H-France Salon
Volume 14, Issue 21, #8

Simple Complexity, Complex Simplicity: on Translating Flora Aurima Devatine

Jean Anderson

What follows is not intended to be a programme or a set of instructions for dealing with written texts imbued with and inflected by orality: rather it is a personal reflection on some of the challenges involved in translating such works, in particular Flora Aurima Devatine's, and an invitation to other translators to share their own encounters with writing that already within its "own" culture, resists the expectations of the language in which it is written, in favour of other models, other traditions. In that sense, these texts are deliberately "foreign" (in the translational sense referred to by theorists such as Berman and Venuti)[1], and that foreignness is such a deep marker of their essence, of their belonging, of their origin and of their resistance, that it cries out to be preserved.

We must first identify that essence. In the case of Aurima Devatine, this may not present itself immediately to the reader-translator, emerging rather in a cumulative fashion, as the original text imposes itself in its patterns, its stresses and its rhythms. The more we read and translate, the clearer these patterns, stresses and rhythms become. Coming from the outside, we need to attempt to encounter them from the inside.

Some of Aurima Devatine's work provides precious clues for dealing with its fundamental (and essentially political) message:

La forme d'écriture ?

De nos jours, c'est

Une écriture ponctuée librement,
Une écriture du souffle à auditionner,
Une écriture rivières rejoignant l'océan, par vague, flux et reflux,
Une écriture répétitive avançant en spirale,
Une écriture enfilée longue aiguillée, longue ligne de fond,
Une écriture tantôt debout, tantôt penchée en avant, en arrière, avec des pleins et des liés, des points de suspension, des espaces, des ronds-points, et des barres, des frontières absentes,
Une écriture laborieuse mais de plus en plus décidée, volontaire, de compétition, de performance, de saut à la perche, de grimper à la corde, de course de pirogue,
Une écriture pirogue à coups de rame,
Une écriture heiva, tambour tariparau qui transporte les mots,

[1] See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995), a historical survey of approaches to translation. The author supports the practices recommended by Antoine Berman (*L'Epreuve de l'étranger*, 1984) according to whom the foreignness of the source text should not only be respected (rather than 'domesticated') by the translator's choices, but may even as a result have an innovative impact on literary uses of the target language more generally.

Une écriture 'ōte'a de tir à l’arc à coups de hanche.

In a long discussion of orality and Tahitian literature, Flora Aurima Devatine lays out this description of what writing is and should be. We should note in particular the ways in which her vision of writing overflows what we might call traditional, European boundaries to draw on alternative sources of inspiration. The last five lines cited above make it clear that writing is a physical and musical activity and not a mere matter of sitting silently in front of a piece of paper or a screen.

While it is not essential (thank goodness) for the translator to engage in these physical activities as part of his or her process, we would do well to bear them in mind. For example, the rhythmic import of the "tambour tariparau" and the dancer's "coup de hanche" can be decisive, as I hope to show here. The concepts of writing that is "ponctuée librement", "à auditionner" and "répétitive avançant en spirale", are key to translating the work on its own terms, with due respect for its differences.

First, though, I would like to do away with a fundamental misunderstanding that seems to haunt Eurocentric discussions of so-called "oral" literature. To my mind, all writing is also oral, in that reading (like writing) is at some level a matter of listening to the voice that arises from the text. Nor should "oral" be equated, as is sometimes the case, with "simple", “everyday”, or "ordinary".

Some years ago, I attended an international conference which gathered together teachers, scholars and researchers of French language and literature from around the globe. In a short presentation, I attempted to discuss the question of oral tradition and written literature: in Western terms, this is often described as a perfectly natural transition undergone by a great many (all?) literatures, although in different eras. Persians, Greeks and Romans, for example, are all understood to have adopted written literary forms long after they were first practised orally.

This notion of the transition as a necessary development marking the passage to a “higher” form of literature is, to my mind, unfounded. In French popular perception, however, there has seemed to be a kind of fascinated fixation on questions pertaining to the possible co-existence of oral forms alongside written ones. I was once present when a French journalist asked Samoan author Albert Wendt how he could write when he belonged to an oral culture. The renowned writer replied that just because his ancestors carved their canoes out of tree trunks was no reason for him not to use fibreglass. The journalist’s question seems to be based on an assumption that the two forms of expression are incompatible and there can be no real connection between the two. In the face of the (supposed) superiority of writing, orality must inevitably, some people seem to be persuaded, die away; or the relationship between them can be no more than a transition from a lower to a higher domain.

At the end of my conference presentation I was asked how I could account for the use of a particular word (I think it was "fulgurance"), clearly of a high register, within a text of which I had been discussing the oral characteristics. My point – which I had evidently failed to make – was that oral texts and written texts influenced by orality are not *a priori* simple texts, that there is nothing basic or (excuse the term) primitive about them, that they may appear strange because they are following their own, in all likelihood highly complex, set of rules. To fail to

recognise this is to deprive ourselves of an opportunity to experience another way of being in the world.

Who wants to read nothing but globalised literature, normalised-for-the-receiving-culture texts? What might we learn from trying to understand "strange" elements on their own terms? Sociologist and educator Carol Archer has referred to phenomena she calls "culture bumps", moments of intercultural unease where the participants become aware of something unexpected or unusual which can, on reflection, be traced back to cultural difference. The realisation of something different in an interaction – essentially an emotional response – is (ideally) followed by what Archer calls a "knowledge dichotomy", a more rational awareness that there is some element of "not knowing".[2] In the case of Indigenous-authored literature, it is all too easy for some, it seems, to dismiss what is unfamiliar, rather than attempt to understand it. Receivers of a text (translators or readers) must acknowledge this strangeness as a deficit on their own part, a gap in their knowledge, not as something missing or misshapen in the work.

My own process of accommodating difference in the translations in this book consisted essentially of opening my mind to several features of the originals, especially those referred to above. Initial discomfort with the punctuation – so many exclamation marks! – gave way to the realisation that they serve in these texts to mark pauses that are stronger than full stops. Cumulatively, they resemble the twitch of the dancer's hip in time with the beat of a drum. We have to hear and see them as more than the convention of a particular kind of mark on a page with an accepted (but totally arbitrary) meaning, i.e. emphasis through finality in their placement in the sentence. In Aurima Devatine’s texts, these marks are a dancer's / musician's emphasis, incorporated into a writer's text.

Other punctuation and line breaks are used in a similar way to the marking of phrasing in music: here they reflect the ins and outs of the breath, and again we need to listen for the voice of the text, "à auditionner". Repetitions, often decried in the French quest for "le bon style", are here evocative of a chant, progressing through the recitation and drawing the listener back and forward at the same time. Together, these formal elements transform the text into a strongly rhythmic and compelling performance. What a reader unfamiliar with traditions of Tahitian oratory might be tempted to dismiss as simple and repetitive is driven by an Indigenous sensibility that needs no excuses for its respect for other models.

Aurima Devatine's work is also marked by another kind of deceptively simple approach. I am thinking here of those moving poems that rely on their unstated depths to draw in the reader. "Le Balancier", for example, takes a metaphor that might be dismissed as obviously drawn from island culture, yet it is a text that lingers in the mind long after first reading, as its full implications unfold. Because of that complexity, and because of the author’s recourse to sophisticated vocabulary as an integral aspect of Tahitian oral tradition and of her love of language generally,[3] I have chosen in my translation to use the relatively unusual word "lest"

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[2] Carol Archer (1991). *Living with Strangers in the U.S.A.: Communicating Beyond Culture*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, *passim*.

[3] It goes without saying that all poets, whatever their background and personal style, are lovers of language. We might think here of Aurima Devatine’s poem entitled “Frêle nitescence” as an example of the deliberate mingling of sophistication and simplicity. (See the discussion of “fulgurance”, above).

in the closing line (which also has the advantage of allowing me to keep closer to the rhythm of the original).

Many other poems grow quietly into their subtexts after first reading: one of the strongest examples of this is "Agréables moments de foire". The deceptively simple account of a day spent at a fair unfolds into a complex image of grandparental love. Intermittent visits to the fair, the purchase of small gifts, the sweetness of the relationship are all evoked in few words, yet somehow the text also evokes the brevity of childhood in the broader scheme of things. There's a kind of intergenerational *memento mori* here: grandparents need to make the most of these special occasions which are sweet precisely because of that awareness that time passes and change is inevitable.

In summary, then, Flora Aurima Devatine is a writer whose work is not only a defence of Indigenous creative practices, but an illustration of the subtle complexity of these. Emphasis and repetition are to be seen, heard, and even felt – the “coups de rame”, the “coups de hanche” – as markers of a difference that refuses to be domesticated in the original, and calls for equal recognition in translation.

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ISSN 2150-4873
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