## Erín Moure / Quand Moure traduit Turcot: Making a Book of Hours into a Book of Ours...

## A tale of a translation in process: François Turcot's Mon dinosaure

"It intrigues me because I can't . . and so I do."
November 1, 2013

I'm almost halfway through a first draft of Montrealer François Turcot's fourth book of poems, a homage to a father, his father, and a co-presence with the final days of co-being with this father. And, après, a meditation on his absence. It is a Book of Hours, lost by the father and rewritten by the son. The book accompanies me eerily in these first months that follow my own father's finale, in Edmonton.

Here, almost halfway: what does it mean to be almost halfway? Time's membrane?

| Lorsque janvier éclata | / While January cracked | / When January burst |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| décembre | / December | / December |


| deux heures moins | I two minutes to | / two minutes short of |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| deux | / two | / two |


| dans son oeil | / in his/her/their eye | / in his blank |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| blanc | / white/blank | / eye |
| figèrent l'horloge | / they'd set the clock | / they'd froze the clock |
| à zéro | / at zero | / at zero |

"Translating" seems an inadequate verb for the activity it claims to describe. "Transmission" or "bearing across"? These turn out to be inadequate ideas, or mere glosses perhaps. What really happens is a poiesis, a making. Each small piece of Turcot poem, in English, takes hours of building, forming syllables, seeing how they interact: pressing them, watching them, and feeling them in the mouth... leaving them quiet to see if their relation holds at a later reading.

November 2

I return to poem " 11 ," in the countdown that is the first series in the book, drafted in English words from François Turcot's own carefully pared lexicon. Now early in the morning of November 2, 2013 in a snowstorm in Alberta, my English versions expand across the page. How can I choose one (for what resonant reason?):

| à pied levé en forme de question | / one foot raised to form / a question | / foot raised in the shape / of a question |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| garé sur le dos avant d'éteindre | / flat on his/my/her back <br> / before flickering out/fading | / flat on my back <br> / before fading out |
| j'éviterai de mourir | / I'll avoid dying | / I'll not die |
| à leurs yeux | / in front of their eyes | / while they're looking |

It does hold. It does not. I go on.

November 8

How possessives in French, tipped toward English, can have an aura of subject indeterminacy that doesn't matter to "meaning," finally, or to the main trajectory of meaning, yet that does affect reading and thus jostles meaning, in reverberatory ways. It lifts reading onto a plane that doesn't exist in English at all, a plane of possibly shifting existences and a human possession that is first of all an intelligence, for it does not just identify aspects of the physical world but offers a movement of belonging in thought itself... his face? her face? their face? The day's face? Son visage in Turcot could be any of these.

| jour torve en chute | I dour day in free- | I grim day in free |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| libre | I fall | / fall |
| à macquitter | I to acquit myself | / as if to free me |
| d'une dette | I of a debt | / from a debt |

derrière elle trois tiroirs / behind her/it three drawers / revealing three drawers placarderaient / to be plastered /would poster over / to placard son visage

This potential uncertainty of ownership (which seems-almost falsely-to turn on "gender") creates ripples and confluences inside the poetic text which are not so quiet, and that, when combined with structures like the line break, push words against each other in a way that can't be replicated in English. English just does not have the same sinews. It is, yes, a sinew that is at stake here: the fibres of a muscle, the connective tissue of a language, and how that mesh with is pulses and inner repartee cannot be transformed whole into the mesh of another language. ${ }^{1}$

Here, the solemnity of the hovering father chooses "his." The father-ghostly in grammar-more often grants his male gender to what grammar makes uncertain, at least for the English language reader.

We, as readers, accept the ostensible subject of the book-the presence of the father, in the passage of hours. Still, the book's emergent father-subject pushes gender,

1 Thinking of structure: We often think of French as gendered. But it is simply substantives that are gendered, and this does not mean that they have a gender, are male or female, but that they have a genre, a type, a sort. Other words-adjectives, possessives, past participles-mirror or echo this genre, without projecting it. In English, on the other hand, possessives do project a gender, when they are not plural: her book refers not to the book and its genre, but to its possessor, who is obliged to have a gender. This gender of the owner, malware from the socius, is injected, toxin or crime or catalyst, into English text, while we obliviously continue to think of English as neutral. In French, the words son livre refer to a textual marking, son refers to the genus of the word book. It is someone's book, but the gender of this someone has nothing to do with the word book or the thing book. To determine more clearly whose book it is, a reader must move back through the phrases that precede it, and locate the open tentacle of a noun onto which to attach possession. Son livre. His book? Her book? Their book? At times, even with this readerly lateral sweep and inclusion, the gender of the possessor, needed for the English version, remains indefinite in French, or the possessive particle that first appears to refer to "someone" doesn't, on closer examination. It's not a problem in French, of course, but gives rise to a problematic breach in translation! PS: Add to this, that when the French text refers to a body part of an individual, le dos, for example, its owner is obliquely already present. As such, in English, le often requires replacement with a possessor, gendered: his back. Whose back?
pushes at grammar without seeming to. Turcot uses the slight blur of referent, its ghosts and ghosting, to move the texts. It's something that can't be reproduced in English because the eye and brain hold English sentences and phrases differently. But if I were to try. How would I do it?

November 14

The minimalism of Turcot's diction, yet the surprises of exactitude in his individual elements of lexicon. The poems surprise. Turcot has an incredible vocabulary, full of minute precisions that spark departures or shifts from daily use, without being self-consciously "literary." The lexicon thus makes the text take little leaps, while its smallness ties it down. The sensation of reading this book: like sitting very still but hearing your heart throb. Disproportionate makes a new proportion here.

And there is the use of the conditional tense, its peculiar leaning forward, and hesitant pulling back. Turcot gives the feeling of rocking back and forth (not rocking but pitching, ship-like...).

The would, could, might... of our English conditional, all those words coincide in Turcot in a single French word. To the translator, this single conditional word provokes a waver, not tremulous but deliberate, in the transfer. The conditional, in French, has fewer conditions (perhaps). It creates an anticipation, whereas in English, it expresses a reticence.

## November 15

Turcot's work, arriving in English, hovers amid choices: if only the resulting poems could be printed with their numerous variations, to lay bare the shifts, movements, twitches at work in the original. Yes, perhaps, at times, translations should be printed like this to lay the bones and sinews bare:
jaillirait telle une intrigue / what a plot would spring up / what a plot could be cooked up à tiroirs / in episodes/installments / in tidbits ma voisine aux pieds nus / my barefoot neighbour / my neighbour barefoot
je déroberais de la main I out of my hand I'd swipe I out of my hand I'd pull son sourire / her smile / her grin

Expectations turn, slightly, depending on which the lexical bit is leaned on. And expressions: a roman à tiroirs, of course, the novel in installments. But what is it doing there? What is it performing?

November 18

In poem 12 of the book's first sequence, exorbitée is not exorbitant. But is, because it has the same sense of sound, a movement of the mouth and voice, consistent. The balances here are real and rough, not fine; they balance sound with words and that sound-space has to be respected. Such a careful balance. And the impossibility of translating "joues" by "cheeks"! To avoid evoking "foufounes."

| quelque part la course <br> des ans | / somehow/someday the fleeting <br> / years | / somewhere the passage <br> / of years |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| exorbitée une meute | / a bulging horde/host | / exorbited swell |
| de souvenirs | / of memories | / of memories |

I keep going, absorbed, moving the particles, letting them evoke and invoke other particles. Wanting to make the word "stutter" stutter....

| autrement j'entrerais rond <br> dans la mort | / otherwise I'd head smack <br> / into death | / what if I headed smack <br> / into death |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| pétri de fictions | / steeped/kneaded/embroiled |  |
| in fictions |  |  |$\quad$| / roiled in fictions |
| :--- |
|  |
| un moulin |
| bégayant d'histoires |

November 26

The use of word "stoppé" in 7 . The flavour of that combination of sounds in the mouth, the English from another century now quite at home in French, but still: how it repositions other words slightly in the phrase, making a tiny but significant shift in the piece: how to render that? How can I read this sound fold, across languages?
janvier intermittent stoppé sous la lune
rivé au coude
du lit
me réveillerai-je
dans le même homme ?

| / intermittent January struck | / intermittent January stoppled |
| :--- | :--- |
| / by the moon | / moon lit |

I jammed at the lip I rivetted to the lip
/ of the bed / of the bed
/ will I awaken / will I wake up
/ in the same guy? / in the same man?

November 27

It would have been my mother's birthday today. I want to end with a secret, that seems to report my own moves between languages, and make a leap from the good deeds, the exploits, the successes, for we don't have the same expression in English for "les bons coups" and the most exact English translations sound "corporate," a sound unwanted here:
secrètement pour moi seul
passant à l'est
loin des sommets je dégusterais
mes bon coups
/ secretly for me alone / secretly for myself alone / all on my own
/ heading toward/to the East/eastbound/heading East / heading East
/ far from the peaks I'd savour / the summits behind me I'll relish
/ my good deeds / my sweet moves / my best pranks / my exploits

March 27, 2014

I keep working, of course. The winter has nearly passed, though the snow still accumulates. But soon Edmonton will be behind me. My own Dad lived with three clocks; he could not possibly have had one book of hours. He left a lot of writing, though, mysterious: "I have no boats!" Still, his last spoken words to me in the hospital were ever so clear. "I'm not depressed! I'm not depressed!"

Here's to the Dads!

