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## Found in Translation: Translating Thomas McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*<sup>1</sup>

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The title I chose for this presentation, “Found in Translation,” was meant as an obvious reference *not* to Sofia Coppola’s movie, *Lost in Translation*, but to the original statement that gave Coppola her title. That statement was made by American poet Robert Frost and is recorded in *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry*; it goes like this: “I like to say, guardedly, that I could define poetry this way: it is that which gets lost out of both prose and verse in translation.” Over the years, that statement was cut down to the more spectacular/striking “poetry is what gets lost in translation.” (Brooks, Penn Warren, p. 7)

An alternative title to my talk was “Friendship matters”. A statement of the obvious which, as you will see, my translating venture verified, also echoing this research team’s exploration of what (really) matters. But “Friendship matters” in another sense too, meant as a noun phrase synonymous with “questions of friendship.”

In this first part of my talk, I will focus on what I chose to call the relational aspects of translation, as I experienced them translating Thomas McGrath’s *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. To begin with very tangible tokens of friendship, two of McGrath’s closest friends, Pamela Sund and Dale Jacobson, provided vital help through this translating venture. Dale Jacobson, a poet in his own right and the editor of the final version of the complete poem, welcomed all my questions on textual matters. Importantly for financing the publication of my translation, he and Pamela Sund, who co-edited with me the volume on McGrath in the *Profils américains* series,<sup>2</sup> helped me get beyond the American publisher who claimed to hold publishing rights, which turned out not to be the case. They put me in touch with McGrath’s only son, who does hold these rights, and who renounced them to ensure that publication would happen. And I certainly took E.M.M.A.’s directors’ decision to back this publication as a friendly gesture. Friendship also comes into the picture through two books I was presented with by a colleague and friend. To these books, Kate Briggs’s *This Little Art* and Daniel Hahn’s *Catching Fire*<sup>3</sup>, I owe much of the substance of this seminar.

Kate Briggs’s *This Little Art* is an expanded translation diary. She wrote it as she was translating two of Roland Barthes’s lecture courses at Collège de France. I call it “expanded” as the author seldom focuses on the nuts and bolts of the process of that translation. She rather used the occasion of that translation to explore the subject of translation in general. But it *is* a diary as the book comes as a succession of entries of unequal length. The book’s title, *This Little Art*, is borrowed from Helen Lowe-Porter, the first translator of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* in 1927. Let me point out how friendly the phrase makes translation sound. Briggs explains on what conditions she took to the phrase: “I accept her *little* for as long as I can oppose it to trivial, to minor, to young. To the extent that I can hear it – that I can make it – speak of an art of attending to all the small differences. [...] To each flower its own special attendant.” (*TLA* 328)<sup>4</sup> Which is why she brings up tact, which she defines as “the art of not treating all things in the same way,” as a skill bound up with translation. No friendship without tact, is there?

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated below as “*LIF*”.

<sup>2</sup> *Thomas McGrath, Start the Poetry Now!*, Ed. Pamela Sund & Vincent Dussol, Montpellier, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviated below as « *TLA* » and *CA* » respectively.

<sup>4</sup> See also p. 330.

Back a quarter of a century ago, as I was making progress in my first reading of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, I could not believe my eyes that such a poem existed. American, surely, but differently so, a palimpsest of American poetry that brought uncharted places and events into the field of that poetry, rich both in things Irish and Native-American matter, at once progressive and redemptory of the past, Marxist but more Benjaminian than drily Leninist, so Wobbly-red and yet so blue, at the crossroads of Shelley and Joyce, Romantic and Modernist, a poem of tears and laughter, so Catholic and yet so blasphemous, so steeped in history but so attentive to the natural world, intensely lyric, just as intensely epic. I could go on... and on... McGrath surreptitiously presses readers for an answer to his letter, by squeezing in the abbreviation for *Répondez s'il vous plaît!*: “(R.S.V.P.)”. (*LIF* 153) I would be one of the recipient friends of McGrath’s long letter. My reply to his letter would be to translate it. This led me to a commitment in the closing sentence of my dissertation to write back that long reply in a different language to my imaginary friend.

Briggs too writes about her “felt relation to [Barthes’s] late work” (*TLA* 145). She stresses “the each time uniquely relational, lived-out practice of [this little art].” (*TLA* 365) She quotes these words of Lydia Davis, Proust’s translator: “When you are translating, you are working in partnership.” (*TLA* 182) That partnership may be real as when you can rely on the author for clarifications. It may eventually even turn into friendship. But when the author is dead, it is clearly a case of delusion. Briggs is familiar with such delusions. They may occur about a sentence, a paragraph or “a longer part of someone else’s work.” [...] “It addresses you. Or is it because you have made it address you? [...] At some point in the process of becoming attached to the work, you have misrepresented the work to yourself and now you have come to love your misrepresentation more in a process of productive mis-attachment.” (*TLA* 129). Clearly, I was a victim of delusional attachment, but it proved a powerful incentive for all sorts of reasons.

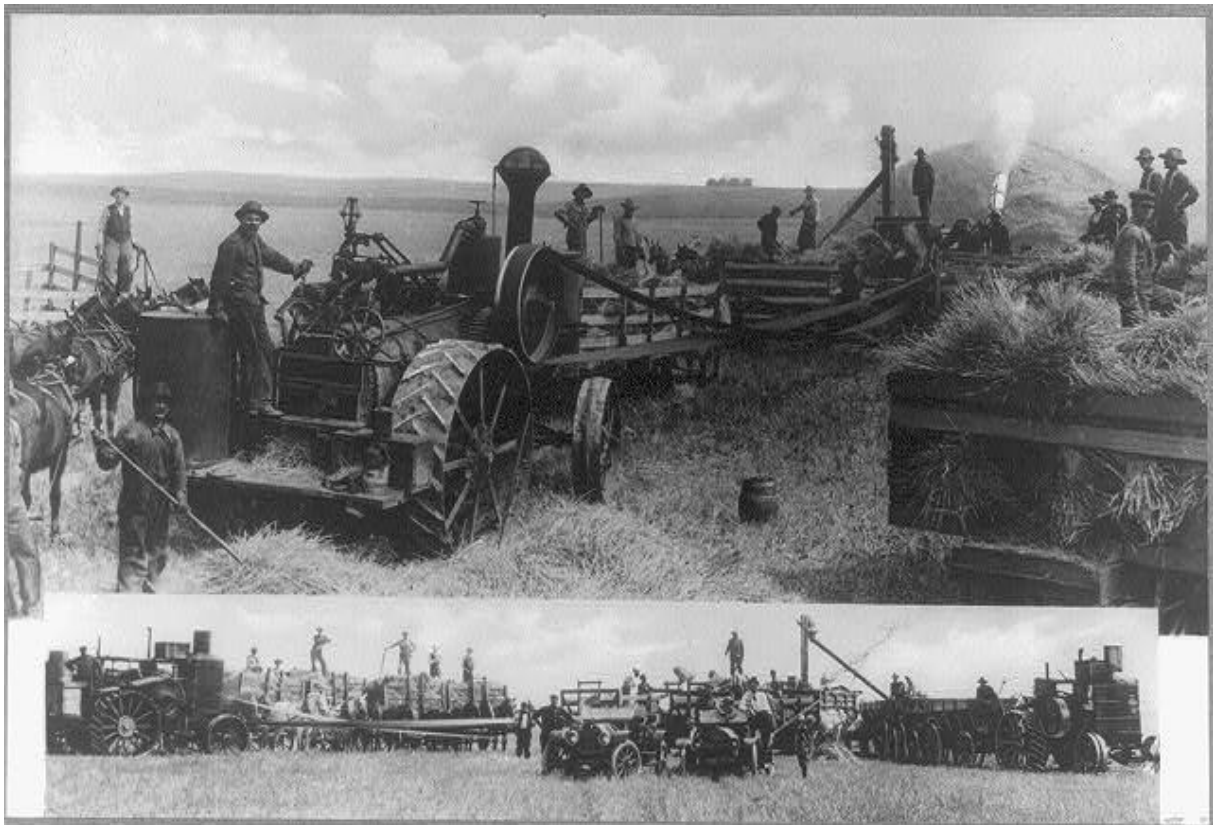
Fidelity matters in friendship. When the author you are translating, though dead, feels like a friend, though he be an imaginary one, you’ll strive to attain the highest possible fidelity. A concern of mine was sticking as closely as possible to the format of the original book, a near-perfect square, and reproducing the lay-out of the pages down to the single line. Briggs quotes Paul Valéry on the subject after he accepted to undertake a translation of Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Though Valéry was aware that “Latin is in general ‘a more compact language’ than French,” “he ‘decided it would be well if the Latin and French were to correspond line for line’. A line for a line, a page for a page.” (*TLA* 275) Lambert Barthélémy, the publisher of *Lettre à un ami imaginaire*, was kind enough to hear my point about a more landscape-like format being better suited to accommodate McGrath’s long lines and to suggest the vast expanses of the Great Plains that feature so prominently in the poem. I did my bit toward ensuring page-by-page correspondence. The lay-out designer’s art did the rest. Now the two books overlap perfectly. The two books overlapping perfectly pleases me.

Fidelity also matters very much to Briggs. As she translated Barthes’s lecture course *How to Live Together (Comment vivre ensemble)*, she kept Barthes’s chosen tutor texts (*textes d’appui* as he called them) close at hand. Briggs muses on that phrase, elaborates upon it, retranslating it more literally: “Supporting texts: the texts that brace us, the ones we lean on [...], the texts we always seem to be in conversation with, whether directly or indirectly; the texts that enable us to say or write anything at all.” (*TLA* 38) I too felt I needed supporting texts, but of a different kind. Long familiarity with *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* meant I knew what to expect in terms of demands upon my French lexicon. That it might not be on par with the job at hand, was what I feared. Signature sections of the poem are about the harvest, or lumbering. I equipped myself for the translation by reading Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (for the harvest part in plains which I imagined were not that different from those of North Dakota) and Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, the first volume of *The Epic of the Wheat*

trilogy. I read the *Kalevala*, the Finnish epic, for the degree of attention paid in it to trees and work related to them. Lexicon extension was one thing; another was seizing upon every opportunity to experience vicariously what may have been part of Thomas McGrath's life experience.

As I translated the poem, my two stays in North Dakota, with long drives about the place, were constantly in my thoughts. The photograph chosen for the front cover of the poem in translation was taken during one of those drives as farmers have left ancient farm machinery amid fields as historical landmarks. Movies like Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (set at harvest time in 1916 in the Texas Panhandle) and John Hanson & Bob Nilsson's *Northern Lights* (set in the Northern Plains during the same period, about the Non-Partisan League, a briefly successful attempt by immigrant farmers to wrest themselves free from grain monopolies) helped me to get a feeling of 'things' as they may have been in McGrath's native North Dakota at the time he experienced them.

The effectiveness of the harvest sections in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, which take place in the 1920s, largely depends on a detailed understanding of the machinery used in those days: threshers were powered by steam engines, to which they were connected by a long belt which crossed midways. Fortunately for me, associations of farmers wherever in the world that equipment was once used, have created websites on which they upload videos of the yearly festivals they organize reconstituting old-time harvests. Being able to visualize those things was priceless.



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<sup>5</sup> Title: "Threshing grain. Beach, North Dakota."

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2012646379/>

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To finish about supporting sources in pursuit of accuracy and fidelity, I should not forget to mention Termium-Plus, the Government of Canada's terminology and linguistic data bank which proved a very useful resource when it came to translating birds' or plants' names. I was aware that the Canadian translations into French of those words would be in Canadian French, and liable not to be found in a 'European French' dictionary but decided it did not matter as North Dakota shares a 310-mile border with the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which makes it quasi-Canadian!

Returning to the idea of mis-attachment to the author you are translating, I would say that McGrath's title, a title which he said he had from the start, invited such mis-attachment. It was the fall of 1954. Thomas McGrath found himself in a trough. He'd been taking flak from his comrades of the Communist Party of the USA. McGrath also knew he had to expect some form of investigation from the House of Unamerican Activities Committee. McCarthy's witch-hunts were in full swing. Enmity was all about. Who could he turn to for support? Visiting with a good friend of his, poet Don Gordon, who, like McGrath, would soon be blacklisted, McGrath told him about a longer poem he had in mind, a poem which would be more on the side of autobiography, starting off from his childhood in North Dakota. "Go home and get down to it", said Gordon. That's how McGrath embarked on *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. You might say that by setting out to write his long letter the poet, teacher and militant left out in the cold, was hoping to build a protective house of words for himself, a house vast enough to accommodate family and friends and his own lifetime too, since McGrath only brought the poem to a close in the late 1970s.

One thing is sure, its clear and vehemently expressed political inclinations notwithstanding, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* feels like a very warm poem, a poem exuding human warmth. The only substantial review of my translation so far<sup>6</sup>, refers to « ce poète radical, sans méchanceté »<sup>7</sup>. « Le lecteur », the reviewer writes, « peut même avoir la tentation de devenir un compagnon de route, au très beau sens du terme, et penser que cette lettre ouverte lui est personnellement adressée ». Coming from a critic who had never read a single line of McGrath's before, I loved that characterization of his voice as a voice "without malice," a voice which might tempt readers into travelling along and becoming fellow travellers in the noblest sense of the word, being tempted to think that this open letter was addressed to them in person."

The poem's inscription goes some way into confirming this: "*This book is for Thomas McGrath Jr.:/ And for all of us/ Together/ A little while/ On the road through.*" (*LIF* unnumbered front page) It posits community, togetherness, friendship among poet and addressees. The matter of friendship is taken up explicitly with the first epigraph to Part I, extracted from the long development on friendship in the "Wednesday" chapter of Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. McGrath lays out Thoreau's prose in the shape of a poem.

Whenever I see my Friend I speak to him;  
But the expecter, the man with the ears,  
is not he. They will complain too that you  
are hard. O ye that would have the cocoanut  
wrong side outwards, when next I weep  
I will let you know.  
(*LIF* 2)

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2024/04/30/poete-communiste-americain-cherche-lecteur-thomas-mcgrath/>

<sup>7</sup> Translations follow.



comrades...

I'll sing you

Out of the prison stone, I'll pick the lock of your night...

(LIF 163)

More precise hints at who the imaginary friend may be, are found at two points of the poem. One is in the occasionally more playful *Part Three*: at one point, the poet chose to materialize seven lines and leave them blank. They come as the conclusion to an episode in which, due to the extreme cold, the narrator feels as if he'd lost the one hand which had been hanging over the side of the horse-pulled sleigh his father is driving. The line that immediately precedes these blank lines reads: "Searching for your hand to hold while we write this down together -/ This:" (LIF 290). The blank lines end on a footnote mark. The footnote reads: "It may be that these lines (and there may be many more than suggested here) constitute the key to the whole poem – and perhaps to *all* poems, or at least to those where unseen collaborators of present and future have added lines of their own." (LIF 291) This wished-for writing partner addressed here is a possible other version of the friend. A much more precise hint is the one that comes in *Part IV*, towards the end of the poem: "*Through that fatal weather, O Friend and Stranger -/ You: reading the crystal of this page! – it was you I sought!*" (LIF 378) Relief! Was my case of delusional friendship not that bad? Shall I confess to more symptoms?

I like Briggs's definition of the translator as "a maker of wholes" (TLA 134, 221), spelled "W-H". It rightly points up the necessity not to lose sight of the whole work/ text when your attention is constantly focused on details. A constant concern is to "keep the consistency," "check the consistency of certain recurring words" (CF 120, 141). I'll broach that lexical question later. For the time being, I want to say how I diverted that "translator as a maker of wholes" in another direction. In a few, rare, places, I wished the poet had not written what he wrote. I didn't want McGrath's image to be tarnished, I didn't want him to be written off as a poet because he showed intolerance of same-sex love (intolerance long nourished by the Communist Party) or because he was critical of Baldwin or Leroi-Jones for taking black people's minds off class warfare. Since doing this translation was my choice, I equally feared readers might think that I condoned those problematic contents of the poem which irk and hurt today's sensitivities and understanding. Short of omitting those few lines, which I never seriously considered, I contemplated minimizing things through endnotes, excusing the author by contextualizing the problematic content or writing an I-beg-to-differ type paragraph in the introduction but was talked out of doing anything of the kind. I finally went by Charles Olson's remark in *Mayan Letters*, the first book I translated: "in a given lifetime a man, or, in a given expression, a culture cannot get any more done than it can get done" (Olson 95)

To continue with the relational aspects of this translation, a few words about my preferences in poetry. That poetry need not be reader-unfriendly to qualify as poetry has always been a concern of mine. In the essay she once devoted to William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, Hélène Aji suggests that the barrier to understanding erected by the Poundian canto with its zillion references is part and parcel of its author's undemocratic inclinations. That does not sound absurd to me. From my first reading of it, the overall readability of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* felt like a welcome mat.

As a translator, however, my concern was that many references in it were still liable to elude the 2024 reader. I therefore decided to include notes to facilitate access to the poetry. I was glad to find hesitations on the subject both in Briggs's and Hahn's books. "*At what point does one start using endnotes?*" (CF 47), Hahn asked. Further into the book, he confesses to "hav[ing] unreasonably strong feelings about using footnotes but wonder[s] whether this is a book in which [he] should maybe just get over [him]self." (CF 129) Briggs kept in mind Vladimir Nabokov's edition of Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, an edition which "famously materialized [Nabokov's] dream of a translation with footnotes rising up the page



like skyscrapers” (TLA 286). “And why not?” she writes. From day one, I ruled out footnotes as I didn’t want the pages bearing the poetry to be defaced. So, I decided to go for endnotes, but without using endnote marks for the same reason as I had ruled out footnotes. The idea was, whenever the reader felt blocked, they could go to the appendix of notes, and possibly easily find an answer to their question(s) thanks to the chronologically arranged endnotes, with the page reference preceding the notes to a given page. In addition to the substantial introduction the length of which had been agreed upon with the publisher, endnotes were my way of leaving the door more widely ajar into that spacious house of words. I now realize the way the poet may have meant the epigraph to Part III: a short quote from Einstein: “Make it as simple as possible -/ But no simpler!” (LIF 274)

Why translate at all? To an extent, the whole of *This Little Art* is an attempt to explicate “the impulse to translate” (TLA 119). Briggs finds what she describes as “a very precise way of phrasing [her] own experience” (TLA 119) in Barthes’s last lecture course, *The Preparation of the Novel*, which she translated. She quotes him in her translation : “ ‘every work I read as desirable, even as I am desiring it, I experience as incomplete [...] because I didn’t do it myself, and I have to in some way retrieve it by redoing it; in this way, to write is to want to rewrite: I want to add myself actively to that which is beautiful and that I lack.’ ” (TLA 115) Although Barthes does not mention translation as a form of “adding yourself to an existing work” (TLA 118), Briggs is quick to go one step further: “Translation conceived as a means of writing the other’s work out with your own hands [...] with all the attention, thinking and searching, the testing and invention that the task requires. [...] Translation as a responsive and appropriative *practising* of an extant work at the level of the sentence, working it out.” (TLA 119) To rephrase, the wish to translate a particular book will come from a feeling of incompleteness rising from one’s not having contributed anything to a work one so much relates to. Translating it would then be the best way to appease that frustration.

Did I experience translating *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* as a way of addressing a frustration? It never *felt* that way. But when, running counter to the cliché of “poetry as what gets lost in translation,” Daniel Hahn promotes the idea of things “gained” (CF 164) or “*found* in translation,” I cannot but agree. (CF 5) Clearly translation is the best substitute for creation, the second-best thing to creation for anyone with an inclination to write. Quoting from Simon Leys’s essay *Notes from the Hall of Uselessness* as translated by Dan Gunn, Briggs writes: “‘One can sit down at one’s table every morning at the same hour, assured of giving birth to something. Of course, the quality and the quantity of daily production can vary but the nightmare of the blank page is, for its part, definitely exorcised. It is, besides, this very reassuring guarantee which fundamentally places translation in the domain of the artisan rather than in that of the artist. However difficult translation may sometimes be, as distinct from creation it is fundamentally *risk-free*.’ ” (TLA 252) Translation offers “an *artificial inspiration*.” (TLA 252) The notion of the translator as artisan leads Briggs to compare them to Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist of another of Barthes’s tutor texts. “Robinson Crusoe is a novice, a beginner. He has never made a table before. But others have. He is fortunate in the sense that he has a model in mind. [...] He knows what a table *is*: he has seen and used them before, back in York, in England. Like the translator, he is not tasked – he has not tasked himself – with making something wholly original, in the sense of unprecedented, without reference or comparison. However, it turns out his table will not be an *invention*.” (TLA 251)

This leads Briggs and other translation scholars to regard translation as a “unique case of authorized plagiarism or authorized appropriationism. The translation is encouraged to pilfer the original with no risk of copyright infringement or allegations of forgery.” (The title of Emily Apter’s article, quoted in Briggs, is worth quoting in full: “What is Yours, Ours and Mine: On the Limits of Ownership and the creative Commons,” *October* 126, Fall 2008, pp.



91-114.) (TLA 314) Another view akin to Apter's is found in Hahn: "Translation is like copying a work of art in a different medium." (CF 5)

The front cover is part of the relational aspects of the published translation. If you have the good fortune, as I did, to have your say in the choice of the cover, you don't want to spoil it. Rather than use a photo of the author, which McGrath's friends had provided, I decided to highlight what may be the most distinctive feature of the poem: its scenes of work. And of the different types of work encountered in the poem – farm work, welding in a shipyard, printer's work – I chose the most emblematic: harvesting, with dramatic intensity relying on the poet's very precise description, and the reader's correct visualizing of the machinery involved. The ancient thresher on the cover is meant to call to mind all the hardships American farmers from the Mid-West went through in the 1930s, what with the droughts, dust-storms, and economic downturns which bankrupted millions of them.

Writing on translation in the form of a diary enables Briggs to digress as she pleases. One of her excursions explores the concerns which are common to literature and translation. Briggs refers to Virginia Woolf's radio talk in which she defined "the value we recognize and invest in literature. The right words in the right order [...]. These necessary words, in this necessary order. There is literature, arguably, or what we call the literary, when this matters: when we feel like something would be wrong should ever these words or their ordering be changed [...]. [W]hen the words of a translation matter in turn, when we feel, in a translation, that it must indeed be these necessary words in this necessary order, the translation has become literature too." (TLA 41-42) Let me give you an unspectacular example, which will ease the transition into the second part of this talk, which focuses more on matters of detail. I arrived at what I decided would be my final translation of the first line of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* after much hesitation concerning which preposition in French fitted best to translate what in the original was the simple indication "east." The first line reads: - "From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east." (LIF 3) "[S]hip all bodies east" first became "expédier tous les corps vers l'est". Note that the sentence comes between quotes. Remembering that it was quoted verbatim from a letter sent to the poet's parents by the Army (following the death of one of their sons in a plane crash), I chose "sur l'est" rather than "vers l'est" to make it sound more like 'admin talk'. I do not know whether that choice made the sentence literature in French, but the concern that was mine not to let matters rest until I had made what felt like a necessary change certainly gave me that impression. So " 'D'ici il faut expédier tous les corps sur l'est.' " it was.

Daniel Hahn's *Catching Fire* is a more straightforward translation diary, which the author regards as a type of making-of. We follow his progress through the translation of *Never Did the Fire*, a short novel by Chilean author Diamela Eltit. The more strictly diaristic approach takes us closer to the nuts and bolts of what a translation involves, which can be quite funny. Hahn confesses to being very frustrated at not being given the opportunity to use an English word he loves. "Ah, I'm rather sorry not to be able to use 'gingerly'. Such a nice old word." (CF 150) Likewise, he admits to forcing favourite words of his, into the translated text. The two verbs he uses to describe this uncalled-for but irrepressible inclusion of words one is fond of are quite graphic: One is "to crowbar into" as in "I also like the word 'baleful' enough, that I found myself trying quite hard to crowbar it into a sentence where it probably doesn't belong." (CF 127) "Shoehorning in" is the other one, which conveys the same sense of fitting in with difficulty. (CF 56) That was me, I thought! After I found out, while reading the translation of *Kalevala*, about a second meaning of "chablis," that is, when it does not refer to a dry white wine, and which is "Arbre, bois abattu par le vent, ou tombé de vétusté", I caught myself using it three times within two pages when twice would have been just fine. (LAI, 205-208)

What else do I wish I had done differently? I wish I had included some kind of section-by-section synopsis of the poem for readers to be able to navigate the whole work more easily. I had created one when I wrote my doctorate on McGrath, but decided against including one this time for fear it might spoil the book... I also think I would include a few more endnotes, glossing more wordplays for instance, whenever no satisfactory equivalent has been arrived at. “A lot of the book just jumps about in time”, Hahn writes about the Chilean novel she is translating. (*CF* 154) So does *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. Given the chance to publish a revised edition of the translation, I don’t think I would be so strict about sticking to the past tenses used by McGrath in the narratives. A more extended use of the present tense in the French would ease the flow of the translated text, without detracting from the fidelity intended. Friends who read the published book have pointed out things I got wrong. Although I did my best to get the names of birds and plants exactly right, it was pointed out to me that on one occasion, a bird I chose to refer to as “un rapace” was not in fact a raptor... More interesting, my translation of the strange compound adjective “god-mating” (*LIF* 83) by “déophiles” (*LAI* 110) was objected to, since “déophile” was a coinage from roots belonging to different languages, with “déo-” borrowed from the Latin and “-phile” borrowed from the Greek. That’s not something you can do, my friend said. Looking for an alternative in Rabelais was his advice... Other coinages were more successful, or should I say, less unsuccessful: “heptalinguée” (*LAI* 34) for “seven-tongued” (*LIF* 6), “impleurant” (*LAI* 296) for “crying for” (*LIF* 268), “cornacine” for “hornacle,” itself a McGrathian coinage to refer to a non-existing mineral, from which he coins another phrase, synonymous with performing a completely pointless task: “to go down the hornacle mine.”

Successive readings of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* made me see that, as in Joyce’s *Ulysses* which McGrath looked up to as the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most formidable literary achievement precisely for its consistency, the poem’s system of echoes was highly sophisticated. Keeping the consistency almost worked in some cases. Other times it didn’t. It almost did with the “Horn” root, which is found throughout the poem, probably as a marker of epic in reference to two lines of *The Aeneid* in John Dryden’s translation: “Two gates the silent house of sleep adorn:/ Of polished ivory this, that of transparent horn.” One of McGrath’s two novels is entitled *The Gates of Ivory, The Gates of Horn*. Work it did with:

- “Horns on the freeway.” (*LIF* 9) became “ça corne.” (*LAI* 37)
- “A horny elm” (*LIF* 26) translated as “dur comme de la corne.” (*LAI* 54)
- “Bix blows his magical horn” (*LIF* 395) turned into “cornet.” (*LAI* 425)
- “[H]ornacle mine” (*LIF* 40) became “mine de cornacine.” (*LAI* 68)

But the presence of the “horn” root on the very first page is invisibilized in translation: “Hunters of the hornless deer” (*LIF* 3) had to be “daim sans bois.” (*LAI* 31)

“Blaze” proved more frustrating. McGrath makes a frequent use of it in the sense of a mark left on a surface, as in “the place/ we went wrong. [...] Put a blaze/ Here.” “l’endroit/ Où on s’est trompés. [...] Faut y mettre / Une marque.” (*LIF* 200, *LAI* 228) Those recurring “blazes” found through the long poem are in turn landmarks for readers, intended to rekindle the sense of a continuity where it might have been fading, as will the lone roadsign at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere. But there are plenty more “blazes” that do not translate easily as “*marques*,” as in: “a blaze of January/ Heat” (*LIF* 173) which I translated as “une flambée de chaleur/ de Janvier” (*LAI* 201) “Drift” returns many times in association with “shift” as operators of transitions. But of course, “drifts”, as in “snowdrifts” also returns frequently as part of North Dakota’s winter landscapes. That is how the poet’s effort to thicken the texture are lost on the reader.

As Edgar Allan Poe guessed, long poems are bound to have their dull moments. When stuck in one of those, I looked forward to reaching those passages, lines, even phrases that resonate most with me. Coming to the phrase “thin wrack of cloud” (*LIF* 320) was one such

occasion. I did not even stop to wonder whether that “wrack” was short for “sea-wrack”. In that instance, it was simply out of the question for me not to go for Modernist translation by sound, sonotranslation as Lily Robert-Foley calls it: “varech” it would have to be, with “un mince varech de nuages” (*LAI* 350) as the end-result. The afore-mentioned “blaze” gave me a second opportunity for such a second moment of Modernist translation: “Chipping the flint of this page to blaze our passage home.” (*LIF* 380) I could not resist “Ébréchant le silex de cette page pour **baliser** notre passage de retour”. I lost the fire linking « silex » to « blaze », but “baliser” sounded impossibly right.

As already mentioned in this seminar, what characterizes this poem the writing of which spans three decades (from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s), is the switch, most visible in Parts III and IV, from poetry largely based on metaphors to poetry often based on paronomasia, or punning. I was apprehensive about how the translation of *Part III* and *Part IV* would go. It proved an interesting challenge. Is it because the Book of Kells is a national treasure, Irish poets have often used the alphabet as a form. *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, the work of an Irish American poet, confirms this. The third part of the poem, which revolves around one Christmas Eve, confession and Midnight Mass included, is the one in which the poet settles scores with the Catholic Church. He seems to bear a particular grudge to a priest who did not take his sins seriously enough at confession, simply because he was a child. Forty years after, it must have still irked him. Reminiscing turns into tall tale. When the priest refuses to give him a harder penance than a few prayers to say, the eight-year-old tells him about the complex examination of conscience supposedly devised by his grandfather which is to be conducted in alphabetical order. In addition, probably because the grandfather devised it for a child, the examination about a specific type of sin must include as many animal names as possible, starting with the same letter. An example will clarify things:

And have you had  
 BATS in yr belfry, Bees in yr bonnet, been Bird-brained  
 and Beaver-struck? Badgered yr Da for dash  
 or Saturday buckshee, tryin’ to Bulldoze and daze  
 the poor man till, totally Buffaloed, he turns loose  
 of the totemic nickel so you may monarchize an ice-cream  
 cone or play the weekendin’ social Butterfly,  
 o me bucko? (*LIF* 330)

Et n’as-tu pas été  
 BONOBO baiseur fou, dingo du minou, une araignée dans ta  
 tête de linotte ? Et n’as-tu pas cavalé après ton pater  
 pour un’ prime, ou un bakchich du samedi, requinant  
 jusqu’à temps que c’pauvre homme hébété lâche le  
 sou totémique synonyme d’un weekend papillonnant ,  
 toutes ailes déployées, agrémenté d’un cône de glace au citron,  
 Ô jeune Blanc-Bec ? (*LAI*, 360)

This is an instance in which collaborative translation would obviously have improved the end-result. I may want to republish this section in a journal in the form of successive attempts by different translators. In another place where the alphabetical form plays a part, about Original Sin, the poet suggests the Forbidden Fruit might have been a Quince, not an apple, and “Quince” which starts with a “Q”, follows “Paradise” which starts with a “P.” (*LIF* 293) What was I to do as “Coing” starts with a “C”? It was a relief to discover that in 14<sup>th</sup> century English, the name for that fruit would have been spelt “Quoyn” Which came from the French

“cooin.” I therefore went for the Middle English word since, if read aloud, it would convey the sense I needed. So “Quoyn” it was. In another place, the passage in Matthew about Nativity is found in five versions, gradually drifting from the original to a homemade Creole rewriting, with everyday speech, Finneganswakesesque and Substantive-7 transrecreations in between! McGrath’s lines tend to be very long: each of the six-strong-beats that he said characterized his line, was like the nucleus of an atom apt to attract an indefinite number of electrons. I did not even try to replicate this. I tried to create poetic texture in other ways. Firstly, through special attention paid to alliteration. Two examples will illustrate my attempt: “**B**ounding along on my **b**elly on my little drug-along sled” (*LIF* 279) translated as “À la remorque, allongé sur le ventre **t**ressautant sur mon petit **t**raîneau” (*LAI* 309) in order to suggest the bouncing; “magic/ Of the whistling distant engines” (*LIF* 279) – became “magie/ du sifflement des motrices lointaines” (*LAI* 309): “motrices” rather than “locomotives” or “machines” to materialize the hissing in the whistle-blowing. Turning now to a more unfortunate attempt, I was at first quite pleased with my translation of “Where the banker’s birch logs flare in the open fireplace flue” (*LIF* 309) as “le brasier de bûches de bouleau du banquier **brûlant** dans l’âtre.” (*LAI* 339), only to realize eventually that it results in the reader’s inability to decide what or who is burning!

Injecting meters well-identified in French was another strategy I deployed to regain texture, as in the example below, where the two lines from the original make an alexandrine followed by an octasyllable in their French translation: “And not so lonely with the fellow worker gone/ Into the dark ahead” (*LIF* 187) becomes “Et pas si seul du fait qu’un collègue s’était / Aussi enfoncé dans ce noir. (*LAI* 215). To close on a bright note, “Don’t does all here; whatever is mean is clean.” (*LIF* 148) “Ici tu fais rien, ça le fait ; rien de salaud n’est sale. ” (*LAI* 176) was the rare moment when the English and the French aligned perfectly.

All of the above challenges generating moments of undue exhilaration are part of the things found and gained in translation. Reading the introduction to *Experimental Translation*, our colleague Lily Robert-Foley’s book on “*The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production*” made me realize the naïveté and the limitations involved in my approach to translation, which is meaning-driven. I stuck to my priorities, which lean toward, and aim at fidelity, equivalence, and accuracy, with belief in “the inherent goodness of translating everything” (Robert-Foley 11) or at least trying to. Priority given to fidelity despite my acute consciousness that the end-result is bound to fall short and often does fall far short of what I intended. But I hope this does not necessarily entail that the materiality of the text is completely lost sight of. I hope Lily pardons me when she notes that the initials to my name are the same as those of her best *bete noire*: Vinay-Darbelnet!

Hahn’s idea of fidelity matches what I kept aiming at. “[W]hat I am seeking is fidelity to what I imagine to be the source text’s *effect*,” he writes (*CF* 14). More precisely, “to allow readers who could not access [the poem in English] a proxy experience that’s as precisely the same as that other book as possible.” (*CF* 201)

Ideally, and I am borrowing my words from Hahn, “[...] I’d like a reader of the translated [Thomas McGrath] to be able to recognise a bit of h[is] writing just as confidently as a reader of h[is] original might.” (*CF* 91) Whether I succeeded or failed is another matter.

No way of finding out of course, by definition. Except by ‘road-testing’ the translated text and see how audiences respond to it, as we shall now proceed to do. To an extent, any book is a letter. Threefold one in the case of this one.

Time for the test...

TWO LONGER EXTRACTS FROM *LETTER TO AN IMAGINARY FRIEND*

A.

I turned in machine-made circles: first from the screaming red  
Weather where the straw stack grew and the rattling thresher mourned;  
Then to the rocking engine where the flywheel flashed and labored  
And the drivebelt waxed and waned, the splices clapped at its cross  
Ebbing and flowing, slack or taut as the spikers  
Dropped the bivouacked wheat in the feeder's revolving throat.

Feathered in steam like a great tormented beast  
The engine roared and laughed, dreamed and complained,  
And the petcocks dripped and sizzled; under its fiery gut  
Stalactites formed from the handhold's rheumy slobbers.  
Mane of sparks, metallic spike of its voice,  
The mile-long bacony crackle of burning grease!  
There the engineer sat, on the high drivers,  
Aloof as a God. Filthy. A hunk of waste  
Clutched in one gauntleted hand, in the other the oilcan  
Beaked and long-necked as some exotic bird;  
Wreathed in smoke, in the clatter of loose eccentrics.  
And the water-monkey, back from the green quiet of the river  
With a full tank, was rolling a brown quirky,  
(A high-school boy) hunkered in the dripping shade  
Of the water tender, in the tall talk and acrid sweat  
Of the circle of spitting stiff's whose cloud-topped bundle-racks  
Waited their turn to the feeder.  
And the fireman: goggled, shirtless, a flashing three-tined fork,  
Its handle charred, stuck through the shiny metallic  
Lip of the engine, into the flaming smoky  
Firebox of its heart.  
Myself- straw-monkey. Jester at court.

So, dawn to dusk, dark to dark, hurried  
From the booming furious brume of the thresher's back  
To the antipodean panting engine. Caught in the first  
Circle.

(*LIF* 17-19)

Je décris des cercles d'une machine à l'autre : pars du hurlement rouge  
De la tempête où la meule grandit et la batteuse ferraille sa plainte ;  
Viens vers le tremblement de la locomotive et les éclairs du volant d'inertie  
à l'ouvrage  
Et la courroie monte et descend, les épissures claquent au point de  
croisement  
Ça part et ça revient, ça se tend, ça se distend, tandis que les fourcheurs  
Font tomber les bivouacs de blé dans la gorge tournante de l'ameneur.

Emplumée de vapeur telle une grande bête que l'on torture  
La machine rugit et rit, rêve et gémit,  
Les robinets de purge gouttent et grésillent ; sous la panse rougeoyante  
Des stalactites de bave chassieuse se forment au niveau de l'orifice d'accès.  
– Crinière d'étincelles, voix métallique acérée,  
Comme du bacon en train de frire, la longue traînée de bruit de la graisse qui  
brûle !  
Et le mécanicien assis là, juché sur les roues motrices,  
Distant tel un Dieu. Crasseux. Un bout de chiffon  
Serré dans un gant à crispin, dans l'autre la burette  
Au bec et au long cou d'oiseau exotique ;  
Enguirlandé de fumée, dans le cliquetis d'excentriques desserrées.  
Le préposé à l'eau, de retour du vert paisible de la rivière  
Avec une réserve pleine, se roule une clope dans du papier brun.  
(Un lycéen) il est accroupi dans l'ombre qui goutte  
Du tender, parmi les rodomontades et la sueur âcre  
Du cercle cracheur des chemineaux dont les chariots de gerbes ennuagés en  
leur sommet  
Attendent leur tour à l'ameneur.  
Et le chauffeur : lunettes de protection, chemise tombée, son trident  
fulgurant  
Au manche carbonisé, enfoncé à travers le métal luisant  
De la lèvre de la machine, jusque dans les flammes et la fumée  
Du foyer en son cœur.  
Et moi : préposé à la paille. Bouffon de la cour.

Ainsi, de l'aube au crépuscule, de la nuit à la nuit,  
De la brume rugissante du dos de la batteuse  
Aux antipodes de la machine haletante. Pris dans le premier  
Cercle.

(LAI 45-47)

B.

It is in winter we see the world as it is: wild:

Inhuman...

*Then* the buildings (that once in summers past  
Nosed like slow ships into the calico winds,  
Their sails full of cicadas, voices the color of gold)  
*Then*, in that bone-breaking cold, the houses that seemed deep-rooted  
Snap off at the knees, at the first joint, as the darkening  
World freezes...

*Then* the failing towns and the fostering  
Cities fasten their lonely concrete around themselves:  
Drowning inward toward their central emptiness:

Isolated  
As the vast high-pressure systems, anticyclonic mainsprings,  
Coil and uncurl and the great weatherclock rounds the seasons.  
*Then* we may love man: so weak, so poor, in that  
Cold wind...

(where even the lights of the villages contract,  
Abashed and afraid in the face of a thousand miles of ice,  
Its white pall...)

Love him as we love all transient beings,  
Brother and sister wildlings at home in that transhuman cold  
That's not machine-made.

Where all are even.

*Then* I'm at home.

But now, like clapboard clouds, the houses float over  
The small towns in the tall white Christmas night...  
lifted...

(Thin rack of cloud towering aloft, darkens  
The high heavens but only slightly: the moon still silvers  
Those little arks...)

lifting and drifting...

a holy frivolity  
Sustains them: swung on a rope of bellsound into the metallic  
Light...

joyfully...

in the joyful season...

– this false peace.

Heavenly Levitation!

Man has put down his ax –  
Now, if only a moment – and the peaceable kingdom exists:  
As long as these souls and houses soar and sing: hoisted  
By the rejoicing and hopeful bells...

(as, now, the bells  
Of that other Lisbon [Portugal] fall through the July snow  
Of leaflets calling for the class war)

false

Christmas

peace. (LIF 319-320)



C'est en hiver qu'on voit le monde tel qu'il est : sauvage :  
Inhumain...

c'est là que les bâtiments (qui jadis lors d'étés enfuies  
Allaient doucement tels de lents vaisseaux dans les vents de calicot,  
Leurs voiles remplies de cigales, des voix la couleur de l'or)  
C'est là que, dans ce froid à briser les os, les maisons aux racines profondes  
semblait-il  
Cassent aux genoux, à la première jointure, tandis que gèle  
Le monde qui s'assombrit...

c'est là que les bourgs en faillite et les villes  
Nourricières s'enveloppent dans leur béton solitaire :  
Une noyade intérieure vers leur vide central :

dans l'isolement  
Tandis que les vastes systèmes des hautes pressions, les principaux ressorts  
anticycloniques,  
S'enroulent et se déroulent et que la grande girouette fait la ronde des  
saisons.

C'est alors que l'on peut aimer l'homme : si faible, si pauvre, dans ce  
Vent froid...

(où même les lumières des villages se contractent,  
Confuses et effrayées par les mille kilomètres de glace,  
Ce linceul blanc...)

aimer l'homme comme nous aimons tous les êtres de  
passage,  
Frères et sœurs sauvages chez eux dans ce froid transhumain  
Qui ne doit rien aux machines.

Dans lequel nous sommes tous égaux.

C'est

là que je suis chez moi.

Mais à présent, telles des bardeaux de nuages, les maisons flottent au-dessus  
Des petits bourgs dans la haute et blanche nuit de Noël...  
soulevées...

(Un mince varech de nuages, imposant par sa hauteur, se dresse, assombrit  
Quelque peu l'empyrée : la lune argente encore  
Ces petites arches...

qui s'élèvent et dérivent...

une sainte frivolité

Les tient en l'air : balancées sur une corde de sons de cloche dans la lumière  
Métallique...

joyeusement...

à la saison joyeuse...

– cette fausse paix.

Lévitiation céleste !

L'homme a posé sa hache –

À présent, ne serait-ce que pour un moment – et le royaume pacifique  
existe :

Aussi longtemps que ces âmes et ces maisons planeront et chanteront :  
hissées

Par les cloches, leur joie, leur espoir...  
 (à présent, les cloches  
 De cette autre Lisbonne [au Portugal] traversent en tombant cette neige de  
 juillet  
 De tracts qui appellent à la lutte des classes)  
 fausse  
 paix  
 de Noël.  
 (LAI 349-350)

I'll close with a tiny poem, taken from McGrath's final collection:

For "my" book  
 Fly up little one  
 Against the wind  
 Who wants an easy ride?  
 (McGrath 1991)

§

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