

An Act of Rash Bravado
Pam Brown and Jane Zemiro

The Poet

The project of translating my poetry into French began when I was invited to participate in the annual translation festival, *Festival franco-anglais de poésie*, in Paris back in 1993. My initial task was to translate poems by others attending the festival into English and they, French language writers from France, Québec and Algeria, would translate my poems into French. Then we would meet for five days and work together on the translations before their public performance and publication. I am not fully proficient in French and as I began this daunting task I quickly realised I would need expert help with my translations. I asked my French speaking partner Jane Zemiro for assistance and so began our collaboration.

Years later, in 2008, I was invited to attend the *Trois-Rivières Festival de la Poésie* in Québec. Participating poets were required to bring forty of their poems in French. So I went back to a couple of the poems translated by Maghrebian poet Habib Tengour¹ in 1993 and began, with Jane, to translate thirty eight further poems from scratch. Jane took the project on and we worked together to get the poems into shape in French.

Some time after I returned from Québec we decided to rework and improve the initial translations and compile a bilingual collection. The manuscript is called *Alibis* because “alibis” is the same word in both languages and to operate under an alibi means that you no longer identify as “yourself”—a mode similar to having your writing translated. “Alibis” is also the title of one of the poems.

¹ For more on Habib Tengour, see: Tengour, Habib. “Habib Tengour: Maghrebian Surrealism [Essay & Manifesto].” Trans. Pierre Joris. *Poems and Poetics*. Jerome Rothenberg. 20 September 2010. Web. <<http://poemsandpoetics.blogspot.com/2010/09/habib-tengour-maghrebian-surrealism.html>>

During the months of work Jane asked two native-French-speaking friends for assistance. The then-French Language Adviser to Australia, Daniel de Rudder, unravelled a few of the trickier words and, later, the Swiss writer, Marie Gaulis read the entire manuscript and worked with Jane and myself making useful suggestions.

The poems discussed here appeared in the collection *Authentic Local* published by Papertiger Media's imprint Soi3 Modern Poets in 2010.

Pam Brown



Marie Gaulis & Jane Zemiro Translating for 'Alibis'

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“And yet, although it may be universally human, the inescapable truth is that poetry can seem completely localized, thoroughly contextualized, and absolutely inseparable from the language in which it is written in ways that prose is not.

The textures of a language, its musicality, its own specific tradition of forms and meters and imagery, the intrinsic modalities and characteristic linguistic structures that make it possible to express certain concepts, emotions, and responses in a specific manner but not in another - all of these inhere so profoundly in a poem that its translation into another language appears to be an act of rash bravado verging on the foolhardy.”

EDITH GROSSMAN, *Why Translation Matters*, 2010.

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The Translator

My act of rash bravado verging on the foolhardy was to translate a set of poems from my mother tongue (English) into French, a language with which I am familiar. Translators usually translate from the “foreign” language into their own. But Pam Brown was to present some of her poems at a poetry festival in Québec, and this bilingual country requires all work to be in both French and English. These are two of the poems from those translated, along with some of the discussion points.

Cubists in suburbia

Monday’s twilight dimming
 on the last few brown leaves
 of dreary autumn,
thin branches jut
 like grissini
from camouflage-patterned trunks,
 it’s the plane tree the tree
 the Cubists loved the most,
the light, green grey,
 they loved that too.

Issues which arise in translation are usually those of structure (grammar), language (vocabulary) and connotation (meaning). The first in this poem was a structural one. The opening line uses a present participle, “dimming”. My instinct in putting this into French was initially to use a verb in order to give strength to the opening line, preferring *s'assombrit* to *s'assombrissant*. But the sound of the participle better suits the poem.

The English use of three adjectives in front of a noun— “last few brown leaves”—cannot happen in French, as an adjective of colour must come after the noun. Again, all dictionary versions of “last few” seem to omit the notion of “few”, as though *dernières* also conveys that notion, e.g. the first few, the last few = *les premiers, les derniers*. So, in French, the omission of “few” may seem to weaken the line.

The image of thin branches which “jut like grissini” is quite powerful in English. The French literal translations for “to jut” refer only to a cape or promontory, a balcony, or a

mountain. Only one of these is appropriate to the poetic idea of “jutting out” in relation to twigs. If the verb *s'avancer* is used with a following present participle

de frêles branches s'avancent ... (en) saillissant des troncs d'arbre

the statement seems more powerful, although there is a point of grammar to consider. Is it correct to omit the *en* in front of the present participle in order to make the initial word in the line stronger? There is another French expression for “jut” which may better reflect the English image, *saillant(e)*, a word existing only in an adjectival form so the force of the verb would be lost:

*de frêles branches saillantes
tels des grissini
des troncs d'arbre*

The translator is left to muse over which version best presents the same direct images as the English text. The decision to use *s'avancent...saillissant* alters the line's length. To change the linebreak reinforces the original style and blurs the differentiation of translator and poet:

*saillissant des troncs d'arbre
en motifs de camouflage,*

Style is often a problem. My instinct was to put the Italian word “grissini” (breadsticks) in italics. But the poet hasn't done that. What should the translator do here?

I read a comment by Kit Kelen in a recent article in *Southerly* magazine (No.1, 2011) on a translation of this poem from English to Chinese: “Can the translator convey to the Chinese reader the idea of cubists and the idea of suburbia, as the Australian mind might connect these?” (The linking of these two notions does indeed present an intercultural dilemma for the translator. For the word “Cubists” my initial reaction had been to insert *peintres* (artists, painters) in order to be sure the reader understood the concept. In review, this was taken out as part of an assumption that they would either know this word or research it.

In French, the word “suburb” is either *faubourg* (inner suburb) or *banlieue* (outer suburb) with distinctions similar to those of inner city and outer suburb, although the characteristics and issues of the *banlieue* in France are different from those of Australia. There is no word in French for “suburbia” but it's probable that the title (*Du cubisme en pleine banlieue*) will convey the irony of the English.

And, finally, a query over the translation of “that”, which in standard French is *cela*, although the pared-down simplicity of the poem’s style seems to ask for the more informal *ça*. “First capture the intention, tone, artfulness of the original” said Edith Grossman. Not an easy task, particularly in poetry.

Du cubisme en pleine banlieue

le crépuscule de lundi s’assombrissant
sur les dernières feuilles brunes
de l’automne morne,
de frêles branches s’avancent
tels des *grissini*
saillissant des troncs d’arbre
en motifs de camouflage,
c’est le platane l’arbre
cher aux cubistes,
la lumière, grise et verte,
cela aussi ils ont aimé.

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Indian summer

a koel calls
two a.m., the
traveller’s clock
ticks two ten

the sodium glow
of the city

a trickle of tadpoles
in the fake creek
below a concrete
mont blanc
at the outdoor

model railway display

free home devilry,
a seagull
and a crow
in fitzroy

big and clumsy,
brush-tailed possums
on the roof
at daybreak

can't fathom
the deep sky,
we've forgotten
how to find
the southern cross

In the second poem, the title *Été indien* may also be translated in French as *L'été de la Saint-Martin* but it would evoke specific French connotations not present in the idea of the English title, so, for once, the literal translation works better.

The first four lines present several interesting issues. Firstly, the localised imagery—the koel's provenance has to be given as a footnote (a migratory bird from South-east Asia coming to Australia in spring to breed). This will still not convey to the non-Australian reader the particular insistent tone of this bird calling at odd hours of the night. This is why to say *un koel chante* ("a koel sings") would not be a true rendition. The first two ideas have been translated indirectly, that is, not using an active verb in either case, in an attempt to represent the way different sounds and times "appear" to the person listening, to give a "floating" effect. In fact, this is how most of the poem is constructed.

The next stanza requires the reader's imagination to work quite hard to process the set of apparently non-related images. The word "creek" has a different connotation in Australia from *crique* in France, where it is a stream flowing to the sea coast (and a tidal inlet in Scotland or North America). The idea of "fake creek" is even harder to convey. The adjective *artificielle* covers the idea of "not real", but lacks the harshness of "fake". The "trickle of tadpoles" reinforces the image of a dry creek in the bush, and although *un filet de têtards* is literally accurate, it's not sure that the image in French is the same.

The phrase *mont blanc en béton* presents no cultural differences at all, in that the image of Mont Blanc is an iconic one, and the building material concrete is common to most countries. It is a semantic problem in both languages because it describes a concrete model of the mountain.

The line “free home devilry” also needed a footnote in French to explain it. I consulted various French speakers on whether to translate the real meaning or the apparent meaning, and of course, it is the latter that stays true to the joke.

Who can be sure that the French reader understands the anomalous association of images of seagulls and crows in cool and groovy Fitzroy? Another footnote? Why not use the shorthand of images at times as part of translation?

Again, for a French reader, the word *opossum* would create an image of a furry, ringtailed creature, whereas for Australians the linking of roof, possum and dawn has a thumping reality.

The first line of the last stanza has no subject before the verb. The pronoun “we” is used two lines later, but I felt that this was not exactly the subject. Why is this important? You can leave out the subject in English but in French, there is agreement between subject and verb, so whatever verb is used will “give it away”, as it were. So a parallel subject (in French) to “we” (*nous = on*) was used, in an endeavour to keep the range of the observations as universal as possible. (The pronoun *on* in French is often not as formal as “one” is in English).

The meaning for most Australians of “Southern Cross” would require a longish explanation, a mere footnote would hardly cover the issues. The stellar constellation, “Southern Cross”, is the motif used on the 1854 Eureka Stockade flag that has become the symbol for the movement for a republic in Australia. So unless the French reader does some personal investigation, the final irony of the poem may well be lost. An attentive reader, however, will make a link between *lire le ciel profond* (read / interpret the deep sky) and *retrouver* (rediscover). The translator can only do so much of the work!

Été indien

l'appel d'un koel
deux heures du matin
au tic-toc du réveil de voyage
deux heures dix

la lueur de sodium
de la ville

un filet de têtards
dans la crique artificielle
au-dessous d'un mont blanc
en béton
à l'exposition en plein air
de chemins de fer
en miniature

malices gratuites à domicile
une mouette
et une corneille
à fitzroy

énormes et maladroits
opossums
sur le toit à l'aube

on n'arrive plus
à lire le ciel profond,
on a oublié
comment retrouver
la croix du sud

NOTES

koel: oiseau du sud-est d'Asie qui migre en Australie au printemps

free home devilry: "free home delivery" (*plat à emporter livré à domicile sans frais*)

Cette phrase publicitaire a été mal écrite par les vendeurs des plats à emporter

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“Bring over a poem’s ideas and images, and you will lose its manner: imitate prosodic effects, and you sacrifice its matter. Get the letter and you miss the spirit, which is everything in poetry; or get the spirit and you miss the letter, which is everything in poetry.”

JOHN FELSTINER, *Translating Neruda: the Way to Macchu Picchu*, 2003.

Jane Zemirow, Sydney, 2012.

Works Cited

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