

From a Table of Green Fields to the Babble of My Memory



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The first time I read a short story by Joe Porter, I thought of Guy Davenport—the precision of each sentence—, then I thought of Ronald Firbank—the choice of words, the syntax, leading the reader to a world fractionally distant from the one we live on. I cannot remember precisely how we got in contact, but it probably was through Toby Olson though I remember very well the first time we met, at the train station in Avignon, Joe coming from the South and I from the North, we pleasantly argued by email about who should be waiting for the other, then we had a beautiful lunch and, that face of his I remember well.

Right from the start, having read all the fiction he had published, I decided to translate him—and it is *bougrement* difficult to get French publishers interested in someone they don't know, someone who hasn't been introduced to them by some literary agent, someone whose books didn't top the best-seller's list in the US, especially when presented by a translator whose choice of authors to translate is not going to redeem the financial status of the publishing industry (good on the list and alms against oblivion, but bad on the wallet). *Touch Wood* was the one I was aiming to translate first, but you know French publishers, short stories don't sell. I tried to convince some

ten of them, and they were interested; though financially hesitant; I eventually managed to convince Joëlle Losfeld, the only willing one among the cutpurse crew, for whom I had already translated a volume by Guy Davenport. Of course, she sighed with relief when Joe published a novel, so it would be *The Near Future*, soon *Le futur proche*, and we would do short stories afterwards. It takes so long! Six years before Joe's colours should be displayed in France! But the translation is out (and it did not become a best-seller over here, thus joining the ranks of Coover, Olson, Sorrentino, Davenport, Goyen, etc.) though it had very good reviews, and now Joe Porter exists in France, and I hope I'll soon be doing *Touch Wood* or *All Aboard*.

Before translating the novel I did something I do sometimes when I have a digital copy of the English text. I did an electronic count of all the words in the text, leading to an alphabetical list of the words and their percentage (this may sound useless and stupid, but it doesn't take more than a couple of hours, and you'd be surprised what you can get during the process, seeing—not reading—a novel as a list of words), you find out, for example, that Vince is there 293 times, Vola 270 times, the next character being Tink with 230, while Lillian, Vince's wife, is only mentioned 168 times (Hemingway 36 times, quite a lot when you know he's not a character of the book): another way of realizing the importance each of them plays in this story. Let's say it is an idiosyncrasy of this translator—a purely objective and mathematical way of looking at a work of art.

Harry Mathews has mentioned the “verbal felicities” of *The Near Future*, the precision with which everything is described, felicities which apply to the United States, very much so, so precise that they tend at times towards a feeling of unreality; and this was one of the greatest difficulty when translating it into a language where this felicity of wording could not properly be transcribed: “skank Formica” (*formica ringard*), “Jar Jif” (*Ouvbocal*), “like a luauer” (*comme une fêtarde aloha*), “extruded sofa” (*canapé extrudé*—no problem here, but I still would like to know what it looks like), “Etosha shows” (*émissions sur les animaux d’Afrique*), “chickees” (*chickees*), “coffee table lemur popup” (*beau livre animé sur les lémurians*), “301k” (*plans de retraite*), “Drug War Mothers” (*Mères en Guerre contre la Drogue*), “space jam” (*planants*), etc. Translating expressions such as these is the common lot of translators, but rarely when they are so far off the

norm (this is a book of mild science fiction) while entirely within the field of the English language.

When translating, somehow the culture of a writer, his interests, what he does everyday, anything that may go into his writing, an enticing bird seen through the window, a headline or an ad in the newspaper, down to his mood when waking up, at the start of the day's writing, the particular mix of mistempred humours, which Shakespeare play Joe Porter was working on at the time: all that is of interest to the translator—so different from what happens to a reader, who is simply interested in a created world for the duration of the book. On the contrary, for months at a time, sometimes for years, the translator tries (and fails, mostly) to see through the eyes of his author, puts on his slippers, reads the books he has been reading, follows on Google Map the paths the author has traipsed, either on foot or on the computer. And this is one of the greatest pleasures of translation, somehow conning oneself one is writing the book, by proxy of course, but still writing it, writing a completely different book, an offshoot maybe of the original, an appendix, a wart, an image in a warped mirror, a blurred copy, a faulty Xerox, a downright shame, still giving more flesh to this author by adding to the list of readers (if not much money to his pocket).

Vicariously living awhile the writing life of Joe Porter is thus a most pleasant task even if one realizes throughout (especially today as I'm comparing both texts) the losses, the mistakes, the lack of smoothness, the paucity of alliterations, the lack of precision; this, of course, because it should not be forgotten that the writer, at every moment, has the whole field of words at his command, that if the sound of one word does not please him, he can change it for another: "irregular gray and damp floorboards", writes Joe one morning, but no, no let's have "grey pine floors", better, "irregular grey pine floors" and then "splotchy with damp and old spills, a flophouse"—slips with grace on the tongue. So now it is pine, and the translator cannot change it, everything, or almost everything, needs a French equivalent: "*un plancher irrégulier en pin gris taché d'humidité et de liquides renversés depuis longtemps, un asile de nuit*", so, Joe's pinging and soft phrasing becomes splotchy in translation, but I could have written: "*un splendide plancher en pin gris humide souillé de taches et de spectres anciens, un flot de poux*", yet, on second thought, no, I couldn't do that, I'd have to sign it Joseph Porteur and I am condemned to plod in French where he sang

in English. As you see, the age-old fight between meaning and music still goes on. Have we any choice if “antimacassar” becomes “têtière”—and yes, my grand-father used brillantine, a kind of grease, to flatten his hair, so that my grand-mother insisted on placing a “têtière” on his armchair. With “macassar” the doors of the Orient open and a whiff of heavy perfumes enters the room, a “têtière” remind one of frogspawn (*têtard*) or of a teapot (*théière*).

Tink has made his way south into an Old Town backwater, down a narrow street of peacefully decaying shotgun cabins behind traveler’s palms with wind-shredded pinnate leaves spread like fans. A gazebo draws his attention to a bungalow engulfed in rose and cerise oleander and hibiscus. “Enter,” says the English line of a plaque that repeats itself in other languages, swinging from the sky-blue tongue-and-groove porch ceiling. Tink complies, and also with the implied “without knocking.”

What is this room, with blue armchairs threadbare under antimacassars, iridescent vases, and irregular gray pine floors splotchy with damp and old spills, a flophouse? A waiting room, while they reset your timing or replace transmission? Except, no tube or Muzak or even a goldfish, only a murmur from the back like rainy voices.

Tink s’est rendu dans un quartier tranquille au sud, il se trouve dans une rue étroite de cabanes en train de se décomposer tranquillement derrière des arbres du voyageur aux feuilles pectinées ouvertes comme des éventails. Un belvédère attire son attention vers une maisonnette engloutie dans les lauriers-roses et les hibiscus cerise. « Entrez », lit-on sur la ligne en anglais d’un panneau qui se répète en plusieurs langues suspendu à la frisette bleu ciel qui forme le plafond du porche. Tink obéit ainsi qu’au « sans frapper » implicite.

Qu’est-ce donc que cette pièce avec ces fauteuils élimés recouverts de têtères, des vases iridescents et un plancher irrégulier en pin gris taché d’humidité et de liquides renversés depuis longtemps, un asile de nuit ? Une salle d’attente, pendant qu’on vous remet à l’heure ou qu’on remplace la transmission ? Sauf que, ni télé, ni musique d’ambiance, ni même de poisson rouge, seulement un murmure venant de l’arrière telles des voix pluvieuses.

How can I compare his summer’s day to my drab and rough winds? I do share the world of my competitor, but I had to cut the cable and let flow my vessel in a different sea. Very rarely is a translator immensely happy and proud of what he has done, he is relieved to

have brought it to an end, sad to leave the world he has lived in for a while, sad also when he realizes he will never again read that book, having extracted the pith—during the course of the translation the leaves have withered, somehow their sap has vanished. And today browsing once more through Joe Porter's book and through my version, I feel melancholy and wish I still had the task in front of me, but there are other books of his to plunge into.