

The *Négraille's* Testament: Translating *Black-Label*

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Black-Label, Léon-Gontran Damas's book-length poem published in 1956, is a text that begs for translation because of its sheer literary power, its long-lasting topicality and not least because of the comparative neglect affecting one of the three founders of the *Négritude* movement.¹ Damas was the 'rasta' of the *Négritude* movement, the most radically opposed to systems, schools and exclusions of any kind. He was corresponding with writers such as John LaRose or Andrew Salkey, and dreamt, half a century before Glissant, of anthologies of the African diaspora beyond linguistic, geographical and colour demarcations.

This chapter discusses the text in relation to the English translation we have produced.² It first examines Damas's critical position within the *Négritude* movement and the complex achievement of this four-part poem; next, it shows how the pervasive sense of uncertainty related to the condition of exile affects place, time and the identity of the figures in the text, which inevitably is echoed in the translation; finally, it comments on various

¹ Musicians and rappers have found inspiration in Damas's work. See, for instance, painter and songwriter Bernard Ascal (2006). The stage too has been a valuable tool for publicizing Damas's poetry (for instance, AWA productions, 'Léon-Gontran Damas a franchi la ligne'). See Gyssels, 2010.

² The authors of this chapter, with the help of Femi Ojo-Ade, author of the only monograph on Damas in English (see Ojo-Ade, 1993).

aspects of the text from the translator's point of view, namely, the effect of Caribbean references, the rhythmic significance of repetitions and enumerations, departures from standard language and the difficulties raised by rhyming lines and idiomatic phrases.

Black-Label is a kind of *circumfession* (to use a concept coined by Derrida):³ a complex piece of poetry in which Damas blends a decidedly individual dimension with the collective destiny of his people of mixed Amerindian, African and European origins, against the backdrop of ongoing discrimination against the '*négraille*'. Both deeply personal and universal, private and public, the poem combines poignant memories and a sense of anguished pointlessness and tragic displacement with a sweeping apprehension of history leading to deep-seated rebellion against all forms of injustice. As Robert Goffin (1972: 10) puts it, Damas 'anoblit [la résistance de sa race exploitée] de ses chants revendicateurs. Il livre sa colère en mots de feu. Il brasse son émoi en poèmes qui expriment l'âme noire elle-même'.⁴

Belated Recognition

While Damas remains the least studied of the three cofounders of *Négritude*, his poetry might well be the most provocative and anti-colonial. Overshadowed in most essays and anthologies devoted to the movement by his Senegalese and Martinican fellow writers,⁵ Damas deserves renewed academic and public attention,⁶ especially since some critics have misunderstood his work. For Richard Serrano, for instance, Damas has been too loyal to French assimilation politics and to the Vichy regime,⁷ while Biringanine Ndagano systematically plays down Damas's collective commitment.⁸ Furthermore, Ndagano calls Damas a '*Nègre tricolore*' [French-flag Negro], a slanderous label which is fortunately corrected by new approaches to Damas's writing,

³ See Derrida, 1991.

⁴ 'Damas's songs of protest give nobility to the resistance of his exploited race. He conveys his wrath in words of fire. He stirs his emotions in poems that reflect the very soul of Black people'. Translated by the authors.

⁵ Some of the most striking and valuable studies on *Négritude* and its posterity discuss Césaire and Senghor, and barely mention Damas, as also noted by Edwards (2003).

⁶ An opinion shared by Christian Filostrat, who knew Damas at Howard University. See Filostrat, 2008.

⁷ See Serrano, 2005: 154.

⁸ See Ndagano, 2000: 72. However, in 2008, the same critic published a collection of essays on Damas and asserted in his introduction that Damas had been misunderstood in his own country (see Ndagano, 2008: 16–17).

such as those offered by Catherine John (2003), Laurence Porter (2007) and Bart Miller (2010; 2012).⁹

To this day, the fact that *Black-Label* has not been translated into English in its entirety proves the belated recognition of the third cofounder of Négritude. Nor have *Pigments* and *Névralgies*, although excerpts from these texts have been made available to anglophone readers through publications such as Ellen Conroy-Kennedy's *The Negritude Poets* (1975). Both in francophone and anglophone criticism, Damas's third collection of poetry remains neglected, something which can partly be explained by the fact that the collection does not offer distinct individual poems (unlike *Pigments*, *Névralgies*, *Graffiti*) but one long poem in four movements, without titles. Here, as Porter suggests, an 'indecisive, emotional, vulnerable lyric self' speaks out loud:

Detailed analytical approaches to the social, economic, and cultural history of slavery and 'postcolonialism' in most recent criticism understandably pass over the intensely personal testimony of *Black-Label*. Specifically, the current neglect of Damas's masterpiece appears to arise from many critics' subliminal confusion among three entities: the historical author who became a professor of Black Studies in Washington, DC; the lyric self who emotes directly in the text, and the implied author who communicates through the context-dependent implications of unconventional verbal patterning and equivocal statements. Sympathizers with Négritude (and other militant movements) promote works that seem capable of producing social change. By this standard, critics judge as unworthy of attention a poem that seems dominated by the voice of an indecisive, emotional, vulnerable lyric self. It is easy to overlook the political resistance communicated through countervailing and incisive but implied meanings. (Porter, 2007: 191)

Damas offers a non-conventional statement on his trajectory as a poet, as a literary activist, as a man who is all too acutely aware of past and present injustices, and as a disappointed lover. *Black-Label* is his own funerary wake, his 'veillée noire' [black wake] in which he recalls his bereft people and the shameful past of Guyana,¹⁰ together with his own bittersweet childhood

⁹ See also Bart Miller, *Léon-Gontran Damas, Genre and Resistance: An Alternative Trajectory of Négritude* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi forthcoming, 2013).

¹⁰ The title he gave to his collection of Afro-Caribbean folktales is *Veillées noires* (1943). A *veillée* often refers to the common custom of gathering around the deceased; it is a collective celebration and commemoration with people drinking and telling stories.

memories and deep-seated sexual frustration, 'les tabous bien bandés / de [son] enfance afro-amérindienne' (*Black-Label*, IV: 'the stiff taboos / of [his] Afro-Amerindian childhood').¹¹ All along he also provides readers with an insight into what it meant, at the time of publication (the year of the first Conference of Black writers and artists at the Sorbonne), to be a Black citizen in a white Republic famous for her *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*. It is indeed in his body that the poet experiences the deep-lying roots of racism and discrimination. This individual experience ties in with the collective burden of his country as a French colony associated with the Middle Passage, with slavery and colonialism, and used for centuries as an overseas prison.

As pointed out above, our translation is also intended as a vindication, a way of making readers aware of this remarkable text.

Unbelonging

The first lines of *Black-Label* introduce readers to an exiled subject in a condition of terrible loneliness and despair. They are in fact a chorus or refrain that is repeated all through the four movements and celebrate the speaker's addiction to 'black label' whisky, an addiction which is soon related to the speaker's living in Paris but also to his divided heritage. While Walcott is 'divided to the vein' ('A Far Cry from Africa'), in the fourth verse we read that three rivers flow through Damas's veins. The poetical subject testifies to an incurable displacement and therefore dislocation of the self. He does not belong anywhere. Paris is synonymous with exile, i.e., in his case, misery, loneliness and depression, but Cayenne and his native Guyane are not places he longs for either. Indeed, his memories of childhood are marked by resentment against the hypocrisy of the middle-class family in which he grew up and the education he received. While school, church and family contributed to suppress anything 'black' in response to a past of racial oppression and discrimination, this work celebrates the superiority of Negro culture. At the end of the second movement we come upon an ironic reminder of how European artists and intellectuals looked for exoticism in African culture:

PARIS-Nombril-du-Monde
à la merci de l'AFRIQUE
à la merci de sa voix
à la merci de la fièvre du rythme

¹¹ Here as elsewhere in this chapter the translation is part of the authors' English version of the poem.

de la piste un mouchoir de poche
 de l'invitation au voyage au mur
 de la trompette bouchée

T'EN SOUVIENT-IL
 Le Blanc à l'École du Nègre
 tout à la fois
 gentil
 docile
 soumis et singe¹²

(*Black-Label* 51–52)

Damas's sarcastic juxtaposition of Paris as the centre of France, Europe and indeed the entire world ('*nombril du Monde*') on the one hand and the fascination of white artists for African art and Negro literature (*Négritude*) on the other is a recurring structuring device in *Black-Label*, a poem in which past and present, here and there, I and the Other, are opposed to lay bare the unacceptable conditions of the 'expérience vécue du Noir' [lived experience of the Black man] (Fanon, 1971: 88).

At first the reader is baffled by *Black-Label's* implicitness and repeated changes of moods (from elation to melancholia, from excitement to despair). Only gradually, and never completely, do place, time and motivations come to be identified. In fact, a clear picture or sequence never quite forms, as Damas makes the point that the condition of displaced exile is incompatible with sharp-edged definitions. Even the identity of the speaker is uncertain. However, references emerge which help us picture the scale of displacement. Locations in Paris are mentioned next to Guyanese place names; episodes that occurred in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, when Africans were rounded up as slaves and transported to the 'New World', are juxtaposed with contemporary events; sharply focused scenes are impossible to locate, and it takes some time for a general outline to come into focus.

Indeterminacy is further present in the erasure of clearly transparent identities of the characters involved. The very name used by the caller in the second movement, 'Limbé', points to a neither–nor situation, an in-between state that is characteristic of the colonial subject. The word 'Limbé' will become Damas's own concept for his 'postcolonial melancholia' (Gilroy,

¹² 'PARIS- Navel-of-the-World / at the mercy of AFRICA / at the mercy of her voice / at the mercy of her fever of rhythm / on the handkerchief floor / of the call of faraway places on the walls / of the muted trumpet // DO YOU RECOLLECT / The White learning from the Negro / all at once / kind / meek / tame and ape.

2005); the name is also related to the slave trade via limbo dancing, the dance enforced upon slaves on slaveships where they had to slide under a stick that was set closer and closer to the deck, which, incidentally, is described in the first movement. In the second movement the persona tries to call an enigmatic 'She' in the middle of the night. In the third movement, the speaker is the addressee, the Other has turned out to be his (female?) double.

So, an important feature in the poem, which has to be taken into account in the translating process, is this overwhelming sense of uncertainty and blurring of boundaries (between past and present, here and there, reality and imagination); even the colour line is crossed in interracial love that seems to be more imagined than actually lived. Damas moves between geographical areas (here and there), temporal zones (present, future and past), and absent lovers, longing to go beyond the ultimate 'wall': the separation between men and women, especially of different skin colour. Hence the surrealist scenes which could very well be illustrated by Salvador Dali's or Max Ernst's dreamlike paintings (Gyssels, 2007): the newborn baby fished out of the Seine amid a gaping crowd and left to dry in the sun or, more markedly still, the description of 'Ketty' flying away through the 'lucarne' [skylight], the elusive figure of ÉLYDÉ, 'deux êtres confondus en un seul',¹³ or, indeed, the ghostly presence of the brigantine at *Anse aux Klouss* in the final movement where in a carnivalesque ecstasy he announces his own hanging (images of hanging are recurrent and the central stanza of the 'hanged Negro' insistently recurs):

POURQUOI EN VOULOIR À TOUS CEUX DONT JE SUIS
 qui retrouvent enfin
 le fil du drame interrompu
 au bruit lourd des chaînes
 du brigantin frêle
 mouillant dans l'aube grise de l'Anse aux KLOUSS
 MASKILILIS
 malins qui dansent

(*Black-Label* 73–74)

WHY SHOULD WE BEAR A GRUDGE TO THOSE ONE OF
 WHOM I AM
 who at last retrieve
 the thread of the interrupted drama
 in the dumb noise of chains

¹³ 'Two beings fused in one'. As a cryptic name, ÉLYDÉ hints at the French verb 'élider', which is used when an element has been left out, so suggesting someone who is somehow incomplete. See Gyssels, 2007: 186–87.

on the fragile brigantine
 moored in the grey dawn of Anse aux KLOUSS
 clever MASKILILIS
 dancing away

A variation on this prevailing uncertainty is to be found in the ambiguity of numerous passages, such as the reference to the choirboy ('enfant de chœur'), a particularly painful memory of his disastrous childhood. Again, the glamour of those colonial Christian times coexists with scathing rejection of the church's hypocrisy making him a mimic male, a false angel, a masked '*chérubin*' all dressed up:

chasuble rouge
 souliers vernis
 qu'il me souvient d'avoir été
 au seuil grandiose
 des repositoires sur qui pleuvaient
 roses effeuillées
 roses parfumées
 roses d'encens
 miraculées
 immaculées
 matriculées

(*Black-Label 38*)

red stole
 glossy shoes
 I remember I was
 on the grand threshold
 of repositories rained upon
 with roses shedding their petals
 roses perfumed
 roses of incense
 miracled
 immaculate
 matriculated

A Cartography of *Guyanité*

Caribbean references are all-pervasive. We find them in descriptions of fruit ('mombin', 'mangue Julie', 'goyave'; 'korossol', 'papaye') and of sweet cakes ('doconons', 'an-mou chinois', 'an-mou Cayenn'). Caribbean words are used to

refer to places: 'Yan-man' for deep forest, 'morne' for hill (the word occurs in one of the repeated passages, about eight times in the second movement and three times in the fourth), 'kaye' for house (in the phrase 'souskaye à mangos / mangos à souskaye'). Specific words are also used for plants ('filao', 'vétiver'). Finally, we also come across the racial label 'Chabine' and 'Sicy-Chabine'. We decided to keep most of them as such. Many are in fact common to the various linguistic areas in the Caribbean but will be puzzling to readers who do not know the place. Instead of 'overtranslating' by providing explanations in the text itself we added a glossary. Similarly, we have retained the words of the girl about to lose her virginity next to the vetiver tree in her native Creole: '*Seigneur / Jézi / la Viège Marhi / Joseph*' – words that are spaced out, rounded and offered like rosary beads. On the other hand, there was no reason not to give the liturgical feast of the 'fête-dieu' its English name ('Corpus Christi'). What matters in the lines of the second movement where the word occurs is the procession and the repositories.

Calligraphic Stammering

The layout and the use of capital letters are fundamental to the rhythm, but do not constitute any particular obstacle for translators other than the need to be attentive to them. Using an appropriate rhythm is important all through the poem, and particularly with the four lines that open and close the work, recurring as a chorus throughout the four movements.

BLACK-LABEL à boire
pour ne pas changer
Black-Label à boire
à quoi bon changer

(*Black-Label 9*)

BLACK-LABEL to drink
so as not to change
Black-Label to drink
why ever change

Other renditions are no doubt possible, and one might object to the second line being a literal translation when the more common turn of phrase would be the ironic 'for a change'. The answer lies in the shape of the quatrain on the page: it lies on the page as a solid square block, with lines of approximately equal length. This is the speaker's drunkenly reiterative and stubbornly repeated statement of his right to drink. In this case, the layout of the translated text ought to mirror the original.

Other instances of striking layout that are to be found in the poem are the stammering spacing of the words, the prayer uttered by the girl next to the vetiver, as discussed above, and the many instance of long single-word enumerations. Finally, there are the repeated capitalized punch-like blocks about the man who was hanged:

IL A ÉTÉ PENDU CE MATIN
 À L'AUBE UN NÈGRE COUPABLE
 D'AVOIR VOULU FRANCHIR
 LA LIGNE

(*Black-Label* 58, 59)

This haunting image of a lynched Black man has been translated as follows:

WAS HANGED THIS MORNING
 AT DAWN A NEGRO GUILTY
 OF WISHING TO CROSS
 THE LINE

The importance of layout may remind us of Senghor's comment on 'Ils sont venus ce soir' (*Pigments*) in which he praised the way the rhythm of the drums can be heard from the shape of words on the page:

Ils sont venus ce soir où le
 tam
 tam
 roulait de
 rythme
 en
 rythme
 la frénésie
 des yeux
 la frénésie des mains
 la frénésie
 des pieds de statues¹⁴

In this respect, it is important to note that Damas turned to a small Parisian publisher, Guy Lévis Mano, a poet of Jewish–Turkish origin, who translated and edited surrealist poets such as René Char, Paul Eluard, Pierre-Jean

¹⁴ A translation is to be found in Ellen Conroy-Kennedy, 1975: 45. A slightly different one can be read at <www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/webpages/DC/asjul58.21/asjul58.21.pdf>. Consulted 4 November 2011.

Jouve, Henri Michaux, and who was well known for his calligraphic and typographic innovations. Damas was also influenced by Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* and by the graffiti on the city walls and public squares. So he was not only an 'aural' artist, as Toni Morrison also wanted to be, writing 'like something that has probably only been fully expressed in music' (McKay, 1994: 152), he was also a visual artist, self-consciously aware of how the text looked on the page.

Rhythm and syncopation are of paramount importance, and indeed jazz provides a fruitful approach to the piece. In fact, one of the most striking features in the poem is its use of reiterative patterns. Not only are some stanzas repeated but, in the second movement, the pattern is of cumulative repetition, as in the nursery rhyme, 'The House that Jack Built'. In the following stanza, the monosyllabic drunken repetitions leading back to the first line are:

J'AI SAOULÉ MA PEINE
 ce soir comme hier
 comme tant et tant
 d'autres soirs passés
 où de bouge en bouge
 où de bar en bar
 où de verre en verre
 j'ai saoulé ma peine

I DROWNED MY GRIEF IN DRINKS
 tonight as yesternight
 as ever so many
 other past nights
 when from dive to dive
 when from bar to bar
 when from cup to cup
 I drowned my grief in drinks

In French, the futility of his behaviour, the absurdity of his remedy is made clear through the empty repetitiveness of those drinking tours: his addiction is echoed in the monosyllabic words ('bouge', 'bar', 'verre'). The last two words were easy to translate; for the first one ('bouge') we needed something equally on the verge of slang.

The dissolution of elaborate speech is further evidenced in the occasional use of the conjunction *Et* at the beginning of enumerations. This reminds us of Damas's most famous poem, 'Hoquet', in which the incipit refers to the strangulation of his vocals, the repression of his language, the interdiction

of free speech in front of a dominant mother who tells him to keep quiet (Damas, 1972: 35–38).¹⁵

Against ‘Français de France’

On many occasions, Damas dismantles regular French grammar and uses *double-entendres* by deliberately choosing nouns that switch from female to male (‘mon bel amour’ can designate a male or female lover, for instance), so that the writer’s refusal to submit to the rules of ‘good language’ had to be respected in the translation. What he calls in ‘Hoquet’ ‘le français français’ is mocked in different ways, so we tried to reproduce departures from standard language. In the scathing stanza about women won over to the oppressors, for instance, we translated the labial tongue-twister ‘longue langue / langue longue’ as ‘long tongue / tongue long’. However, some words are less strikingly unexpected in the English version than in the French original so that the translation has lost some of what Berman (1999: 65) calls ‘parlance’. An example would be the verb ‘tâter’ in the second movement: ‘mon cœur ... dont nul n’a voulu tâter’ (*Black-Label* 39). We used the verb ‘taste’, which is in fact exactly the same verb, borrowed from French in the Middle English period. Considering the dinner table context, the poet probably means both taste and feel with your hands, with possibly a hint at good manners. Similarly, in the same movement, ‘enfance enjouée’ does mean a childhood full of play and games, so ‘playful childhood’ is semantically correct but in contemporary French the adjective ‘enjoué’ is mostly used to describe a person’s character, someone who is in a good mood.

In order to restore some balance in the sense of departure from an expected use of language, we have relied on the possibility of turning nouns into verbs in cases where this is rarely done in English. An example here would be the ‘miracled’ roses at Corpus Christi, or ‘razzia’, in the first movement, which results, as in French, in a past participle ‘razziaed’.

As a matter of fact, Damas repeatedly refers to the need to go against the rules of grammar, to express his ‘authentic self’ independently from the conventions of language. Transgressing normative French and parodying sophistication in the use of vocabulary and grammar as illustrated by L. S. Senghor (who was born and raised in the village of Joal, south of Dakar), Damas addresses the Lord in a bitter-ironic tone:

¹⁵ Repression was also of a political nature. Damas’s first collection was seized and destroyed by the French government for its subversive nature, as was *Retour de Guyane*, his uncompromising 1938 report on the French colony.

moi qui
 malgré la défense formelle
 que m'en a toujours faite
 la grammaire des grammaires des grand-mères
 de Grand-Mère JOAL
 moi qui
 vous *cause*
 et le souligne
 et ose¹⁶

(*Black-Label 24*)

with the rhyme emphasizing the spoken quality of the verb. In the translation, we have disrupted the word order and used a verb that is not implausible in a conversation with God ('share'), but we are aware that the tongue-in-cheek reference to correct speech ('bien causer') has been sacrificed.

Jazzing the 'Parole nègre'

Some of the skipping rhymed passages, reminiscent of nursery rhymes and popular poetry, and often loaded with grim humour, can prove tricky to translate. One instance can be found fairly early in the first movement, repeated, and triumphantly inverted, in the fourth movement:

Mort au cancre
 au pou
 mort au chancre
 au fou

(*Black-Label 23*)

Death to canker
 to the bug
 death to cancer
 to the mug

¹⁶ me who
 in spite of its being strictly forbidden
 as has always told me
 the grammar of grammars of grandmothers
 of GrandMother JOAL
 me who
 now with you *share*
 and insist on it
 and dare.

Here the obvious objection is that although we have a similarly terse and crisp formulation and the play on sounds is closely adhered to the words do not mean quite the same, which we readily acknowledge: the ‘dunce’ (‘le cancre’) is lost and is replaced by a rather more sinister ‘cancer’ (though permuted with the ‘chancre’ / ‘Canker’ of the third line), and the ‘fool’ (‘le fou’) has been changed into a helpless and gullible person (‘mug’). But this is an instance of sound partly taking precedence over sense, because such is obviously the case in the original. A similar sound effect is to be found in a series of insulting words, the connotations of which are triumphantly inverted:

Nous les gueux
 nous les peu
 nous les rien
 nous les chiens
 nous les maigres
 nous les Nègres

(*Black-Label 50*)

We the villains
 we the littl’uns
 we the slurs
 we the curs
 we the beggars
 we the Niggers

By changing ‘the little’ (‘les peu’) into the ‘littl’uns’, as in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, and ‘the nothing’ (‘les rien’) into the ‘slurs’, in the sense of smudge, we lost something of the deliberate ungrammaticality of the French construction, and ‘Niggers’ is much stronger in English than ‘Nègres’ and does not carry the aura of ‘Négritude’. In another instance when slander words for blacks are enumerated (‘Ceux qui se traitent eux-mêmes / de sauvages / sales nègres / soubarous / bois-mitan / gros-sirop / guinains / congos / moudongues / fandangues / nangues’ (*Black-Label 16–17*)), racist insults in English such as ‘spooks’ seemed to fit the spirit of the original.¹⁷

The three lines in which Damas echoes the strongly derogatory words used to dismiss in one same move lower class and coloured people (‘à mort la négraïlle / la valetaille / la racaille’) do not rhyme as neatly in the translation, but the English words, though they miss the scornful ending, have great negative strength: ‘death to the niggers / death to the wangsters / death to

¹⁷ ‘Those who call themselves / savages / dirty niggers / spooks / soubarous / spades / bois-mitans / guineas / congoes / mundongoes / nangoes’.

the coons'. As often with Damas, short lines suggest slogans scribbled on the wall (Halling, 2005).

Black-Label has many other instances of lines that play on repetition of sounds and syllables, of short words that provide the typical beat of his most violent attacks on assimilation and alienation. In most cases they can be reproduced with slight alterations. In the enumeration of luring sweets found in the dresser on which the key was inadvertently left (in the third movement), 'mangues Julie jolies jaunies à point', with 'Julie', 'jolies' and 'jaunies' slipping smoothly into each other, though we do not have a threefold repetition in the English version ('juicy mellow yellow Julie mangoes'), the echo between 'mellow' and 'yellow' contributes to the sticky juiciness of ripe mangoes. In the first of the four movements, the n- alliteration in the line 'le néant de mes nuits au néon à naître' could almost be retained: 'the nothingness of my neon nights to come'. The importance of sounds sometimes results in our changing words. On the very first page, for instance, 'Parias' is translated as 'the Damned', for phonetic reasons: while the first sound in 'terre' is an occlusive; 'earth of the Parias' would want a needed edge, which can be heard in 'the Damned', while the word also expresses a sense of utter rejection, like 'Parias'.

Just after the passage in the first movement when he imagines going back to his uncle, the first two lines of a litany in a stanza detailing his distress read: 'PARCE QU'IL N'ÉÛT ÉTÉ NI DE JEU / ni de mise et de règle'. Three verbal idioms with the same patterns had to be used in English so as to retain the crispness of the rhythm: 'BECAUSE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN OUT OF TUNE / and out of step and out of bounds'. While the second and third phrases are semantically close to the original, the image in the first is markedly different. The first reason for choosing 'out of tune' was the similarity of pattern; however, 'ne pas être de jeu' does mean that there is some sort of transgression, some dissonance, so 'out of tune' is not really 'out of place', as it were.

In the repeated enumerations referring to the Caribbean islands, the word 'isles' in French has just the same archaizing touch as 'isles' in English. While it introduces some fairy-tale distance, it also takes us back to the time of colonization, of those 'first encounters' examined by Peter Hulme. The nouns used to describe the islands repeatedly slip into neologisms. In the first such enumeration, on the first page of the poem, 'sucreries' on its own might have referred to sweets or to a sugar-refining plant, and the latter is of course present in the word (though rather as sugar house). However, coming as it does after the coinage 'Nègreries', we felt that it too could be translated with a coinage in English ('Sugaries'). In a later, similar, enumeration, one of the defining words is omitted between 'isles à miel' and 'isles amènes'. It might just indicate (as, indeed, it does in the translation) that the enumeration is open, but, on closer

examination, given the alliterative pattern, the missing word is probably one of the taboo words in the bourgeois milieu in which Damas grew up ('merde'). This assumption is strengthened by the occurrence of the word a couple of pages further on ('voilà / qu'il recommence / qu'il recommence à dire / Merde').¹⁸ If this is the case, our translation loses the suggestion. We might have tried to play on 'shifts' and 'shine', but it sounded contrived. As often happens, attempting to get a detail right can ruin the effect of the verse.

Ceux dont la sainte résignation n'a d'égale
 que le sacré mépris de l'Église où le Curé préfère
 au blanc de blanc catholique et romain
 un cul-sec de cœur de chauffe
 des isles à sucre
 des isles à rhum
 des isles à mouches
 des isles à miel
 des isles à ...
 des isles amènes

(Black-Label 23)

Those whose holy resignation is equalled only
 by the sacred contempt of the Church when the Priest leaves
 the Roman and Catholic blanc de blanc
 for bottoms-up of tafia from
 the isles of sugar
 the isles of rum
 the isles of flies
 the isles of honey
 the isles of ...
 the isles in the sun

With 'cul-sec de cœur de chauffe' meaning that the glass of rum is swallowed in one gulp, the lines are a most irreverent reference to unholy practices within the church.

Shifting Words, Retaining the Flavour

Layout, rhythm, play on sounds, play on words – those various dimensions that contribute to define poetry all have to be taken into consideration in the translating process, which unavoidably results in transactions. A syntactic

¹⁸ 'here he goes / here he goes again / here he goes again saying / Shit'.

quirk will be left out at one point while one will be introduced elsewhere; semantic accuracy may at times be played down to retain rhythm and rhymes, etc.

Only some of the many displacements effected in our translation are presented above. What guided us in each of our choices was the spirit and music of the piece, the movement in the lines, the resonance and tonality of the words, the mood that pervades the poet's favourite collection of poetry. This work can be read as a testament in which he expresses his disillusionment both with the pan-africanist ideals and the *Négritude*-movement; indeed, by 1956, most expectations had backfired, blown to pieces by the acute reality of racist discrimination, as felt in his own private, as well as public, life.

Beyond the need to be granted permission by rights' holders, an obstacle to publishers' interest in our translation (it has yet to find an outlet) may be the perplexing nature of the text, which, as we hope to have shown, is intrinsic to what it conveys. The translation does not take any of this away. It is firmly committed to retaining the complexity of the original. However, the translation also provides notes and a glossary that should facilitate access. Beyond the sheer selfish pleasure of translating, we very much hope to enable scholars, teachers and readers from various horizons to discover a bold and militant poetry on some of the most preoccupying issues of post-war and postcolonial times.

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