

An Interface



Joe Ashby Porter

Bernard Høpffner's title alludes to *A Table of Green Fields*, a collection of short fictions by Guy Davenport, one of the writers my work called to his mind. Davenport's title itself alludes to the most famous emendation in English literature, Lewis Theobald's 18th-century replacement of the seemingly nonsensical "a table of green fields," in the account of Sir John Falstaff's death in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, with "a [he] babbled [a second term in Bernard's title] of green fields." An elaborate indirect acknowledgment of my own indissoluble liaison with Shakespearean Joseph A. Porter, you might suppose. But there's more.

Bernard's compliment zeros in on the fact that Theobald's emendation, while generally adopted, remained merely conjectural for some 250 years, until the collocation of "babblers" and "green fields" in a text known to Shakespeare was found by none other than the said Joseph A. Porter. The site for the collocation is in fact John Eliot's *Ortho-epia Gallica*, an English-French language manual that Shakespeare probably owned a copy of, and consulted repeatedly when he chose to write a scene or a passage in French over the 20-year expanse of his career, as in *Henry V*. The pamphlet consists of entertaining dialogues on facing pages, French verso and English

recto (which the original, which the translation?). For *King Lear*, with Cordelia away in France during the middle of the play, Shakespeare seems to have considered dramatizing a bit of her interaction with her husband the King of France, and so remembered or consulted Eliot, a trace of which surfaces when the mad king babbles “Sa, sa, sa, sa,” as he exits running. As editors note, the phrase is a hunting call. Shakespeare saw it in Eliot, where it faces the phonetically identical French “Ça, ça, ça, ça.”

Probably Guy Davenport never knew of my 1986 justification of Theobald’s emendation. In 1993 when he published his *Table of Green Fields*, I was teaching at his alma mater Duke, and I had already failed to persuade him to return for a reading or other celebration of his work. While we never met, our links extend beyond Duke to include his residence in my home state Kentucky, our both having had work accepted by James Laughlin for publication by New Directions, and our both having been translated by Bernard Hoepffner, who himself did have the good luck to know Davenport in person.

I titled my 1977 New Directions novel set on an island and variously concerned with territorial boundaries *Eelgrass*, after the signature plant of tidal interface. James Laughlin in accepting the manuscript asked for only one substantive change. The title seemed “odd,” and he wondered that June whether I might find an alternative by September. For the three months I wrestled with other possibilities. Scores of times I hit the sack relieved to have succeeded, only to realize the next morning that no, no dice. Finally *faute de mieux* I settled on *The Fortunate Islanders* and mailed it off, only to learn by return mail that Laughlin had grown comfortable with *Eelgrass* and wanted me to keep it.

My roots in the English-French interface already went deep, and included the youthful folly of a novel heavily indebted to Djuna Barnes’s New Directions Paris novel *Nightwood*, the form of whose title must have figured in *Eelgrass*. In that novel, my first, my French alliance shows most explicitly in the setting of an interior pornographic novel-in-progress—where but a French country house—and doubtless in other ways too, for I was already headed toward fiction in which it may seem (as Jaimy Gordon writes of my *Resident Aliens*) everything except the language is French. Thus with Bernard Hoepffner’s invaluable assistance and masterful translation,

and with Joëlle Losfeld's serene publication of *Le future proche*, the very language is French, and the moment feels like a homecoming.

Eelgrass was in print several years before I saw what was for me a spectacular instance of my stake in the English-French margin, spectacular precisely because of its previous invisibility. In a manner of speaking, what revealed itself was the two languages' connivance in my unconscious mind, to produce a bilingual pun, *eelgrass* and *île grasse* (cf. *mardi gras*). Given that outline determines enclosed territory, and vice versa, each term comes close to translating the other perfectly. Thus should Bernard or a lesser light ever translate *Eelgrass* into French, it might be worth considering as a title the phonetically nearly identical *Île grasse* which, via a further pun, would specify the rich isle's graciousness.