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A Translator's diary

Translate or not translate Tim Winton's *Island Home* into French

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My interior dialogue à la Nathalie Sarraute:⁴

- *You are going to do it?*
- *Yes, I think so.*
- *Translate a whole book without having neither the copyrights nor a publisher?*
- *I tried, I contacted the author's agent, to no avail. Many of Tim Winton's novels have already appeared in French, most of them translated by Nadine Gassie, and published in reputable publishing houses; The Shepherd's Hut for instance was published by number one literary publishing house Gallimard.⁵*
- *Translators told you it's a bad idea!*
- *Maybe when the book is fully translated something will happen. Like, forty years ago, when my translation of K.S. Pritchard's Coonardoo got published in the end.*
- *It might just stay buried in your computer hard disk.*
- *I'll start anyway...*

Setting aside the translation's future, fifty pages in, Tim Winton's *Island Home* proves to be quite a challenge to translate into French.

I read it twice, offered it to Australians living abroad or French living in Australia, as this essay is about understanding our relationships with the land. I quoted from it. I rhapsodized about it. Yet, reading and interpreting it with an eye to translate is quite a different experience.

I now feel the full effect of Winton, the wordsmith: *Island Home*'s stylistic complexity, wide range of vocabulary, the abundance of dialogues and descriptions, the visceral feeling for the land, the intellectual motifs, the urgency of the committed environmentalist. It is after all a memoir and a political manifesto, a 'love letter' and 'an aesthetic response to the glory and mystery of nature', according to some critics. It requires all my acquired knowledge of Australia – and of Western Australia at that – having lived here more than forty years. It requires a deep understanding of my task.

I am confident that I understand the text well enough, catching its allusions, its subtext, its density. Yet finding the right resources in the target language and culture is like trying to hold water through your fingers. It's there, and yet it slips through.

My approach is to reproduce the effects on a (potentially future) readership: it has to sound natural and fluent, without totally expunging its foreignness. It has to move, impress and ultimately challenge the way the French see Australia, that is, as a beautiful and endangered land. Geography is the main theme of the book: 'Geography trumps it all. Its logic underpins everything', Winton writes (17) [*La géographie l'emporte sur tout. Sa logique sous-tend tout.*] as opposed to 'most Asian and European countries [which] can be defined in human terms.' (16) [*la plupart des pays d'Asie ou d'Europe peuvent se définir en termes humains*]. For a European translator, this means that their target language is not so well equipped, not as rich as Winton's lexicon when it comes to talking about geography.

⁴ I am reminded of Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*, written as a dialogue between a *self* hostile to the autobiographical project, and a *self* determined to overcome all the autography's pitfalls.

⁵ Translated by Jean Esch as *La cavale de Jaxie Clackton*.

Starting with the title: *Island Home* doesn't render easily in French. It borrows from Neil Murray's song, *My Island Home* and is highly evocative to Australian readers, faintly echoing Sally Morgan's *My Place*. Although should a publisher ever be interested, they will probably impose their own choice, I still want to propose an adequate rendering. Home can be : *Chez moi, Chez soi, A la maison, and Island Home, Mon/Une île-maison*. The possessive sounds not only childish, but wrong for Winton's intention to blend the personal and the political. *Habiter une île? Mémoires d'un îlien ? L'île natale ?* I am getting carried away. At the moment, I incline towards a sober: *L'Île-continent : essais*. It echoes the first sentence of the second chapter: 'I grew up on the world's largest island' [*J'ai grandi sur la plus grande île du monde*].

Continuing with *home*. On page 5, Winton replies to his four-year-old son's question about photos pinned to the wall: – 'Is it real?' – 'It's home [Winton says]. Remember? That's Australia.' No problems here: '*C'est chez nous. Tu te souviens ? C'est l'Australie.*' Also relatively unproblematic is the last sentence of this first chapter: 'When we get home,' the boy declared, we're getting a dog. In a ute.' [*Quand on rentrera, déclara l'enfant, on prendra un chien. Dans un pick-up.*]

'Island' re-appears in a few instances, as in this chapter title: 'The island seen and felt' (9) '*L'île vue et ressentie*'. Here I stumble, not on vocabulary, but a syntax which doesn't seem appropriate for a title. I prefer : '*Voir et ressentir une île*'. But I am still unconvinced since '*une île*' doesn't render the source text definite article. I sense that the indefinite article corresponds better to the author's generalising intention, to transform the personal into a collective experience. After all, use of definite and indefinite articles varies between the two languages.

More geography: 'land', 'landscape', 'place', 'country': the French language supplies a whole semantic field here: *terre, territoire, terrain, endroit, lieu, pays...*

Despite a peopled history of sixty thousand years, Australia remains a place with more land than people, more geography than architecture. (5)	Bien qu'elle ait une histoire de peuplement de soixante mille ans, l'Australie demeure un lieu avec plus de terre que de gens, plus de géographie que d'architecture.
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I had originally thought of a long explication for 'a peopled history of sixty thousand years': '*habitée pendant soixante mille ans tout au long de son histoire*' but a (misplaced?) sense of economy made me change it.

Yet the trickiest geography-related word is 'country' without an article, an unknown quantity in French history or culture:

[Aboriginal] culture originated in and deferred to country. Two centuries after this way of living was disrupted forever Australia is still a place where there is more landscape than culture. (16) In my own lifetime Australians have come to use the word 'country' as Aborigines use it, to describe what my great-great-grandparents would surely have called territory. A familial, relational term has supplanted one more objectifying and acquisitive. (28)	[...] la culture aborigène avait son origine dans la terre, était renvoyée à la terre. Deux cents ans plus tard, ce mode de vie était bouleversé à jamais. L'Australie reste un lieu où il y a plus de territoire [paysage ?] que de culture. Par exemple, ne serait-ce qu'au cours de ma vie, les Australiens en sont venus à utiliser le mot ' <i>country</i> ' comme le font les Aborigènes, pour décrire ce que mes arrière-arrières-grands-parents auraient sans doute appelé 'territoire'. Un terme familial, relationnel en a supplanté un, fait d'objectification et d'acquisition.
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‘Country’ could perhaps be translated as ‘pays’ in its original Latin sense of ‘pagi’, an administrative area, a district; later on, it came to be used to mean ‘my native village’ and even ‘a person from my native village’, *un pays*. Maybe I could use this, as long as I italicize it: but if I am prepared to attract attention to this word, I might as well keep ‘country’ in my translation and add a footnote or refer to page 28. As Winton is well aware, ‘territoire’ has to be avoided, even though it has in recent years been revitalised by French novelist, Michel Houellebecq.⁶ A geographer defines ‘territory’ thus : ‘*Le territoire est un espace délimité, approprié par un individu ou une communauté, sur lequel s'exerce un pouvoir.*’⁷ [‘a territory is a confined place, appropriated by an individual or a community exercising power over it.’]. Appropriation and power would run counter to the Indigenous symbolic notion of ‘country’ as Winton understands it.

The last ‘geography cum history’ element that presented a translation challenge is a chapter title (again!). ‘Settlers at the edge’ recounts the transformation of Karrinyup from bushland to suburbia, an area cleared in the 60s, a few kilometres from downtown Perth, where Winton spent most of his younger years. ‘*Colons en périphérie*’, ‘*Pionniers en bordure*’ are nonsensical in French. The issue is both lexical and syntactic: ‘at the edge’ of what? ‘Settler’ (*colons, pionniers*) will evoke in a French reader American (or maybe French) imperialism or a sense of adventure. ‘*Envahisseurs marginalisés*’ [marginalised invaders] seems excessively political. The expression here is ironic to describe ‘Aussie battlers’ lured by ideals of modernisation which turns to be destruction of the land.

I’ll conclude with a sentence whose meaning was completely clear to me, but which runs the risk of becoming rather torturous in my target language. It is dense with pictures and sounds, rendering a scene that no French reader could visualise, unless they have been in this type of house and living this type of free and protected childhood:

Lying under the night sky I feel a curious sense of return and restoration, not unlike the way I felt as a kid coming in the back door to the sudsy smell of the laundry and the parental mutter of the tub filling down the hall. (22)	Sous le ciel nocturne, j’ai la curieuse impression d’être chez moi, de m’être ressourcé, un peu comme ce que, gamin, je ressentais en rentrant par derrière pour tomber sur l’odeur savonneuse du linge et le murmure des parents au bout du couloir.
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- *You will need to revisit this.*
- *Yep, don’t worry. This will be my mantra. ‘Revise, revise, and revise again’.*

⁶ Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris, Flammarion : 2010), trans. *The Map and the Territory*. by Gavin Bowd (New York: Knopf : 2012).

⁷ <https://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/glossaire/territoires-territorialisation-territorialite>, accessed 8 September 2025.