

VAN SCHENDEL IN TRANSLATION

*Translation by Ben-Zion Shek, with an
Afterword by Michel van Schendel*

INTRODUCTION

MICHEL VAN SCHENDEL is one of Quebec's leading poets, but he is little known in English Canada, and this fact was one of the spurs that led to the preparation of this sampling of his poems, appearing here for the first time in the language of the other solitude. When he won the Governor General's Award in 1980 for his collection *De l'oeil et de l'écoute* (Of the eye and of the ear), many were shocked to learn that he had been refused Canadian citizenship for almost thirty years because of radical political activity in his native France, where he was born of Belgian parents in 1929. The publicity surrounding this paradoxical revelation resulted in a quick turnabout by the federal government.

Michel van Schendel's first (short) poetry collection was *Poèmes de l'Amérique étrangère* (Poems of a Strange America), 1958. This was followed by *Variations sur la pierre* (Variations on Stone), 1964, *Veiller ne plus veiller; suite pour une grève: poème daté, 17 septembre 1976–30 avril 1977* (To stay awake or not stay awake; suite for a strike . . .), 1978; *De l'oeil et de l'écoute*, 1980; *Autres, autrement* (Different, differently¹), 1983, and *Extrême/livre des voyages* (Extreme/travel book), 1987. In addition to his poetic production, Michel van Schendel has written for radio and television, has been a journalist for several of Montreal's major dailies, and has edited the now defunct magazine, *Socialisme québécois*. His own literary production was paralleled from the beginning by critical activity, and he was one of the founders of the review, *Liberté*, as well as being involved for a time in the management of the seminal publishing house, l'Hexagone, which has produced all but one of his poetry collections. For several years, Michel van Schendel has been a professor of literature at the Université du Québec à Montréal, and is currently preparing several books on literary theory.

The leading journal of Quebec letters, *voix et images*, had a feature issue on him (no. 32, Winter 1986) which contains a penetrating interview, three critical studies on his poetic and other writings, and a selected bibliography.

The selections of van Schendel's poems presented here in translation are all taken from *Autres, autrement* (Montréal: Hexagone, 1983). The notes I have appended to my translations are there merely by way of example, for they could have been multiplied several-fold, the job of rendering his poems into English being complex, and the poems themselves being rich not only in their lyricism, but also in their reflexivity and social comment.

BEN-Z. SHEK

1.

The sensual: a knit of forms.

This knit when the intimate hits the public eye.

The sensual: a drop of water, a rhythm, a flamboyant tree,
a lovely leaf repeated, the trajectory of a finger learn-
ing how to count. The sensual is a calculation. And also
a profusion. Therefore economical. And an act of solidarity.

I am learning to count. A timeless age settles in. Thus it
becomes immediate yet different. Thus it becomes the here
and now. And it follows from this that it startles.
You may call it bizarre, odd. Open to the drapes of nudity,
the caress soars through the sky of squares. The sensual is
that knit of forms of the humdrum.

Montreal, 8 September 1979 — Toronto, 16 September 1979

2. *We shall go all the way to the star beamed by the city*

Velvet of the wooden ceiling tender skin is a perceptive eye
Today two pretty ones betwixt and between two stages
A memory of woodland strawberries and twigs
A smell never before reaching the eyes which soften them with salt
A walk on the sand close to the most expected
A tremble of snow on the lower roofs
The wind turns their domes white²
We shall go all the way to the star beamed by the city

Montreal, 9 December 1977

3. *Sketch*

Cloud-rack or mare's tail
 through the window-pane
The stomach yields while distilling forgetfulness
"Provincial Bank" one reads through the blue hoarfrost
Between lawn and latch helter-skelter a hound a head of hair opening
 out of the flowers a coat beneath the wave

All is blue like an almond a woman stretches a stamen
Passover is more beautiful than a cradled child

Ligré, 24 July 1979

4. *Frail*

Sylvie by the lamps
By the pitter-patter of plankton³
The crack is the ornament of remains
Even the synagogue is gone
The Templars have set down their work-bench of nails
They have razed the plane and the tree
White whiskey equalizes all

Vienna, 5 July 1979

5. *Brief*

The cinder in the port
Is softened by its navel
Under the sandstone curtains
The sails are astonished
By a shiver of seagulls

Paris, 1 August 1979

6. *Imagines Possessing*

That arm stretched over the other shoulder like a pat possession⁴
He withdraws it at dessert time
He counts his pennies

A desire to harvest
A little bird
A most tenuous twig
Which breaks
Like a beating wing the oar splits the wave

She didn't twitch an eyelash

Montreal, 18 June 1979

7. *Support*

From a hotel room I meditate on time
 Waiting for the money which haunts me
 A pedestrian walks caterpillar-like.
 I have no greater concern
 Than to extend by an eyelash
 The stretch of his steps

Paris, 13 June 1978

8. *About a sum and a remainder**First Draft*

In the middle the upturned but double wing
 Decalcomania of tender arrivals
 A blue gluttonous gal eats a dragonfly loaf
 The table is white before me before her
 I attract a glance on the grass's edge
 One knee bends above the other
 The blue cloth is a hiding place for that which has no time
 and yet will last not last
 In geometries

I owe money phone calls letters calendars
 Delay the thorn on the spinning wheel I am improvident
 I examine a leaf attached to the wing

Montreal, 8 May 1979 — Ligré, 24 July 1979

Second Draft

In the middle the upturned but double wing
 Decalcomania of tender arrivals
 The table is white before me before her
 I attract a glance on the grass's edge
 One knee bends above the other
 The cloth of light is the acquaintance of a hiding place
 And of a fleeting beak

I owe money phone calls letters calendars
 I don't know how to separate them
 I examine a leaf attached to the wing

Montreal, 23 September 1979

9. *A Request to my trade-union comrades*

What goes by doesn't go by it's mortar
The death-blow the voice carried away beneath the caissons
Unanimity is unreal,
Not unity.

A long road long real long
In the tender taking of pulse and freed fingers
In the patient body of fatigue
Facing but within the crowd
The loud-mouths demand a roll-call.
This knots the nest,
The little ones choke.

Montreal, 30 May 1979

10.

The proverbial is an obelisk: it is naked, syncopated, straight, very tidy.

It apparently proposes a simple truth, reductively, evidently universal. The proverbial is that which repeats endlessly, in short sentences, the signs therein engraved, prosodic, thus changing, ever new.

For the immobile originality of the proverb, inscribed in its recurring gesture, depends on who utters it, who puts it to use in ever changing situations. The proverb thus offered to all, one can harness it to innovative ends, not necessarily dangerous but troubling, partial ones. Turning inside out is what's at stake.

Proverbial, axiomatic, maieutic: teaching's involved, where the discovery of new meanings is ever reached by slow repetition. Proverbial, like that of a saying that can be deciphered at a touch or sounded by a hurdy-gurdy: what's involved is a *diferencia*, a *distanca* but also a *diskant*, a *romance*, perhaps a *roman*, always a *vers*, a *ballade*, a *danse*.⁵ Proverbial: the one who works at the dactyl of the pyramids, the stone of the staircase, the material ordering of orchards, who says what he can't say otherwise, his fingers being worn; the one says what comforts him through provisional perennity, that supple saying figuring eternity. Eternity is short for him, but infinite for the flock of petitioners, of those who duplicate demands by way of a maxim. Infinite, thus countless, for a saying is ready for all immediate

and ephemeral uses which its transformation resuscitates and preserves, and one can just as easily utter a saying to reinforce a unique tradition as proffer it for an opposite use.⁶

The proverbial goes in a circle, for it concerns the stable, the identical, the law, dolmens, the dead, the ornament of order. Yet, because of this, it can be shaped, for “it’s by going in circles that one advances,”⁷ and the rhythmic rule which punctuates the filling of time turns upon itself against structural subservience. All that’s needed is a few slight, almost tender, shifts.

The proverbial is sexual. It involves unreason.

Montreal, 10-20 October 1979

11.

The heterogeneous is a laugh, a lack of order. The heterogeneous is the non-hierarchical. It denies god, his splendour, his armies, his dazzling lights, his law. It loops, it laughs. The heterogeneous is a nothing-at-all.

A laugh: a beech-grove jostled by the wind is not a tree-top mockery of birds, nor simply a rustling of branches; if the wind rises to a squall, the beech-grove may come down on our heads.

A laugh. You are with friends. And in the air, beneath the sprigs, thanks to the smoke, there is a teasing, a warm pleasure, you feel good, you will go home that evening. Yet you observe yourself. In the air, surveillance — and there are Chinese lanterns, a luminous demarcation of territory. But a laugh makes a mockery of brilliance, and all surveillance. I didn’t ask you who you are. Don’t ask me who I am; you do not do so.

Yet, it’s there, that request. But we erase, via utopia, every gradation, every ordered difference. Let’s be precise — I am — we don’t erase it but rather counter it. Rats, the rat system, is familiar to us and we refuse it. Such is our resolve. We are well versed in this system. We know that for now it will not stop functioning. Yet we believe, through irony or tenderness, that a thrust of that resolve, of that fever — since the rat system is sick — once it reaches a critical threshold, can unleash a concentrated movement that will destroy hierarchies and free the rats. Such a thrust is exhausting, we are war-weary. We die often. The survivors are the fighters of memory. They sketch signs, negotiate knowledge.

The heterogeneous is a principle of writing. It cannot be hierarchized. Yet it is ordered. But only to be perturbed. It is made of atomizable, atomized particles. It arranges them. It's a speck of dust, a paper-maker's bench, a ream being glazed, before the cut and after the roller. It's a work-bench, a workout, an impossible pull-up, on the bar between the floor and nothingness. There's a lack of order and yet a program. Thus, a kind of order.

The heterogeneous is a beach stubbed by pebbles. It's a rhythm. Rhythm is shaped in the wood or stone alone, or in the poem. A contrast of vowels. An anonymous imprint of a name. A tambourine.

River, oh river!
Fire, oh fire!
Memory, oh flesh!
And there, all the residual, all the abhorred.

There is no other notch. I am not revealing the incoercible for you. The blind man, unaware of his blindness, does not know that it's there, uncoercible. The hand envelops a vertebra of night. Countless suns.

All the abhorred, since it's there without apparent continuity. The heterogeneous is completely discontinuous, yet whole. Each notion is reported. It forms a poem. The poem has a line or two. It exists only to the extent that it clashes with other equally precarious notations [here the comma and the period mark a moment of hesitation]. The whole is polyphonic and it creates a cliff between resounding and receiving. The crop of all these cries is desolation. Nothing can, nothing ought to console the poem-of-notations.

All the abhorred. For the abhorred receives. He is the outsider. He can't help but hear. His ears are fettered.

All the abhorred, all the heterogeneous. The heterogeneous one is he who comes from every direction and politely steps aside for some other walker. The heterogeneous is a politeness and a silence. I walk. He who walks carries, in his gait, a forest. A beating of beaks. He who walks becomes the step, the burning one, the dying one, the newborn, the knowing one. He wins to the walker's wiles the varied footsteps which could bar the entry to the escarpments.

Thus I compose. Thus I advance. Thus I read.

Montreal, 20 October–4 November 1979

12. *Poem-drawing*

Under vaults of lime the pencil's spray
 Rounds the ends of a smile.
 You handle it with precarious attention
 And a few flowers.

Paris, 10 June 1978 — Montreal, 4 November 1979

13. *Written on rue Danton near fertile eyes
 or Homage to a book*

The shadow the blind stain a way of dissolving the wing
 Also the roof which is absent beyond
 To see what no longer remains and mobilize there
 At a common height
 Without a three-cornered hat cross or beak helpless
 But a burning
 Or the audible sieve-like circumstances the still enamoured bone

Paris, 12 August 1979

14. *Discreet*

Silence and ochre an ellipsis
 A stone tossed at the skull the well
 A simply elided word which spurs on
 I have seen that land beneath the impatiens
 Ardently lives the recumbent effigy
 With a certain cellar frugality
 The garden stretches to the brightness of the heights

Montreal, 14 August–4 September 1979

15. *Another Ellipsis*

I shall plan to write a book on windflowers. And nothing else. I'm not familiar with them. Haven't seen their shape or perhaps not attached a name to them. I don't know if that conveys a smell to the living who might be concerned. Windflower is a blind man's name, or perhaps an ellipsis. I can do nothing but write in its name.

Montreal, 14 August 1979

16. *Three words three points*

1. Altar-piece of a grace, they call it cerebral.
 These dunces know nothing,
 They make bubbles bulls popes piles of paper,⁸
 They don't play marbles.

Cerebral they call this disturbing poetry;
So it must be poetry.
Their cerebrum defecates.
They've got the wrong figure.

I do not forget the minarets coal-cellars workshops,
The oil-flame and the shade of eyelids on the fear of the sun.
This calls for invention, always.

Montreal, beginning of May 1979

2. Poetry is not a sorcerer's art, although that too
Coming from furthest time, most fragile, with its
glow remaining in the ashes, all the
more vibrant in their ardour for being
not yet totally extinguished;
Poetry is not a sorcerer's art, but one of experience, and
that is totally rocky, shining in the pathways where
I tread,
Of experience, then, when you walk the streets behind a
blue turban worn for style or because it's out of fashion,
and you sit down on the steps of a noisy cafe which
is shaded below
And there's music, and there's more.
Someone writes on a paper canvas
In bold-face or light but regular letters.

Montreal, beginning of May 1979

3. I write on silence or the voice the name against the flesh of
what is spoken by the streets
It hurts like a violently blue sky,
Some bread-box angel eating from a trough a purchased
pleasure.
I rush to the redoubts.
I grope for the sounds, for the other ear.
Some not too old women stood at the doorsteps;
They recounted the day's tale, beneath blowing bedsheets;
Their mouths were not basted with submission.

Montreal, 14 May–4 November 1979

17. *A pinch of ink is just too much*

The edition flees like a moon and the conversations are lost
In a paper hankie etched with a camaieu

June it will be he said before hanging up
 And then fall and winter and then spring
 It will come out next fall said he again
 So you have time to write crochet reweave
 Two three books of dawn and night
 Poetry says this poet doesn't sell
 Poetry is for the night
 So there you are with all that soiled paper
 And you turned it into something sad
 Like a box-tree for boughs or wood for autumn coal
 And less sad grave birds
 Friends' voices ashes in an ashtray papers in the wind of
 store windows
 And you wrote about the stranger who speaks
 Beside you, you a scribe wrote that stranger
 The vague icon with twisted tracks traversing the trains without
 a tiara
 And this counts as much as a fly's wing
 Caught by the eye beneath the blue window in fine weather
 All this grillwork of blue rage you are done undone you fly off
 through paper lined for indignation
 They had you, you know it, as they say in the iron and cotton
 workshops
 Cacophony telephone case he made the sole mistake of
 not saying
 What of not saying it
 That that one with the hair-shirt
 There's nothing else he can do.
 He's only a poet after all
 And he has objections
 Which he can't reveal
 Therefore you tarry you take off
 By the birches streets derisions
 You stain with your hand the bark of stations
 A pinch of ink is just too much
 To mark the pupil
 Of strangers who approach the blind window

Montreal, 2 May 1979

18. *Written with a new pen*

The finish is that pleasure of the white page broadly open
 where one discovers the pebbles amidst the splashes of sand
 It's the good the blue the sensible thing the finicky

A pain pierces the ear's epitaph just behind the bone
Between the two boxes of brain and jaws
The long roads will soon open up
But the page signs point to wisdom
You will find courage grass and water bubbles
Near the eglantines

Montreal, 2 May 1979

19. *On the line*

Time is lined with grey on the book cover
Small piles of stone obscure the eye
You didn't understand a thing I said
Or perhaps I understood nothing of the tenderness of teasing
I loved you from a paradise where we needed road-side roses
The lighted lamp wounds dry flowers
Near the keyboard of the writing desk at the edges of the rain
The books are slow in coming but the mountain
Assures me behind me with dahlias and birds for a fever
All this is said on the stopless line
In the manner of hapless encounters under umbrellas upturned by
a gust
I loved you we loved each other we know our grammar
An entire people passed beneath the Persian blinds parsed by fear
We left behind our friends' fear like a torn undertop
They thought the weather was turning fine perhaps they caught a
chill
In their backs and palms very far from their gaze

Montreal, 3 September 1978, 23 February 1979, 5 November 1979

20. *A (nearly) unretouched portrait*

Her cheeks speak appetite
She looks you straight in the eye
She trod and trod the pathways
She has been through worse
She extends eyelashes which wander towards mountain plants

She is prudent she has seen mounds moons
She walks horns first into the underbrush
Towards the tenacious tinges of autumn
She donned her modest old billy-goat frock
She came radiant

She walked and walked among the daisies
 She stamped the earth with many a dismembered almond
 The windows opened to trade-winds
 She put her finger to her lips
 A bird's wing caressed her

Montreal, 15 November 1978, 13 January 1979, 5 November 1979

21. *Conversation*

She said: How can one stand this a whole year long, between
 moon and tiger, cloud and cat?

How

The atmosphere of fire, the starry cinder 'neath the eyebrow
 The tranquil tub, a quarrel, a care too quickly curbed by too much
 talk

The stop, the pen piercing the skin, the prolonged stop, stopping
 Work, the narrow span

To stand all this when she comes from far, how when

There is, out there, like morass of a moat⁹

A roof's slate, a pumice stone for the sole, the polite, the loveable
 and the calendar

The work-bench for the warp, a yellow drawing on the wall, a
 half-closed eye in bed, the night for waking sleep, the distended,
 the gilding, the scarlet, the splintered

Even so indented by the index which the closed ear lends to
 the salamander of the hearth. It is six in the morning,

Aren't you asleep? You won't be able to stand him. Between moon
 and tiger

you repeat,

The lights of the mining towns have no room, or perhaps
 emilian¹⁰

Distant in the streets all lights out, the apsidial chapel or
 the distancing of the sun, I mean the obsidian

Along the roads without lairs without larches

Which simply form a network for mayweed and menace¹¹ or,
 say, something smooth

Achieved by an oh so slow index at the tenderest skein of the skin
 But how

Those missing towns of the supersonic bang, commercial cold air,
 the tall blue chimneys between the bareness of buildings, the
 teeth of wolf-friends very jagged with ambitions and misfortune,
 dust or the hollow echo of sounds of excavations, the lapse of
 lips?

I used to rise at ten, and you, thoughtful, tied the slightest
step to silence.

22. *The tea-rose unties the tongue*

I'll not forget those ardent eyes which entered the station at
the top of the stairs,
near a shoulder, digested dust, a star,
a smell.

A white flower brings the vase and the bee,
lips form flesh,
there's nothing more to add.

I can't forget the crossing, the thrice-felt heart-throb, the tea
rose,

The ravines gutted by drops of water bouncing from the bridges
of slate — you said it in Toronto amidst the rose-bushes we
sought —,

the vase, we hadn't one so we drew
a red cat alongside a sun perched over pollen.

Montreal, 20 November 1978, 22 June 1979

23.

The musical flows from silence.

The musical flows from an ellipsis.

The musical flows from a colour.

The musical is continuo and syncopation. Within that opposition,
it accompanies the humdrum. It seduces it, it fulfils it.

Continuo: a repeating of rhythmic parts, deployed syncopically in
two, four, five tempi. Thus and yet a syncopation, wherein is woven
the melody which calculates and traps the continuous. The melody is
the form of the ephemeral, the narrative cell of the banal. But with-
out the prosodic continuity of narrative argument, no text is possible.

It's a question of weaving. Perhaps of woven. Surely a shiver.
There's the measured pause, like a freed form, a hesitation before
the obscure in order to sound its signal.

The shiver sets off ancient techniques, the augmented, the con-
tracted, the canon, the ricercar. One must seek. Which means nothing
unless something has already been found. Something out of which the
impass arises. This ellipsis proceeds by linkages, by the roadblock and
release of linkages.

The musical is an offering. For nothing can be offset unless it is first offered. Homage to the name. Homage to the motif. Motif of a fête. Perhaps of a repose.

Montreal, 10 November 1979

24.

She'd love the branch of slate
 At the crumbliest rancour of rain at sunrays' repose
 Then she smiles she suddenly has time
 The deep-sea pleat when the hour's release is nigh

One can say it with an offering or a contradiction
 The release of the nullified hour for the pleasure of
 a fishnet weary of water
 When the diverse and the deep-sea overlap in the large
 lips lento

Montreal, 20-25 June 1979

NOTES

- ¹ My original translation for the collection's title was "Other, otherwise." This and other problems which arose during the process of translation were discussed with the author in several face-to-face meetings, as well as telephone conversations.
- ² The original line read: "Le vent leur fait le dôme blanc." I had originally proposed "The wind whitens their domes," but the poet wanted me to maintain the stress on "blanc."
- ³ The original was "Aux planctons de pluie." In order to keep the alliteration in [p], I chose "pitter-patter of plankton," with its suggestion of, but not explicit reference to, rain.
- ⁴ The poet used "propriété lisse." Again, as in many of the texts, I looked for an alliterative coupling which was not in the original. I had first put "purring possession," but switched to "pat" to render "lisse," and keep its irony.
- ⁵ I decided to retain the underlined terms (the first three of which were of foreign origin, and all of which were in Roman characters in the original French, to offset the italics of the rest), since their meaning would still remain clear.
- ⁶ This fragment gave me much difficulty, as did, in general, the philosophico-aesthetic texts on the sensual, the musical, and the heterogeneous (nos. 1, 11, 23).
- ⁷ Bertolt Brecht, from *Meti, Livre des retournements* (Paris: L'Arche, n.p., n.d.), free translation.
- ⁸ This verse read: "Ils font des bulles des papes des paperasses." The word "bulles" has two meanings in French: bubbles and bulls, meaning formal papal documents with seals attached. It was impossible to find a single-word English equivalent. I thus dropped the idea of "bubbles," and kept "bulls" with its stream-of-consciousness link to "popes." But the poet suggested rendering his "bulles" by two words:

bubbles, bulls. And this most useful suggestion was accepted. The free-association of “des papes des paperasses,” with its identical initial syllable, was another knotty problem: “popes piles of paper” is, I think, a close substitute.

- ⁹ The original reads: “Il y a là, là-bas, comme un dormant de douve.” “Dormant” is a polysemic word for which I found no equally complex English equivalent. I had to be content with keeping one of its meanings through the word “morass,” which I chose in order to keep the alliteration with “moat.” I had at first used “mire of a moat,” but decided to turn to the final version in order to preserve the double syllable of “dormant.”
- ¹⁰ In French, the line read: “Les lumières des coronas n’ont pas de place, ou peut-être l’émilienne.” The poet indicated to me that the last word could have been evoked by a girl’s name, or, as I thought, by the region in northern Italy, Emilia-Romagna, here in adjectival form. The following verse began with “Lointaine,” which could refer to the enigmatic “émilienne” or the “l’absidiole” which comes later in the second verse. The poet told me, too, that this poem reproduces the process of its own composition, as the poet gropes for the right word. I decided to leave the word “emilian” with lower case “e,” but am far from sure that the meaning is clear. (Is the original any clearer?)
- ¹¹ The original reads: “Qui forment simplement un lacis pour la ronce et le risque, ou alors quelque chose de lisse.” It was hard to maintain the alliteration in [l], [s], and [r]. My first attempt gave “Which simply form a network for bramble and brag or, say, something smooth.” I then tried “dog fennel and danger” for “la ronce et le risque,” finally choosing the present version, with its repetitions of [s] and [m] sounds.

TRADUIRE L’AUTRE, PRESQUE LE MÊME

Réflexions d’un auteur à propos d’une traduction

Michel van Schendel

AUTRE: que puis-je dire d’une traduction quand elle est adéquate sinon qu’elle produit un *texte* autre, à la fois fidèle et différent? Je connais la langue d’arrivée, en l’occurrence l’anglais. Je ne connais pas dans mon propre texte la possibilité d’un autre qui, écrit en une autre langue, puisse en devenir l’émanation, presque la transcription. Si, au moment d’écrire, je connaissais ce possible, je n’écrirais pas. En même temps, écrivant aussi pour les tiers, pour leur

appartenance à d'autres cultures qui me sollicitent, j'apprends à épeler la différence d'écriture dans la langue d'arrivée, et j'aurais presque envie d'écrire en anglais, en italien, en espagnol, en tant d'autres langues. Tel est le paradoxe que suscite une traduction intelligente. Je rends hommage au texte de Ben-Zion Shek.

Pour les avoir pratiquées jadis, j'appréhende les embûches de la traduction de poésie. Deux partis sont offerts, un troisième est possible. Le premier invite à suivre le sens, ou plutôt la référence lexicale, pour autant que les divers moments du poème y soient réductibles. Il s'agit, en effet, d'une réduction. Le tissu échappe. Le deuxième parti est de tricoter en laine ce qui est tissé de lin, ou l'inverse. De construire dans la langue d'arrivée des allitérations, des assonances, et des métriques et scansion censément analogues à celles — de la langue de départ? non, du poème que la traducteur tient en modèle. La traduction y arrive, si arriver est jamais possible dans le texte, mais en brouillant le sens qui, à son tour, échappe. Un poème, si c'en est un, est la construction d'un sens inouï dans une forme inédite, la production d'une forme-sens actuelle mais inépuisable qui réinvente la langue dont le poète est tenu de garder l'usage et le savoir minutieux. Le traducteur intelligent opte donc pour un troisième parti, le plus périlleux. Il pratique un droit singulier: le droit multiple du sens, de l'ordre des mots du texte d'origine, de sa scansion réinventée, de sa sensualité phonique. L'hésitation est nécessaire, aussi la reprise. Elles sont la marque d'une sensibilité avertie. De même, le conciliabule fréquent entre le traducteur et l'auteur initial, gens d'entendement s'ils ont cette modestie de la passion. Ce sont les signes d'une transculturalité mutuelle, et d'une longue mémoire historique inscrite jusque dans les os ineffaçables.

Que l'on comprenne ceci, car ceci me concerne. Un poème organise la polysémie, on le sait, la rend audible et lisible dès lors qu'il exige la difficulté de l'amitié. Je rends actuelle la mémoire, celle de l'ombre inentendue dans l'histoire du présent, dans toute l'histoire accueillie. Ce n'est pas une prétention, c'est le sens de mon métier de poète. L'amitié est transversale, elle s'adresse aussi à des inconnus isolés sur quelque Place des Trois-Cultures. Le poème engrange et distribue cette mémoire qui n'est jamais assez intelligente, — ou sensible, c'est tout un, — il compose une extrême tension de sens, d'habitudes et de vocalités entre les mots, en pourvoit chacun d'eux aux endroits stratégiques du passage vers d'autres plages textuelles, arides ou douces, mémorielles, actives. Le mot peut alors, sans complément d'objet ou autre indice, concrétiser des constellations de silences. Celles-ci viennent de l'histoire, et l'on n'a pas à parler pour ce qu'elle ne dit pas, pour ce que ses agents ne disent pas bien qu'ils la réclament. L'inconscient est fluide mais cultivé, il accueille dans son parcours l'histoire écourtée des autres, de la mienne aussi.

De là, de cette polysémie diffusée et pourtant de cet écourtement vient une redoutable difficulté pour l'interprète, même s'il est transculturel. Comment traduire? Premier, deuxième ou troisième parti? Troisième. Après et avec hésitations et conciliabules. Et par décision. Ainsi, dans "*Croit posséder*" (décrit en *Imagines*

Possessing), le mot “engrangement.” Comment le traduire? Voici le texte d’origine, dont la traduction est présentée plus haut :

*Ce bras étendu sur l’autre épaule comme une propriété lisse
Il le retire à l’heure du dessert
Il compte les sous*

*Un désir d’engrangement
Un petit oiseau
Une branche très ténue
Qui casse
D’une aile battue la rame fend l’eau*

Elle n’a pas bougé d’un cil

Dans une première version, Ben-Zion Shek avait traduit “Un désir d’engrangement” par “*A desire to store grain.*” Mais il ne s’agissait pas de cela, du grain à engranger. C’était inutilement référentiel et réducteur. L’engrangement ne concernait pas la grange, peut-être pas elle seule. Pris entre le premier et le deuxième parti (*A desire to store grain / A little bird*, où “Un désir d’engrangement” n’appelle pas en complément syntaxique “Un petit oiseau” qui, placé au vers suivant en même position, fait partie du même paradigme imaginaire, si je parviens à me lire après coup), M. Shek a opté pour une formulation intransitive et généralisante, “*to harvest*,” qui dit le sens et protège le tissu.

Troisième parti de traduction, donc. Un autre exemple vient. Dans “*Trois mots trois points*” (*Three words three points*), dans la troisième séquence du poème : “*Quelque ange de huche mangeant à l’auge un bonheur acheté.*” Cela est radicalement intraduisible, cela est épouvantable; cela néanmoins participe encore du français. L’ange qui vient prétendument du ciel, l’auge attribuée au cochon et la huche normalement destinée au pain, comment les concilier phonétiquement et les contraster dans une langue d’arrivée? Conciliation et contraste ont fait l’objet d’une invention : “*Some bread-box angel eating from a trough a purchased pleasure.*” La forme-sens y est, plénière — bien qu’elle adhère à une tout autre beauté culturelle où j’aurais tort de chercher la mienne. Sans doute, le très référentiel “*bread-box*” ne peut être l’équivalent du sensitif “*huche.*” Mais ce n’est pas la faute à Shek, c’est la faute au référentialisme culturel de l’anglais. Cet élément lui-même, déplaisant à mon oreille française, est intégré dans une séquence qui établit, en anglais, selon un autre système, une sensibilité et une intelligence. Ces qualités ne sont plus seulement référentielles. Elles sont symétriques au texte du poème.

MICHEL VAN SCHENDEL