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Translating Marilyne Bertoncini's "Adam&ve": images, emotions, and questions

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What does one translate when they translate a text? A succession of words? Or rather, the impressions that they produce on the reader? Personally, I am whole-heartedly convinced of the latter. The interpretation, and not the text itself, is paramount, as Umberto Eco argues in *Experiences in Translation*: "Translations do not concern a comparison between two languages but the interpretation of two texts in two different languages." (14)

I feel that this is especially true for poetry. As a reader, what I value in (and remember from) a poem is the web of emotions it impresses on me. The poem is not on the page, it lives somewhere between the book and the mind of the reader, in a third space where emotions are stirred, interrogations are asked and left there to mature. As it stands, I also strongly believe that a poem is a question, one that may not ever be answered and, more importantly, does not require an answer. Letting the poem come to you and move you is, in my opinion, the quintessential experience of poetry. Consequently, as a translator, I see my role as allowing the poem to exist in all its dimensions, so that readers can experience it as closely as possible to the original language.

The convention is that one translates from a foreign language into their mother tongue. The reverse happened here, which I believe helped me explore the impressions and effects from Marilyne Bertoncini's playful use of words and sensory images in "Adam&ve", but also, as we shall see, might have caused some less-than-ideal translations.

One or two bodies

The first hurdle in this translation is indeed the title "Adam&ve", a newly created word or name that is repeated throughout the piece. The ampersand links the two quasi-names of Adam and Eve and also stands for the first syllable of "Eve". This way, with one word only, the readers still hear the two names concatenated. To reproduce this effect in English, I kept the ampersand and had it play the role of the second syllable of "Adam" given the similarity in sounds, thus transforming the title into "Ad&Eve". While not perfect, it allowed English readers to experience a similar incongruity at the reading or hearing of this strange neologism, both recognisable and entirely new.

As foreseen with the title, one key feature of the text is the constant ambiguity between the one or two bodies of Adam and Eve. The poem seems to be written, as it states, "avant les commencements / et les dieux des humains" (before the beginnings / and the humans' gods). In this sense, and yet in a totally different register, the poem has the same feeling to it as William Butler Yeats' "*Before the world was made*". Adam and Eve seem to live in a time and space before they are severed into two, but strangely enough it is by the grouping of their two (already distinct) names that this is conveyed, just like the penultimate line forms their one body from "elle-lui" ("her-him"). To illustrate this tension, the whole poem is irrigated with many instances of plural ("Nés", "pétris", "délivrés", "ces deux corps") and singular ("Une même chair", "une seule bouche", "leur corps", "corps translucide").

A difficulty lies in translating the two instances of the singular "leur corps". In French, if a group of people has one object each, it is grammatically correct to use the singular, particularly if this object is not transferable (like a part of the body); the plural is used to put the focus on the group of objects owned. This entails that the singular "leur corps" could be a real one meaning a unique body, or a grammatical one talking about two bodies (one each). In the first case, it should logically be translated as singular; in the second, as plural. I wanted to

translate it the same on both occasions, so I settled for the plural as it sounded more natural, especially when contrasted with the singular night's ink or alongside the multiple explosion that evokes plurality. Secondly, the very fact that the plural possessive "leur" is used indicates that the owners of that body or bodies are already numerous. Finally, it allowed me to balance out the translation of several plurals ("Nés", "pétris", "délivrés", "issus", "méduses", "cheveux de comètes", "yeux de soleils") by seemingly singular or singular terms ("Born", "kneaded", "released", "born", "jellyfish", "comet hair", "sun eyes"), thus guaranteeing the overall ambiguity remained throughout the piece.

Lost in the space-ocean

The main impression of the poem is one of floating through space, before the human world of Adam and Eve and even before the creation of – one could think Platonic – forms ("où les formes sont à naître"/where forms are to be born). Contrary to Plato's conceptual realm, Marilyne Bertoncini's sensory context is vividly rendered with powerful lyrical images. What is particularly interesting is the combination of the scientific lexicon of physics, with examples such as "matière noire" (dark matter, which would have been a much better translation than "black matter"), "étoiles" (stars), "éther" (ether), "nébuleuses" (nebulae) or "comètes" (comet), and the maritime lexicon: "mer" (sea), "sirènes" (sirens), "nageuses" (swimming), "méduses" (jellyfish). The similarities between two seemingly very different worlds, up in the sky and down in the depths of the earth, is in my opinion what makes the poem work so well: the lack of gravity, the dark colours, and the absence of human beings.

I intended to convey such striking images by staying as close as possible to the text and translating the poem quite literally. I had also discovered a few weeks before submitting my entry how much I loved translations that stayed true to the author's intent. I was reading a newly published bilingual edition of Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts* (translated as *Poème pour les oiseaux* in French) and found myself scribbling notes alongside the French translations. For Bertoncini's "Adam&ve", I therefore did not concern myself with understanding the choice of words but simply followed it, just as I followed the author's uppercase and lower-case decisions. Doing so allowed me to maintain most of the rhythm of the poem, through longer and shorter verses and stanzas, only making minor adjustments (such as moving the adjective 'multiple' to the verse above) to ensure consistency in both meaning and rhythm.

In particular, one new word to translate was the "espace-océan", that is exactly the combination of the word for space and ocean and adequately describes the fusion of the two in which this poem takes place. But should it be translated as "space-ocean" or "ocean-space", given the word order is usually reversed in English compared to French? "Ocean-space" had one problem: it sounded like it was a space for the ocean, and a quick Google search confirmed my fears – it was the name of a platform for "ocean action". With the goal of keeping the image fresh and new, something that would not have been heard before, I kept the original order of words to create the "space-ocean" in which readers could lose themselves too.

Forming the human world, sense after sense

Marilyne Bertoncini's writing is full of sensory images that I wanted to vividly render in translation. The poem summons nearly all senses, starting with touch in "pétris de la matière noire du Désir" (kneaded from the black matter of Desire). "Pétris" means *kneaded*, as one would with a bread or pizza dough. It could have also been translated as simply "shaped" or "formed" but in this I felt that we were losing the most important part, the hands-on action of kneading the matter like God must have done when he created Adam from clay. Touch (and taste?) is again used with the fleshy "Une même chair / une seule bouche" (One same flesh / one single mouth) and the bodies clotting "où coagulent ces deux corps" (where these two bodies clot). I preferred the rapidity of the verb 'clot' to 'coagulate' in English.

We also have hearing, introduced right after touch with the “chant de sirènes nébuleuses” (song of nebulous sirens) that could be the alluring sirens from Ulysses’ Odyssey, both enchanting and incredibly dangerous. Hearing is then taken over by the “voix des étoiles” (stars’ voice) that is shivering and the “Grelot de givre” (Frosty bell). The latter gave me some difficulty as a “grelot” is a small high-pitched bell, but the distinction does not exist in English, and “de givre” means literally made from frost – not just iced over. I settled for “Frosty bell” as it seemed to me the easiest way to carry the vision and hearing of a little white bell making frosty sounds.

And of course, the sight of colours progressively comes to life against the dark backdrop of the space-ocean. It starts with the absence of colour of the “matière noire” (dark matter), before moving on to the (implicitly red) blood at Adam and Eve’s temples. Then, colour explicitly appears through a diaphanous body. In the verse “la blancheur de leur corps sur l’encre de la nuit” (the whiteness of their bodies against the night ink), translating the preposition “sur” with its usual meaning “on” did not fit. The idea was one of contrast between the black night and their white bodies, so “against” worked better. Bright white or yellow colour keeps slashing the dark background in the last two stanzas where the milky jellyfish “zébr[ent] le bitume indigo du vide universel” (strip[e] the indigo bitumen of the universal void) before their “comet hair” (“cheveux de comètes”) and their “sun eyes” (“yeux de soleils”) flash (“fulgurent”). It is precisely the flashing that seems to make the world emerge, so rendering these lightning impressions was essential.

“Adam&ve” was a pleasure to translate due to the many interwoven complexities that make it a masterpiece. For instance, the constant opposition between the worlds of Christianity (Eden, Adam and Eve, the Genesis) and of polytheist Ancient Greece (the forms, the ether, the sirens, the humans’ gods), as well as the merging of the scientific spatial lexicon with the lyrical maritime one. By staying close to the text and trying to render the images and impressions to the English-speaking reader, I hope I have managed to convey both the joy and interrogations that this poem brought me.

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Adam&ve
By Marilyne Bertoncini

Ad&Eve
By Marilyne Bertoncini

Translated by Diane Delaurens

Nés de bien plus loin que l'Eden
pétris de la matière noire du Désir

Born from much farther than Eden
kneaded from the black matter of Desire

Adam&ve

Ad&Eve

Une même chair
une seule bouche

One same flesh
one single mouth

le sang des étoiles bat à leurs tempes
dans l'espace-océan, l'éther mer infinie où
les formes sont à naître
nageuses étoiles au chant de sirènes
nébuleuses

the stars' blood beats at their temples
in the space-ocean, the ether infinite sea
where forms are to be born
swimming stars to the song of nebulous
sirens

la blancheur de leur corps sur l'encre de la
nuit

the whiteness of their bodies against the
night's ink

avant les commencements
et les dieux des humains

before the beginnings
and the humans' gods

délivrés
retrouvant dans l'espace
l'obscurité céleste
la stellaire explosion
multiple de leur corps
se délite et se forme
la dimension cosmique
niée par la Genèse
enfermant leurs semblances

released
finding again in space
the celestial obscurity
the multiple stellar explosion
of their bodies
crumbles and makes up
the cosmic dimension
denied by the Genesis
confining their semblances

dans la prison d'Eden

in the prison of Eden

Or la voix des étoiles frissonne
Grelot de givre des étoiles où coagulent ces
deux corps
issus d'une poussière astrale

Yet the stars' voice shivers
Frosty bell of the stars where these two
bodies clot
born from an astral dust

Corps translucide de nébuleuses dérivant
dans l'espace
méduses bras étendus en longue trainée de
Voie lactée

Translucent body of nebulae drifting
through space
jellyfish with arms extended in the long trail
of the milky Way

zébrant le bitume indigo du vide universel
leurs cheveux de comètes
et leurs yeux de soleils fulgurent dans la
nuit des espaces infinis
d'où le monde naquit

d'elle-lui
Adam&ve

striping the indigo bitumen of the universal
void
their comet hair
and their sun eyes flash in the night of
infinite spaces
from which the world was born

out of her-him
Ad&Eve