



To cite this article:

Gibbard, Paul. "Review of Marie Darrieussecq's *Crossed Lines* (trans. Penny Hueston)." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 16 (December 2021): 64-66.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Review of Marie Darrieussecq's *Crossed Lines* (trans. Penny Hueston)

PAUL GIBBARD
The University of Western Australia

Darrieussecq, Marie. *La Mer à l'envers*. Paris: P.O.L., 2019.

———. *Crossed Lines*. Translated by Penny Hueston. The Text Publishing Company, 2020.

For Marie Darrieussecq, the most pressing issues confronting the world are mass migration, climate change and electronic surveillance: in her novel *Crossed Lines* she explores the first of these by bringing together two characters from disparate spheres – a middle-class Parisian psychologist, Rose Goyenette, and Younès Aboussa, a Nigerien who is attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in search of a better life. They encounter one another when the cruise ship on which Rose is holidaying rescues a group of migrants from a sinking boat. Darrieussecq explores how the lives of the two characters become entangled from this point on and details the hesitancy Rose displays back in France before committing to offer Younès help. In the final third of the novel, the focus expands from a study of Rose's thoughts and experiences towards a form of social documentation, as Darrieussecq draws on her own travels and research in describing Rose's visit to a migrant camp near Calais and Younès's tragicomic journey from Niamey to a beach in Tripoli.

Crossed Lines is the seventh of Darrieussecq's books to have been brought out by Text Publishing in Melbourne and the writer seems to have found her English-language home there, English translations of her earlier works having been published in New York and London. It is the sixth book of hers to have been translated by Penny Hueston, whose flair for capturing the subtleties of Darrieussecq's expression was recognised in 2020 by the Australian Academy of the Humanities – which awarded her its Medal for Translation for her version of Darrieussecq's *Being Here: The Life of Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Text Publishing, 2017).

Hueston's deft touch is evident from as early as the front cover of *Crossed Lines*. The original French title, *La Mer à l'envers*, resists literal translation; the phrase "à l'envers" can have various meanings, from "upside down" and "inside out" to more figurative meanings connoting confusion or absurdity, as in the expression "C'est le monde à l'envers." Drawing on a phrase from analogue telephony, Hueston's choice of "crossed lines" captures not just the element of confusion in the relations between Rose and Younès, but also the traversing of personal and political boundaries. The text of the novel itself is written largely in the "free indirect style", a technique developed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers which fuses narrative description with the delineation of a character's thought processes, giving the reader a more direct sense of access to a character's mind by avoiding repetition of "she thought", "she wondered" or "she said to herself". As a result, much of Darrieussecq's original has an easy conversational tone about it, which Hueston reproduces accurately and fluently. In places Darrieussecq also incorporates speech into her indirect style, which Hueston sometimes converts back into direct speech, no doubt in an effort to make things clearer for the reader. Areas which often present difficulties for translators – slang and humour – are well handled by Hueston. Rose's son Gabriel speaks in teenager-ese and Hueston turns "dégueu" into "gross" and nicely exploits the comic possibilities of the colloquial "like". There is an especially tricky joke in which Rose's daughter Emma, when released from behind a locked door, emerges

singing the chorus of Elsa's popular song from the Disney animation *Frozen* (2013); in French this is "Libérée, délivrée" ("set free, released"), rather than "Let it go", and Hueston adeptly manipulates the narrator's description to preserve the humour of the original.

In a number of places Hueston chooses distinctively Australian terms to translate Darrieussecq's French. An "édredon" becomes a "doona" (rather than the British or American "duvet", "quilt" or "comforter") and "bornes", a slang term for kilometres, is rendered as "kays", the Australian term providing a handy metric equivalent unavailable in British or American English (although their militaries have taken up the term "clicks"). She draws on the colloquial Australian expression "to be the full bottle on" ("to be fully informed") in a couple of places: to translate "potasser" (for which a bilingual dictionary might offer "to bone up" or "to swot up") and for "se mettre à" ("to apply oneself to" or "to learn about"):

elle a potassé les droits des mineurs isolés (*La Mer à l'envers*, 203)
she is the full bottle on the rights of unaccompanied minors (*Crossed Lines*, 230)

n'allez pas croire que Rose ne s'est pas mise à l'anatomie (*La Mer à l'envers*, 219)
[d]on't think for a moment that Rose isn't the full bottle on anatomy (*Crossed Lines*, 247)

Hueston's inventive choices are a reminder of the role that regional terms can play in literary translation. Forms of British English have of course traditionally dominated the translation of French literature into English, whether in formal or in informal registers (Cockney slang often standing in, for example, for nineteenth-century Parisian *langue verte*). But Hueston is happy to go her own way: why shouldn't translators of European literature, based in Australia, she implies, use the terminology they are most familiar with? And other Australian translators of contemporary French literature are taking a similar path. In Joseph Ponthus's long poem *À la ligne* (2019), the morning break which the narrator takes at the fish-packing factory is, in Stephanie Smee's translation, his 'smoke-o' (*On the Line*, Carlton, Vic., Black Inc., 2021, ebook edition). Now that Australian publishing houses are introducing some of the world's leading writers to English-language audiences, it seems that their works may start to take on a faint whiff of eucalyptus...

If Darrieussecq conceived *Crossed Lines* as an 'issue' novel, what perspective does she offer on the question of migration? The reader is presented with Rose's perceptions of her interactions with Younès and his fellow migrants, but not in entirely conventional realist terms. Darrieussecq generally refrains from naming the emotional states of her characters: she wishes to avoid the 'commonplaces of psychology', as she has put it,¹ preferring instead to describe the detailed experience of sensation. Rose's delayed reaction to her first encounter with the migrants on the cruise ship, in which she had to step over the body of a drowned man, is framed not in terms of shock, sorrow or horror, but contains a sort of ineffability:

The cabin seemed full to overflowing with a strange fluid. She could still feel the movement in her legs, in her hips, from when she'd stepped over the body [...]
Even the idea that she could have walked on top of him... The contact, the idea of the contact. (54)

Rose's internal monologues, in which she ponders how she should behave towards Younès or how Europe should deal with migration, are generally presented without narratorial

¹ Cited by Simon Kemp, "Darrieussecq's mind", *French Studies* 62/4 (2008), p. 431.

identification of her emotional state. Her experiences are described in somewhat obscure mechanistic terms, as when she listens to a debate about immigration: “Rose felt valves opening and shutting inside her” (45) – leaving the reader uncertain perhaps about exactly what is being felt. Rose’s reflections on migration seem relatively sedate: she entertains the idea of having all the migrants aboard the ship come and live in tents in her French home town, before rejecting this: it was “perfectly logical to share the planet in a better way, but in Clèves?” (46) When Younès arrives at the Gare de Lyon, she watches him but refrains from making contact, thinking that her earlier gift to him of a phone was “already a lot” (125). Later, staring down from a smart terrace bar at migrants gathered by the Seine, she thinks: “Getting caught up in all this. It’s not like her” (133). It is only later, when Younès phones and tells her that he is lying injured in a migrant camp near Calais, that Rose finally commits to helping him: her decision is immediate and no explanation is offered, apart from that she was “speaking with a boy the same age as her son, emigrated from Niger, wounded in a makeshift camp” (171). Migration is treated in deliberately unemotive terms and Rose retains a certain opacity; for all this, it is of course obvious where the novelist’s sympathies lie. Some of the most striking passages in the novel appear in the description of Rose’s visit to the otherworldly migrant camp near Calais and in Younès’s tales of his travels from Niamey – that is, in the sections which do not feature Rose outlined against a comfortable middle-class backdrop. The novel returns to just such a setting in its final images: Rose lies ‘safe’ in bed beside her husband; outside, the Harmattan wind has been blowing and the Pyrenees stand “covered with a red veil of Sahara sand” (280). Africa is crossing the sea to Europe, but this is inevitable and need not be a cause for alarm, the narrator seems to imply: the mood is not menacing but peaceful.