

“Shall two know the same in their knowing?”



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In Canto 93 from *Section: Rock-Drill* Pound quotes Dante's *Convivio*

“quest’ unire
“quale è dentro l’anima
Veggendo di fuori quelli che ama”

and in his *Companion to the Cantos* Carroll F. Terrell translated these lines as “And this union [is what we call love, whereby we can know] what is inside the mind by seeing outside the thing it loves”. The words in brackets are left out by Pound. The next word in the Canto is “Risplende” standing in a line on its own, shining, before the poet emphasises the centrality of presence, “Manifest and not abstract”. I think that when Michael Grant and I decided to embark upon some collaborative translations of poetry from the French originals we firmly held in mind that sense of presence: something made ‘Manifest’.

Our earliest collaborations arose from looking at the poems of Yves Bonnefoy and we published two small volumes of these with Oystercatcher Press run by Peter Hughes, a noted translator of both Petrarch and Cavalcanti. In Bonnefoy's 1976 essay, “The Translation

of Poetry”, he proposed that poetry, “the very thing we cannot grasp or hold”, is the very thing we can translate, because, unlike the fixed nature of the poem itself, the poetry is unfixed. A translation is poetry re-begun and we should try to relive the act that produced the poem. It is as if the translator must aim to renew that impulse to bridge the *dentro* to the *veggendo*. However, whereas a material bridge is passive and inert we felt that our translations must attempt to make a construction of energy with which to convey the active experience of a foreign original text. We also took heed of Bonnefoy’s warning about the unimaginative bondage of the translator who becomes a hostage to words; we did not wish to cripple the experience through bondage to a text. We felt that we had to proceed with caution: the ontological rightness of our newfound images mattered much more than whether they matched term by term, in a skin-deep resemblance, those of the original.

After our versions of Bonnefoy we decided to look at Mallarmé and adopted a similar pattern of working. Michael would write a first draft which was a close approximation to a literal translation and we then used this as our skeleton. In response I would then re-write the poem accompanying changes with a little comment as to why I felt that these changes were appropriate. In a sense this became a little like an act of close textual criticism. We would then meet up and put together a final version for publication. What now follows is the original French sonnet ‘SALUT’ and the two versions that Michael Grant and I put together:

Rien, cette écume, vierge vers
 A ne désigner que la coupe;
 Telle loin se noie une troupe
 De sirènes mainte à l’envers.

Nous naviguons, ô mes divers
 Amis, moi déjà sur la poupe
 Vous l’avant fastueux qui coupe
 Le flot de foudres et d’hivers;

Une ivresse belle m’engage
 Sans craindre même son tangage
 De porter debout ce salut

Solitude, récif, étoile
 A n'importe ce qui valut
 Le blanc souci de notre toile.

The following first draft is the version which Michael sent to me, titled 'TOAST', and we worked from that:

Nothing, this foam, pure verse
 Referring only to the cup;
 So drowns a distant troupe
 Of sirens, most of them head first.

We sail on, my various friends,
 Me on the poop already,
 You at the ornate prow that cuts
 The wave of thunderbolts and winters;

A superb drunkenness urges me
 To be unafraid even of the pitching
 And propose this toast on my feet

To solitude, reef, star
 And whatever else was worth
 Our sail's blank consideration.

My first response to this was to question the use of the word 'cup'. I suggested that surely 'la coupe' referred to the external form of the poem, the structure within which the words can be contained. This raised the stakes a bit and so we opted for 'chalice' instead. I wasn't altogether happy with the word 'distant' in line 3; it seemed to me that 'loin' was further away than that: 'far-off' into the distance perhaps. We also mischievously contemplated the phrase 'down the hatch' as perhaps being not altogether inappropriate in a poem that is titled 'Salut'! More importantly we discussed the sense that the poem was about the poet as Odysseus and that this should inform the language of our translation. This led to 'friends' becoming 'crew' and the poet 'lashed' to the mast as the Greek hero passed the island of the Sirens. Some of the changes we made then followed on inevitably from this and 'cut' for 'coupe' became 'slice' as we

imagined that movement through water and 'reef' became 'rocky shore' as an illustration of the dangers facing the poet and his crew. Michael's title of 'TOAST' needed to become more evocative of that promise made by both poet and Greek warrior to his readers and men and we settled on 'PLEDGE'.

Pledge

**Nothing, this foam, pure verse
Referring only to the chalice;
So drowns a far-off troupe
Of sirens, a host of them head first.**

**We sail on, my motley crew,
With me already lashed to the poop,
While you, luxurious prow,
Slice through winter tides and lightning;**

**A beautiful intoxication urges me
With no fear of keeling over
To stand and raise a glass**

**To solitude, rocky shore and star
Or whatever else was worth
Hoisting our white sail for.**

A second Odyssean poem we looked at was 'A la nue' from 'HOMMAGE':

A la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
A même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
 De quelque perdition haute
 Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
 Avarement aura noyé
 Le flanc enfant d'une sirène

Michael's first draft of this sonnet was a steady starting point again and we spent quite a few days pushing ideas back and forth before settling upon a final version. Our first draft kept the title of the original French, 'A la nue':

Silenced at the overwhelming
 Cloud base of basalt and lava
 Not to mention the slavish echoes
 By a worthless foghorn

What sepulchral shipwreck (though
 You know it, foam, you drivel there)
 Supreme against the flotsam
 Got rid of the bare masthead

Or concealed what furious for lack
 Of any more exalted wreckage
 The whole unreal abyss displayed

In a strand of this white a hair
 Will out of sheer greed have drowned
 The child-like haunches of a siren

The French 'accablante' offered us a sense of 'overwhelmed' and in discussion we moved from 'Silenced' to 'Struck dumb' before settling on 'Dumbstruck' with its *coup de foudre*, lightning-strike of immediacy. The use of the word 'foghorn' for 'trompe' was misplaced we felt: it lacked the seriousness of the original and we played around with the idea of shifting the noun to a verb to give us 'Even to a slavish echo / By a useless trumpeting'. However, this again had a vulgarity to it and we finally settled on 'Nor deceit of a worthless

horn'. What we were aiming for was a seriousness which might prompt a reader to be aware of an underlying sense of either an image from the *Song of Roland* or from Browning's 'Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came'. We also decided to change the title from the original opening line of the French to 'Beneath the Skies':

Beneath the Skies

**Dumbstruck, near overwhelmed
At the foot of basalt and lava cliff
Not excluding enchanting echoes
Nor deceit of a worthless horn**

**What sepulchral shipwreck (you
Know it, foam, you drivel there)
Erected against flotsam,
Abolished the bare masthead**

**Concealing what, furious for lack
Of any further high-grade wreckage,
The whole sham abyss laid out**

**In one strand of bright white hair
Will have drowned in narrow greed
The haunches of an infant siren.**

When we were working on the second chapbook of Bonnefoy translations, which were to appear in 2013, we often moved some distance in the attempt to bring things to light. For instance looking at the first untitled poem in the French poet's volume *Pierre Écrite* we paused at the opening two lines:

Prestige, disais-tu, de notre lampe et des feuillages,
Ces hôtes de nos soirs.

Initially we were looking at the word 'Glamour' to open that first line before finally settling on the noun 'magnet':

The magnet, you said, of our lamp and of the leaves,
These hosts of our evenings.

It was with some considerable pleasure that I received an email from Bonnefoy saying “*The magnet of our lamp*” *pour traduire le très difficile (et aisément misleading) “prestige”, c’est bien trouvé. Hardiesse et fidélité together.*” I think that both Michael Grant and I took that statement to be a recognition of “Manifest and not abstract” although, as that Canto of Pound’s goes on to recognise, “Shall two know the same in their knowing?”