



To cite this article:

Bishop, Judith. “Translating poetry-in-prose: the ‘sound of emotional sense’ in Philippe Jaccottet’s *Truinas: le 21 avril 2001*.” *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 19, (December 2023): 42-50.

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Australian Association for Literary Translation

**Translating poetry-in-prose: the ‘sound of emotional sense’ in Philippe Jaccottet’s
Truinas: le 21 avril 2001
Paper presented at the *Translating Poetry Symposium with CO.AS.IT***

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Introduction

Philippe Jaccottet, a revered Swiss Francophone poet, died at the age of 95 in 2021. Jaccottet’s *Truinas: le 21 avril 2001* (*Truinas: 21 April 2001*) was published by La Dogana in 2004. In this short but emotionally complex book, Jaccottet describes the burial of his close friend, the contemporary poet and fellow admirer of Friedrich Hölderlin, André du Bouchet. Despite Jaccottet’s despairing assessment of his effort, having worked on *Truinas* for three years and then, he says, abandoning, rather than completing it, *Truinas* bears many of the technical and emotional hallmarks of his most exquisite poetry. Yet this is poetry that is rendered in a prose style. To distinguish this lyrical style from prose poetry, I call it *poetry-in-prose*. Poetry-in-prose is made possible by Jaccottet’s deft use of certain resources of visual and auditory prosody that are common to both poetry and prose. In this article I will argue for the importance of retaining certain aspects of the visual and auditory prosody of the original in the translation, in order to keep faith with what I have called, adapting Robert Frost’s renowned phrase, the “sound of emotional sense” in *Truinas*.

I translated the whole of *Truinas* in 2006. I was encouraged in this work by a note from the eminent translator Richard Howard, which added to my appreciation of Jaccottet’s prose as poetry “by any other name”. Writing as Poetry Editor of *Western Humanities Review* in 2005 to accept my translation of another of Jaccottet’s poems-in-prose, “Les pivoines” (“Peonies”), Howard remarked: “I think “Peonies” is not only the best translation of Jaccottet I’ve ever seen, but a wonderful poem besides...”. I had earlier published a translation of a chapter of Jaccottet’s book *Rilke* titled “L’accomplissement” (“Fulfilment”), in *Agenda* (U.K.) in 2006. Rilke, like Jaccottet, is a poet of perceptive interiority who takes the shifting arcs of emotional sense and shapes them exquisitely in language. I was drawn to the deep resonance that Rilke’s life and poetry had for Jaccottet. Yet Jaccottet’s prose, even more than the verse, had always intrigued me for its undulating sentences, their questing and questioning lyricism, and their movement through emotional tension and release. Lacking the time and resources to seek publication, I did not publish my translation of *Truinas* in whole or in part. John Taylor subsequently published his translation of *Truinas* in 2018. Taylor has become the most dedicated translator of Jaccottet’s late prose works, most of which bear the imprint of the lyrical style discussed in this article.

The emotional sense of existence

Philippe Jaccottet appeared with other post-World War II poets and artists in the literary magazine *L’Éphémère*, whose title points to a preoccupation with the ephemeral or transient. Jaccottet had an affinity with these poets and artists, urgently attuned as they were to the existential anxieties of the period immediately following the war. They included Yves Bonnefoy, Jacques Dupin, André du Bouchet and Paul Celan. Jaccottet also knew and admired the Swiss Italian sculptor Alberto Giacometti, whose gaunt, existential figures and sketches are an almost desperate attempt to access the living force behind the human figure and the human gaze, and whose ghostly sketch of a human figure featured on every cover of *L’Éphémère*. Each of these poets and artists foregrounded ideas of existence, being, presence, absence and death. Their work is charged with the emotions elicited by these ideas. It is often their glimpses

of a deeper dimension of reality, mediated by the external world, which generate the emotions they record. The materiality of existence is foregrounded, too, as an untranslatable presence, to be gestured at in language using deictics, the category of words that “point” to something from our own perspective, such as *this* and *that*, *here* and *there*, and *you* and *me*. André du Bouchet writes about this in a poem:

on ne s’aperçoit pas que *cela* n’a pas été traduit

[one doesn’t notice: *that* has not been translated]

(Du Bouchet 108)

Certain of Giacometti’s sculptures, such as ‘L’homme au doigt’ (Man pointing), from 1947, explore the same idea. Jaccottet, too, uses deictics to point to what exists beyond the text, whether in the writer’s mind or in the world. Their triangulation of the speaker, the world, and the text is as essential to Jaccottet’s poetics as it is to Du Bouchet’s. They appear often in Jaccottet’s poetry-in-prose, including *Truinas*, as in the following passage.

Original text	My translation	John Taylor’s translation
<p><u>Ce</u> saupoudrage de neige sur toutes choses: <u>cette rencontre</u>, ou la première ou la dernière, en début ou en fin de saison—une surprise—, des prairies et de la neige, des feuillages et de la neige; la découverte de toutes les choses autour de nous comme rafraîchies par cette sorte de plumage sans poids, <u>cette surprise</u>—comme si un très grand oiseau en effet avait effleuré un instant le sol, <u>cette touche légère</u>, fraîche, presque immatérielle—virginale, je crois qu’on peut, qu’on doit le dire aussi («Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui »).</p>	<p><u>This</u> powdering of snow across all things: <u>this meeting</u>, the first or the last, at the opening or the closing of the season—a surprise: the prairies and snow, leafy branches and snow: to discover how everything about us seemed refreshed by a kind of weightless plumage—<u>this surprise</u>: indeed, as if a great bird had touched the earth briefly with its wing, <u>this light touch</u>, cool, and all but immaterial—virginal: I believe one can, one must describe it so (“The virgin, bright and beautiful today”).</p>	<p><u>The</u> sprinkled snow over all things: <u>the encounter</u>, either the first or the last, at the beginning or at the end of the season—a surprise—, snow and meadows, snow and foliage; the discovery of all things around us as if they were freshened by a sort of weightless plumage, <u>the surprise</u>—as if a very big bird had swooped down and grazed the ground for an instant, <u>the light touch</u>, fresh, even immaterial—virginal, as I think one can and must say (“The virgin, vivid, and lovely today”).</p>

(Jaccottet 1206; relevant phrases are underlined).

Jaccottet is always *en passage*, underway. As he moves through time and space, he points to what he sees, and hears, and understands. He also gestures to singular events in his own mind and body, such as the feeling of surprise in this passage. It is important both for the emotional and the existential sense of the text that these gestural words, the deictics, are translated by the same in English; yet this is not consistently the case in the translations that Taylor has chosen, as in the example given here, where deictic *this* (or *that*) is replaced by the definite article *the*.

Why “poetry-in-prose”?

Though it is written in visual prose lines and paragraphs, *Truinas* shows a concentrated use of certain language resources that are common to poetry and prose, especially prosody (the musical structures of language) and deixis, as shown above. Jaccottet uses the many sonic and visual dimensions of prosody to communicate the imperatives of his vision as a poet. Prosody is not *what* is said, or the conventional form that is used to say it, but rather, *how* it is said. As

the musical structure of language, prosody sits above the level of words and phrases, just as musical structures such as key signatures and dynamics sit above, so to speak, the individual notes and bars in a musical score. The two tables below illustrate different aspects of prosody, many of them shared between poetry and prose. I have underlined the shared resources that are clearly deployed by Jaccottet in *Truinas*.

The first, auditory prosody, is what is typically meant by prosody. Used as a cover term for auditory structures above the level of the word, it can include the resources of intonation. The second, visual prosody, is my formulation of similar functions at work in the visual dimension of the written work. Visual prosody has subtle effects also in the auditory domain, such as the slight pause in reading associated with a paragraph or stanza break. Both auditory and visual prosody are relevant to Jaccottet's poetry-in-prose. Both prosodies engage the sensory perceptions of the listener and/or reader, who, following the prosody of the work, mirrors its transformations in their own body, and in doing so, may experience emotions through an empathetic transfer from the work.

Auditory prosody <i>(how the mind is directed to pay attention to some words and groups of words more than others through sound)</i>	
Poetry	Prose
<u>Accented syllables (extra emphasis on specific words)</u> Metre (regular or irregular moments of patterns of stressed/ unstressed syllables) / Syllable count	<u>Accented syllables (extra emphasis on specific words)</u> Metre (irregular moments of patterns of stressed/ unstressed syllables)
<u>Tension and release</u> <u>(non-final non-falling intonations leading to a final falling intonation)</u>	<u>Tension and release</u> <u>(non-final non-falling intonations leading to a final falling intonation)</u>
<u>Pauses (at stanza breaks / line breaks / punctuation)</u> <u>Intonational contours (question / exclamation/ statement etc.)</u>	<u>Pauses (at paragraph breaks / punctuation)</u> <u>Intonational contours (question / exclamation/ statement etc.)</u>
Enjambment (the line ends but the sentence continues) Rhyme and part-rhyme (regularly or irregularly occurring within and at the end of lines) Assonance & alliteration	Rhyme and part-rhyme (irregularly occurring within sentences) Assonance & alliteration

Table 1: Some resources of auditory prosody in poetry and prose

Visual prosody <i>(use of the page space, how the eye and mind are directed to move or to pause between words)</i>	
Poetry	Prose
Line start / end / length	<i>'In prose the poet gives up the meaning-making powers of the line-break.'</i> (Lehman 48)
Spaces within lines / Spread of lines across the page	
<u>Punctuation & capitalisation / Typographic variations</u> <u>(italics, character spacing) / Dashes & brackets / Sentence beginning / ending / length</u>	<u>Punctuation & capitalisation / Typographic variations</u> <u>(italics, character spacing) / Dashes & brackets / Sentence beginning / ending / length</u>
Stanza breaks	Paragraph breaks

Table 2: Some resources of visual prosody in poetry and prose

Translating the “sound of emotional sense”

As a translator, I have a strong affinity for the prosodic resources of language, having studied these at the doctoral level, and deployed them in my own poems. I find myself drawn to the delicate movements of emotional meaning which these resources enable, allowing the skilled writer to communicate shifts in feeling to the reader just as surely as a musical composer communicates emotional content and relationships through means such as melodic motifs, rests, and dynamics. Philippe Jaccottet exquisitely expressed the emotional sense of existence and presence in his works. The question we must ask as translators is, what does that mean for translating poetry-in-prose works such as these, in a way that holds true to that sense?

In this article I make the case that the “sound of emotional sense” is as important to translate as lexical sense (word meanings), or rhyme, or poetic form. Prosody is what carries the “sound of emotional sense”, both in prose and in poetry. Translating Jaccottet’s poetry-in-prose means keeping faith with the sound of emotional sense as closely as possible, including its emphases, its repetitions, its fast-paced runs and pauses, and the virtuosic length of its sentences, which so exquisitely build and release emotional tension. Prosody encompasses all of these resources, as well as the rise and fall of the voice, its loudness and its quietness, its strong and weak beats, its dynamics, and its use of the rests, or silences, of white space.

In the remainder of this article, I will offer further examples of my own and John Taylor’s translations of passages from *Truinas*. I will describe characteristic aspects of the sound of emotional sense in the book, and I will illustrate the impact of translation on the communication of that sense. In what follows, I have divided these aspects into four broad categories:

1. Searching sentences: the wandering structure of emotional events and their echoes.
2. Walking on air: the prosodic ‘tightrope’ of long sentences and their arc of tension and release.
3. Lamps in the existential night: urgent and insistent repetitions and parallel structures (anaphora).
4. The sound of emotional white space: isolated sentences and sentence fragments.

Searching sentences: the wandering structure of emotional events and their echoes

Jaccottet’s ruminations in *Truinas* recall the motions of a man searching on foot for the source of an echoing sound or a quivering light. But Jaccottet is searching the interior of his life, using

places, people and passages of literature and song as if they were searchlights or lamps turned on in the night of his mind and body:

...pour ce thème du passage qui m'aura accompagné toute ma vie, et pour la multiplicité d'échos qu'il suscitait en moi...

Échos moins multiples qu'obstinés, entendus dans les profondeurs du cœur...
(Jaccottet 1205)

[...because of this theme of passage which accompanies me through life, and because of the multiplicity of echoes it evokes in me...
Echoes more stubborn than numerous, heard in the depths of my heart...]
(my translation)

Much of *Truinas* is focused on that interior search for echoes, in which Jaccottet is following the lead of all the connections that bound him to his deceased friend André du Bouchet. This questing movement is essential to the emotional sense of the work. At certain points during the quest, the speaker arrives at a moment of insight, and these halts are as important to the text as the movement between them. Searching has finding as its end-point, even when the finding is always and only provisional, as it is in Jaccottet. The implication for the translator is that where a passage or paragraph in Jaccottet's prose ends – just as where a poem ends or a stanza ends – matters rather deeply. It is a moment of resonance, of cadence, of lingering sound in the mind that can carry a great deal of weight in poetry, and does so in Jaccottet's poetry-in-prose. The sequencing of ideas and emotions in the middle of a passage also matters prosodically, but to a lesser degree.

I have chosen the passage below to illustrate the auditory prosodic impact of where a passage ends, and the fall in the voice and the emphasis that comes with that ending. I have annotated the words that carry the strongest beats with underlining, and with arrows, the rising or falling pitch that, based on the syntactic and intonational structures of each language, is likely to be associated with a certain word.² You may notice a different feel to the tentative, wandering movement in each translation. The translation that Taylor has chosen breaks with the musical structure that Jaccottet establishes in his passage. The musical resonance of the passage is changed and does not echo the original ending.

² It would be an interesting empirical study to test these annotations for each language with acoustic-phonetic transcriptions of recorded readings across a statistically valid and demographically diverse sample of readers. This is beyond the scope of the present work. For a full-length study of French intonation, see Brechtje Post, 'Tonal and Phrasal Structures in French Intonation', https://www.researchgate.net/publication/243768972_Tonal_and_Phrasal_structures_in_French_Intonation. Accessed 5 December 2023. For a description of English intonation, see Janet Fletcher, 'E-ToBI Intonational Annotation', https://www.alta.asn.au/events/altss2004/course_notes/ALTSS-Fletcher-Prosody.pdf. Accessed 5 December 2023. The arrows in the annotations above indicate both the location of the intonational accents and the expected dominant pitch movement on the syllables marked by the accents.

Original text	My translation	John Taylor's translation
Rien d'étonnant donc, non plus, si, pour prendre congé de lui, un fragment de «Mnemosyne» m'était venu presque immédiatement à la pensée.	No surprise either then, if, for taking leave of him, a fragment of "Mnemosyne" sprang almost immediately to mind.	No surprise either, that a fragment of "Mnemosyne" almost immediately occurred to me for bidding farewell to him.

(Jaccottet 2014: 1204; Jaccottet 2018: 19)

In this passage, the wandering movement of thought ends with an event in the mind ('la pensée', thought) in Jaccottet's version and my own, but 'farewell to him' in Taylor's. Since much of this book, and indeed, Jaccottet's oeuvre, is about the movements and events of the mind, this seems an odd lapse in attention. It matters if a poet such as Jaccottet chooses to end a passage with the word *pensée*. In this position, the word carries the weight of accentual emphasis, falling pitch, and the following silence, which underscore the significant emotional event of this thought.

Walking on air: the prosodic "tightrope" of long sentences and their arc of tension and release

A comma, in English and French alike, is associated with rising or steady, "non-final" pitch in the voice, where a period corresponds to a distinctly falling, "final" pitch (Post; Fletcher). Using the typical French pattern of non-final intonation (in French, *la continuation mineure ou majeure*), a pattern which keeps the pitch of the voice up at the end of each phrase, Jaccottet keeps us up, too, in a literal suspension that we feel with our bodies as much as we understand it with our minds. The task of the translator is not to let us "fall" any sooner than Jaccottet would have it happen; not to break up his often very long sentences for the sake of the English reader's preferences or ability to follow the syntax through its aerial acrobatics, but to follow as closely as possible the movements – including the tensions and suspense – of emotional sense in the original text.

John Taylor's translation of *Truinas* generally follows Jaccottet's prosodic tightrope act quite beautifully. However, there is one instance in the opening paragraph, a very important paragraph, where Taylor's translation lets the reader down too early. The original sentence is long enough to feel the difference it makes to have it broken into two shorter sentences in Taylor's translation. The difference we feel is, again, a difference in musical structure, and that change in the structure seems unmotivated here.

Worse, however, is the impact on emotional sense. The first period in Taylor's version separates the question about saying a few words and the thought of not having the courage to do so, thus breaking the tension of anxiety in the original sentence. Note, too, how ending on *courage*, "courage", makes that word resonate more strongly, due to the confluence of accentual emphasis, falling intonation and following pause in this position. Taylor makes the unfortunate choice to end the passage on "so" instead. Yet, *courage* is, arguably, central to *Truinas*: the courage of existence in the face of death, especially, the death of a most beloved friend. Again, the final word matters, resonating emotionally well beyond this sentence.

Original text	My translation	John Taylor's translation
La veille de l'enterrement d'André du Bouchet, le 20 avril, Marie, sa fille, m'ayant téléphoné <u>pour me</u> <u>demander si je dirais quelques</u> <u>mots à cette occasion, je lui avais</u> <u>répondu n'être pas sûr d'en avoir</u> <u>le courage.</u>	When, on the 20th of April, the day before André du Bouchet was to be buried, his daughter Marie phoned <u>to ask if I'd say a few words</u> <u>on that occasion, I replied</u> <u>that I wasn't certain I had</u> <u>the courage.</u>	It was the 20 th of April, on the eve of Andre du Bouchet's burial, when his daughter Marie called <u>to ask if I would</u> <u>say a few words for the</u> <u>occasion. I told her I wasn't</u> <u>sure I would have the courage</u> <u>to do so.</u>

(Jaccottet 2014: 1195; Jaccottet 2018: 1; relevant phrases underlined)

Lamps in the existential night: urgent and insistent repetitions and parallel structures (anaphora)

Jaccottet uses the resources of prosody to make certain words and phrases stand out like lamps in the existential night of his wandering mind. These include repetitions of words and parallel structures or anaphora, both familiar tools of the poet's trade. Repetitions and anaphora are highlighted in the passage below, which bristles with these structures, so strong is the emotion. This is the final paragraph of the book before its postscript, and it has all the intensity of a cry in the night. Its significance in the work makes the sound of emotional sense all the more important to consider when undertaking the translation.

Again, Taylor's translation of this central passage ends on a word other than the one chosen by Jaccottet – *(le) taire*. *Taire* carries the weight of suppression of the "mystery of being" and the emotion it elicits, which desires to erupt as poetic expression – a suppression which Jaccottet the poet cannot, and will not, tolerate. Prosodically, replacing *taire* in the final accented position in the passage with *yourself* risks shifting the emotional emphasis away from the *mystery of being* to the *self* – a shift that is entirely contrary to the sense of the work, which follows the unanticipated advent of existential meaning in and through the world. The self is merely the vehicle for this upsurge of meaning; it, and not the self, is the resonant focus of the emotional sense of this passage.

Original text	My translation	John Taylor's translation
Alors, ayant frôlé du <u>plus intime de soi, si fragile qu'on puisse être, si débile qu'on puisse devenir</u> , quelque chose qui ressemble tant au <u>plus intime du mystère de l'être, comment l'oublier, comment le taire?</u>	Then, <u>however fragile one might be, however feeble one might become</u> , if one has lightly touched, with the <u>most intimate part of the self</u> , something that so closely resembles the <u>most intimate mystery of being: how to forget it, how to quiet it?</u>	And once something that looks so much like the <u>most intimate part of the mystery of being</u> has been grazed with what is <u>most intimate in you—however frail you might be, however moronic you might become—</u> , <u>how can you forget it, how can you keep it to yourself?</u>

(Jaccottet 2014: 1209; Jaccottet 2018: 71; relevant phrases underlined)

The sound of emotional white space: isolated sentences and sentence fragments

In Jaccottet's poetry-in-prose, the single-line paragraph is the visual prosodic equivalent of the single-line stanza in poetry, and he deploys it in very much the same way. The following lines illustrate the point (the translations are my own).

<p>...l'arc à sa plus vive tension. <u>Paroles incandescentes.</u></p> <p>.... the bow drawn to its highest tension. <u>Incandescent words.</u></p>	<p>...une sorte de gaucherie devant la mort. <u>Sauvage.</u></p> <p>....a kind of clumsiness in the face of death. <u>Wild.</u></p>	<p>... aussi simplement, aussi miraculeusement qu'un ruisseau se fraie un chemin entre les herbes et les cailloux (et il coulait, en effet, plus bas, fidèlement).</p> <p><u>Une fumée lumineuse.</u></p> <p>... as simply, as miraculously, as a stream makes its way between grass and stones (and a faithful stream ran, as it happened, lower down).</p> <p><u>A luminous smoke.</u></p>
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(Jaccottet 2014: 1196; 1207; 1208; Jaccottet 2018: 2; 23; 25; relevant phrases underlined)

In each instance, the single-line paragraph is also a sentence fragment, lacking a verb. It is as though the engine of the sentence, the verb, stalls in these sentence fragments, and the onrush of momentum – the momentum of anxiety and recollection and joy and terror – is quieted. These few words are embraced by the silence and stillness of the white space.

There are several such moments of sparseness in *Truinas*. In an indescribably moving last page of the postscript – a page that we have been prepared for as readers by all the preceding lone lines, with their emotional impact – Jaccottet's prose breaks down into a series of single-sentence paragraphs, petering out to the ravishing final line of the book. This final sentence is separated from the penultimate not by a single line break, but by two. Jaccottet works with the visual prosody of these line breaks as if they were rests, which, added together, create a deeper, more emotionally weighted pause:

Le soleil de la vie qui recule d'un pas, puis de beaucoup de pas.

Je me demande s'il peut encore passer un oiseau dans ce ciel-là.

(Jaccottet 1214)

[The sun of life that takes a step backward, then many steps.

I wonder if a bird can still pass across that sky.]

(my translation)

In Jaccottet's lines, there is a complete condensation of sight and sound – of visual and auditory prosody – to distil an emotional and existential moment. Because of the art with which it is expressed, that moment continues to echo in the heart and the mind. The translator's task is to make her text equally resonant and faithful to the emotional sense of the original work.

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