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Special Session on Literary Translation and the Undergraduate Curriculum
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Baudelaire's "Le Balcon" Opens the General Literature Classroom to Translation Studies"

(Let me say at the outset that I am using "Le Balcon" because it is one of my favorite Baudelaire poems. I advance that my comments will not only fit any Baudelaire poem but will apply to any literary work not written in English taught in an undergraduate classroom. But let's indulge ourselves with Baudelaire.[1])

Let me state also my conclusion at the outset: I believe that the use of multiple translations (at least two) and/or translating not only encourages, but enforces, entering into the literary work. That intimacy, I contend, will show undergraduates that literature is worth loving.

Now, on to Baudelaire as a test case. If we may consider as givens that Baudelaire's aspirations and frustrations are sufficiently relevant to make his work appropriate for courses which introduce undergraduates to major authors and literary traditions, then we may well find our own pedagogical aspirations frustrated by the translation phenomenon. Our own Baudelaire is probably in among synapses in our own brain. That is, as native English speakers, we first read a poem in a non-English language that we read fluently. As we do, we add possibilities from our own rhetorical and socio-psychological repertories. We do not, or do not primarily, translate. Indeed, if we are asked by someone to translate, we cannot find precise equivalents, but must continually adumbrate and explain.

Nor shall we, I predict, find "our" Baudelaire in any of the innumerable English translations available. We probably never find "our" Emily Dickinson or "our" W. B. Yeats either, but with English-language literature in a class composed almost entirely of English-speakers we recognize such a situation as a trigger for group discussion.

It simply seems more daunting when an author did not write in English, when even bilingual editions may not approach "our" Baudelaire.

We need not worry. Our students go to Google anyway, where they can even have the necrophiliac experience of watching Baudelaire recite "Le Balcon." For this particular poem Ken Knabb's site "Bureau of Public Secrets" reproduces 22 English balconies. He includes four prose versions[2] and 18 verse adaptations.[3] Among his omissions is the facing-page anthology by Baudelaire's biographer Joanna Richardson.[4] In my multi-ethnic student population I would encourage students whose native language is neither French nor English to look for translations into their own native language--or try doing a translation themselves.

Now we may turn to "Le Balcon" to see what the techniques of translation studies insert into the literary analysis or, put another way, how the insertion of translation studies enriches the discussion. First of all, the existence of several poems, i.e., translations by writers who presumably knew French almost natively shows line by line, stanza by stanza, as many interliminal conduits as there were writers. By "interliminal" I mean the mental space of phonetic and semantic resonance between Baudelaire's text and the translator's.[5] It is specific to each reader. Furthermore, in fairness to the translator(s) we must bear in mind that she or he, in committing her or his translation to words, may well have--and most likely did--limit the possibilities that occurred to her or him when reading the poem.

My own reading is unabashedly Proustian, following Claude Pichois, the Gallimard editor, beyond

what he hints and perhaps enclosing the poem in a narrative of my own fictionalizing.[6] Perhaps this is a female, if not a feminist, fictionalizing, for I find in Joanna Richardson's and Rosemary Lloyd's translations, lexical hints of my own reading, which extrapolates from Baudelaire's relationship with his mother as depicted in Richardson's biography and in a recent essay by Lloyd.[7] All 23 translators know that they are dealing with memory. Knabb's introductory paragraph in his website promotes an interpretation in which "mistress" overrides "mother." Knabb tells the internet audience that this poem was addressed to Baudelaire's mistress Jeanne Duval. From there one goes to a Freudian -- but still Proustian, for that matter -- analysis of a poet seeking a mother in a woman of his own generation. As for me as a reader, I choose to read the mistress allusions as somewhat transparent overlays of imaginary memories of his mother. That is, I would contend -- but with a class I would background my own reading -- that with neither Jeanne Duval nor Carolyn Aupick do we, I believe, read convincing memories of actual or nearly actual, even if romanticized, experiences.

Pichois believes, on the contrary,-- and contrary to Proust -- that Baudelaire is privileging voluntary memory (37). If so, I would doubt that the sessions of togetherness on the balcony in autumn were habitual. At most, they happened once or twice and represent rituals that Baudelaire could have remembered if his mother had not remarried. He relives these memories by giving them a textual reality, because they were absent both in the time of the poem and in real time of his life. What he recalls so hauntingly are memories of a fantasy life.

You have noticed that I have focussed on semantic resonances, i.e., the child in a mother's lap, the child leaning against her breast, the child feeling her breath, the child extrapolating a prenatal past between her knees. None of these can be re-born -- or could have happened -- because interdicted. But he has been washed in the depths of a maternal deep, i.e., the homonym "mers profondes." But in this imaginary parenthesis in time the two of them were protected by the night which put a wall around the balcony and provided a moral suspension of incest.

The phonetic resonances are more difficult to share, because more personal to begin with, and usually obliterated by the translator's choices. Few English-language poets of Baudelaire's generation or later would use alexandrines anyway. Nor would they attempt six stanzas of quintaines where masculine and feminine rhymes are so intricately patterned.[8] Longfellow, whom he admired and translated, used hexameters in *Evangeline* and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. Longfellow was a consummate wordsmith, but did not favor the hexameter; nor did Poe, another writer whom Baudelaire translated.

The complicated form brings to mind Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), who tried various *rhétoriqueur* forms and was inclined to effective repetitions and rhymed stanza enclosures. To prepare for this panel I indulged myself by translating "Luke Havergal" (1897) into French. While this experiment illustrated both the intimacy achieved by translating and the extent to which translating can expand the translator's repertory of trivia, I have relegated this tangent to a footnote and to some doctoral student looking for a topic in prosody.[9]

To return now to the conclusion announced at the beginning: the use of multiple translations (at least two) and/or translating not only encourages, but enforces, entering into the literary work. That intimacy, I contend, will show undergraduates that literature is worth loving, treasuring, and committing to memory.

NOTES

1. All my Baudelaire references are to Claude Pichois, ed. *Baudelaire. Oeuvres complètes*, I (Paris: Gallimard,1971), 36-37;898-899.

2. These are Elaine Marks (1962), Francis Scarfe (1961, 1986), Keith Waldrop (2006).
3. These are by Arthur Symons (1900-1920), Frank Pearce Sturm (1906), Lewis Piaget Shanks (1931), George Dillon (1936), Roy Campbell (1952), William Aggeler (1954), Jacques LeClercq (1958), Wallace Fowlie (1963), Richard L. Tierney (1981), Richard Howard (1982), William H. Crosby (1991), James McGowan (1993), Cat Nilan (1999), Clive Scott (2000), Peter Low (2001), Rosemary Lloyd (2002), A.S. Kline (2004), Ira Lightman (2007).
4. *Selected Poems* (Middesex: Penguin, 1975, 1980); *Baudelaire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).
5. See my *Translation and Literary Criticism* (Manchester, UK: 1997).
6. Pichois (898) points out the common phraseology in a letter 18-year-old Baudelaire wrote to his mother and one he wrote to her about Jeanne 18 years later.
7. For Richardson, see note 4; for Lloyd, see *Mundus Mulierbris*: Baudelaire's world of Women," *From Goethe to Gide. Feminism, Aesthetics, and the French and German Literary Canon 1770-1936* (University of Exeter, 2005), 97-112, esp. 106-108.
8. stanza 1: A fem,B masc, A, B, A; stanza 2: A masc,B fem, A,B,A; stanza 3: A fem, B masc, A, B, A; stanza 4: A masc, B fem, A, B, A; stanza 5: A fem, B masc, A, B, A; stanza 6: A masc, B fem, A, B, A; stanza 6: A masc, B fem, A, B, A. The first and last lines of the first five stanzas are identical; the sixth stanza, nearly so..
9. "Luke Havergal" is a memory poem. *The Tilbury Town* narrator (perhaps Havergal himself) is addressing Havergal:

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall,
Go, for the winds are tearing them away,--
Nor think to riddle the deads words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call.
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal--
Luke Havergal.

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Là-bas la porte de l'ouest, Luke Havergal,
Là-bas où le lierre pourpre grimpe,
Vite! Le vent arrache les feuilles!--
N'écoute plus leurs funestes murmures
Ni laisse plus leur touche effleurer ta peau,
Mais là-bas pour entendre son appel
Là-bas la porte de l'ouest, Luke Havergal--
Luke Havergal.

Ne regarde plus l'est.
Que l'aube ne trouve point tes yeux
Mais à l'ouest ténébreux
Où l'ombre atteint l'abîme
Et Dieu s'étiole dans la chute

Des feuilles, où l'Enfer comprend le Paradis
Ne regarde plus l'est.

Du tombeau je monte te le dire
Du tombeau je monte pour éteindre
La flamme sur ton front,
Le feu obscure ta voie.
Oui, tu peux la voir
Mais en dehors de la foi.
Du tombeau je monte te le dire.

Là-bas la porte de l'ouest, Luke Havergal
Là où le lierre pourpre grimpe,
Au crépuscule, attends.
Les feuilles, bruissées, murmurent
Et tombant, effeurent ta peau.
Mais écoute. Elle t'appellera
A la porte de l'ouest, Luke Havergal,
Luke Havergal.

It is not known whether Robinson was a Baudelaire devotee, although we can be sure he would be familiar with him. Joyce Kilmer in a 1912 review links Robinson and Baudelaire: A Classic Poet: Edwin Arlington Robinson--An essay in Appreciation." Further, it is alleged that President Theodore Roosevelt liked "Luke Havergal" but did not claim to understand it. I would say that working with this translation got me into Robinson's atmosphere and back to his mood and from there back to the recognition that only in death fantasies would "she" (quite possibly a person in Robinson's life) ever call him. But unlike Baudelaire, who alters his past, Robinson looks to a future communication with the dead..