



To cite this article:

Rice-Davis, Charles. "Translating Coutechève Lavoie Aupont." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 16 (December 2021): 136-142.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Translating Coutechève Lavoie Aupont

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Part of the ascendant young generation of Haitian poets, these poems by Coutechève Lavoie Aupont appear in translation as part of a growing recognition of his work in both Haiti and the world. In 2016, he received the Prix René Philoctète and the Prix Dominique Batrville, the highest national awards for poetry in French and Kreyòl, respectively. He likewise stood as one of the youngest entrants featured in James Noël's landmark 2015 collection, *Anthologie de poésie haïtienne contemporaine*, published in Paris, drawing international recognition to the poet as part of a contemporary canon (Noël).

Lavoie Aupont's first book, *Partances*, from which these translations are taken, straddles the form of discrete poems assembled into a collection, and a single, sprawling, circling, long poem. The latter model has a well-established tradition in Haiti, as famously embodied in the "Spiralism" movement of Frankétienne and the aforementioned Philoctète (Munro 145-46), and in the poems of René Depestre. This style of writing reflected "errance" (Dash 758)—wandering directionless, with a hint of exile—which in turn translated both the perambulating attentions of the poets' gaze throughout their long poems and the displacement imposed on many writers of the Duvalier era. The sense of exile was particularly urgent during the dictatorship, which saw many literary figures forced out of Haiti, jailed, killed or disappeared at the hands of the repressive regime and its feared secret police. This newer work echoes, rhymes with, the aesthetic of *errance* — "*Partances*" (which I translate as *Taking Leave*) signals a spectral departure, one which is either about to happen, or which may never occur. This ambiguous relationship to *errance* is stated in the opening: "poet / i see myself stammering and aimless [*poète / je me vois bègue et errant*]" (77). The declared love of the Haitian capital, following a repeated formula of Street/City/Country is compared to "the way one reads worry /dashed on a postcard [*comme on lit l'inquiétude / sur une carte postale*]" (86). Such a perspective implies both an imagined distance and projected ambivalence. The poet cannot set aside the feelings, at times uneasiness, at times disgust. Nor can he separate himself from a city the poet insists he will never abandon, and which won't separate from him: "the city didn't want to leave, / so, tenderly, we spent the night / together [*la ville n'a pas voulu me quitter / et amoureuxment nous avons passé la nuit / ensemble*]" (84).

This position has led one critic to evoke Baudelaire, casting the text as the "*Spleen de Port-au-Prince*" (Louis). And indeed, there are moments where the poet's contemplations slip into the realm of melancholy nostalgia: "my youth tiptoes no longer on the walls of this Street / of this City / of this Country [*ma jeunesse ne trotte plus sur les murs de cette Rue /de cette Ville /de ce Pays*]".

The blurring of borders between discrete poems belonging to a short collection, some of which bear their own dedications, and a single, meandering long poem, does not pose too much of a problem for a translator of the whole work, as the recurring motifs and call-backs can guide the interpretation of otherwise ambiguous moments in the text. Nor does the extremely sparse text employ large quantities of specifically Haitian terminology. Those which one does encounter (*loas, péristyle, madras, calebasse*) are generally rendered in their original, foreignized form. Instead, the greatest difficulty emerges from what is perhaps the poetry's most striking feature: its elliptical and liquid syntax. At times, predicates and subordinate clauses appear partially, progressively or wholly detached. In the lines "at night you are in the murmurings / the dew on your eyelids from fraying dawns [*le soir tu es dans la rumeur / la rosée sur tes paupières d'aubes fragilisées*]" (86), hedge between casting "dew" as a

complement for “murmurings” [*rosée/rumeur*] or a substitute, a revision in the speaker’s own speculations. The question is intensified when, after a line break, more images are listed, their syntactic relationship to the preceding lines even more tenuous. These dangling predicates—from a poet who dangles poems around the city “like public pendula” (110)—pose a substantial challenge to the translator.

Elsewhere in the text, single lines may be read as interjections, whispers, dialogue, but can be identified as such only by the subtlest of implications. Still more vexing for the translator are cases like “*plus de rêves*” (89). *Plus* in French can be either “more” or “no more” depending on context. I have opted for the latter, following patterns of elliptical negation elsewhere, like a “plus rien” which closes a long series of “plus de” constructions (79).

Where possible, however, I have tried to avoid adding a layer of intelligibility to a text replete with disjointed and impressionistic imagery. One can speculate, for example, about the startling appearance at the end of the sequence, “midnight /conjuring hour / when dogs howl their grievances / like an orange” (110). A slant homophony to *orage* [downpour], transfigured into one of the only occasional warm colours which burst from the otherwise predominant blue tones, perhaps? Whatever the case, the reader in translation should, insofar as possible, join French-language readers in the experience of disorientation. I am guided in this belief by recent scholarship on Caribbean translation which, following the work of Édouard Glissant, has emphasized the relational nature of translation, allowing the original’s opacity to assert a certain “right to untranslatability” (Forsdick 161). Such an “exchange fostered by translation” in turn makes it possible for both versions to be able to “retain their thickness and opacity” (Bermann 7).

I am also guided by the poetry itself, which stakes its own claim for maintaining a kind of “liquid” opacity. This is an urban landscape (or seascape), in which tides, fish, or sea salt are around every corner, where even dreams are waterlogged (92). The moments of ambiguity can take on their own tidal character, as an incomplete phrase can be cast less as a fragment, and more as one in an endless sequence of small waves lapping at the shore. Let me suggest then that perhaps the best model for both the source text and the translation is properly speaking colloidal. The colloidal is the liquid (or limpid) and opaque blended together, in such a way that both reflects and refracts, cloaks its meanings but not its light—not in the blue clarity of the sea but in what the poet calls “milk-blue,” *bleu au lait* (111).

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Selected poems by Coutechève Lavoie Aupont

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Translated by Charles Rice-Davis

ici j'invente la rupture des espérances
j'imprime la rumeur du papier
sur les formes à venir

here I concoct dreams to be dashed
and press rustling paper
onto future forms

ici j'apprends mal la vie

here I mis-learn life.

//

//

poète
je me vois bègue et errant
comme un homme qui sait prendre la route
mais qui ne sait pas
conjuguer ses pas collés sur les toits du silence

poet
I see myself stammering and aimless
like a man who knows the way there
but can't lay down
his sticky steps on silent roofs

la stridence du temps est une boussole
a-t-on aussi besoin de cela pour faire une Vie

time's clatter is a compass
which we need to make a Life

la poésie est une vieille ruse fantôme
enlevée à de faux sentiments jaunes
des habitudes peu communes
qu'on ne pardonnerait jamais à notre enfance

poetry's a well-worn ghostly ruse
ransomed to yellowing sentiments
rarefied routines
we were never permitted as children

la poésie est un saignement de souvenirs bleus
elle scie le quotidien flûte
à chaque fois on redevient l'enfant qu'on a chassé

poetry's a bloodletting of blue recollections
it saws through the ordinary
each time we become the child we chased after

À grand brassées de spasmes
et de rêves coqueluche

With overloaded arms
and whooping-cough dreams

//

//

je t'aime face au soleil couchant – à bon entendeur
[salut
les yeux grands ouverts sur le monde
comme si tu pouvais voir
par cet amour les voyelles à l'épreuve du quotidien

I love you in the shadow of the setting sun
–don't say you weren't told
eyes wide onto the world
as though your love could let you see
the vowels braced against the day

au blanc de l'obscurité
la beauté se reconstruit
comme une fille à son treizième printemps

in the white of darkness
beauty is remade
like a girl in her thirteenth spring

les doigts entrebâillés nous courons après les
palpitations des autres

our fingers fanned out
we chase others' palpitations

que peut-on avouer sur un paysage étranger

and what claims are made of distant landscapes

si son cœur est d'ici
ta saveur est dans la terre
la rame aussi pure qu'un parchemin durci par le sel
[marin]

le soir tu es dans la rumeur
la rosée sur tes paupières d'aubes fragilisées

le vent
le tamtam des jupes solaires

oui l'odeur noire du grand large

à plus forte raison d'aimer
l'amour est dans les yeux
ou dans l'ombre touffue des passants

j'aime cette rue
cette ville
ce pays
comme on lit l'inquiétude
sur une carte postale

//

*pour la Ville
et ceux qui n'ont pas su l'aimer*

plus de rêves
et le désir n'est que vomissure sur papiers jaunes
j'ai essuyé mes pas tissés dans le sable brûlant
de cette île
et trace l'adieu
comme un arc-en-ciel d'ordures

je me réclame un corps à milles pattes
et je dis mon cher soleil
rien ne pourra réinventer la bouche de l'homme
sur le Calvaire

le sang-sources ne coule plus dans ses veines
[meurtris]

par la Cité dont la Citadelle et les arbres portent
encore le nom comme une cicatrice dans l'œil

[gauche]
la mémoire broute le destin des vies sidérales
depuis que Sodome et Gomorrhe se réjouissent
encore du Sel

l'oubli s'accroît et devient plus noble
c'est toujours aux yeux de l'enfance
que le vent broie le sable les jours des fêtes
[populaires]

if the heart's from here
your taste is in the earth
in the oar as pure as parchment baked in sea salt

at night you are in the murmurings
the dew on your eyelids from fraying dawns

wind
tam-tam of solar skirts

yes the black aroma of endless expanse

all the more reason for loving
love is in the eyes
and the jumbled shadows of passers-by

I love this street
this city
this country
the way one reads worry
dashed on a postcard

//

*for the City
and those who could never love it*

dreamless
and desire is just vomit on yellowed pages
I've dragged my crisscrossed steps on the hot sand
of this island
and it spells out farewell
like a rotting rainbow

i demand a body with a thousand feet
and say my cherished sun
that nothing could remake the mouth of man
on Calvary
spring-blood flows no more in veins murdered

by the City whose Citadel and trees still
bear his name like a scarred left eye

memory prunes the fate of astral lives
since the days when Sodom and Gomorrah
reveled in Salt
oblivion swells and grows nobler
the wind turns the days of neighbourhood games
to sand in childhood eyes

d'ici la dérive est un vœu sur l'apothéose
l'adieu seul est bien mis

adieu à cette ville qui défie les coraux
cette ville où les enfants n'ont pas besoin de
pour jouer à la marelle [songes]

adieu à cette ville
où les femmes portent la douleur dans leurs madras
et autour de la source si vient la calebasse.

//

adieu
ma jeunesse ne trotte plus sur les murs de cette Rue
de cette Ville
de ce Pays
où l'avenir est un pain au milieu de l'apocalypse

dans mon visage d'enfant soleil la vie lente
insignifiante
inerte
doucement se brise
tells les midis que les couverts n'ont pas sonnés

//

les enfants
depuis quelque temps se taisent
sur ma ville
où j'ai suspendu des poèmes
comme des pendules publiques
pour qu'on y voie l'heure
pour qu'on ne s'y trompe plus

les jours dans nos yeux s'ouvrent à reculons
comme les fleurs molles de la nuit

minuit
heure fétiche
où les chiens se disputent les aboiements
comme une orange

heure pure
où les vieux songes basculent
dans nos gestes de marées basses

to be adrift is a promise to the pinnacle
the only thing in order is farewell

farewell to the city that defies the reefs
this city where children have no need of dreams
to play hopscotch

farewell to this city
where the women keep pain under their madras
or around the springs if the calebasse comes

//

farewell
my youth tiptoes no longer on the walls of this
of this City [Street
of this Country
where the future is bread at the centre of the
[apocalypse]

in my sun-child's face this plodding life
insignificant
inert
sweetly shatters
the noontime hours of silent placesettings

//

children
for some time now keep quiet
about my city
where I've hung poems
like public pendula
so all can see the time
and be tricked no more

in our eyes days unfold backwards
like flowers dewy from the night

midnight
conjuring hour
when dogs howl their grievances
like an orange

uncorrupted hour
when dreams tumble over
in our low-tide expressions

tels regards perdus à l'envers de la vie

heure indécise
où s'égare le poète

heure mouvante où le poème ne vit que pour lui
[même
et enfonce ses prunelles
dans le mouvement des mots qui scie le silence

mon cœur
depuis quelques temps se tait
sur la ville

like side-eyed glances at life

waffling hour
when the poet goes astray

shifting hour when the poem lives only for and by
[itself
and shoves its eyes
into the movement of words which seal the silence

my heart
for some time now keeps quiet
about the city