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ııne un bref aperçu du langage sexiste en fournissant des exemples empruntés à ıutre, il énumère un certain nombre de raisons pour lesquelles les traducteurs doi-r d'éviter ce langage dans leur travail, pour autant que les contraintes du texte ne ıent pas. L'article décrit un nombre de contraintes qui empêchent le traducteur s à des alternatives non sexistes et aborde ensuite certains aspects des théories de le J. House et P. Newmark pour illustrer cette question. Cette discussion permet ıe les contraintes sont moins nombreuses dans les traductions libres que dans les lèles au texte d'origine. L'article attire l'attention du lecteur sur le fait qu'un texte ıgage sexiste risque cependant d'être subjectif, compte tenu du contexte, et, par e créer des difficultés. L'auteur termine son article en donnant un modèle de tra-ıpes, conçu pour aider les traducteurs qui souhaitent utiliser autant que possible n sexiste.

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Translating poems: A precarious balance

Christine Pagnoulle

To translate: to undo the curse of Babel with Pentecostal gift of tongues... This is an everyday necessity in the worlds of business, science, technology, trade, advertisement, or academic publishing. In those spheres the need to translate is combined with the relative freedom of the translator to recreate the message, sometimes changing the outward shape, sometimes even improving on the inner logic. But can poetry be translated? How can a unique work of art, a unique balance of sounds and stresses, of silence and song, ever find an equivalent in another language? That it should in some cases actually happen is just as much of a miracle as those other "translations": removals from earth to heaven without death. It is impossible. Therefore it is worth trying. Something is bound to be lost. Sometimes, though, something is gained too.

Words can be misleading. There is in fact no ferrying, no carrying through or across. Languages, even such closely related languages as English and French, work along different lines. The poems have to be penetrated, experienced to their core of music, to their marrow of sounds, and then recreated on the different score of the other language.

I am going to illustrate my comments on this precarious craft with instances taken from my own practice. This may seem immodest, but is, I feel, the best way of knowing what is actually involved in a task. It should be clear that I do not in any way suggest that my translations are models to be imitated. In fact I know that they can be improved on. Since, however, so much of the present essay rests on my practice I shall first define some of my beliefs about the translation of poetry.

I agree with most of the usual claims (tacit or explicit) made on those who translate poems, and essentially with the demand that each translation should be a labour of love requiring complete empathy. This may seem difficult when instead of specializing in one poet or a specific kind of poetry one is called upon to translate a few poems by perhaps five or six different writers in one summer, as I sometimes did for the European Poetry Festival in Louvain. It certainly requires a good deal of negative capability (the capacity to neutralize feelings of rejection or disbelief, or even occasional misgivings) and a great adaptability. But it can be done.

I also share the basic expectation that translators should be able to hear and feel the poem from within and to conjure up something similar in the target language, that is, that they should be open to some sort of poetic sensitivity. However I do not think of myself as a poet in my own right, so I do not subscribe to the claim that translators of poetry must be poets themselves. Besides I also believe that most people can learn how to let sounds weave their patterns of meaning and how to weave an echoing pattern.

There are two other received ideas about the translation of poetry which I would like to qualify. It is sometimes said that poetry can only be translated when working in isolation. Poetic experience has come to be regarded as something highly personal and jealous of intrusions. There are, for translators too, moments of "inspiration," moments when words fall into place, when rhythm takes care of syntax and images seem to form themselves of their own accord. But I strongly believe in collaborative work: other people's inspiration may be better than mine, or I may have failed to perceive one possible reading of a line. So I keep talking to friends and relatives, and fitting finds of different origins into my reconstructed structure. This approach is particularly fruitful in a translation workshop, to which each student brings a slightly different version.

In the same vein I have made it a rule to get in touch with the poets I translate whenever possible. I send them my translation and explain, in their own language, how I have worked on their texts, what changes I have made and why, and how my version compares with the original. In most cases I have found this to be a mutually enriching experience.

One last point. I am not certain that it is only possible to translate poetry into one's mother tongue. There are cases, I think, when you can come to *feel* another language from inside just as intimately as the language you learned as a child.

Artificial though this is, I will try and isolate a number of parameters that go into the making of a poem and to give instances of attempted transpositions for the use of rhythm, sounds, rhymes, diction, and images.

Any piece of (good) writing is informed from inside by some sort of *rhythm* which partly depends on the speech rhythms and length of words proper to each language. It is one of the most elusive, and yet essential, task of translators to capture that inner rhythm and transpose it into the appropriate rhythm in the target language. A poem by Taban LoLiyong which satirizes our bloody habit of hacking each other to pieces gives an instance where I felt that changes were called for in order to retain something of the military beat. Here are the opening lines in the two languages:

Bobel

blood iron and trumpets	*fer sang et clairons*
blood iron and trumpets	*fer sang et clairons*
forward we march	*nous avançons*
(others fall on the way)	*(d'autres tombent)*

In the first line of a short poem written by Bradley Stahan about Liège, the Belgian city where I live, a problem of specific cultural association led to a problem of rhythm.

Sad-faced hurdy-gurdy girl
city of cobbles
where the muddy Meuse
marks cathedral columns
with fingers of flood.

A hurdy-gurdy is a mechanical musical instrument often played in the streets. In some cases it can refer, as another translation has it, to a "vielle." But apart from the fact that the name is soft and smooth and singing, this instrument has romantic medieval connotations not called for here. Moreover you won't find a "joueuse de vielle" in the streets of Liège, whereas you do come across that other kind of hurdy-gurdy called in French "orgue de Barbarie." Here the sounds and the connotations are right, but the rhythm does not work ("Fille aux yeux tristes / avec ton orgue de Barbarie"?). My translation turns one line into three, but suggests, I hope, the haunting sing-song of a street organ:

Fille aux yeux tristes
tournant la ballade
de ta manivelle
cité de pavés
où la Meuse boueuse
marque de doigts d'inondation
les colonnes de cathédrales.

Sounds are the primary material out of which poems are built. They are so ever present that it would be tedious to comment on all changes and adaptations (often carried out without the translator's being aware of them). In this poem on Liège the alliteration in the third line (the "muddy Meuse") turned into a rhyme in French: "la Meuse boueuse."

Many contemporary poets avoid *regular prosody*, yet occasionally play on it or with it. So in a long poem on Jeanne Modigliani by Eric Brogniet most lines swing on a carefully irregular alternation of seven, six, eight, and ten syllables. This makes the intrusion of the classical form of the alexandrin, the twelve-syllable line, all the more remarkable. At that point I felt that a similarly classical variation on the iambic pentameter was called for.

Je viens à toi
Femme originelle aux hanches de fleuve large
Au ventre évanoui sous la main qui le flatte
Femme comme les eaux sans fin roulées
Du bonheur et des dramaturgies
Femme aux hanches d'écume et de frissonnement
Solaire, pour conjurer une fois encore
La cendre, et la nuit, et l'exil

I come to you
Primeval woman with broad river hips
And a vanishing womb under the stroking hand
Woman like the endlessly rolling
Waves of happiness and shape-giving
Woman with hips of foam and solar shuddering,
To ward off once again ashes,
And night — exile

At this point I would like to interpolate an aside on *diction*. Clearly the kind of recondite vocabulary used by Brogniet is far more at home in contemporary French poetry than in poetry written in English. But the translator has no right to adapt and simplify. I think I have only changed one word in the 120 lines of the poem: "dramaturgies" becomes "shape-giving," even though the word "dramaturgies" can be used in English too. As used in the poem it has obviously little connection with adaptations for the stage; it refers, rather, to that essential drama of shaping, of form-giving, therefore the (unduly elucidating?) "shape-giving."

The external constraints of regular prosody are however still used systematically by some. George Szirtes, for instance, writes most of his poems in regular rhyming lines, and some of their poetic force derives from the form. By way of illustration I will quote the beginning of "The Chairs," a poem which has the form of a nonsense nursery rhyme. A translation in which words have been forced into a regular rhythm and a rhyming pattern sounds better, I feel, than a translation that would be more respectful of the literal meaning of the original or of the normal word order in French.

The Chairs	*Le fauteuil*
Where did you stay that winter?	*Où êtes-vous partis cet hiver?*
(Singapore? Hyderabad?)	*(Singapour? Hyderabad?)*
No, we waited in the snow,	*Non, dans la neige nous attendions,*
All dressed up, nowhere to go.	*Tout habillés, sans horizon.*
Where did you sit while waiting?	*Où étiez-vous assis en attendant?*
(In a taxi? In a train?)	*(Dans un train? Dans un taxi?)*
We took the armchair from the hall	*Un fauteuil nous avions sorti*
But did not feel we'd moved at all.	*Mais sans jamais être partis.*

Similarly when great poets such as Geoffrey Hill or Seamus Heaney use the sonnet form I feel that the translator should at least try to translate the poems as sonnets. This is what I have attempted, not altogether successfully, with Heaney's sonnet "The Skylight."

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.
The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick with palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.

Toi, tu voulais des lucarnes. Je disais non
A toute entaille dans les mortaises et les tenons
Patinés du pitchpin. Je l'aimais fermé, bas,
Effet claustrophobique d'un nid haut sous le toit.
J'aimais la poussière sèche, l'ajustement parfait
Du vieux plafond, couvercle sur un coffre à jouets.
Dessous c'était chaleur de hotte, huche ou pertuis.
Les ardoises la gardaient comme chaume de minuit.

Mais quand on ôta les ardoises, extravagant
Le ciel se déversa, ouvrit grand ma surprise.
Pendant des jours, je me sentis comme l'habitant
De la maison où le paralytique fut descendu
Par le toit, où il fut lavé de ses péchés,
Guéri, d'où il prit son lit et s'en fut.

With Seamus Heaney we have poetry taken to its highest pitch, poems in which every word rings true, is at once (though often a weathered Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic word) brand new and unexpected, and yet inescapably right. Unfortunately I am not Pierre Leyris, who can, apparently at a pinch, find splendid equivalents for, say, a sonnet by Hopkins. Confronted by such excellence it becomes not only artificial but impossible to isolate different aspects: everything hangs together.

While retaining his usual accuracy for material details Heaney has met the demands of a fairly strict and classical form. I have tried to write something on a similar rhyming pattern, in twelve-syllable lines, while preserving the sense of cosy closeness and the wonder at a miraculous opening out on the world suggested in the octave and in the sestet respectively.

In the first part, I have tried to retain the "perfect . . . fit" in the form. This raised a problem of rhyme from the moment I wanted to keep the warmth unexpectedly but powerfully suggested in the image of the "midnight thatch" in line 8

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In line 9 the unusual position of the adjective in French gives even more impact to the sudden surprise. In the last line the French phrase (sometimes used out of context) for Christ's words "Take up your bed and walk" is "Prends ton lit et marche"; in the translation I have kept the expected verb ("prit son lit") in the first part, and, following Heaney, slightly changed the second one ("s'en fut").

Images by themselves can often be transposed almost literally. Since they are part of a poem they will be fresh and unexpected, sometimes disturbing, in both languages, such as Heaney's "midnight thatch." In the last stanza of Brogniet's poem I have also kept very close to most suggested images:

Quand le jour enfin s'effondre	*When day at last collapses*
Au poids des capitales	*Under the weight of capitals*
La lumière pas plus que la peine	*Light no more than pain*
N'entrent par la fenêtre	*Come in through the upstairs*
Là-Haut refermée sur le dernier	*Window now closed on the last*
Cri	*Scream*
Avant le saut, et le pinceau	*Before the jump, and the brush*
Repose dans le désordre des verres	*Lies among a disarray of empty*
Vides, des couleurs écrasées	*Glasses, of paints spilt*
Comme la rose et le carmin	*Like the rose and carmin*
De la vie inquiète et douloureuse	*Of the aching and unquiet life*
En sa beauté	*In its beauty*
Inachevée.	*Forever unfinished.*

Note, apart from the use of images, the way the lay-out isolates and drags out the tearing scream. I considered that the inner rhyme of "saut" and "pinceau" was utterly unintentional, and could thus be left out without any qualm. I have made three minor changes. The order of the adjectives in "la vie inquiète et douloureuse" has been transposed for reasons of rhythm. I have added "forever" before "unfinished" as a way of ending on that suspended opening. More significantly I have substituted "spilt" for "crushed." Both words can be used for paints depending on their fluidity. Both can be used to describe the limbs of a body that has crashed onto the pavement from an upper floor. I felt that "the rose and carmin" of life were suggestive of blood (even though vermilion is avoided, just as Modigliani transposed and avoided all obvious colours) and that the sense of waste (redeemed in the last two lines) could be hinted at in the allusion to the spilt milk of the proverb.

However, images can raise problems of translation in two cases: when they are associated with idiomatic phrases in one of the two languages, and when they are caught in word play or puns.

I have recently come across two poems that make use of a special kind of set phrases, those that occur in fairy tales. Bradley Strahan's "Happily Ever After" is a most enjoyable takeoff of the promises of a bright future on which fairy tales often end: "Ils vécurent heureux et eurent beaucoup d'enfants." Children have failed to materialize, and Cinderella has discarded her slippers, vairy or otherwise, to revert to her former bare-footed ways. The "sleeping prince" in the last line but one is of course her husband, who is still asleep. But the phrase echoes the "Sleeping Beauty" of another fairy tale. The title of Perrault's tale in French is "La Belle *au bois* dormant" and readers or listeners rarely stop to think about its literal meaning: the girl is taken to be called "la belle au bois dormant," so I have reinforced the echo by translating "son prince au bois dormant" instead of "son prince endormi." In the last line, incidentally, we find at last some sort of reason for the truant behaviour of the redeemed queen. The two adjectives "fat and fifty" dispell the charm that may have been revived in the words "sleeping prince" and conjure up a ludicrous and somewhat repulsive figure. As often happens it has proved next to impossible to convey the same impression as economically in French, so I have settled for two longer adjectives that do not alliterate, but which at least have the same connotations: "bedonnant et quinquagénaire."

Another poem that plays on fairy tale formulae is the third part of Heaney's "Seeing Things," where he remembers the day he encountered his frightened and humbled father as his equal. One can feel the absent quotation marks around the opening and concluding words: "Once upon a time my undrowned father / Walked into our yard" and "And there was nothing between us there / that might not still be happily ever after." It is not unthinkable to use the standard French opening: "Il était une fois mon père pas noyé / Qui . . ." But the phrasing is awkward. I am not thinking of the negated participle "pas noyé," which sounds almost as odd in English, and is intentional, but of the shift of emphasis from a process to a person. I have suggested another possible opening, often followed by a similarly distancing place adjunct: "Un jour au temps jadis, mon père pas noyé / Pénétra dans la cour." An echoing set phrase from French fairy tales is even more difficult to find for the conclusion, not to mention the difficulty of handling double negations. Tentatively: "Et il n'y avait là rien entre nous / Qui pût ne pas toujours nous donner le bonheur."

In cases of almost insuperable semantic discrepancies translators can choose one of three courses. The easiest option is simply to opt out. It may also be the most honest. If they don't, if they somehow insist on translating the untranslatable, they have two alternatives which are equally valid but serve different purposes. One is to provide a gloss, almost as they would in the source language. They remain faithful to the original and use as many words as needed in the target language to cover the various meanings involved, they may add footnotes to explain how it works in the original. The third course is to find other words in the same register, and with similar connotations on which the target language can play, and thus to recreate a similar effect through different means. The exercice can be dismissed as a gratuitous game from which the translator is the one who derives most fun. Yet, basically, overcoming insuperable obstacles is what the translation of poetry is about. In my experience this course is all the more satisfactory if I can work with the poet, as happened with Rose-Marie François for the translation of "Evadam." In the following stanza I couldn't find a suitable equivalent for the charade (in the French meaning of the word) gold/angel/orange, with its threefold repetition of heaven ("cieux") and its timely inclusion of crime ("délit").

Métal pré-
cieux habitant des
cieux fruit-délit-
cieux.
L'homme s'empare de
la grenade
l'orage détruit l'orange.

Pomegranates
split
into poisoned apples
and man-made grenades.
A screech
tearing the peach.

I have changed the orange into a pomegranate, the fruit of life and knowledge, a much coveted key to the other world, a word which so easily splits into apples (French "pommes") and grenades (which is also the French word for pomegranates). My translation anticipates the fifth and sixth lines. The point of the last line is made partly in the verb and partly in the echo "orage"/"orange." To retain the echo I have transposed the orange into a peach, which appears further in the French text as "le fruit du pêcher," where I lost the allusion to sin.

Earlier in the same poem the same word ("grise") is used in two different meanings:

La distance
accoudée
grise et grise
sauvegarde la connivence.

The ambivalence is made clear later, when we come across the two echoing nouns "griserie" and "grisaille".

Quelle griserie
leur fera
inverser l'ordre
les livrera
à la grisaille?

English does not have one and the same word to describe the colour grey and an inebriated condition. I have started from the second passage, and, short of perfect homonymy, thought I would play on tipsy/topsy. Grey then becomes dull. And the position allotted to distance is closer to that of a cat — or a snake:

Distance
curled
tipsy and dull
keeps concord.

What tipsy steps
will make them
dull
will deliver them
to topsy-turviness?

Translating poetry is a deeply exhilarating experience, especially when taken to the limits of translatability. Quite apart from its "usefulness" in terms of mutual understanding between different cultures, translating poetry is, for the translator, very much like a passionate love affair, with its complete loss of self in lines written by another, with the daredevil relish of attempting apparently impossible equivalences, a crushing sense of failure when it doesn't work, but also the splendidly uplifting sense of elation when one feels one has contrived a "shape in words" (to use David Jones's phrase) which conveys — at least approximately — the same feel and the same music as the original poem.

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NOTE ON THE POETS:

Eric Brogniet is a young Belgian poet who has several collections published in Paris. He currently manages the "Maison de la Poésie" at Namur, where he organizes a three-yearly festival on European poetry.

Rose-Marie François, though born and brought up in the Belgian Picardie, now lives and works and writes in Liège. She often writes prose poems, but also enjoys playing with short lines.

Seamus Heaney hardly needs an introduction. He is one of the great Irish poets of our time. He teaches at Harvard and Oxford, but has retained a great simplicity and immediacy both in his writing and in his approach to people.

play, and thus to recreate a similar effect through different means. The exercice can be dismissed as a gratuitous game from which the translator is the one who derives most fun. Yet, basically, overcoming insuperable obstacles is what the translation of poetry is about. In my experience this course is all the more satisfactory if I can work with the poet, as happened with Rose-Marie François for the translation of "Evadam." In the following stanza I couldn't find a suitable equivalent for the charade (in the French meaning of the word) gold/angel/orange, with its threefold repetition of heaven ("cieux") and its timely inclusion of crime ("délit").

Métal pré-
cieux habitant des
cieux fruit-délit-
cieux.
L'homme s'empare de
la grenade
l'orage détruit l'orange.

Pomegranates
split
into poisoned apples
and man-made grenades.
A screech
tearing the peach.

I have changed the orange into a pomegranate, the fruit of life and knowledge, a much coveted key to the other world, a word which so easily splits into apples (French "pommes") and grenades (which is also the French word for pomegranates). My translation anticipates the fifth and sixth lines. The point of the last line is made partly in the verb and partly in the echo "orage"/"orange." To retain the echo I have transposed the orange into a peach, which appears further in the French text as "le fruit du pêcher," where I lost the allusion to sin.

Earlier in the same poem the same word ("grise") is used in two different meanings:

La distance
accoudée
grise et grise
sauvegarde la connivence.

The ambivalence is made clear later, when we come across the two echoing nouns "griserie" and "grisaille".

Quelle griserie
leur fera
inverser l'ordre
les livrera
à la grisaille?

English does not have one and the same word to describe the colour grey and an inebriated condition. I have started from the second passage, and, short of perfect homonymy, thought I would play on tipsy/topsy. Grey then becomes dull. And the position allotted to distance is closer to that of a cat — or a snake:

Distance
curled
tipsy and dull
keeps concord.

What tipsy steps
will make them
dull
will deliver them
to topsy-turviness?

Translating poetry is a deeply exhilarating experience, especially when taken to the limits of translatability. Quite apart from its "usefulness" in terms of mutual understanding between different cultures, translating poetry is, for the translator, very much like a passionate love affair, with its complete loss of self in lines written by another, with the daredevil relish of attempting apparently impossible equivalences, a crushing sense of failure when it doesn't work, but also the splendidly uplifting sense of elation when one feels one has contrived a "shape in words" (to use David Jones's phrase) which conveys — at least approximately — the same feel and the same music as the original poem.

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NOTE ON THE POETS:

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