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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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