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Helen Stevenson on Translating Alain Mabanckou's *Broken Glass* (2009)

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For readers of Francophone African literature, Alain Mabanckou is a household name. The author, who hails from Congo-Brazzaville, has penned eleven novels, six volumes of poetry and numerous essays on language, literature, and identity. In addition to being a prolific writer, Alain Mabanckou is Professor of French and Francophone Studies at the University of California in Los Angeles. His popularity amongst readers and students is such that he is affectionately called “Mabancool” — a nickname used by former French Cultural Minister, Frédéric Mitterrand, when presenting the author with a Legion of Honour in 2011 (“Prince of the Absurd”).

Among the estimated three percent of all books translated into English (Steeimers 107), Mabanckou's fifth novel *Verre Cassé* (2005) was published under the title *Broken Glass* by UK publisher Serpent's Tail in 2009. The novel, which has since been adapted for the stage, was translated by British translator and writer Helen Stevenson, with whom I exchanged a series of emails in 2016 for my doctoral research on humour translation. Of particular interest to me was Stevenson's experience translating the novel's roughly three hundred literary and cultural references, many of which are woven into the narrative without any typographical emphasis.

Whilst scholars Kathryn Batchelor (2013) and Vivan Steemers (2014) have examined some of the challenges that Mabanckou's references engender for readers and translators of his novel, Helen Stevenson is of the opinion that “[t]he richness of his cultural references may make [his] books difficult to sell, but not to translate” (translators must read with their ears). In the following email interview, the translator of *Broken Glass* speaks of the game-like experience of translating Mabanckou's hidden references, the responsibility she feels in being a translator, and the value in drawing from what she calls “your best library” – the material that is already in your head.

Sarah Martin (SM): Where are you from?

Helen Stevenson (HS): I'm British, white, female, from Yorkshire, in the North of England. I've lived in France for long periods, in the Pyrénées-Orientales and more recently in the Lot region, near Cahors. I live in Somerset now, in the South West of England.

SM: What are your language pairs?

HS: I translate from French into English. I have also done some translation from German into English.

SM: How did you learn these languages?

HS: I learned German and French at school, then did my degree in Modern Languages, at the University of Oxford. I have worked in France as a tourist guide and also lived in Munich for a year. I always enjoyed translating into English. I'm a pianist – I also teach piano – and I have always felt that playing music and translating went together well. Even as a child my ambitions were to be a pianist and interpreter.

SM: How long have you been practising as a translator?

HS: I have been translating now since 1985 when I left university, and before that, but the first novel I translated was *Naissance des Fantômes*, by Marie Darrieussecq, in 1998. I loved her work, and was delighted when I was approached by Faber to translate one of her books. I've also translated Alice Ferney, Antoine Bellos, though more recently I've only done works by Mabanckou.

SM: Apart from literature, do you translate other types of documents?

HS: Occasionally I translate letters as a favour, but not really. My husband translates poetry into and from Italian and French and we enjoy doing that together. I expect I'd get paid much better to translate the publicity for Eurostar, but no one's ever asked me!

SM: In your opinion, what makes a 'good' translation?

HS: That's a big question! I know I do it instinctively. I don't have a technique. I've always felt I just knew how it should go. I absolutely believe that there is a musicality to good writing, and that you have to render that. Obviously you have to be accurate and not fanciful or self-indulgent, or correct the writer's thought. It's important to be able to write good English, that people want to read, that flows and is alive. If you can't do that you can't possibly translate, because while translation is a process of transposition, it's also a process of composition. You are composing sentences which correspond to the sentences of the original but which aren't mirror images of them. I have no confidence that a machine can translate well. The dictionary part is the smallest element of translation – knowing what the words mean. You have to know how to balance them. And then there is register – the right degree of formality or informality; and understanding the writer's style, and reflecting it. I get quite irritated when people suggest that machines could do the work of translators. So much of the work is in the understanding of the spirit of the writing. Once you've grasped that it's relatively easy to find the words in your own language. It's a bit like being an actor sometimes. You have to get inside the role.

SM: What advice would you give to an aspiring translator?

HS: Don't do it unless you're passionate about it. It's not well paid, though it is very rewarding, so to be a literary translator is usually something you do alongside other things, not as your main means of earning a living. The publisher at Serpent's Tail once said to me that he thought I was a good translator because I was also a writer and therefore didn't feel I had to express myself personally through my translations as some people do! He said it makes it easier for the editors. I'd say only translate books you enjoy, though that's not always possible, but at least books you respect, anyway. I need things to get my teeth into, with complexities of style and meaning, and lots of nuance – humour is nuanced, so that's always interesting. You need to be meticulous and inspired at once, and thorough and consistent. It's a very big responsibility, to translate someone's precious work.

SM: Because of the subjective nature and creative constraints of translating humour, do you ever feel *powerful* or *powerless* when recreating it for your readership?

HS: Power isn't a word I'd use, not in this context. As I say, I feel responsible. I often feel surprisingly free, creatively, in the way I do when I write – there are so many ways of rendering a sentence. To know that, and to have confidence that you have chosen the best one – that's a nice feeling. I might feel powerless if I found myself having to translate something I didn't admire or respect because I needed the money but I would try not to have to do that as I would probably do it badly and unhappily.

SM: When faced with a challenging humorous element, what tools/options do you have recourse to?

HS: In the case of Alain, my greatest resource is knowing him. I don't really think about humorous elements in any different way to the rest of the text. He did say to me once that he thought it was really helpful that I had children and could write their voices. I don't think that with Alain you need much more context than I have – after four – or is it five books? – I rarely meet things I don't understand. With *Broken Glass* that was a big challenge, especially with the titles, which were embedded throughout, but once I realized what was going on it became like a game. I developed an eye/ear for the embedded titles – there was always something about them that caught the eye or the ear, and I don't think I missed any. I hope not! It made it more interesting for me. Alain's irreverence towards authority, the fact that politically we see eye to eye, I think, and that he is so funny about pomposity and hypocrisy – I like all that, so I guess

I have recourse, in a sense, to our common view of the world, despite the fact that he is a huge black African and I am a blond English woman! Occasionally I've googled references to the Congo and political and social events there, of course. Sometimes when he makes word plays I have to wrestle for a while till I get the right equivalent. He will take an idiom in French and subvert it, substituting other words, so I have to find equivalents in English – that can be tricky sometimes, but you just have to let your brain wander till you find it. I draw on what's in my head almost always. That's where your reference material is, your best library. That's why you're a translator. It just so happens that you speak both languages, but the language work isn't really the nub of it. It's the dismantling and the reconstruction that is so interesting and vital.

SM: Humour is often used to construct or display identity. To what extent do you feel that you display your own identity when translating humour? Is this a conscious decision?

HS: I try not to display my white English female educated middle classness. To do so would surely be a total failure. I want people to believe that this is written by Alain Mabanckou, it just happens to be in English. So I aim for total invisibility – and that's a delicious kind of freedom, particularly for a writer.

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