The AALITRA Review

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

No. 6, May 2013

AALITRA

The AALITRA Review

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Testimony, Theory, Testament: On Translating François Villon

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"*Traduttore, traditore"* – Traditional

** ** **

Abstract
François Villon is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest of all French poets – and not only by the French. Since the nineteenth century, his "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" – one of the most perfect jewels from Villon's masterpiece *Le Grand Testament* – has become the basis for a sequence of spectacular English translations by an extraordinary variety of eminent writers and critics, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Andrew Lang, Tom Scott and Robert Lowell, among many others. Yet, despite this intense literary attention, there remains something peculiar, enigmatic, about this poem, attested to by many major commentators: everybody enjoys it, is even captivated by it, but nobody wants to know anything more about it. This state of affairs is all the more surprising given that the *Testament* as a whole has proven rich fodder for the most erudite philological investigations. This article examines this odd state-of-affairs as exemplary of a kind of state-of-emergency for translation. It argues that the reception history of "unknowing enjoyment" fostered by the poem is already inscribed in – "preprogrammed" by? – the structure of the poem itself, and that a careful interpretation of the poem's deployment of proper names is able to articulate something essential about the relations of enjoyment, not-knowing, language and death that are at the heart of the translation of poetry more generally.

In this essay, I wish to discuss my experience of translating a handful of poems by the great medieval French poet François Villon (1431-c1463) for the collection *Villain* (Clemens). This experience is a paradoxical one; in fact, strictly speaking, it's not an experience in the common acceptation of this term, but what I will rather rebarbatively call an "experience of depersonalization". If this sounds overly theoretical, I'm not offering a theory but a testimony – although, not coincidentally, the words share the same root. A *theoria* in ancient Greece was the name for a kind of embassy, a sending of reputable citizens as witnesses to a sacred event. A *theory* is therefore an extraordinary testimonial journey, one that also bears close pragmatic and etymological links to *theatre* as a seeing, a showing, a spectacle (Constantinou 53-62). Such theoretical testimony is not, however, simply theory in the sense of withdrawn contemplative abstraction, nor theatre in the sense of a fictive restaging of myth for the community. Before Aristotle opposed theory and practice, theory was itself integrally a *practice* of witnessing, in which a political delegation was sent outside the city proper, towards other polities, other stages, other events.

Just as the words for *amnesty* and *amnesia* were the same in Ancient Greek – to forgive was therefore necessarily to forget, and vice versa – but came apart in the experiences of non-Greeks, who bifurcated the word while its root remained, testimony was split from theory. Testimony became the eyewitness account of an event in which things came apart, an event which simultaneously cracked apart the words available to convey the event. In this crack-up, words must by definition fail, as this very failure testifies to a truth the words still convey by failing to tell.

Words failed then (pre-event), and they fail now (post-event), but in different ways, although it is impossible to say exactly what those differences are, given that the very words to say it have been cracked apart by the event. Truth cannot be told except as a failure to tell it – which makes all true testimony necessarily fictive, imaginative, creative. Yet this transmission of self-concealing differences is itself the only proper index of a fidelity to what has taken place; moreover, it means that translation is always also testimony, and all testimony a translation. Translation is always the testimony of an irreparable loss, there's no getting around it; yet without it, there's no going on, nor any creation. This paradox can only cause further irresolvable difficulties. Since testimony has legal implications, one is simultaneously enjoined, impossibly, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Translations prove that this is impossible. The law of language entails that we break the law in essaying to fulfil it.

Finally, poetry is the place where these features of translation-testimony are not only present with the greatest intensity, but, in being *patently* so, provide evidence of the absolute impossibility and necessity of all and any translation. It's decisive that the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century agree that, if an analysis of language must be primary in any analysis of human interaction, then one realizes that language is already primarily action. If, as Ludwig Wittgenstein says, the meaning of a word is its use, then the meaning of words cannot be gleaned from dictionaries; moreover, as Martin Heidegger adds, the use of words in poetry is precisely *not* a "standard" use of words. Aside from the obvious difficulties that beset every attempt at translation, even the most basic and pragmatic – not meaning, nor form, nor sounds, nor structure, nor contexts of use, etc., can be transposed without suffering and enjoying loss and addition – every poem brings the tensions *within* a language to a zenith. Poems do things to the words with which people do things to their worlds. In doing so, the "meanings" of those words are necessarily remade in and by the poem – or, more precisely, one can never know whether the use of a word in a poem is conforming to or transforming existing uses or meanings of that word in that language at that time. To go to a dictionary is already to beg the question. To go to other prior or contemporaneous texts to seek a standard usage from which the poem departs cannot resolve the problem of the new meaning. To put this in the terms already broached above, this renders testimony a law-breaking-fulfilling-truth-lying-utterance which is also a paradoxical mode of amnesty-condemnation and amnesiac-recollection. These paradoxes are at the centre of the problems with translating poetry; they are, moreover, exemplarily poetic problems in themselves, and every poem restages the problems in its own singular way.

This situation is further complicated – if that's possible – by the fact that the history of translation and translations is itself a feature of translating Villon today. It's not just that one translates from one place to another, one language to another, but today – particularly in regards to classic and foundational texts – one is dealing with a long-established, entangled and extraordinarily diverse work across generations of prior translations, translations that have affected the target language itself. In fact, I myself encountered Villon first in translations, and in a variety of kinds of translation: to deploy John Dryden's famous schema, some metaphrastic, some paraphrastic, and some imitative. Villon himself, or rather translations of Villon, have been, at least from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, an essential part of English literature itself. Since his recovery by the immediate post-Romantics, who established a certain vogue for neo-medievalism – Villon's reputation having fallen into desuetude for well over two centuries – Villon has been translated by such major poets as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, A.C. Swinburne, J.M. Synge, Ezra Pound (who even based an opera on Villon), Siegfried Sassoon, Basil Bunting, Robert Lowell, Tom Scott, Philip Levine, Galway Kinnell, Louis Simpson, and many many others, as well as by scholars and *litterateurs* such as Henry Francis Cary, Louisa Costello, Walter Besant, John Payne, Andrew Lang, and Barbara N. Sargent-Baur (on the Victorian recovery of Villon, see Omans 16-35 and Morsberger 189-198).

We could put this another way: nationalist monolingual literary history is already integrally formed by the international and interlingual translations it disavows. The great classicist Hermann Diels coined the term "doxography" as a moniker for philological traditions in which lost originals are transmitted only in the fragments and commentaries of later writers. Under such a rubric, the self-dissimulating doxography of nationalist literature would thereby falsify the very texts that it purports to be handing down, creating a tradition of poems we repeat but know nothing of even though we may have them by heart (on some of the perils of doxography, see Cassin). As Pound put it in "How to Read": "English literature lives on translation, it is fed by translation; every new exuberance, every new heave is stimulated by translation, every allegedly great age is an age of translations, beginning with Geoffrey Chaucer, *Le Grand Translateur*, translator of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, paraphraser of Virgil and Ovid, condenser of old stories he had found in Latin, French, and Italian" (Pound 35). This situation is at once overturned and exacerbated by the emerging contemporary genre of "world literature", a genre which is, by definition, governed by the exigencies of distributed translation (Roberts and Nelson 53-63).

It was in fact primarily through Pound's own "Villonauds" that I became enamoured of Villon in the first place. In an attempt to return to the "original" "himself", I started to acquire and read bilingual editions of Villon's work. As I read these translations, I at once became more and more enthusiastic about Villon, and less and less enthusiastic about the translations. Yet how could this be? My medieval French is hopeless, so how could I possibly sense what was lacking from the translations, except on the basis of the most general and obtuse sense of my own ignorance? I acquired dictionaries, I started to read biographies of Villon and histories of the period, and began my faltering attempts to translate fragments of his verse. In this, I would see my practice as analogous to what Borges remarks of Edward Fitzgerald's attempts to translate Omar Khayyam, if it is of course not comparable in its achievement. If I can parody Borges here: "from the fortuitous conjunction of a Parisian criminal and an enthusiastic Australian who peruses old French books, perhaps without understanding them completely, emerges a poet who resembles neither of them" (Borges 368). Notably enough, this is *not* a notable thing with Villon. It prompts the question: why is it that Villon in particular seems to inspire all sorts of intense identifications that manifestly go far beyond the expertise of his translators? I am not sure how one would go about trying to answer such a question. In any case, such translation is a practice which begins with a lack of the requisite knowledge, as it knows it lacks this knowledge and which, moreover, knows more as it knows more – about Villon's biography, forms, language, culture, and so on – that further, previously unknown vistas of non-knowing will arise.[1]

This is my testimony, then, of my experience of translating Villon, with all the complexities I have just adduced. The word *testimony* is all the more appropriate here, precisely because of its poetico-legal significance for Villon himself. Villon's greatest work is his *Le Testament* (1461), an absolutely extraordinary false will of 2023 lines, written mainly in eight-line stanzas of octosyllables, with a variety of interpolated ballades and rondeaux, and the occasional intrusion of ten-line decasyllabics. The *Testament* is set in contemporaneous urban Paris, in a France barely emerging from the aftermath of the Hundred Years' War with the English. It is full of incredible topographical, institutional and personal details, ranging widely not only in its forms of address, but in its topics and tone, from high to low and back again. Its language constantly shifts from the familiar to the high-falutin', from argot and cant to noble disquisitions, as well as literally shifting *between* languages as well, incorporating English military slang and Latin

[1] I apologize for the difficulty of this sentence, which is nonetheless decisive for my propositions about translation: such translations must begin with a kind of acknowledgement of their fundamental lack of knowledge about their own *raison d'être*, that is, the original text; as the process of translation proceeds, it certainly may come to know more in a positive sense about its object; however, the knowledge thereby gathered is often about how much it is impossible to know (the limits of translation emerge, irreparably).

theological concepts. Just like a contemporary talkback radio jock, Villon is always whining, bitching, dissing, mocking, indulging in outrageous insults and bouts of *ressentiment* and self-pity; precisely unlike such a jock, Villon is also ironic, self-deprecating, sensitive to the perils of rootlessness and degradation. The poem is full of multilingual puns and reworkings of current clichés. The *Testament* is, among other things, a work in which Villon announces to people he doesn't know his bequests to other people he doesn't know of things that he doesn't have.

This brings us immediately back to the problem of unknowing. For, from the very beginning of Villon's manuscript and print appearance, almost everybody has been forced to admit that they can't ever quite get what he's on about.[2] The great court poet Clément Marot, who produced what is regularly adduced as the first critical edition of Villon for François I in 1533, announces in his introduction to the work that:

> Quant à l'industrie des lays qu'il feit en ses testaments pour suffisament la cognoistre et entendre, il fauldroit avoir esté de son temps à Paris, et avoir cogneu les lieux, les choses et les homes dont il parle: le mémoire desquelz tant plus se passera, tant moins se coignoistra icelle industrie de ses lays dictz.
>
> (Green 70)
>
> [To sufficiently recognize and understand the ingenuity of the legacies that he makes in his testaments, it would be necessary to have lived in the Paris of time, and to have known the places, the things, and the men of which he speaks: the more the memory of these passes, the less the ingenuity of these legacies can be recognized.]

If Marot was already suffering this difficulty, despite himself being a near-contemporary of Villon, as well as having gone out into the streets of Paris to hear personages recite and sing their memorized versions of the poems, his experience proves exemplary. The difficulties are further exacerbated by the very nature of Villon's work: not just variations in the manuscripts and the unstandardized orthography of the times, but the secret puns, allusions and addressees that are nonetheless clearly at stake at so many points of the works. As a criminal associated with various underworld organizations, Villon was also a master of thieves' cant, in which he writes, and such a tongue is at once specialized and secretive by definition (although, of course, many have attempted their own translations, including into contemporary French). These difficulties have even inspired certain commentators to treat the *Testament* as if it were an *essentially esoteric* work, containing numerological, linguistic and sexual *codes* that can still be cracked by the diligent scientific researcher. One of the victims of such code-breaking fantasies was, perhaps surprisingly, Tristan Tzara, father of Dada. In my opinion, such cryptographical endeavours are themselves paranoid defences against the impossibility of translation, insofar as they presume, one, that the text itself provides the code that will decipher it; two, that this code is a master-code, the final secret of Villon's work; and three, that the code-breaker is the hero who has seen the truth, against all other interpreters.

Villon himself complains in the *Testament* that others have been calling his own earlier work, the *Lais* (c1456), by the wrong name, that is, by the name of *Testament*:

> Sy me souvient, ad mon advis,
> Que je feiz a mon partement

[2] There are four major surviving manuscripts, of which C is usually considered the most authoritative, and a first printed edition by P. Levet of 1489. The manuscripts are: A in the Arsenal Paris (ms 3523); C in Bibliotheque Nationale (20041); F in Stockholm (Fauchet, second half of the fifteenth century); and B in Paris (BN, fr. 1661); the earliest printed edition is Imprimé I (Levet 1489, based on C).

> Certain laiz, l'an cinquante six,
> Qu'aucuns, sans mon consentement,
> Voulurent nommer Testament;
> Leur plaisir fut, non pas le myen.
> Mais quoy? on dit communement
> "Ung chascun n'est maistre du scien."
>
> And I recall, it seems to me,
> That on departing I composed
> Certain bequests, Year Fifty-Six,
> That some folk, without my consent,
> Saw fit to call a Testament.
> It was their pleasure and not mine.
> Ah, well! It's commonly observed:
> "No one is master of his own"
>
> (Sargent-Baur 105)[3]

So not only were there misunderstandings from the first – by Villon's own friends and contemporaries – but those misunderstandings are deliberately introduced into and staged by the work itself. In other words, such misunderstandings were *already* influences upon and inspirations for the *Testament* in its composition. Such difficulties recur throughout the poem, which is exceptionally closely-integrated with Villon's life, social milieu, political situation, and sophisticated linguistic games in such a way as to preclude the possibility of any attestable resolution.

But this self-evidently poses extreme problems for translation: if we cannot from the beginning properly locate the status of the address, we can't even work out the sense or tone, let alone the "meaning" (see the discussion in Draskau). Take the verses about one Jean Cotart, a diocesan prosecutor alleged by Villon to have represented him in a defamation case. As David Fein comments:

> The nature of Villon's relationship with Cotart has never been definitively established. Some critics maintain that Villon's treatment of the lawyer (who, like Villon, was charged with several crimes, and was once even jailed in the Châtelet) suggests a sympathetic point of view. Others believing that Cotart was among the officials responsible for prosecuting Villon for various crimes, find in the prayer for Jean Cotart a cruel and heavy-handed attack.
>
> (Fein, *François Villon Revisited* 100)

As Fein rightly continues: "Deprived of essential information about the case to which Villon refers (and for which he claims to be figuratively and literally in Cotart's debt), we cannot conclusively characterize the tone of the ballade as either sympathetic or vicious" (100). Having made the point, Fein then, in a move entirely characteristic of Villon scholarship, proceeds to an unjustifiable speculation: "Jean Cotart, regardless of his professional successes or failures, had apparently acquired quite a reputation as a drinker, and Villon celebrates this aspect of Cotart's life in the *orroison*" (100). I don't think this is justifiable at all. Why not? Because Villon is just as likely to be mocking a wowser as praising a tippler, and dissing an enemy as joshing a mate. He is just as likely to be claiming familiarity with somebody he knows only by reputation – as happens

[3] This substantial recent translation suffers from the fact that, as Michael Freeman notes, it "rarely succeeds as poetry but it is generally reliable as far as meaning is concerned" (Freeman 14).

frequently in the *Testament* – as he is to be affirming a close bond. Is this praise or blame, epideixis or its parody, epideixis through its parody, making in-jokes or affirming homiletic clichés? As Fein himself notes elsewhere, "Changes of tone in the *Testament* can be fully perceived, and are meant to be fully perceived, only by the reader who is truly sensitive to the poet's voice, one who is equipped to judge the tonal quality of the voice by juxtaposing it with personal knowledge of the man to whom it is inextricably connected" (*François Villon and his Reader* 55). But it is precisely that personal knowledge that is lacking, since our knowledge comes precisely only through the poetry itself. The incapacity to decide opens onto an abyss of illegitimate decisions that both energize and paralyze any possible translator.

Into the bargain, there are further formal and local issues: the *Testament* notoriously begins and ends with drinking, and drinking is a theme throughout; there was moreover a popular genre of drinking songs, to which this contributes. Aside from its formal, social and religious implications, there are a couple of obvious things about drinking we shouldn't forget: first, that drinking literally puts you out of your right mind; second, that drinking is not a form of work, but of spiritual-physical transformation (for better or worse). The *Testament* opens with the lines:

> En l'an de mon trentïesme aage,
> Que toutes mes hontes j'euz beues,
> Ne du tout fol, ne du tout saige,
> Non obstant maintes peines eues,
> Lesquelles j'ay toutes receues
> Soubz la main Tibault d'Aucigny…
> S'evesque il est, signant les rues,
> Qu'il soit le mien je le regny;
>
> In this my thirtieth year of life
> When I had drunk down all my shames,
> While *compos mentis* (more or less)
> Notwithstanding many pains,
> Every one of which I've had
> Under Thibault d'Aussigny –
> If he's a bishop, blessing streets,
> That he is mine, this I deny;
>
> (Sargent-Baur 53)

And it concludes with a ballade, spoken in the voice of another, perhaps Villon's imaginary clerk Fremin:

> Prince, gent comme esmerillon.
> Sachiez qu'il fist au departir:
> Ung traict but de vin morillon,
> Quant de ce monde voult partir.
>
> Prince, noble as the merlin is,
> Here's what he did on taking leave:
> He drank a draft of dark-red wine
> When just about to leave this world
>
> (Sargent-Baur 193)[4]

[4] As Karl Uitti has argued, "the *fist* (did) and the *but* (drank) of the [final] envoi [of the final ballade] bring up, and respond to, our puzzle about the missing preterite in the initial *huitain* of the *Testament*…. By completing the

We are therefore entering a deranged world from the first: having been forced to drink shame, Villon exits with a real alcoholic drink. That final drink, of course, is also a final communion, which St Paul considered a real participation in the blood of Christ. In between the shame inflicted by Bishop D'Aussigny and Villon's final act of self-delivered communion, we hear of him having been forced to swallow other kinds of liquids too, as well as consume – and not be able to consume – all sorts of substances. He invokes his own torture by a form of medieval water-boarding, as well as being made to eat *poires d'angoisse*, literally "anguish pears", a hard pear from Dordogne but also apparently a torture device placed in the mouth (or other orifice) and which, depending on the design, could be extended until the victim's jaws were dislocated. Very many of Villon's bequests have to do with foodstuffs and drinks of all kinds, some real, some imagined. At one point, Villon even provides a "recipe" in the form of a *Ballade* (sometimes subtitled "of Fried Tongues"), which I have myself roughly adapted. My own version of the *envoi* runs:

> If, Prince, you lack webs, sieves or sacks,
> These treats in shit-smeared panties hide;
> But, just before, in porcine cracks,
> Let all those jealous tongues be fried!
>
> (Clemens 67)

Because the *Testament* is globally a parody of a legal document, itself an authoritative public genre, its form has to be thought about carefully, not least because a genre is, aside from anything else, a form of instruction to the reader. A "Testament" or "Will" has to do most often with the transmission of property across generations, from the fresh-dead to the still-living. As a juridical document, it is governed by strict protocols which must be fulfilled for it to be valid: as more than one commentator has remarked, this makes the will an anti-poetic genre in its heart. The idea that one can "will" the things that you possess to others, such that those things will be able to continue to have a use in the lives of others after your death, is a very strange one: think of all it presupposes about the nature of life, death, intention, form, objects and property. One always makes a will by presupposing one's own irrevocable disappearance; one often does so in the face of (perceived) imminent death. And it is all these presuppositions that are clearly targeted by Villon, whose most-used epithet for himself is *povre*, "poor" ("Povre je suis de ma jeuness,/De povre et de peticte extrasse", T. 273-4), and he speaks throughout the text of all sorts of poverty, real and imagined, economic and spiritual.[5] A testament which explicitly states that its own testator has nothing to bequeath is clearly a funny kind of thing. What does Villon have to give? Nothing! So what the *Testament* leaves to others is not the various goods (and evils) of which it speaks and pretends to promise, but itself: the verse is itself Villon's legacy and it, not having any legal standing whatsoever, must by definition transmit itself outside the logics of the law. Into the bargain, the *Testament* reflects on its own illegality in all sorts of ways. The beginning of the final ballade is as follows:

> Icy se clost le testament
> Et finist du povre Villon.
> Venez a son enterrement,

---

poem in this fashion as a "sentence", that is, by causing it to buckle back to its starting point, Villon connects his Testament with Guillaume de Lorris's *Romance of the Rose*" (160).

[5] This is also why the economics of the text are of extreme importance. On the circulation of money in the *Testament*, see Harden (345-350), which contains invaluable information about the sorts of coinage and their value circulating in Villon's time.

Quant vous orez le carillon,
Vestuz rouge com vermeillon,
Car en amours mourut martir:
Ce jura il sur son coullon,
Quant de ce monde voult partir.

Here closes and comes to an end
The testament of poor Villon.
Come to attend his burial
When you will hear the carillon,
Dressed in red like vermilion;
A martyr did he die, in love;
He swore it on his testicle
When just about to leave this world

(Sargent-Baur 191)

Note the swearing on the single testicle, which commentators have made out to be in fact a pretty sophisticated bit of bawdy. First of all, testament and testimony are not only linked etymologically, but by their signification in Roman law: the putative witness, necessarily a man, would swear to tell the truth, and the legend has it that he would have to swear on his testicles to do so. This, at least, is the pun Villon relies on as he tampers with it: note only one testicle is involved in the drama, not the standard-issue two. This means that, according to law, the testimony must be invalidated according to a number of principles: first, a single witness has no probatory value (*unus testis, testis nullus*); second, nobody can act as a witness on their own behalf (*testis in re propria sua*). There may also be a joke here regarding Aristotle's advice regarding the sexing of one's progeny: the right testicle apparently was the repository of male-producing sperm (all sperm ultimately being generated cerebrally), and so one wonders just which ball Villon is swearing on here, the *dexter* or the *sinister* one. Villon is literally announcing, through the medium of a patently-false third-party voice, that he has not properly sworn anything, that the account of his swearing itself testifies to this failed testimony, that this account is itself compromised, and that Villon himself is an intestate testator whose will has nonetheless been successfully done – illegally or not – insofar as you are reading these lines. Villon thus renders us simultaneously the witnesses and executors of a will that, to the extent that we attest to his claims, we too can only assent to their illegality. To put this another way: Villon turns the impotence of his poverty into the greatest resource for his poetry.

This illegal or a-legal form of transmission is further complicated by the content and context. Villon was himself a notorious Parisian criminal, and his verse takes criminality of all kinds, from low-level mountebankery all the way up to grand theft and murder as its topics (see Freeman; Hunt; Taylor). He was, as aforementioned, fluent in the argot or jargon of the criminal classes and perhaps directly associated with the notorious Coquillards. A lot of what is known about Villon in fact comes from the court records: the manslaughter of Phillipe Sermoise, the burglary at the Collège de Navarre, imprisonment in Orléans, Meun-sur-Loire and Paris, street brawling, various civil suits, the torture, trials and executions of his friends and colleagues, and ultimate banishment from Paris. Nonetheless, if we think of this in the context of Villon's time, we can add that a testament is also a religious matter, here parodied but also paradoxically purified by its carnivalesque inversions. Precisely because a sinner with nothing material can leave nothing but the form of a testament, such an eventuality may be considered in some sense more spiritual than that of somebody who has spent their life accumulating goods and riches. The *Testament* is then of course also a *Confession*, one that shows how even its form is saturated with sin, and is therefore,

in its very duplicities, more deeply soul-searching than one that is simply direct, earnest and honest.

Villon was not only a sinner; he was also a scholar, or, as he refers to himself, an "*écolier*", a good little arts student with an M.A. from the University of Paris. His education had been an education in grammar, rhetoric and logic, comprising an extreme attentiveness to techniques of structure, argumentation and style in the work of Scripture, the Church Fathers and the Scholastics. If this is not-quite-yet Renaissance humanism in its full glory, it is still a life dedicated to the studies of ancient texts. It is therefore entirely bound up with issues regarding the transmission of the dead and their literary testaments – with translation. Even the apparently vernacular and intimate addresses made by Villon to his readers are given an erudite twist. As John Fox notes, "medieval rhetoric, like present-day stylistics though with a different motivation, drew attention to numbers of linguistic devices, amongst them anacoluthon, or *nominativus pendens*, a lack of grammatical sequence caused by a sudden substitution, under emotional pressure, of one subject for another" (Fox 14). Villon's apparently spontaneous interpolations, even interpolations within interpolations, are nothing of the kind.

Finally, Villon was a semi-orphan, adopted by Guillaume Villon, a professor of law at Saint-Benoît-le-Bétourné. Villon is therefore not his "real" name, but the name of his adoptive father. He himself could be Montcorbier or des Loges. One of the immediate consequences of this situation – leaving aside any psychobiographical speculations we may like to indulge in – is that Villon has no proper patronym, and certainly not the "Name of the Father" in its usual acceptation. Even in the legal documentation surrounding the case of Sermoise's death, he is referred to by various names: Montcorbier, des Loges, and Villon, and as "Michel Mouton", the false name that he gave to the barber who fixed him up in the immediate aftermath of the incident. He is not anonymous, but polynymous in all sorts of ways: Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and Pessoa's heteronyms, not to mention the monikers of contemporary rappers might all legitimately be invoked in this context. This a-patriarchal naming obviously has a bearing on the testamentary structure of the *Testament*. For such a will to make sense, it must be signed – the testator must of course be legally identifiable – and so the play of names and voices throughout the *Testament* are themselves peculiarly determined. That he certainly signs himself "Villon" in acrostics in the text, and possibly in anagrams and heteronyms too, is just another twist on the plays with identity throughout. I will return to these problems of proper names shortly.

These are not just contextual or hermeneutic remarks about "the text itself" – which is already irrevocably enigmatic – but features that establish a state of emergency for any possible translation. If a translator is happy to remain unaware of these features, then what they are actually translating becomes obscure; if a translator recognizes that these features ought to be accounted for in the translation, then what they are actually translating becomes obscure. The double-bind is irreducible and uncircumventable, but it seems to me that the second option is really the only option. The material of the text is not simply the literality of the text, but implicates materials beyond – as the text itself tells us, in a number of heterogeneous modalities.

Let me turn now to a specific case, one of the Ballades from the *Testament*. This is, moreover, not one ballade among others, but in fact the single most famous "poem" of Villon's, known since at least Marot – who gave it its now-canonical title – "Ballade des dames du temps jadis". The ballade is a highly-structured form, comprised of three eight-line stanzas rhyming abbabcbc, supplemented with a concluding four-line *envoi* rhyming bcbc, and in which the last line of every stanza is a refrain repeated throughout. This particular ballade is, as D.B. Wyndham-Lewis once noted, one of the master-lyrics of European poetry, an ornament of the *Ubi sunt*? genre. I provide the French and my own translation:

Dictes moy ou, n'en quel paÿs,
Est Flora la belle Romaine,

Archipiadés, ne Thaÿs,
Qui fut sa cousine germaine,
Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine
Dessus riviere ou sur estan,
Qui beaulté ot trop plus qu'umaine.
Mais ou sont les neiges d'anten?

Ou est la tres saige Esloÿs,
Pour qui chastré fut et puis moyne
Pierre Esbaillart a Saint Denys?
Pour son amour eust ceste essoyne.
Semblablement, ou est la royne
Qui commanda que Buriden
Fust gecté en ung sac en Saine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'anten?

La royne Blanche comme liz
Qui chantoit a voix de seraine,
Berte au plat pié Bietrix, Aliz,
Haranburgis qui tint la Maine,
Et Jehanne la bonne Lorraine
Qu'Engloys brulerent a Rouen…
Ou sont ilz, ou, Vierge souveraine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'anten?

Prince, n'enquerrez de sepmaine
Ou elles sont, ne de cest an,
Qu'a ce reffraing ne vous remaine:
Mais ou sont les neiges d'anten?

You tell me where, give me a name,
Is Flora now, Rome's loveliness?
And have they too succumbed the same,
Archipiada and Thaïs?
Or Echo – O her beauty bless! –
Who answers back with fading tears
When sound rings out on rock or ness?
Where are the snows of vanished years?

Where's Heloïse, so wise, for whom
Poor Abelard mislaid his balls
And found a darkened cell his room?
The heights of love give way to falls!
And, similarly, that Queen whose calls
Saw Buridan caught by his ears,
Slung in a sack and to the shoals?
Where are the snows of vanished years?

The lily Blanche, that Queen whose voice
Was sweet as any siren's strain,

Big-footed Bertha, Alice, Beatrice,
Or Erembourg who held the Maine,
And Joan the virtuous Lorraine,
The English burnt for Rouen's peers –
Where are they, Virgin, and their pain?
Where are the snows of vanished years?

Prince, ask not this week where they
Have gone, nor ask though Christmas nears,
Or else you'll hear this line replay:
Where are the snows of vanished years?

(Clemens 53-54)

In a famous essay, the great Austrian philologist Leo Spitzer points out several features of the poem that shouldn't be ignored: first, its placement in the body of the *Testament*, and especially its articulation with the two ballades that immediately follow it; second, its stylistic beauty; third, the precision of its formal composition; fourth, the peculiarities of its self-annihilating nature. Spitzer, despite his seriousness as a historically-minded philologue, is at pains in this essay to defend a serious problem with historical studies of literary works – the want of an aesthetic sense (7-22). For the poem is outrageously beautiful, and without a sensitivity to the lilt of the lines, the modulations of tone, the extraordinarily subtle ways in which the figure of water insists throughout (rivers, ponds, melted snows, the Seine, seas), placed in apposition to images of forced enclosure (bounce-back, monastic cells, towers, sacks) and linked to and by supernatural literary phenomena (nymphs, sirens, goddesses), there is no translating this poem.

The poem, as Marot's interpolated title suggests, focuses on a kind of negative triumph of famous women, who, crucially, come to represent the fate of humanity *tout court*. The poem begins with a question that is a challenge, moves to imprecation, and, after warning the Prince who is in the place of poetic judgement not to ask the question, concludes by repeating the ultimate form of the question it purports to forbid. One cannot not question; even the warning not to question inevitably reverts to a meta-question. Spitzer emphasizes that "Dites-moi où, n'en quel pays" dominates the poem, which is picked up in the envoi, "n'enquerrez de semaine, ne de cest an". He adds that the poem translates the passage of its named women across the earth into recurrent questions that in turn transform the refrain into a reprimand, implying: why pose such a useless question as "Where are the snows of vanished years"? The refrain remains, as the women and their names disappear; the anguished and terrifying nature of the refrain is all that is left from their disappearance; soon even the names themselves, chosen for their significance of having lost any real significance, will go. Hence we are witnesses to, in Spitzer's felicitous phrase, the staggering experience of a poem that destroys itself before its public. Yet, paradoxically, the very violence of the refrain's irony threatens to disrupt the inexorability of hopelessness it incarnates. Spitzer, again: "It calms our anxiety by the very fact of repeating the same sounds: a repetition can be bracing and stimulating". Villon's corrosive irony incarnates a form of despairing hope.

Yet note how the poem begins with an indeterminate form of second-person address ("Dites-moi") before mutating to the public "Vous" to the (generic patron) Prince in the *envoi*: all levels of society are implicated. Note, moreover, that all this incessant questioning should lead us to think of torture in this context for at least two reasons: first, because the technical term for torture was precisely *quaestio* in Latin; second, because Villon himself had been submitted to torture, as indeed are several of the figures mentioned or alluded to herein – whether by water or fire or iron or air. Here, however, the question has itself become the torture; and, indeed, a form of self-torture. In becoming so, it also makes confession, let alone expiation, impossible: even if you provided a full list of your criminal comrades (to yourself!), no name could be acceptable as the

real culprit, and so the torture will only end with the end of life. Language as questioning is thereby essentially and explicitly linked to the threat of death in and by the poem. Jody Enders notes that "During the Middle Ages, even as it connoted torture, *quaestio* continued to denote such intellectual activities as scholastic debate, legal question, and legal investigation, all of which retained their potentially punitive connotations while they were dramatized in medieval courtrooms, classrooms, and theatres" (Enders 42). Not only the poem, but the epoch itself takes place under the sign of such questioning.

The late Peter Steele once remarked to me that the figures presented in the three stanzas of W.B. Yeats' poem "A Long Legged Fly" represent three forms of human creative power: first, political-military power (Julius Caesar), second, sexual power (Helen of Troy) and third, artistic power (Michelangelo). Yeats himself was familiar with Villon, and one might even speculate that he learned something from the French poet here. Moreover, such chains of influence should also remind us of the multiple influences on Villon himself, some of which I have tried to treat above. Here, quite to the contrary of Yeats' verse though, the invocations do not concern the praise of power, but rather the immutable, distressing and incomprehensible limits of all earthly powers.

The first stanza invokes four women famous for their beauty, Flora, Archipiada, Thaïs and Echo. At least two of these, Flora and Echo, are supernatural, the first a minor goddess (but also the name of a notorious prostitute), the second a nymph; the other two, Archipiada and Thaïs, had at least a semi-natural status, Archipiada involving a misrecognition of Alcibiades, the great Athenian general, considered by many medievals as a woman. Thaïs, by contrast, was a notorious courtesan. The second stanza involves intellectual power – Heloïse and an unnamed queen, possibly Jeanne of Bourgogne – or, more precisely (as we shall see in a moment), women's power over intellectual power. The third stanza lists women who are known for their temporal sovereignty and/or for their maternal powers: Blanche was Queen of Castile and mother of Louis IX, Bertha was Charlemagne's mother, Alice and Beatrice were familiar from *Chansons de geste*, whereas Joan of Arc, burned in the year of Villon's birth, presumably needs no introduction. The other woman apostrophized, however, is of a different nature: although the very type of maternal power, the Virgin Mary is the only specifically Christian figure denominated by the poem. Note then, how the third stanza invokes the epithet of the mother of Christ almost as an expletive: the Virgin will not respond, and indeed she is even invoked here as an emblem of non-responsiveness. Heaven's Queen will not answer the question of earthly death.

What I would like to point to here is the problem of the translation of proper names. What makes this problem so fraught is that the proper name is so often held to be untranslatable, precisely because it is not linked to a *meaning*, general or particular, universal or singular, but to a physical, human referent. As such, one does not strictly speaking *translate* a proper name, but transliterates it: letter for letter, sound for sound. Hence the common sense that a name can be simply shifted between languages as a non-signifying sound that is *essentially* or *primarily* referential. Yet is that the case here? I've already spoken of Villon's polynymic status, but we could also add that, given the random orthography of the fifteenth century, the manuscripts provide often quite radically different spellings for the "same" names. It is, moreover, not always clear who or what these names are supposed to designate. As Jane Gilbert has it, "the names are evocative but mainly indeterminate, with minimum social structuring, and barely defined reference points" (129). Gilbert also notes, *contra* the extraordinary epistemophilia that the *Testament* generally excites in scholars, this particular Ballade seems to incite the very opposite: such authorities as Spitzer and Siciliano even go so far as to declare that there are things that they do not want to know about this poem, which "calls on us to suspend detailed knowledge" (Gilbert 129).

Yet questions still remain about how much to make of *these* names. The nomination of "Archipiada" is already problematic, for instance, given that its referent was not a woman at all, but appears here because it seems that, given the medievals were incapable of acknowledging Greek pederastic politics (following Boethius), Alcibiades simply had to be a woman famous for his

beauty (so to speak). There is further dispute as to the referents of these names: is the nominated Blanche the thirteenth-century Queen of Castile or the fourteenth-century Blanche of Navarre, wife of Philip VI of France? Is "blanche" even a proper name or is it an adjective? The word was often also a moniker for prostitutes in the epoch, a possibility which links it at once to the Flora and Thaïs of the first stanza. Is the Queen of the second stanza Jeanne of Navarre or Jeanne of Burgundy, whose sister and sister-in-law were both executed for adultery? Jane Taylor remarks that the names not only resist integration into any overarching pattern, but "the referents defy this process of 'making sense'" (73; see also Mus 81-91). It is possible Villon himself doesn't know or isn't sure who he's referring to; that he has confused or misremembered the personages; or even that he has deliberately chosen names for which such confusions are irreducible. The last of these possibilities is certainly likely. As Jean Dufournet has pointed out, throughout the *Testament* Villon plays overtly on homonymy to confuse identities of persons to derisive effect (e.g. Thibaut d'Aussigny and Tacque Thibaut), to convert proper names to (very) common nouns, as well as sporting with the straightforward deformation of names: Trascaille/Trouscaille and Macé/Macée (Dufournet 25-27).

Yet the question remains: why, in a great poem that inspires scholarly epistemophilia, does the Ballade itself consistently seem to neutralize such a desire? This further bears on how to translate the poem. Are these names simply resonant signifiers, which, reduced to the enigma of their purely sonorous qualities, embody what the poem itself announces, the inevitable disappearance of all flesh? Or are they names carefully chosen for the symbolic nature of the personages they designate? Or are they names chosen precisely because they are between *being-known* as names and *being-obscure* in their referents? One would have to say *all of the above*. This is because Villon is always *explicitly* writing for *at least* two audiences: the first are his immediate friends and compatriots, those "in the know"; but he is also writing for a more amorphous public, that goes beyond what he himself can possibly know. And in doing this, Villon is also simultaneously putting in question how much those allegedly in the know actually know. How do we know this? Not simply from the general historical and generic issues that I have already raised, but because of the structure, form and content of the Ballade itself, which announces that it is doing precisely this *in an exoteric way*. I would prefer to say: this division in address of the poem is part of what the poem does; in doing so, it proposes a particularly poetic conundrum to the translator; this conundrum involves how to translate, not simply the words or form or tone, but *the elusive division of address itself*.[6]

But this torsion returns us again to the problem of nomination. Although there is much to say about all the names, let me concentrate on two, precisely because it is incredible that Villon did not know a great deal about them. Why? Abelard and Buridan were not only famous Parisian intellectuals, whom Villon would have had to study at university, but they were notorious too for other reasons, wreathed in legends that went far beyond their own intellectual importance. They are also male names, taking centre-stage in a poem which is otherwise dedicated to women and women's powers. If we begin to think more about these names, the poem begins to look much more humorous than it has almost invariably been taken to be. Although exegeses of the *Testament's* black comedy are a staple of scholarship, almost all interpretations and translations of

[6] For a contemporary translator, this means posing the question: rather than simply reproducing the names "themselves", should we not translate the names into ones *with comparable functions in the present context*, i.e. which retain a differential relationship in each case between significance and reference for a contemporary audience, and which also sustain dense intertextual allusions amongst themselves? Of course, this presumes we can identify what's at stake in both contexts, as well as that there are indeed comparable functions in those different contexts, plus that we can reproduce those functions in verse, etc.

this poem are keen to underline its searing enigmatic melancholy – and not its biting wit and compressed, compounded academic jokes.

Abelard (1079-1142) remains famous today, as he was in his own time and beyond, primarily for his famous relationship with Heloïse (c1090-1164). Abelard was Heloïse's tutor; they had a child (named Astrolabe) out of wedlock; after much argy-bargy, Heloïse's uncle Canon Fulbert had his niece's paramour castrated; thereafter, Abelard retired to the Benedictine monastery at Saint-Denis. Abelard was in other words a man who was very unchaste – and then enforcedly chaste and chastened. The language of Villon's poem even covertly indicates this: the phrase *très sage*, "very wise", is clearly linked to *sagesse*, which can have the sense of not only wisdom, but chastity. In Latin, it is *sapientissimus* ("most wise"), a word which naturally appears in the writings of Abelard and Heloïse themselves. This also sets us up for one of the obscurities I've already mentioned regarding one of the names in the following stanza: Blanche of Navarre's nickname was precisely "*Belle Sagesse*". The black humour so prevalent throughout the *Testament*, but so often held to be lacking in this and its accompanying Ballades, makes its insidious return in the form of *suppressed potential allusions without any certain proof*. Abelard made his name by losing an essential part of his body, and then withdrawing from the world to a monastery. In this, his life already mimics the theme of the poem as a whole: Abelard's name was made by the castration of his body, which is already figuring our ultimate fates. The body dies, the name remains, without reference and with a confused signification, and then the name too dies. Moreover, as previously discussed, the *Testament* as a whole contains a great deal of obscene humour, not least the aforementioned testicle joke in its own closing Ballade.

Yet the allusions don't stop there. For, in addition to his amorous adventures, Abelard is also one of the greatest figures in the history of logic, perhaps the first of the so-called "nominalist" philosophers. Although this is not the place to enter into the subtleties of Abelard's philosophy, there is nonetheless one theme that is absolutely determining: his theory of names. As a nominalist, Abelard denies the real existence of universals – these are nothing but words – and proposes that the impositor of names "meant to impose them in accordance with certain natures or characteristics of things, even if he did not know how to think out the nature or characteristic of the thing" (cited in Cameron 348; see also Eco 51-55). Whatever the difficulties with interpreting this position, it's clear that the name is linked integrally to a feature of the thing it names. What happens, then, to the sense of a name when a part of that thing disappears? Or when the thing itself disappears? The problem of time and change returns at the heart of the name itself. In Peter King's exegesis: "Abelard is a 'presentist': only the present exists, although past times did exist (they just exist no longer) and that future times will exist (but they do not yet exist). Abelard is not rejecting the reality of time so much as calling attention to the fact that existence is tied to the present instant alone" (103). But this returns us directly to Villon. On Abelard's account, there is no point in asking where, exactly, last year's snows have gone: they are simply non-existent if you believe in Abelardian metaphysics. But to believe that, you'd have to believe an unfortunate castrate whose philosophical positions could not prevent him from being led astray, mutilated, and then enclosed in a darkness which remained unleavened by further philosophizing. Into the bargain, you would be believing somebody who no longer exists, who survives in name alone.

Villon's learned humour, moreover, continues throughout the stanza. Jean Buridan (c1300-c1358), an arts master as intellectually influential as Abelard and twice Rector of the University of Paris (Villon's own *alma mater*) is here also the subject of a triple joke. First, he was renowned for being a ladies' man, who, in the course of his adventures, had an encounter with Queen Jeanne, who, as was allegedly her wont, would subsequently have her lovers bagged and thrown into the Seine from a window of her tower. The story goes that Buridan, knowing Jeanne's proclivities, had a barge full of straw sail past as he was being defenestrated, thereby preserving himself from drowning. This story is, needless to say, apocryphal, and perhaps known to be so by Villon himself. Second, one of Buridan's famous *Sophismata*, Sophism XVII is entitled "You Will Throw

Me in the Water". Plato, guarding a bridge, tells Socrates that the latter can cross if the first proposition he utters is true; if not, Plato will throw Socrates in the water. Socrates at once responds, "You will throw me in the water" (Buridan 74-76). This is, in Buridan's own terms, an *insolubilia* for, if what Socrates says is true, then it is false, and vice-versa. (In fact, Buridan's commentary notes that Socrates is speaking about a future contingent and therefore this places the ball in Plato's court to make that statement true or false; as for Plato's statement, it is a conditional, and therefore, strictly speaking, not true. Buridan does helpfully add that Plato shouldn't make such promises in the first place, at least not without prohibiting a response based on self-reference.) Third, Buridan had become extremely influential for his modification of Aristotle's theory of movement. As Alexandre Koyré has suggested, the Aristotelian theory "has only one flaw (besides that of being false): that of being contradicted by everyday practice, by the practice of throwing" (411). Why? Because the mover had to keep exerting force for the moved to keep moving. Buridan's impetus physics therefore attempted to solve the Aristotelian problem by suggesting that, in moving, the movement itself is produced as a cause. But this solution is precisely what is parodied by Villon's list of the disappeared: the names, flung into the future by the bodies that they once designated, have lost their movers, and now fly through time without them – but, like any projectile, must eventually come to earth. Buridan's hypothesis does not present a physical but a philological phenomenon.

So, on the one hand, the more we know about these names, the more we understand the pertinence of their appearance and disappearance in the poem, and without such an understanding then something crucial about the poem must escape us – not least its complex intellectual humour. Yet, the more we understand about these names, the less we ourselves actually experience the necessary loss of meaning and being that the names incarnate as meaningless, material enigma. The division of address is therefore not just happenstance, nor an unfortunate consequence of time and translation, but a "positive" – if such a word still has any meaning – feature of the poem, and this feature then undermines itself. So the proper name itself – the very emblem of a rigid designator with reference but no sense, to advert once more to the commonsense philosophy of proper names – changes its material qualities with translation. Even the sounds do not remain stable, nor their sense, nor their reference, nor their relationship to each other. If they are certainly deployed by Villon for their material beauty, this beauty is itself in part dependent on the vanishing fame of their bearers, this fame is already compromised by lack of knowledge of the bearers of the names, and the beauty is compromised by the very knowledge that would enable a better sense of the sense of the poem, which, in gaining, one loses.

For the poem itself is about precisely the inevitability and irresolvability of such loss. My own translation, in an attempt to respond to – not answer nor resolve – this situation, seeks a way to denote and recreate this doubleness in a kind of contemporary English without simply transcribing or transliterating what is there. Such a transcription runs the risk of terrible distortion. For example, my own translation suffers by suppressing certain names (e.g. Saint Denis) through quasi-explanatory substitutions, or by modifying names with adjectives or epithets they did not originally possess. Even worse: given that I have done this in the name of an attempt to preserve a particular *division of address* that the poem presents without supplying an undue supplementary apparatus, it is no longer clear whether or not this can be understood at all by a reader…. Yet this necessary failure then testifies to something that may otherwise have remained obscure about the poem. The paradox of Villon's poem is that it survives only due to its staggering powers of self-division and self-destruction, which are transmitted imperceptibly through the translations that fail to present this.

Translating poetry is not so much a matter of producing new words, although that is a necessary end, and a disappointed one. It is a process of profane illumination, in which one is transfixed and transfigured by what Stephane Mallarmé called "the mystery in letters". It is the most intense form of reading I have experienced, insofar as it involves an intense decreation of the

original, and the reintroduction there, in the divisions that the original knew nothing about but which the translation itself cannot know, of the original's own mode of unknowing. Translation provides the paradigm of materialism, since it deals with the very elements that make sense itself, for example, inscriptions in the air or upon wood. Yet to attempt to translate a work from a radically different time and place and language is to be confronted by a constant loss of knowledge – about one's own language, as about the other's – to the point of unknowing impotence. Such is mystical experience. Yet Villon, it seems, is one of the poets for whom such an experience is *already* inscribed and staged in his verses. The mystical, material abyss that one encounters upon reading his work therefore constitutes a particularly heightened "experience" of unknowing, of disappearance, of decreation. This essay, and my translations of Villon, are testimony to this experience.

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Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants: On Translating an Anthology of Persian Poetry

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Abstract
Poetry translated into English from other languages has long been an important scene of Anglophone literary activity. In the last few decades, however, poetry translation has become an even more prominent field of literary production in English-speaking cultures. This *translational turn* in contemporary poetry has been beneficial in not only expanding the often small readerships that exist for contemporary poets but in also expanding the literary horizons of English-language readers. In this article I explore some of my own experiences and concerns as the co-editor and co-translator of *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants*, an anthology of Persian poetry in English. Whilst I am quite satisfied with many aspects of my work on this publication, there are also others which I believe have made working on this project difficult. It is hoped that by addressing both the positive and negative aspects of (co-)creating this anthology, this article will contribute to our understanding of the opportunities as well as potential problematics of the current *translational turn*.

The translational turn in contemporary English poetry

Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants: An Anthology of Persian Poetry from Rudaki to Langroodi (Arc Publications, 2012) is a new bilingual anthology of poetry that I have co-edited and co-translated with poet and anthologist John Kinsella. This book is the first sustained presentation of poetry from early medieval Persia to contemporary Iran to appear in English, and it aims to provide a selection representing Iran's entire poetic history. It is, therefore, a project deeply engaged with views and *doxa* apropos of the nation's contested past, its putatively troubled present state and its potentially unstable future; and, as such, the book unavoidably speaks to a range of challenging cultural, social and political themes and issues. It is not, however, these topics that I wish to address in this article. My aim here is to briefly discuss the book as a translation project, and to assess my work on it in terms of my role, intentions and expectations as a translator of poetry from Farsi into English.

Poetry translated into English from other languages has long been an important scene of Anglophone literary activity, arguably since Thomas Malory's late-Middle English interpretations of French Arthurian romances in the fifteenth century. In the last few decades, however, perhaps due to socio-political phenomena such as globalization, rapid and escalating movements of populations across the world, and the proliferation of theories and readerships of world literatures and transnationalism in both academia and the publishing sphere, poetry translation has become a prominent field of literary production in English-speaking cultures. Translations of poems of medieval Middle Eastern poet Rumi have become bestsellers in the United States, and many major contemporary poets known for their own *original* (here meaning *non-translated*) writings – such as Robert Pinsky, Seamus Heaney and Simon Armitage – have authored volumes of poetry translated from Italian, Russian and Greek sources.

This *translational turn* in contemporary poetry has been greatly beneficial in not only expanding the often small readerships that exist for the work of contemporary poets – by, for

example, introducing the Anglophone readers of the nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud to the style and aesthetics of one of Rimbaud's latest translators, the postmodernist American poet John Ashbery – but by also expanding the literary and cultural horizons of English-language readers who do not possess many or, in some cases, any language other than English. As a reader who can neither read nor speak Chinese, for example, I am very grateful to the Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu for editing and translating the 2002 anthology, *In Your Face: Contemporary Chinese Poetry in English Translation*, which has introduced me to the work of many innovative and subversive contemporary Chinese poets.

In this article I would like to present and explore some of my own artistic and professional experiences and concerns as the co-editor and co-translator of one such anthology. Whilst there are many aspects of my work on *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* with which I am quite satisfied, there are also others which I believe have made working on this project precarious and have complicated my personal response to the book since its publication. I hope that by addressing both the pleasures and perils of (co-)creating this anthology, this article will make a contribution to the understanding and evaluation of the opportunities as well as potential problematics of the current translational turn in the production and dissemination of poetry.

Collaboration, transformation and poetry translation

The most satisfying aspect of my work on first sourcing a very wide range of potential inclusions and contributions for the Persian anthology under discussion, and then selecting and translating forty of these for the final manuscript of the anthology, was my collaboration with the renowned Australian poet, publisher and activist John Kinsella, a process which started in 2007.

I had worked with John prior to this project – by having had my second book, the collection of poems *Eyes in Times of War* (2006), commissioned by him and published by Salt Publishing – but the conception and the process of producing *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* provided me with the valuable opportunity to creatively engage with one of Australia's most remarkable and accomplished poets over an extended period of time. As I've said of this process elsewhere:

> This has been by far the most involved and stimulating collaboration I've worked on, not only due to its size and scope, but also because of the intricacy and complexity of the individual pieces included in our project. Selecting and translating poems from a literary tradition of such depth and breadth of aesthetic variety and divergence required quite a bit of research and discussion between John and me; and once we had chosen the pieces that we would include in the anthology, we set about turning my initial literal English translations (often in the form of prose/paragraphs) into English poems that very closely aesthetically resembled the original Farsi texts. This required quite a bit of fine-tuning at times, and very detailed work on individual lines and phrases. I feel I've learnt a lot from working so closely with John and observing his poetics in action
>
> (Alizadeh n.p.)

I am further delighted to find that John has also found our collaboration stimulating and productive. While acknowledging "a few technical questions that confronted" him during our work – mostly to do with the abovementioned "fine-tuning" – John has written that as a result of our collaboration, he has become "passionate" about "one of the great world poetries"; and that he has "enjoy[ed] working [on the project] as someone with a bit of a 'history' background [who likes] to explore eras and contexts" (Kinsella 25).

Another positive aspect of my experience of working on this anthology has been what Simon Patton has described, in the context of his own work translating poetry from Chinese into

English, as an "exhilarating sense of linguistic freedom, the sense that we could remake ourselves and our world through a new way of speaking" (136). This "*new* way of speaking" is, interestingly enough, the direct consequence of bringing an *old* or existing object – in this case, a poem in a non-English language – into an equally old and pre-existing linguistic and literary context, i.e. modern English poetry. Yet this *bringing into* or, put more accurately, *lingua-aesthetic transportation*, results in the creation of something new – in the case of our anthology, for example, the very first English version of a seminal early twentieth-century free verse poem by the Iranian modernist Nima Yushij – which did not exist prior to the act of translation. The possibility of creating something new out of an existing object via translation has been discussed by Valerie Henitiuk, drawing on David Damrosch's work, as the consequence of a work of writing "being read in a language, medium, or juxtaposition other than that of its origin", which results in "previously unseen significances [that] allow new intertextualities to develop" (4). In the case of the aforementioned poem by the Iranian modernist Yushij, for example, by translating his poem "*Qoqnoos*" ("The Phoenix") I became aware of the thematic as well as formal rapport between Yushij's writing – and, potentially, between the modernist movement in Iranian poetry – and the work of European modernists such as Stéphane Mallarmé who also used avian and/or mythological motifs in his equally enigmatic work. This awareness was, put in Patton's terms, something of a "new" and "exhilarating" discovery for me.

Related to the idea of translation giving birth to a new work of literature, or it fomenting a new perception of existing relations, is the possibility of what Henitiuk has viewed as the "transforming (or refracting)" of the original piece "in myriad creative ways" (7). Seen as a purely evidence-based and, in a traditional sense of the word, *academic* pursuit – with the objective of merely transmitting data or *meaning* of linguistic formations from one tongue into another – translation would have very little appeal to creative writers such as myself; however, seen as a *refraction* or a deliberate and decisive transformation in aesthetic or discursive direction – which some may see as an inevitable result of translating poetry from one language into another – the translator's prerogative comes to entail the possibility for a space in which "translation functions as a prism that allows glimpses of many different and potential aspects of a complex work, according to what are necessarily differing understandings, aims and sensations" (Henitiuk 20).

Such an approach was particularly useful, even necessary, in translating the much older, classical poems included in our Persian anthology. It is undeniable that my and my collaborator's "understandings, aims and sensations" are radically different to those of the highly religious, evangelical Sufi poets who lived in medieval Persia; and, by seeing our task as not one of offering a *definitive English version* but a "different and potential" version of a mystical *ghazal*, it was made possible for us to not only engage with works with (political, spiritual and ethical) values different to our own, but to also view our project as a creative – as opposed to scholastic – engagement. This meant that our versions of well-translated classical poems by the likes of Rumi, Hafez and Omar Khayyam did not have to resemble existing English versions of these poems, and we took pleasure in transforming these poems – however subtly and without an overt deviation from the linguistic and prosodic attributes of the originals – into texts that expanded on and reflected our own literary and theoretical desires.

As such, the process of poetry translation has the capacity to be as stimulating and artistically satisfying and rewarding as that of writing one's own *original* poetry, and this may further explain why we are in the midst of what I referred to above as a translational turn in contemporary poetry.

Constraints, limited reception and anti-interpretive communities

While the abovementioned ideas – of collaboration, discovery and transformation – made the creation of our Persian anthology an engrossing and at times joyful experience, a number of other aspects of the work have rendered it challenging and continue to make me feel concerned not only

about this particular project but also about the entire milieu of poetry translation. Before mentioning some of these aspects, I would like to state that my discussion from here on is made in the spirit of provoking thought and solutions apropos of these proposed problematics, and I do not at all wish to undermine the work I've done on *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants*, nor do I wish to critique the processes and aims of other authors involved in similar projects.

My major challenge during the first stage of the project, during the reading and shortlisting of a large number of original Farsi-language poems – prior to finalizing the selections and translating these into English with John Kinsella – had to do with what Walter Benjamin has discussed in his influential 1923 essay as the foremost task of a translator, that is, the demand to discern and "incorporate the original's mode of signification" (79). While it would be feasible to determine the linguistic meaning and content of any given poem, Benjamin's *mode* – or, "manner of meaning" (Stoklosinki 51) – is notoriously varied and almost impossible to localize when one deals with a body of poetry comprising texts written over the course of well over a millennium by poets from a very diverse range of historical, ethnic, confessional and aesthetic origins. To address this demand, we had not only to analyze the form and content of the original pieces, but also to decipher and accept, as Benjamin would have it, an original poem's "intended effect" (77). This exigency required, in other words, deducing the discourse or philosophy of each individual poem, and then deciding whether or not such a discourse or ideology would be something that my co-translator and I would be happy to respond to in the process of writing our new English versions, irrespective of the eventual degree of creativity or refraction in our final approach.

The work of the before-mentioned religious, Sufi poets, for example, posed a major challenge to my personal, atheist/materialist sensibilities. Time and again I found that, despite my admiration for the lyrical and prosodic qualities of the poetry of Attar and Rumi, among others, these poets' firm belief in a creator, an afterlife and suchlike opposed my attempts at appreciating their "mode" or "manner". I am further concerned that by translating such poems – and by seeing to their publication by an established commercial publisher – I may have, inadvertently, contributed to the propagation of religious writing, something that, as a secularist and a Marxist, I find rather troubling. Whilst it is possible to read and appreciate a medieval Persian *ghazal* as a purely literary text – and to interpret the genre's common tropes and allegorical motifs such as *eshq* (love) and *saaqee* (wine-bringer) as those of a romantic or picaresque poetics – my knowledge of these texts' religious modes or intentions meant that I had to struggle against my own subjective judgements in reading, assessing and choosing to work on translating these poems, and that I remain somewhat unsure about the outcome of espousing, however unintentionally and indirectly, the words of moralist and ascetical Islamic preachers.

The fundamental difference between my subjectivity and that of many of the poets selected and translated for our anthology could be seen as what Adele D'Arcangelo has described, in the context of her own translation of contemporary prose across linguistic, cultural and generational divides, as "an element of constraint" or a "gap" (93). However, while this gap presents D'Arcangelo with an enticing challenge – one which she has chosen to address through an astute oscillation between the differing registers of colloquial and official language use – the chasm between my worldview and that of many of the poets eventually included in our anthology presented itself as a significant hindrance, resulting in my decision to only translate poets with whom I have a strong philosophical and political affinity in the future.

Another decision that I have made, this time in the light of our anthology's reception since its publication a year ago, has been to rethink having my translations from Farsi published bilingually, that is, having my or my and my co-writer's versions published alongside the original Farsi texts. *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* is, as mentioned earlier, a bilingual publication, in keeping with the current trend to have poetry books in translation feature the new English version next to the original script. While I can see the obvious advantages of this approach when it comes to translations from many European languages, I believe it is quite problematic,

even counterproductive, for books which include translations from languages that do not use the Latin alphabet.

In the case of English translations from languages using the Latin alphabet – as per my own experience of reading bilingual versions of Dante, Rimbaud and Neruda, among others – the Anglophone reader could compare and contrast the translator's version against the original text, however successfully, since the reader is capable of recognizing – if not comprehending – the words and syntactic units of the original text due to the original text using the same alphabet as the one used by the English-language reader. Such a reader could note the *basic accuracy* of the translated version – even if the notion of accuracy is extremely provisional – which would result in the reader establishing rapport and trust, however rightly, in the translator's version.

However, in the case of a poetry publication featuring a non-Latin alphabet which the overwhelming majority of Anglophone readers would find simply illegible – in our case, the Arabic alphabet – the very presence of such an impenetrable script could, far from encouraging rapport between the reader and the translator or even conveying an exotic allure, have an alienating effect. The readers of such a publication may feel ill-equipped to establish trust in the translations' basic accuracy as they have no way of recognizing the material/visual inscription of the basic units of the original poems' language and, as a result, they may come to feel inadequate and incapable of appreciating the value of the work undertaken by the translator/s.

This is, to my mind, one of the main explanations for our anthology being hardly reviewed or discussed since its publication by a renowned UK publisher. That despite so much current intellectual and popular interest in Iran and the Middle East this anthology has received fewer and much less substantial reviews than my other books – my first, self-published book of avant-garde poetry, available only at three bookshops in Melbourne in 2002, was much more widely reviewed than *Six Vowels and Twenty Three Consonants* – is nothing short of puzzling, and one explanation is that many readers and reviewers are uncertain about responding to a book half of which is written in an entirely unfamiliar script. Another related explanation is that many reviewers, even those with some interest in Persian poetry and/or possibly some knowledge of Farsi and its artistic formations, may not feel confident about publicly commenting on a book featuring non-Western works, lest these readers make comments that may appear *culturally insensitive, ignorant*, *Eurocentric* and so on. I feel, at any rate, that our anthology has been more or less ignored by the reading public, and that it has fallen on the deaf ears of – to paraphrase Stanley Fish's famous phrase – an *anti-interpretive community* of readers.

The paucity of responses to our anthology can be demonstrated by a brief citation of the only two existing reviews of the publication, if these may indeed be called *reviews*. In the two paragraphs on the book written by David Hart in the October 2012 issue of *Stride Magazine*, the reviewer comments on the anthology's introduction, and on one of the two included poems written by a contemporary diaspora Iranian writer, a poem originally written in English and hence appearing in our anthology untranslated without an accompanying Farsi text. The reviewer then quotes from one of the poems translated from Farsi. The other reviewer, Ian Pople, writing on a British poetry blog titled *Eyewear* in January 2013, also mentions the Anglophone diaspora poet in his own two-paragraph commentary, and he, rather problematically, reads our anthology in the context of a comparison with a recently published volume of the British poet Basil Bunting's translations of Persian poetry. The reviewer, therefore, expresses confusion at our not including a medieval poet whom "Bunting rated as one of the very greatest". What Hart's and Pople's reviews convey, in short, is an unwillingness to engage with our anthology as such; and that theirs have been the only public responses to our book – a book which has been five years in the making, and which, in its publisher's words, is "a groundbreaking new collection of poems presenting the wealth of poetic voices from one of the world's most important literary cultures" – is nothing short of disappointing.

Conclusion

It is my view that the above concerns hint at the limits of translation as a scene of contemporary literary culture. As also mentioned, poetry translation has the potential to constitute a truly creative and exciting literary development, and yet the current circumstances – to do with most Anglophone readers' attitudes regarding non-Western languages and/or languages written in non-Latin alphabets; the dearth of suitably knowledgeable, enthusiastic and confident reviewers and commentators capable of writing adequate responses to a diverse body of translated writings; and the *gap* between many a translator's values and the principles of the works chosen for translation – impose constraints on the ways in which a translation project may be conceived, conducted and ultimately received by the reading public. It is my hope that scholars of translation studies will attempt to address these obstacles alongside championing the art of literary translation.

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“As If We Were God’s Spies”: Poetry out of Nothing

SIMON WEST

Abstract
The starting point for this article is the Latin dictum *ex nihilo nihil fit*, famously dramatized by Shakespeare at the beginning of *King Lear* when the king declares, nothing will come of nothing. Through a discussion of *King Lear* and the poem “Frost at Midnight” by Coleridge, the essay then examines analogies between the writing of poetry and its translation. Two conceptions of creation are introduced and compared briefly, that of the hero who summons his poetry out of the void, and that under the auspices of Lucretius, whereby the poem is a composing of preexisting materials. Finally, the concept of metaxy is introduced to describe the role of both writer and translator.

I find myself in a difficult position as I prepare this article. I’ve always felt that the most fascinating aspect of talk about translation is when an experienced translator discusses the concrete details of choices he has made as his two languages come together. To give two examples from the language from which I have translated the most, how do you translate *buon appetito*? How do you convey the cultural connotations of a word like *pane* for an English audience? I think there is a limit to how far theoretical discussions can take us. The meeting of two languages is as complex and unique as the encounters between two human beings. However, I have translated little in recent years, and I was reluctant to go back to the work on Cavalcanti which engaged me for a decade. There will be no juicy examples here of the difficulties of cultural transposition, nor of my ingenious solutions to such problems. Instead, I have decided to tempt fate and write about poetry and translation in general. I must ask for readers’ patience in what follows if the first part of what I have to say regarding *King Lear* and Coleridge seems more of a manifesto for poetry. What I hope will become clearer as I proceed is how no discussion of the translation of poetry can avoid the question of what poetry itself is, for the very simple reason that both the writing and the translation of poetry are closely connected activities.

I

I would like to begin by recalling that very dramatic moment in the first scene of *King Lear*. An old man has summoned his three daughters and is about to divide his kingdom between them. First, however, he asks them to declare how strong is their filial love. Regan and Goneril speak eloquently. Then Lear asks his favourite daughter what she has to say for herself.

> CORDELIA
> Nothing, my lord.
> KING LEAR
> Nothing!
> CORDELIA
> Nothing.
> KING LEAR
> Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

My starting point is that phrase, nothing will come of nothing, and the question, where does poetry come from? It is common to trace *nothing will come of nothing* to Lucretius and the

Latin dictum *ex nihilo nihil fit* (see *De rerum natura*, Book 1, ll.148-9). Lear speaks an admonition to Cordelia, but originally the maxim, which Lucretius derived from the Greek tradition, was used in a positive sense to argue for the permanence of life. Everything in existence must derive from other matter already in existence. Men might be afraid, Lucretius argues, because things happen whose cause they cannot understand. They attribute these to the action of gods. However, such things are not created by divine agency out of nothing. Rather there is an eternal stock of matter from which things continually arise and to which they must eventually return. Marcus Aurelius stoically says something similar in his *Meditations*:

> I am composed of the formal and the material; and neither of them will perish into non-existence, as neither of them came into existence out of non-existence. Every part of me will eventually be reduced by change into some part of the universe, and that again will change into another part of the universe and so on forever. And as a consequence of such change I too exist, and those who begot me, and so on forever in the other direction.
>
> (Book V, 13, my translation)

Shakespeare on the other hand has Lear use the phrase as a rebuke: if you can offer nothing you will receive nothing in return. And in modern times this is the sense most immediately understood. One might rewrite this in the light of the twentieth century: if you have no solid grounds for speaking, and given all that has happened in the last one hundred years only the most daring can claim to do so, then you cannot hope to speak the truth. Instead the most forceful utterances will be heard in the marketplace. Nihilism is barren. Only God can summon things out of nothing, and God is dead. It is easy enough to fall under the sway of Lear's words construed in this sense. *Creatio ex nihil*, any creative act can seem an impossibility because it rests on nothingness.

And yet while Cordelia's inability to heave her heart into her mouth sets in motion the calamities of the play, part of that very tragedy derives from the fact that *in truth* the reader knows her *nothing* to be more pregnant with love and charity, her silence to resound with more life than the glib and oily art of her sisters. It is a rough and ready truth, unsatisfactory for a philosopher perhaps, but serviceable enough, especially when given convincing voice in the good sense of Kent or the starkness of the Fool. For whether one agrees with Lucretius or not, on one level all life and all art are born of nothing. I did not exist and now I do. The page was empty, and now it contains a poem. It is this miracle of coming to have a form and substance that I like to think poetry should continue to celebrate. Just as in translation one continually defies the underlying impossibility of the act itself.

I shall now change tack and consider the opening of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight", that meditation on a winter's night as the narrator watches his newborn son sleeping.

> The Frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
> Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.

I have always been struck by those words "secret ministry". To me they evoke that sense of awe on seeing snowfall. There may be perfectly good scientific explanations for snow and frost, and yet often the sight of them returns the viewer to a state of childish wonder, as if they came out of nowhere. "Frost at Midnight" is full of such amazement. For this reason it might be a good example of what Keats once called Negative Capability. Ironically so, because in explaining the concept Keats distanced himself from poets like Coleridge:

> Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the

> Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.
>
> (From a letter dated 22 December 1817.)

Yet "Frost at Midnight" celebrates at least three distinct but related mysteries or examples of half-knowledge. If the first is the frost of the title, the second is the birth of Coleridge's first child:

> Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
> Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
> Fill up the interspersèd vacancies
> And momentary pauses of the thought!

The interspersed vacancies, the void, are now full of the breathings of a child who until recently did not exist. What better example of *creatio ex nihil*.

The third mystery of the poem is the film that flutters on the grate. Popularly called "strangers", these particles of soot that dance in the heat of the fireplace were said in folklore to portend the arrival of some absent friend.

> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form,
> Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
> By its own moods interprets, every where
> Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
> And makes a toy of Thought.

Coleridge seems to be suggesting it is only human to project onto this thing the inner moods of our idling Spirit. This was clearer in an earlier draft: "To [the film] the living spirit in our frame, / that loves not to behold a lifeless thing, / transfuses its own pleasures, its own will." But whereas the draft is open to Keats' criticism, the final version presents things without explaining them away. This task of poetry, to express delight and awe at the world as it is, and at the potential for *creatio ex nihil*, often means contenting oneself with half-knowledge.

But should that be poetry's charge? Is such delight merely childish? Is it possible, or right, to treat of miracle and mystery in an age caught between science and nihilism? Late in the play Lear fancifully, perhaps half-madly, imagines life in prison with Cordelia as a sort of paradise:

> No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too-
> Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out-
> And take upon 's the mystery of things,
> As if we were God's spies;

I love those last lines: to take upon oneself the mystery of things. Importantly, it adds a dimension of responsibility to Keats' half-knowledge. The indefinite in Keats might be dismissed as a recipient for one's own imagination and romantic fantasies. Like Leopardi's

siepe it suggests the infinite, but it is an infinity onto which the poet is free to project himself. Lear's phrase suggests something more, a responsibility to care for and preserve the necessary place of mystery in the world, and of one's need to come to terms with the inexplicable, beginning with the miracle of one's own life. "Thy life's a miracle" says the disguised Edgar to his father. Gloucester believes he has just jumped from the cliffs of Albion, so the grounds for Edgar's words are false. Gloucester's fall and survival is a deception. And yet there is no irony in what Edgar says. The truth of the affirmation remains. If anything it hits home more strongly to the audience because they see this double vision: the truth resting on a falsehood, but still as true as ever it can be in a world gone awry. A world that no longer has the myth of progress to uphold as Gloucester had declared earlier: "we have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves".

That sense of miracle is hard to hold on to. It is not the monotony of reality that dulls perception, but a lack of meaning. That lack with its ruinous disorders is like a veil that mutes the world. Often one's sense of really living life is limited to moments of intense experience like falling in love, or the death of someone close. In "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison", Coleridge writes:

> ... Hence forth I shall know
> That nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty!

It would be nice if these sentiments could stand as a manifesto against the difficulties of our age. But the rhetorical high pitch of Coleridge as he reaches the climax of the poem is hard to enjoy today. A calmer, clearer voice is wanted, one that does not mince words or let too much weight be borne by those old traves, Love and Beauty. Perhaps a voice like Cordelia's. However stubborn she may appear in the play's first scene, and however naive it may be to rely on virtue and action to speak for her, Cordelia's dilemma is our own. What her sisters have just said leaves her without words and keenly aware of the enormous struggle she must undertake to speak with a skerrick of sincerity. She finds herself on a stage that has had its fair share of the empty rhetoric of playful dissimulation and self-aware deception.

II

It is sometimes said by poets that translation is useful to fill in those moments when one feels there really is nothing to say. In translation one is never faced with the blank page because there is already something concrete to work with. In this sense translation puts a positive spin back on *ex nihilo nihil fit* and brings things back to Lucretius, for whom everything comes from pre-existing material. And like their translations, all poems arise out of pre-existing elements. The constituent atoms of a poem are the words of a language and its community of speakers. These existed before the poet, and in most cases will continue to do so long afterwards.

But translation is useful for poets for another reason too. As a check against the dangers accompanying the view of poetry I have been describing. Sometimes in the creative act hubris leads the writer to think that he, god-like, must conjure a world out of nothing. He forgets the relation of the created work to reality and to the community which gives it value; he forget the complex histories and values of the poem's words; he seeks a self-sufficient idiolect, a bastion against the instability and absurdity of the world. That of course is the paradox of language: a medium common to many and therefore impersonal, that one wants to personalize in order to express one's individuality. As Cordelia knows only too well. What words can she find to express herself after that assault on language by her sisters?

Translation is a reminder that the writer does not pull rabbits out of a hat. He responds to an existing situation, he takes mystery on board. For just as a translator owes an allegiance to

the original poem, so too the poet owes an allegiance to render reality accurately. This common analogy in discussions of poetry and translation is often taken a step further. Just as reality is unstable and evades the author's attempts at representation, so too the original poem will always remain at one remove from the translator. From this point of view the translation and the writing of poetry are both creative acts. Roman Jakobson gave the most theoretical weight to such ideas in the twentieth century in numerous essays including "Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959), but of course poets have long been declaring just that. Dante says in the *Convivio* I, vii, 14, "nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzato si può della sua loquela in altra trasmutare sanza rompere tutta la sua dolcezza e armonia" – "nothing [no poem] that is harmonized with musical links can have its speech transformed without destroying all of its sweetness and harmony" (my translation).

The contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy has discussed such ideas at length.[1] Like many he is of the opinion that in translation only creative transposition is possible. To argue this point Bonnefoy makes a distinction between an individual poem and poetry in general, poetry that becomes a sort of force, and an activity. The poem, in a sense, is not an end in itself, but rather an opening onto what lay behind the writing of the poem and its language: an experience of the world. Bonnefoy names this catalyst the *acte*. The translator's task on one level at least is to evoke that act again, that initial intention or intuition in another language and cultural context.

In Bonnefoy's distinction between poem and poetry lies both the impossibility and potential of translation. A poem is a unique language object that cannot be translated. But a poem is itself a searching after something beyond language. Poetry can be translated, poetry can take another form where the translator is open to that initial experience, and open to the ways poetry relates to language in order to reach closer to *présence*. In framing the question of translation in this way Bonnefoy advocates the possibility of recreation, but also of fidelity to an initial spirit. Such a spirit remains vulnerable to criticisms that are not dissimilar to those that arise in discussions of Keats' half-knowledge and Leopardi's infinite. Bonnefoy doesn't resolve such problems in talking of the need for an affinity between poet and translator. However he is motivated by a rigorous sense of responsibility to that which he translates. There is a life-long engagement with the poem, the poet, and the language. Or perhaps an obsession. I am reminded of Ezra Pound and his decades-long obsession with Cavalcanti. Pound tried all sorts of ways to bring Cavalcanti to life in the early twentieth century. He started by doing translations in pre-Raphaelite Wardor Street English, but thirty years later he was translating some of the same poems in a pseudo-Elizabethan English because he thought it closer to thirteenth-century Italian. There are also a number of original poems in the voice of Cavalcanti, there are the essays on Cavalcanti, and finally the Opera (both the music and libretto) about the life of Cavalcanti. It was as if Pound were living between two worlds, his own and that of the medieval Florence. But then deep down I suspect that most translators believe in metempsychosis.

What I want to focus on briefly is another aspect of this analogy between poet and translator. Like Pound, both writers and translators exist in a state of in-betweenness, or, as Simone Weil described, adopting a concept from Plato, in a state of *metaxy* (Weil 132-34). Between two languages and cultures; between the original and the rendition; between reality and the poem; between the creative act and nothingness; between our subjective selves and external reality. The role of go-between is rarely easy. Translators will be familiar with that experience when after having worked on the translation of a poem for some time it becomes impossible to read that original without one's own version intruding. Suddenly, neither the original nor the translation exists independently of the other, and one is never wholly satisfied with either. Neither is an end in itself. One is caught between them.

Most of all, though, the poet is caught in between the two conceptions of creation I have outlined here. On the one hand that of the hero who must summon his work out of the

[1] For the discussion that follows see various essays in Bonnefoy, and in particular the essay "La traduction de la poésie".

void, like a monotheistic god, or who finds he can no longer do so in the culture of post-divine nihilism that is an extension of the same tradition. And secondly, the view of Lucretius that poetry, like translation, arises out of the pre-existing atoms of the world. We may swing between these conceptions, but ultimately both of them require us to take Lear's mystery on board. Weil writes, "The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God. We have to experience them as such" (132). So that it is not far-fetched to consider translation, that carrying across as both an activity and a state of mind, to be an analogy for writing and living in general. One is always in a state of metaxy. To adapt another aphorism of Weil's, poetry out of nothing (she talks of the material world as a whole) is a closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through.

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Translating Baudelaire

JAN OWEN

Abstract

In this article I discuss my approach to translating a selection of poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. I aimed for fidelity of tone, and to stay as close to the diction of Baudelaire's original poems as was consonant with musicality and ease of style, the desired outcome being a natural-sounding and convincing poem in English. I decided on traditional verse form, and on iambic pentameter rather than alexandrines. When omissions or additions to the text or divergences were unavoidable I kept in mind Baudelaire's characteristics of style, diction and tone, his ambivalence, use of synaesthesia, and his sensitivity to sounds, scents and the exotic. My selection of poems was representative of Baudelaire's range, I researched as needed, and I revised obsessively in an attempt to correct blurred, stilted and bumpy lines and phrases.

I began translating Baudelaire almost on a whim, since I was going to Paris for a six-month residency. I flicked open *Les Fleurs du Mal* and settled on "Les Plaintes d'un Icare"; it was a challenge to produce a metrical rhymed version, and the fascination of what is difficult pushed me to try more. The first ones were the hardest and went through many drafts. It was like doing Rubik's cube; often the main problems were metrical – getting the detail of Baudelaire's alexandrines into iambic pentameters since they sounded more natural in English. There is no end to the tinkering that can be done. And there is always the salutary anxiety about error; the word or phrase misundertood, the lapse of tone, the lost implication, and the concern over what has had to be left out.

I aimed for fidelity, a general deference to the source text, while aspiring to the musicality of Baudelaire's poetry, which quite often meant a departure from the literal. Paul Valéry defines the poem as "cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens" [that prolonged hesitation between the sound and the sense] (637). With Baudelaire's poetry, in particular, the sound pattern is not merely a surface effect so much as a deeper, pre-verbal, layer of meaning setting up correspondences and reflecting his perception of the universe – "une ténébreuse et profonde unité": a deep dark unity. My goal was to achieve a convincing poem in English, with occasional gain as well as inevitable loss. A pessimistic view of translation emphasizes what is lost, but the greatest leap of translation is from the writer's initial perception, and how much of that elusive, nuanced experience can be carried into language? Well I'm an optimist; I see literary translation as a sort of re-creation while keeping a difficult balance. Perhaps in the circus of literature the translator is the tight-rope walker, with juggling as a side skill. Part of the balance is the attempt to re-experience the pre-linguistic moment of the source text, to follow the thought processes of the originator, to be receptive to its effect, and then to bring about a similar state of mind in readers of the target language.

Some strategic decisions came about as reasonable compromises following trial and error. I've heard it said that only full rhymes are satisfactory in formal rhyming translations of *Les Fleurs du Mal,* but since English is not rich in rhyme I decided that half rhymes would suffice when necessary, especially when close in sound and effect to the French. I avoided generalization from specified items to their class. Syntax and punctuation necessarily changed: I cut back on the exclamation marks, for instance. Texture, vowel colour and consonant weight could be approximated often. With capitalized abstractions such as Beauty, Death, Suffering and Memory I tended to drop the capital though this cannot well be done in a poem such as "Recueillement"

with its strong personification: "give me your hand, my Sadness". This occasional side-stepping of allegory, so important to Baudelaire, is certainly open to criticism, I know. With titles and first and last lines, important signal points of a poem, I gave faithfulness a particularly high priority. I felt easier about bypassing a straight and obvious translation when the French words might have been chosen by Baudelaire partly for their rhyme, and when I could pick up a shade of meaning from a similar poem in the collection. I bore in mind Baudelaire's vocabulary, his characteristic, even favourite, words, his use of ambivalence and synaesthesia and his sensitivity to sounds and scents and to the exotic. Alliteration came when it would. If internal rhyme could not be summoned at the same point as in the French text then it sometimes arrived as a bonus elsewhere.

I researched as I went, checking on details about Paris and the social history of the time, and also following up classical references such as Cybele, Maegera, Pyrrhus and Helenus, Pylades, the river Pactolus and so on. Critical articles on Baudelaire, including critiques of individual poems, helped me to correct some misreadings and outright errors, especially where I had jumped to a conclusion or had confused two words. *Vrille* and *grille*, for example: my first draft of "Les Petites Vieilles" described one of Baudelaire's little old women as having eyes like a cricket instead of like a gimlet. On checking a critique, I realized my version of "Spleen: *Quand le ciel bas et lourd…*" had a howling error, quite literally: I had found a false friend in the word "hurlement" and made it "hurling" which fitted the context; the correct translation, of course is "howling" which in true Baudelairean style challenged its context.

I looked at other translations only when I had finished my own viable draft since it is too easy to remember another translator's phrase or solution as your own. And then significant differences called for closer scrutiny. I emailed several ambiguous lines to French translator friends for clarification; in stanza three of "Le Cygne", "The Swan", for example, Baudelaire remembers the old Carrousel and uses the phrase "brillant aux carreaux, le bric-a-brac confus" which might mean the jumbled bric-a-brac is shining on the tiles or else shining at the panes. Translators are divided on this. After advice and some checking I finally made it: "The jumbled bric-a-brac glittering at the panes."

The relationship of the translator to the writer and his or her text is complex: intimate, admiring, ambivalent, exasperated, celebratory, and though you have more freedom when the author is dead, you have less assistance. I agree with Charles Simic who believes that the translator takes on the role of author, and the process becomes a sort of dialogue: "You're like a medium […] You stand in the shoes of whoever you're translating". When I was hesitating over alternatives, trying to vary verbs and images, or negotiating changes between the singular and plural of a noun, as in "The Albatross", I asked myself how Baudelaire himself might have dealt with the problem. Translation has been called a lonely task but I found it can seem quite a companionable process especially when the writer has as strong a presence and voice as Charles Baudelaire.

I realized after a while that with some poems where I had been quite literal, the result was stodgy or stilted; I had to loosen up and sacrifice some detail to avoid a crammed effect or rhythmical clumsiness and unlikely rhymes. For example, in "Dawn": the first draft of one line, "Debauchees were returning, broken by their labours", became "worn-out womanizers hit the home path" ("Les débauchés rentraient, brisés par leurs travaux"). Conversely, in the poem which begins "tu mettrais l'univers dans ta ruelle", an early draft was over-exuberant and unnecessarily off-track so I had to tone it down. The early version was "Dead boredom's turned you cruel. Do you keep tally, / you slut? You'd shove the whole race up your alley!" But this ended up, more accurately, as "You'd have the universe vie for your bed, / you slut. You're turning cruel because you're bored."

The visibility of the translator is, of course, an issue. I needed to guard against a tendency to strain for resolution, to grasp at a mediocre rhyme, to soften or minimize the horrific, or alternatively to exaggerate some lurid details to fill out a line. But it seemed reasonable, when unavoidable, to extend certain phrases or images by innocuous padding so as to achieve a rhyme, a correct emphasis or the right tone or pace. In "L'Albatros", "The Albatross", one line describes

the poet as laughing at the archer; in my translation, the poet is "laughing at arrows and slings". With "The Giantess", in which the poet imagines he is a cat, I changed the landscape a little; a fairly close non-rhyming translation for the last lines might be:

> And sometimes in summer, when the unhealthy suns,
> stretched her, listless, across the countryside
> I would sleep nonchalantly in the shadow of her breasts
> "Like a peaceful hamlet at the foot of a mountain."

I fixed on:

> and when the sultry heat of summer splayed
> her drowsily out across an acre of grass,
> I'd fall asleep below her breasts, in the shade
> like a village nestled up to a mountain pass.

The degrees of formality and informality, the use of "vous" and "tu" for example, created in some poems a shifting or ambivalent mood difficult to echo since the intimate tone of "tu" or "toi" is not directly transposable as it was in in Victorian times. Half of the last line of "A Une Passante", "To a Woman Passing by", translates literally as "O thou whom I could have loved", using the familiar "toi" towards the woman, and also the literary form of the past conditional in "toi que j'eusse aimée" giving a formal but delicate tone, a melancholy distance. At the same time, the necessary agreement of the past participle "aimée", "loved", with the object of desire, the woman passing by, strengthens the intimate, linguistic link between her and the narrator. There is a movement towards and away which focuses on the moment of passing. The English "you" and our all-purpose past conditional lose those shifting subtleties of feeling. Compare the French and the English of the final two lines:

> Car j'ignore ou tu fuis, tu ne sais ou je vais,
> O toi que j'eusse aimée, O toi qui le savais!
>
> Where the other is going, neither of us can tell.
> Yet I could have loved you—and you knew it well!

A free translation in more everyday speech but, alas, without those nuances.

Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie*, defamiliarization, is particularly relevant to Baudelaire's work. Shklovsky believed that perception should be prolonged, and that art presents things as they are perceived, not as they are known (Lodge 15-16). So I was wary of smoothing out or rationalizing what seemed odd done into English, if it sounded strange in French as well. Baudelaire in fact believed that the beautiful is always strange or somewhat bizarre. The perception of the beautiful and the true does vary from one culture to another: translation involves the representation or suggestion of these and other values, thus of one particular world-view in terms of another. The intrinsic differences between two languages reflect these perceptual differences. We think differently in different languages. As Martin Sorrell points out in his comparison of English and French poetic languages, Yves Bonnefoy sees Platonism as the heart of the French language and Aristotelianism as that of English:

> The received wisdom that French tends to abstraction is something Bonnefoy tends to believe. He sees such abstraction as the result of a French desire to seek and map out the "Idea". The consistent movement is away from the particular, the discrete, and towards the general, the universal. French is a language which reduces, which

> excludes. Its constant tendency is to transform the rich diversity of the world into manageable, intellectual categories. For Bonnefoy, a function of this need is that the focus of attention will be on the word rather than on the thing which it signifies. The symbol, not the thing symbolized, carries the weight. The word is the signifier of an eternal form.
>
> (Sorrell 129)

So English is Aristotelian, concrete, values the thing, while French is Platonic and tends to abstraction, reduces and maps the idea, values the symbol. And Laurence Sterne has his Sentimental Traveller say "All that can be said against the grandeur of the French sublime [...] is this, that the grandeur is *more* in the *word* and *less* in the *thing*" (79). I have translated some ideas in terms of things but I've also moved in the French direction from a concrete to an abstract noun. In "L'Harmonie du Soir", "Evening Harmony", I despaired of a rhyme for the final word "monstrance" which sounds unsympathetic in English anyway. I named, instead, the religious celebration itself so the last stanza reads:

> A tender heart that dreads the black abyss
> guards every scrap the shining past will spare;
> the sun, in thick blood-light, is drowning there…
> Your memory glows in me like the Eucharist!

Can poetry transcend the innate tendencies of a given language and be precisely "what is preserved in translation" as Miroslav Holub (18) believed? Rhythm, timing, the quality of a silence, line endings and connotations are so elusive. Word connotation is hard to duplicate and it is dispiriting to lose the sometimes ironic effect of homonyms. "Vers" meaning both "lines" and "worms" as well as "towards" suits Baudelaire's bent very well in these lines from "Spleen: *J'ai plus de souvenirs*…"

> Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers
> qui s'acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers.

I had to be explicit rather than subtle and overstate the "eating away" connotation of remorse:

> these lines, long desperate worms trailing remorse,
> devour my dearest dead to eat up loss.

You can trip over unwanted associations: "Agathe" in "Moesta et Errabunda" is not really the French sister of "Agatha". Another example of a word with different connotations in English and French is "armoire" when translated as "wardrobe" or "cupboard". Although the straight translation, "a wardrobe in an empty house" is fine for the sinister poem "Le Flacon", the compliment offered to the young woman in "La Belle Navire" seems cumbersome: "that proud bosom's like a fine wardrobe…a wardrobe full of good things and secret joys". Other translators have also baulked at that "wardrobe" and chosen "coffer" or simply kept "armoire" with its apt echo of "à moi" or "mine". Carrying over one everyday word may be more awkward than furniture removal. I finally settled on "cabinet" since it extended well as a metaphor.

There were divergences, omissions and additions as I wrestled with syntax and word order as well as diction: I rendered the famous last line of "Au Lecteur", "To the Reader", not as "hypocritical reader my counterpart, my brother," but as "hypocrite reader, my counterpart, my twin". Again, for the rhyme. This need to find chiming words can make for ingenuity and serendipity though. Here are some other examples of divergence.

The first stanza of "Correspondences" translates fairly literally as:

> Nature is a temple where living pillars
> sometimes allow confused words through;
> man passes across forests of symbols
> which observe him with familiar looks.

I regularized this by a variation and doubling up of the nouns "words", "pillars" and "forests".

> In Nature's temple, eerie words and cries
> rise from her living pillars and arcades;
> a thousand symbols breathe in woods and glades,
> and watch us pass, with long-familiar eyes.

In the final lines of "Le Gouffre", "The Abyss", I reversed subject and object. "– Ah! Ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres!" "Ah! Never to get away from Numbers and Beings!" is ambivalent, even ambiguous. My version picks up that uncertainty from a different angle: "Will forms and numbers never let me be?"

In "La Musique", turning the noun "mirror" to a verb and adding the filler word "there" gave the emphasis needed in the final image of the sea. "D'autres fois, calme miroir/ de mon désespoir!" became "Till dead calm mirrors there/ my own despair".

In "Le Balcon", "The Balcony", stanza three, I believe I kept close to the tone while very freely juggling with the words and phrases.

> Que ton sein m'était doux! que ton coeur m'était bon!
> Nous avons dit souvent d'impérissables choses
> Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon.

Literally:

> How soft your breast was to me, how good your heart!
> Often we said imperishable things
> those evenings lit up by the glow of charcoal.

My version:

> All my desire,
> dear heart, soft breast, was that our words not die,
> those evenings lit by the glowing charcoal fire.

I moved towards the tangible in "Bohémiens en Route", "Gypsies on the Move"; the literal translation would be "the familiar empire of future shadows", I made it "whose empire is tomorrow's dark terrain".

My choice of poems was eclectic, even haphazard, at first, but once about twenty poems were done I began to aim for a balance of subject, tone and length in further poems chosen. As I've worked on these translations from *Les Fleurs du Mal* I've come to appreciate aspects of Baudelaire's character and work that seem to receive less critical attention, the empathy and tenderness, say, to be found in some of the love poems and in passages of "Les Petites Vieilles", "The Little Old Women". One of the last poems I translated was the first one I ever read: "Une Charogne", "A Carcass". This poem, in particular makes me think of Baudelaire's aim to make beauty out of evil. The following translation was first published in *Shearsman Magazine* in 2012.

A Carcass

Do you remember what we saw, my soul,
that bright summer's day?
Right in our path, a dreadful carcass sprawled
on its bed of pebbles and clay.

With legs thrust up like a woman gripped by lust,
the seething poisonous mass
coolly and cynically offered us, as we passed,
its belly of stinking gas.

Onto this rotting flesh the sun's rays poured,
cooking it to a turn,
rendering to Nature a hundred-fold
what she had laboured to join.

The sky was gazing down on this proud carcass
opening like a flower.
So dreadful was the stench, you sank to the grass
overcome by its power.

Flies were buzzing over the putrid hide,
and black larvae squads
were pouring out like streams of viscous liquid,
animating the shreds.

The body, lifting and falling like a wave,
bubbling, spattering, sighing,
seemed to be vaguely drawing breath, alive,
thriving and multiplying.

An eerie music was rising from that world
like flowing water or wind
or the grain in a winnower's sieve, rhythmically swirled
then tossed up high and turned.

The shapes were effacing themselves as in a dream,
a sketch slow to come right,
on a canvas cast aside, with the artist's scheme

Une charogne

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,
Comme afin de la cuire à point,
Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.

Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,
Comme l'eau courante et le vent,
Ou le grain qu'un vanneur d'un mouvement rythmique
Agite et tourne dans son van.

Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir,
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève

traced only in hindsight.

Lurking behind some rocks, a restless bitch
sent us an evil look,
watching for the moment she could snatch
her ripped-off morsel back.

– And yet you too will be like this, a foul
stinking abomination,
you, star of my eyes, sun of my soul,
my angel and my passion.

Yes, you will come to this, O queen of grace:
the last sacraments done,
you will go down under the blossoms and grass
to moulder among bones.

Then, my beautiful one, say to the worm
with its kissing, nibbling lust,
that I hold safe the divine essence and form
of my love decayed to dust.

Translated by Jan Owen

Seulement par le souvenir.

Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète
Nous regardait d'un oeil fâché,
Epiant le moment de reprendre au squelette
Le morceau qu'elle avait lâché.

– Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
A cette horrible infection,
Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

Oui! telle vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
Après les derniers sacrements,
Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossements.

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!

Charles Baudelaire

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Four Poems by Yaxkin Melchy

ALICE WHITMORE
Monash University

Y que sea éste un libro alienígena / para los niños / en la vida radiante.
And may this be an alien book / for the children / in life resplendent.
Yaxkin Melchy, *Los Planetas*

** ** **

Abstract

Yaxkin Melchy is a young self-published Mexican poet and founding member of the *Red de los poetas salvajes* [Savage Poets' Network], an online community of emerging poets and artists based in Mexico City. This article reflects upon the process of translating Yaxkin's most recent book of poetry, published in 2012, entitled *Los Planetas* [The Planets]. It concludes with a sample of four translated poems.

Yaxkin's work is remarkable for many reasons. Its online context allows for the inclusion of large-scale visual artwork alongside the poetry, as well as active links to videos and other media, and provides unique opportunities for reader interactivity. The poetry also contains a significant degree of wordplay and intertextuality, combining innovative and novel language use with smatterings of scientific jargon, hypnagogic space fantasies, and a metaliterary penchant for self-reflection. The result is a bizarre and scathing critique of hypermodern society; a truly unique cosmos populated by aliens, dinosaurs, poets and angels.

Until now, the work of Mexican poet Yaxkin Melchy did not exist in translation. Translating a poet for the first time is a daunting and humbling experience, and one that invokes a curious sensation of honour and responsibility. The translation process inevitably involves the construction of certain relationships – between translator and text, between source text and target text, between translator and poet – and I have found that the more firmly grounded these relationships, the more profound one's understanding of the task at hand. Poetry, more than any other form of language, possesses qualities that are impossible to render in a second language without some degree of transformation. Whether the translator's challenges involve reproducing rhyme, rhythm, metre, neologism or cultural references, two things must be kept in sight at all times: both the source text, which is the translator's constant guide and inspiration, and the final poem, which belongs to the translator herself. The wisest path in translation is that which strays neither too far from the source nor too far from the target, but forges a coherent connection between the two.

When translating Yaxkin's most recent book of poetry, entitled *Los Planetas* [The Planets], I was fortunate enough to establish regular email correspondence with Yaxkin himself. This correspondence proved immensely valuable throughout the translation process, as it allowed me to clarify certain points and discuss the poetry with someone who knew and understood it more intimately than I ever could. From my growing personal investment in Yaxkin's work there emerged a unique sense of loyalty, quite distinct from the outdated and restrictive notions of "fidelity" and "faithfulness" that persist within translation studies commentary. Following Christiane Nord, I perceive loyalty as an interpersonal concept, primarily founded upon "a social relationship between *people*" (125). In other words, loyalty pertains above all to the translator's human context, implying a bilateral commitment to both the source and target texts. As a loyal translator, I have sought to produce a work of poetry that is worthy of bearing both Yaxkin's name and my own.

I have adopted a generally foreignizing strategy in my translation of *Los Planetas*. The original idea behind the concepts of foreignization and domestication was outlined by

Schleiermacher in his iconic 1813 treatise "Methoden des Übersetzens" ("On the Different Methods of Translating"). Schleiermacher declared that there were only two possible methods of translation: "Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader" (42). The former method, advocated by Schleiermacher himself, involves retaining a certain sense of foreignness in the translated text. Rather than naturalizing the inherent strangeness of the original, foreignization implies "sending the reader abroad" (Venuti 20), thus transforming the reading experience into one of alienation.

The alien universe of *Los Planetas* is marked by a distinct poetic strangeness, which I have been at pains to preserve in my translation. Like all literature, Yaxkin's work is embedded in a specific cultural and social context. There are certain concepts that simply cannot be rendered into English without some degree of explanation or distortion. Certain supplementary techniques, such as compensation, explicitation and generalization, are designed to facilitate the translation of such concepts (cf. Vinay and Darbelnet). For instance, the inevitable losses involved in translation can sometimes be redeemed at other points in the text. Unfortunately, though, compensation is not always possible, and culture-specific concepts in the source text must occasionally be smuggled into translation under the blanket of a more general target-language term. Moreover, implicit cultural information in the source text often needs to be rendered explicit in the target text in order to achieve the translation's communicative objective. Poetry translation requires a special degree of caution in this regard, however. Ambiguity, intertextuality and complex wordplay are important components of Yaxkin's work, and I have therefore hesitated to employ strategies of explicitation or clarification except in instances where I feel that the terminology has an obvious and important cultural implication (in the contemporary Mexican context) that will almost certainly be unfamiliar to Australian readers.

The poet

Yaxkin Melchy represents an exciting new generation of talented young poets in Mexico. Born in Mexico City in 1985, he studied Industrial Design before embarking on his current studies in Letras Hispánicas at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). In 2009 he won the Premio Nacional de Poesía Joven Elías Nandino [Elías Nandino Prize for Young Poetry] with his book *Los poemas que vi por un telescopio* [Poems I Saw through a Telescope]. His other books of poetry include *Ciudades electrodomésticas* [Electrodomestic Cities], *Nada en contra* [Nothing Against], *El Nuevo Mundo* [The New World], *El Sol Verde* [The Green Sun], and *Los Planetas.* These last three books form a trilogy, of which *Los Planetas* is, in Yaxkin's own words, "el tercer libro, o nave" [the third book, or ship] (personal communication).[1] Yaxkin is also a founding member of the *Red de los poetas salvajes* [Savage Poets' Network], a community of emerging poets and artists based in Mexico who publish and share their work online. Deriving inspiration from the bohemian characters of Roberto Bolaño's novel *The Savage Detectives* (1998), the *Red* began as a small-scale blog and eventually transmogrified into a vast, unofficial online journal and forum. Today, the *Red* is a borderless, youth-friendly space for creation and self-publication, offering promising opportunities for translation into languages other than Spanish. As well as publishing his own poetry, Yaxkin also compiles, edits and shares anthologies of poetry and visual art. Contributors range from his young Mexican contemporaries to important Latin American writers from earlier generations, such as Enrique Verástegui and Félix Luis Viera.

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Red de los poetas salvajes* is its predominantly online presence. Indeed, technology and the incorporation of modern communication media into the realm of art and poetry is one of the major recurring themes in Yaxkin's work. For him, online publication is more than just a means of minimizing costs. Rather, it offers a way to "break away from literary monotony", permitting access to "a form of creation that belongs more fully

1 All translations from Spanish are my own.

to this movement" (from *Los Planetas*).[2] In other words, the dynamism and heterogeneity of the Internet make it the perfect vehicle for the kind of eclectic, innovative artwork that Yaxkin and his fellow "poetas salvajes" create. The online publication format allows for the inclusion of large-scale visual artwork alongside the poetry, as well as active links to videos and other media.[3] At once a private and communal space, the Internet also offers unique opportunities for reader interactivity and feedback. Furthermore, as Yaxkin himself comments, the ephemeral nature of online literature adds a beautifully savage element to his writing. Composing poetry intended for the screen, he affirms, "means never relinquishing while there exists this universe of expressions that appear and disappear, that are created and erased" ("Electrónico-poetica"). The complex web of creativity that is Yaxkin's *Red* exists within the only truly untamed medium remaining, one impervious to censorship, the demands of the publishing industry, and the passage of time. "The web", Yaxkin reminds us, "is a riddle waiting to be written", an amorphous entity shaped and encoded by the very people who consume it ("Electrónico-poetica"). Needless to say, the indeterminate and multifarious nature of the Internet cannot be replicated on paper. Even when removed from its online context, though, Yaxkin's poetry retains its singular allure. While its personality is altered somewhat by the change in medium, the poetry's essential nature remains intact.

Aside from the aforementioned focus on technology and online writing, Yaxkin's poetry displays a complex vocabulary and intertextuality that pertain to the poet's own, unmistakably Mexican context. As the title suggests, *Los Planetas* contains strong recurring themes of astronomy, space-fiction and metaphysics. There are several references to theoretical physicists and philosophers, and scientific or mathematical terminology is often woven into the fabric of the poetry. Yaxkin describes himself as "a scientific spirit, a wonder-struck child", and his poetry is indeed a remarkable collage of juvenile fantasies and sophisticated scientific language. As a translator, I have had to first comprehend this language before attempting to communicate it in English. However, I have not attempted to demystify Yaxkin's complicated vocabulary, deciding to leave his references more or less as opaque as they are in the original. Yaxkin also dedicates many of his poems to friends and contemporaries, and his writing frequently verges on the metaliterary with its self-reflective themes and explicit references to other poets and artists. Among the well-known figures populating his work we find Hermann Hesse and Federico García Lorca, musicians Ravi Shankar and Mercedes Sosa, and a host of Chilean poets including Bolaño, Neruda, Héctor Hernández and Juan Luis Martínez.

Yaxkin's intricate, alliteration-rich language, along with his Joycean penchant for neologisms, has often demanded a certain measure of ingenuity on my part. One striking example of such language appears in the book's opening poem:

> arreversados
> entreverados por la primavera
> varados en el verso
> versados en lo que primeramente nace como un signo de
> interrogación que crece con la lluvia

Difficult elements in this passage include the invented word *arreversado*, the repetition of the letter *v* and the sound *-ados*, the strange choice of the word *primeramente* (akin to using *firstly* instead of *first*), and the relationship between the words *verso* and *versados*. After much experimentation I settled on the following translation:

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2 In a section of *Los Planetas* entitled "Electrónico-Poética" [Electronic-Poetics], Yaxkin dedicates several poems to the topic of technology's impact on the experience of composing and consuming poetry.
3 For examples, see the website of the *Red de los poetas salvajes*: reddelospoetassalvajes.blogspot.com (in Spanish).

rereversed
interspersed by spring
deserted in the verse
versed in what is first born as a question
mark that grows with the rain

The replacement of one neologism with another was simple enough, as was preserving the relationship between *verse* and *versed*. The real challenge lay in reproducing the rhythmic alliteration of the original. Initially, I preferred *streaked with spring* to *interspersed by spring*, and *stranded in the verse* to *deserted in the verse*. Nevertheless, I eventually opted to prioritize the sound of the whole stanza over my partiality for individual words. Happily, the word *first* fitted the rhyme of the stanza better than its clumsy cousin *firstly*, so I also chose to disregard Yaxkin's odd word choice in this instance.

Reading the stanza aloud several times helped me to arrive at this decision. I paid particularly close attention to the intrinsic patterns, rhythms and aural motifs formed by Yaxkin's language, and attempted to create analogous sounds in English. Many acclaimed poetry translators admit to employing similar methods in the translation and revision of their work. Edith Grossman, who has written extensively on the subject, describes her (re)creative process as one of aural repetition, focusing on the poem's spoken cadences rather than its formal structure. "I begin", she writes, by "reading the lines aloud, over and over again, until the Spanish patterns have been internalized and I can start to hear in my mind's ear the rhythms of a preliminary English version" (99). Margaret Sayers Peden, translator of Isabel Allende and Juan Rulfo, describes her method in equally musical terms, claiming to listen to "the way the poem is sung" (9). For Paul Valéry, the aesthetic quality of spoken verse is paramount: a poem, he writes, "is both a succession of syllables and a combination of words; and just as the latter ought to form a probable meaning, so the succession of syllables ought to form for the ear a kind of audible shape which, with a special and as it were peculiar compulsion, should impress itself simultaneously on both voice and memory" (113). Certainly, listening to a poem's living, audible pulse reveals latent rhythms and "deep-rooted tempos" within even the most prosaic verse (Grossman 99). Although Yaxkin's poetry conforms neither to rhyme nor to any strict poetic metre, it possesses a distinct musicality and resonates powerfully when spoken aloud.[4] Yaxkin himself draws clear parallels between the composition of music and poetry: "I am composing mud", he writes in the opening poem of *Los Planetas*, "and the symphony orchestra of the prelude". Yaxkin's carefully chaotic, often unexpected word pairings lend the poems a subtle structural coherence, which I have attempted to preserve in my translation.

At several points during the translation process there arose instances in which, due to ambiguity, invented vocabulary and my own limited understanding of the poetry's intimate context, I was uncertain whether my translation decisions were accurate. The fact that I was engaged in regular email correspondence with Yaxkin prompted me to seek his advice in such instances. Had this not been the case, I would have been forced to make those decisions on my own, or with the help of other Mexican acquaintances, trusting in my own interpretation of Yaxkin's difficult language. Fortunately, though, Yaxkin deigned to guide me through some of the poetry's more perplexing terrain. His explanation of the neologism *próstumo*, for example, was at once illuminating and bemusing: "It has to do with the word *posthumous*", he wrote, "but I wanted the word to sound dirty, smeared with pristine mud". Unable to encompass all of Yaxkin's paradoxical concepts within one word, I eventually decided that the stanza as a whole managed to impart both the sense and self-contradictory feel of the original. I settled on:

4 Yaxkin and other members of the *Red de los poetas salvajes* frequently perform their poetry aloud. Examples can be found at the following links:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HzE9hVULv8;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvPA_yPvBt8&feature=channel&list=UL

> and I am composing my prosthumous mud
> out of the pristine tombs of dictionaries

Such compromises are an inevitable part of poetry translation, and every translator suffers from an inherent sense of insecurity in the face of them. They recall the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt, from an 1816 preface to his translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: "I know only too well", he wrote, "to what extent my own translation falls short of what I would wish it to be" (59). Nevertheless, I do not feel disappointed with the text that I have produced, nor am I pessimistic about the outcomes of poetry translation in general. Like poetry itself, translation is a difficult and imperfect art form. It requires creativity, ingenuity and yes, a certain degree of compromise. But so does all writing. Poetry translation is no doubt a challenging task, but it is by no means a futile or impossible one.

A final, crucial element of Yaxkin's poetry is its smouldering undercurrent of social criticism. The Mexico of *Los Planetas* is a kind of cybergenetic dystopia, ravaged by modernity and capitalist debauchery. Indeed, Mexico's recent history is a chaotic mélange of unbridled consumerism, astonishing violence and deeply entrenched political corruption. Yaxkin articulates the disenchantment of a generation born and raised in that confusing social climate. "Mexico City / is my Third World Tokyo", he writes, a place where poverty and frivolity co-exist, where hypermodernity is inextricable from waste and decay. This said, his poetry is far from defeatist. The cosmos that Yaxkin has created is one in which poets rewrite entire constellations, where universes decompose and are rebuilt by human consciousness, where books are as big as houses – indeed, as big as planets – and time is distorted to the point of losing all meaning.

To an extent, then, *Los Planetas* is a form of surrealist escapism, a hallucinatory journey into outer (cyber)space. It is also much more than this, however. Poetry, Yaxkin explains, has become unnecessary in modern times, a peripheral art form disregarded by many as convoluted and bizarre. Art and Literature now tend to spring from inessential creative desires, rather than from necessity. "Desire creates writers, poets, Nobel laureates", he remarks, "but necessity is what compels a child to write stories in his schoolbooks" (personal communication). Yaxkin's own writing is an attempt to capture that child-like urgency, to recognize "the marvellous, mysterious Other that surrounds us" and to invade everyday language "with animals, plants, robots". Poetry understood as necessity, he claims, is not something superfluous but something inextricable from life itself, "more closely related to community, to dreaming, to children's riddles" than to artistic transcendence. In this sense, poetry is also a form of resistance in a society where ignorance and apathy reign: "Writing poetry is like taking to the streets in protest, but the streets are inside us and in our heads and in our hearts". For Yaxkin, poetry holds the key to comprehending, expressing and remedying our social discontent. It is a mechanism of innovation and renewal, both artistic and political. "The Book", he writes, "is a constellation of kites landing on the / metropolis / this country's forced landing in times of crisis / against the shootings and massacres / a weapon of destruction against the old and outdated / of regeneration" (from the text of *Los Planetas*).

Los Planetas reminds us that poetry, in all its forms, is what keeps us from the brink of self-destruction or utter de-humanization. It is a place populated by "living organic creatures, and that is the antithesis of dead literature" (personal communication). Mexico, in other words, is not (yet) a nation of cyborgs; "the poetry / transmitted in the breath / is the consciousness that we are living creatures of air and fire" (*Los Planetas*). For Yaxkin, poetry "belongs to us, to all of us, to everyone", and the creative flame within us all is what constitutes our humanity and our indefatigable freedom. While it burns, all is not lost.

I

estoy componiendo barro
y la orquesta sinfónica del prólogo

aquí dentro de mí voy a escribir porque afuera
vive un monstruo
y esta es mi alma hecha de colores un cometa de
papel y azufre

aquí en el fondo del océano
a diez mil metros de altura en los tiempos
donde se revuelven las mareas y es pasado y
futuro

aquí donde la palabra está sentada en un trono
de corales negros
y la luz oscura se parcela y hace rayas y se
planta la luz

donde las hojas luminosas se abren y se
cosechan los textos inauditos
y los ángeles
y los jaguares sigilan como astros-universos que
también están aquí
concentrados en las galaxias
en la creación de la reversión mutante
una palanca de hierro el corazón cifrado en
violetas azules

y pinto rollos de arcoiris hasta que duermo en el
arcoíris

estoy componiendo barro y soy de barro
y la música está desperdigada por toda la
profundidad pelágica
como una caverna de gusanos luminosos

liliput liliput liliput
ja ja ja
dios está en la luna tirando la basura de su
enorme planeta
y yo pesco y yo pesco con los oídos

I am composing mud
and the symphony orchestra of the prelude

I am going to write here inside myself because
outside there lives a monster
and this is my soul made of colours a paper and
sulphur comet

here at the bottom of the ocean
ten thousand metres high in time
where the tides toss and turn and it is past and
future

here where words are seated on thrones of black
coral
and the dark light divides itself and casts stripes
and the light takes root

where the luminous leaves unfurl and brand new
texts are harvested
and the angels
and the jaguars stealth like star-universes that
are also here
concentrated in the galaxies
in the creation of the mutant reversion
an iron lever the heart encoded in
blue violets

and I paint reels of rainbow until I sleep in the
rainbow

I am composing mud and I am mud
and the music is scattered through the pelagic
depths
like a cave of glow worms

lilliput lilliput lilliput
ha ha ha
god is on the moon taking out his enormous
planet's trash
and I fish and I fish with my ears

los bucles del tiempo interminable

y corro y corro repitiendo descubriendo
cambiando de color las
    televisiones
caracoles y avispas
limoneros y libélulas

corro y corro
y los juegos olímpicos se trasforman en cadenas olímpicas
los aros están en mi nariz y en mi lengua
me siento todo continente todo océano todo cielo
todo república de banderas de nylon

jajaja
calcetines rosas
toda palabra al revés tiene otro color sabor y punto de quiebre

corazón tropical tropicalísimo
hirviendo café en las ojeras de mi rostro

poesía consumida
quemándote como el sinfín
el sinfín sillón de un muerto

corro aunque soy universitario y desleal
aunque mi padre está en el bosque esperándome borracho
y aunque mi madre vive en una caja de cerillos
porque afuera
    todos se queman

aunque mi hermana es de puntos alrededor de su cuerpo
porque es un dibujo que no se ha unido ni arrebatado ni cosido a las
telas de la existencia
así
porque soy desleal
sé que se puede reescribir dieciocho veces el

for loops of interminable time

and I run and I run repeating discovering
changing colour the
    televisions
snails and wasps
lemon trees and dragonflies

I run and I run
and the olympic games transform into olympic rings
the hoops are in my nose and in my tongue
I feel all continent all ocean all
sky
all republic of nylon flags

hahaha
pink socks
words written backwards have a different colour flavour and breaking point

tropical tropical heart
boiling coffee in the circles under my eyes

consumed poetry
burning like infinity
the infinite armchair of a dead man

I run although I am an undergraduate and disloyal
although my father is waiting for me drunk in the woods
although my mother lives in a matchbox
because outside everybody is burning

although my sister is made of points outside her body
because she is a drawing that has not joined nor been snatched from nor stitched to the fabrics of existence
so
because I am disloyal
I know that the same poem can be rewritten

mismo poema
y las estrellas son dieciocho veces estrellas por minuto
naa está bajo el mismo poema todo está chorreando del mismo
    sujeto poético
político prolífico pontificio

los shinigamis llevan cruces a la espalda
y los videos virtuales son los sueños de los que aún no nacen
los que ya nacieron grabaron ovnis o extraterrestres
dejaron algunos poemas tontos locos alucinantes

se han muerto esperando
a ver que el sol saque la lengua
que las nubes se quemen y el cielo se convierta en un diccionario de cristal
y la tierra en una licuadora de palabras

no les daré ninguna clase a ustedes
nada que provenga del lenguaje a la militarización del lenguaje

instrúyanse conmigo en la pedagogía de las cartas que mandamos al dios de mil rostros
a veces hay que llenar el corazón de luciérnagas
y pensar como un río que es otra forma de ser luciérnaga
y sentir como el volcán que también es una forma de ser
    luciérnaga

penachos de escoba
ropa llena de piel y esqueletos
guantes pegados con engrudo
pulmón abierto y corazón calcetín
todo relleno con semillas negras

moco tierra vómito y vinagre
alfombras mágicas cuernos y precisión lunática

eighteen times
and the stars are stars eighteen times per minute
naah it all falls under the same poem
everything is flowing from the same
    poetic subject
political prolifical pontifical

the shinigamis bear crosses on their backs
and video games are the dreams of the unborn
those who were born recorded ufos or extraterrestrials
they left a few silly crazy wonderful poems

they died waiting
for the sun to stick out its tongue
for the clouds to burn and the sky to become a
    glass dictionary
and the earth a blender of words

I will not teach you anything
nothing stemming from language to the militarization of language

learn with me in the pedagogy of letters that we send to the god of a thousand faces
sometimes we must fill our hearts with fireflies
and think like a river which is another way of being a firefly
and feel like the volcano which is also a way of being a
    firefly

tufts of broom
clothes full of skin and skeletons
gloves stuck together with wheat paste
open lung and sock heart
all filled with black seeds

snot earth vomit and vinegar
magic carpets horns and lunatic precision

marea cuerpo vocación de hilo enredar las
ciudades con inmensas líneas de pintura
hasta trazar un mapa sobre el mapa
un mapa textil sobre el mapa de lo concreto

tide body thread vocation
entangle the cities with immense lines of paint
until a map is traced upon the map
a textile map upon the concrete map

ondear la ciudad como bandera sobre el valle
la bandera constelación
la bandera Marte
la bandera prepucio
la banderola tambor
la bandera seno
labio partido

ripple to the city like a flag upon the valley
the constellation flag
the Mars flag
the foreskin flag
the drum flag
the breast flag
chapped lip

ángeles paralíticos con una flor en vez de
cuerpo
ángeles epilépticos con una flor en vez de
cabeza
ángeles sanguíneos con sangre en vez de flores
en vez de pensamientos

paralytic angels with a flower for a
body
epileptic angels with a flower for a
head
sanguine angels with blood instead of flowers
instead of thoughts

arreversados
entreverados por la primavera
varados en el verso
versados en lo que primeramente nace como un
signo de interrogación
    que crece con la lluvia

rereversed
interspersed by spring
deserted in the verse
versed in what is first born as a
question mark
    that grows with the rain

alrededor de peces blancos comidos por
murciélagos azules
zorros verdes
muchachos esporádicamente transparentes

around white fish eaten by
blue bats
green foxes
sporadically transparent boys

llamados antárticos pero llamados al sol
muchachas que caen del cielo para rociar con
sus orines el equinoccio
y hacernos creer lo mismo que hacernos crecer
que algún día esta
escalera llegará al infierno

antarctic appeals but appeals to the sun
girls who fall from the sky to spray the
    equinox with their urine
and make us believe the same thing make us
believe that some day this
stairway will lead us to hell

ja ja ja
nada podrá mordernos
ni la modernidad ni su cola
ni los remordimientos ni la culpa

ha ha ha
nothing will bite us
not modernity nor its tail
not regret nor doubt

las cruces del cristo son espadas de madera
y rompemos las piñatas
repletas de estrellas

y estoy componiendo mi próstumo de barro
el prístino sepulcro de los diccionarios

pero estoy reponiendo cosmopolitismo extraño
extraterrestre y estratosférico
angelical y dragónico:
ácido desoxirribonucleico
así nace una planta
así se crea un gen de la historia
de una semilla donde está dormida la flor que
soy por adentro de
    los huesos
la yerba que soy por los ojos hacia fuera
la hechura verde de mi sol
la tela muerta de mi hojarasca

ese
libro
que
vino
del
espacio
exterior
preguntando
me
si…
ja
ja
já!

the crosses of christ are wooden swords
and we shatter the piñatas
full of stars

and I am composing my prosthumous mud
out of the pristine tombs of dictionaries

but I am replenishing cosmopolitism, strange
extraterrestrial and stratospheric
angelic and dragonic:
deoxyribonucleic acid
this is how a plant is born
this is how a history gene is born
from a seed where sleeps
the flower inside
    my bones
the grass that grows out of my eyes
the green make of my sun
the dead fabric of my fallen leaves

that
book
that
came
from
outer
space
asking
me
if...
ha
ha
ha!

II

calcula
el espacio
que queda
entre tu boca
y la boca de las estrellas

reanuda trayectos
barcos de vapor manchando el horizonte gris

muerde
escupe una y otra vez

no dejes de mirar
los sonidos tristes del día
las gargantas en éxtasis de la noche
la bulimia de las estrellas
vomitando
cometas miles de cometas

no dejes de romperte
como el faro
al que le cae una piedra del espacio

no dejes de hundirte más
como la ola tragada por sus hermanas
hasta convertirte en un submarino
profundo y negro
con mil manos
atrapando millones de luces
con lenguas de lodo

busca
huye
vierte tu espeso torrente a tu hueco corazón

vive
acuéstate con el pecho lleno de hologramas

sube
rima
bate las ondas de la luz

calculate
the space
that remains
between your mouth
and the mouth of the stars

resume your journeys
steamboats dirtying the grey horizon

bite
spit again and again

do not stop looking
at the sad sounds of the day
at the throats in night-time ecstasy
at the bulimia of the stars
vomiting
comets thousands of comets

do not stop breaking yourself
like a lighthouse
smashed by a stone from outer-space

do not stop sinking further
like a wave swallowed by its sisters
until you become a submarine
deep and black
with a thousand hands
trapping millions of lights
with tongues of mud

search
flee
spill your thick torrent upon your hollow heart

live
recline with your chest full of holograms

rise
rhyme
pound the waves of light

el cielo es un lago de gasóleo
todo va a arder dicen los ángeles excitados
y sientes unas cosquillas terribles

olvida lo que serás
revierte aquella energía en los ojos
moliendo poemas remoliendo poemas

mírate con el planeta
en tu puño

the sky is a gasoline lake
everything is going to burn, the excited angels
say, and you feel a terrible tickling

forget what will be
spill again that energy in your eyes
grinding poems regrinding poems

look at yourself with the planet
in your fist

III

danzas folclóricas del mezcal
electroacústica
revienta el sonidero en mi cabeza
sé que es un libro que ha estallado en mí
sueño hambriento
hiena del sol
lujuria de verdes campos
ángeles sin dientes
bailan con dinosaurios
se acerca un meteorito –sol gigante como una flor–
estamos en una monografía extraterrestre
bailando con el petróleo una danza llena de fuego y noche
voz de nieve
arruinadero
hervidero
fiesta de los eclipses
besándose
como el universo
cuando crecía como una célula mutante
y estos son los versos del microprocesador
del juego del baile
que todos bailan
para siempre

folkloric mescal dances
electroacoustic
bursting the sound system inside my head
I know it is a book that has exploded in me
hungry dream
hyena of the sun
lust of green fields
toothless angels
dance with the dinosaurs
a meteorite is approaching –sun gigantic like a flower–
we are inside an extraterrestrial monograph
dancing with petroleum a dance filled with fire and night
voice of snow
ruins
hives
fiesta of the eclipses
kissing each other
like the universe
when it grew like a mutant cell
and these are the microprocessor verses
of the game the dance
that everyone dances
for ever

IV

los perros de los cuadernos murieron
desaparecieron de la imaginación

adelante y afuera de mi ventana hay cientos de perros callejeros
que no encuentran las entradas de lo infra
calles llenas de perros
cementerios de perros marinos
perros voladores
y perros luminosos

desenterramos los huesitos junto a latas de refresco
pepsi perros
y perros sabritas
serán
los dinosaurios del futuro

cierro los ojos
los párpados son duros como hojas metálicas
y la música pop bilz pap no puede dormir

enciendo mi yo reality show:
estoy bailando con los perros que se fueron al cielo
y el sol gordo arriba
deshaciéndose como una bola de mantequilla

los perros tienen grosellas en las orejas
como los pendientes de santa Claus
y jalan un trineo de leche
sobre los edificios

¿a dónde irán?
de un lado a otro del ecuador
que es una calle muy ancha
sin puntos cardinales
y sin porvenir

the notebook dogs died
they disappeared from imagination

ahead and outside my window there are hundreds of stray dogs
that cannot find the entrances to the underworld
streets filled with dogs
cemeteries of marine dogs
flying dogs
and luminous dogs

we unearth the little bones buried among soda cans
pepsi dogs
and doritos dogs
will be
the dinosaurs of the future

I close my eyes
the eyelids are hard like metallic leaves
and the bilz pap pop music can't sleep

I switch on my personal reality show:
I am dancing with the dogs that went to heaven
and the fat sun overhead
melting us like a lump of butter

the dogs have currants in their ears
like santa claus earrings
and they pull a sleigh of milk
atop the buildings

where will they go?
from one side of the equator to the other
which is a very broad street
with no cardinal points
and no future

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