

Translating *Witchbroom*

As we all know, translating is fundamentally impossible *and* absolutely necessary. Plays, poems, novels are constantly being translated. While translations will never be entirely 'faithful' to the original texts, whatever this means, most of the time they capture enough of the original texts to make them live again in other languages.

I read and loved and taught Lawrence Scott's first novel long before I thought of translating it. Then I used extracts for a literary translation class, and one of my students, Karin Jadoul, translated the beginning of the novel as part of her MA dissertation. So I am grateful to Karin as well. The first of the two epilogues 'Jouvert' had been translated by Patrick Watkins et Francisco Bensignor, and published with colour photos in the glossy and expensive magazine *Revue noire* 9; but their translation was more of a foil than a help, or a help in that it could be used as a foil.

Translating is all the more difficult if we think of Caribbean English literature into French, partly because of the radically different attitudes to language in the two linguistic spheres. English is not normative, so syntactically deviant forms are quite acceptable, which makes for a smooth continuum. Not so in French. Capturing the local touch and colloquiality of spoken language without either making characters sound grossly uneducated or losing readers with no knowledge of French *Créole* is a recurring source of perplexity. The question already arises in the first paragraph, when Antoinetta tells the narrator: 'So you come back? Well, I still here. You find me where you leave me, keeping your mother house, Madam house.' No verb, no Saxon genitive, and yet a perfectly acceptable utterance. It would have been impossible to write in French pidgin 'moi toujours ici', for instance. Eventually I wrote, « Saison des pluies, tu reviens saison des pluies. Alors tu reviens ? Moi je suis toujours ici, oui. Tu me trouves où tu me laisses, à m'occuper de la maison de ta mère, la maison de Madame. » I dropped the preposition and article in the first sentence, and as often, added the emphatic 'oui'.

Here is a passage in the 'Overture' which can be a good introduction to how the novel works.

I chose Lavren, or did he choose me, did she choose me, or did we choose each other, or was he or she chosen for me out of the bric-a-brac of history? Maybe you can tell. Maybe you can decipher, divine whether it is tragic schizophrenia or miraculous coupling or something else I tell you here, at times confusing and fusing my pronouns. I allowed Lavren his fragments of tale, his fugues, his first tales. I allowed him his way of telling the story. Lavren tells these tales with the help of his beloved Marie Elena, his mother and muse, and with the help of black Josephine: cook, housekeeper, servant, nanny, nurse, doer of all tasks, comforter in the darkness and in the hot stillness of noon. She it is who speaks first.

'Cric,' she says, teaching Lavren to tell stories. Not once upon a time, in the olden days, in a fine castle, but like an African story-teller telling anancy stories, she invites him to listen and to respond. 'Cric,' she says.

'Crac,' he replies, eager for her story. ('An Overture', P 2-3 / H 2)

J'ai choisi Lavren, ou m'a-t-il choisi, ou m'a-t-elle choisi, ou nous sommes-nous choisis, ou fut-il / elle choisi(e) pour moi dans le bric-à-brac de l'histoire ? Peut-être le savez-vous. Peut-être pouvez-vous déchiffrer, pressentir si je vous parle ici d'une

tragique schizophrénie, d'un jumelage miraculeux ou *d'autre chose*, confondant et fondant ça et là mes pronoms. J'ai laissé libre cours à Lavren pour ses fragments de contes, ses fugues, ses premiers contes. J'ai laissé libre cours à sa manière de raconter l'histoire. Lavren raconte ces contes avec l'aide de sa bien-aimée Marie Elena, sa mère et muse, et avec l'aide de Joséphine, la négresse : cuisinière, gouvernante, servante, nounou, nurse, bonne à tout faire, réconfort dans l'obscurité et dans l'inertie lourde de la mi-journée. C'est elle qui parle la première.

'Cric', dit-elle, enseignant à Lavren comment raconter une histoire. *Pas Il était une fois, il y a bien longtemps, dans un beau palais*, mais comme un conteur africain racontant les histoires d'Anansi l'Araignée espiègle, elle l'invite à écouter et à répondre. 'Cric', dit-elle.

'Crac', répond-il, impatient d'entendre son histoire. ('Ouverture', *Balai de sorcière*, 8-9)

The two narrators (first person and Lavren, with her/his identity as a hermaphrodite) delve into history through (tall) tales inspired by both Marie Elena the mother muse and black Josephine, who nursed him and told him the ancient art of African story-telling. As it happens 'confusing and fusing' can be reproduced in 'confondant et fondant' (even though in this case 'fusionnant' might have been more accurate... though less effective). 'Cric crac' as a formula for opening a tale and for checking on listeners' attention is the same in French and in English. Similarly, 'Ananci', the name of the wily hero of African tales, as it is an African word, is the same in the two languages, but as it might not be as familiar to French readers, I 'incremented' an explanation 'l'Araignée espiègle'. Another stumbling block was the translation of 'black Joséphine'; obviously neither 'Joséphine noire' nor 'la noire Joséphine' would work, but then as it happens, in this kind of creolizing context, 'nègre' and 'négresse' can be used without any insulting sting, it is indeed quite common in French Caribbean literature.

We find a similar level of meta-fiction in the following extract (from the second epilogue entitled 'Postscript').

There is the putting-down of all this. There is the continual alchemy which the imagination works, and I knew that no words here would have been possible without the poetry, prose, history, painting, sculpture, the mobility of mas, the invention of pan, calypso and the spoken voice which had come out of the yard of this archipelago, and which had invaded my ears, sitting on the sill of the Demerara window.

And – but – there was friendship, which allowed me to come down off the sill and walk hand in hand. 'Partner, how you?' ('Postscript', P 303 / H 270)

Il y a le récit de tout cela. L'alchimie toujours répétée que produit l'imagination, et je savais qu'aucune de mes phrases n'aurait été possible sans la poésie, la prose, l'histoire, la peinture, la sculpture, la mobilité de la mascarade, l'invention des steel bands, le calypso et les voix qui montaient des cours de cet archipel et m'avaient envahi les oreilles alors que j'étais assis sur l'appui de la fenêtre à guillotine.

Et – mais – il y avait l'amitié qui m'avait permis de descendre de l'appui de fenêtre et d'aller défiler main dans la main. 'Quelle nouvelle, mon compère?' ('Postscriptum', p. 344)

Here I came upon two minor obstacles, namely the pervasive word 'pan' and the greeting 'How you, pardner?' 'Pan', as in 'pots and pans', is essential to the Trinidadian steel bands, but if kept on its own it cannot be understood by a French-speaking reader, so I changed it into 'steel bands'. In the other epilogue, however, while I translated 'pan' with 'bidon', which is what those 'pans' often are, when the description of the music turns into onomatopoeia producing the music, I had to retrieve the English word 'pan', so I added 'poêle' as a clue.

The city, Belle d'Antilles, the last bead in this Caribbean archipelagic rosary, trembled under the moon and stars of the dawn, with the north star still over Laventville hilltop shrine in the sky, with the moon over the continent of Bolivar, sipping on the waters of the Gulf of Sadness. The comet that had once heralded the witchbroom blazed through the sky. The city trembled to every tinkle of every bottle and spoon in the whole of Kairi, as each and every tamboo-bamboo band from down the centuries came out to play, and Makandal himself descended on stilts from Mount Hololo as Moco Jumbie, Majesty of the Niger. In every backyard under a governor-plum tree each dustbin cover, each piece of iron, played its part in the forge of fire that fashioned out of all this pain, all this passage over all them sea, entangled with sargasso weed, the pure and silver beauty of the slung-round-the-neck pan, tenor pan, pan, ping p'ding, pingpong pan, woman on the bass pan, until the whole beautiful city, Belle d'Antilles, rocked and jammed like a gigantic Hosay from out St James, coming down Western Main Road to meet up with Invaders steel band Tragarete Road, with pan and tassa in unison, together with the oldtime tamboo-bamboo. Jour Ouvert! ('Jouvert' P 298-9 / H 265)

La ville, Belle d'Antilles, le dernier grain du chapelet archipel des Caraïbes, vibrait sous la lune et les étoiles de l'aube, l'étoile polaire encore dans le ciel au-dessus du sanctuaire en haut de Laventville, la lune par-dessus le continent de Bolivar, lapant les eaux du Golfe de la Tristesse. La comète qui avait jadis annoncé le balai de sorcière flamboyait dans le ciel. La ville vibrait à chaque tintement de cuiller sur chaque bouteille par tout Kairi, tandis que tous les groupes de tambours-bambous depuis le fonds des âges sortaient pour jouer et que Makandal lui-même descendait sur ses échasses du Mont Hololo en Mokozi, Roi du Niger. Dans chaque arrière-cour sous un prunier-gouverneur chaque couvercle de poubelle, chaque morceau de métal jouait son rôle dans la forge de feu qui façonnait à partir de toute cette douleur, de tous ces passages par-delà la grande eau, paralysés dans les sargasses, la beauté pure et argentée du bidon en bandoulière, du bidon ténor, poêle ou pan, pan ping p'ding, pan pingpong, femme au baril basse, jusqu'à ce que toute cette ville splendide, Belle d'Antilles, danse et se balance comme un gigantesque Hosay sorti de St James, descendant Western Main Road pour rencontrer le steelband des Invaders sur Tragarete Road, pan et tassa à l'unisson, rejoints par les bons vieux tambours-bambous. Jour Ouvert! ('J'Ouvert', p. 338)

Lawrence's use of geographical terms deserves some comments. He calls the Gulf of Paria the 'Gulf of Sadness'; this echoes the name it was given in Spanish in the 18th century, but is explained in the novel through the many tears shed by young Elena when abducted by Georges Philippe de Lanjou. The island is given its Amerindian name of Kairi (island, or island of the hummingbird). The South American continent is consistently called 'the continent of Bolivar'. And the hill called Laventille

because of the gentle wind that blows there is renamed Laventville, playing on Lavanville, the city's suburbs.

Trinidad's Carnival is obviously central in the novel (Lavren's tales are 'Carnival tales'), and particularly in this short chapter called 'Jouvert'. Makandal, the legendary Haitian slave leader becomes or is fused with Moko Jumbie, the stilt dancer who represents the spirit of Africa; the 'tamboo-bamboo' recalls the time when white planters prohibited drums and bamboos were used instead; the Invaders is a large-large steel-band, with all sorts of drums, from the small pans to the huge empty oil drums. 'Tassa' is a word of Persian origin and refers to a drum ensemble, though here the tassa drums are probably large. 'Hosay' is the name of the main Indian Muslim festival, oddly celebrating in great Carnival rejoicing the murder of Imam Hosein or Husayn, the Prophet's grandson. The word 'ville' is used differently from 'town' in English: lots of places that are called 'towns' would be mere villages in French, and a 'cité' is not necessarily more extensive; the word is used either in reference to hot neighbourhoods in the periphery of Paris or in certain collocations such as 'la Cité ardente' for my home town of Liège, while Paris is called 'la ville lumière'. The rosary became 'chapelet', partly because of the play of sounds 'chapelet' / 'archipel'.

The great moment in this passage, which I see as indeed a key to the whole novel, is the long sentence that performs in its sinuous syntax the magic transmutation of pain into beauty, of the chains of slavery into the exhilaration of dancing.

It is often stressed how hard and arduous the translating process was; in my case, the opposite is true. I have enjoyed every minute of it, also because I felt that this was very much a team work. So I wish to thank several people who have been involved: Lawrence himself, Mylène Wagram, an actress friend from Martinique who I turn to for *créole* phrases, Elizabeth Walcott, for initiating contact with Eric Maîtrejean, and not least Eric Maîtrejean, whose suggestions have all been spot on; Virginie Turcotte, Rodney St Eloi et the whole team at Mémoire d'encrier; and finally my mother, posthumously, for her support and critical listening.

Drafts of my translation are now part of the [Witchbroom archives](#) at The Alma Jordan Library, University of the West Indies, St Augustine (Trinidad). The translation ([Balai de sorcière](#)) came out in Canada in October 2020 and will be available in Europe in February 2021.