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Helen Stevenson on Translating Alain Mabanckou's *Broken Glass* (2009)

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For readers of Francophone African literature, Alain Mabanckou is a household name. The author, who hails from Congo-Brazzaville, has penned eleven novels, six volumes of poetry and numerous essays on language, literature, and identity. In addition to being a prolific writer, Alain Mabanckou is Professor of French and Francophone Studies at the University of California in Los Angeles. His popularity amongst readers and students is such that he is affectionately called "Mabancool" — a nickname used by former French Cultural Minister, Frédéric Mitterrand, when presenting the author with a Legion of Honour in 2011 ("Prince of the Absurd").

Among the estimated three percent of all books translated into English (Steemers 107), Mabanckou's fifth novel *Verre Cassé* (2005) was published under the title *Broken Glass* by UK publisher Serpent's Tail in 2009. The novel, which has since been adapted for the stage, was translated by British translator and writer Helen Stevenson, with whom I exchanged a series of emails in 2016 for my doctoral research on humour translation. Of particular interest to me was Stevenson's experience translating the novel's roughly three hundred literary and cultural references, many of which are woven into the narrative without any typographical emphasis.

Whilst scholars Kathryn Batchelor (2013) and Vivan Steemers (2014) have examined some of the challenges that Mabanckou's references engender for readers and translators of his novel, Helen Stevenson is of the opinion that "[t]he richness of his cultural references may make [his] books difficult to sell, but not to translate" (translators must read with their ears). In the following email interview, the translator of *Broken Glass* speaks of the game-like experience of translating Mabanckou's hidden references, the responsibility she feels in being a translator, and the value in drawing from what she calls "your best library" – the material that is already in your head.

Sarah Martin (SM): Where are you from?
Helen Stevenson (HS): I'm British, white, female, from Yorkshire, in the North of England. I've lived in France for long periods, in the Pyrénées-Orientales and more recently in the Lot region, near Cahors. I live in Somerset now, in the South West of England.
SM: What are your language pairs?
HS: I translate from French into English. I have also done some translation from German into English.
SM: How did you learn these languages?
HS: I learned German and French at school, then did my degree in Modern Languages, at the University of Oxford. I have worked in France as a tourist guide and also lived in Munich for a year. I always enjoyed translating into English. I'm a pianist – I also teach piano – and I have always felt that playing music and translating went together well. Even as a child my ambitions were to be a pianist and interpreter.
SM: How long have you been practising as a translator?
HS: I have been translating now since 1985 when I left university, and before that, but the first novel I translated was *Naissance des Fantômes*, by Marie Darrieussecq, in 1998. I loved her work, and was delighted when I was approached by Faber to translate one of her books. I've also translated Alice Ferney, Antoine Bellos, though more recently I've only done works by Mabanckou.

SM: Apart from literature, do you translate other types of documents?
HS: Occasionally I translate letters as a favour, but not really. My husband translates poetry into and from Italian and French and we enjoy doing that together. I expect I'd get paid much better to translate the publicity for Eurostar, but no one's ever asked me!
SM: In your opinion, what makes a 'good' translation?
HS: That's a big question! I know I do it instinctively. I don't have a technique. I've always felt I just knew how it should go. I absolutely believe that there is a musicality to good writing, and that you have to render that. Obviously you have to be accurate and not fanciful or self-indulgent, or correct the writer's thought. It's important to be able to write good English, that people want to read, that flows and is alive. If you can't do that you can't possibly translate, because while translation is a process of transposition, it's also a process of composition. You are composing sentences which correspond to the sentences of the original but which aren't mirror images of them. I have no confidence that a machine can translate well. The dictionary part is the smallest element of translation – knowing what the words mean. You have to know how to balance them. And then there is register – the right degree of formality or informality; and understanding the writer's style, and reflecting it. I get quite irritated when people suggest that machines could do the work of translators. So much of the work is in the understanding of the spirit of the writing. Once you've grasped that it's relatively easy to find the words in your own language. It's a bit like being an actor sometimes. You have to get inside the role.
SM: What advice would you give to an aspiring translator?
HS: Don't do it unless you're passionate about it. It's not well paid, though it is very rewarding, so to be a literary translator is usually something you do alongside other things, not as your main means of earning a living. The publisher at Serpent's Tail once said to me that he thought I was a good translator because I was also a writer and therefore didn't feel I had to express myself personally through my translations as some people do! He said it makes it easier for the editors. I'd say only translate books you enjoy, though that's not always possible, but at least books you respect, anyway. I need things to get my teeth into, with complexities of style and meaning, and lots of nuance – humour is nuanced, so that's always interesting. You need to be meticulous and inspired at once, and thorough and consistent. It's a very big responsibility, to translate someone's precious work.
SM: Because of the subjective nature and creative constraints of translating humour, do you ever feel *powerful* or *powerless* when recreating it for your readership?
HS: Power isn't a word I'd use, not in this context. As I say, I feel responsible. I often feel surprisingly free, creatively, in the way I do when I write – there are so many ways of rendering a sentence. To know that, and to have confidence that you have chosen the best one – that's a nice feeling. I might feel powerless if I found myself having to translate something I didn't admire or respect because I needed the money but I would try not to have to do that as I would probably do it badly and unhappily.
SM: When faced with a challenging humorous element, what tools/options do you have recourse to?
HS: In the case of Alain, my greatest resource is knowing him. I don't really think about humorous elements in any different way to the rest of the text. He did say to me once that he thought it was really helpful that I had children and could write their voices. I don't think that with Alain you need much more context than I have – after four – or is it five books? – I rarely meet things I don't understand. With *Broken Glass* that was a big challenge, especially with the titles, which were embedded throughout, but once I realized what was going on it became like a game. I developed an eye/ear for the embedded titles – there was always something about them that caught the eye or the ear, and I don't think I missed any. I hope not! It made it more interesting for me. Alain's irreverence towards authority, the fact that politically we see eye to eye, I think, and that he is so funny about pomposity and hypocrisy – I like all that, so I guess

I have recourse, in a sense, to our common view of the world, despite the fact that he is a huge black African and I am a blond English woman! Occasionally I've googled references to the Congo and political and social events there, of course. Sometimes when he makes word plays I have to wrestle for a while till I get the right equivalent. He will take an idiom in French and subvert it, substituting other words, so I have to find equivalents in English – that can be tricky sometimes, but you just have to let your brain wander till you find it. I draw on what's in my head almost always. That's where your reference material is, your best library. That's why you're a translator. It just so happens that you speak both languages, but the language work isn't really the nub of it. It's the dismantling and the reconstruction that is so interesting and vital.

SM: Humour is often used to construct or display identity. To what extent do you feel that you display your own identity when translating humour? Is this a conscious decision?

HS: I try not to display my white English female educated middle classness. To do so would surely be a total failure. I want people to believe that this is written by Alain Mabanckou, it just happens to be in English. So I aim for total invisibility – and that's a delicious kind of freedom, particularly for a writer.

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Review of Marcel Proust's *Un amour de Swann*
(trans. Brian Nelson)

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Proust, Marcel. *Un amour de Swann*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987[1].
———. *Swann in Love*. Translated by Brian Nelson, with an Introduction by Adam Watt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Brian Nelson, Emeritus Professor of French and Translation Studies at Monash University, has been translating for years, mainly novels in Émile Zola's Rougon-Macquart series. Here he turns his hand to *Un amour de Swann*, a detachable component of the first major section of Marcel Proust's great novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927). Usually printed as the middle part of *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), it has, at different times, been published separately, filmed (by Volker Schlöndorff), dramatised, adapted for voices and recorded on a cassette for Radio France. For it is all but self-contained, focuses mostly on two characters, and requires of the reader little acquaintance with the rest of the work. Adam Watt's Introduction is excellent, authoritative, informative and wide-ranging. A bibliography of works in English is also excellent (though it repeats the half-truth that Tadié's Pléiade edition (1987) is 'the' authoritative one, despite its at times unsatisfactory solutions to editorial problems and the fact that there are other equally reliable French versions). Nelson thus joins a handful of translators who have Englished this and other parts of Proust.

In a Note, Nelson endorses a statement by one of the team engaged by Penguin just over twenty years ago to translate the whole of the *Recherche*: "I have worked very much in the shadow of these previous translators and with much gratitude towards them". That is evident to anyone who compares Nelson's text with his predecessors'. He appears to have often worked with an eye on their versions.

On the matter of syntax, Nelson discusses a principle espoused by one predecessor, Lydia Davis, doubting the wisdom of her "retention of the precise order of elements in a sentence" (xxx). Often, however, he reproduces Proust's structures and the "order of elements in a sentence". One wonders where is the advantage in designing the order of the clauses on a more French, less English, model? To some readers, such ordering will feel aptly French, nay, 'Proustian'; to others, too French, awkward or stilted. It gives a slightly foreign feel to much of the prose, placing some of the longer, more complex sentences within what we might call 'the Venuti spectrum', after the American traductologist most associated with a notion of 'foreignisation' (1995). That any degree of foreignisation gives a more Proustian experience to reading Proust in English is, like many things in translation, debatable. Understandably, this fidelity to the "order of elements" quite often determines the choice of punctuation, which can feel clumsy.

Similarly, Nelson quite often chooses to translate the *« si » d'opposition* by the contrastive or concessive 'if', rather than, say, 'whereas', 'while' or 'though'. This 'if' is of course used in English, albeit at a much lesser frequency than the *« si » d'opposition* in French. But, partly because of that infrequency and because English 'if' tends to suggest hypothesis, it can make a reader hesitate. Especially in sentences like these:

[1]First published by Grasset in 1913, then all subsequent editions by Gallimard. Edition translated, Gallimard 1987.

> If he was obliged to make his excuses to people in society for not visiting them, those he made to Odette were for not staying away from her;
> If she was now frequently away from Paris, even when she was there she saw very little of him.
>
> (116)

There, many readers, having assumed until halfway through that each 'If' introduces a hypothesis, will have to re-read to disambiguate structures which turn out to be contrastive.

Imitation of French may perhaps be seen too in a tendency towards the literal in choice of word or phrasing. Speaking of frequencies, Nelson uses forms which, though morphological equivalents of French terms, seem improper in context, for instance the Latinism 'a priori' ("her a priori excellence", 117) favoured by some of his predecessors, despite the fact that in English (2,892 = 1.3 per million, according to the corpora of the University of Bologna) it is ten times less frequent than in French (21,034 = 13.00 p.m.). This does not necessarily disqualify it, but the English contexts where it is used, largely philosophical or theological, do. Would a character who is neither philosopher nor theologian use it in indirect speech, describing a woman? Also favoured by a predecessor is "peripeteias" (179), a word known, I suspect, to few readers: Bologna's frequencies are 0 in English and 4,298 for *péripéties*, a word well known in French. Similarly, defensible though it may be to render *une petite ouvrière* as "a little working-class girl" (30) and *une petite bonne* as "a little servant-girl" (56), it might be preferable to call them 'young', as that is why Swann the sexual predator fancies them.

Imagery can enable a translator to be creative without being unfaithful. Here too Nelson, like most predecessors, often prefers literalism, though it makes for weak or obscure images. Two examples: Proust implicitly compares Swann's *âme*, in the throes of his jealousy, poisoned by Odette's confessions, to a stream contaminated by corpses. Implicitly, because the idea of flow is conveyed only by the verbs *charriait*, *rejetait* and *berçait*, commonly used in watery contexts. But "His soul bore them along, cast them aside, cradled them" (170) – all terms used by Moncrieff and Davis, by the way – weakens the evocation of a river and loses the force of the metaphor. To describe melody emerging from a violin as "like a devil in a baptismal font" (149) is to calque an old but still vivid expression (*comme un diable dans un bénitier*) into its literal equivalents, although in English these have little association with seething frenezy.

It is good that some of the dialogue which Proust embedded inside paragraphs is indented for each character, making those parts of the text more reader-friendly. There could have been more of it. Proust's paragraphing of dialogue was an afterthought, intermittent and inconsistent, arising not from aesthetic considerations but from a concern to reduce the length of the volume and hence the price to the buyer, none of which argues for retaining his arrangements with dialogue.

Speaking of dialogue, I do think the translator's ear lets him down at times. I give three examples, one a cumbersome Frenchlike mouthful: "I was about to make one of those judgments of you of a severity that love cannot long endure" (97). The second, spoken by a prostitute in a brothel, "If you'd been boring me, I'd have said so" (173), ignores the semi-educated speech-form of the French, *Si vous m'auriez ennuyée, je vous l'aurais dit*. Par for the course for translators of Proust's satirical voices; but that's no excuse. The third is "if you would stop by for a moment" (136). The speaker being the Marquise de Gallardon, this apparent borrowing from Davis's American version makes this aristocrat of the 1880s sound like a character in *Seinfeld*. Why not 'drop in' or even 'pop in'? The dialogue, just before, of male characters is markedly English ('old chap', 'my dear fellow') and apt for the period.

There are more than 100 endnotes, many giving helpful information about things which Proust assumed his first readers were familiar with. Some which seem superfluous, such as the

one explaining 'Eurydice', could have been replaced by others on *cocotte*, *demi-monde*, 'table-turning', on 'the Châtelet', 'the Musée Grévin' or 'the Luxembourg', or the sociographical significance of 'the Faubourg Saint-Germain', which will be apparent to few readers. At least three, to pages 70 (see below) and 119, and the first note to page 174, give perplexing misinformation which any attentive reader can see is incorrect. That to page 119 also prematurely divulges the shocking outcome of the affair, thus spoiling one of Proust's most ironic and off-hand revelations.

There is another unfortunate consequence of footnoting certain things: to date exactly the *fête de Paris-Murcie*, Gambetta's funeral, or the first performance of *Francillon*, etc., giving more information than original readers had, probably than Proust had, for he was only approximately suggesting the 1880s, is to make too precise the timing of the affair between Swann and Odette and contradict what the narrator says of it. If we are to believe these dates, it had been going on for about eight years between December 1879 and 1887, whereas, by the chronology of the narrative, unannotated, it takes place in the rough compass of a few seasons, little more than a winter, the spring following, then the summer of Bayreuth. The first kiss seems therefore to date from 1879; and soon after, at the moment of Swann's banishment from the Verdurin salon, he reflects that Odette has *vécu plus de six mois en contact quotidien avec moi*. This further perplexes the reader who tries to make sense of Proust's chronology, which suffers from a design flaw or two: two pages after the banishment, Swann looks at photographs of Odette and remembers how she was two years before, suggesting that the non-sexual phase of love between a womanizer and a woman of easy virtue had lasted for an implausibly long time, or that the photos date from before the start of the affair, equally implausible. Towards the end of the affair, Proust mentions Swann's love of music, through his rediscovery of the Vinteuil sonata, dating it to *depuis plus d'une année*; yet, not much later, he says *cette existence durait déjà depuis plusieurs années*.

There are, as one would expect, few mistranslations, though "corridor" for *couloir* (p. 48) is probably, in this context, one of them. Another is "because it was good for her peasants" (70), an error common to most of Nelson's predecessors (*cela faisait bien pour ses paysans* = 'it made a good impression on her peasants'). Other mistakes I class as slips; and if the volume is to remain in print for a long time, I would hope that, before reprinting, Oxford will make good several small errors (which I have communicated to the translator). Some of these slips, though noticeable to the knowing eye, may not confuse an unknowing reader who reads only this part of the *Recherche*. However, they make one wonder how attentive was the eye doing the revising or the editing.

One of these oversights (actually several in one) shows how confusing tiny things can be in a translated text. The aristocratic name "La Trémoïlle" (67), misprinted as "La Trémouïlle" (68), reverts to "La Trémoïlle" (69), confusing enough. This is soon compounded by Brichot's mispronunciation of it as 'La Trémouaille'. Or rather it is not compounded, because here the name, mistakenly again, is given as 'La Trémouille'. To this a footnote adds misinformation: that Brichot's faux pas lies in not pronouncing the diaeresis. But that diaeresis is never pronounced by those in the know, and neither of Brichot's solecisms is that. His first is that the form *ces de la Trémouaille*, intended by Proust as a faulty hypercorrection of *ces la Trémoïlle*, suggests that Brichot is not just a pedant but an ignorant pedant, the use of the *particule nobiliaire* being, in French, much less common in such collocations than in English (Proust, commenting on Mme Verdurin's ignorance of such niceties of social discrimination, refers to it as a *vicieuse façon de parler*). More importantly, Brichot's other solecism is to mispronounce the name with his discrepant *a* — which this translation omits! The misinformation given in the note is contradicted by Tadié (1216). This all makes for a dog's breakfast, which is then aggravated by the addition of a third faulty variant of the same name, ending with an *s* this time ('Madame de La Trémouilles', 70).

Despite my strictures, this edition could make a commendable introduction to further reading of Proust in English, especially in the English of those of Nelson's predecessors, which is the majority, who cleave close to the syntax of the original.

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