

Translating the Poems of Louis Brauquier

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Translating the poems of Louis Brauquier

Two years before his death, on a copy of *la Nouvelle Revue française* (September 1974) which had published a group of his poems, Louis Brauquier wrote :

À Catherine (Kate) Duncan
à mon aimable traductrice
qui ne me trahit que le moins possible
très affectueusement, Louis Brauquier.

Louis was well aware of the amorous treason inevitable in translating poetry. He spoke and wrote several languages, including his native Provençale, and his fluency in English had been acquired during a career spent outside France as agent for the Messageries maritimes. Polished and enriched by postings to Australia, Egypt, Ceylon, and the six years under Japanese occupation in Shanghai, his vocabulary surpassed most dictionaries by the number of technical and shipping terms learnt from traders along the African coast, or under the godowns of Saigon, Noumea and Madagascar.

I met him first in Sydney in 1956, not knowing then that the « Agent général responsable » for the whole Australian-Oceanic zone covered by the Messageries maritimes was also a poet, with a number of publications to his credit. I did remark however, that Monsieur Brauquier had succeeded in penetrating both the mysteries of our Australian slang and the practice of our deadpan humour, achievements so rare they could only distinguish an exceptional Frenchman. At moments of stress his favourite expletive was a direct translation from Australian : « Que Dieu lapide les bloody corbeaux ! » Who else but a poet could have caught the tone with such verve ? Sixteen years later therefore, meeting again under the cupola of the Académie française when it awarded him the Grand Prix de poésie for 1971, Louis Brauquier's future translator had no illusions about her chances of pulling linguistic wool over his eyes.

The poems Louis brought back from his voyages and published under the titles : *le Bar d'escale* (1924), *Eau douce pour navires* (1930), *le Pilote* (1934), *Liberté des mers* (1941) and *Écrits à Shanghai* (1947) are still unknown to English readers. This is particularly regrettable in the case of a poet who can evoke the sea and the atmosphere of ports with such sensuous nostalgia. His

poems have a taste of whiskey drunk on wide verandahs, the aroma of copra and pipe tobacco.

But in 1970, when Gallimard published *Feu d'épaves*, Louis had dropped anchor for the last time in his home port Marseille, the « Desirada » of his dreams. There, as a young man « the most tempted by love of ships and the form of the world », he addressed his friends assembled in *le Bar d'escale*.

Mes amis rassemblés qu'un même amour dépasse,
C'est pour vous que je pars.
Je vous offre déjà l'ardeur de mon absence
Qui sera votre part.

My friends assembled that a same love leaves behind,
It is for you I depart.
Already I offer you the ardour of my absence
which will be your part.

This theme of attachment and departure continued to beat, intimate and discreet, as the poetic pulse of his life. Always present, always elsewhere, Louis inhabited a physical space eroded by absence.

L'hiver est un pays où l'atmosphère est douce
A ces yeux qui réfléchirent tant de miroirs
Sur les rades immobiles des ports torrides
Où se plombaient des ciels de typhon étouffants.

Et cet ancien enfant qui rêvait de tropiques,
Autrefois, mangés de lumière, et qui les a
Vécus la moitié d'une vie, quand maintenant
Il veut les retrouver, intacts, dans sa mémoire,
Il se tourne vers l'ombre et ferme les paupières.

Soleils qui jaillissez où êtes-vous en moi ?

Winter is a country where the atmosphere is kind
To these eyes which once reflected the many mirrors
Of glassy roadsteads in those torrid ports
Where skies of stifling typhoon turn to lead.

And this ancient child who dreamed of the tropics
Long ago, devoured by light, and who has
Lived them half a life-time, now when
He wants to find them in his memory, intact,
He turns toward the shadow and shuts his eyes.

Suns which burst forth where are you in me ?

To celebrate those mythic suns, Louis Brauquier the painter, affirmed a light the poet Louis Brauquier, progressively rejected. In the one, an obsession

The sweetness, the tenderness and the pleasure of bodies.
Powerless over the ineffable, piteous hands.
Pensive hands, impractical hands, fortunate hands.

The poet of St-Mitre was happiest no doubt, as « egoist beside the fire », re-peopling the rooms of the old house with « absences forgotten in a dream of silence ». (« You British people can't re-people walls, but we can : « walls » being taken for « house », the « contenant » for the « contenu ».) Reassuring and familiar presences, Louis greeted the appearance of their English counterparts with joyful recognition :

Phantom of the horse : oui, oui, oui : « iron clattering on the threshold » et peut-être « irons » au pluriel, il y en avait toujours plusieurs. You must have got it straight from the horse's mouth.

Fantôme du cheval qui dormait dans l'étable
Où j'ai fait mon bureau : j'écoute et je l'entends.

Tant de sillons tirés droit dans les terres dures
Où plus tard flotteraient les moissons, tant d'empreintes
De paturons qu'effaçait la herse pudique,
Tant de sueurs mouillées sous le collier de cuir,
De paysages limités par les œillères,
De retours dans le soir, les fers heurtant le seuil,
Les mâchoires broyant le foin, tant de seaux d'eau,
Et de sommeil debout.

Maintenant, quand le feu
De bois crépite là où était la mangeoire,
Je songe aux froides nuits, aux frissons de la peau
Solitaire, aux piètements sur le sol battu.
A cette vie de bête, à ses rêves obscurs.

Phantom of the horse that slept in this stable
Where I have made my study : I listen and I can hear him.

So many furrows straight drawn in the hard earth
Where later harvests would flutter, so many pastern
Marks effaced by the pudic harrow,
So many dripping sweats under the leather collar,
Landscapes limited by blinkers,
Returns at evening, irons clattering on the threshold,
Jaws munching hay, so many buckets of water,
And the standing sleep.

Now, when the wood
Fire crackles in what was once the manger,
I think of cold nights, shivers of solitary
Flesh, stamping of hooves on the earthen floor.
Of this animal life, and its obscure dreaming.

Gradually however, I became aware of a change. Instead of these domestic presences, the phantoms that invested him rose from the hollow of lagoons,

crawling toward the house, « pushing before them the white solitude ». They were the « Souvenirs of Sirens », the « Souls » of men he had once dreamed of being. The « little lost destiny » of « Virginia Dare, first white child born on the old shores of the New World », pleaded to know her end, and he whispered :

Virginia, Virginia, death is a secret.

He knew that complaints were no longer sung, but perhaps his use of the balled form at that moment was an attempt to appease the gentle wandering spirits who called him further and further from the quotidian. Yet the form could not disguise the poet's slow detachment from reality, and it was precisely with *The Ballad of the Fortuna* that I began to experience a gravity in the task of translation, not merely concerned with words.

This long poem about the phantom of an old three-master brought back to life, included a number of technical terms which I did not know either in English or French. Our close collaboration in the past incited me to take the easy way out. Instead of verifying dictionary translations and working through the tissue of the poem to a semi-final version at least, I sent a rough draft to Louis. The following day his voice sizzled over the phone.

« What the hell is this translation ? Don't you know the meaning of « chalumeau » ? How can you possibly break up a ship with a shepherd's blow pipe ? »

His anger would have been justified about any other term except « chalumeau », which I was sure about.

— Have you looked in the dictionary ?

— I don't need to.

— Look it up all the same. Do *me* a favour.

The story of the « chalumeau », which Louis often told, was our last linguistic joke together, and *The Ballad of the Fortuna*, published side by side with its English translation in the *Courrier de la Compagnie générale maritime* shortly after his death, was our last work of real collaboration. I realised that his anger had not been about the word, but the fact that once his phantoms were created and given presence, Louis could no longer bear to have them dissipated in the working-over of English. From then on, before submitting them, my translations had to be seen with the same hallucinating actuality.

The dark coombs of the Luberon spread their phantasms about him, and for a brief moment the fantastic poems, as he called them, rejoined the paintings in a sunset glare.

Têtes vides, empalées sur les remparts rouges.

Longtemps, des villes sont restées mystérieuses
Dans le silence de leurs visiteurs égorgés.

La vie continuait avec son goût de sable,
Et le midan sentait l'urine de chameau.

Empty heads, impaled on the red ramparts.

For a long time cities remained mysterious
In the silence of their slaughtered visitors.

Life continued with its taste of sand,
And the midan smelt of camel's piss.

Even these suns went down, and in poem after poem, obsessive as the yellow of his paintings, the word « obscur » returned. I protested that « obscure » had other connotations in English, creating them unconsciously no doubt, as I tried to block the path of Louis' tenebrous withdrawal. I complained that English preferred the solid concepts of broad daylight, and had fewer means than French to suggest the impalpable. « Rêve » could become « dream », but where would I find a synonym for « songe » appearing two lines later in the same poem? Already from a long way off it seemed, Louis sent me his translation of the line.

Les rêves dorment dans l'épaisseur du sommeil.
Serpents lovés qui se déroulent lentement
Lorsque nous atteignons la profondeur du songe
Et qu'ils perçoivent la chaleur de notre corps.
Alors, ils nous enlacent vers d'autres mondes,
Nous abandonnent nus sur des plages obscures,
Et vont se rendormir aux limbes de la nuit.

Dreams dormant in the depths of sleep.
Coiled serpents slowly unwinding
As we reach their level
And they become aware of our body's warmth,
Then, they enlace us toward other worlds,
Abandon us naked on obscure sands,
And return to sleep in the limbos of the night.

Our meetings still had the deceptive warmth of his presence. But the poems could not deceive me. And « *Then* »... oh, terrible moment for the translator, I could no longer ignore his icy desolation.

Alors les oiseaux froids émigrent vers les îles
Malheureuses, dérivantes sur l'Atlantique
Sous leur suaire de brouillards, dont les navires
Aveugles, traversent la frange à la corne à brume.

Ah! encore une fois entendre ces appels —
Dans l'inquiétude inavouée des basses terres —
Angoissants, angoissés par une longue nuit
Peut-être sans lendemain.

Et le vent de la mer
Qui parle, se répète et n'écoute jamais —
De ses doigts gantés de glace, touchant les harpes
De la tempête, poussait au large le tonnerre
Irresponsable, de grandes paroles émergées.

Then the cold birds emigrate toward the Unfortunate
Isles, drifting on the Atlantic
Under their shroud of mists, the fringe of which the blind
Ships traverse on a sound of fog-horns.

Ah! to hear yet once again those calls —
In the unavowed anxiety of the low lands —
Agonizing, anguished, on a long night
Perhaps with no tomorrow.

And the wind of the sea
That speaks, repeats itself and never listens —
Its fingers gloved with ice, touching the harps
Of the tempest, pushed toward the open sea, the irresponsible
Thunder of lofty words emergent.

The final poems, written in the dark house at Marseille, were wrenched
from me, less as a translation than an original experience.

I wander in the silence of empty rooms,
The unprecedented length of passage, the deserted
Kitchen where I sit.

Why is it so weighted
With the years, and suddenly become
So thick that it envelopes me and I'm afraid?

J'erre dans le silence des chambres vides,
L'insolite longueur du couloir, la cuisine
Déserte où je m'assieds.

Pourquoi est-il si lourd
De toutes ces années, et soudain devient-il
Si épais, qu'il m'enveloppe et que j'ai peur?

His letters became spare, cramping the opulent, translucent hand. There
were few references to the poems they enclosed, leaving me to make my own
translation of the distances to be assumed.

PAROLES MORTES

Ne vous attardez pas. Ce visage immobile
Ce corps froid, cachez-les dans l'ombre du tombeau.

Je suis très loin de vous, où je suis : si je suis.

Distances prises : le mystère révélé
Peut-être.

Mais j'ai tout oublié. Je ne
Vous entend plus, ni ne vous vois.

Un nouveau monde
Jamais imaginé. Nul ne saura, ni moi,
Si je regrette l'autre, ou si je l'ai atteinte
La bienheureuse indifférence des dieux morts.

DEAD WORDS

Do not linger. This immobile face,
This cold body, hide them in the shadow of the grave.
I am so far from you, where I am : if I am.

Distances assumed : the mystery revealed
Perhaps.

But I have forgotten everything. I
No longer hear you, nor do I see you.

A new world
Never imagined. None will know, nor I
If I regret the other, or if I have attained
The blessed indifference of the dead gods.

Was it the « mystery revealed » that he painted in the garden at St-Mitre a fortnight before his death — « the most magical painting I have done in 25 years ? » Luminous as some unimaginable paradise, it beckoned the eye through avenues of trees, while on my desk lay the poem *Novembre*.

Devant le feu, j'attends le soir,
la nuit,
les songes,
Dans cette fin d'après-midi sous le brouillard,
D'où l'Autre sort, parfois,
celle dont les pieds d'os
Hors du suaire, ne touchent pas l'herbe mouillée,
Et que l'on n'entend pas faucher dans la campagne.
Mais les plus lourds portails s'entrouvrent devant elle.

Si je n'ai pas compris ce que voulaient les dieux,
Je n'ai pas épuisé les beautés de ce monde.

Je la suivrai. Sur ce visage de vieil homme
Un air d'innocence jamais perdue.

When I showed him the translation, I pointed out that in English, Death was masculine and always symbolised by a male skeleton. He listened, then crumpled the sheet of paper in his hand.

« No, Kate. For me, she can only be a woman. Forget this poem. Death is untranslatable. »

In his last poem « Peinture » poet and painter merge. Looking at them today, poems and paintings side by side, although they are by the same artist, the tension is unrelaxed between light and dark, « yellow » and « obscure ». Louis Brauquier provided no fixed place for mythic suns to rise, and by an almost imperceptible change of tense, left us to situate the artist in his historical context.

PEINTURE

Je voudrais être un vieux peintre du Quattro Cento :
 Mes élèves, dans un coin, broieraient des couleurs.

Ils les posaient d'autorité sur ma palette,
 Sans même que je les demande. Tellement
 Ils croyaient en savoir plus que moi.

Et pourtant
 Modestes, se laissant rudoyer par ce maître
 Déjà grognon.

Encor que l'un d'eux fut ce Piero
 Della Francesca, l'autre Paolo Ucello
 Et qu'ils surnagent bien dans l'océan des siècles,

Tandis que je suis oublié dans mon vivant.

PAINTING

I would like to be an old painter of the Quattro Cento :
 My pupils, in a corner, would grind the colours

Which they placed unauthorised on my palette
 Even without my asking. So convinced
 They were of knowing more than I.

And yet
 Modest, letting themselves be bullied by a master
 Already tetchy.

Although one of them was Piero
 Della Francesca, the other Paolo Ucello
 And they loom large on the ocean of the centuries,

Whereas I am forgotten in my lifetime.

It is the only translation I made of his poems that Louis did not have time to criticise or approve. I left it among the « pale saladelle » he always gathered for winter, and which we heaped on his grave in the cemetery of St-Mitre. To be blown away by the Mistral, or washed out by the first rains. Symbolic rather than sentimental gesture. Death is also a translator, and if it betrays the original, it allows us to understand how essential is the part of death to the creative act. In the ardour of the poet's absence, we are left the poems of Louis Brauquier, freed from any one interpretation, multiple in meaning, to be re-created by each new reading. By deepening the mystery, Death has changed the connotations of the word « obscure ». To translate them today, I would borrow a line from an English poet, Christopher Fry :

The dark is light enough.

To his life-long friend, the writer and poet Gabriel Audisio, Louis left the task of collecting and publishing his last poems under the title of *Hivernage*. An exhibition of the paintings by Louis Brauquier will be organised by the Musée Cantini of Marseille in 1978.

CATHERINE DUNCAN