gallimard, Paris, 1972, p.220.
- (22) Cf le commentaire de Deledalle in PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1978, p. 246-252. Cela ne signifie pas néanmoins que la dimension intersubjective en soit absente.
- (23) «(...) par "semiosis", j'entends (...) une action ou influence qui est ou implique la coopération de trois sujets, tels qu'un signe, son objet et son interprétant, cette influence tri-relative n'étant en aucune façon réductible à des actions entre paires», PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1978, p. 139.
- (24) «sujets» parce que pour Peirce les «éléments» du signes sont des relatifs (des relata).
- (25) PERCE C.S., *Lettre à Lady Welby* du 23 décembre 1908, rapportée par Deledalle in PERCE C.S., 1978, op. cit., p.54.
- (26) cf le commentaire de Deledalle G. in PERCE C.S., 1978, op. cit., p. 241.
- (27) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (1.321), 1978 (p. 93).
- (28) VAN LER H., *l'animal signé*, De Visser, Rhode-St-Genèse, 1980, p. 37.
- (29) Ce faisant, nous suivons l'utile suggestion qui nous a été faite par J.P. Meunier et qui constituera la trame de notre interprétation des classes de signe. Cf à ce sujet MEUNIER J.P., *Analyse des langages iconiques*, notes de cours 86-87, DCS, U.C.L., Louvain-la-Neuve, p. 25-35.
- (30) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.275).
- (31) VERON E., *La sémiotique et son monde*, in *Langages* n°58, Larousse, Paris, juin 1980, p.67.
- (32) cf Bateson G., *Vers une écologie de l'esprit*, Seuil, Vol.1, 1977(p.33-34, 148-150) et Vol.2, 1980 (p.170).
- (33) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (1.357), 1978 (p. 72-73).
- (34) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.254), 1978 (p. 179-180).
- (35) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (1.313), 1978 (p. 125).
- (36) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (1.425), 1978 (p. 92).
- (37) cf sur ce sujet VERHAEGEN P., *Signe et autoréférence. Essai de modélisation de la communication sur base de la théorie sémiopragmatique de C.S.Peirce*, thèse de Doctorat, Département de Communication Sociale, U.C.L., L.L.N., février 1988, p.224-250.
- (38) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.263), 1978 (p. 183).
- (39) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (5.93), 1978 (p. 102).
- (40) DELEDALLE G., *Théorie et pratique du signe*, op. cit., p. 19.
- (41) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.301-302), 1978 (p. 165-166).
- (42) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (5.474), 1978 (p. 129).
- (43) PERCE C.S., op. cit., 1974 (2.95), 1978 (p. 142-143).

The complexity of the translation process will be briefly illustrated by specific problems encountered in the translation of two poems. Extensive extracts are to be found at the end of the article.

In Kingston in the Kingdom of this World (4) I shall consider three kinds of difficulty: playing on sounds, altering grammatical forms, retaining allusions.

In lines 17-18 "croak" is the proper English verb for the noise made by frogs, and "creak", while being an attested verb, plays on the nursery rhyme alternation of /l/ and /ou/ sounds which we also find in French ("Que le Grand Cric me croque"). If we are not to invent verbs (and it should be noted that for all his inventiveness Brathwaite hardly ever actually invents a word) the effect is impossible to achieve with such neatness in French "crissent" and "coassement" offer only a weak echo of the original sound effect. Yet there is an echo, and distortion is minimal. Another problem of the same kind is raised in line 67 "these bleaching lips bearing obscenities". We have to look for two words in French that would offer a similar echo, but also make sure that we get their meaning right. If "blear" had been used in the sense of "blur", then "ces lèvres éteintes étouffant des obscénités" (printed version) might have been acceptable. But "blear" here means "blare": what the poet had in mind was the kind of distorted sound produced through loudspeakers. So perhaps "blèmes" and "brillant"?

Incidentally, it seems to me that the translator of a living author should ask his advice whenever possible. The writer may not know the target language, but he is in a position to explain, and understanding is an essential component in the translator's job.

In some cases different ways of dealing with words and of reacting to linguistic forms in English and in French lead to adaptations. I suspect that such adaptations would be censured by Berman, but the point is that each language has its own strategies to achieve similar effects and that a translation could hardly be called "fidèle" if it estranged where no estrangement is intended, or vice-versa. The most striking (and the most frequent) transformation concerns present participles or more generally "-ing forms". The occurrences mentioned have been debated a lot and remain controversial. In line 5 "drifting" becomes "à la dérive" instead of "dérivant"; in line 27 "crossing" becomes "au passage" instead of "traversant"; in line 30 "healing" becomes "remède" instead of "guérissant". One reason for the change is that the present participle in French is necessarily related to a noun, whereas the English "-ing form" can be used as a noun on its own, so that "crossing" for instance, has a far greater autonomy than "traversant", a form which immediately begs the question: who or what is crossing?

Kingston in the Kingdom of this World is pervaded with biblical language and references to African/Caribbean culture. As the latter appear in a standard diction they do not offer major translation difficulties. Most allusions to the Scriptures are straightforward too, and do not raise any problem other than the risk that the French-speaking reader, not being so familiar with the Bible as most English-speakers, will miss some of them. There is, however, a definite difficulty in line 2 "and I suffer the little children". This is in fact an incomplete quotation, which the reader/listener is expected to trace at once, from the Gospel instruction "Suffer the little children to come unto me... for of such is the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16, cf Matt. 19:14). The corresponding French phrase, however, is not "souffrez que les petits enfants viennent à moi", but "laissez venir à moi les petits enfants". But "laissez" is much less connotated than "souffrez". So what should be preferred? Should we say "et je souffre les petits enfants" or "et je laisse venir à moi les petits enfants"? The determining element here is that "je souffre les petits enfants" will be felt as only anomalous. The reader may understand, rightly, that this means "I suffer for", "I am in pain because of", as well as "I tolerate", "I am ready to welcome" but he will not be in a position to trace any external justification for the anomalous construction, whereas, clearly, there is one. We can note that the phrase is repeated and amplified further in the poem, in lines 35-8. By translating "je laisse venir" we

lose an explicit reference to suffering, but we retain the allusion; we weaken the text, but we retain what some would call its "intertextuality".

Mont Blanc, that towering eleventh poem in the splendid new sequence *X/Self* (5) offers rather more acute translation problems, as indeed most poems in this latest sequence. I shall only consider two: porte-manteaux words and dislocated words.

A frequent device is the use of words that suggest others, so that two meanings both to be reconciled. "Oven" in line 4 suggests the (expected) "over". "Oven" is both puzzling (how can a glacier be an oven?) and right in Brathwaite's perspective since he sees that legendary mountain as a kind of matrix for conquering imperialistic Europe. In the essay he read at the 1984 Poetry Festival at Leuven he says:

Mount Blanc is, to me, the centre of Europe. It is their holy mountain: this hub of white around which European history revolves... when the mountain of history becomes "active", as it were; as Mt Blanc "rises", as it were, and becomes "illuminated", as it were; so do the areas around it sink and become darker, shift away or lean towards; begin to slide and flow, as it were, in a counter-movement of equilibrium: the steppes running from Russia, the Rhone and the Rhine and the Danube (dan); the Caspian and the Adriatic, la Manche and the Mediterranean; the Lowlands of the Scheldt; even the cold blue fords of Scandinavia, the mountains of the moon and the Sahara... they all move, alter, shift, change... (6).

So Mont Blanc is indeed an oven in which Europe is baked. Another word in which echoes raised problems is "film". "Film" is a current mispronunciation for "flim", especially frequent in the Caribbean; but the word recalls "filmsy" and thus suggests the deceiving, deceptive quality of recorded pictures. Unfortunately French has no word that would be as conveniently close in sound as to immediately call up "flim". So in line 56 "the film crew camera already closing in" becomes "déjà dans le cadre des caméras poudre aux yeux".

A device Brathwaite often uses consists in splitting one word into two at the end of a line or even of a group of lines and leaving the reader to construct meaning out of two different, sometimes conflicting elements. A recurring instance throughout the sequence, is "harm/attan", the desiccating wind that blows from the desert and brings to harm. The device is by no means new or limited to English usage. There are famous instances of it in students' ribald chanting or in some of Bérart's songs (7). But Brathwaite has given it a new twist.

Because of the technique used and of the respective structures of the two languages the last four lines of the poem are almost impossible to translate. "Eye/less", eyeless is synonymous with blind (as in *Eyeless in Gaza*, the words from Milton's *Samson Agonistes* that Huxley used as a title for one of his novels) but neither "sans yeux", "sans vue", or "non-voyant" will do; the first line has to end on something positive, followed by a negation in the next line. Similarly, while lines 63-66 follow an almost normal word order in English (albeit with rather unexpected compounds), a French translation will either violate the way meaning is gradually built or alter the French syntax so deeply that we end up with nonsense verse, which it is not in English. "Cette montagne au versant telle du gaz en ascension aveugle" or "cet oeil sans montée gaz face montagne" are equally misleading as translations. Meaning cannot be disembodied but a strictly literal adherence to the text also destroys the original intention. Again we have to settle for some compromise.

Whatever the translator's good will and ethical passion there are thus "indomitable" obstacles to a faithful and accurate rendering of the original. True, as we have seen, meaning completely "disrobed", bereaved of the sound environment that contributes to making it, bears little resemblance to what the poem expresses. But on the other hand the violation of linguistic conventions in the target language that a strictly literal translation would often require leads to a distortion of the poem which is just as bad. Whatever our reluctance, compromises have to be negotiated, and the leaning of our compromise can often be determined with the poet's help.

"Kingston in the Kingdom of this World" (extracts)

The wind blows on the hillside
and i suffer the little children
i remember the lilies of the field
the fish swim in their shoals of silence
our flung nets are high wet clouds, drifting

5

... ..

here where the frogs creak where there is only the
croak of starlight
he is reduced
he is reduced
he is reduced

17

to a bundle of rags
a broken stick
that will never whistle through
fingerstops into the music of flutes
that will never fling nets white sails
crossing

25

gospel was a great wind freedom of savannas
gospel was a great mouth telling thunder of heroes
like water in claypots, healing

30

this reduction wilts the flower
weakens the water
coarsens the lips
fists at the bars, shake rattle and hammers
at the locks

35

suffer the little children
suffer the rose gardens
suffer the dark clouds howling for bread
suffer the dead fish poisoned in the lake

... ..

but

i am reduced
i am reduced
i am reduced

61

to these black eyes
this beaten face
these bleaching lips blearing obscenities

65

"Kingston dans le Royaume de ce monde"

Le vent souffle sur la colline
et je laisse venir les petits enfants
je me souviens des lys des champs
les poissons nagent en bancs de silence
nos filets lancés sont de hauts nuages humides, à la dérive

5

... ..

ici où les grenouilles crissent où il n'y a que le
coassement des étoiles
il est réduit
il est réduit
il est réduit

17

à un tas de haillons
un bâton brisé
qui jamais ne sifflera musicale
de flûte à travers les trous
qui jamais ne lancera de filets voiles blanches
au passage

25

évangile était un grand vent liberté de savanes
évangile était une grande bouche contant tonnerre de héros
évangile était une caresse fraîche chaude de soleil
comme eau en jarres d'argile, remède

30

cette réduction flétrit la fleur
affadit l'eau
épaissit les lèvres
poings aux barreaux, secouent ébranlent martèlent aux verrous

35

laissez venir les petits enfants
laissez les roses
laissez les nuages sombres hurlant de faim
laissez les poissons empoisonnés flottant sur le lac

... ..

mais

je suis réduit
je suis réduit
je suis réduit

60

à ces yeux noirs
ce visage battu
ces lèvres biêmes brillant des obscénités

65

"Mont Blanc" (extracts)		"Mont Blanc"	
Rome burns and our slavery begins		Rome brûle et notre esclavage commence	
In the alps oven of Europe	5	dans les alpes four de l'Europe	5
glacier of god chads opposite		glacier d'or divin face aux tchads	
...	
volt crackle and electricity it has invented buchenwald nagasaki and napalm	15	volt grésillement électricité il a inventé buchenwald nagasaki et napalm	15
it is the frozen first atomic bomb its factories blaze forth bergs and avalanches		il est la première bombe atomique congelée ses usines pulvérisent bergs et avalanches	
its unships sail down rhine down rhone down po down dan down tiber		ses non-navires déjà descendent rhin et rhone descendent po et dan descendent tibre	
to the black sea dead to the world to the red sea of isaias		jusqu'à la mer noire morte au monde à la mer rouge d'Esaië	
...	
as it rises		quand il s'élève	
chad sinks	30	le tchad s'enfonce	30
sa hara wakes out slowly		le sa hara se réveille lentement	
the dry snake of the harm attan the harmattan reaches into our wells into our smiles in	35	le serpent sec des armes attan du harmattan s'introduit dans nos puits dans nos sourires dans	35
to our cook ing pot oil in		nos casse roles huilées dans	
to the water re flecting our walls in		l'eau re flétant nos murs dans	
to the bone of the mutton in		l'os du gigot dans	
to our dry gully eyes	40	nos ravins d'yeux asséchés	40
...	
black bladders of dried milk hung haggard from my mannequin files dying into crevices of mouths from all the fertile places	55	vieilles vessies de lait en poudre pendues penaudés à mon mannequin mouches mourant dans les crevasses de bouches venant de tous les lieux fertiles	55
with only memories of nipple suck suck suck ing their blistered lips the film crew cameras already closing in		avec seulement le souvenir de tétons suç suç suç ant leurs lèvres gercées dans le cadre déjà des caméras poudre aux yeux	
like buzz like buzzards on this moonscape manscape in slow motion		comme buses comme busards sur ce paysage lunaire cette terre des hommes au ralenti	
...	
this eye less rise		cet oeil aveugle as	
ing gas face mountain	65	cension de gaz face montagne	65
250		251	

Notes techniques

Henri Fadeur
Logopède

Le développement cognitif du tout jeune enfant Observations sur l'acquisition du langage oral

Dès logopèdes à la crèche.... une idée curieuse au premier abord. Une jeune mère de mes amies y réagit assez vivement. Elle évoque le fameux docteur Knock qui affirmait que la santé est l'illusion d'un malade qui s'ignore, et convainquait ainsi une ville entière de s'aliter.

A dire vrai, l'image du logopède que le public connaît le mieux est celle de thérapeute des troubles du langage oral et écrit. Pour les populations jeunes, hormis l'aide précoce aux déficients auditifs, son espace d'intervention coïncide avec celui de l'école. Il est appelé en scène là où se manifeste une désadaptation, et se retire en coulisses dès que l'enfant a repris son autonomie. En-deçà de la frontière du langage constitué, chez les tout-petits, sa présence ne se justifierait pas. Dans cette zone réputée floue où le langage verbal émerge et se structure, la notion de pathologie, voire de simple retard n'aurait guère de sens.

Pourtant, J.-F. Rondal renseigne dans les caractéristiques du retard de langage, que «les premiers mots sont souvent apparus tardivement, vers 24 mois ou plus» (1). Un réseau de petits détails qui attirent l'attention des parents peut indiquer un trouble en voie de constitution. Ici, une intervention précoce préviendrait peut-être une maladaptation scolaire ultérieure. Mais si l'intervention du logopède n'est jamais trop précoce, elle doit s'appuyer sur un bilan approfondi des possibilités de l'enfant, de son niveau de maturité intellectuelle, afin de la corréler avec le retard de développement du langage.

Nous avons eu l'occasion de travailler dans une pouponnière faisant partie d'une institution pour enfants du juge. Les enfants y vivaient en groupes de dix à quinze individus environ. Une équipe composée de psychologues, d'un pédo-psychiatre, de puéricultrices, éducateurs et logopèdes, collaborait en vue de poser les diagnostics et orienter si nécessaire les enfants vers tel ou tel type de thérapie.

Nous étions souvent amené à examiner des bambins en-deçà de trois ans et qui manifestaient un retard flagrant du développement du langage dans ses divers aspects: qualité de l'articulation, structure des énoncés, qualité de la compréhension, et globalement, investissement de l'outil en lui-même.

Deux possibilités d'interprétation nous semblaient possibles: soit les insuffisances du langage participaient d'un retard intellectuel général, soit ce développement pouvait se révéler satisfaisant et il fallait isoler le retard de la langage comme lié à des troubles des relations socio-affectives.

Un problème supplémentaire était posé par les difficultés d'établir une anamnèse satisfaisante sur base de dossiers à caractère médical ou administratif et de contacts problématiques avec la famille. Notre diagnostic logopédique devait donc s'appuyer d'abord sur l'observation de l'enfant en situation de vie quotidienne, puis d'examen.

NOTES

- (1) Antoine Berman, "la traduction et la lettre", in *Les tours de Babel*, Mauvezin, Trans-Europ-Repress, 1985, pp. 32-150
- (2) E.K. Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: the Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, New Beacon Books, 1984.
- (3) Berman, *op.cit.*, p. 87.
- (4) "Kingston in the Kingdom of this World" first appeared in book form in a collection called *Third World Poems* (1983). It is also the first of the four poems in the sequence *The Visibility Trigger/Le détonateur de visibilité*, translated by Maria-Francesca Mollica and Christine Pagnouille, Leuvense Schrijversaktie/Cahiers de Louvain 59, 1986.
- (5) E.K. Brathwaite, *X/Self*, OUP, 1987. "Mont Blanc" has also been reproduced in *Poetry Review* 6,3, along with my translation into French and a commentary on the sequence, pp. 33-38.
- (6) "Metaphors for Underdevelopment A Proem for Herman Cortez", in *Sixth European Poetry Festival*, essays and poems selected and edited by Eugène Van Isterbeek, Leuvense Schrijversaktie, 1984, pp. 48-49.
- (7) Think of "La bureaucrate": "elle fait des bonds/bons de livraisons"...